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West-Central Forage Association (WCFA) is a non-profit organization serving six counties in the west central region of Alberta - Brazeau, Lac Ste. Anne, Leduc, Parkland, Yellowhead, and Woodlands. WCFA specializes in applied research and extension delivery for forage and livestock farmers across the value chain (please see Appendix A for agricultural statistics specific to the region and scope of typical producers accessing WCFA programming). For over 35 years WCFA has built strong producer connections stemming from grass-roots initiatives and producer involvement that is evident at all levels including the board of directors, project cooperators, project ideas, and in the dissemination of information. This is a model unique in North America and has been very successful in connecting with agriculture producers and encouraging them to strengthen/improve/enhance their management practices.

Some of the work the Association has done includes Annual Regional Forage Variety Trials; Triticale Swath Grazing Demonstration Trials and Perennial Variety Trials; conservation agriculture events and programs such as drought mitigation workshops and Environmental Farm Plans; and agro-environmental programs for youth including Pond Days, 4-H Riparian Health Education Program, and Classroom Agriculture Program (see Appendix B). WCFA also produces a monthly newsletter- *Forage Views*, hosts a website, is active in social media, and provides a selection of rental equipment, and engages with producers through one-on-one consultation and site specific recommendations.

WCFA believes strongly in collaboration and partnering with other organizations throughout the sector including not-for-profits, industry, and all levels of government (see Appendix C for a list of current partners). This is done through the delivery of programs, information, and funding.

WCFA accesses core program funding by means of the Agriculture Opportunity Fund (AOF) through AB Agriculture and Forestry (AAF). Core program funding refers to financial support that covers basic “core” operational and administrative costs of an organization, including some salary of full-time staff, facility rental, specialize equipment, communications, accounting, and the direct expenses of day-to-day operations. This funding is also important as it is used to leverage external funding.

AOF is currently capped at \$1.5 million and has remained at the initial dollar amount for over twelve years with one addition of environmental funding in 2011. In 2006 there was a capital funding grant and there have been two supplemental funds (2010 and 2012) that were available for staffing and capital expenditures. AOF has a requirement of matched funding rated at a 70:30 basis. In 2014, in response to industry requests for more research capacity in the province, GOA announced that the AOF fund would be doubled to \$3.0 million through the Agriculture and Food Innovation Endowment Fund. Research associations were instructed to hire needed staff, expand services, and capacity. When elected, Mr. Prentice closed the endowment fund and then Minister Olson announced that AOF would remain at the initial dollar value. Due to that announcement WCFA has already had to cut back one staffing position.

Funding for the agriculture research and forage associations across the province is provided in part through core program funding and the balance is accessed as project based funding. Project funding is aimed at specific activities on a case-by-case basis. WCFA takes on additional projects to fulfill its mandates, meet the needs of agriculture producers, and meet its matched funding requirements. However, many of the project funders will not cover full time employee wages, capital purchases, travel, or any administrative costs associated with project delivery. Typically, project funding is sourced based on alignment with funders' priorities and funding availability through a variety of industry partnerships. Considerable time and resources are spent in developing projects and reporting, which is not compensated for in this funding model. If viewed on a long-term basis, it is the opinion of the WCFA Board of Directors that these contracts are compromising the sustainability of the Association.

WCFA has increased staffing and operational capacity considerably in the last seven years but with the current funding model struggles to meet operational costs and increases to costs of living—making it difficult to retain employees and deliver consistent, quality programming. WCFA is always looking to source long-term, sustainable solutions within industry and other government funding programs. This has been increasingly challenging, as federal funding is now allocated to Growing Forward 2 initiatives that have proven to be virtually inaccessible (see Appendix D for a brief budget with current operating costs). Research in the forage and livestock sectors have unique funding challenges as there are very little check-off sources and forages are a long-term crop with little inputs that industry can sell to producers.

WCFA faces challenges and a number of barriers to success which include:

- Capital costs for replacement of specialized research equipment;
- Competition for skilled labour and providing competitive wages;
- Instable funding model due to the changing funding climate;
- Inability to secure matched funding that pays for core operational costs.

The WCFA Board sees that the producers accessing services provided by the Association are seeing increased financial success and environmental sustainability of their farms. This means they are more successful businesses, less reliant on government insurance and compensation programs, and are reducing the negative environmental impacts agriculture can potentially have on the landscape and water systems—benefitting all residents within the county and the province. See Appendix E for more information on savings that producers can make by implementing practices learned through WCFA programs.

West-Central Forage Association wishes to continue to provide these services, but to do so must be able to access stable funding to overcome the barriers outlined above. Support of agriculture research associations across the province is generally strong, with county contributions ranging from \$10,000 to \$60,000 per year.

WCFA is asking for the counties directly served to explore the value of our organization, and the services we provide for county ratepayers. We ask you to consider increasing your contribution to West-Central Forage Association core funding so that we can continue to provide valuable services that directly benefit forage and livestock producers within your county.

Grant Taillieu
President
West-Central Forage Association