



FCC Knowledge Podcast

Season 4 – Episode 5

Women's work: Cultivating change with Amy VanderHeide

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Interviewee: Amy VanderHeide (AV)

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

AV: I think it gave me a little bit more confidence to be able to do that, a little bit more gumption to say, "I do know what I'm talking about," because I had those strong female role models in my life. I never felt that I couldn't do something because I was a female.

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AS: Today, we're tackling one of my favorite topics, women in Ag. I'm joined by Nova Scotian farmer and a true agent of positive change in the Ag industry, Amy VanderHeide. Having grown up on a farm run entirely by women, Amy's applied the lessons she's learned to her own operation in the Annapolis Valley, as well as in her family and on the ag boards she's involved with. Nine years ago, Amy and her friend Katie Keddy created the Maritime Ag Women's Network to build community and further the conversation with and about Women in Ag. Amy's currently the chair of the Chicken Farmers of Nova Scotia, and has volunteered her time on other ag-related boards, including the Do More Ag Foundation. But why am I still talking? Let's let Amy tell us her story. How about we start by getting you to tell us a little bit about your background in agriculture and your upbringing?

AV: I grew up one generation removed from my grandmother's beef farm, but we lived next door, and she was our after-school babysitter, and my aunts were living at home at the time, so we were with them before, after school, weekends, whenever. Whenever we wanted to be there, we just walked down the road. I always say that I grew up on the beef farm. I mean, a farm teaches you life lessons, and that's where I learned them. Grew up in that environment, and definitely knew that whatever I did when I grew up would involve agriculture somehow.

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AS: So grandma put you to work on the farm?

AV: She did. It was more my aunts. My grandfather passed away when I was two months old, and the farm went to my grandmother. But I had two aunts still living at home that were in college and high school at the time. They just kind of continued running it. Never a conversation of whether they should sell the farm. So it was my aunts that said, "All right, we've got to go do chores. We've got to go do this and you're coming with me." Or summers when we were being babysat was spent fencing with my aunts. So it was kind of them that instilled that work ethic to, "We have to go get things done and you're coming along and you're going to help." So it wasn't really a question of whether we were going to do it. It was just kind of an expectation. And luckily, I loved it, so I never minded.

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AS: So let's fast forward to now. Tell us about your farm life.

AV: My husband, James and I and his parents operate a poultry farm in the Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia. And then we also have three children. Jackson is 16, Warren is 12, and Clay is 10. So they have very much grown up being involved in the farm as well. We also do some cropping. And then James and I also own our own small farm, which is just a small cow calf farm on the side. It uses some of the land that isn't good for cropping or use in any other way, from his parents' farm. So we're lucky in that way that we can kind of use some of their farm to help our business grow.

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AS: So your in-laws, from what I understand, they have the poultry farm. And then you and your husband have a beef farm in partnership.

AV: Yes.

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AS: And then you're eventually going to take over the poultry farm from your in-laws? Is that the plan?

AV: Yes, that's the plan right now. I don't see it changing. We don't want to do anything else. My husband is one of five siblings, but he's the only one interested in continuing in agriculture in any way. So it's been him and I as primary operators. And his parents are in their 70s, still involved with the farm, but just lesser physical and visual way. They're unable to do some of the tougher jobs, but still very much involved in the day to day.

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AS: So it was you that brought over the concept of raising cattle to your husband?

AV: I like the chickens, but the beef come with certain personality and a little bit more hands-off, but I missed having cattle, and luckily, James was all for it. We started just raising a few calves for beef and then morphed into a cow-calf operation. It's still a lot of work, especially in the summer when you're trying to do 100 other things, but we love the cattle and they're pets to us, but they still serve a purpose.

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AS: You learned some important values from your grandmother and aunts. Can you tell us more about those values?

AV: It taught me to stand up for myself, to be outspoken, to generally care, and to just be a good person and show up for yourself. There is a place for you on the farm and there is a place for you within leadership roles. Our grandmothers, or mothers, were the ones bringing out the meals and keeping people fed and getting kids to school. But there's so much more to it. Even to my mother-in-law, she'll say that she's not a farmer, but I can tell you that she's kept this ship afloat for many years. She's out there running straw, getting ready for chicks and in the barn.

