

New idea lands major seed deal

By Michael Raine
Saskatoon newsroom

SUNDRE, 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 public grain variety.

Sundre barley was developed at Alberta Agriculture's Field Crop Development Centre in Lacombe.

Mastin, who operates Mastin Seeds near Sundre, 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, conventional barley that has the highest grain yield of any barley developed at Lacombe, beating out previous champ Vivar. With forage yields surpassing AC Lacombe by 12 percent, 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 only in the highest fertility 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 BT566, as Sundre was then known, was coming to fruition.

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

Mastin had noticed BT566 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 BT566 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. Imported American corn was keeping a lid on barley prices so nobody appeared interested in marketing a new barley.

Mastin filed a first time application for distribution of a new variety and was in line to take BT566 home.

"Bob 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 his idea 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



Besides growing certified grain, Bob Mastin trades commodities, stocks and minerals. He travels with his charts and keeps in touch with his Winnipeg broker no matter where he is, even mountain tops. (WP photo by Michael Raine)

amplify the problem by jacking 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 in."

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," he said.

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

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

"I'm 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 Sundre.

The plan, if producers 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 lowest levies of any barley out there and with the high yields it should undersell the competition ... and it means there are no excuses for skirting 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 BT566 into the ring.

Mastin was told he needed to flesh out his plan or lose BT566 to the grain company.

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 BT566 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 resist the urge to push the price too high," he said.

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

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

PIONEER HI-BRED: THE SEED COMPANY

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Sundre barley, right, is noticeably different from a leading barley variety grown in neighbouring plots on Mastin's farm. The Sundre variety has much longer awns, a larger seed size and a bigger head. (Bob Mastin photo)