

Dairy Women Come Together Over the Challenging Side of Family Farming

A full house of support at the 5th WCR Dairywomen's Summit

Ronda Payne

There was a palpable hum of excitement and togetherness March 5 as dairy women from two months old to 70-plus years came together in Abbotsford for the fifth annual West Coast Robotics Dairywomen's Summit. The event was well-timed with International Women's Day on March 8 and the UN's International Year of the Woman Farmer.

Despite the camaraderie, sharing and warmth in the room, the topics weren't always light. Elaine Froese, a farm family transition expert, took the stage to bring attention to how farms can do a better job of supporting farming families and women as they move from eager young worker to semi-involved mentor, to full-blown retiree.

Event MC, Morgan Sangster, producer services manager with BC Dairy, kept the engagement going by making use of the time between speakers to get to know audience members. Suzanne Cuthbert of Ladysmith was a first-time event attendee.

"We have just switched houses with our

son," Cuthbert says. "He's full time on our dairy farm and we're now living across the road."

Her experience of moving houses with shifting roles and responsibilities was echoed throughout the evening. Froese was peppered with questions from women wondering how they could ensure their income during both their working years and retirement. The undercurrent was that a woman's say in farm transitions, finances and planning isn't always equal to that of a man's.

Froese challenged the thought processes that put the farm first, ahead of people.

"What I want to encourage us as women tonight is to think about what is the story we're telling ourselves in our families, in our businesses, as to how we can change the mindset or the culture that's around us that's not working," she says.

The event has come a long way from its first year in the West Coast Robotics board room with 40 women eager to learn and share, says Mitch McCormick, sales manager with the company.

"It started out as an opportunity to celebrate women in the industry," he says. Over the years, we've seen a lot more younger women coming. Some women bringing their daughters."

The youngest in attendance was two-month-old Janelle with mom, Brooke Post, of Woodside Farms in Agassiz, where they milk 300 cows.



The gathering has grown every year, as women find common ground and support among those who understand their farming paradigms.



Elaine Froese – farmer and farm transition expert – offered considerable guidance related to practical farm business issues – with a woman's perspective.

Hannah Woodhouse shared her journey from dairy farm to Ph.D. in dairy science to DFC employee – showing there are other paths for dairywomen beyond the farm too.

Ronda Payne photos



"I've come all five years and every year it just gets better," says Post. "To connect with other women that are in the industry in some way."

Referring to intergenerational farm transitions, McCormick says, "As we look across the industry, it's something we see some struggle with. Knowledge is power. Some do it really well. By giving this information to women... it's an opportunity for them to take it back to the farm and put it on the table."

Froese says many women know they need to act to ensure everyone on the farm is taken care of in a transition, but they don't do it.

"The wills and estates thing is really super important because it's the best gift you can give your family," she says.

She stresses that young women, especially, need to have their names on assets. Because young women will have changing roles on the farm, often more than men. They will be farmers, caregivers, parents, cooks, advocates and more.

Hannah Woodhouse grew up on a dairy farm in Ontario. Now, she's at the start of her career with Dairy Farmers of Canada as manager of sustainable production. Prior to landing at DFC, first as a contractor, then permanently, she earned her Ph.D. as a leading expert in milk free fatty acids at the University of Guelph, resulting in six peer-reviewed articles published in scientific publications. Her seventh published piece

is a case-study article giving farmers a practical look at the possible causes of free fatty acids from cow to bulk tank.

"Milk is so complex," she says. "A bunch of milk quality issues can occur because of free fatty acids."

She notes that free fatty acids above 1.2 mmol per 100 grams of fat is too high.

"I connect with people around the world. I feel like I'm making a real difference," Woodhouse says. "Connections are critical and it's so great to be able to attend events like this, talk to people, get to know more about what people are doing, where their path has led them."

While Woodhouse has stayed in Canada to advance her career, another speaker at the event, Sue Hagenson, senior dairy consultant with inBarn, has spent a career traveling the world learning, sharing and educating about the dairy industry. From her homeland of New Zealand to Uruguay to China to Canada and points in between, she has walked a lot of farms to improve operations.

"A lot of stuff I had to learn very quickly," she says. "I was teaching them how to dairy farm."

Angelina Rodenburg, wife of West Coast Robotics owner and general manager, Brian Rodenburg, gave the event's opening prayer after saying she hoped the evening would leave guests "recharged for another dairy season and ready to go again."

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