

A Discussion on Coordinating Extension Services in Alberta November 2023

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Introduction

This paper makes the case that Alberta's extension system is currently disconnected, and that a discussion amongst key players could result in a system that is more effective.

We will briefly examine the history of extension, provide an assessment of the weaknesses inherent in the current state in Alberta, and discuss a potential pathway forward.

Extension Defined

The terms "extension", "knowledge and technology transfer", "technology adoption", "practice change", "learning", "demonstration", etc. are often interchangeably used. They all convey slightly different meanings in what can be a confusing array of terminology.

Prevailing extension approaches in North America, including Alberta, are generally based on the Boone model of extension, developed at North Carolina State University. The model is based on five key components:

1. Understanding the culture, economics, and value systems of the community you serve.
2. Linking the institution to its public through needs analysis and leader involvement.
3. Program design and implementation (this should be appropriate to the needs, culture and learning preferences of the audience and could include: one-on-one office visits, farm calls, telephone consultations, short courses, seminars, specialist visits, webinars, blogs and vlogs, field days, demonstrations, etc.).
4. Program evaluation and assessment.

5. Feedback from this evaluation into the planning process for the next cycle of extension (seasonal or annual).

As you can see, the term “extension” includes all the sub-component activities such as planning, technology transfer, demonstration, adoption, evaluation, etc. It speaks to an entire system, versus merely sub-components of that system. For that reason, we choose the term “extension” as the most complete and overarching of the many terms that describe some form of this activity in Alberta.

A Brief History of Extension

This section is included because it helps us understand with greater clarity “where we’ve been.” Knowing where we’ve been may be a useful reference point in determining “where we should go.”

Seaman A. Knapp (1833 -1911) is generally credited as being the father of the extension system in North America. He combined teaching with on farm demonstration to encourage southern US farmers to improve crop production and better manage their soils: “What a man hears, he may doubt; what a man sees he may doubt; but what a man does he cannot doubt.” This is reminiscent of the 4-H Motto: “Learn to do by doing”.

Knapp’s famous demonstrations in Texas helped eliminate the cotton boll weevil epidemic in 1903. His teaching and demonstration methodologies began to gather significant momentum during his lifetime. A bridge in Washington DC is named after him.

While Knapp did not live to see it, the Smith Lever Act of 1914 founded the US Cooperative Extension System. This system is anchored in a network of county agents in each state, connected to specialists and researchers at the Land Grant Universities (usually signified by the word “state” at the end of their title).

In Alberta, as settlement rates and farm numbers began to grow, the province implemented its own extension system with the placement of its first district agriculturist (“DA”) at Sedgewick in 1920. The system

grew apace with the increase in farmers and arable land over the succeeding decades.

When the author joined Alberta's extension system as a rookie district agriculturist 46 years ago, the system was at its peak. A network of 65 district offices across the province provided extension services to Alberta's 60,000 farmers and ranchers. 100 DAs, 63 district home economists and 80 client service representatives lived and worked in the communities they served and interacted on a daily basis with local farm families.

Every district office was required to file accurate monthly statistics regarding the number of farm contacts. Rolled up provincially, these totaled over 600,000 contacts per year, or an average of 10 contacts per farm family per year.

The local extension agents were supported by 90 regional specialists located in six regional offices. These regional specialists were in turn supported by provincial level entomologists, pathologists, economists, home design experts and other highly specialized staff. Local extension staff could draw on the services of a provincial soils lab, provincial feed lab, provincial foods and nutrition lab, and four regional veterinary pathology labs.

Alberta's extension system was widely regarded as the best in Canada and amongst the top 10 in North America. Paid for by provincial revenues at a time when the province possessed significant wealth, the system worked well and provided an almost complete extension service for farmers and ranchers. The extension offices were co-located with AFSC Lending and Crop Insurance offices, and usually with Public Lands, Fish and Wildlife, PFRA, the local health unit, etc. A visit to the red brick Provincial Building in your community was a one-stop experience.

But during the eighties and nineties, some new trends began to emerge:

1. Some of the more specialized and technically sophisticated farmers were beginning to bypass the generalized knowledge of DAs in favour of direct contact with regional specialists. This was especially true in areas

such as dairy, poultry, pork, and emerging crops such as pulses and canola.

2. An inherent disconnect with U of A began to emerge. In the US Cooperative Extension System, subject matter specialists have been embedded in the land grant universities for 109 years and continue to work successfully with county agents to this day. In contrast, the size and strength of Alberta's extension system enabled it to bypass the U of A for most of its specialized knowledge needs. At the same time, elements of the university system were more focused on academics and research than on extension. The greatest strength of the provincial extension system, its completeness, became its greatest weakness. Because there was no formal requirement to work together, the two systems drifted apart. This inherent system inefficiency was not sustainable.

