

## IMPACT OF AFC INVESTMENT IN PEACE REGION INNOVATION NETWORK AMPLIFIED OVER 10 YEARS

A \$70,000 investment from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada received through the Agriculture and Food Council a decade ago was the seed needed to attract more investment and grow a project that continues to impact the Peace Region today.

"It was the Agriculture and Food Council's confidence in us and their vision that allowed us to get started in September 2002," said Bruce Rutley, Director of the Centre for Research & Innovation, a partnership between Grande Prairie Regional College (GPRC) and the Peace Region Economic Development Alliance (PREDA), which grew out of the AFC-funded project. "That strong commitment made it possible for us to get other funding partners in place."

The Centre's website boasts that with only five per cent of Alberta's population, the Peace Region provides 40 per cent of all patent inquiries in Alberta. To support this, PREDA and GPRC, with an initial investment from AET - Technology Commercialization Division, joined forces to create the Centre for Research and Innovation. Significant funding from Rural Alberta's Development Fund soon followed.

Since its official opening in April 2007, the goal of this partnership has been to provide more accessible innovation services to entrepreneurs and businesses in northwestern Alberta.

The Centre offers services to inventors, researchers and investors, including helping them to connect with each other. Services for inventors include management and technical advice, consultation with a patent lawyer, workshops, new product development assistance and applied research. In the three years since the Centre began, it has been involved with 37 applied research projects, and assisted 173 inventors and entrepreneurs to develop their products and ideas. Rutley said the network helped to commercialize 17 products or services to date.

GPRC also recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Research Branch Strategic Partnership Secretariat around the Beaverlodge Research Farm for collaboration on pertinent applied research projects for the region.

"I just wanted to acknowledge how significant this Agriculture and Food Council investment has been," Rutley continued. "The evidence is here. This has turned into something wonderful for the region."

PREDA received \$10,000 in 2001 from a previous Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Adaptation program managed in Alberta by the Agriculture and Food Council for a Feasibility Analysis and Business Plan for a Peace Region Innovation Network. Later that year, the proponent was approved for \$60,000 for Seed Capital to Establish the Peace Region Innovation Network.

The initial investment saw the Innovation Network through until March 2005, but there wasn't enough funding coming in to allow it to continue at that level, so Rutley said he fired himself and a part-time executive director was hired to lead the project.

A significant number of the early clients were involved in the agriculture



*Jim Letersky, a member of the adjunct staff, looks on as Murray Smith demonstrates the latest prototype of his golf swing machine at the Centre for Research & Innovation.*

and food industry, then with the support of Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, the Learn Agri-Food Group was developed.

In 2007, PREDA's The Innovation Network merged with the Integrated Research Unit at Grande Prairie Regional College creating the Centre for Research & Innovation, which has since attracted almost \$4 million in funding through provincial government and other agencies to create a one-stop shop for small to medium sized enterprises and innovators.

Rutley returned to lead the network in September 2008.

"That's when we opened up our activity," he said. "In the 2009-10 budget year, we did \$1.7 million worth of revenue from grants and from clients. Not only did we add a zero to our budget in 2008, but we added a zero to our staffing complement (now near 10, about six full-time equivalencies). We've gone from servicing 20 clients in the first year of operation to 1,200 in the last four years."

Agriculture and Food Council (AFC) Chair Heather Broughton was elated to hear how the initial investment had blossomed into such a valuable resource for the Peace Region.

"The Centre for Research & Innovation is a wonderful example of how one organization believing in a project can have such a ripple effect," she said. "The Agriculture and Food Council is proud to have been able to provide funding to help get The Innovation Network project off the ground, and we are very excited to learn of so many Albertans being able to benefit from this great resource."

More information about the Centre for Research & Innovation is available on its website at [www.gprc.ab.ca/community/cri](http://www.gprc.ab.ca/community/cri).

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