



SEEDHEADS TRANSCRIPT

Episode 20: ALLISON SQUIRES English

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Steph: Welcome to SeedHeads, the cross-pollinating podcast where our Canadian seed heroes tell their stories, share their how-to tips, and talk about the seeds they love. I'm your host, Steph Benoit, coming to you from Ottawa, Ontario, on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabe people.

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Steph: In this episode, I had the joy of talking to Allison Squires. Allison is a farmer first and foremost, and the co-owner and operator of Upland Organics. She's also currently the president of Canadian Organic Growers. She and her family live in Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan, on Treaty 4 Territory. In this episode we talked about how Allison engages with seeds on her farm and in her work with Canadian Organic Growers, her experience with the participatory plant breeding program, recent developments in agricultural policy in Canada around genetically engineered organisms, and her experience hosting apprentices through Young Agrarians. I learned so much through recording this episode and I really enjoyed speaking to Allison. I hope you enjoy listening just as much. Thank you again for following along for another season of SeedHeads.

Steph: Thank you again, Allison, so much for taking the time to be here today. I appreciate that you have a very busy schedule, especially this time of year. It just means a lot that you would sit down with us and have a conversation for a little bit. Thank you so much.

Allison: Oh, you're very welcome. This is a great opportunity for me as well, so I appreciate it.

Steph: Oh, thank you. To begin with, could you tell us a bit about you and your farm and land and some of the projects that you're involved with?

Allison: Oh, sure. Well, I guess what I'll say first is that I'm an organic farmer in Saskatchewan. What most people don't know about me is I actually was not originally from a farming background at all. Newfoundland is where I was originally from. My family are not farmers at all. I ended up meeting my husband when I was going to university in Saskatoon at the University of Saskatchewan. I was finishing my PhD there in toxicology.

It was during my time when we were dating and getting to know each other, he brought me home to his parents' farm. That's where I learned about organic farming and how amazing it was and its importance for the future of the planet. It was not a hard sell for me to drastically switch career paths and start learning about farming and choosing that as a way to dedicate my life to and the future of our kids as well because we also have three kids together. That's my origin story into farming.

We started our farm in 2010. Our farm name is Upland Organics. We made our first land purchase down here in Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan, which is in Treaty 4 territory. We bought seven-quarter sections and that was the start of our farm. From then, we sat down and we had a vision. We wanted to be really purposeful in how we were going to run our farm and our family. We came up with a vision that included aspects around being family-orientated, environmentally, and economically resilient because it's important when you're farming to actually be able to make money and feed yourself.

Steph: Absolutely.

Allison: Then we also had a vision for how we would contribute to our local community as well as the greater ag organic sector as a whole as well. That's how we started our farm and we've continued with that vision since. We've expanded our land base quite significantly since that initial purchase, but we've also added on two additional enterprises. We run a commercial grain cleaning facility, seed cleaning facility right on farm. Then we also started a cow-calf herd in recent years as well. That's the thrust of our farm and the history of it anyways.

Steph: That wasn't exactly the trajectory, I guess, you saw yourself on when you started your toxicology degree.

Allison: No, it wasn't. What's interesting is that, well, toxicology, for those who don't know, is basically the study of poison. My specialty was actually in environmental toxicology and water quality issues specifically related to the oil sands operations in Alberta.

Steph: Oh, wow.

Allison: I learned a lot about environmental impacts of industry, of the different aspects of water and soil contamination through that. It really wasn't a hard stretch for me to see the values of farming without any impact to the environment and, in fact, trying to improve the environment while farming. My background actually landed really well into my current career as an organic farmer.

Steph: Yes, that actually makes you so uniquely positioned, such a deep background understanding of the impact of all of these agrochemicals on the landscape. That's really interesting.

Allison: We actually have a big focus on our farm on research as well. I'm always a geek, so we've been researching different ways that we can use our growing practices to improve our farm and our soil. We're looking at specifically things like organic matter and water-holding capacity. Our soils are pretty rough right now. We've been in drought for about seven years on our farm. We started in 2017 with about an inch and a quarter of rain.

Steph: Oh, my gosh.

Allison: Yes, that was really tough. Then from then, we've been averaging maybe 3 inches every year. We used to get, I don't know, 12 or 14 inches during the growing season. We're down to about a quarter of the rain that we used to get. It's really been important for us to learn and to try to mitigate these types of climate impacts on our growing capabilities. We started to do things on our farm researching around techniques such as diversifying our crop rotation.

