



COMMENTARY

“The Voice of Manitoba Farmers”

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Scapegoat?

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Why is it that one of farming's biggest challenges, public relations, is the one that gets the least attention from farmers and their organizations? Other businesses and industry affiliations spend millions to get their stories across to the public, advertising their products and services as well as what they see as their roles and public responsibilities. Commercial entities with vested interests in natural resources are not shy about telling the public in the media how good of a steward they are of public resources, like air and water.

What do we do? We generally wait until a farm media reporter calls with an inquiry and hope the story puts a positive light on agriculture. We put articles in agricultural magazines and commodity newsletters, but how much impact does that have on the general public's perception of the business of agriculture and the family farm? I suspect very little!

Agriculture is beginning to receive a great deal of scrutiny because of media attention surrounding the food vs fuel debate, and the impact (fairly or unfairly) that rising commodity prices are having on inflation. As farmers, we know what it costs to produce a bushel of wheat, barley, or canola. Does the public?

We know how many loaves of bread can be made from a bushel of wheat or bottles of beer from a bushel of barley. When Susie or Joe go to the store and see large increases in food prices, do they know this is far more than any increase in commodity prices would warrant?

Does the consumer complain about the price of fuel? Maybe a little, but not as much as they did about what they paid for that last bag of groceries. Who gets all of the negative attention because of food and fuel increases, with headlines such as “Farmers reap windfall because of record high prices” and “Food used for fuel pushing up prices” and “Cost of food driving up inflation”?

Who is reaping the windfall profits from agriculture and creating these rising costs to consumers? **It's not farmers -- despite all the headlines.** Even with increased commodity prices, the return on investment in farming lags way behind that of value-added industries that use primary products from agriculture.

“Whatever the market will bear” seems to be a common catchphrase for many companies. The rider on that statement is “...providing we can blame someone else for the increase.”

Unfortunately, agriculture and farmers are increasingly becoming the scapegoat.

What can we do? We have to be prepared to spend some dollars to promote our industry, to do the research and verify our message. Then we need to get that message out to the general public about how important we as farmers are to the economy, to the environment and to the safety of the primary products we supply to the processing industry.

Maybe we also need to supply some information about the prices farmers receive for their product, and our costs to produce it. We may also need to help them connect the dots on who is actually manufacturing the price increases they see in the store. Perhaps that may generate some political attention and a few media inquiries to other agricultural industries, asking about who is actually reaping those windfall profits!