



FCC Knowledge Podcast

Season 4 – Episode 3

Business synergy: When one plus one equals more than two

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Interviewee: Fanny Delisle (FD)

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AS: From AgExpert, it's the FCC Knowledge Podcast – a show that features real Canadians and agriculture, real stories and real good conversations about the business of farming. I'm your host, Aimée Stang

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FD: If you want to be good in agriculture, just being good in the field and being good in the barn is not enough anymore. You really have to know your management. You have to know your economics; you have to know your numbers.

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AS: In this episode, we're talking with Fanny Delisle about her relentless pursuit of creating synergies for her business, her community and the ag industry. Managing the family dairy and cash crop operation alongside her husband, Jean Keurentjes, near Henryville, Quebec, Fanny's approach is laser focused on her people, her finances and her environment to ensure she's passing along a sustainable business, in all aspects of the word, to the next generation.

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AS: As you'll hear, Fanny's newest business venture is an ag business incubator, *La Cambrousse*. This project allows Fanny and her family to partner with new farmers by sharing knowledge, networks and resources to create a thriving ag sector and community. I think you'll find Fanny's vision for agriculture to be contagiously inspiring.

Let's start from the beginning. How did you get your start in agriculture and where did it lead you to today?

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FD: Agriculture was not my plan to start with, and it's very funny because my first job as a student was to milk goats in a goat operation, and I loved it. But I had really good grades in school, so everybody was, "You're going into science!" All right. That's what I did. And I actually didn't like it very much. I went to school for 21 years. When I started working in my field, years later, I met a farmer. We got married and had kids, and I stopped working in an office. I came to work on the farm, and it's the best thing that ever happened to me. And having degrees in other subjects than agriculture – of course, at the beginning, I was really bad at everything – but it gave me perspective. So it was interesting.

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FD: I think it added to the farm.

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AS: I'm a firm believer that education is never wasted.

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FD: Exactly. It was biology and land management. We manage land. With a vet, the animals. And the field, with biology knowledge, it's useful.

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AS: That's a great perspective. How did you start in goat milking?

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FD: I like animals very much. So I just applied and I'm very small and they were like, "Well, women are good with animals, so let's do that." And I started milking goats and it was one night a week and Saturday all day, and chores at night. I just started doing that and I loved it. There were horses over there. We had tiny pigs, and I took care of the animals and I was really good at it.

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FD: For some reason it didn't come to my mind that I could make a career out of that. When I look back at it, everybody was so convinced that I was going to be in science because I loved science too.

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AS: It's funny because a few generations ago farming wasn't necessarily sold as a viable career, period. Right?

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FD: Yeah. But where I'm from, the farms are smaller. The farms were not as much into technology. So now with the robotics and everything, it's so much easier than it was.

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AS: So now you and her husband; Jean, you have five businesses. It's dairy operations, correct?

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FD: No. Actually, one dairy operation. The thing is, in agriculture, you always respect the succession, because transferring a farm from one generation to the next is complicated. And it takes years. It's done over 20 or more years. So, my parents-in-law, they had planned their succession, and when we got married, we had to each keep our things separate.

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FD: At that point there were two company farms. One was the dairy farm and one was land that just belonged to my husband because to respect the succession, they had to stop growing the dairy farm in the term of land. So the succession would continue to make sense through time. And since I got married, but I didn't have access to anything, I didn't go the route of getting married and working for free for my husband.

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FD: So I told him, I have no problem with separating our things. I'd keep it as separate, but I need to have something in my name. So we agreed that the next [piece of] land would be bought under my name and that I would work at the farm. And that's what happened. So that's the third one. And then we were doing good.

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FD: So we transferred the milk into a company. And right now I have a farm incubator that is also on the start-up. So that's the five companies. And I also managed another dairy farm.

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AS: So quite busy.

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FD: Yeah, yeah, I know why I'm tired.

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AS: And you have two boys, correct?

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FD: Yeah, but they're teens right now. Actually they're more helpful than they're a burden and they work a lot on the farm and they're super nice and it's going great with them.

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AS: And one of your sons is interested in taking over the farm.

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FD: My eldest son, he's 18 right now and he's in school. It's not done yet, but he really shows an interest. It's been on his mind forever, even when he was small. And his second word was tractor, so he was into it naturally. He works on the farm every weekend, every summer, and he's really into getting the farm. My second son is more into mathematics, so not the farm, probably.

