

Alberta's Egg Farmers Begin Journey Toward Sustainability

Starting in 2015, Egg Farmers of Alberta (EFA) will be taking new approaches to help consumers increase their understanding of egg production, how hens are cared for and how production affects the environment.

Fifty years ago, many Albertans had some kind of connection to a farm; people were farmers themselves, or had farming roots just a generation or two away.

In recent decades, farms have grown larger and become fewer in number. Meanwhile, despite the province's proud farming heritage, Alberta's population today is now overwhelmingly urban.

When it comes to eggs, 164 Alberta farms produce enough for 4 million consumers in the province. Susan Schafers, a second-generation egg farmer, believes that a gap in understanding between farmers and consumers has been years in the making.

Consumers want information on egg production practices and sometimes demand changes based on perceptions about bird health and welfare, food safety and environmental impact. In Schafers' view, there's no doubt that egg farmers are feeling some pressure.

"We want consumers to know we're doing the best job possible, but it's not easy," says Schafers, who owns a 7,000-hen free-run operation near Stony Plain, west of Edmonton. "As farmers, we're busy and very focused on our birds, our eggs and our own businesses."

At times, the gap in understanding between egg farmers and consumers can seem daunting. This is why Schafers believes what's needed is not just one-way communication from farmers to consumers, but a sincere two-way dialogue.

Muneer Gilani's family has been part of the Alberta egg industry since 1976, both as farmers and as owners of Sparks Egg Grading Station, which grades and processes roughly half of all the eggs produced in the province. In Gilani's view, today's consumer has far different expectations than just a decade or two ago.

"More and more, society wants transparency," he says. "They want to know what's involved with farming practices and food production. As society moves away from having a background in agriculture, there's more of a disconnect between farmers and consumers."

Telling the story

Beyond their day-to-day work putting eggs on Albertans' tables, Gilani and Schafers are also members of the Board of Directors of Egg Farmers of Alberta (EFA), with Schafers serving as Chair.

In 2014, EFA investigated how to narrow the gap in understanding between producers and consumers. Their idea, according to General Manager Susan Gal, was to open up and share more information.

“We had started to see that some of the trust between consumers and farmers had eroded,” says Gal. “An important principle here is that we want to control our own destiny. We decided that it was important for us to tell our story.”

How should the story be told? Over a five-month period, EFA worked with consultants ‘The Prasino Group’ and staff from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development to determine what EFA needed to achieve and how best to get there. This work was supported by the federal-provincial-territorial Growing Forward 2 initiative.

This process included engaging with egg farmers, as well as egg graders, processors and retailers. EFA also gained insights from non-governmental organizations that advocate on environmental and animal care issues. EFA’s goal was to help these groups understand EFA’s values and programs, better understand these groups’ own values and beliefs and identify common ground to advance meaningful continuous improvements. These non-governmental organizations, while a bit surprised to be asked, were nonetheless happy to join the conversation.

What was it like to sit down with the *other* side of the issue? Susan Schafers notes the exchange was sometimes challenging but in hindsight, entirely necessary.

“If you don’t have the discussion, you don’t get the other person’s viewpoint and there’s no basis for understanding,” she says. “It was a big change for us to not just look at the industry internally, but to go out and speak with other stakeholders and see what’s out there.”

From these stakeholder engagements, a set of issues emerged that will be the focus of discussion over the next few years. These include hen housing, animal welfare, producer profitability, environmental stewardship and food safety.

Three pillars of sustainability

In February 2015, based on this research, EFA shared its inaugural Sustainability Report. EFA’s sustainability strategy defines sustainable egg production as *socially responsible, environmentally sound and economically viable*. It commits the organization to engage with key stakeholders, deliver accountability and transparency, and integrate work processes to improve efficiency along the egg value chain.

“Many people are needed to ensure that consumers get fresh eggs every day,” Gilani says. “The farmer, grader, processor, retailer and others need to work together to ensure we do this as efficiently as possible.”

At the heart of the strategy are three pillars: *Healthy Birds, Healthy Eggs and Healthy Farms and Communities*. Each pillar is linked to at least two key result areas where results will be monitored and shared with stakeholders.

EFA General Manager Susan Gal likes how the three pillars capture what’s most important in egg farming today, so that farmers, consumers and other stakeholders have a framework to share information, discuss the issues and build trust.

“It’s not just what we’re saying, it’s what egg farmers do every day,” she says. “Healthy Birds reflects our animal care program, Healthy Eggs relates to our food safety program and Healthy Farms and Communities highlights our important environmental program and the work we do to support communities.”

Sustainability, and the stakeholder communication that goes with it, is also central to EFA’s new vision and mission statements.

Gilani acknowledges that writing the plan may be the easy part. Implementing it may be much tougher. Egg farmers are used to focusing on their own businesses, and may fear that ultimately, consumers still won’t understand. Even so, Gilani’s on board with the new Sustainability Strategy.

“That level of openness and transparency isn’t necessarily intuitive for everyone,” he says. “But anything worth doing is a mountain to climb.”

Kerriane Koehler-Munro, Environmental Program Specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, worked closely with EFA on the development of the Sustainability Strategy. She believes this approach will help egg farmers and consumers.

“The agri-food industry operates in a complex and changing marketplace,” says Koehler-Munro. “The strategy focuses on advancing, reporting and communicating the sustainability of Alberta egg production. It will better position Alberta egg farmers to meet increasing expectations around sustainability from retailers and consumers.”

The journey’s just beginning

EFA Chair Susan Schafers shares the story of having coffee recently with a non-farming acquaintance, and being asked about hen housing. This is a complex issue that touches on production efficiency, animal welfare and economics. In discussing it, Schafers gained some insight into how far EFA’s Sustainability Strategy ultimately needs to travel.

She points out that consumers’ knowledge of agricultural practices is often far less than producers might like. Egg farmers can either remain frustrated by this situation or, as Schafers prefers, roll up their sleeves and get busy addressing it.

“We can’t expect that consumers will somehow have an understanding of egg production, when they haven’t been exposed to it,” she says. “Consumers want to know where their food comes from, and it’s up to us as producers to engage with them. This is a very exciting time to be an egg farmer, and we look forward to these next steps.”