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Thank you.

Phil Ferraro, Editor, Executive Director PEI ADAPT Council

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Leveling The Perfect Sod

Renee Joppe farms a different kind of crop.

The Central Lot 16 resident is one of only three sod farmers in the province. His crop is sold to landscapers, building contractors and homeowners— anybody looking for sod for that perfect lawn. He has been farming his 100 acre operation for the past seven years and his market is expanding both in P.E.I. and beyond.

In growing sod, the key ingredient is a level field. To help achieve as close to perfection as possible, he is evaluating a leveling bar developed by a Quebec manufacturer for use in the landscaping trade. To Joppe's knowledge, this is the first time the equipment has been modified for agricultural purposes. He is receiving funding help from the P.E.I. ADAPT Council, which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund in the province for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Joppe explained the bar, which is approximately 20 feet wide and two feet high, attaches onto the back of a tractor. As it goes over a surface, it both levels out any ruts or imperfections in the field and compacts the soil.

"If there was a large hole in the field for example, you would use the leveling bar to move soil from other areas and fill it in," Joppe explained. "When you are producing sod, any ruts that can be seen will take away from the value of the product."

He said the product could also have a number of non-agricultural uses. For instance, he said it would be perfect for golf courses looking to level out rough areas on the fairway. Similarly, it could take an imperfections out of a baseball or soccer field.

Joppe said the key to the technology is getting it set at the proper level. When that is accomplished, "how quickly you move depends on how much horsepower you have." With his 120 horsepower tractor, Joppe said he can do about ten acres in an hour.

"We are pleased with the way it has worked out so far," he said. "It allows us to offer a better quality product to our customers and in the end that's what it is all about."

Seeking A Cleaner Spud

In a province where potato is king, Marvin Webster is committed to making those spuds as clean as possible. For Webster, whose family grows 650 acres for the processing sector on his farm on the Blue Shank Road under the corporate name Valley Grove Farms, it is a case of necessity being the mother of invention. He explained major processors across North America have encountered problems with debris in shipments taken to their plants.

That debris can be anything from rocks to golf balls to (in rare cases) decaying animals. Many processors in other areas are now demanding all raw product brought to their plants be washed. While neither Cavendish Farms or McCain's are asking that of Island growers, Webster is convinced it is just a matter of time.

To help himself and other growers prepare for that eventuality, Webster has obtained funding from the P.E.I. ADAPT Council (which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund in the province for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada) to develop a mobile washer. He is now working with Bernard's Welding in Chelton on the design and manufacture of the product.

He explained many growers have warehouses spread out over a considerable distance and it doesn't make economic sense to have the potatoes trucked to one location to be washed. In his own case, there are three warehouses on the Blue Shank Road and another in Port Hill.

Webster explained much of the technology he is using has been around for some time--what he is trying to do is modify it to travel. The first point of entry for the spuds into the new machine would be a flume system to help sort out rocks and other debris. While such systems on stationary equipment are often 15-20 feet long, he has already been able to shorten it to four feet. The concept then calls for the spuds to go into a drum washer and then dried off to the point where they could be shipped under winter conditions. He explained if a potato is shipped dripping wet in winter, there is a possibility of freezing. The potatoes would then go to a grading table, where any debris missed could be sorted out. Depending on the crop, if there was an abundance of smaller sized potatoes, they could also be taken out at that time.

Webster said the machine could be moved from warehouse to warehouse as the shipment was being loaded. He said the manufacturer has already received some inquiries about when the technology will be on the market "but we have a lot of work to do yet. " Webster said the machine would not be needed on the farm everyday, so it would present a chance for a number of producers in a given geographical area to purchase the equipment on a collective basis.

"I know in our case, we ship in June-July and again in November-December," he said. "The rest of the time we wouldn't need it."

Webster said he and the manufacturer are now working out the final design and they will then build a prototype for testing. He added "we are quite a piece from commercial development yet, but I am pleased to see there is a fair bit of interest from growers— this could be marketed both on P.E.I. and in other potato growing areas since all processing growers are facing the same type of problems.

Growing an Organic Strawberry

If you purchase an organically grown strawberry, chances are it has been imported to the province from the United States.

However, if a three year pilot project being undertaken by Westech Agriculture Ltd. proves successful, that could change in the future. With funding help from the P.E.I. ADAPT Council (which administers the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund in the province for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada), the Alberton company hopes to develop a protocol for growing organic strawberries in a P.E.I. climate.

They planted their first test plot of less than an acre this year, and owner Nora Dorgan said the first results are somewhat encouraging. However, she added "we are breaking entirely new ground here so it is way to early to make any judgments."

The company develops plants in a nursery setting and sells the cuttings to growers throughout Canada and the United States. Dorgan explained the company included the organic option when it began looking for alternatives to chemicals the company had been using as fumigants.

She explained the project has a two pronged component— as a first step the company wants to determine if strawberries can be grown in commercial quantities in the province. Just as importantly, they are hoping to determine whether such a venture would be economically viable.

As part of the project, Dorgan said the company hopes to bring in a number of experts over the next three years that will not only offer advice to Westech but to the strawberry industry at large through workshops and seminars. She is hoping the first such session will take place this fall.

Dorgan said the project is the firm's first foray into organic agriculture and she admits "it took some time to get our head around the organic concept." She added "there was really an extensive protocol that had to be followed to prepare the test plot for this year's crop.

She said this year's results will provide a benchmark for the remaining two years of the project since "right now we have nothing to compare any results to— there is nothing like this being done anywhere else in eastern Canada that I am aware of."

If the project proves feasible, Westech could find itself on the cutting edge as one of the few suppliers of organic strawberry plants in Canada. However, Dorgan said it is too soon to think that far ahead and "right now we just have to learn as we go— hopefully at the end of the three years we will be able to make a determination whether to take the idea to the next level."

New Generation Cooperatives - 10 Things You Need to Know

A New Generation Co-op (NGC) is a form of business arrangement that encourages agricultural producers and processors to expand the scope of their businesses. Sometimes described as hybrids between traditional co-ops and limited companies, NGCs may be one way to help bridge the gap between commodity-oriented primary producers and consumer-focused markets. This web site has been set up using a two-level design. The first level (this document) features "Ten things you need to know about New Generation Co-ops." Its easy-to-read question and answer format provides basic NGC information. If you need more detail you can follow any of the numerous links to level two. This second level consists of references, research papers and links to other web sites.

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