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AS: That's not a bad career choice to have either. And probably the farm has set him up for some interesting work ethic and some interesting experiences for the future as well.

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FD: Yeah, we do believe in that. And you know, it's really our dream to be farmers, all those companies, all that work and everything. And we hope that we have somebody to keep it going and to take the farm and bring it further or do something

with it. But I mean, it's really our dream and the children, they're allowed to have other dreams. So we're really lucky that one is interested.

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FD: But the other one, I still show him administration and he has to learn about how does it work to own land because he's going to be part of the estate as well. So I told him you might not be farming, but you're going to be a landowner at least. So you have to learn about these things.

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AS: That's such a good perspective because I don't think all farm families – maybe it doesn't cross their mind who's interested in the farm and who's not. But then you don't think about the relationship that they're going to have with the farm in the future and set them up for success for that. And set the other sibling that's going to stay on the farm up for success.

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FD: Exactly. And we cannot separate like half and half on value, because if you want your farm to go on, you cannot give half away. That's not how it works. So we tell them, this is how companies work, planning fiscally and economically and looking at opportunity of where you're going with the assets that you have. You can turn them into any kind of dream afterwards.

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FD: You don't have to do what we do because my father-in-law was a lot into genetics and he was doing a lot of shows and stuff, and my husband is not into that. We transitioned out of that. My father-in-law was really into cows. My husband likes the cows, but he likes land as well. So we have more land now and we do grains and we do other things and I have a sense of contributing more in a social way.

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FD: And that's why we're starting the incubator, you know, so the dream can progress and that's great. But it's just a huge opportunity to take part of the farm, even though you want to do something else. Because right now we're pivoting into something else. But I'm still with the farm.

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AS: Let's talk about the incubator. How did that come to be exactly?

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FD: You see all those magnificent companies with young people who start in the vegetable business or growing [raising] animals, and it's really hard to start. And with the price of land, it's almost impossible. I have 20 years' experience. My husband has 40 years' experience on the farm. I mean, it's easy for us to manage problems and find solutions. But when you're starting, it's really hard.

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FD: We've been seeing people who have great ideas, failing again and again. On the other hand, we look at our land and we have those tiny irregular pieces. I mean, they're not profitable to us. And we bought land that is a little farther away. So this one cost me more to exploit [operate] because I have to go all the way there and I don't see it and I don't go visit it as often.

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FD: So maybe over there we could do something else, like have people growing different cultures and then create collaboration and synergy with those people. Because both my husband and I, we love the synergy between the farms. Just like my father-in-law did with his son and with his other son. And we're working with my husband's brother still. So why not regroup [bring together] more people to create synergies on the parts that are not the most profitable ones?

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FD: I already have a few growers that are working with me. We've built such a huge company – it's such a big cake that there's too much to eat for my husband, me and my children. Why not share it and build an even bigger cake with those persons and help bring diversity to agriculture? Because it is a problem if we don't find produce from Quebec, if we don't have access to food and we don't have sustainability within the province.

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AS: So you're providing coaching and advice to these new farmers that are entering in this group with you?

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FD: Yeah, for free. And I also provide all my network because it's so easy. It makes sense, but at the same time it doesn't. For example, I had an angora goat producer and she

didn't have access to a vet because when she came here she had 15 animals. Veterinarians, when they have my 300-cow herd to take care of, they don't go spend an hour with 15 goats because there's not much to do, and the person doesn't know much, and it's really hard to have access. But, since I have access to that veterinarian, she goes there because it's in another part of my farm. So it's a minute away. Same thing with the nutritionist from the grain companies. Those are professionals that are hard to go and get and get at a reasonable price because you're one tiny person.

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FD: So if we can regroup [get] all those people together and get the service together, it's less expensive. And for me it doesn't bother me at all in my farm activities. I have the machinery; I just have to pin it on the tractor. It's such an easy thing for me to do. And for them, it's so big what I gave them.

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FD: This difference in scale can really serve to grow a business really fast at very little effort on our part. And then we want to start and build to sell.

AS: A market.

FD: Yeah. And if you have ten people building it in the tiny building, it's way cheaper. And then if you're ten people, you can go and get subsidies because it's a community and then it snowballs into something very positive.

