

Containerization: The only path out of the bulk export trap

We are calling for a shift in overseas grain-trades, from consolidating in bulk to selling specific types or grades of crops directly to end-users. These sales will not be in large volumes to meet market-wide needs, but in smaller quantities that end-users can purchase directly from producers to meet their own needs, instead of going through a stream of intermediary channels. Deliveries can be made to end-user facilities in containers at scheduled intervals to meet their input requirements, by crop type and volume, thereby reduce stock-levels and inventory costs.

This is not a novel concept we invented; it is practiced widely across North American grain-trades. Corporate buyers had long discovered the virtues of procuring grains directly from producers, cutting out consolidators or traders, thereby reducing their costs while also leaving behind higher margins for producers, as multiple buyers compete over what they produce. In Canada, as certain crops were dropped from CWB's monopsony, the same competitive market dynamics had taken hold.

When we started advocating direct-sales for overseas exports, however, the concept seemed alien to most producers. There was a belief that overseas grain-exports had to be consolidated in bulk and traded in large volumes. As we bring up in many of our articles, many producers seem to take this model as a *celestial dictum*, the only way to export grains overseas, whether in the hands of a *public-monopsony*, CWB in the past, or today's *private-oligopsony* that has captivated these trades since.

In several recent articles, we tried to bring attention to how market forces had reduced the need for consolidation across North America. A shift to containerization would achieve the same in overseas trades, the same as truck or rail shipments in North America. Some of this started to resonate but still with *show-me* type reactions, which we will once we start attracting prospective overseas buyers. But the first step is overcoming producer skepticism, as it takes two parties to trade.

Here we take another stab at the topic in the hope of overcoming the resistance to both direct-sales and containerization. We start with a familiar theme: virtues of direct-sales and how they can be achieved in overseas trades, just as they have been across North America. Then we turn to containerization, how this revolution took hold of industrial and retail chains in all corners of world trade, and why it is equally suitable to grain-trades, with clear evidence that it is already taking place.

We cite examples from around the world, European Union and across Central Asia to the Pacific coast, and the benefits containerization has brought to both sellers and buyers of grains. The same is achievable from North America to Asia, particularly in view of so many containers returning empty across the Pacific after delivering retail and manufactured goods. We will get into the logistics of repositioning empty-containers in the interior to serve our grain-export trades in a subsequent article.

Direct-sales versus bulk-trades

To avoid any confusion or misunderstanding, let us first clarify what we mean by direct-sales. Loosely speaking, the term can mean any exchange between two parties, including a sale from a producer to a consolidator or grain-company with the intent of reselling to another buyer. But these are precisely the types of sales or trades we are trying to avoid along the supply-chain. A direct-sale in our vocabulary is from a producer to an end-user – like a miller, processor, crusher, or even feed-lot.

When the *Canadian Wheat Board* was the sole buyer of grains, and necessarily the sole marketer and seller, there were no direct-sales in grain-trades in Canada. As certain crops were dropped from CWB's monopsony, direct-sales became possible and would prove to be beneficial to both producers and end-users, as intermediaries were cut out, leaving higher margins to share between the two parties to the trade. There were fewer buyers than sellers, but since there were still multiple buyers in the marketplace, competition prevailed, and producers still got their fair-share.

The significance of these trends was overlooked during the acrimonious debate over the future of CWB. Instead of learning lessons from North American trade practices, overseas grain-trades were viewed very differently where the same model could not possibly work. In fact, there were no differences; the same could be achieved to benefit producers in overseas-trades, as they had in domestic and transborder ones.

Let us first look at what had taken place in domestic markets. Under pressure from meat and dairy industries, feed-grains were the first to be dropped from CWB's monopsony in the mid-1970s. These industries were significant grain buyers across the country, but particularly in Ontario and Quebec, relying on not only local sources but also buying from the Prairies. Grain producers started selling to meat-dairy farms as well as feed-companies, which were not mere traders or consolidators but added value to the supply-chain as processors, packagers, and distributors.

In the next decade or so oats and other cereals, together with more specialty crops, were also dropped from CWB's net. Direct-sales allowed end-users to start buying these, then referred to as non-board grains, from producers. Oats were particularly controversial at the time with plunging prices due to overproduction or imports. Naturally, the blame fell on CWB's abandonment of this crop, but soon corporate purchases kicked in. The breakfast-cereal industry had been around for more than a century, with direct procurement programs already in place across North America.

