

Report from Extension Coordinator, Nicole Driedger

As we saw lower attendance in some of our events in the last few years, we took a different approach to planning events in 2023. Hosting events at a time where producers could attend became crucial as the winter months, November to March, are busy for most local farmers who take on a second occupation working on the log haul north of Fort Vermilion or outside the county. As well, the February to April months are busy with calving season for some livestock producers.

A few things we tried was fewer winter events to accommodate producers schedules, and more in-person events, as some producers in the county have less access to internet or technology for webinars. We received feedback on what was of most interest and in turn, tried more on-farm tours in the summer, hosted fewer small workshops and focused on full day events. To give back to our members, we started Meals in the Field for the seeding and harvest months. We also collaborated with local and provincial groups to create new relationships, expanding our network. We did this by kickstarting Ag in Classrooms at MARA and hosting a school tour for grades 7 to 9 in September within the **Fort Vermilion School Division**, collaborating with **Mackenzie County** on 2 events as well as **Organic Alberta** for 2 events. We also collaborated with **AWES, Mighty Peace Watershed** and **Cows and Fish** for one event and **BASF** for another.

With advertising, we took the approach to advertise to this regions producer needs instead of the common social media approach. For example, although some associations find success in posting events to social media, based on feedback we received, the Mackenzie County producers are more likely to see or hear about events through signage or in local bulletins, as well as by word of mouth and through WhatsApp, rather than Facebook or Instagram. This prompted MARA to set up a second Magnet sign in a more central location and interact with producers through WhatsApp and making more calls outside of our memberships ahead of events.

Making these changes resulted in our average event attendance increasing in 2023 to 41 people per event as opposed to 2021s average of 25 people per event and 2022s 33 people per event. Our memberships have also risen significantly, with 25 new members in 2023 as opposed to 5 new members in 2021.

In 2023 MARA reached 448 people through extension events and in 2024 we will strive to continue hosting events with the funding we receive that is directly related to producer interest. Combining regenerative agriculture topics and economic growth discussions to further aid producers in making sustainable farming decisions. MARA's impact on producers is growing and we hope the funding we receive helps us to continue that trend.

Thanks to everyone who attended or contributed to MARA's events this year!