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AS: It sounds so cool that you can leverage what you've got and the assets that you have in your business and your know-how and help others [with a] bit of information or coaching and possibly sharing some assets too – some equipment or access to land. There are so many boxes that you're checking off.

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FD: It serves me a lot because I'm a very curious person, so I want to learn about all those things. I don't want to do it myself. I want people who are responsible, and I can go give a hand, have a good relationship, create synergy and learn about all those new products. And I'm a food person. All those new [areas of] production – I get to try all kinds of new products.

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FD: So it's fantastic. It's really a great exchange.

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AS: So what's the long-term vision eventually? A marketplace where people can come and purchase these products and it becomes more of a community-based type of experience for people?

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FD: Yeah, I have two pieces of land, I'm looking for people who want to be full-time in agriculture and have a commercial business in agriculture. So technically it's going to be pieces that are a few hectares – some things don't need a lot of space. But if you think about fruit trees and such, they need more space. And I would love to do grains and stuff like that. We have a lot of land, so we have a few empty barns right now.

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FD: I would really love to have a complete grocery store, all produced on my land. Like in ten years to be building that store where you can go in and get everything you need on a site where you also have a place to learn gardening. You can have coffee, a small restaurant. And my dream really is that I get a family come Saturday morning with the kids in their PJs.

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FD: They have breakfast and everybody goes to do their activity. And by noon they are home with their groceries. They had a lot of fun. They were within a community. They belonged somewhere and they had access to nature.

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AS: And they learned about farming.

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FD: Yeah. There will be chores to do, and I will invite people to come and do chores. And I think that this physical work and the contact with the animals is so great for your health. People are going to come back with all the benefits of being in agriculture.

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AS: There's all sorts of equine therapy programs and animal therapy programs. So why not give people that option?

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FD: I have a few horses, and we have tiny horses that I want to reproduce [breed] and eventually open a place where children can go and pet the mini horses because they're so nice and easy to manipulate and they're not dangerous like the big horses. We have ideas in many ways but having therapy there and having a connection with the animals, and stuff like that would be so great.

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FD: And then you go back to nature, and you take a moment to breathe the air, see the leaves, the wind in the leaves. It's so calming.

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AS: It's good for your mental health.

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FD: Yeah, exactly. The producer, but all citizens from all the cities around who come to that place, have a place where they can restore [reenergize] and rejuvenate, but in a natural way.

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AS: And so the producers that you're working with, have there been any surprises in terms of this experience managing their businesses or growing with them or helping them?

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FD: I don't have many yet. The one that I've been doing it with, it's growing faster than they think. My [garlic] grower is doubling production next year already and he's like, I may put some more because I've had some more contacts already. It's so easy to double production because now the field work is not an issue, and the space is not an issue because before that he was on five tiny properties. And for us he's got the smallest field of all and it's already way too big for him.

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FD: So there's no problem with expansion. There is no problem [having access to] machinery. We needed a rototiller this fall, and we just bought it because financially I can do that and then the new farmers, they rent it for a very small price and eventually it's going to pay off for me.

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AS: And so on your own businesses, you carry the same sense of community and diversity on the team that you manage. Yes?

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FD: I have people from many countries. We speak three languages every day, of course, French, English and Spanish, which is common on farms. And I have people from France, I have people from the United States, I have people from Mexico, I have people from Guatemala. I had a guy from the Philippines twice. Everybody gets along, we've had no integration problem at all.

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FD: And on the other hand, I've got both women and men. We're at parity most of the time. And even with the fact that we have neuro-atypical people, including my husband, who's got ADHD with a lot of hyperactivity. And I have an autistic person. Everybody's special, everybody's different, but we get along so well and I'm super proud of my oldest workers, who really take care of the younger ones, and they show them things. For us, respect was always the first value. Anybody that I get, I choose them carefully to be able to work in that culture. But it's so pleasant for us. We call it a FARM-ily.

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AS: A FARM-ily. I love it.

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FD: Yeah. We're together all the time and it's pleasant and people are helpful. When I'm at the barn, because I'm the "old lady," everybody has an eye out if I need help. When I'm doing something that is hard, there's always somebody presenting themselves, "You want me to help?". And so it's fantastic.

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AS: You have such a strong sense of collaboration and family and community.