We have a really long 10-year crop rotation on our farm that includes using perennials, cover crops, annual cover crops. We do reduce tillage practices. We use compost and compost teas. Like I said, we bought a cow herd, so we do lots of rotational grazing on the cover crops every year. We've seen all of that research. All of that learning has really paid off for us because we've seen our organic matter start to climb in our soils. Our water-holding capacity, our water infiltration rates are getting a lot better, so we're seeing hope. It's been rewarding in that sense.

Steph: Wow. For context, I was just home visiting my family and we had an incredibly unseasonable rainstorm here in December. We had 2.5 inches in a day. For me to think about you having 3 inches in a whole growing season is actually incredible.

Allison: I always say that we're one of the driest. We're in the Palliser Triangle, so it's one of the driest parts of Canada, but I do think it's important to recognize that climate is impacting farms differently across Canada. In your sense, when you're getting 2.5 inches in one day, that's really hard.

Steph: It's a whole lot of rain.

Allison: It is, and so fields get flooded. Farmers can't get out there and seed their crop. It's just as much of a devastating impact for them as the dryness is for me. It's definitely not an easy time to be a farmer in that regard.

Steph: No, absolutely. I'm wondering how seed issues show up on your farm and how you engage with seed in your day-to-day work.

Allison: Seed is actually the main product that we produce on the farm. It's an everyday thing for us to be interacting with seed and thinking about seed and sourcing seed and selling seed. Especially with the droughts in the last several years here, we've been finding it really hard to save our own seed. The seeds that we're growing may not be of quality enough that will germinate properly in the next year. Seed has also transformed recently into our main expense on the farm as well, so it has that aspect too.

Buying quality seed is an expensive thing to do. That's why it's really important when farmers are able to save their own seed and use their own seed from on-farm. It really helps with that expense as well as, obviously, regional differences and varieties and things like that. When we're interacting with seed and planning for our seed supply, that's a huge part of our system here. As I mentioned before, we have an on-farm commercial grain cleaning plant.

There is a bit of story behind why we decided to go through that because it's not an easy enterprise to set up. In 2015, we didn't have the plant then, but we had this beautiful crop of flax. We had a great buyer that really wanted it. They wanted it cleaned to a certain standard. No problem. We had another seed-cleaning company that we sent our flax to and they cleaned it. We came back. They had taken out 30% of their crop-

Steph: Oh, my Gosh.

Allison: -while they were cleaning. They weren't just taking out the chaff or any weed seeds, but they were taking out a whole bunch of clean, very saleable

quality flax. Then we weren't getting paid for that either because it was deemed screenings, which means that it's waste products to them. We lost a significant amount of money with that. We looked at the numbers there and we're like, "Well, geez, I think we can do a little bit better than this."

We started figuring out how we can set up a cleaning plant. We built a building and sourced all of the cleaning equipment. From that point on now, we're able to not only clean all of our crop that we grow on farm to whatever specifications our buyers want, but we can also then keep the screenings and sell those because those are also worth something as feed, especially in the cattle industry.

We are now going from losing 30% of our income to now able to sell everything that we grow on the farm and make a profit off of that. That's been a huge benefit to us, our economic viability, right? Then we decided to not just use it on farm but actually make it a commercial enterprise because, in the community here, there isn't a whole lot of options for places to take your grain.

Especially if you're a smaller farm and you don't have a lot to clean, it's really difficult for a larger cleaning facility to shut down and clean 200 bushels of something and then start up again. It's a service as well to the community in that they can bring those smaller quantities to us and we'll do that for them. I think it's been a win-win for everyone in the area by us doing that. It's been really rewarding.

Steph: Oh, that's wonderful. I often explain to people who aren't in the seed world, especially with vegetable seeds, it's a bit different with grain. I'm sure, but it's like, it's manageable if you're a really small operation or if you're a really big operation. If you're somewhere in the middle, it's a really awkward place to be because, as you said, you're not big enough to justify necessarily all of the equipment and everything just for a medium amount of stuff. You're also not small enough to do it all by hand, again, in a vegetable context. That's so awesome that you could bring that service to your community as well. I'm guessing, is it a dedicated organic mill or do you do both?

Allison: We do both actually. We are certified organic. There's clean-out protocols and everything that we have to do to switch between organic and conventional, but it's definitely doable, yes.

