

FAMILY RELATIONS | CONFLICT SOLVING

Book offers ways to calm troubled waters

Family conflict | Unresolved issues can lead to serious consequences for farm operations

BY ROBERT ARNASON

BRANDON BUREAU

A familiar anecdote of a woman on her wedding day is shared on motherinlawstories.com.

In it, the mother-in-law asks the bride to step aside during a photo session so she could have some pictures of "her family." The bride moves out of the frame and is fuming on the sidelines, while her freshly minted husband shrugs his shoulders and smiles for the camera.

Mother-in-law stories are commonplace in all spheres of society, but in-law tension and hostility are a particularly vexing problem on family farms, say the authors of a new book on the subject.

"The classic line is: 'everything was fine until she came along,' referring to the daughter-in-law," said Megan McKenzie, who collaborated with Elaine Froese to write *Farming's In-Law Factor: How to have more harmony and less conflict on family farms*.

The book cover has an illustration with 15 eggs. Fourteen eggs are white and one is brown.

"One of these is not like the other," Froese said.

McKenzie and Froese, both of Boissevain, Man., have an immense knowledge of family and interpersonal discord. McKenzie works as a conflict



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consultant and has a PhD in conflict resolution. Froese is a professional speaker, writer and farm family coach who specializes in succession planning.

Froese came up with the idea for the book after listening to dozens of stories of discord on family farms.

"What I was finding in my coaching practice is the same conversation or thread kept re-occurring," said Froese, who farms near Boissevain, Man. "When I do family meetings... and I ask the mom what she wants for the farm family.... in 80 percent of the cases (the) first words are, 'I want my family to get along.'"

McKenzie, who grew up on a farm, collaborated with Froese on the book because personal conflict is a pervasive problem on Canadian farms.

"A farm family has their own way of being, their own way of doing things.... And you have somebody coming from a different farm family, or different city family."

McKenzie said established families often view their new daughter- or son-in-law as a threat to their traditions and stability rather than "a new resource with skills and wisdom to bring to the family unit."

The co-authors interviewed a number of farmers for the book and relied upon the experience of Froese, who has coached more than 600 farm families.

"A lot of the examples we use in the book are conglomerates. One classic (example) is where the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are sitting in an accountant's office talking about the transition of the family farm," Froese said.

"The daughter-in-law makes a comment, which the mother-in-law takes huge offence to and they stop talking for the next six months."

Froese said farm families excel at agronomy, technology and production, but often struggle with family relationships.

"Conflict avoidance is one of the biggest issues in farm families... that's hurting agriculture."

Personal strife within families and being treated as an outsider isn't exclusive to farms, but the realities of rural life can exacerbate the stress, McKenzie said. Problems at work are usually separate from family, but that rule doesn't apply to farming.

"Some of it is how closely connected the family and the farm are," McKenzie said. "It's not like the day you act as business people and at evening have your family time. The two... are so enmeshed."

WHAT HELPS RESOLVE OR MITIGATE FARM FAMILY CONFLICTS?

- When a person marries into a farm family, it's easy to judge their beliefs, habits and ideas. A healthier approach is curiosity about and respect for the new person's perspectives.
- Hold face-to-face meetings, facilitated by a professional or outsider, to discuss concerns, grievances and confusion
- Recognize the gifts and talents of in-laws.
- Treat in-laws as equals, not as children.
- Offer assistance or advice when asked.
- Be quick to apologize when wrong.
- Be open to learning from all members of family, including in-laws.

Froese said the simplest things can cause tension between the generations on a farm.

"Your mother-in-law judging the colour of the paint on the walls that used to belong to her."

Froese and McKenzie said unresolved quarrels can have dramatic or subtle consequences. It might lead to divorce and the dissolution of the farm or cause productivity losses.

"I call it distracted management," Froese said. "The conflict is sucking emotional energy from the family and from the energy that should be going into running a fantastic business."

The book offers a great deal of detail on in-laws, including chapters on each family member.

McKenzie said it's not harder to be the new woman on the farm compared to the new man, but there is a gender difference.

"The daughter-in-law ends up in conflict with the mother-in-law and the son-in-law ends up in conflict with the father-in-law."

McKenzie and Froese launched their book June 6 in Boissevain. For more information, visit www.elainefroese.com or farmingsinlawfactor.com.

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"Banks will back you up if you have a good business plan, but the levels they back you up at makes it hard to compete with large commercial guys, so you have to find a niche market," said Sandhu.

He said leasing land is a viable option, provided the banks offer affordable financing.

"Reasonable interest rates and profit sharing would make it easier to get started," he said.

Siemens recently returned to the farm and is hoping to buy and expand the farm with his brother in the next five years.

"Coming up with the capital for supply managed (operations) is difficult," he said.

Land prices as high as \$100,000 an acre in the Fraser Valley are another hurdle, he added.

"That's a huge amount for a young farmer trying to start out," he said, conceding he is luckier than most because he is part of an established farm.

Other challenges for Siemens' farm include cross-border shopping and easy access to cheaper products just a short drive away in the United States and a strong animal welfare movement in nearby Vancouver.

"We want to provide the best animal care, but (practices like) free range increases the costs of production," he said.

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