

Workshop Title: Agro-bio: Experiences in a Grain Co-operative

Speaker(s) & their titles: Loic Dewavrin (QC)

Executive Summary

Loic Dewavrin owns and operates a 1500-acre farm in Quebec, approximately 35 minutes from Montreal. Loic transitioned the family farm to organic and his primary product is oil from his sunflower field crop, producing over 12,000 litres of oil per year. In this presentation Loic discusses how he helped found a grain cooperative in Quebec, touching on the benefits and challenges of small producers banding together. The talk covers the creation of the co-op, the reasons for starting, the current projects they are undertaking, and their hopes for growth and future work.

Detailed Notes

FOUNDATION OF THE CO-OP

Coop Agrobio Quebec is a cooperative of farmers specializing in 100% organic grains such as corn, soybeans, wheat, spelt, oats, barley, buckwheat, sunflower, and many others.

Founded in 2006 by a group of passionate and determined producers, it now includes 24 member-farmers covering an area of about 4,000 hectares of agricultural land in Quebec and Ontario.

In 2006 a group of five members decided to band together to form the co-op feeling that they were not always well represented by the [Union des producteurs agricoles \(UPA\)](#), since most of its members are conventional. The group felt that forming a co-op would give them more influence on the market and allow them to share the same values and resources.

Some added incentives for starting a co-operative:

- Better market perspective by sharing information between farmers instead of hoarding knowledge or info.
- Strength as a group
 - from sharing equipment and knowledge.
- Friendship and socialization
 - breaking isolation
 - share ideas and experiment and trial

Phase one (3 years): finding ourselves

- Defining the mission

- Secure seed supply for members by members
- Improve marketing of grains produced by members - which would help secure better prices.
- Help solve issues with GMOs and lack of organic seed
- Shared values
- Getting acquainted

Phase 2 (create working groups and initiating projects)

The co-op first had to find resources.

- money
 - government programs
 - donations
 - in-kind from members

The co-op has been successful in getting funding from generous donors and some government funders.

- Human Resources
 - willing members
 - consultants
 - employees
 - one manager/coordinator
 - may hire someone for marketing

Results

- increasing membership
 - don't grow too fast because everyone needs to be comfortable and you want new members to share values
 - new members join through referral
 - more union and market power
- overall improvement of members conditions through marketing
 - sharing contacts and information
 - discussing prices and quality

Forming a co-op has allowed members to jointly capitalize.

- From equipment and goods, acquiring new tools.
- Hopefully a building or office
- Some equipment to clean seeds
- Processing
- Possibly a distribution center to do deliveries

- The idea is not necessarily to have a centralized location but it could better utilize the member's individual resources, helping make various things accessible to different members.

Forming a cooperative can help bolster the organic sector.

- Strengthening seed supply
- GMO contamination testing: Some seeds purchased are from companies that also sell GMOS so testing is important to keep certifications.
- Sharing the cost of testing can make it easier and more affordable
 - Tests are \$260 each
 - Better deals in groups - \$180 each if 5 people join

Finding alternatives to hybrids – Open-pollinated R&D

- Finding seeds that are well adapted to regional climate
- From seed banks
 - Loic is acting as a seed grower and saver (saving around 400 ears of each population)
- Farmers sharing
- Research stations on farm
 - average year there are 5 farms testing new populations
 - long term goal is to obtain and maintain their own hybrid varieties which would allow farms to save seed and share amongst farmers
- Currently focusing on corn for feed as it has a better market value and collaborating with Dr. Reid (Ottawa Central Research Station)
 - using some organic methods but also many seeds are treated
 - support from Quebec government

SEED CLEANING AND CONDITIONING

The co-op hopes to share equipment and perhaps purchase useful equipment as a group.

- Equipment sharing projects
- For seeds and grain processing
 - perhaps a mobile seed cleaning facility
 - tricky because everyone would need at the same time
 - will also need someone to operate the machinery - more employees to hire so more cost

MARKETING PROJECTS

- Sharing grain user contacts
 - group sales
 - export projects
 - Looking into some export possibilities in France (oats), but it takes time to make contacts and people involved should be compensated for their work.
 - Grain processing projects
 - Value chain development
 - value added production

FOOD CORN PROJECT

- From open pollinated sources of corn populations

Regional Farms Project

- Select different farms in different regions to set up main facilities to use equipment
- Sharing storage, dryer, cleaner, mill, etc.
 - example: Loic is building a mill which members can use - still working on how it would be used
 - creating a brand that all members sell under but have their individual farm and identities' on labels.

MILL AND CO-OP BRAND

- member initiated
- still in progress

Structure of COOP

- 6 board members
- Elected at general assembly
- Currently 24 members
- One vote per member regardless of size
- Asking members to market a percentage of their product with the co-op
- Voting by majority and consensus
- Currently members are from around a 200km radius from Montreal

Still working on how members would pay and for processing. For example, Loic is opening his processing equipment for members, but there are a lot of costs associated

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with this, so how would it be billed? It is often more expensive than people imagine. Would the co-op be billed and would that be included in the member fees?

Co-op members are obliged still to be a part of the provincial union.

Loic spent some time working in the UPA but it has been hard to get support. In the future the co-op could have a stronger voice, but still it is small.

When you go to the meetings there is an overwhelming majority of conventional farmers so the organic producers have no say. This is what prompted the formation of a cooperative.

See www.coopagrobioquebec.com

For anyone interested in Loic's farm refer to notes from his presentation titled *Oilseed Production*.