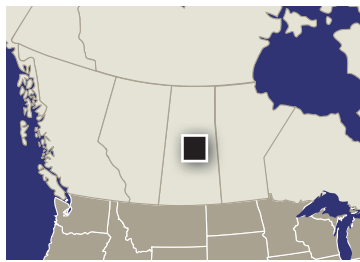


Wild rice business takes family for wild ride

On the Farm: Harvesting the crop from northern Saskatchewan lakes relies on the weather and comes with highs and lows

ON THE FARM



MUIRHEAD FAMILY
Meeyomoot Lake, Sask.

BY SEAN PRATT
SASKATOON NEWSROOM

Larissa Muirhead has witnessed the wild side of the wild rice business.

The venture started off with a bang in 2015 and 2016 when her family agreed to a share-cropping arrangement with the previous owner of the operation on Meeyomoot Lake in northern Saskatchewan.

“They were the highest producing years in wild rice history,” she said.

“They were huge years, like massive yields off of that lake.”

Forest fires were burning out of control in northern Saskatchewan. The tinder dry conditions were ideal for producing wild rice.

The family harvested a whopping 180,000 pounds of wild rice their first year in the industry.

“We just saw exactly what we could do with a business like this,” she said.

The excitement wasn't all about



The end result is in the bag for the Muirhead family and their crew at Against the Grain Organic Wild Rice. | SUPPLIED PHOTOS

the potential to make money. Larissa recalls gazing at a full moon during her first night at the camp.

She and her husband, Chase, watched the moon “peel off” the

tops of the trees on the far side of the lake as it ascended into the night sky.

“I was sitting on the harvester and I said to him, ‘yep, I want to be here.

This is what I want to do. I love this,’” said Larissa.

“There is just something about that place that is so magical. It's untouched and it's just so beautiful.”

The next year was another banner year with their kids jumping on bloated bags of rice. The family decided to take sole ownership of the business.

That's when they saw the ugly side of wild rice farming. They had one of the worst years imaginable.

A cool spring, poor crop germination, high water levels and strong

winds combined to wreak havoc on the operation.

They harvested less than 100 bags of product that fall, which is the equivalent of one morning's bounty during the two previous years.

To make matters worse, they had to contend with the damage caused by some industrious beavers.

“They dropped two massive poplars onto the harvesters. They're made out of aluminum so they just snapped in half,” said Larissa.

This year was another wretched year due to high water levels. They harvested a paltry 5,500 lb. of wild rice in 2020.

The shareholders of the business are Larissa and Chase, Chase's parents Garth and Cosette and his sister, Katy, and her husband Derek Charles.

They all live in La Ronge and have jobs outside of the wild rice business. Larissa is a lab assistant with the University of Saskatchewan's College of Nursing program.

Garth agreed that the family venture has been a roller-coaster ride so far. They are familiar with both extremes of the business.

The year after they assumed sole ownership a plow wind toppled a boat and felled more trees, damaging some of the cabins.

Another boat sunk during harvest. And there have been plenty of other challenges, such as transporting supplies over a slush-covered lake during the winter.

“It's an adventure,” said Garth. “We could have a reality show I'm sure. A person needs to wear one of those GoPros.”

But it has also been a rewarding experience for a guy who grew up on a mixed farm near Shellbrook, Sask.

Harvest time at the camp reminds him of pictures he has seen of the old-time threshing crews. It is a labour-intensive endeavour.

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KNOW THE
SCORE OF
TONIGHT'S
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Harvest is a labour-intensive endeavour.

» CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

They had to hire a cook who feeds the family and their crew on an over-sized dinner table.

"Everyone comes in and you discuss your day. It's a lot of fun," said Garth.

Larissa is thankful for the harvest work crew, especially the baggers.

"The rice is so itchy and the spiders are the size of your hand," she said.

"It's just a sucky job, so if we can pay somebody \$20 an hour to do it, we're all OK with it."