Steph: Okay, that's really interesting to know. I didn't know that actually. Admittedly, in case you can't already tell, I'm not as fluent in grain as I am in veggies. I didn't know that you could go back and forth between the two. That makes sense that with the right protocols, that would be doable.

Allison: When I say right protocols, it takes a full two days to clean the plant out.

Steph: Oh, my gosh.

Allison: If you run into some organic stuff and then you want to switch to-- or when you run some conventional stuff or want to switch to organic, it's a two-day clean-out process, so you climb up into the cleaning equipment and tweezer out all of the green kernels and vacuum everything.

Steph: Oh, my gosh.

Allison: We do like to run if we're going to run organic grain. We like to do it all together as much as possible. It's a lot easier. [laughs]

Steph: You would have to have a very intense attention to detail to go in with the tweezers and get every little piece of chop.

Allison: I have spent quite a few hours in equipment with my earbuds on listening to podcasts. [laughs] Also, I'm tweezing out wheat kernel, whatever. No, it's good though. I think that's important because when you're growing organic, it's really important to maintain that integrity, right? It's just part of the work that goes into it.

Steph: Yes, absolutely. As you were saying, in the past few years, you haven't been able to save high-quality seed as much. You have to go and purchase seed for your own farm. Why do you see regional seed as an important part of that puzzle?

Allison: Well, it is an important part of the puzzle and just in the sense that we're all farming in different climatic zones. We had a discussion earlier here about some areas are getting lots of rain. Some areas aren't getting any. If you expect to source seed from an area that's experiencing a different climatic challenge than you are, the seed may not be as successful growing in your new context. For us, when we're able to save our seed year-to-year, our supply then becomes acclimatized to low moisture content, for example.

They germinate quicker. They are able to grow longer roots to get to that subsoil moisture. They're more acclimatized to those growing conditions. That's why I think regional seed matters and why it's really important that farmers are able to save their own seed and develop those regional differences in their seed supply because that's how they're able to still grow under these crazy conditions that we're all experiencing now.

Steph: Yes, it is quite interesting to see how much things are changing from year to year indefinitely from microclimate to microclimate.

Allison: It's something that Cody, my husband-- I haven't mentioned him yet. I have a husband. Cody's a traveler. [laughs] We talk about it almost daily actually. It's something that's always on our minds because it's where we work, right? We're constantly facing it. We don't go into an office building somewhere and don't emerge again until it's dark at night. We're outside and we're seeing it. Actually, the thing that's concerning us right now is not only the lack of moisture because we don't have any snow cover right now, but it's plus 7 degrees outside and it's the end of December. [laughs] That's not normal. We often reach out to some of the previous-generation farmers, I'll call them, versus old farmers.

Allison: In our area, there are some guys that have been farming here since before the '80s. They're also nervous, which makes us even more nervous. Because they acknowledge that even though we had a bit of a dry spell in the '80s in this area, it's nothing compared to what we're going through now. It's nothing that they've seen before. It is something that is getting worse. You can just talk to your previous generations and discover that quite easily. It's something that's always on our minds for sure.

Steph: It is so nice to also have that longer-term memory because, I don't know, I think a lot about shifting baselines. Like for me growing up in the '90s, things may not seem that extreme now. They still do. Relative to someone who grew up in the '30s and have that much deeper memory of what those times were like, things in the '90s were already changed so much. It really is so valuable to talk to people who can really put things in the context of multiple generations.

Allison: Yes, I agree. We try to write as much of that stuff down as we can so we can remember it.

Steph: Well, maybe a little bit of a lighter note. Could you talk about your history with the participatory plant breeding program?

Allison: Yes, for sure. Actually, this leads really well from the regional seed discussion. The participatory plant breeding program, I think, is one of the shining stars of the research program in the organic sector. I just love it. We actually first heard about it when we attended Organic Science Cluster conference in Winnipeg in the winter of 2012. Like I said, we started our farm in 2010, so this is only just a year or two after we started growing. Being, again, the research nerd that I was, having just finished my PhD the year before, I was super interested in developing an on-farm research program. We have it now. Back then, we didn't. When I went to this conference, I dragged Cody with me. We heard about this program.

I knew right away, it was going to be a really great fit for our farm because I really believe super strongly that we need to start getting research out at field

scale as soon as we can because I know from my own background that research that's done small scale in lab is important, but it lacks that real-world applicability sometimes, right? Something that's really cool and discovered on the lab bench or in a small field plot, when you translate that into the economics on a larger-scale farm, it's lost sometimes. If we're going to be funding research, I think it's really important to make sure that we're making that connection to the actual farm scale.