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FD: Yeah, but I think that it's ingrained in farms because it's often family businesses. When crap happens, it's not a problem of there's no ink in the printers. And you have those neighbours, like for three generations, so you know them. But the whole agriculture sector is conducive to be collaborative. And we might have forgotten it a little bit, but it's still there and it's really easy to bring back to the farm.

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AS: That's great. And so you're talking about the neurodiversity you have on your team. You said you had someone that's autistic, your husband has ADHD. They must bring an interesting perspective to your team.

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FD: Well, when you started discovering the symptoms people [have] and naming them, it was named as a problem. But, you know, having a hyperactive person on a farm is fantastic because they never let go. They want to work 12-hour days. They're so happy and they get into big chores like, "We're going to do this!" They're like Vikings. And someone who's autistic is really good with details.

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FD: So with cow health, she sees everything and she won't let go of it. If a cow has any kind of problem, it's going to be dealt with. It's not going to be on the table for two days. It's going to be dealt with right now. I think it's necessary to look at the strengths of the person, even any ordinary person, look at their strengths and have them work into their strengths.

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FD: Here, we're lucky because I've never worked on the farm, like eight hours a day in the barn. I did chores. I still go and do the veterinarian visits. But there is time that is dedicated to that. And it took me years to get there, to learn how to do things well, how to get the best out of our employees.

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FD: And I really invested a lot of time in that because I think it's paramount to the success of our farm. It ended up being my husband that didn't believe in it, you know, "You just tell them what to do."

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AS: I heard someone say that once: job training is, "Here's a pitchfork and figure out what to do with it". In any other industry that wouldn't work. You'd have an employee manual, you would have some guidelines, you'd have some protocols. But on the farm, we just expect people to naturally know what to do.

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FD: If you go back 30 years ago, in your first days when you started working, people expected you to just come in and do something and know what to do. And I've never had any formal training in the two jobs that I had before the farm. I would come in and they said, "This is your job, this is your desk, this is the paperwork."

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FD: Go ahead." Since it's been so difficult to find employees, we've had to up our game. We used to change employees every year and now I have a lot of employees who have been here many years. And even my international workers, they stay here at least two years.

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AS: It's so difficult to find labour, retain employees, and then have employees that are thriving and are enjoying what they're doing, and a team that's thriving. Because turnover does cause an impact on the whole team, when you're having to train somebody new all the time and invest the time in that.

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FD: We try to hire people and play to their forces. Every time I have a new person, everybody's task list changes a little bit. So we all have to get adjusted to the new person. And we did it for everyone. So everyone does it for everyone else.

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It sounds like innovation is very important to you with your incubator project, with the way that you're looking at your human resources on your farm, how else has innovation shaped your farming practices and your vision for agriculture today?

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FD: Both my husband and I come from very innovative families. My father-in-law, when he came to Canada, he was one of the first to get a pipeline. He was one of the first to get an automatic cleaner for the barn. So he was very forward-thinking. He's the one at 60 years old that pushed my husband to get a robot, because he was seeing himself getting older and milking cows in the pit and he wanted to be at the barn until he died, which he did, but he wanted an easier way to do it.

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FD: And my husband is a very creative person, so he's always rethinking what he's doing, questioning what he's doing. He invented some machinery to work with on the farm. We have deep bedding and we have no processor machine to do it in a way that would be quick and pleasant. It was a terrible task. It would take an hour and a half scraping manure out of the stall and trying to even out the stalls.

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FD: And so he created a machine to do that. And now it's 20 minutes and there's the one with the fork to remove the cows, and there's one with the machine that passes behind. And it's really quick and it's really easy for everyone. The amount of strength that you need to do that is very little. So it's always been important for him to think about better ways [to do things].

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FD: As for me, my ideas are more progressive [when it comes to] being part of our community to be socially equitable, be more environmental. Ways to do more with less. I've been working the finances, and my husband is an incredible negotiator. We basically combine our forces to do better, but we're always open to innovation because that's what makes life interesting. It's necessary to be innovative.

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AS: In what ways have you innovated in your environmental practices?

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FD: When I got here 20 years ago, they were already doing no-till, so they were already ahead in that area because it does take less work in the spring. So it's easier and there were a few fields that were properly prepared for that. But then we started [using] new techniques. We went into organic farming and we realized that it was super time consuming.