The camp came with a Cessna 185 airplane, which is used to fly bags of freshly harvested rice to nearby Molanosa. There they are loaded onto a bus and transported to the La Ronge Wild Rice Corp. where the green rice is processed into a table-ready ingredient that is black in colour.

Most of the product is sold to wholesalers. In an average year where they harvest 100,000 lb. of wild rice, the Muirheads keep about 30,000 or 40,000 lb., which is marketed through their own company, Against the Grain Organic Wild Rice.

They sell one kilogram bags to individuals locally and throughout

the province and 50-lb. bags to larger customers such as Amy's on Second Restaurant in Prince Albert, Sask. They also have a big customer in China.

Larissa would like to expand sales to more restaurants, capitalizing on the local food movement.

"Everybody is realizing food sovereignty is a thing," she said.

Garth thinks there is an opportunity to use smaller packages to sell to grocery stores across the province. Many grocery chains are starting to establish local sections in their stores.

They both feel it is critical to expand the marketing side of the business and eliminate the wholesalers.

One of the reasons Garth wanted to get into the business is that he knew the previous owner who travelled the world, selling wild rice from northern Saskatchewan.

That lifestyle appeals to Garth, who is a few years away from retiring from his job at SaskTel.

"It would be nice to ship a container to Europe and just go over there and travel around and see if we can get rid of it," he said.

"That would be kind of fun."

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Boats are part of the job in the wild rice business.

Alberta job cuts hit rural social services

Government closes homeless facility near Edmonton and employment training service

BY DOUG FERGUSON
CALGARY BUREAU

A rural Alberta facility that helps homeless men suffering from mental health issues and addictions is among the services hit by the latest round of provincial government job cuts.

Sixty-three jobs will be affected due to the closure of the McCullough Centre, which is in the hamlet of Gunn about 60 kilometres northwest of Edmonton, said the Alberta Union of Public Employees (AUPE).

As many as 536 jobs in Community and Social Services may be affected across Alberta "through various means" by the end of the 2020-21 fiscal year on March 31, said a letter Oct. 19 to AUPE by the Public Service Commission. They range from "permanent abolishments" and reclassifications to redeployments, it said.

"It is appalling that this government has nearly \$5 billion to waste in tax giveaways to already profitable corporations, but is seeking to cut services on which our most fragile citizens depend," said AUPE president Guy Smith in a statement Oct. 21. "To do this while the second wave of COVID-19 is sweeping over the province is dangerous."

But the McCullough Centre is currently being used by fewer than 15 people "and we will help them connect with appropriate supports," said an e-mail by Jerry Bellikka, press secretary and senior adviser to Community and Social Services Minister Rajan Sawhney.

Intake to the centre has been paused since Aug. 26, 2019, due to things such as staffing pressures

and the expected future closing of the site, said the commission. Thirty-two jobs at the centre will be abolished, with things such as temporary and wage positions ended early, it said.

"The closure of McCullough Centre is expected to save more than \$3 million per year," said Bellikka. "This is funding that can be re-focused to serve people with the most critical needs."

Although the provincial government is examining ways to re-deploy the staff who worked at the centre, some may be displaced, he said. "Where that occurs, we will treat people fairly and according to the collective agreement."

Other jobs affected by cost cutting include 32 positions at Alberta Job Corps, which is closing across the province. "It works with people who normally struggle to find employment with training and job placement," said the AUPE statement.

Thirteen jobs are being abolished, with 18 people redeployed and one temporary position ended early to redeploy a permanent individual, said the commission. The program has been suspended since March due to the pandemic, it said.

"After a careful review of the data, it's clear the Alberta Job Corps program is not as effective as other employment training programs available," said Bellikka.

"The decision to close Job Corps will save approximately \$6.9 million which can be re-focused on other programs that achieve better results. Staff at Alberta Support Centres across the province are available remotely to help clients connect to employment resources in their community."

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