

Indigenous agriculture driven by passion

Terry Lerat is on a mission to share his life-long love and enthusiasm for agriculture with future generations of Indigenous people.

“Every morning when I get up, I’m chomping at the bit,” says the 67-year-old manager of 4C Farms Ltd., owned and operated by the Cowessess First Nation in southeast Saskatchewan. “It’s like waking up with the land. It’s so awesome out here, a wonderful life and I’d like to share my passion with our people.”

Growing up, Lerat’s parents always kept cattle, but he didn’t consider agriculture as a career until 1969 when he got his first part-job with PFRA running cattle on pastureland near Cowessess. That eventually turned into a full-time job that he kept for about eight years before PFRA turned over much of the land to Cowessess.

Since then, Lerat has managed the land on behalf of the First Nation, hoping to eventually turn the mixed cattle and grain farm into a self-sustaining operation. The community-owned farm currently consists of 150 black Angus cows, 2,500 acres of pasture and hay land, and about 1,200 acres of grain land.

“The goal is to slowly grow our cattle numbers to make it sustainable,” Lerat said. “I want it to fund itself, employ families and be able to give a little back to the community – that’s where my heart is and that’s what keeps me going. I want them to see the bounties of agriculture, get them involved and allow them to experience the same benefits I’ve seen in life.”

The challenge, however, is that Cowessess and many other First Nations are two generations removed from agriculture. While First Nation communities were equipped with meagre farm equipment at the turn of the century, many were confined to land not suitable for agriculture and government-appointed Indian agents rigorously enforced a pass system, preventing First Nation farmers from competing with non-Indigenous farmers.

That pass system was in effect for 60 years on reserves across western Canada and was only abolished in 1941. By then, however, First Nations agriculture was effectively reduced to subsistence farming, while off-reserve agriculture was well established and growing.

Access to capital for agriculture and economic development has also been a significant challenge for First Nation communities. Land – one of the most valuable assets on any farm operation – cannot be used to secure a loan on a First Nation reserve, since it’s held under the title of the Canadian government. As a result, private property ownership on reserves is almost non-existent and most other assets owned by First Nations cannot be used as security.

Despite these historic challenges, many Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs have made significant inroads into one of the most important sectors of Canada’s economy.

According to the last census in 2016, Aboriginal agricultural operators represented 5,160 (1.9 per cent) of the 270,720 agricultural operators in Canada. The number of Aboriginal agricultural operators in 2016 increased 53.7 per cent compared with 1996. In contrast, the total number of agricultural operators declined 30.1 per cent over the same timeframe.

The number of Aboriginal people in Canada involved in agricultural in 2016 was 21.4 per cent higher than in 1996. During the same period, the total agricultural population declined by 39.3 per cent. Among the factors that contributed to this increase is that Aboriginal people represent one of the youngest and fastest-growing segments of Canada’s population, and many of them are choosing careers in agriculture.

“We’re going to show the world there is a First Nation that’s going to fulfill the Treaty promises, regardless of what happened in the past, and we’re going to do it to our best ability,” said Cowessess Chief Cadmus Delorme, who grew up on the reserve wondering why his own people weren’t farming the land.

“Agriculture is not something new to our communities,” he said. “We’re simply reawakening to what has been done for centuries upon centuries, except in today’s economy, it’s done on a much larger scale within a corporate structure and guided by sound business decisions.”

4C Farms Ltd. currently employs two full-time and one part-time worker, but the employment level varies throughout the year.

“We are still in the asset building stage, so it’s hard to see a surplus of income right now,” said Lerat, who is a big advocate of sustainable agriculture. “When you combine the economics, we sometimes lose sight on the importance of the ecological value of the land. But we’ll eventually achieve both, because there’s no shortage of land out here. And if we take good care of the land, it will take care of us.”

FCC is proud to celebrate Saskatchewan’s proclamation of May 4 as Indigenous economic development day. We recognize the opportunity Indigenous communities have in agriculture, the historical contributions Indigenous people have made in this sector and the current challenges they face revitalizing their agriculture businesses. As a result, FCC has built a team to support Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs entering the agriculture sector, along with strategies for Indigenous procurement, employment and community investment. We will continue to share updates about the strategy as it evolves.