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Growing Forward 2 brings new life to Ontario pear-growing

By Lilian Schaer

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Jordan, Ontario - It's the new variety that has brought pear growing in Ontario back from the brink of extinction. And it's funding from Growing Forward 2 (GF2) that the president of the Vineland Growers' Co-operative credits with helping make that happen.

Cold Snap™ pear was launched in Ontario last fall – a hardy, disease-resistant new variety that stays crisp and juicy even when the fruit changes colour from green to yellow, unlike standard pears that become soft and mushy as they ripen.

Michael Ecker says Ontario's oldest farm co-operative – it marked its 100th anniversary in 2013 – accessed funding under two different streams of GF2 to help make Cold Snap™ a reality in Ontario.

“Our first project gave us support to determine what market is out there and what is needed to grow new pears in Canada,” he explains. “The second project gave us the funding to get the new pear into consumers' hands. We can grow something new, but getting it onto the store shelf and educating consumers takes money and hard work.”

At one point, the majority of Ontario's pears were grown for the processing market, but as the province's canneries closed, fruit growers needed something new.

The first Cold Snap™ trees, a variety developed by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and originally called Harovin Sundown, were planted in 2011 with the first crop harvested in 2015. To date, more than 70,000 trees have been planted, which Ecker estimates will produce over 60,000 bushels of fruit annually when they reach full production.



“Over 90 per cent of all pears eaten in Canada are imported so this leaves a huge market in Canada for fresh Canadian pears,” he believes. “The sky’s the limit for giving Canadians fresh Canadian pears all winter long.”

The co-op collaborated with the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre on consumer research before launching the pear, adds Ecker, and the Ontario Tender Fruit Marketing Board has been very supportive of marketing efforts to help launch Cold Snap™.

Long term, this innovation means Canadians will be able to enjoy locally grown Canadian fruit during the winter months as the crop is harvested in October and marketed right through until March or April, depending on supply.

There are economic benefits too. A rejuvenated pear industry will create packing and on-farm jobs locally. And the Vineland Growers’ Co-operative has just invested in a major expansion of its storage facilities near the Niagara Region town of Virgil to accommodate the new Cold Snap™ crop.

For growers the pear is a welcome addition too. Its resistance to fire blight paired with new high density plantings similar to those seen in the apple industry makes it a viable crop to grow for the fresh market.

But none of this would have been possible without the support of GF2 and the Agricultural Adaptation Council (AAC), which assists with GF2 delivery in Ontario.

“As a co-op, the ability to access funds through AAC is invaluable to growers. It is very costly to do these types of research projects on your own and Growing Forward 2 is helping us move our industry forward,” Ecker says.

He also speaks highly of AAC’s program delivery services, appreciating in particular the appointment of a dedicated program co-ordinator to each project, staff’s easy accessibility when questions come up, and their ability to be flexible.

“We’ve worked on a number of projects with AAC and Cold Snap™ is a real revitalization for the industry. With canners closing and disease pressures, we were at a point where no pears were being grown and now with new varieties, we can provide Canadians with fresh Canadian pears in the winter months,” Ecker says.

This project was funded in part through Growing Forward 2 (GF2), a federal-provincial-territorial initiative. The Agricultural Adaptation Council assists in the delivery of GF2 in Ontario.

<http://www.adaptcouncil.org/read-news.php?id=7n4j7t3j8r6k>