3. During the eighties and nineties, private agronomists, veterinarians, financial consultants and other service providers began to offer more complete producer services in subject matter specialties that were typically the heavy demand areas of the provincial extension system.

4. Alberta producers who travelled to Australia and the UK were exposed to farm clubs, where on farm "walks and talks" were beginning to play a key role in knowledge transfer. Returning home, these Alberta producers, with the support of their local DAs, began to form similar clubs. This led to the formation of Foothills Forage and Grazing Association, and Pembina Forage Association (now Gateway Research Organization) in the seventies, followed by formation of the remaining ARA's over the next decades. While these organizations worked closely with the local extension services, they began to assume the demonstration component of extension that was formerly handled by DAs.

5. Budget restraint became a reality.

The convergence of these forces led to a rationalization of Alberta's extension system on 24 January 1994. The system of DAs and district home economists was terminated, the number of extension staff was cut in half, district offices were reduced to 52, and specialists were placed

directly in these offices. This system worked well for approximately a decade. But within 10 years, further budgetary restraint, and the growing extension market share of the private sector further debilitated the provincial government system.

At the same time, the internet moved into mainstream use as a knowledge source for farmers. The rise in land values and some difficult years during the 1999 - 2002 drought and the 2003 – 2005 BSE crisis caused significant exit from farming. This resulted in larger, more sophisticated business units, but fewer farmers and less total demand for extension.

In the early 2000s, the front-line extension offices were completely closed in favour of retaining a few regional and provincial specialists in heavy demand sectors. The rural office network was replaced by a Call Centre at Stettler. At its peak, the Call Centre handled about 50,000 calls/year, or about one tenth of the contact volume of the former rural network.

In recent years, the Call Centre volume declined significantly, and very recently, the provincial government has discontinued most of the Call Centre services.

What Do We Learn From the 100-Year History of the Province's Extension System?

The significant changes in the provincial extension service underscore four critical considerations:

1. The exit of province as a significant role player in extension has left a vacuum in the system.
2. While the provincial system provided great value to Albertans in its day, unlike the US system, it was not structurally interconnected with other agencies, and as a result has left a question mark about succession. Future interconnectedness may be a critical success factor.

3. Private sector companies and NGOs have filled some components of that system on an opportunity basis. But there are gaping holes in many areas, especially when it comes to new crops, entomology and non-commercializable agronomy or forage management practices, start-up food companies and local marketing.

4. There is currently no comprehensive extension system, no integration/coordination plan and no compelling need for the players to talk to each other. It is unclear how colleges and universities see their role in the new extension reality. Who will pick up those important aspects of extension that the private sector will not address? How should the ARAs, ASBs, and colleges work together? Where do commodity organizations fit into the matrix? What does the Department see as its extension role in future? How do we provide high-quality extension training to young staff? Etc.

The Extension Task Force

In February 2021, the author wrote a paper for RDAR, encouraging an industry-owned and driven discussion on coordinating extension in Alberta. In response, RDAR funded the Extension Task Force (ETF). Broadly representing extension stakeholders in Alberta, the Task Force engaged MNP and filed a final report in December 2022. The report's key findings were:

1. There are varying degrees of capacity / resources (depending on sector / region etc.) supporting extension efforts.
2. [The identity of] Who is viewed as a trusted advisor differs among stakeholders.
3. A key piece of delivering extension is a network - and it is challenging to grow and maintain such a network.
4. Measuring adoption and impact are the greatest challenges of "measuring success."
5. Producers are well recognized as key players in extension.
6. Post-secondary institutions have valuable information; however, varying capacities and mandates challenge their ability to provide extension services.

7. Stakeholders are more comfortable participating in extension activities versus an extension system.
8. There is a key difference between the "business of extension" versus the "activity of extension."
9. Stakeholders voiced concern that institutional knowledge is being lost.
10. There is currently no clear extension leader, and the system is decentralized.
11. Extension systems reflect project-based funding models.
12. Limited nostalgia existed for the previous system facilitated by the provincial government.

The ETF recommended that RDAR take on the mantle of extension leadership. RDAR rejected this, not because they didn't appreciate the value of extension, but rather because they believed they were primarily a research funding agency. Agriculture and Irrigation then stepped up to ensure the important discussion was moved forward.

Where are Things At?

ARECA is now hoping to sponsor, with the support of AGI, an industry led discussion that will build a new and more strongly coordinated cooperative extension model for Alberta. The intent is to include a broad cross section of extension stakeholder organizations in a working group that rolls up its sleeves to collectively build this model. Given the current vacuum and disconnected approach, there may be little to lose and potentially much to gain through a discussion amongst the key players that develops and tests a more coordinated cooperative extension model for Alberta.