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Taber, AB – Dirt can be sweet.

The soil in Southern Alberta is about to get a little sweeter with farmers taking to the fields to plant sugar beets. 26,000 acres of sugar beets will be seeded this spring across Southern Alberta with the participation of over 200 contract holders. These sugar beets will produce thousands of tonnes of sugar in the fall which will be used in a multitude of ways. Many people believe sugar just adds flavor to foods but there is a lot more science involved in the use of sugar and the farming of sugar than meets the stomach. Sugar also aids in preservation, creates texture and increases volume in foods which promotes a longer shelf life, the golden-brown look every baker desires, and the fluffy light bread which we remember grandma making.

Sugar beets are a staple to many farming operations in Southern Alberta due to their rotational value. Whether you grow cereal crops, beans, peas, or potatoes; sugar beets can be value added to the rotation. The only time it gets a little tricky is if the farmer grows Canola as that may present a nematode issue. However, ASBG has worked with their processor to develop a solid rotational guideline that ensures nematode is a very limited threat and farmers are using science in their fields daily to monitor issues like this.

“Seeding is always an exciting time of year in the community as people see the equipment moving and it is a sign of spring. However, most people don't know the role science plays in seeding sugar beets. Farmers are testing their fields to analyze soil conditions, nutrient levels and moisture content. They will establish the parameters from that testing to help ensure a successful growing season can occur. Without science, food production is difficult and less assured says- Arnie Bergen-Henengouwen, President of ASBG. Farmers work with a variety of partners including soil testing labs and agronomists to understand what the soil needs to grow sustainable and healthy food.”

Many of the contract holders growing this year's sugar crop are third or fourth generation on the farm and have seen an evolution over the years of how the crop is grown. This evolution and understanding needs to be communicated to people living in the city. It is commonly known that some people living in the urban areas may be removed from the farm by at least three to four generations if not more and may not be fully aware of where their food comes from.

“It is important for people to understand that the equipment they see in the field is a tool to help in growing their food and that their food comes from farmers and ranchers. The grocery centers are the retailers of the product, but not the producers. For example, the sugar they are using to create the muffins for their child's snack day was grown by the sugar beets these farmers are getting ready to plant.” Says Melody Garner-Skiba, Executive Director of ASBG. “We will continue to work to provide that education to the community about where Alberta Sugar comes from.”

Sugar processed by Roger's Sugar in Southern Alberta is the only 100% Canadian grown and refined sugar. Something all Albertans should be proud of. Look for the black stamp on Roger's Sugar that starts with the number 22 and you will be supporting local farmers. The ASBG strives to ensure a Southern Alberta Sugar Beet Industry exists that is progressive and sustainable for future generations. It is focused on promoting the industry through effective partnerships, providing a united voice for producers, guiding research to enhance competitiveness of the industry, while providing leadership and representation to local producers at all levels.

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