



Putting Expansion Plans to the Test

With growing demand for their pork products, should this farm family build, renovate or sit tight? With help from Growing Forward 2 and a business consultant, they considered the question carefully.

In just a decade in Canada, Alan and Nicola Irving have made business plan after business plan, only to beat every projection and grow faster than they'd ever imagined.

Arriving from England in 2006, they set up a free-range, hormone-free Berkshire swine herd near Round Hill, Alberta in 2009 and built a 1,500 sq. ft. meat shop. Operating as Irvings Farm Fresh, they make and sell traditional bacon, sausage, and other pork products to a consumer base that, seemingly, can't get enough. By 2014, and not for the first time, demand was outstripping production capacity.

"We've had this growth year after year," says Nicola Irving. "After being in business for nine years, we've been hitting our numbers and never feeling that we can keep up with demand. We're doing a lot with the small equipment we have, but we want to continue to supply our customers with what they want."

As the Irvings considered what to do next, they saw three alternatives: build a purpose-designed production facility, buy and retrofit an existing facility or try to make their current facility do more.

Fresh Pair of Eyes, With Business Expertise

You know how it is when you run your own business. At times, you're so close to it, it's hard to see the forest for the trees. The Irvings decided to tackle their expansion question with an outside, professional perspective. They engaged a business consultant they knew, with cost-sharing made available from the *Growing Forward 2* Business Opportunity Program. The project took place from June 2014 to February 2015.

"We were eligible for 50 percent cost-sharing through Growing Forward," says Irving, "which was great, because it made the cost seem reasonable to us and we were comfortable moving ahead."

The consultant spent some time with the Irvings, gathered information about their business and their goals and set to work analyzing the alternatives. Issues such as market demand, sales projections, building and equipment requirements and power costs were all considered.

The Irvings themselves had a preference to build or renovate a building off-site. Nearby Camrose seemed like a logical candidate for an off-site location. This would allow them to convert their current on-farm meat processing building to a shop for equipment and supplies.



Equipment, Not Space, Decides It

After analyzing the question from all angles, the consultant delivered his report. In the process, he helpfully framed the issue, the tradeoffs and the costs for the Irvings. One possibility was crossed-off quickly.

“It was obvious that building from scratch off-site would cost too much, \$1 million or more,” says Irving.

As they looked at factors such as market demand, meat supply and equipment capacity, the Irvings concluded their best option might be to stay put, but purchase higher-capacity equipment. The final decision has yet to be made, but the couple are glad they took a rigorous, professional approach to weighing their options.

Growing Forward 2 funding, and ongoing advice from Alberta Agriculture and Forestry (AF) staff, have helped this farm business grow on its own terms. It’s something that Nicola Irving believes makes Alberta a great place to farm.

“I love that Canada and Alberta are set up for people who want to work for themselves,” she says. “Every week, AF has webinars or events where you can learn something. They always ask, what can we do to help you? We see so much opportunity in this province. My advice to others is, go get it.”

Growing Forward 2 is a federal – provincial – territorial initiative.