Another specialty crop outside CWB's domain was canola, grown in much smaller volumes back then but would become our second largest export crop behind wheat. We would become the largest exporter of this oilseed of own creation, a rapeseed variety, with two-thirds share of global trades, while also exporting large volumes of canola-oil. Primary buyers of relatively modest domestic-consumption share were crushers, canola-oil producers, as well as other food-processors. Producers were selling direct to these buyers, not just in the Prairies but across the border to the US.



By 2020, a bumper crop year, we were exporting 51 MT of grains, 50% of this volume wheat-durum and 23% canola – among smaller volumes, barley, soybean, and peas 5-6% each, oat and lentil 3-4% each. Two crops, wheat and canola, accounted for almost three-quarters of grain exports, perhaps better than 30 years earlier when wheat alone accounted close to 90%, but still a far cry from a truly diversified export portfolio. The crop-mix of our production-base was already more diversified, with prospects of even further diversification through exports, but focus on bulk-trades, driven by large volumes, was hindering specialty-crop exports in small volumes.

Going back to the 19th century, wheat had always been our primary export crop, if not our only crop-export, even in the days when Ontario was the center of our grain economy. As Ontario faded from the grain scene, and the center of gravity shifted to the Prairies, wheat remained our staple-crop, and luckily now in a region where soil and weather conditions were much more favorable. With modest advances in seed-quality, farming-methods, introduction of grain-elevators, railway expansion, and rise of coop-power, the Prairies became a leading source of wheat in the 1920s.

Even more improvements were on the way: advances in agronomy, mechanization of farming, regulation of crop-quality standards through CGI, and market stability brought by CWB. With the animosity against government role rising into the 1970s and beyond, we started to forget that in the post-WW2 era Canada had become the *king-of-wheat* on the world stage. Yields were still rising, but production and export volumes started to level off into the 1990s, and, mainly because of other crops grabbing more land, our share of global wheat trades started to decline. At the same time, competing regions had started to close the quality-edge we had enjoyed.

Wheat and canola had come to dominate our crop-base through different paths. Wheat was the only crop settlers knew, and it turned out that the land they were settling was very suitable for its production. Also, wheat came under the protection of CWB in 1935 and stayed in its monopsony until 2012. Canola was a Prairie invention, a type of rapeseed with superior qualities in not only its oil but also meal. The local conditions were very favorable to its production and proved to be a good rotational option to wheat. Also, unlike wheat, canola became a dominant crop outside the net of trade-regulations, in fact a rebel-crop to defy CWB's monopsony.

Their destinies, however, merged in bulk-trades. The sole custodian of wheat-trades was CWB, which was also the architect of the bulk-system developed to move wheat from farm-gates to inland-elevators to coastal terminals to export markets. CWB did not own assets along this logistics-chain; it managed the flows through third-party contracts. The bulk-system expanded, improved, and integrated over time, while upholding crop quality and integrity to high standards. The system was refined and sectionalized as wheat exports became increasingly differentiated by type and grade.

As canola exports were growing, CWB did not have jurisdiction over them, but the bulk-system was there to also handle canola, like it did all varieties of wheat as well as barley. In fact, with fewer types and varieties, canola was even more suitable to bulk-trades, but it had to be bought from producers and sold to overseas markets. Private grain companies and coops that already owned the elevators and terminals on the bulk-system were the natural candidates to play this role, and became the principal custodians of canola-trades, like CWB had been of wheat and barley trades.

When CWB's lock on wheat-barley ended in 2012, their trades were up for grabs, and fell into the lap of the same grain-companies that owned the assets on the bulk-system – by this time, coops had already been privatized, and they had become like other grain-companies. Weeks after its monopsony ended, now a regular grain-company, CWB announced its entry into canola-trading, paving the way to its future owner, G3, to become a member of the *grain-trade-club* with control over overseas exports of wheat, canola, barley, and other crops handled through the bulk-system.

This was the overseas side of our grain exports, highly captive to bulk-trades, now roughly 85% of all grain exports through the west-coast – 75% wheat and canola, 10% other crops. This is about half of what we produce in total, while the other half is sold to domestic and transborder markets, where trading patterns are different. In these latter markets, direct-sales impose the necessary discipline for grain-trades to function more competitively – including wheat-barley trades freed from CWB's monopsony only a decade ago, and also canola, free to trade openly all along.