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AS: You're quite present in social media and different ag circles. Your passion for agriculture just is very well known and shines through. What are you in particular passionate about?

AV: For me, it's the education piece of agriculture, getting to talk to people who genuinely, really don't know where their food comes from. But also just chatting with kids through Ag in the Classroom but also being a co-founder of the Maritime Ag Women's Network with my great friend Katie Keddy, and bringing together a community of like-minded women throughout primarily Atlantic Canada, but it's grown. We have members across Canada now and beyond. Having that community just online through Facebook has been more than we ever thought it would be, and it's just sometimes mind-blowing that we've actually been able to get this community of women together and share conversations and worries and stresses and successes and all that stuff together is great.

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AS: The network. Where did that come from?

AV: It came from a weekend in 2015. Katie and I had been to the Atlantic Farm Women's Conference, which was held in Halifax. And as we were driving home, and we were talking about the people that we'd met that we saw on social media but didn't really know, and you got a chance to meet them. And it's a shame when you leave, that connection is gone until either the next conference or the next thing that brings you together. So we were just kind of chatting, and said, "Well, maybe we'll start a Facebook group and invite the people that we met, and that'll give us a little space in the world to connect with them." And it just grew. They invited friends, their friends invited friends, and now we're well over 1000 members.

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AS: The Maritime Ag Women's Network, this just exploded into something that was a really great, far-reaching network. Was there anything else that surprised you about that?

AV: Some of the topics of conversations. People saying, like, "I need work clothes and I can't find any that fit me, like, can't fit my body type," and stuff like that. Stuff again, that you don't necessarily think about all the time. And then your brain goes, you

know, I go to my local workwear store. There is nothing that's either in a size, you know, two to eight and doesn't fit me, or it doesn't exist. Definitely just some conversation stuff that maybe I hadn't experienced myself necessarily. But then also, on the flip side, is also the opportunities that it's given for both Katie and I. We didn't go into it expecting any type of recognition, and we still don't expect any type of recognition. That's not why we did it. But we've been invited to take part in opportunities like these podcasts, conferences and having all these chances to bring awareness a) of the women's network as a whole, but also so we can kind of use that voice and what we've learned to connect with more women. Having somebody call and say, "Oh, I know you're a co-founder of this, really interested to talk to you." It still blows my mind almost ten years later.

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AS: How do you receive that when someone says, "Okay, you're a female farmer. We want your perspective on this discussion panel or think tank," or things like that? Do you embrace that? Do you sometimes go, "Oh, I'm the token female again?" Or, where does your mind go?

AV: Yeah, it felt like that for a while And it kind of got where Katie and I were, like, "Okay, people have to be sick of seeing us and hearing this over and over again," to the point where we started reaching out to other women that we had met through the Facebook page that we knew would be great for the situation. It's always great to be asked, and I don't mind doing these things. I like it. It gives me a chance to talk to other people, but sometimes the platform isn't quite where I am comfortable with if it's at a different type of farming conference or a horticulture conference that I'm not involved in that. I would rather say, "Here's someone who's in your sector, would benefit from being in that room in more ways than I would. Would love to introduce her if she's willing to do it." And then there's times where you get an opportunity that you can't pass up. It's still going both ways. If there's an opportunity that I can give somebody that little boost of confidence and say, "I think you'd be great for this," I'm definitely going to do it. And because we need that continuation, it can't fizzle out with the two of us. It has to keep growing and keep having more people to go out and chat.

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AS: I think that's such a great approach. You're still embracing the opportunity to speak your truth and share your experiences and inspire other people. And you're also, at the same time, lifting others up that could potentially support these messages in different rooms and different sectors. There's a lot of power in that.

AV: Yeah, and they have some different views on things than I do, too. So it broadens the conversation. If I'm busy, or Katie's busy, or we've been talked out for that month, or whatever it is, it's great to know we can think off the top of our heads now of five or six different people each that would be perfect for that situation. So just meeting all these people has created that and given that platform to lift others up. And I think that's not what we expected, but has been a really great outcome of the Maritime Ag Women's Network.

