

Executive Summary

The forage industry is significant in Alberta. There are an estimated 30,000 forage producers in Alberta, managing more than nine million hectares of land in forage and managed range and bush. Many other individuals and organizations are affiliated with the forage industry: forage producers, livestock producers, forage processors, suppliers, seed producers and sales companies, managers of rangeland/bush pastures and natural areas, conservation and reclamation organizations, turf grass and apiculture.

Forage has been a specialized area in governments (though recently there appears to be a decline in interest at the provincial and federal levels) and in the agricultural programs at many Alberta colleges and universities. At present, there is no Alberta organization to represent the many producers and affiliates associated with forages.

A grassroots movement to explore the formation of a provincial forage network began in 2007. The Agricultural Research and Extension Council of Alberta (ARECA) agreed to champion the formation of a provincial forage network in its infancy. Industry stakeholder endorsements and funds were obtained in support of a grant from the Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food (ACAAF) program of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. ACAAF approved funding for Phase 1, for activities related to sector development, i.e. aimed at determining the level of interest and potential involvement of the forage industry in such a network.

The potential formation of the Alberta Forage Industry Network (AFIN) attracted the interest and participation of a large cross-section of the industry. A discussion paper and survey were shared with 111 Alberta organizations and individuals related directly or indirectly to the forage industry.

A forum held in Red Deer in December 2007 drew 65 participants, double the expected attendance of stakeholders; most delegates represented small to large organizations. This group overwhelmingly supported the formation of a provincial forage network, and two dozen people indicated their active interest in volunteering to help make AFIN become a reality. Discussions went a long way in identifying the challenges and opportunities for the forage industry, and the vision and objectives of the network.

Priority issues were seen to be:

- 1. Issues related to identity and recognition of value of forage industry.**
- 2. Issues related to research: funding support and gap between industry research needs and government funding program criteria.**
- 3. Issues related to sustainability: rising costs, competition for land use, etc.**

Priority opportunities were identified as:

- 1. Opportunities to Communicate: united voice, info exchange**
- 2. Opportunities for Research: research priorities, funding, extension**
- 3. Opportunities to Influence: advocacy, government policy, funding**
- 4. Opportunities for Environment: water, air and soil quality; land use**

Priority objectives for AFIN were identified as:

1. **Communications: identify common concerns and speak with one voice**
2. **Advocacy: influence government and industry re: policy, environment**
3. **Leadership: Be a champion for forage research and extension**

Priority next steps in forming AFIN were agreed to and included:

1. **Gather information and awareness of the value of the forage industry.**
2. **Establish credibility for the network by uniting (leads to funding, influence)**
3. **Form an organization and mandate that will work for us**
4. **Find champions to support AFIN.**
5. **Speak with one voice as advocates for the forage industry.**

A preliminary report was drafted and a follow-up session was held in Nisku on February 5, 2008. This time participants focused on prioritizing needs and next steps, and formulating the ways and means to structure and start up operations.

Though a stand-alone organization is desired over the long term, participants recognized that at start up, AFIN may need to be primarily volunteer-driven and dependent on short term funding. They also identified teams or committees that would take on this work: Executive, Research, Communications, Education/Outreach, Policy and Advocacy, Opportunities, and Funding and Sustainability. There were 15 people who volunteered to lead or serve on ones of these teams; added to the people who volunteered at the Red Deer forum, we now have a solid base of volunteers to continue the work.

The two primary needs are to activate communications and fundraising. Communications within and outside the network is a priority focus as AFIN continues to attract and strengthen its relationships with people in industry, government and other organizations. Start-up funding and long-term sustainability were recognized as challenges for AFIN as they are for any new organization; discussions on potential funding sources offered a wide range of options. Though there was a consensus at the Red Deer forum for establishing a stand-alone organization, participants at the second forum agreed that funding realities make an affiliated network more practical in the short term. It is hoped that additional AACAF funding can be obtained to support Phase 2, which will focus on the establishment of the new organization.

A draft vision and mandate for the new organization were developed:

Vision: The Alberta Forage Industry Network will speak with one voice for the forage industry in Alberta.

Mandate: The Alberta Forage Industry Network provides a unified provincial voice for forages in order to foster two way communication, champion research and extension, and influence policy and practice.