

Boot camp for farmers puts emphasis on business plans

by EMILY BULMER

SMITHERS – Spring is in the air, and northern farmers are heading into the season with tips on how to grow their profits. Launched by 'Beyond the Market,' an economic development strategy aimed specifically at the food and agriculture sector along Highway 16, the two day Farm Business Plan Boot Camp trained 60 participants across six northern communities.

Jillian Merrick, co-ordinator for Beyond the Market, explains the purpose of the project.

"One of the goals of Farm Management Canada is to have a business plan for every farm. Farmers sometimes get lost in the passion for their product and don't realize they need to gather information that makes a good business concept profitable."

For Merrick, a successful, sustainable farm community is one that gets paid.

"It is really important that they have to pay themselves a wage, which is something that needs to be built into the business plan at the beginning."

Trisha and Brad Gustafson, owners of Chiliako

Nubians, attended the workshop in Prince George. "We raise dairy goats and with the milk, we make goat milk soap. We already have a business plan for a goat dairy and cheesery, so we focused on the soap making aspect of our business during the workshop," recalls Trisha. The Gustafsons have been operating for five years with a herd that ranges from 25 to 60 goats.

"We did an exercise on what the cost breakdown is to produce a dozen eggs. Most of us don't include our man hours, and that's really expensive actually. One thing that really hit home is that our time is worth something. We had already factored in our time with the goats, but Jillian was saying that the

whole farm needs to pull its weight. After the workshop, we decided to sell the chickens. Chickens were not something we intended for a business and through the workshop, we realized how much of a time sink it is for us. We want to focus our attention on the goat business or have some downtime."

"This learning doesn't work very well through distance education or books," Merrick explains. "With a business plan, it can seem very overwhelming. The whole workshop is designed to get the farmers to put pen to paper and do the thinking that is required to put together a business plan."

Gustafson expands on the value of doing the workshop face to face.

Sharing information important

"One thing that I found was the networking side of it. Farmers are so incredibly busy, so to take time to meet new people and share information about the little things make their farm better is rare – the sidebar conversations were really helpful."

All the participants leave knowing how to write a business plan.

"A lot of them step away and say 'that's not really that hard at all.' It is really simple and formulaic, so they walk away feeling pretty confident," says Merrick.

Other topics covered in the workshop included production planning, inventory and distribution systems, brand development and marketing.

The other theme of the workshop was ensuring that businesses are market driven, not product driven.

Gustafson took advantage of the opportunity.

"I gave out samples of our soap and did a bit of market research at the workshop. One of the comments was that I need to diversify my products.



A workshop that focused on business plan development for farmers was eye-opening for dairy goat farmer Trish Gustafson. (Photo courtesy of Chiliako Nubians)

I've been asked for liquid soap and lotion and I have started making those."

In addition to the workshops in Prince George, Vanderhoof, Dunster, Fort St. James, Smithers and Terrace, Merrick presented to an additional 20 participants in Kamloops.

"Our service area is the Highway 16 corridor in the north, but the program has been so successful, we were approached to present it in Kamloops as part of a conference." Merrick hopes to deliver the workshop in southern communities in the fall.

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