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AS: That's amazing. So let's go back to your upbringing a little bit. What did it do for you in terms of your world view on how women are involved in our industry?

AV: I didn't realize when I was growing up on a farm that was owned by my grandmother, how rare that was, first of all, and then having the primary operators being my aunts. To me, it was normal. That's how I grew up. And as far as I knew, that was normal on every farm everywhere. But as you grow up and become more involved, and you realize that wasn't the case, when I kind of came up and wanted to be more involved and sitting around boardroom tables full of men, and I'm the only woman in the room, I think it gave me a little bit more confidence to be able to do that, a little bit more gumption to say, "I do know what I'm talking about." Because I had those strong female role models in my life, I never felt that I couldn't do something because I was a female. I'd grown up seeing these women take everything on, difficult calvings, purchases, everything. For me, I could take all of that knowledge and confidence that I had gained from that upbringing and bring it to the board table.

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AS: That's amazing. Little Amy, seeing all this happening and having no idea that anything could be possibly different.

AV: Even growing up, and you hear news stories, and you still hear the term "male-dominated", as far as I was concerned, there was no such thing. But as you grow up and you get more involved, and you do see that agriculture is male-dominated, that it can be hard to find your place. But just because I've had that leadership role in my life by those women carried me through.

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AS: How do you think your personal experience inspire other women on the farm?

AV: I think it's representation and being able to see that there's another woman in a role that you would like to take on someday. Or maybe you've been thinking about doing something, but it's scary, or it's not comfortable. By other people sharing their stories, and being able to see that representation out there, kind of gives you a little bit more of a boost to say, "Okay, I know I can do this. I can try it, I can see how it goes. But if she's doing it, I can do it too." Or "If they're doing it, I can do it too." It's just having that representation, I think that really matters, and being able to see it. And I'm not sharing as much on social media as I used to, just because it is a huge time suck. I just don't have it anymore. I wish I did, but it's not so simple as posting a picture anymore, but I still do. It's being able to take that five minutes and make that post and have people message me or put a comment in that says, "Thanks for sharing. I wanted to try this, glad to know it worked," whatever.

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AS: Yeah.

AV: But just being able to share that little corner of my world and inspire somebody else is mind-blowing to me. I'm just Amy from Nova Scotia, so to have people recognize me from as far as away as they do because of social media is crazy sometimes.

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AS: It's definitely opened up a lot of networks that we wouldn't have had otherwise.

AV: It's that isolation factor too, where you're on the farm and you've got kids or you've got the responsibilities of farming that you're not necessarily able to go out and connect and network with people as often. So having that outlet online and being able to share that story or that frustration or success is everything, and then seeing that representation from others can inspire somebody else.

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AS: You talked about how important that is to you, sharing the reality of agriculture, and it also spreads to other passions of yours, such as mental health.

AV: On social media, one day, decided I was going to just make a post about how mental illness affects me. I do have seasonal affective disorder. September, October, and it starts to get darker, and my mind starts to get darker, and I go into hibernation mode. And I just felt like sharing that. There's other ways I've been affected by mental health, by those close to me. And I got two or three reactions to that post that were, like, "Thank you for sharing. I could never do that. I have the same situation," or, "I'm going through this, and I'm not ready to talk about it, but I'm glad that somebody is." And the fact that I was a farmer, and I was using the farm to boost that message related to others, and being agriculture and being resilient and being strong and not letting things affect you has been the stigma that farmers have faced forever. By saying, "Oh, I am vulnerable, and this is what I'm going through," can inspire somebody else to share their story as well. And then through that, just continuing to share anything I could about mental health. And I took some of the mental health first aid courses, and getting to know people like Lesley Kelly, High Heels and Canola Fields with Do More Agriculture, led to a position on their board for a while, and deeper connections in the mental health community. It can be a weight off your shoulders to share some of that and know that you're not alone. And I have been okay sharing that about myself. So if I can inspire someone else to talk about it and get help that they need, then I'm willing to do that for them.

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AS: There's so much value in other people seeing that they're not alone and feeling like they're seen.

