

Georgian Central Soil & Crop Improvement Association *Summer Bulletin, 2020*

Serving Members of Bruce, Dufferin, Grey, North and South Simcoe Counties



***Great Lakes Fields & Riverbend Farms, Bruce County
Fiete Suhr, Irene Kollmann, & daughters Rena & Anna***



Grassroots Innovation
Since 1939



HURON TRACTOR

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

HOLMES
AGRO

Appreciation is extended to the following Partner Sponsors:



Huron Bay Co-operative



ALPINE®



Ontario 

Member Spotlight



Aerial View of Riverbend Farms

Fiete Suhr, and his wife Irene Kollmann, are 1st generation Canadian farmers. Together with their two children, Rena, and Anna, they farm in the Paisley/Port Elgin area. We profiled them in 2008 when we were launching our first colour issue of the Georgian

newsletter, when Fiete was the Region's President. It seemed fitting to return to chat with this farm family as we move to the exciting online Innovator initiative.

Background

Fiete grew up in Germany, and Irene in Austria. Fiete has his bachelor's degree in Agricultural Economics, and is a CCA, while Irene holds a PhD in Agriculture. They both studied conventional agriculture, but Irene was always intrigued at looking at the whole ecological system, especially from the nutritional side. Fiete first came to Canada in 1979, spending considerable time here, and immigrated in 1983. He met Irene when she came to Canada on a 4-day business trip, and they were married in 1993. Their daughters were born in 1995 and 1998.

Their Farms

This family is in a somewhat unique position in that they farm conventionally and organically. In their company Great Lakes Fields, they farm 5500 acres conventionally with the work done by custom operators using no-till or minimal till cultivation. All of the crops are Non-GMO and include: corn, soybeans, wheat, canola, and alfalfa. They try to avoid spraying with insecticides, although they have had to spray for soybean aphids. The only time they use fungicides is on winter wheat, as they believe that the fusarium risk is high with the shorter rotation. Keeping that rented land base is challenging with the competitiveness in land rentals. Riverbend Farms, with land purchased in 2000 and 2005, consists of 800 acres, farmed organically. Their fields are 2/3 heavy clay. Everything but the combining is done with their own equipment. The diversified organic crop mixture, with no fixed rotation includes: corn, soybeans, spelt, oats, peas, sunflowers, black beans, winter canola, winter wheat, winter barley, and hay for their 150 ewes. The sheep and cover crops are vital to add fertility to the organic crops. Fiete has grown cover crops for 20 years on the organic side. This year they are going to use in-crop cover crops as well. They are seeding white clover into sunflowers, and white clover and oats into their soybeans. Cover crops are also used at Great Lakes Fields. Fiete and Irene believe that a longer rotation, with some hay/forage integrated into it, will be more beneficial to soil health, and increase the resilience of the soil, and the total system. On the organic side they have more crops in the rotation which helps on the risk management front, and provides more flexibility to meet market demand, or deal with varying field conditions/weather implications. They strive to use as many winter crops as possible to have the soils covered in the winter. Since the timing to get into the fields for planting or weed control on the organic side is much more crucial vs conventional, there is a sweet spot of how much you can realistically crop

organically. They feel that their organic operation is in that sweet spot now.

Organic & Conventional Practices

Much of our conversation focussed on a comparison of their organic and conventional operations, but both Fiete and Irene stressed that there is a place for all systems in agriculture, there is no right or wrong way. Based on their own personal opinion, they feel that in the long run, the more sustainable and integrated organic approach is a better way of farming, as it will keep the earth, the soil, and the whole ecological system healthier. Farming organically means that you are living with nature, instead of trying to control nature. If you look at advertising, farmers appear to be at war against weeds and insects. Fiete and Irene do not want to destroy insects or fungi that they consider highly essential to soil life. With an approach that strives to mimic nature, they hope to create produce of higher quality, instead of higher quantity. The focus is not to squeeze the last bushel out of every field, the focus is to create and grow more quality food. When farming organically, you have to work much more in-tune with the soil, and with the weather than on the conventional side, because you don't have the artificial "crutches" of nitrogen, pesticides, fungicides and growth regulators. Irene clarified that although they are certified organic, they are aiming to practice regenerative farming. Fiete commented that "If we don't integrate livestock properly into our cropping systems, we are never going to be able to build back our soils again, as it is impossible to do that with artificial fertilizers."

Their workload is similar on the two farms, but the management/timing part of the organic operation is much more demanding. If you are not there at the right time with the tine weeder or the row cultivator, there is no going back to try to reconcile it with a pesticide or another 50lb of N. Every morning you need to establish what has priority. Fiete commends his conventional crew, as he can set them up for their tasks in the morning, and in the afternoon, he focusses on the organic farming. Scouting on the organic side is much more intense as you need to identify those crucial timing windows. You need more patience on the organic side, and be prepared to have less control over what is happening in the fields. Fiete stated that "Weeds don't bother me as long as they are not detrimental to yield. Even on the conventional side, I am not getting the last weed eradicated."