In North America corporate buyers are familiar with production sources to do their own procurement, what we refer to as direct-sales, to set price bench-marks for other trades. If there is consolidation or processing involved, price differentials reflect the value intermediaries add. The key requirement for direct-sales from producers to end-users, however, is the means of transport to be able to make direct deliveries to processing plants by truck or rail, without having to consolidate in bulk.

The substitute for this in overseas exports is “containerization”, which has not taken hold in North America like in most parts of the world. Overseas grain-trades remain captive to bulk-systems, which the vested-interests perpetuate by claiming that “bulk” is the most efficient and cheapest way to transport. This is a fallacy that producers pay the price for believing: squeezed margins from bulk-trades, and limited diversification prospects to higher value crops that must be containerized.

Global advent of containerization

Now let us leave grain-trades aside and reflect on containerization *per se*, how it got underway, gained momentum through the latter half of the 20th century, and engulfed global general-freight trades into the 21st century. Now more than 90% of non-bulk cargo movements worldwide are handled in containers, representing a volume close to half-billion TEUs (twenty-foot-equivalent-units). These containers are moved along intermodal-chains – by truck, rail, and ship, transferred through truck-terminals, rail-yards, and container-ports, without breaking up the contents.

In the last 50 years the world economy opened to trade in a way never seen before, with exports increasing from 20% to 60% of GDP. There was a strong policy-push behind this, but it could not have happened without the intermodal-revolution. Manufacturing-chains globalized and integrated beyond borders, while retail-chains reached to all corners of the world to procure, with goods moving in standard-boxes by all modes of transport and being transferred from one to the other seamlessly.

The idea of containerization was not new; we can trace its roots back 18th century England, when coal started moving in wooden-boxes, 10 of them on canal-boats, then carried by horse-drawn wagons. Into the railway-age, iron-boxes replaced the wooden ones. Thus, the idea was around when we were plunging into the grain-era, but it was of little use as grain had to be bagged to get to box-cars and unloaded to transfer on to ships. Without intermodal transferability, boxes were of little value.

In the first half of the 20th century there were attempts to introduce boxes of various sizes into railway operations on both sides of the Atlantic. There were also efforts to use containers on ships, with the world's first container-ship built in Montreal in 1955 and introduced to service from Vancouver to Skagway, Alaska, carrying 600 containers, which would then be transferred on to railway-cars bound to Yukon. This was the first intermodal-operation with a purpose-built ship, custom-railcars, and trucks at the Vancouver end – the service continued to operate until 1982.

At about the same time, 1957, a visionary trucking entrepreneur Malcolm McLean had started a service on a refitted tanker-ship, carrying 58 trailer-vans with two-boxes on each, from New Jersey to Texas. A couple of years earlier, together with an engineer, Mclean had designed standard boxes from corrugated-steel that could be securely stowed on ships, lifted by cranes, and hauled by truck or rail. By separating boxes from the chassis, the concept of standard intermodal-containers was born.

Given the efficiency improvements and cost savings, nobody was going to be able to hold back the intermodal-revolution that had gotten underway. However, given the vested interests of different modes of transport (truck, rail, and ship), globally as well as in the US and across Europe, battles were never ending. But some form of standardization was inevitable; in the US, the domestic standard settled on 48' and 53' for both rail and truck, though also handling the 20' and 40' containers that had become standard globally, without having to stuff or destuff containers at ports.



During the last half century, global transport systems have been transformed beyond recognition. Container-ports started popping up along coastal areas, new ones built, or old break-bulk ones converted to docks lined-up with container-cranes. What were once regarded large with hundreds-of-thousands of TEUs a year gave way to giant-hubs, now the top-10 handle more than 15 million TEUs each. Most advanced ones are now automated with AI taking charge of arriving containers, stacking them, moving to assigned docks, and lifting on to container-ships by unmanned cranes.

Container-ships once considered giant, carrying 1000-2000 boxes, may still operate on some routes, but major-lanes are increasingly served by vessels that are now known as *20,000TEU+club*. Average container unloading times used to be measured in minutes but are now down to less than 30 seconds in Asia – still about 50 seconds in Northern Europe and 75 seconds in North America. The port challenge posed by truck-congestion has now given way to accommodating dedicated container-trains.

These intermodal advancements naturally had profound impacts on global retail and manufacturing chains. The scale effects have certainly brought down unit-costs, but even more importantly, intermodal systems have reduced delivery times while also improving reliability, together lowering inventory, storage, and distribution costs, thereby globalizing and integrating supply-chains around the world. Where possible, containerization became irresistible for manufacturers and retailers alike.