Steph: Absolutely.

Allison: That's one of the reasons why this program is a favorite of mine is because it does bring farmers into the fold and gets their feedback really early on in the process. The participatory plant breeding program involves sending seed out to farmers. They plant these packets of mixed seeds and grow them in little field plots. Then they go by and harvest the plants that they think look the best or work the best on their farm.

You do that for a few years. Then, eventually, you get a line or a mixture of seed that works really well in your farm in your context. Then you send it back to the University of Manitoba, which is where this research is based out of. They do some magical things over there and start developing varieties from these farmer selections. I think looking at the results of some of this research as it's coming out now, we're seeing some really successful lines coming out.

There are some farmers in the Swift Current and Estevan regions especially that are getting some really great lines that are coming out and being super applicable to the organic context. Because when you're farming an organic farm, obviously, you're very low input. We're not using any synthetic fertilizers or pesticides or anything. Our seed and our plant trait needs are quite different from what would be conventional.

A lot of the modern seeds that are bred nowadays are bred to require the use of fertilizer because they are not bred to be able to source their own nutrients within the soil themselves. Of course, flooding those lines in an organic system isn't really successful because we don't use synthetic fertilizers, so the plant's out of luck, right? We need plants that are going to search and work with the soil to feed themselves. That's one of the many reasons why doing these on organic farm seed selections are so pivotal and so successful.

Steph: Something I also really love about the PPB program compared to conventional plant breeding is just how democratic it is. I think that openness and sending it out into the world, into a bunch of different places, and collaborating with a bunch of different farmers and different conditions is so much closer to how seeds have been grown since humans started participating

in agriculture. I think that I really appreciate that aspect of it that lots of different people can have different say about their needs and what works for them and what doesn't.

Allison: That's a really great point. I can't imagine the logistical nightmare of researchers trying to match all of us farmers. They're so open. They'll send you more seed. If you want to start growing out your variety on your farm to use, they will give you the seed. It is excellent. It's been really, really great.

Steph: You also have a very cool role with Canadian Organic Growers, so I was hoping you could talk a little bit about how seeds show up for you in your work with COG.

Allison: Oh, yes, I haven't mentioned Canadian Organic Growers yet, but I guess I should. I'm the president of Canadian Organic Growers right now. I joined the board in 2018 and became president in 2021. I've really enjoyed my time with COG. I think we've seen a bit of a transformation in the organization over the last several years. We're now operating at a really good capacity.

We've got a whole slew of really great team members on board. We're doing a lot of great work right now. In terms of how we're working with seed, actually, right now, we're recruiting again for more farmers to participate in a program called the Regenerative Organic Oats program. I don't know if you've heard of it before. It's primarily based in the prairies just right now because that's primarily where the oats are growing, so that makes sense.

It's a program where we're developing farmer networks. We have several farms. I think, right now, we have 12 or more farmers that have reformed a network with them. They're able to share information, knowledge, experience between themselves so they can better implement practices on their farm to improve their seed quality, to improve their growing conditions and their success.

Then we also pair those farmers with professional agronomists as well that specialize in organic and regenerative growing practices because, right now, there's definitely a hole in knowledge professional-wise for farmers to access that kind of information. A lot of agronomists nowadays are trained in conventional production, so this is your formula. This is your prescription for your land. You apply these things at this time and you will be successful. Organic growing is not like that at all. It's much more management-intensive.

We're repairing these farmers not only with themselves but with this professional advice. How that translate is they are able to grow better crops, higher-quality crops. The seeds that they're growing, the oat seeds that are growing are going into a supply chain that has its integrity from the farmer all

the way to the product on the shelf because we've also involved several companies that are interested in these practices and are interested in helping farmers implement these practices.

They're sourcing seeds from these farms specifically to use in their products that they're selling to the consumer. They're telling the story of how it's done. I think that has been really rewarding to see this product, this whole program come to life, and we're actually expanding it again. We're at least doubling, hopefully, the number of farms coming out in the next year. It's been a really successful program for COG.