Cultivation is key in organic practices. Their row cultivator, that they have equipped with a Camera Guidance System, is crucial to their operation. The CGS helps lessen driver fatigue, keeps you on the rows, gives you the opportunity to cultivate closer to the plant, and assists drivers with less experience. The tine weeder is also essential, controlling the weeds ideally when they are white hair roots. If you hit it right, it can control 70% of the weeds. They use the plough if they need to incorporate hay crops or clover establishment. The plough is used on 50% of the acreage if it is late in the year. Fiete stated that organic practices are more physical soil disturbing than no till practices. But he is not convinced that more tillage always is detrimental to the soil. Explaining that further, he believes that if you till the land carefully and incorporate living organisms that stay alive within the soil, it is not as detrimental as pesticides. Irene added that soil disturbance is one of the downfalls in current organic

Member Spotlight

practices, and there is no way around that yet, but with optimism in their voices, they said that they are working on that. They do not use no-till on their organic farm yet, but are working on disturbing the soil less. Some people are using no-till with a rye cover crop and a roller crimper. Fiete commented that that process is very weather and soil dependent. If you have a nice loam soil you can do it, but if you have wet clay it will be challenging. Since there is more cultivation on the organic side, some believe that there are more passes on the field. Depending on the crop, Fiete explained that there are similar numbers of passes in conventional and organic practices, but they are of a different nature. While you drive through the fields with pesticides in conventional farming, you use mechanical weed control in organic fields.

Most people want to know how the yields compare, and that depends on the crop. Soybeans have no yield drag if you can manage the weeds in such a way that they are not detrimental. Black beans have comparable yields as well. Corn yields depend on the rotation. If you follow an alfalfa plow down with a composted manure application, you will get the same corn yield. Fiete says that they are limited because they do not have enough animal units compared to their grain crop acreage. The markets are more stable on the organic side than conventional. They fluctuate from year to year but: soybeans have been stable for the past 6-7 years; corn goes up and down with feed demands; grain is stable; and spelt has had a lot of fluctuation, dependent on supply and demand. Overall, if you have a good buyer, and you contract your crop, it is stable. Whereas on the conventional side, Fiete says that if you are not a good marketer, and if you are not looking every day at Chicago numbers, you might lose 20 cents a bushel in a day. Their crops that are insurable are covered by Crop Insurance. Fiete would like to see improvements in this area. On the organic side, it is only corn, soybeans and wheat that have an organic price attached to them. If they grow sunflowers, canola, peas or black beans, those crops have the conventional prices attached to them. So, if Riverbend Farms has a crop failure, and the yield is below their long term averages, they only get the conventional price for the difference, instead of the organic price, which is usually close to double for most of the crops. The production costs are significantly lower on the organic side, as you are missing a lot of inputs.

Innovation

Irene commented that she is always contemplating how to improve things in farming. She is working with many ideas, but they have not created anything that is completely fresh and new, yet. She has recently taken a soil health course and has purchased a microscope to better assess the soils in their two cropping systems. She will be evaluating soils based on bacterial life, fungus, nematodes, protozoa etc. She stressed that it is not enough to just focus on the physical, the chemical compounds of soil, or even the biological activity. You cannot just look at what is going on in the soil, you need to look at the whole picture, and consider what is happening above the soil too - insects, and birds. She also added that we need to factor in how we are changing the climate. Climate is the biggest player in agriculture, especially in the last couple of years. Fiete

added that they are open to any new ideas and are keen to listen to others at conferences in order to discover new approaches, and implement what suits them and their farms.

Both agree that in their organic operation there is a constant scramble to find suitable equipment. Having the ability to modify or build your own custom innovative equipment, would be an asset to the operation.

Industry Outlook

Covid-19 has highlighted some of the concerns that Fiete and Irene have had for some time. Our industry is too heavily focused on commercial high volume production of a few products. The North American market, especially with Corn, is dependent on ethanol. But, there is no future for ethanol because transportation will be fuelled by alternative sources like electricity or hydrogen. We have seen what is happening in the slaughterhouses recently, which has brought to the forefront the fact that there are not enough players there. We must decentralize and go back to different practices. Fiete believes that if you want to sell meat in the future, it will have to be more conscientiously grown to meet consumer demand. Consumers are choosing more healthy food, and they want to know that their food is produced in a more sustainable way. The demand for local meat will grow, and we need more local abattoirs to meet that need. Irene mentioned that "Buy Local" is a huge trend as well, which has ballooned during the pandemic. Irene is intrigued to see if that trend will remain after Covid has passed. Their daughter Rene believes that soon we will trend to micro farming, and Irene thinks that there will be an increased demand for small acreages of land as city dwellers migrate to the country to farm. There has certainly been a back to the land movement during these uncertain times.

Replying to a question if they are missing holidays, Irene commented laughingly that most time it feels that they have a holiday living on the farm anyway, and there is always the wintertime to enjoy. During these Covid times, her heart goes out to those people sitting in the city in a little apartment. She expressed that "We live in paradise!" Often on an early morning of their busy and demanding days, Fiete and Irene sit outside on the stairs with their coffee and discuss the daily activities – that is their daily holiday.

It was an absolute pleasure to speak with Fiete and Irene. This dynamic farm duo's enthusiasm and passion for agriculture is certainly contagious!! I would like to thank them for agreeing to participate in this Member Spotlight.

Lorie Smith

