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# Canada’s ag minister: NAFTA benefits worth saving

By **SEAN ELLIS**  
Capital Press

SUN VALLEY, Idaho — While visiting Idaho last week, Canada’s agriculture minister discussed the upcoming North American Free Trade Agreement renegotiation and said it’s important not to do anything to upset the benefits the agreement has brought to agriculture in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico.

That view was well-received by directors of 13 Western state agriculture departments, with whom he met July 27 in Sun Valley, and Idaho farm industry leaders, with whom he met July 28 in Boise.

Pointing out that Canada and the U.S. trade more food products with each other than any other nations in the world, Lawrence MacAulay said, “There’s no question (NAFTA) can benefit from



Canadian Agriculture Minister Lawrence MacAulay, left, speaks with Idaho Lt. Gov. Brad Little, a rancher and farmer, July 28 in Boise during a roundtable discussion the ag minister had with farm industry leaders on the upcoming North American Free Trade Agreement renegotiation.

modernization. We want to make a good thing even better.”

But, he added to members of the Western Association of State Departments of Agriculture, “It works pretty well. Be careful how you fix something that is not broken ... because it puts so much money in both of our pockets.”

Karen Ross, secretary of

the California Department of Food and Agriculture, told Capital Press she was encouraged by that comment because it’s the same message she’s been hearing from California producers: “Do no harm. There are some tweaks that need to happen but let’s not tweak it and then lose all the benefits that all of us have gained.”

According to Agri-Food Canada, the U.S. exported \$24.7 billion in food products to Canada in 2016, making that nation the No. 1 destination for U.S. agricultural exports, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Canada exported \$22.5 billion in products to the U.S. last year.

In Boise, MacAulay had an open conversation with representatives of several main farm commodities, including potatoes, dairy, beef, wheat, onions, apples and lumber.

Dairy farmer and Darigold

board member Allan Huttema asked MacAulay to push for Canada to rescind its new “class 7” milk-protein class that the U.S. dairy industry believes is allowing that nation to sell some dairy products on the global market at 10-15 cents per pound below average world prices.

“It’s not right; it’s not even above board,” Huttema said. “I would ask you to put whatever pressure you can to rescind that milk class. Plans are already underway to start a (World Trade Organization) challenge and I would hate to see it go there.”

Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Frank Muir brought up the U.S. potato industry’s concern that Canada is allegedly unfairly justifying placing anti-dumping tariffs on U.S. potato exports because U.S. growers sometimes sell spuds at below the cost of production.

“We believe (this issue) can be addressed through NAFTA re-negotiations or just by working together,” Muir said.

“We’re not going to resolve that today but I’m fully aware of what you’re talking about and we are working on it,” MacAulay said.

Wade Small, president of Agri Beef’s livestock division, told MacAulay that “the Canadian cattle supply is pretty important to the packing industry in this region” and “making sure we keep those channels open ... is very important to us as a company and the industry.”

He also said the paperwork associated with moving those cattle into the U.S. is cumbersome.

MacAulay told Smart and WASDA members that cutting red tape to improve producers’ bottom line is a goal of the renegotiation.

## Monitor wells show surge in ESPA storage

By **JOHN O’CONNELL**  
Capital Press

BOISE — Irrigators who draw from the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer are well ahead of schedule in their efforts to reverse a longterm trend of declining groundwater levels, an analysis of monitor wells confirms.

Based on March readings from roughly 400 wells throughout the ESPA, Idaho Department of Water Resources officials estimate the aquifer has increased by 660,000 acre-feet of water since the spring of 2016.

The estimates are conservative, as the state took the well readings midway through its managed aquifer recharge program — which involves paying fees to irrigation companies who run surplus surface water through unlined canals or into spill basins to bolster the aquifer.

“This is probably the first significant gain we’ve seen in the aquifer in years,” said Brian Patton, manager of IDWR’s Water Planning Bureau, adding the aquifer made modest gains in storage levels from 2010 through 2012.

In 2016, irrigation districts represented by Idaho Ground Water Appropriators Inc. renegotiated the Surface Water Coalition’s water call, which was filed based on declining spring flows into the Snake River.

The updated settlement sets dates for meeting aquifer milestones, aiming to restore spring flows to their average from 1991 to 2001 within a decade. In addition to providing a flat amount of annual mitigation water and facilitating conversions from groundwater to surface water, groundwater users are required to reduce their collective water consumption by an average of 240,000 acre-feet per year.

Patton attributes the aquifer gains to the combination of an especially wet winter, a big year for the state’s recharge program and groundwater users meeting their reduction goals.

The settlement also designated 20 “sentinel” wells for monitoring compliance with the agreement. Patton said water levels in the sentinel wells rose by nearly 2 feet on average through March, though levels in some individual wells dropped or held constant, where the snowpack hadn’t begun to melt when readings were taken.

Assuming gains in the sentinel wells are maintained, Patton said groundwater users have already met the first benchmark of the agreement — to stabilize the aquifer at 2016 levels by 2020. IDWR is conducting additional analysis to determine the percentage of gains resulting from the state’s recharge program and irrigation reductions.



