

Grey Bruce Farmers' Week celebrates 60 year anniversary

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It's a showcase of how a local farmer-driven conference can endure and thrive through decades of change if they remain flexible.

Registration at the door is \$50 per day, which includes access to all sessions and a full hot meal. Attendees can also opt for three-day passes or a full-week live stream package.

Lorie Smith, the executive director at Grey Ag Services, the body that is running the event, said the six-day conference from Jan. 7 to Jan 12. will cover a wide variety of topics from farming techniques to environmental advice.

"Right now, the lineup is beef, dairy, goat, sheep, horse and crops," she said. "Beef and dairy and crops have been with us the whole 60 years. But we've had a lot of other different days other than what we have now."

This year's conference will combine in-person programming in Elmwood with a live-streaming option that opens the doors to farmers across Ontario, other provinces, and beyond.

Each day is shaped around practical content. Producer panels and expert sessions will cover technical topics such as beef market outlooks, sire selection, raising healthy calves, succession planning, feed efficiency, solar grazing, herding dogs, equine dentistry, pasture management, and the latest in crop production.

The event will feature a trade show with 137 agribusiness participants and 90 sponsors, which Smith said will give producers direct access to input suppliers, service providers, and emerging technologies.

Compared to some previous events, this will be a huge show for attendees to explore, Smith said.

Alongside the trade show, speakers will be lined up for each of the days to bring hands-on tested-in-the-field advice to attendees. Smith said speakers are coming from across North America and are the linchpin of the conference.

"We rely heavily on speakers and we have dynamic speakers coming from across Canada and the U.S.," Smith said. "This year there's even one from the Netherlands, so we have the reach to get people from across the world."

A strong technology component runs throughout the week, including autonomous machinery, precision and targeted spraying, and artificial intelligence applications in the dairy industry.

Ecological and sustainability themes are integrated into each day, from manure management and wool's role as a renewable product to more efficient, lower-input production systems.

Behind this year's program is a long-running tradition of farmer leadership. Gray Bruce Farmers' Week began in 1966 as a four-day event, with beef, dairy, and crops on the agenda from the very start.

The event has moved around to many locations over the years and has outlived similar conferences across Ontario.

"We think we are the only remaining farmers' week still in existence in Ontario, which is pretty cool," Smith said. "So I think that's quite a feather in our cap. The last one I know of was the Central Ontario Agricultural Conference, and that was in Barrie. They were having a tough time, and then COVID kind of snuffed them out."

A key factor in its resilience has been flexibility and its farmer-driven committee, which meets twice a year to evaluate the previous program and design the next one.

The involvement of Grey Ag Services, which has coordinated the event since 2001, is also responsible for the event's longevity.

Early adoption of live streaming in 2018 allowed the conference to pivot successfully to virtual delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic and then return as a hybrid event.

"I think Grey Bruce Farmers Week has a strong future," Smith said. "We keep getting bigger and better every year."