

TIME

productivity

The romantic image of the industrious farmer working from dawn to dusk is becoming a bit old for many people in the farming community.

"My husband and I work harder now than we did 10 years ago," says Pam McIntosh, who farms 3,000 acres of specialty crops with her husband and oldest son near Carman, Man.

Statistics support McIntosh's assertion. Studies show that since 1970, workers in the United States have added the equivalent of seven weeks to their annual work time through longer hours and less vacation time. That's generating the stress and the emotional and health issues that come with it.

Everyone needs to slow down and take leisure time. It's not only good for the individual; it's good for business.

"In the middle of harvest, when we've been working for 16 days straight, all we think about is a couple of weeks off – no computers, no phones, no one to answer to – just be free for two weeks."

McIntosh has worked off the farm as a travel agent for the better part of 20 years and understands farmers' need for leisure time.

"It used to be that vacations were considered a luxury. Now they are a necessity," she says.

Elaine Froese agrees. She is a farm family coach (www.elainefroese.com) who also runs a 3,500-acre certified seed farm with her husband near Boissevain, Man.

"Leisure time is a time for pause. It gives the mind a chance to shift, be creative and find new perspectives," she says. "Farmers who spend a week in Mexico find the next seven days are the most constructive of the year. They get new ideas and do their best planning."

But it's not all about taking a tropical vacation. Techniques and alternatives for relaxation and leisure exist closer to home. Froese suggests that farmers take a suitcase-less vacation.

"Draw a line up to 100 kilometers from home or about a one-hour drive. Relax at a lake, go to a fair or a festival or visit old friends. What's important is that you gain new perspective through leisure and relaxation," she says.

It can be as simple as taking Sundays off, but farmers need to take time to refresh their minds and bodies.

"The body is not a John Deere tractor. You cannot treat it like a machine. It is not meant to work all the time," Froese says. She adds that especially farm men, who have a poor track record when it comes to regular medical checkups,

need to pay attention to symptoms of overwork and stress like fatigue, low-grade depression or sleeplessness.

"Rest ties into physical and emotional health. You need it," she says. "You'll find that having a nap or taking a walk from time to time will allow you to be more productive."

Froese also maintains that taking time to have fun together as a couple is the secret to a successful marriage. She says that even going for a picnic or a short hike with family members reinforces the bond and puts the fun back into home life.

"If you are able to spend fun times with your spouse or your family, it becomes like a bank account that you draw on during the bad times."

McIntosh heartily agrees. "A farm is like a sponge," she says. "It keeps sucking up your money and time. It's endless. You have to take some for yourself to make all the work worth it." She recommends that couples put money aside for a vacation. And if time and money are the issue, McIntosh subscribes to many small breaks.

"A holiday is what you make it," she says. She and her husband can't get away during the summer because they have to irrigate their potatoes every eight hours. So they spend an occasional night in their trailer that's parked at a campsite by a lake just 10 miles away.

"There's always someone having a campfire and we join in and socialize. It's a lot of fun. It lets us stay connected to our community and as a couple; it helps us get through the summer."

Dr. Nikki Gerrard's 2004 Saskatchewan study "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" says communication, connection and celebrating community keep rural residents emotionally balanced. That ties into leisure time. When farmers work all the time, they lose connections with their community and become isolated.

"The art of the drop-in visit is dead," bemoans Froese. She suggests farmers use their cell phone to call when passing by a friend's place to see if they can visit. "Don't talk business," she says. "Take the time to relax and socialize."

Leisure may seem like someone else's reality, especially today when many farmers work off the farm to supplement their farm income. But to forfeit leisure time has an impact on the bottom line. Farmers can improve profitability and productivity by resting their bodies, nurturing their relationships with family and friends and taking time to relax. **FF**