

Extending road life and feeding the world

Owen Roberts, Urban Cowboy

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A team from Surface Green Solutions demonstrates a new biodegradable soybean oil sealant that restores asphalt and prolongs the life of roads, streets and parking lots.

The debate over using grain for food, fuel or other industrial products hit another crescendo last week when the United Nations warned of more pending problems on the food frontier.

It said there's little buffer left in world grain reserves anymore, which have further dwindled this year owing to poor production in grain-producing countries, mainly the U.S., which was rocked with drought.

Basically, we're consuming more than we're producing. And once again, food prices are inching up.

That's prompted doomsday predictions, including one from longtime global agriculture watcher Lester Brown who warns of more civil unrest if food production can't keep up with demand.

It's important to acknowledge such warnings. Privileged countries such as Canada need to help those less fortunate grow food for themselves, through a combination of education for better management and more crop and livestock options suited for specific regions.

Back home, part of the research required to keep Ontario farmers' production humming along concerns the environment. The domestic population won't tolerate feed-the-world practices that put too much pressure on their own surroundings. That's one reason Ontario farmers have individual environmental farm plans that guide them through increasingly tough regulations designed to look after the population's best interests. And it drives agri-food research activity at the University of Guelph, sponsored by the sector's chief research funding source, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

It's a twist on a theme when farmers' harvests go toward making products specifically dedicated to helping the environment. Actually, it happens a lot, but like most of agriculture, the incredible versatility of basic commodities such as soybeans and corn is not well understood.

Last Thursday, the Guelph-based Grain Farmers of Ontario and Soy 20/20 demonstrated that versatility when they hosted a demonstration of an asphalt sealant called RePLAY. In the increasingly busy parking lot of the Ontario AgriCentre in Guelph, officials showed how the product is applied and explained how it can extend the life of asphalt by up to 15 years.

The product, which is manufactured in the U.S., still needs Ontario-based research to prove its usefulness here. But the potential is significant. Consider how many thousands of miles of asphalt cover Ontario, and the huge cost of maintaining those roads. Good roads, though, are essential for Ontario farmers to transport their harvests for shipping abroad. Good roads are also needed to attract and service businesses and industries the province desperately wants and needs to help balance its bottom line.

It's kind of ironic that agriculture would have this kind of a role promoting manufacturing sector infrastructure, I suppose. But then again, agriculture and food processing has now been established as the leading economic driver in Ontario. So maybe that irony no longer exists.

In any event, the grain farmers' group also says products such as RePLAY have the potential to open a new market opportunity for Ontario soybean farmers. This may seem to run counter to the need to have farmers feed the world. But soybeans are already a globally exchanged commodity. A system is in place. Owing to soybeans' versatility, it's the industrial sector that holds as much promise for them domestically as does the food sector.

The drive to expand the soybean market started years ago when farmers were getting peanuts for their harvests. Governments were pouring millions and sometimes billions of dollars every year into financial aid programs to keep farmers going, because people weren't paying enough for food. Now, the price of food is getting more in line with what it costs farmers to grow it, and at the same time new opportunities are emerging for their harvests.

This is already a challenging balance. It's one that the agri-food community will need to address publicly with increasing clarity, as pressure to feed the world grows.

Owen Roberts teaches agricultural communications at the University of Guelph. His column appears Monday. Also, check out his Urban Cowboy blog at www.guelphmercury.com.



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Surface Green Solutions is a distributor/installer for a line of soybean based products used in the asphalt industry, offering 20 different product lines. Committed to environmentally friendly solutions THAT WORK.