AV: I still get DMs that say, "Thank you for sharing," and sometimes there's no more explanation. But I think if someone takes the time to say, "Thank you for sharing," that's them reaching out. It's nice to know that people are paying attention and people are realizing they're not alone, and that's so important.

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AS: I see more and more women today owning that title of farmer, and I've heard the discussion too about, some people are less comfortable with that title. You should be able to assume the title that you are comfortable with. But it seems to me that more people are, regardless of their role on the farm, are assuming that and it's being accepted, which is great.

AV: There's always been the argument, farmer versus farm wife. I've been fine with either. I fully understood when I married my husband, I was also marrying the farm. Being a farm wife doesn't make me any less of a farmer, or vice versa. I think owning that and saying that you are a farmer and not discrediting yourself for the work that you do, because sometimes those hours or weeks that you spend at your computer desk doing paperwork, your farm wouldn't be successful without that. So you're still a farmer, if that's your job.

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AS: So you're raising three sons, as you mentioned. What do you hope they take away from you as they move through life, either on or off the farm?

AV: I hope that they grow up and see what I was doing is normal to them. I grew up seeing my aunts in the roles that they were in and owning the farm and stuff like that as normal, and hoping that I carry that through to the next generation, and that they never question it. They never look at a boardroom and say, "Wow, there's only one woman here," or think that they don't deserve to be there. I want them to respect women and know the importance that they bring to the table. And there's a lot to unpack and to try to describe, but I think that them having someone willing to take the time to sit down, to do meetings, to do things off the farm that reflect the farm, build it up from the outside, type of thing, that that is normal. It's just status quo, and nothing is unbalanced.

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AS: Do you see them adopting that kind of mindset already at this age?

AV: My oldest is 16, so he's got his own life pretty much now. There's never a question of, "Oh, Mom's got to go to a meeting and, you know, it's supper time," or ... And the other two, they're supportive kids, and it's normal to them. I don't know if they've been exposed enough to see that it is different still.

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AS: Yeah.

AV: And I'm hoping that by the time that they are my age, that it's not on the radar anymore. That's the goal, right?

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AS: During your farming career, what surprised you the most about your experience as a woman in ag?

AV: Again, it's going back to not realizing that my upbringing was a little outside the box, and becoming more involved, and then looking around the room and sometimes realizing I'm one of only a handful of women, or sometimes the only woman in the room. I am the chair of Chicken Farmers of Nova Scotia, and I'm the only woman on the board. That visual is still there. I don't feel like I am the token woman in that sense, but looking in, it could be viewed that way. It still surprises me sometimes when I hear an announcement about a woman elected to a board for the first time in agriculture. It's, like, wow, it's still surprising today. So entering into it and sitting

around those rooms, even just at AGMs, realizing that I'm in the minority, and it being 20 years later, and it's still the case, that continues to be surprising.

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AS: We often hear, there's nothing holding a woman back from getting involved. But I always wonder, is there? Could it be self-confidence or imposter syndrome? The mental load that typically is required for women to physically lead the farm? Like you said, women sometimes are quote, unquote, "stuck on the farm," or is there something else?

AV: We're the load-bearers. We're there for our spouse, for our children, for everyone. For me to leave for a day or a night, or however long, I'm lining up someone to make sure that the kids get on the bus on time, and making sure that there's food in the freezer. And it's not because my husband can't do it; it's just because my brain just goes there to get it all done before I leave. There's kind of that second shift where we've got 17 balls in the air we're trying to juggle at once. I don't know why that is as women that we naturally kind of do that. I look at my husband and he's, like, "Okay, I did this, I did this, I did this." He checked them all off in order. He's done, he's happy. His mind is clear. And I've got rabbits up there, just, like, doing laps in my head. There are things that not everybody thinks about that do hold us back, and it's the time thing. I didn't really step up to take part in a board or a committee or anything until I knew I could leave the house for two hours without a baby crying or needing to be fed or all this other stuff. Now, did I lug them as babies to these things? 100%, but then you're not 100% in the room either. There's definitely things that are still barriers. Childcare is still a barrier for families in rural communities. There's a lot to organize in your life to be able to do these things. And for some reason, I think that falls harder on women.