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FD: We have a dairy operation and we do silage in the summer. It was really hard to do silage and control the weeds in the organic lots. We had good results, but not exceptional results and there was a lot of erosion with organic farming, so it was complicated. We asked ourselves what we could do to get the benefits without all the hassle and be more successful.

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AS: Fanny explained to me that she and her husband began exploring regenerative farming practices. She was very candid about the challenges they faced as they learned what works for their operation.

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FD: We've been trying for three years. The first year was a complete fiasco. Then we learned. Last year we had a few fields that had really nice ground cover through the winter. This year, we did both ground cover as second crops and ground cover in between the rows of corn. The environmental question has two sides. When you pollute it means that you're paying for something that's not staying in your field.

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FD: I mean the phosphorus and the nitrogen that go into nature, I paid for it. We can see it as an environmental thing to try to get into those techniques. But actually, what I'm trying to do is stop leaking money away. It was very hard to sell only eco-agriculture things to my father-in-law and to my husband.

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FD: But when I started selling it as, well, maybe we could keep our money in the farm. That sounded better. They were more open to that. So we also started planting trees. Then I started planting trees with a truffle inoculated on them. So I'm just not planting trees again. It's all a question of creating more than one plus one, doing a synergy.

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FD: So I have new trees that have truffles on them. I have nut trees that could eventually become productive as well.

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AS: I think a common thread in many farms is if we want to be more sustainable, it has to make sense financially.

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FD: We cannot just throw money into the environment. It would be a nice gesture, but it's not possible. So you have to find ways where it's actually a win-win. Because protecting the environment often meant it was a loss for farmers and a win for the environment. And there are many ways where it can be a win-win. And there are many ways that cost nothing. Planting trees, especially like poplars and stuff like that, you go with the kids, you cut twigs, you make a little hole, you put your little branch in there, and that's it. Some things really don't cost anything. You need an afternoon with the kids. So when you have toddlers, it's a great activity.

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AS: It's a great activity.

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FD: Then you call your friend, "Does your toddler want to come and play outside with us?" And make it an outing for everyone. And then the kids come back and after a few years they have trees and they're so proud. There are so many ways to take those gestures and make them into something more interesting. But if we take a minute, and say, "How could I do this so it becomes valuable for someone, and how can I make it fun for myself," or "how can I make it easy for myself"?

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FD: First thing you know, you're planting a kilometre of trees every year. So in a few years, the farm will be completely surrounded by trees – every field. And it's going to be beautiful, it brings something back into our lives too, as farmers to have time, to have a nice environment.

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AS: As part of your education that you've pursued an executive MBA.

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FD: Right now, I'm a candidate to the executive MBA at HEC McGill. I'm on the last stretch, writing the memoir [thesis], and that for me seemed necessary because there's so many more challenges in agriculture and with climate change, we really don't know what's ahead. And there's a big change in consumption as well of food products. For example, in the last twenty years or a little more, white milk consumption has come down 40%.

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FD: But then cheese went up and then butter went up. We have to be able to make decisions based on facts that don't come to us easily. And I did have to learn new tools, new ways to look at things. I wanted to see other sectors. What did you do with those problems? And I realized, funnily enough, that the workforce crisis, we went through it, and we're good now in agriculture because we put in place all those systems that allow us to have representation.

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FD: But we also have international workers and we're putting things in place, and other sectors are just starting to live it. I have to transfer companies to my kid, technically, and I really want to transfer something that is doing well and is on a good track and where it's not going to be a challenge for him to have the company survive.

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FD: And if you want to be good in agriculture, just being good in the field and being good in the barn is not enough anymore. You really have to know your management. You have to know your economics, you have to know your numbers. You have to understand the macroeconomy around yourself. And I do agree that an executive MBA might have been a little bit overreaching.

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AS: You have big dreams.

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FD: But I love to go to school. It was a lot, but I had a blast. It was so interesting. And that particular formation [training] has been curated to be so excellent all the time. I'm amazed at the people we met, the conferences, the teachers and everything, and

I'm the first person to get into that program as a farmer. I was in no way behind anybody in that class.

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FD: So we don't realize the management [skills] and the amount of knowledge that we have, and we have to understand that – and all the crises that we go through all the time and how we get through them. So our management skills are amazing. And then when you take that with all the tools that we don't know exist, because we have no education in management when we go to be a farmer. I mean there's so little of that in CEGEP or even university. They tell you how to manage your field.