I'm really excited to always talk about it because I just think it's something that we can use and apply to many different types of seeds. You talk about vegetables, right? I don't know very much about vegetables. If you see my kitchen garden here on the farm, you'd be totally disappointed in me. We could do this as well like in carrots or in tomatoes or whatever. I feel like it's something that can be really beneficial to farmers no matter what type of seed that they grow.

Steph: That's such a holistic approach like really involving a lot of different steps from the agronomists all the way down to the companies that are going to be purchasing this down the line and everything. I think, like you said, it is applicable to a lot of different seeds. Also, it sounds like it's a fairly scalable model. The fact that you're able to double the number of farms that you have next year is very encouraging and exciting, I'm sure.

Allison: I'm very excited about it. [laughs] We have a great program manager that's in charge of it too and she's just really great. She's a big part of the success as well. It helps to have the right people doing the right thing.

Steph: Well, shout-out to her. Both from your perspective as a farmer and your perspective as the president of the Canadian Organic Growers right now, I was hoping we could talk a bit about the recent developments in ag policy in Canada with regards to genetically engineered organisms. It's definitely a complicated topic. I've heard it described as both scary and also boring, which I think is a really great description, but it's not boring. It's just complicated. I was hoping you could walk me through what's been happening and the implications of that.

Allison: You know what? I'll identify with whoever called it scary and boring because it is both of those things. That's part of the reason why it's so difficult, right? Prior to becoming so involved with COG, I actually was blissfully unaware of some of these issues. I can no longer say I am unaware now. [chuckles] Coles Notes version, the government of Canada has a method of assessing, registering,

and communicating when a genetically modified organism is being used in agriculture.

A genetically modified organism in this sense means you're taking a foreign DNA and inserting it into something. In my context, out west here, we're going to say like, Roundup Ready canola is a prime example of a genetically modified organism. You're taking a foreign Roundup Ready gene and putting it into a canola plant. That's still the same, right? If it's a foreign-inserted DNA situation, that's the same.

What's different now and what's equally as scary is that anything that's genetically engineered is no longer regulated in Canada. What that means is that if you're not inserting foreign DNA but you're using a technique like CRISPR, for example, where you can shut genes on and off in an organism, the government of Canada says, "A-okay." They say that that that is no longer deemed novel in their language. What that means is that they don't feel there's any reason why they need to look at it.

You don't need to look at it to see if it's safe for humans, for animals. You don't need to tell us if it's safe for the environment. You just go ahead. You can do that. You can sell that in Canada. We don't need to know about it. It's all good. That's basically what the regulatory changes are saying. What this means for farmers, organic or otherwise, it means that, right now, there's no mandatory traceability system for anything that's genetically engineered.

There is for things that are genetically modified. Like I said, inserting foreign DNA. Anything outside of that, there is no mandatory traceability system. Seed companies can develop these biotech products. They can sell them into the seed supply in Canada. Farmers can buy them. They wouldn't necessarily know that that's what they're buying because the seed companies aren't required to disclose that information. That's scary, right?

As an organic farmer, what that means to me is that when I'm sourcing my seed for the next growing season, how am I going to make sure that that seed is free from genetic engineering, which is something that's explicitly prohibited in organic production worldwide? [chuckles] I'm laughing because, otherwise, it would be the opposite. It's a scary proposition. If I accidentally put genetically engineered seed on my farm and I find out about it, well, that means that my land is now decertified.

It takes at least years to transition it back, so it could ruin organic farms that way. What's frustrating in my role as president of the Canadian Organic Growers, I'm very vocal about how this really affects farms. It doesn't just affect organic farms. It affects conventional farms too because it's not just organic

farmers that don't want to use genetically engineered seed, right? There's lots of conventional farmers that have found these really profitable niche markets, especially overseas, where you cannot sell genetically engineered seed products into that market.

They're making a lot of money by selling into that market. I don't think they've understood yet what these changes mean for them. It's always been seen as an organic issue because of standards, but it's actually an everybody issue. It's also a food-eater issue, right? You're going to go to the store. You're going to buy whatever food product you're going to buy. There's no guarantee now that that's going to be necessarily free from genetic and engineering. If you buy certified organic, I can say, yes, it would be. Otherwise, there's no label for that, right?

Steph: Right. Now, even with the current regulations, even you're saying, you can guarantee that with certified organic. If, down the line, these seeds are getting into the supply and then you're growing them out under organic conditions unless they're being tested before they're going into the food system, is there not the opportunity for them to sneak in there?