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AS: I think some of it is—I would qualify that as biological, because we typically have birthed these children unless we adopted them, and so then we're responsible for basically keeping them alive for the first year of their lives.

AV: Yeah.

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AS: And then that just naturally dovetails into other things, where your partner might not have had to think about those things before, and then he just gradually progresses and keeps going that way. That's not to say that it can't change, but it requires a lot more thought process.

AV: It's that caretaker mentality. Like, for me to be able to go and give my all and be completely present, I need to know that x, y and z are all looked after before I leave. I still do that today. I still have a hard time walking out to go to an overnight trip or to a day-long meeting, and I'm still thinking as I'm driving there, like, "Okay, did I leave whatever in the freezer so that they can pop something easily into the oven for lunch?" My kids are old enough to make their own lunch. I don't have to worry about this, but I still do.

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AS: Do you think the imposter syndrome and all that other mental, trying to chalk yourself to being enough, plays into the equation as well?

AV: I have felt that a lot, because you go out from that situation that I grew up in to realize that's not the way the world is, and then it's kind of, like, smacks you in the face. I do feel that some on our own farm, just because of my in-laws' upbringing and their belief systems is more leaning towards those traditional gender roles. It's been 21 years in this family, and I still catch myself thinking that I need to prove myself in some way. I don't. I know that the only person I have to prove anything to is myself, and that's enough. But there still are days where you feel overlooked, or you feel like you haven't done enough, or that you never get the thanks that you deserve, or whatever the situation may be. I don't hold that against them. That's part of their generation, part of their religion, but it still messes with your head.

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AS: It's a hard thing to live your truth in a generation that had known a different reality.

AV: Exactly, and I didn't grow up that way, and so it's very different for me. I mean, I knew what I was getting into. But also my husband doesn't have that same belief system. We're very much 50/50. If he needs something done, he knows I can do it, and he doesn't hold that I'm a woman and shouldn't be doing it. He just tells me to go do it. So that wouldn't have worked otherwise. But it's still there, because we still have those people in our lives. It's something that I do have to separate every now and then when I'm thinking about—whether I'm doing a job or whether I've brought something new to the farm to try out, or have ideas that I know are not going to go over well, because they're coming from me. But I've learned to let that slide and let them mull over it for a while, and it usually works out.

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AS: Patience is important.

AV: That's right.

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AS: You mentioned that some of the boards that you sit on, you're the only woman there, or one of few women there. What would you say women bring to the table that broadens the perspective of the board?

AV: When we were talking about how we're caretakers and we think about things differently than men do, it's the same around the board table. Sometimes I'm a little more empathetic, or look at things from a different angle than my male counterparts. I do notice sometimes that they're kind of cut and dry. It's very black and white, and then I'm sitting there in the gray and thinking, "Well, what if we looked at it like this? How do we fix this problem?" And the seven different ways we can tackle it go through my brain, where they go to the one that they think works the best, and that's it. It's that way of thinking that brings a lot of value to women being on boards, because it can change a view on something and change the outcome, or the

particular way that you make a decision or you lead a discussion. It is the different ways of thinking and being in that gray area, I think that women experience that more than men.

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AS: That probably leads to more possibilities and a deeper perspective on certain issues.

AV: There's times where their gut reaction is definitely the right one, but we've broadened the conversation. We've found something else that we need to address or fixed other problems in the process. Just having that different approach to problem solving or brainstorming can be a very valuable tool to have.

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AS: Yeah, that's the last thing you want on a board is groupthink, right?

AV: Having different views of things is very progressive. If everybody thought the same, it'd be a pretty boring place to be.

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AS: Over the course of your career, what evolutions have you seen of women in ag?

AV: It's still seeing that boards elected the first female but then it's five years later, and now they're the chair of that board. I keep going back to boards, because that's where the public really sees it. But also, there's more and more stories about women taking on ownership roles in farms or food processing or whatever it may be in the food system, and feeding our country, and having that representation that there are more and more women stepping up into these positions or taking on these huge tasks that maybe 20 years ago, nobody would have ever thought of. Things are changing. Maybe it's not changing as fast as we think it should, but there is that turnover happening.

