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Jim Irvine, Dufferin SCIA

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Member Spotlight

Jim Irvine joined Dufferin County Soil & Crop around the year 2000. Although not a farmer, Jim is described as having been a "critical, life-blood member of the Dufferin S&C for many years". I was pleased to have the opportunity to interview him for the spotlight article this month!

Jim's dad was raised on a farm, and Jim grew up in the Grand Valley area. He said that although he never lived on a farm himself, he remembers spending summers helping his cousins with haying and harvest. His real connection with agriculture began when he was 15 years old and started a part time job at the local FS store. What began as a high-school job in the retail store has led to a life-long career in elevator management, grain buying and marketing.

Jim says that when he started out, Grand Valley had a small set of elevators that were managed by Charlie Zietsma and then Brian Hillis. Jim moved from working in the store to working in the elevators, and was able to take over management when Hillis moved on. From the late 1980's to the early 1990's all of the elevator business was in canola which was a very large crop in their cooler 'highlands' region. Through the '90s low heat unit beans began to be grown. In 1998 FS bought the Gowland property on Highway 109 and in 1999 built a new elevator which greatly expanded their business. Around that point they started accepting wheat as well. Up to 2010, Jim managed the entire Grand Valley FS location – including the people, grain business, retail store and agronomy divisions. In 2010 the retail store was closed and his position shifted to focusing solely on the grain business, covering all the original area as well as Dufferin and Wellington counties. In 2014, Jim became the Zone originator for Central and Midwestern Ontario. This meant he now covers a much larger area and spends more time on the road and on the phone, talking to producers.

Jim said that his Fridays are devoted solely to setting up trucks, talking to traders and solidifying plans for the following week. He noted that there's a lot more storage on farms now, and the logistics of moving grain between farms, elevators, and buyers can be very complex. Also, not only are they working with the crop that is currently being harvested, but they're always looking ahead to the following one too; aware of storage capacity down the road.

He said when it comes to the marketing end of his job, he always tries to show customers where their values are and is not the type of person to push them one way or another. He humbly joked that maybe he should have pushed a little more recently, with the way prices are going but admitted that it's not really in his personality to push versus make suggestions.

Jim said that the job is to look at historical facts, and that they often work with fifteen-year trends and make recommendations based on that, relying a lot on averages. He noted that the job gets tough when world events throw those trends all out of wack, giving the war in Ukraine as an example. He also noted that grain marketing deals on a global economy. The US used to be a leader in markets, but now South America has taken over in corn and soys. What happens down there in December is comparable to our season in June, so the markets are always moving, and people need to pay attention to that.

He commented that corn through the winter mostly goes into the feed trade, with the Ontario industry being strong and having lots of feed mills looking for ingredients. Wheat in the off season goes to flour mills, and in the summer is shipped to Hamilton, Goderich or Owen Sound for export. He noted that unfortunately for export markets to exist, Canadian product needs to be cheaper than other places. In general, Hamilton is the hub for exports and corn, soybeans, wheat and canola are all shipped out of there. He specified the importance of Ontario's elevator system in all of this grain and marketing business too, saying nobody has enough space, and much of the crop needs drying at an elevator. The system needs to be strong for the grain industry to keep moving along properly.

When asked about changes that Jim's seen in ag over the years, he commented on the types of operations in Grand Valley and beyond. He said around them a lot of the cow-calf producers have disappeared, but they have given rise to more chicken barns, and bigger dairy operations. There are some larger hog barns being

Jeff Luckhardt (right) and Jim Irvine (left) at a stop on a past yield tour.

put up too, but not the number of pigs that there were years ago.

Jim in front of the Grand Valley elevators.

Jim had a gratifying comment that he sees lots of young people getting into agriculture as well. He noted many kids are going to Ridgetown after high school, and on lots of farms he is working with the 3rd generation in the family now. He shared that he sees whole families involved in the operation; wives, sons and daughters are decision makers too. Jim commented that there are a lot of operations where the kids are coming home and expanding or improving the family farm, especially with more supply management commodities in the area. In his words, they have "lots of really good farms and great farmers".

Jim felt that even outside of being a producer, agriculture offers a lot of career opportunities to young people wanting to join the industry. He said, "we all struggle to find enough good people" and noted that there is great opportunity for young people to get into the business. A lot of folks go into agronomy but he feels there is lots of space in grain marketing as well. He commented that when the markets are running you see a real rush, and excitement in the industry, making it a fun place to be.

When asked about challenges for agriculture, his first thought was in the balance of commodity prices versus input prices, noting that the price of inputs haven't come down as much as those of crops. He said that from 2020 to 2023 the price of inputs followed crop prices up, but they haven't dropped comparatively. Not wanting to broach a sensitive subject, but feeling it would be remiss not to mention, he also noted that fuel prices haven't come down, and the carbon tax is affecting everyone; from combining to trucking to drying. Globally, Jim shared that there is a huge American crop this year, and with every report those numbers seem to grow too. That will contribute to a price drop, and for Canadian grains to stay competitive we'll need to beat them on yield, a challenging goal with many crops getting in late in 2024.

When I spoke to Jim they had just finished up the first week of two in their Great Lakes Grains crop tour, in which they stop and inspect fields all the way from Windsor to the Embrun/Ottawa areas. He said they'd covered 141 fields in the previous four days and still had many more to go. Looking at fields this time of year gives them an idea of what is coming in the harvest season ahead. He noted that a lot of the crop seemed to be behind, and attributed that to a slow start in May, joking that they'd like to see no frosts in September, please! They have been very happy with wheat yields so far and noted that that crop has been early. Jim commented that the last time they saw wheat coming off the fields without needing drying was in 2012. He said that falling numbers have been a huge issue in the past three to four years, and so far this year's have been good.

Jim is very active outside of work at FS. He actually took radio broadcasting in college (while still working part time for the co-op!) and did a short stint with a radio station before a throat injury ended that career path. He now announces races at Sauble Speedway on weekends. In the past Jim was involved with their local Junior D & C hockey teams and is a Past President of Grand Valley Minor Hockey. On top of those activities, Jim performed on the Super Dogs team for 20 years and played flyball with his dogs too!

Jim joined Dufferin Soil & Crop around the year 2000 and was nominated onto the local board. When the association was struggling to keep a consistent secretary, he filled in for the position, and took on the secretary-treasurer role fulltime from the fall of 2003 or 2004 until the fall of 2015. He has remained a member of their board since, and now organizes their highly successful Seed & Feed Show and AGM each year.

Jim giving out 2024 Crop tour results at the FS booth at the Outdoor Farm Show.

I'd like to extend a huge thank you to Jim for agreeing to be highlighted for the member spotlight, and for taking the time to speak with me on one of those busy Friday afternoons! I know the Dufferin SCIA is very grateful for his years of service, experience and insight, and I appreciate his willingness to share some of those perspectives with the region as well!