Allison: You know what? I'll be honest. Potentially, as far as I know, there's no way to test for genetic engineering. I think that's going to change, obviously. It's in the biotech company's best interest to be able to charge farmers accordingly if they're using this kind of seed. I do think that that testing capability will magically appear because I'm sure it's already in use right now with those companies, but it is tough.

As an organic farmer, the way that I'm looking at this right now is that I'm looking at sourcing seed from people and suppliers that I can trust. They're going to have to sign legal affidavits stating that the seeds that they're selling me is free from GE. That's going to be a big part of the traceability system in organics. There will be seed suppliers that won't feel comfortable signing those kinds of documents. We won't source from them anymore.

Steph: Right. You sell quite a bit of your crop to Europe, correct?

Allison: A lot of our lentils go to Europe. What we're finding now is we're selling more and more domestically as well and across the border to the US as well, especially in our series.

Steph: Okay, yes, because I know Europe also has slightly different standards that are sometimes more stringent around genetically modified stuff, genetically engineered products. If you're, for example, selling to Europe and they have more stringent regulations, and then now Canada's getting more and more lax

and it's harder to trace that, that could really potentially shake up your ability or threaten your ability to sell to those markets, I would imagine.

Allison: Oh, 100%. That gets back to the whole-- it's an everybody issue because these are the same markets these conventional growers are selling into that aren't organic, but they're marketing that their product is being GE-free. Europe is, in a lot of ways, light years ahead of what we do here in Canada in terms of both support of organic agriculture and also just support of having a more natural farming system approach, I'll say. We will lose those markets eventually. Absolutely. There are some countries such as Korea and Japan as well that will lose first because they're even more strict.

We have to figure out a way to work with a system that doesn't have this mandatory traceability. That's why we are still advocating to have that system put in place. If anyone's listening and they want to participate, you go to the COG website. We have a whole way you can contact your MP to bring this issue. We have to keep bringing it up. There are thankfully people that are doing that work on behalf of the sector as well. They're still talking with the government and trying to get that figured out. All hope is not lost, but it's definitely an uncomfortable place to be right now.

Steph: [clears throat] Excuse me. Sorry. I think one of the things that I'm hearing you say and I think in reading a bit about this issue, my takeaway is that it's not like everyone is saying, "Okay, we need to ban all forms of genetically engineered products or foods or whatever else," but just give people the choice to opt in or to opt out and give farmers the choice to opt in or out so that they know they're fully informed about what they're growing and how that's going to affect their market options and all of that. It just seems like an issue of information and choice really from my perspective.

Allison: I would 100% agree with you on issue of choice. Absolutely. You've actually summarized it quite well. The organic sector has never ever said, "You can never use GE to the conventional sector." We've never ever said that. We've always just said, "We deserve the right to choose not to use it." I think anyone who chooses to eat GE food should have the choice and be able to make that choice as well. I think it is definitely an issue of choice. It's an issue in communication in the sense that, in my viewpoint, it would be very easy for the government to say, "You know what? Let's just make this mandatory list just the way we've always done it for GMOs. It would essentially solve that issue." I cannot understand why they wouldn't do that, but we'll see.

Steph: In reading up on this issue a bit, I came across, I guess, some of the guidelines from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, so the CFIA, that in terms of seeds that fall under the category of automatic assessment from them, they

talked about, as you mentioned, seeds that have DNA introduced from another species as well as any plants that possess new traits and have the potential to negatively impact the environment.

Then my question with that, and I don't know if you know the answer, is who is determining that? That feels very subjective, the potential to negatively impact the environment. Is that something that the seed breeders are determining? Is that something that industry is determining, that the CFIA is determining? It seems a little vague just that first blush. I'm wondering if you know anything about that.

Allison: Well, that's a really great question. From my understanding, that is going to be left up to the seed developers to declare whether or not it's something that is looking at further. They're the ones that determine if their traits are novel or not novel.

Steph: Interesting.

Allison: Did I answer your question?

Steph: Yes.

Allison: [laughs] There's a literal "fox guarding the henhouse" situation in that sense.

Steph: Oh, it's a little tricky. Well, I'm very grateful for the work that COG is doing to advocate for just more transparency in these systems.

Allison: It's a tough topic to talk about as a farmer. It's definitely not one of my favorite ones to talk about, [laughs] but it's an important one. I think what struck me the most about this whole process so far is how little farmers are actually consulted with these changes. Some of the tables that I've sat around in the last couple of years talking about these issues is that I'm usually one or there's maybe one other farmer around the table with me.

