

20 YEARS LATER....WHAT HAS CHANGED?

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EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED

Last February (2020) when I first prepared this presentation I was going to say that remarkably little has changed with respect to the London Swine Conference over the past 20 years. For the first 19 years, it remained a 2-day event held in London in the spring each year at almost the same location. Throughout those 19 years, the conference was organized by a small dedicated group of volunteers (some of the committee members participating every year from the very start). The founding organizations (Ontario Pork, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, and the University of Guelph) plus more recently the Ontario Pork Industry Council remained heavily involved each year. The conference continued to be loyally sponsored by the swine industry, through good and bad times. Each year the program featured an array of speakers presenting cutting edge science, opinions on social issues affecting pork producers, and very practical on-farm experiences. Even the registration cost remained the same!

But, of course, last year everything changed and the event was cancelled. This year, as the conference moves to a virtual format, it is still true that the conference is organized by the same hard-working and dedicated organizing committee, with the same loyal sponsors, and the program once again features a wonderful array of speakers. However, in each of the first 19 years of the LSC, some of the most important take-home information came from the discussions in the hallways and around the coffee stations. Sadly, that aspect of the conference will be missing this year and will be the most important motivating factor for the return of the in-person format in the years to come.

SOME THINGS HAVEN'T REALLY CHANGED

If we compare some of the big issues on the minds of pork producers in the spring of 2001, it is surprising how similar they are to the concerns today. One of the biggest topics of discussion in the hallways in 2001 was the outbreak of a foreign animal disease in Britain and news articles predicting the inevitable spread to Canada. The cause of border closing and mass destruction of swine herds in Britain in 2001 was Foot and Mouth Disease. There was not enough time from when the outbreak occurred in February until the first LSC to have a speaker on the program deal with this subject, but in the following year, Dr Terry Whiting from Manitoba presented a very sobering talk on the consequences of an exotic disease outbreak in Canada. Pointing out how vulnerable the Canadian pork industry is to any situation that might close borders to export. If you read Whiting's paper in the LSC 2002 proceedings and substitute African Swine Fever, instead of Foot and Mouth Disease, it will seem very relevant. At that same conference in 2002, Dr Scott Dee presented a very

thorough description of handling endemic Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS) virus. In 2021, PRRSv is still the biggest health issue facing the Ontario swine industry, and although that won't be the subject that Dr Dee will address, he is once more on the program. It's interesting that PRRS has persisted as a problem but over the past 20 years Ontario has seen an outbreak of Porcine Circovirus come and go, as a result of vaccine development, and outbreaks of Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea that have been for the most part kept in check by enhanced monitoring and biosecurity. The emergence of new diseases seems to be a constant, and LSC proceedings of the past 20 years reflect this aspect of pork production.

There are many other issues faced by the swine industry that remain priorities and find a place on the program almost every year. For example, in the 2001 proceedings you can read a paper by John Deen discussing the problem of growth rate variability and another paper by Kees de Lange and Mike Tokach discussing on-farm tips for feeding grower-finisher pigs. There is a timeless quality about these papers dealing with a subject that is just as important today as it was 20 years ago. Feed is still the biggest input cost and adjusting feeding programs to achieve the best performance at the lowest cost remains as important now as it did in 2001.

SOME THINGS HAVE CHANGED

Since the spring of 2001, there have been monumental events in the world that have resulted in massive changes. For example in April 2001, the skyline of New York City was dominated by the giant twin towers of the World Trade Center and 6 months later they were gone and we are still experiencing the aftermath. In the last 20 years, there has been the introduction of disruptive technologies that have completely altered our way of life and destroyed some industries almost overnight. For example in 2001 buying Kodak stock still looked like a safe investment. In the Canadian swine world in the past 20 years, there have been major changes but nothing quite as earth shattering as the introduction of digital photography and the smart phone and the disappearance of Kodak. I use Kodak as an example of how fast change can occur and how very smart people who are experts in their field can miss the implications of disruptive technology.

Changes have certainly occurred in pork production. Change has occurred at such a fast and steady rate that maybe the tremendous progress made in pork production is not appreciated unless you stop and reflect back at the last 20 years. In every aspect of production including; growth rate, feed efficiency, reproductive performance, carcass quality and meat safety, improvement has been made. This is probably one of the most compelling arguments as to why forums like the London Swine Conference are necessary, because to stay competitive producers have to continually innovate. The LSC has been an annual forum to exchange ideas and to be inspired. In the 2005 proceedings there is a paper by Rob Knox describing the possibility of some day achieving 30 weaned pigs per sow per year. To me that seemed out of reach in 2005 but in less than 10 years I was visiting farms that were achieving it, and it is starting to be commonplace.

The London Swine Conference has had speakers that have looked back at the changes and summarized the progress helping us realize the value of the application of science to the

business of raising pigs. An example of such a presentation was the 2017 CFM de Lange Memorial Lecture presented by Mike Tokach, who summarized some of the key advances in swine nutrition in the previous 20 years and at the same time he credited the tremendous contributions of Dr de Lange, who was one of the founding organizers of the LSC and a major contributor over the years.

In reviewing the proceedings from the early conferences I noticed in 2003, Peter Brooks from the UK was on the program to discuss group housing of sows, long before the Code of Practice was changed to make group housing mandatory. At that same conference Jens Peter Nielsen from Denmark spoke about the Danish experience of banning antibiotics in feed if they were used for the sole purpose of promoting growth, another topic that was not a pressing issue at the time but has become a reality. I think there are many examples of presentations at the London Swine Conference on topics that were ahead of where the industry was at the time but were included to stimulate discussion and get people thinking of future decisions the industry would need to make. And no doubt the pork industry will be facing many more changes in the years to come.

AND SOME THINGS CHANGE BUT STAY THE SAME

The Chair's Message in the proceedings of the first London Swine Conference states that on April of 1999 in a conference room in Guelph 6 people (Kees de Lange, Gary Koebel, Jim Morris, Andrew Pharazyn, Doug Richards and Janice Murphy) gathered to discuss starting a "world-class annual swine conference in Ontario". Their intention was to provide a platform to speed up the implementation of new technologies in commercial pork production in Ontario and to facilitate the exchange of ideas within the swine industry. In subsequent meetings the committee grew, a date was picked, a location chosen and committees were formed to organize, promote, raise-funding, create a program and make it happen. And on April 5th and 6th 2001, the first London Swine Conference took place, and continued to take place annually until 2020. This year's virtual conference has been organized in order to continue that tradition.