Though containerization is generally associated with oceanic-trades, the practice was embraced by inland canal or waterway users, as well as all-land movements that can be fulfilled by truck and rail. The main advantage was in eliminating intermodal cargo transfers, be it from barges to rail/truck or between truck and rail, often starting and ending with trucks with rail in between for its line-haul cost advantage. This became prevalent in all three continents, North America, Europe, and Asia.

Though containers were initially seen fit for mostly finished goods (intermediate or final) they started attracting all sorts of cargo to avoid handling costs associated with intermodal-transfers. We saw these shifts in what we generally regarded as break-bulk cargos, like construction materials as well as forest products like lumber, pulp, and paper. Most overlooked sector was agriculture, including grains that were had always viewed to belong to bulk-systems. But initially pulses and specialty-crops, and in time even grains like wheat and barley, started to get containerized.

We saw containerization of grain-trades getting underway across the European Union at least two decades ago. Even before that, grains had been moving forever through rivers and waterways in containers, but not necessarily with the standard intermodal containers of the modern age. EU is the 3rd largest grain producer with about 350 MT, but also the 4th largest trader with about 50 MT (both imports and exports); most of EU's grain movements are containerized to move intermodally.

Two other grain sources to EU's east, Russia and Ukraine, together produce more than 200 MT and export almost 90 MT. Though today's media images mainly show grain-ships blockaded on the Black Sea, most of their grain exports move by rail in containers. Similarly, the whole region to their south and east, what we call the *New Grain Belt*, moves grains in containers, mostly by rail to their further east to the Asia Pacific region – courtesy of China's *Road and Belt Initiatives'* intermodal focus.

Mostly captive to bulk-systems, which we are historically conditioned to believe to be the only and most efficient way of transporting grains, we tend to ignore these containerization trends in grain trades globally. Vancouver is a fairly modest port, handling only 15% of the tonnage of the world's largest volume port, Ningbo, and only 10% of the container traffic of Shanghai, the world's largest container-port. But it is still the 5th largest in container and 3rd largest in cargo volumes in North America.

We currently export 30 MT of grains in bulk through Vancouver, about the same as the other principal bulk-commodity, coal. We export only 4.5 MT of containerized grains through this gateway to Asia Pacific, nowhere commensurate with global trends. This containerized volume mostly consists of pulses and specialty crops that cannot be consolidated in bulk, and a bit of overflow from bulk-systems that are destined to smaller markets, still sold by grain-companies, not through direct-sales.

The sadder part of the sorry is that a third of the containers that come to Vancouver with imports from Asia go back empty to be repositioned for the eastbound head-haul in Pacific trades. Yet close to another 10% of the containers coming east are diverted to other ports due to lack of backhaul revenue prospects out of Vancouver. In essence, we have enough empty container capacity to be utilized for an additional 10 MT of grain-exports to Asia, only if we tried to divert that volume away from bulk-trades to direct-sales to be fulfilled in containers, not only yielding higher-margins to producers but also opening further diversification prospects to higher-value crops.

By sticking to their devotion to bulk-trades, producers are only undermining their own interests. Instead of capitalizing on containerized export opportunities, they stick to the status quo that not only squeezes their margins from what they produce but also holds them back from diversifying to new crops that are sure to yield even higher returns on their land. They will continue to be trapped in this situation unless they try to combat the bulk legacy of our grain-economy's history, a system that developed under CWB but continued to dominate our overseas exports into the privatized era, despite the fact that containerization is well within our means.

How did we get left so far behind?

We tried to provide a brief historical perspective on what we call the intermodal-revolution in global transport systems over the last half a century. Now we want to turn to our own experience in this domain and reflect on how, in Canada, we got left behind in containerization of many of our trades including grains, an important part of the Prairie economy. The fact that our economy was heavily skewed towards natural resources was a factor, but we failed to see how grains were so different than coal, ores, or minerals, with prospects, if not an imperative, to containerize.

In the 1980s we had set up a boutique advisory practice. In addition to dealing with trade, regulatory, and infrastructure matters, we assembled a small team focusing on transport-costs in all modes – truck, rail, air, marine, and intermodal. We had expected profound changes in Canadian freight-transport systems through the 1990s driven not only by privatization and deregulation but also technological change. Intermodal trends were underway all around the world, and there were clear signs that the same would be happening in Canada, particularly in containerization.