Conventional organic, it doesn't matter, right? These decisions are being made without actually consulting the sector that uses it properly. I think that's a huge thing in and of itself that's not being talked about enough. I really appreciate you bringing the whole choice thing in there. That's a really important point that I sometimes forget to say. It isn't really about choice. You said that really well.

Steph: Well, to end on a bit of a more hopeful note, I was hoping you could tell me a bit about your work with Young Agrarians and what you hope to contribute to agriculture and teaching in the next generation of farmers.

Allison: This is a great topic to end on. [laughs] Way more fun than the other stuff. The Young Agrarians program is something that actually Cody and I just started working with two years ago now, I think. I cannot say enough good things about this program. It's really brought a lot of really benefits to our farm that I actually wasn't even expecting. What happens is Cody and I sign up as mentors in this program.

What that means is that we're open to bringing someone on board for the growing season who is a new or young or aspiring farmer, somebody who wants to learn about agriculture, or maybe somebody who knows a little bit but wants to learn about a different way of growing. We've had that as well. They come on our farm. They work for the growing season. We teach them as much as they want to learn about soils and plants and all the things that we do on our farm and with the hope that they would then take that knowledge and apply it to their future career plans of starting their own farm or their own ranch.

In this way, it's a really great way to get the next generation of farmers onboard with experience and knowledge so that they feel confident in starting their own farming enterprises going forward. We've had two apprentices so far on our farm. They were very different, equally lovely people. The first one, she was really interested in cows. She spent a lot of time with our cattle manager. She moved the cows every day with our rotational grazing program. She did the calving and she did all the stuff.

She actually still comes back. She's been back to help us move cows and with calving every year since. I can't seem to get rid of her, which is great. The second one we had, she was more interested in crop production. I got to take her for a while because I'm more of the crops and Cody's more of the cows. We talked a lot about soil. She spent a lot of time on the tractor. She learned about seeding and harvesting and composting and all of that great stuff.

For us on our farm, we see nothing but positive things coming from participating in the program. We get a very enthusiastic worker for the summer. They're obviously paid. They're paid a fair wage and provided housing and everything like that for them, but it's exciting to have them on the farm because it really forces us to look at what we're doing and why every year. If we can't explain what we're doing and make it understandable, then we're doing it wrong, is how we view it. It really challenges us every year to explain what we're doing and how important it is to these new and enthusiastic young farmers.

Steph: I think it's such an important program. Thinking about how Canadian farmers are aging out of farming, how there's mass consolidation of farms across the board, and how there are so many barriers in terms of knowledge and access and all of these things to mentors and to farming opportunities, it just makes me

so happy that programs like this exist. Also, I believe Young Agrarians also has a Land Matching Program.

They have opportunities where if farmers are aging out of their land and they're looking for someone to take it over, they can match incoming farmers and help them get an idea of either leasing or purchasing or all of that sort of stuff. Overall, it's an amazing program as you said. It makes me happy, the work they're doing, to bring more people into agriculture and into farming in a bigger way.

Allison: It's really a feel-good thing to participate. Actually, in my other hat with COG, I have no problems talking about how amazing this program is when I'm talking to especially AOC staff because everyone's concerned about, like you just said, the aging out of farmers. We've got a whole gap right now. We don't have enough new farmers coming in to fill the spaces for all the farmers retiring. That actually is something that the government's aware of. When I talk about this program and how inspiring it is and how much success it's having, they hear that. That's really great too. Hopefully, that translates to some support too for the program.

Steph: It's a great program. I think it's so awesome that you and Cody are participating and I've had so much success in it.

Allison: Me too. Thank you. [chuckles]

Steph: Gives me a lot of hope for the next generation. Well, thank you so much again for taking the time to come on here today and for fighting the good fight in a lot of different ways. I really look forward to following along with what happens in the coming years. Hopefully, some of that will include some rain in Saskatchewan. [laughs]

Allison: Thank you so much. Yes, I know. We'll keep our fingers crossed for rain. I appreciate you asking me to be on. It's quite an honor, so thank you so much for the interview today.

Steph: Oh, thank you.

Steph: SeedHeads is produced by The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, a program of SeedChange. SeedChange's main office is located on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg People. To find episode transcripts and translations, learn more about our programs, and to support seed work in Canada, please visit seedsecurity.ca.

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