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AS: It's a marathon, not a sprint, right?

AV: Yes.

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AS: Who do you think is pushing this evolution?

AV: It's the people like us that are having this conversation today. It's the women in those Facebook groups that are networking and connecting and building courage and confidence. I can't even begin to tell you how many times I've been asked to be a part of a panel or be a part of a think tank that's been funded by whatever program to get however many women in the industry by whatever year. Those things fizzle out. They always do. There's attention from it for a while, and then it dies out. And meanwhile we're still back here having these conversations and still out here trying new things. And I think it's that organic process moreso than the spotlight and the money being thrown in. Not saying that those aren't valuable, because they still

create those networks and create relationships that help us. It's the conversations in the background that are pushing it more forward.

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AS: Looking at long term as the end game here, what is the plan to have some sustainability to carry on into the future?

AV: It's hard to have a measurable outcome out of something like this. Yes, we want to see whatever percentage of women in leadership roles or whatever, and it's the same in so many industries. But how can you measure that outcome to say this is worth investing in? And it's not that it's not worth investing in, it's just hard to quantify.

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AS: It's hard to pinpoint what you exactly need to invest in that's going to make the biggest impact.

AV: Is it a mentorship program? Is it just allowing some growth in somebody's business through a funding program or something like that, that can bring more women into it or create more awareness? It's difficult, for sure.

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AS: Looking ahead, what's exciting for you in agriculture?

AV: There's a lot to be excited about. It is kind of a scary world we live in right now in agriculture. But looking ahead and seeing how much advancement there's been in technologies to not only help with efficiencies and farm processes, but also help with that work-life balance and know that for the next generation, it may be a little easier than it was for me, and a lot easier than it was for my father-in-law. But also seeing my 16-year-old wants to do nothing else except farm. If I would let him quit school today and farm full-time, he would be the happiest kid on the planet. It's nerve wracking for me to see that because we don't even own the farm yet, so trying to get him to understand that we put all our eggs in one basket here and nothing's changed yet, we don't want you to do that. It's hard because we see other avenues he can take for a while, or go do some training and come back to the farm and open your own business and do whatever. But knowing that he will likely end up farming in some way, whether it's with us, for us or someone else, that next generation is so hugely important to keeping our industry going.

Seeing young people who are going to come up through and contribute to agriculture in one way or another, that's the ultimate goal. I'd never push my kids to join the industry if they didn't want to. For me it was my passion, it was what I wanted to do and I did it. And same with my husband, and it's looking like it'll be the same for my 16-year-old. But my 12- and 10-year-old, I don't think will have anything to do with agriculture, and that's totally fine too. Having those kids or those even not involved in agriculture now but are looking towards agriculture in the future is definitely something that we should all be excited about. That's why I do what I do, so I can hopefully ensure that it's there for my 16-year-old if he wants it. It's nerve wracking at the same time to say, I can't imagine him in this role right now, and being stuck in a transition, for one, but also responsible for a family in an industry

that is up and down so much. But when the passion is there, it's really hard to stay away from it too.

00:31:14

AS: This is great, Amy. This was an awesome conversation. Thank you so much.

AV: Thank you.

00:31:19

AS: Our conversation was recorded during a busy season for Amy and her family, and we sure appreciate her taking the time out of her schedule to talk about such an important topic. Growing up on a farm run and owned by women, Amy had no reason to believe that her experience was out of the ordinary. This perspective has guided her journey to running her own farm alongside her husband and three sons. She's also been able to bring these same values and viewpoints to the boardroom table and to her networks. Through it all, she continues to be a strong advocate and voice for Canadian agriculture, for women, for mental health and for the industry as a whole. Even through the occasional self-doubt or the feeling that she might need to prove herself, Amy continues to roll up her sleeves and be a part of the conversation that needs to happen. She's also finding other voices to bring into the conversation as well. Her influence isn't limited to industry events or board meetings either. Raising three young men, Amy already sees how her example is changing how they look at life and farming. I'm so inspired by my conversation with Amy. There's so much strength in knowing that we're all in this together and that we can influence positive growth in our families, on our farms and in the industry.

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