In 1989 our practice was retained by Saskatchewan to investigate the lack of container-supply across the Prairies, a critical factor that was holding back the province's trade and economic development. Among other initiatives, we proposed an inland-container-port (like the one in Calgary). It would eventually be developed (GTH in Regina) but with no understanding of container trades or supply; it would turn into all purpose industrial-park with little relevance to container-logistics.

In 1991 the government changed, and a Ministerial Grain Transportation Task Force was struck – transport and agricultural portfolios were under the same Minister. We assembled a distinguished team consisting of a retired Deputy Premier, academics, industry, and union representatives. The issues were controversial, but consensus was reached on most, with recommendations on rural-roads, branch-lines, elevators, and containerization – though the final report would never see the light of day.

Through the 1990s, railways got their way on most policy issues, shedding public obligations, trimming networks, gaining rights to confidential contracts, and freedom to set market-rates. The duopoly was not going to be conducive to a competitive environment, but they resisted any change that would undermine rail-interests, like running-rights to benefit shippers, and achieved commercial success following their own corporate agendas. They continued to focus on bulk-consolidation, but could not resist containers creeping into their systems, which we will come back to.

What we were seeing across Canada was little *swells* of intermodal trends, but the real *tsunami* was underway in Asia, particularly China, where we were increasingly drawn to in the next two decades. Working with international agencies as well as local authorities, we witnessed the deregulation and privatization of trucking, construction of expressways, modernization of waterways, advancement of railways, building of massive ports – coordinated unfolding of a true intermodal-revolution.

BULK-GRAIN LOGISTICS CHAIN



CONTAINERIZED-GRAIN LOGISTICS CHAIN



The pace and scale of change was truly remarkable, in fact it was difficult to relate to. Scope of our exposure was too broad to cite in a paragraph, but let us give a few examples that are most relevant to containerization. The coastal ports were already served by all the shipping-lines, including China's own. In terms of capacity targets, whatever we would suggest, China had the habit of adding a zero or two. A dozen container-ports with million TEU capacity looked reasonable, but now China has a dozen handling more than 10 million TEU, the largest in Shanghai 45 million TEU.

The coastal focus was not enough; containers had to be pulled inland. The railyards in the interior back then were scenes from the 1950s, with containers of all sizes (1-5 ton) scattered around. These had to be consolidated to international norms, 20' and 40', and equipped to load and unload railcars. Again, capacities in the order of a few hundred-thousand TEU sounded reasonable, but now China has a dozen ICDs with at least 1 million TEU capacity – comparable to Port of Vancouver's container capacity.

China already had the world's largest and best utilized rail-network. While the railway was desperately trying to minimize delays, the container-train operations had to be allocated additional capacity. The situation looked hopeless, but within 10 years of building high-speed passenger-lines, there was a huge capacity relief for freight trains. Together with all the double-tracking and signalization-improvements, linehaul capacity constraints vanished, providing access to inland-container-ports.

Aside from all these dizzying experiences, we also witnessed a side-show, China's *Road-and-Belt Initiatives* across Asia. We were first surprised to see the emphasis on container-ports and rail-lines, together with technical-assistance to revive agriculture across Central Asia. This was going to be in direct competition to our grain-exports. Moreover, all the grains from Central Asia, as well as further west from Europe, were coming containerized, with end users realizing significant inventory cost savings.

Upon returning to Canada in the mid-2010s, we did observe some changes, but it was difficult to relate to how little had been achieved. Container volumes were up in Vancouver and there were more container-trains running across the country. But despite the pulse-revolution, there was limited containerization in grain-trades. We were happy to see our brain-child, GTH, built in Regina, but it was virtually a ghost-town. Most disappointingly, there was little awareness of the containerization-imperative; if anything, contentment with bulk-trades had been further entrenched.

After what we had experienced in Asia, we were perplexed with the lack of change in how we exported grains overseas. Since we had left, containerized grain exports had increased and so had their share of the total but only modestly. The shift was mainly due to increases in pulses and specialty-crops that could not be handled any other way. When the whole world was shifting to containers, what was holding us back? The answer was obvious: vested interests that may suffer from any change or shift.