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FD: But not how to manage a company. That to me is what is going to make our farm go to the next generation easily. And that to me is what is going to make the incubator successful as well. I encourage everybody, even in the winter, to do some continuous learning and go on YouTube – there are so many groups for that.

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FD: I think this is actually what we're missing the most in agriculture to get to the crises that we're living through right now.

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AS: At FCC, we like to encourage people to up their management game to really consider how they can take their business to the next level. And we forget about the skills that people already have in their back pocket. And probably as farmers, we're quite humble as an industry, but there are so many things that we have to do to help our business survive. That foundation is there. And getting the tools and the resources to apply them in more efficient ways is just the next natural step.

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FD: Yeah, actually I need to applaud to FCC. Because you have a program in Quebec, I don't know in the other provinces, I know in Quebec you have a program to learn administration and management for a farm business.

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AS: This seems like a nice spot for me to plug FCC events. We do have in-person and virtual opportunities for you to sharpen your management practices and grow personally and professionally. Check the show notes for links or visit FCC.ca/knowledge.

What do you see yourself having accomplished in ten years in terms of your initiatives and your commitment to agriculture?

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FD: I think that we're going to transfer part of the farm or be in the process of transferring yearly to my kids. That's one thing that I want to accomplish in ten years, knowing how my kids are going to fit into the future of the farm. But I want to really continue the incubator, of course, and get to that point where I have this big site, where I have the market, when I have classes, when I have spaces, everything.

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FD: But I would also like to start talking about my experience and being part of the decision making. Right now, I'm doing it on a small scale in being on the CA [board] of agriculture and rural farmers for my region. But I would like to do more of that, more on a bigger scale and really talk about solutions with the farmers.

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FD: But really be part of a movement of hope and prosperity in agriculture. That would be for me a really big challenge first, and it would be a really big accomplishment to be part of that and having given hope to that many farmers. And having built some models that are new and that actually create wealth in a sector that is very hard right now. I think I could have tea on the porch and be happy about that.

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AS: I think you're well on your way to achieving that goal. Thank you so much Fanny for spending the time to chat with me today.

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FD: Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure.

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AS: I was really inspired during my conversation with Fanny. I love her passion for agriculture and community connection. If you listened to the first episode of this

season, you'll remember that we dove into the farm CEO mindset. Fanny fully embodies this mindset in how she approaches her business and community. It's clear that her approach in creating synergy is the key to her success and will continue to be a crucial driver for a thriving agricultural industry in the future.

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AS: Even though she didn't initially envision a career in agriculture, Fanny has been able to combine her education and experience off the farm with her on-farm experiences to add value to her business, nurture a fulfilling career and grow a sustainable business model for the next generation. And she's leveraging this knowledge and experience with new farmers to create a more robust ag sector.

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AS: Fanny's driven by the belief that it's no longer good enough for farmers to just be good in the fields or in the barns. Implementing strong management practices and understanding the financial side of the farm is crucial, especially when looking to transfer a successful business on to the next generation. In this case, Fanny's eldest son is already interested in carrying on the family business, but Fanny and Jean are investing in showing both of their sons how the business works.

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AS: For one son, this means learning to take over, for the other, he's gaining an understanding of how the farm operates so that he can be a responsible steward of the assets he'll be entrusted with in the future. This is clearly an investment in future synergies to protect the legacy the family has built.

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AS: Investing in her employees and focusing on their strengths has been an approach that has paid off in terms of work environment, productivity and employee retention. The entire team benefits from this FARM-ily, as Fanny calls it, again, synergy at work. As Fanny continues to grow her agricultural business incubator, this model will help her create synergies with new farmers through community and relationship building. This idea will snowball into positives for the local community, the local economy and the ag sector. As Fanny says, it's about creating more than one plus one.

00:34:48

AS: Thanks for joining us today. Check out the show notes of this episode for further reading and resources related to our conversation.

00:35:11

AS: Did you enjoy this episode? Be sure to share it with your family and friends. Please do subscribe so you can be the first to know when we drop new episodes. And if you have feedback or topic ideas you'd like to share, go ahead and leave us a review. Your feedback will help us make decisions on what's valuable to you as a listener.

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