

Farm Tech program celebrates ten years of training

by Heidi Riley

The PEI Farm Technician Apprenticeship program, which is unique in Canada, helps to address the demand for a skilled, sustainable, agricultural workforce on PEI.

The program was developed by the PEI Agriculture Sector Council in coordination with the PEI Agricultural Trade Advisory Committee, and in consultation with the Nova Scotia Agriculture College, which is now part of Dalhousie University.

Tracy Kittilsen, Manager of Extended Learning at Dalhousie University Faculty of Agriculture, and **Laurie Loane**, Executive Director, PEI Agriculture Sector Council, work together to continue development of the program.

Since 2009, more than 90 Apprentices have come through the block release training program, and 25 are registered as Blue Seal Technicians. “This program would not be successful without the farm employers who believed in it, and the board members who supported it,” says Laurie.

“PEI is leading the way in agriculture apprenticeship training, and now Nova Scotia is moving towards the adoption of a farm apprenticeship program as well,” says **Dr. David Gray**, Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture.

The Farm Tech Program is a two-year registered apprenticeship program offering hands-on experience on a farm gaining skills with a farm mentor. Apprentices also participate in five weeks of in-class training on PEI delivered by instructors from Extended Learning, Dalhousie Faculty of Agriculture. The annual intake of the program began in January.

The program teaches skills such as crop production, pesticide application, food safety, production of potatoes, forages and other field crops, shop skills, preventative maintenance, tractor safety, communications, occupational health and safety, soil and nutrient management, and much more.

After the program is complete, Apprentices write the Certificate of Qualification exam for Farm Technicians. Individuals with extensive practical work experience in farming may apply to challenge the certificate of qualification exam based on their years of experience.

“Farmers are always looking for employees,” says **Darrell Wallace**, Chair of the PEI Agriculture Sector Council. “The Farm Technician designation looks awfully good on a resumé. That skill set means a lot to employers.”

Employer values the program

Four years ago, **Patti Baird Gill** was the farm manager at Indian River farms. “Some of the employees who wanted to take the Farm Tech program were concerned that they did not have their GED. Some had learning disabilities.

“Many had been out of school for a long time, and were worried about going back. But they all loved it. The program empowered them and gave them confidence in what they were doing. They were encouraged to earn their GED, which led them to success in other programs through the PEIAGSC such as Class 3, Forklift, and more.

“Employers want their employees to understand what to do and why you do it. Many employees did not grow up on farms, and farming techniques have changed so much. The Farm Tech program helps them get that information.”

Farm employees

Basil Attwood, Rollo Bay Holdings Ltd., was in the first graduating class in 2012. “The Farm Tech program is fantastic. Thanks to the program, I moved from a general labourer to food safety supervisor on a farm with about 40 to 60 employees. It has been a rewarding experience.”



Willie Brander, former student of the Farm Technician Apprenticeship program, and **Patti Baird Gill**, who was the farm manager when Willie took the program.

Willie Brander graduated from the Farm Tech program in 2016. “The program gave me a whole new outlook,” says Willie. “We understood more about plant diseases, and now we know what to look for in the field.”

In order to earn their Blue Seal as a Farm Technician, participants needed their grade 12. While taking the Farm Tech program, Willie also earned his GED in five weeks while working on the school subjects during lunch breaks.

Willie has stepped away from the farm and now works at a fertilizer business. “If I would not have taken the program and earned my GED, I probably would not have even thought to apply for the different jobs I have had. The program allowed me to branch out to different aspects of agriculture.”

Tuition for the Farm Technician Apprenticeship Program can be 100 percent subsidized by SkillsPEI. Applicants must be EI eligible and have 1,000 hours work experience in the agriculture industry. For more information about SkillsPEI, visit www.skillspei.ca

For more information about the **Farm Technician Apprenticeship program**, contact **Laurie Loane** at 902-892-1091, email info@peiagsc.ca.

Visit www.peiagsc.ca



Lobster fisherman expands into other food products

by Heidi Riley

Island food entrepreneur, **Rob Morrison**, has won \$25,000 from Innovation PEI's Ignition Fund through the Food Island Partnership Food Xcel program. The program started with 20 Island entrepreneurs, and eight finalists competed at the final pitch day in February.

The winning entry was Rob's Covehead Seafoods Premium PEI Lobster Dip, which is packed with the meat of half a market-size lobster in every container.

Winner's story

Rob fishes lobster with his dad and his two sons out of Covehead Harbour. “I have easy access to lobster, and I am always playing around with new ways to serve it. My lobster dip was a favourite with friends and family.”

Rob realized that producing a value-added product could level out the yearly peaks and valleys in the price of lobster. “I know Tyson McInnis, who works at Food Island Partnership, and one day I called him. Tyson urged me to enter the Food Xcel program.”

Rob has a business degree from UPEI with a specialty in accounting, and he is also the Comptroller at the PEI Potato Board, so his background in finance was a great help when starting his business. At the Food Xcel program, Rob learned how social media can be an economical piece of a business marketing plan.

Rob also connected with Bio|Food|Tech, which helped nail down a formula of ingredients, resolve shelf life issues, develop nutritional information labeling, and test the product.

“Bio|Food|Tech staff have been very helpful. They have the expertise, the lab, and a federally approved facility to produce enough product for a test market. As we were testing, it became apparent that we needed to extend the shelf life by freezing, which means it is stable and can be shipped anywhere.”

Help with distribution

Covehead Seafoods Premium PEI Lobster Dip is available in Charlottetown at MR Seafoods, which distributes seafood across PEI and the Maritimes, Ontario, Quebec, and the eastern US. “MR Seafoods has been awesome to deal with,” says Rob. “They were happy to carry my product and were supportive from the start. They did a test market in the store last Christmas, which was very popular with customers.

“I am also working to market the product with Chef Tyler Gallant and Christine Murnaghan, a product developer at Canada's Smartest Kitchen.”

Future plans

“I plan to tap into MR Seafoods' distribution network, and will start marketing to restaurants and specialty seafood markets. With the winnings from the Food Xcel competition, I plan to buy processing equipment, move into the Annand Clams facility in Conway, PEI and ramp up production.

“I would like to use the expertise of Canada's Smartest Kitchen to develop more flavours of lobster dip, and to work on ideas for other seafood products. I also want to educate consumers on other ways to serve the lobster dip, from a sauce on steak or fish to stuffing baked potatoes.”



From left, **Bryan Inglis**, Food Island Partnership, **Rob Morrison**, winner of the Food Xcel competition, and **Chris Palmer**, Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Photo by Heather Ogg

Rob says his plans won't keep him from going back on the water with his family. “No matter how well the business goes, I will still be fishing lobster.”

Food Island Partnership

Food Island Partnership is an industry-led organization tasked with growing the food industry through food cluster development on PEI. The Food Xcel program helps Islanders bring innovative food ideas to market.

Food Xcel is an initiative of Food Island Partnership along with funding partners including the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), Innovation PEI, PEI Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, NSERC, and Springboard Atlantic.

For more about the **Food Island Partnership**, contact **Morgan Martin** at 902-367-4411. Visit www.foodislandpei.ca

For more about **Covehead Seafoods**, check Facebook at www.facebook.com/rob.morrison.16100



8 EJ

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