

# The Christmas tree capital

## Lunenburg County growers confront marketing, production challenges

A gathering of the Lunenburg County Christmas Tree Producers' Association (LCCTPA) is no small affair. After all, this is the jurisdiction that bills itself the Balsam Fir Christmas Tree Capital of the World. The group has been around since 1967, representing the interests of a sector that has deep roots in this part of Nova Scotia.

But even in Lunenburg County, where the tradition of growing Christmas trees remains strong, there are concerns for the future of the industry. So when producers gathered for the LCCTPA's fall field day and technical sessions, held Sept. 24 in Oak hill, N.S., just outside Bridgewater, the agenda was focused on meeting market demand in the years to come, and ensuring that the business will be economically viable for the next generation of growers.

Leading the presentations was Jim DeLong, president of the SMART Christmas Tree Research Cooperative, Ltd. The co-op is an investment vehicle established to generate an industry contribution to the Atlantic Christmas Tree Research Centre (CTRC) at the Dalhousie University Faculty of Agriculture in Truro, N.S., and to allow contributing producers to benefit directly from proprietary scientific developments. The offering, closing at the end of 2016, allowed producers to purchase as many as two \$500 shares a year, up to a maximum investment of \$10,000.

DeLong said there are several promising technologies in the works, but at this point three are being developed for commercialization: a genetically improved SMART seedling; a needle abscission delaying compound; and an integrated environmental control system for storage and shipping of harvested trees. Hammering out the details of a licensing agreement, with the help of Dalhousie Law, is proving to be a slow process, he added, and commercial availability may still be



**Randy Naugler gives a demonstration of his preferred fill planting techniques, at a fall field day presented by the Lunenburg County Christmas Tree Producers' Association on Sept. 24. Naugler said he likes to dunk seedlings in a solution of 10-52-10 fertilizer prior to planting. He also remarked on the importance of ensuring that planters take the time to do a good job. "You need to pay more than 10 cents a tree," he said. "We pay our guys by the hour, and we end up paying 20-25 cents a tree." (David Lindsay photos)**



two years down the road.

Scott MacKinnon, president of the Christmas Tree Council of Nova Scotia, spoke about the need for a marketing plan based on a differentiated product from this region. That would be a branded Atlantic Balsam fir, the region's predominant Christmas tree species, with its distinctive appearance and aroma.

"What the market studies have shown us is that a lot of people don't know where Nova Scotia is," MacKinnon said. "If the market is looking for trees, we want them to be looking for Balsam fir."

Sarah Weston, executive director of the Christmas Tree Council, said funding proposals have been submitted to the Atlantic Canada Opportu-

nities Agency (ACOA) and to the Nova Scotia government, in support of a branding program. A new entity called the Atlantic Canada Balsam Fir Partnership has been established for this purpose, operating at arm's length from the Council. Weston said she hoped to find out about funding within the next six months or so, then the project would require about a year's work. The end result would be a brand comparable to the Tidal Bay wine label, available as a marketing option for producers who meet the specific standards.

Research has revealed that Balsam fir is sometimes being sold in export markets without being recognized for what it is, Weston said. Fraser fir, by contrast, is widely recognized by

name. "There was a lot of marketing behind that."

### U.S. LEVY

Addressing marketing in a broader context was Betty Malone, a grower from Oregon, representing the Christmas Tree Promotion Board (CTPB), the entity that administers funds from the new 15-cent check-off on all trees sold in the U.S. She reviewed the history of this initiative, starting when a task force was assembled in 2008. Growers understood that their industry was in decline, and that they would have to take action to compete with artificial trees.

"We've seen that when you put money into marketing, it works," she said. "What doesn't work is the

## The war on weevils

Murray Crouse welcomed visitors to his lot during the Lunenburg County Christmas Tree Producers Association fall field day on Sept. 24, and described his ongoing battle with White pine weevil. White pine is not widely cultivated for Christmas trees in this region, but Crouse said the species regenerates well on his land, and when it's nicely sheared – and sprayed with blue-green dye in the August prior to harvest – it makes a good niche product. "These White pine sell us a tractor-trailer load of fir," he remarked.

So Crouse became increasingly frustrated with weevil damage to the leader, which rendered his pines unsaleable. Recently he experimented with pesticide, and found some success spraying Decis (deltamethrin), a formulation commonly used for the Colorado potato beetle. "This was a man in a desperate state of affairs," he admitted. A double-strength solution applied to the tops in spring – when the female insect is climbing up to the leader to lay eggs after overwintering in the duff around the tree – appears to be effective. But Crouse also said he's keen to see results from research into natural controls.





voluntary programs. It's the 'free rider' syndrome. We needed something that's sustainable, and that's equitable."

There was no referendum on the levy, but U.S. producers were asked to submit comments on the proposal, and they supported it by a ratio of three to one.

Malone credited Kurt Schrader, a congressman from Oregon, for getting the levy into the farm bill and helping to get it passed. She also had high praise for the Canadian industry. "We appreciate you showing us the way to do a check-off," she said. "It's really fun to see the leadership here. You guys are ahead of the curve."

This year the CTPB has a \$1.25 million budget. That includes \$70,000 for research, some of which will go toward fire safety. None of the money can be used for lobbying, Malone said, but information gained through research can be very useful for lobbying.

The CTPB is now entertaining pitches from marketing companies. Malone said social media will play a very important role in the campaign. One of the proposed taglines that resonated with her was: "It's Christmas. Keep it real."

The USDA, which governs the board, will not allow use of the word "fake" in reference to plastic Christmas trees, and is generally wary of negative advertising. "We are going to push the envelope on that. Some of it is pretty edgy," Malone said. "It's not for us that we're marketing; it's the younger generation."

The technical sessions also included presentations by Malcolm Pelley with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, covering pest issues; Peter Burgess from Perennia, discussing pesticide safety; Ron Dykeman, a vehicle compliance officer, outlining road regulations for trailers and farm equipment; and Henry Vissers, executive director with the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. After lunch the group visited three nearby Christmas tree lots, belonging to Fred Eidt, Murray Crouse, and Andrew Crouse. DL



Colin Hughes spoke about the expanding market for small Christmas trees. "People are buying more than one of them," he said. "It dries out, and they get another one." He pointed out that this makes it possible to generate revenue by cutting trees that are too crowded, or by taking the top three feet from trees that have defects in the lower branches.

## Beating back the juniper

Gin drinkers might have a soft spot for Ground juniper, whose berries have historically been valued as an aromatic. The low-lying native plant is also sometimes used as a ground cover to help prevent erosion. But Dr. Scott White, from Dalhousie University's Faculty of Agriculture, has taken on the challenge of suppressing juniper, because on some Nova Scotia Christmas tree lots it grows so thick that it chokes out the regenerating crop. During a producers' field day held this September in Lunenburg County, Dr. White showed visitors several trial plots where various controls have been used.



The cheapest method—tarping the juniper with salvaged plastic lumber wrap—has proved reasonably effective, but is not considered practical over a significant acreage. Chemical herbicides are the more likely solution, though getting contact with the foliage is difficult, because the plant grows in layers. "With persistence, I think you can beat this thing back," White said. "You're going to have to thin it out season after season, until you win out, or give up."