

A Successful Summer Solstice Tour

AFWA tours southern Alberta

The clouds parted and the sun shone down upon the annual Alberta Farm Writers' Association summer tour and Annual General Meeting, held Wednesday June 19 to Friday, June 21, 2024.

No AFWA event would be complete if the group hadn't gathered for a brewery tour. Luckily the 2024 tour kicked off on Wednesday evening at the [Theoretical Brewing company](#) founded by Kris Fischer and Kelti Baird. As friends and home-brew enthusiasts, Kris and Kel began a journey in 2012 that would ultimately lead from brewing on the back deck of a west-side house to the establishment and growth of Lethbridge's first micro-brewery, opening its doors in December 2015.

With a focus on the scientific method, (Kris teaches chemistry at the University of Lethbridge) this pair set about growing a quirky, nerdy little brewery bent on environmental sustainability, community support and growth, social awareness, and fun. Their beer titles reflect the chemistry theme, with titles such as Study Buddy Hef and Alberta Clipper IPA. Flights were even served up in test tube bottles!

Thursday morning was met with clear Alberta blue skies and warm weather. A smaller tour bus was secured from the Picture Butte Transportation society, and the group was off to its first stop at the Cory VandenElzen sugar beet farm. VandenElzen said there are 200 farm families who crop 28,000 acres of sugar beets in southern Alberta. This will yield nearly one million tonnes of sugar beets. The crop needs close to 17 inches of water each year, and one acre will yield 45,000 beets. Of those beets, 19 to 20 per cent will be available for sugar, and 17 per cent will be extractable sugar. Growers are only allowed to grow 1,400 acres annually. This limitation ensures the success of smaller farms and helps to spread the risk of crops getting wiped out by frost or hail.

With some extra time, the group stopped at [Broxburn Farms](#) for coffee. In 1994 Paul de Jonge purchased 80 acres of land five kilometers east of Lethbridge on highway 3, one kilometer south on Broxburn road. Originally intended as a U-pick strawberry operation, a small greenhouse was built to grow peppers in 1996. In 2001 a larger greenhouse went into operation and tomatoes and cucumbers were added to the mix. In 2002 a barn was remodeled for the purpose of a storefront and café. In June of 2004, the café was officially opened. Today land at [Broxburn Vegetables](#) is farmed for the production of various fruits and vegetable, including one of the largest commercial broccoli crops in Alberta.

Next was a feedlot tour of the 7,000 head [KCL Cattle Company Ltd.](#) at their Coaldale location. Les Wall provided insight into their expansion plans to 15,000 head. All cattle is finished at their feedlot locations in Coaldale and Lethbridge, and most of the animals are processed at the Cargill facility in High River, Alberta. Les' daughter Karleen and her husband Jared also met the group to explain the day-to-day operations of KCL.

In 1999 they had the opportunity to purchase a larger feedlot north of Lethbridge which is now known as the West Lot. In 2009 they expanded their operation further, purchasing the East Lot located east of Coaldale. In 2016 they had the opportunity to partner with a neighbor farmer and expand their land base. In 2017, they were able to get together with a group of producers and purchase a feedlot in Ceylon, Saskatchewan. In 2023, Beef City Lot was purchased north of Lethbridge expanding the business once again.

KCL Cattle Company is certified in both the CRSB and VBP+ programs. The Certified Sustainable Beef Framework provides a tool to certify farms, ranches and processing facilities against sustainability standards, supports sustainable sourcing and enables consumers to purchase beef from Certified Operations. VBP+ is a voluntary, market-oriented, producer managed forward-looking program enabling Canada's beef industry to anticipate and meet emerging and growing demands for beef production systems throughout the Canadian beef value chain.

The next stop was perhaps the largest farm AFWA has ever toured. [The McIntyre Ranch](#) welcomed us to its stunning location south of Magrath, and lunch was held in its historic 1913 barn. The ranch recently entered into the largest conservation agreement in Canadian history with the Nature Conservancy of Canada to protect the 55,000 acre ranch from development. The agreement will allow the Thrall family to continue raising cattle.

Ralph Thrall III met the group to explain the history of property, which was founded in 1894 by Texan William McIntyre. It remained with his family until his son, Billy, died in 1947. It was a long-time family friend and employee, Ralph Thrall, who bought the property after Billy's death; they continue to own and operate it today. The property is home to over 150 species of birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and fish. Recent wildlife surveys have revealed 27 species of concern living there, including ferruginous hawk, chestnut-collared longspur and American badger.

The Conservancy says keeping the land sustainably grazed by cattle is important because their grazing behaviour approximates the historic actions of bison. The group managed to get a photo just in front of the buffalo jump located north of the ranch buildings.

After the AGM was held on Friday morning, a smaller group of members headed out to see the canola field trials from [Hytech Productions Ltd.](#) Chief commercial officer Scott Horner provided the history on the company, and how as an independent seed production company, it provides services in parent seed production, experimental seed production, and field-testing service. Farm writers were received a tour of its primary seed facility. This facility focuses on custom seed treating, small scale seed cleaning, custom seed packaging and seed storage.

The AFWA wishes to thank its tour sponsors BASF and Alberta Canola, along with the tour locations.



AFWA members spend its summer solstice at the southern Alberta tour at the 55,000 acre McIntyre Ranch on Thursday June 20, 2024. Standing from left to right: Cassandra Driedger, Michelle Chunuya, Joyce Howell, Jack Howell, Laura Thygessen, Ian Doig, Lee Hart, Ross Halseth, Reg Norby, Dana Zielke, Jane Norby, and bus diver David Feist. Seated (L to R) Ivor Bernatsky, Mary MacArthur, Gail Halseth and Tracey Feist.