



THE ORGANIC FEDERATION OF CANADA NEWSLETTER

Organic Value Chain Roundtable Co-Chair, Susie Miller, hands over the reins

by Priscilla Reimer

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Forty percent of what she eats, estimates Susie Miller, Co-chair of the Organic Value Chain Roundtable, is organic. As much as possible, she shops at local farmers markets and describes herself as “a buy Canadian freak. I check every label of every product I buy,” she says, “and I want my chickpeas to come from Swift Current.”

Miller is stepping down as co-chair and generously agreed to an interview, prior to upcoming OVCRT meetings in Quebec City, 28-29 June, with Priscilla Reimer, Manitoba director of the Organic Federation of Canada.

Susie Miller, a Director General of AAFC’s Food Value Chain Bureau, grew up on the farm and always wanted to be a farmer. To this day, whenever she visits another country, whether it is on business or on vacation, she always finds a way of visiting a farm.

“I like the field of agriculture because it is critical to life; it is a fundamental life force,” she says, “and it is undervalued. The reduction in the number of farmers . . . the distance between urban and rural has increased . . . most people don’t know the challenges of being a producer.”

“But I could never afford the farm,” she says, laughing.



Instead, Miller has channelled her love of agriculture into more than 35 years of leadership and service to Canada’s agricultural sector at both the provincial and federal levels. She holds a Master’s degree in Agricultural Economics from the University of Guelph.

Before assuming a leadership role at the Bureau, Miller spent twelve years in Saskatchewan where she was appointed Assistant Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Food in 1997. At the

time, she suggests, the organic sector was a small and seemingly insignificant player on the larger agricultural stage and was not taken seriously by its conventional counterpart. “But as government we made a real effort to ensure that the organic sector got the same consideration as the conventional sector, whether it was access to research funds, whether it was having the extension people on the ground that could help them meet their challenges, whether on the regulatory side, the export side, the market development side.” And it was during Miller’s tenure, that Saskatchewan appointed its first organic sector specialist.

Perhaps this explains why the organic sector, while not the first to be invited to the Deputy Minister of Agriculture’s table, never-the-less received an invitation only three years after sector value chain roundtables were introduced in 2003, as a mechanism to take Canada’s *Agricultural Policy Framework* (APF) to a new level.

With an inaugural meeting in Toronto in December, 2006, the Organic Value Chain Roundtable (OVCRT) became the eighth of nine value chain roundtables related to beef, grains innovation, horticulture, organics, pork, seafood and special crops.

Roundtables bring together leaders from all points along the value chain—retailers, producers, processors, exporters and others—to build a shared understanding of their competitive position, create consensus on how to improve it, and put plans into action. They are sector-specific and able to focus intently on exactly what their individual value chains need to do to achieve long-term global success for all players.

While AAFC organizes meetings and provides expertise and financial support to help roundtables develop and implement their action plans, it does not set the agenda. Industry leads the process and, in turn, federal officials ensure that roundtable priorities drive the planning and decision making of the department.

An organic presence at the table, along with everyone else—roundtable co-chairs, federal and provincial staff and colleagues—increased the visibility and raised the profile of the organic sector, Miller says. “For me that was a strong signal to the Department and within the Department that we took the organic industry seriously, as it should be taken. I have brought my philosophy [that I developed in Saskatchewan],” she goes on to say, “as much as I’ve been able to, to my current job. I try to be part of the solution. Some say, ‘I’m from government. I’m here to help you.’ I actually try to do that,” she says, laughing.

“And what the organic roundtable did much sooner than everybody else was to put those [tensions] aside and look for collective solutions that would add value to everybody. And I think that that is a continuing strength. The strength is the people around the table. The strength is the dedication, the commitment and the vision.”

Overcoming its marginal status was the organic sector’s first challenge, according to Miller. A second challenge is the almost unmanageably broad scope of the industry. Where other groups have a single focus like beef or eggs, or even a specific crop disease, the organic sector captures all commodity groups and their individual needs and concerns within the larger “certified organic” net. “In order to move an industry forward, whose priorities do you address first,” Miller asks. “When you’re talking about a range of every agricultural product that’s

produced across the country, the scope is so broad that to find common . . . or ways that you can work together is much more challenging.”

But a group’s liability can also be its greatest strength and the strength of the organic roundtable, according to Miller, is its willingness to work together for the good of the whole. “When you have a supply chain or value chain approach,” she elaborates, “there’s always the tension between buyers and sellers, because that’s the nature of business. And what the organic roundtable did much sooner than everybody else was to put those aside and look for collective solutions that would add value to everybody. And I think that that is a continuing strength. The strength is the people around the table. The strength is the dedication, the commitment and the vision.”

The strength of the organic vision, however, has always been stronger than the financial resources available for promotion, research and development.

Miller identifies this as a third challenge for the sector. The organic sector does not have access to the same kind of funding as other commodity organizations, she points out. Other groups have the check-off. “In some ways it is a miracle itself that [the organic] industry has been able to bring the successes that it has had both inside and outside the roundtable.”

However, when the government moved from the APF, the program under which roundtables were introduced, to its new policy framework, *Growing Forward*, with its emphasis on research and research funding, the OVCRT was able to use its cohesiveness, its team spirit to full advantage.

Unlike other roundtables, researchers were part of the OVCRT team from its inception and in January 2009, at its fifth face-to-face meeting in Guelph, the Research and Innovation Working Group received concurrence from the OVCRT to proceed with developing an Organic Science Cluster Proposal.

“It was a total industry approach rather than coming from a group of researchers,” Miller explains. “Organic research needs were tied into a strategic approach to develop the sector over the longer term. So the roundtable was extremely well positioned when the terms and conditions of the Canadian Agri-Science Clusters Program were announced and in fact, the applicants for the Organic Science Cluster, the Organic Federation of Canada and the Organic Agriculture Center of Canada, were the first ones to make an application.”

“From my perspective,” she summarizes, “it is an example of how the ability to work together in a full chain fashion has led to some significant investment in the organic sector.” And it is a clear sign that the organic industry has entered the mainstream, she adds.

Miller has Co-chaired seven of the nine roundtables and is stepping down as Co-Chair of the OVCRT.

She is handing the reins to Dr. Jaspinder Komal who brings a background in veterinary medicine and is no stranger to the organic sector. As Director of the CFIA’s Agri-food Division in 2009, Dr. Komal played a key role in the implementation of the Organic Products Regulations

and under the authority of those regulations he was instrumental in negotiating Equivalency Agreements with the United States and the European Union for trading of organic products. And, he will always be remembered appreciatively, as the one who made the public announcement that Canada's organic standards would be available free of charge at the Cornwall meeting of the CGSB Committee on Organic Agriculture last January.

The OVCRT is an important link between organic stakeholders and agricultural policy makers, and an effective tool that contributes to the sustained growth of the organic sector. For more information, please visit the AAFC roundtable website at: <http://www.ats-sea.agr.gc.ca/rt-tr/org-bio-eng.htm>.

Primary references:

1. An interview with Susie Miller, 14 May 2010.
2. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's website: <http://www.ats-sea.agr.gc.ca/rt-tr/index-eng.htm> and <http://www.ats-sea.agr.gc.ca/rt-tr/org-bio-eng.htm>.
3. An email from Susie Miller to OVCRT Members and Invited Guests, circulated on the Can Reg List serve on 31 May 2010.