

# Alta. seed grower spreads out risk

By Michael Raine  
Saskatoon newsroom

SUNDRE, Alta. — Bob Mastin's seed growing operation may have its headquarters in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, but it's built on a foundation that stretches across Alberta.

Mastin Seeds is located near Sundre, a few kilometres from the western edge of prairie grain growing country.

More than 20 years ago, Mastin and his brother evaluated their mixed family farm and decided to become registered seed growers to maximize returns from their limited land base.

His brother has since relocated his farming operation northwest to expand the cattle business, while Mastin expanded the seed company.

"I realized early on that I didn't need my own cleaning plant and a bunch of staff to be successful in this business," he said.

"I needed to provide the best seed I could to as many customers as I can, and to spread my risk."

Risk management is high on Mastin's to-do list.

After a disastrous early frost in 1992, which cost him an entire seed crop, he realized that if the business was going to reduce its losses due to weather he needed to grow grain across the entire province, not just on his 500-acre Sundre farm.

"It's also about manpower, investment in equipment, land and the time to market, plan and operate the business," he said of his one-person operation.

He relies on a semi-retired gentleman of 78 to help with farm work and another part-time staffer, as well as local residents for plant roguing crews.

But the bulk of Mastin's seed grain land, nearly 4,500 acres, is contract grown by other farmers, stretching from Lethbridge in the south to the Peace River district in the north.

"No one drought or frost will keep me from having a supply of top quality seed," he said.

Mastin spends weeks on the road each year meeting growers and inspecting crops and facilities. He also buys and installs grain bins at municipal seed plants across the province, which allows him to provide seed to com-

mercial growers from Fort MacLeod to Grande Prairie.

"I can sell my seed to a farmer 250 miles away and he only has to drive 25 miles to pick it up. That's servicing the customer," he said of his 800 farmer-clients.

The municipal seed cleaning system in Alberta charges 35 cents per bushel for cleaning and additional fees to handle and weigh seed that Mastin stores at their locations.

"It has enabled me to expand and do business at a lot of seed plants where I wouldn't normally be a customer. It's good for everybody."

Mastin uses his ability as a seed grower to add value to grain he contracts and to create margins for his farm.

"I source registered seed, arrange transportation, crop inspections, roguing crews and provide all of the production specifications to my growers," he said.

"I could do the same thing by renting land and having custom operators do the work, but this puts more money in active farmers' pockets."

## Plenty of demand

Mastin's foothills location also provides him with an annual clientele of cattle producers in need of forage crop seed.

"Cowboys don't usually own combines so, unlike grain farmers, they buy seed every year. They want to maximize production whether they are swath-grazing or silaging, so top quality seed is a priority."

Mastin's forage cereal business has resulted in his becoming the largest forage oat seed grower in Alberta and has earned him awards in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Last year it also provided him with a new market for his seed oats in South Korea.

"It's a learning experience, dealing with direct international sales, but any new market is worth the time you spend on education," he said.

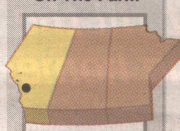
Oats have been profitable for Mastin and for the past few seasons he has been selecting his own Waldron variety seed for improvement.

"I am selecting for seed size. I am hand sorting the largest Waldron seeds and it appears to be paying off. I'm using the same method that (pi-

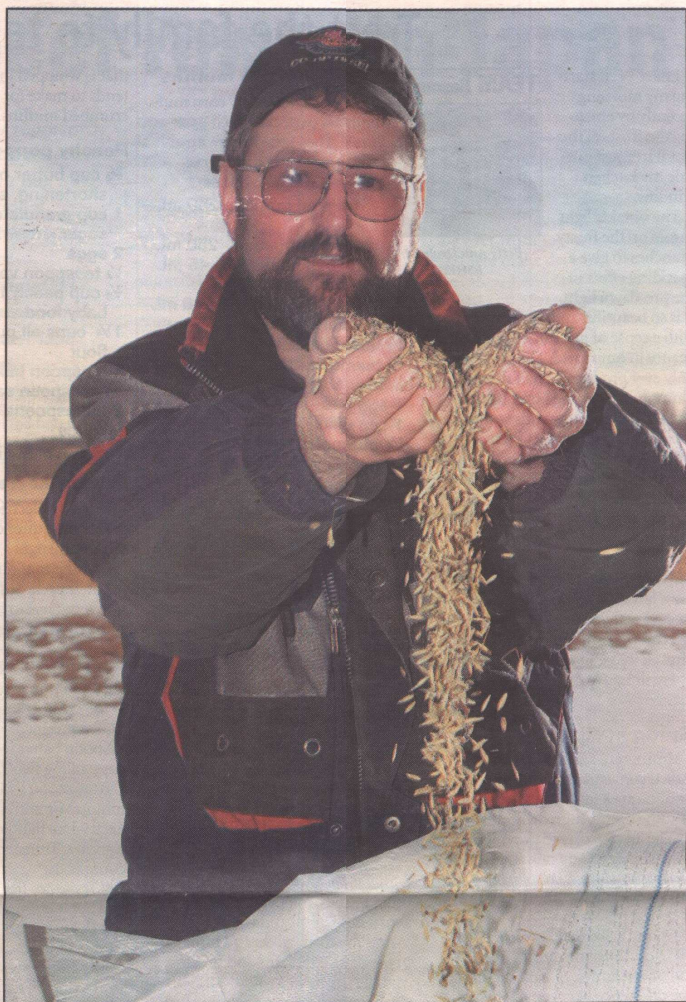
**"If I can make it better and attract new markets, then I will have done something for my clients and the industry I'm proud of."**

— Bob Mastin,  
Alberta seed grower

## On The Farm



Bob Mastin,  
Sundre, Alta.



After being wiped out by frost on his Sundre, Alta., farm in 1992, seed grower Bob Mastin spread out his risk by contracting growers across the province and has become the largest forage oat seed grower in Alberta. (WP photo by Michael Raine)

ioneer Saskatchewan plant breeder) Seager Wheeler did. Hand sorting the best and largest seeds and then planting them the following year. And repeating the process."

Mastin is also considering other varieties beyond Waldron for improvement.

"If I can make it better and attract new markets, then I will have done something for my clients and the industry I'm proud of."

Mastin was a cattle producer until a couple of years ago, but found the added work created seasonal conflicts with the seed business.

"After I sold my cows, just ahead of BSE, I re-

alized I needed a little more income."

Mastin began trading commodities and other financial instruments because it was work he could do from his farm home and still be available to his seed clients and contract growers.

Throughout the year his satellite television is tuned to markets news and his computer and telephone are handy to perform trades on a wide variety of investments ranging from fed cattle to gold.

"Farming isn't what it used to be, but if you want to keep doing it you need to adapt to a changing world," he said.