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Meet Matt Sawyer

This third-generation Alberta farmer has traveled the world to share with his customers how he cares for the land, crops, cattle, and water on his farm.

On an early morning in early springs, Matt Sawyer heads out to check his cows and can sense a feeling of change in the air.

"It's just beautiful and so peaceful out there," he says. "The cows are calving right now and you can just feel spring in the air. I really do love the changing of the seasons. The trees are signalling now that it's time to get going."

Looking forward and embracing change isn't out of the ordinary for Matt. This is typical of the way he approaches life and work. As president at Sawyer Farms Ltd., Matt works alongside his wife Tara, and his father, Glenn, 100 kilometers northeast of Calgary on a farm started by his grandfather.

The Sawyers grow a variety of hard red spring wheat, different varieties of malt barley and canola, in addition to growing hay and raising black angus cattle. Export is a crucial part of their business. With this in mind, Matt has been heavily involved in opening doors and creating global opportunities for his fellow Canadian farmers.

Matt was on the ground in Europe during the preparation for the Canada and European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). He met with various farm groups and government representatives to promote Canadian agriculture. "As a young farmer engaged in agriculture, I wanted to be part of expressing our desire to show people how we farm, and to connect the producer with the consumer."

In making these connections, having a producer involved is key.

"To meet in person and talk about our farming practices and what we do on a grassroots level builds a trust with the customer that is so important in our business," Matt says. "Our customers are interested, they want to know how that grain is handled, how it's raised and grown on the farm before it hits that train or barge."

NEW MARKETS, NEW PRODUCTS

Matt joined another mission in 2014 on a project with Obihiro University in Japan, this time to assist in promoting Canadian barley as an alternative to corn in feeding cattle. He also joined G3 Canada Limited, formerly the Canadian Wheat Board, to explore more opportunities in Japan.





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"We met with Sanwa Brewery about testing Canmore, a barley variety established at Lacombe, for the Japanese Shochu market. There was a lot of excitement around that."

Combining his farming and travel experiences, Matt has gained valuable perspective in terms of where he sees potential for his operation. All of Sawyer Farms' crops are exported — he sees a strong international demand for wheat, canola, and especially barley, including both malt and feed varieties.

"I've done some trade missions with Alberta Barley and the Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership," he says. "We're looking at Mexico where diabetes is a big concern. Barley, with its low glycemic index, is a nice alternative for those struggling with obesity and diabetic issues. I saw a demand and massive interest for barley there."

While Matt has seen great potential in the export markets, he also notes some challenges Canadian farmers will likely continue to face in the upcoming years.

"It's so competitive," he said. "When you start to participate in these trade missions and travel around, you realize what a global market place agricultural export is. Even from your farm east of Calgary, you're competing with people globally, and it's key to promote and differentiate yourself. There are a few ways to do this, whether you highlight the quality of your product and practices, or even showcase your reliability in your ability to supply that product."

STEWARDS OF SOIL AND WATER

Matt and Tara have three children, Emmett, Cassidy, and Quinn, and have a keen interest in the long-term success of their farm, as well as a commitment to improving the soil on their farm and the water that flows across their land.

Matt continues to look ahead in a proactive manner. While his family has always taken steps to preserve their land and be mindful of the environment, he enjoys getting involved in finding new solutions as times change.



The Sawyer family on vacation.

"We've made several improvements," he said. "From when my grandfather farmed, working the land a fair amount in order to control the weeds, to converting to a no-till form of farming, we're able to seed directly into the standing stubble from the previous year's crop. That in itself has made our farm sustainable as far as our carbon capture model. It's a net carbon sink."

The Sawyers also take steps to protect water quality on their farm, such as watering cattle off-stream, incorporating a portable, solar-powered watering system and fencing off waterways. Currently, they're experimenting with tile drainage to manage an unusually high water table that has created a high occurrence of saline soil conditions.

"I'm also working with the Government of Alberta on a water-shed project to ensure the water that starts on our farm in the creeks and the coulees is just as fresh, or fresher, when it leaves our place," Matt says.

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