New idea lands major seed deal

By Michael Raine
Sustainable Agnewson

SUNDRÉ, Alta. — Bob Mastin has carved an impressive notch on his seed grower belt. He is said to be the first small seed grower in Western Canada to acquire exclusive distribution rights for a new, publicly grain variety.

Sundré barley was developed at Alberta Agriculture’s Field Crop Development Centre in Lacombe. Mastin, who operates Mastin Seeds near Sundré, Alta., will distribute it to seed growers this spring and hopes his lower fees and recommended distribution methods will result in greater sales and longer future for the variety.

Sundre is a six-row, smooth-awned, large-seeded, commercial barley that has the highest grain yield of any barley developed at Lacombe, beating out previous champions Vivar and Golden. With forage yields surpassing AC Lacombe by 12 per cent, it’s also a strong ensiling performer.

Sundre has multiple gene resistance to a variety of North American diseases, similar to the small-seeded, six-row, rough-awned variety Manny. Lodging can be a weakness, but even in the highest lodging situations, Mastin said good timing and a new idea for handling plant breeders’ rights were instrumental in helping him as a small seed grower acquire control of the new variety’s distribution.

Jim Helm, head of livestock feed research at the Field Crop Development Centre and the plant breeder who developed Sundre, said drought, low feed grain prices and BSE had conspired to dull interest in new feed barley varieties at the time that BT 566, as Sundre was then known, was coming to fruition.

Helm said there were no takers in the first year that the variety was put up for bid contracts.

Mastin had noticed BT 566 at a Lacombe experimental station field day.

“It was taller. Its heads were bigger. It had bigger leaves. And it wasn’t even part of the tour because nobody was really in the market for new barley,” he said.

The second year that Mastin visited Lacombe, he was told that BT 566 was ready for release but it still didn’t have a home.

Feed grain prices were low, and BSE and a rising Canadian dollar had battered the cattle business. Import American corn was keeping a lid on feed prices so nobody appeared interested in marketing a new barley.

Mastin filed a first application for distribution of a new variety and was in line to take BT 566 home.

“Helm had an idea that caught the committee’s imagination,” Helm said.

“We’ve released 29 varieties out of here and Mastin’s idea might be worth a try. He’s a farmer and he might appeal to other farmers.”

Mastin said one advantage working for him is that he doesn’t have the high marketing costs of large seed companies.

When big seed companies release a new variety, they often kill it by extracting every penny from it they can in the first two years. Seed growers amplify the problem by making their prices to rates as high as the market can stand,” he said.

“Commercial grain growers then feel justified in buying a mini-bulk bag of seed the first year and then brown-bagging it from there on,” Mastin said this creates a situation where plant breeders’ rights fail to deliver to the breeding institutions and seed companies.

“A couple of years after a great new variety is released, seed growers end up selling their carefully tended crop as commercial grain at the local elevator.”

In Mastin’s proposal to obtain distribution rights for Sundre barley, he pitched breeders on the concept of an initial levy of about six per cent the first year, reducing it by one per cent each year after the variety’s release.

“A much lower levy than you normally see,” he said.

“I am also asking my seed growers to resist overcharging in the first two years. Not going out there asking $8 a bushel just because you can get it.”

Mastin’s plan is designed to make the variety affordable for certified growers and for them to sell the new variety cheap enough that commercial growers won’t bother increasing their own stock.

The plan, if providers follow it, should result in more bushels grown, cleaned and sold by seed growers and greater PBR returns because the variety is planted as registered seed rather than commercial.

“It’s going to have one of the lower leases of any barley out there and with the high yields it should undercut the competition,” Helm said. “And if there are no excuses for slinging the law,” he said.

With only days to go before applications closed for distribution rights, a large seed company dropped its finely crafted, traditional PBR application for BT 566 into the ring.

Mastin was told he needed to freshen Growers’ Association’s list or lose BT 566 to the grain companies.

With an around-the-clock effort Mastin and his assistant remodeled the Mastin Seeds application. A late night 100 kilometre drive to Lacombe and Mastin’s unique distribution plan would seal his rights for BT 566 and change its name to Sundre.

Careful planting

The spring of 2006 left Mastin with the only 60 bu. of Sundre in existence.

He responded by hiring a contract grower in the Peace River district who planted a portion of the crop on two 10 acre fields 16 kilometres apart to reduce the risk of hail.

The result was a 160 bu. per acre grain yield on the seed increase.

“Now I’m hoping I can convince my fellow seed growers to produce some Sundre and set the urge to push the price too high,” he said.

Mastin hopes to entice seed growers with aggressive data, signs, co-op advertising and no special grower membership fees beyond the Canadian Seed Growers Association.

Mastin recently added a second crop to his distribution stable with the rights to Mustang oats.