Keith Berns, a Bladen, Neb., farmer who heads the cover crop seed supplier Green Cover, speaks about soil health July 20 at multi-species cover crop trial plots in Soda Springs, Idaho. His talk was sponsored by USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service in Caribou County.

## Soil health expert preaches plant diversity to Caribou County growers

By **JOHN O’CONNELL**  
Capital Press

SODA SPRINGS, Idaho — While leading a tour of multi-species, dryland cover crop trials in a local farm field, soil health expert Keith Berns uprooted a stunted turnip from a strip in which other plant species were killed by a late-spring cold snap.

Then Berns moved to an adjacent trial plot — covered by a thick and diverse stand of green and flowering vegetation — and plucked a turnip with a softball’s circumference.

Berns, the keynote speaker at a July 20 soil health workshop attended by about 70 farmers and sponsored by USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service in Caribou County, said the demonstration highlights how diversity leads to healthier plants and more productive soil.

Farmers plant cover crops for soil health benefits such as improved water infiltration, nutrient scavenging, weed control, pollinator support,

yield gains in subsequent cash crops, organic matter gains and less soil compaction. Berns says it “heart breaking” when a farmer plants a single-species cover crop.

“It’s so difficult to get diversity with our cash crop, but it’s easy to get it with our cover crop,” said Berns, a Bladen, Neb., farmer who sells seed for Green Cover Seed.

Farmers often worry about competition resulting from a variety of species in the same cover crop mix. But Berns finds when growers strike the right balance, each species benefits the others by scavenging for different nutrients and supporting a broader variety of soil microbes and beneficial organisms.

In fact, he’s noticed a trend of growers pursuing diversity within their cash crops. On his farm, Berns’ irrigated, commercial sunflower fields resemble a wild prairie, with a multi-species cover crop planted simultaneously. He said wheat growers often boost yields by mixing radish-

es within their grain, and Miller-Coors has had good results in small trials with “companion crops” of crimson clover, vetch and spring lentils seeded with malt barley.

Chance Lyman, a grower from Delta, Utah, said he stopped controlling a weed in his alfalfa, tansy mustard, to let it provide a natural fumigant for harmful nematodes. He also plants a multi-species cover crop within his alfalfa after his second cutting, grazing the field rather than taking a third cutting. Lyman said he’s eliminated his bug pressure and boosted yields without adding more fertilizer.

Berns cited test results from May 2008 at a North Dakota farm as evidence that cover crops can fill a role on dryland.

The top 4 feet of soil in a field that had been planted to cover crops contained 3.07 inches of moisture. A nearby field farmed under similar methods, but without cover crops, had 3.11 inches of moisture — about the same.

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## Incubator aims to boost local food products

By **JOHN O’CONNELL**  
Capital Press

DRIGGS, Idaho — Teton County Commissioner Cindy Riegel may soon turn a yogurt-making hobby into a small business, and without the usual startup costs, thanks to a new city service.

In February, the City of Driggs launched a “food business incubator,” called Teton Valley Kitchen, in a former downtown restaurant in a converted home.

Producers of local food products can book space in the incubator for \$15 per hour at night or \$17 per hour during the day to prepare their products in the licensed commercial kitchen. New businesses are offered a \$10 per hour promotional rate for the first month.

“The commercial kitchen was a community effort to try to inspire more local food entrepreneurs by providing an inexpensive place for them to make their products,” Riegel said. The facility also includes space where vendors may eventually sell their products.

The incubator has a 600-square-foot kitchen in what was once a garage and has a walk-in freezer, a roll-in refrigerator, mixers, proofers, convection ovens, a gas range, a hood, a fryer, a grill and kitchenware.

Assuming Riegel’s plans come to fruition, she’ll buy milk from a local dairy and sell her yogurt at the local farmers’ market. Proponents of the facility say a primary goal is promoting food products made with locally sourced ingredients.

The incubator also offers business-development services such as aid in drafting a business plan, conducting market research, product testing, distribution, nutritional analysis and meeting safety regulations. University of Idaho Extension has obtained an \$1,800 grant to offer four food-safety workshops through the incubator on the last Monday of each month starting in July. UI’s Teton County Extension educator, Jennifer Werlin, said officials from USDA’s Small Business Development Ad-

ministration and the Eastern Idaho Small Business Development Center will lead the first workshop on July 31. Werlin said incubators often take years to reach their potential, but she envisions the local incubator will become a food hub and distribution center, increasing access to locally produced foods.

Doug Self, Driggs community development director, explained that a countywide economic development plan finished in 2013 concluded the county had growth opportunities in local food and value-added agriculture. A subsequent regional agricultural assessment funded by a federal Department of Housing and Urban Development grant identified the need for a kitchen incubator.

The City of Driggs funded a feasibility study for the facility, conducted in 2014 by the E-Center, affiliated with Brigham Young University-Idaho in Rexburg. The study found about two dozen people were interested in using the incubator in the first year.



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