The bulk-system had been developed under the rule of CWB over grain-trades, with systematic improvements and expansion over the years. Wheat-pools (producer coops) and private grain-companies had built and owned the consolidation assets (inland-elevators and coastal-terminals) and were being paid from grain revenues. CWB was the marketer and seller of grains but owned very few if any assets; owners of the assets got compensated by CWB for the services and facilities they provided.

Railways did all the hauling, initially at crow-rates and later through a combination of contributions from CWB and government subsidies – compensatory rates from CWB or other grain-shippers came later. Earlier the government bought hopper-cars to facilitate grain-hauls, a contribution in lieu of non-compensatory rates. Grain-rates are now compensatory, but still regulated with a revenue cap. Railways continue to push for negotiated market-rates, but in the meantime they are investing in new grain-cars to replace the old ones, an obvious sign that grain-hauls are profitable.

If there was a shift to containerized grain shipments, one could argue the railways would not suffer since even the containers would move on their tracks, but that is not how they view grain-transport. Grains are shipped from elevators to terminals, generally captive to one railway at both ends – any railway's dream, a long-term contract with high margins. Breaking this traffic up into container-loads comes not only with cumbersome logistics arrangements but also makes each container contestable by the other railway. It is unrealistic to expect any support from the rail-duopoly for disrupting their largest and arguably the most profitable market.

Another lobby that stands vociferously against containerization is the grain-trading oligopsony that had formed with the dissolution and subsequent privatization of wheat-pools. When they were producer-coops, at least they were protecting the interests of their rightful owners. When they joined the ranks of private grain companies, they collectively controlled all the gateways to the bulk-system and the trades handled through it. They were supposed to be the liberating-force but have turned into another block with as much market-power as CWB. With their trading interest at stake, they are even more staunchly anti-container than the railways.

Thus, the limited shift to containers we observed upon our return from a region that was rapidly containerizing all trades, should not have come as a surprise. But from a distance we had underestimated the market-power that the new trading-oligopsony had amassed through the careless, in fact reckless, corporatization and privatization of grain industry assets, with no regard for the primary stakeholders, producers.

Where does that leave producers?

Abolishing the CWB was a political decision by a conservative government that did not believe in any form of public ownership or control over a market economy. After winning 2004 and 2006 elections, albeit with a minority but strong backing from the Prairies in both, conservatives were determined to do away with CWB; after gaining majority in 2011, nobody was going to stop them. Even if producers were divided on the matter, the government had rightfully considered producers' earlier internal vote to corporatize and later privatize their coops as an endorsement of free trade.

In our opinion, current overseas grain trades are not working in producers' best interest, squeezing their margins, and limiting their diversification prospects to higher value crops. But producers still have the right to sell to whoever they want through direct-sales channels, like they do in domestic and transborder markets. These sales can be fulfilled in containers without having to rely on bulk-systems or going through layers of intermediaries before grains get into the hands of end-users. Also, end-buyers benefit by getting the specific types/grades of grain they need, and realize savings by lowering their internal distribution, inventory, and storage costs.

Most producers can relate to these benefits and are motivated by higher margins, but they have many fears of the unknown, further stoked by vested interests:

- Producers gained experience selling direct to North American markets, but in response to procurement efforts by familiar corporations – they have limited knowledge of, or trust in, overseas buyers, thus are reluctant to engage.
- Producers do not even have prospects to consider, as overseas buyers have little knowledge or awareness of our region or of the huge variety of quality crops that can be procure directly from primary production sources, farms.
- There are also trade risks to consider, real or perceived, as well as container supply worries and fear of much higher shipping costs in containers, an unfamiliar territory that most producers have limited if any experience in.
- These concerns or fears are of course stoked by grain-companies that have a vested interest in buying from producers at farm-gates, as well as by the railways with an interest in seeing grains consolidated and traded in bulk.
- Ironically, there is little support forthcoming from producer-associations or governments to open new export-markets or facilitate new trade-channels – a strange if not inexplicable attitude on which we would rather not speculate.

Our mission is to help producers overcome these concerns and barriers, but we are mere trade-facilitators, committed to being honest-brokers without imposing commissions on the trades that we facilitate, unless asked in advisory or support capacities. In addition to launching our virtual *trade-mall* platform later this year, our interim efforts will focus on posting purchase-interests or crop-offers through our *trade-forum*. In the meantime, we will continue to publish articles to alleviate producer concerns over the risks they fear direct-sales pose, as well as the risks bulk-trades present under growing competition from low-cost emerging grain-regions.