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University of Lethbridge welcomes new Research Chair in Potato Science

Funded by a consortium of association and industry partners, the University of Lethbridge has appointed Dr. Dmytro Yevtushenko as Research Chair in Potato Science.

The local potato industry is poised to benefit from Yevtushenko's experience as a plant biologist and from his expertise in potatoes, a plant he has studied for more than 25 years.

"This is a dream job, tailored for me," says Yevtushenko, who assumed the position on Jan. 4. "Thanks to the Potato Growers of Alberta (PGA) and the remarkable people at the University who have the vision for the potato and agriculture in Alberta, I can start this program in a relatively short time."



The PGA, McCain Foods, Lamb Weston and Cavendish Farms made a \$1 million investment over five years to establish the Chair in Potato Science. Western Canada has few researchers dedicated to the potato industry and the new Chair will enhance and expand the current capacity.

"Dmytro's arrival in southern Alberta is a result of unprecedented collaboration between the potato industry and the University," says David Hill, Director of Development, Southern Alberta Agriculture Program. "For the potato growers and processors to have had the long-term vision, insight and dedication to work with the U of L to enable a potato research program focused on the needs of the industry is significant. This initiative is a key element of the renewed focus on agriculture and agri-

business that is being pursued by the University and its partners. It is an exciting time for the University and the students who will benefit from participation in this program.”

The PGA is a non-profit potato grower organization working to increase the success of the Alberta potato growing industry, currently worth \$1 billion annually.

“Local growers and processors welcome Dr. Yevtushenko and we are eager to start working with him,” says Terence Hochstein, the PGA’s executive director. “Our membership identified a need for university-level research and education in the potato industry and we are excited to have Dr. Yevtushenko and his expertise available to us.”

“Potatoes are a very large part of the economy here in southern Alberta and it’s very important for the people involved in the potato industry to have a feeling that the problems involved are being addressed by research,” says Dr. Joe Rasmussen, a U of L biology professor and Canada Research Chair in Aquatic Ecosystems. “It’s also important for the potato growers to have access to trained people who are ready to work in their industry. Students will gain higher education in an area they would not have had before and in a field that has potential employment for them in this region.”

Yevtushenko plans to co-ordinate his research programs with the needs of the local industry. His major research interests are in the areas of plant biotechnology and breeding, with focus on crop improvement and food safety using modern techniques that involve molecular biology, plant tissue culture, and genetics. While he has researched many plant species, he prefers working with potatoes. His experience working in the plant biotechnology industry has given him an appreciation for the concerns of producers. He has a broad range of research expertise, including development of potato genotypes with wide-spectrum disease resistance and large-scale production of virus-free seed potatoes in vitro. Among other projects, his research plans include improvement of tuber yields through epigenetic enhancement of current potato cultivars and speeding up the potato breeding process using innovative methods.

Yevtushenko is eager to get started and he’ll be visiting local potato farms and facilities in the next few weeks. His lab is being retrofitted in a construction trailer near Hepler Hall, where he will conduct research until lab space becomes available through the Destination Project construction. After it opens this summer, he’ll be starting his research projects. In September, Yevtushenko will teach a course in plant breeding and genetics with a component specific to potato agriculture. He also plans to have students working in his lab and, in the future, he hopes to develop co-operative opportunities for students.

“Potato growers are interested in a new generation of young people who will graduate from university and come to farms with knowledge of potato science,” says Yevtushenko. “Surprisingly, there is a shortage of qualified people in potato agriculture

and when they need to hire someone, they hire people from the United States and from Europe.”

Yevtushenko was born in central Ukraine and attended Kiev State University, as it was then called. He’d wanted to be a scientist ever since he was in middle school and he arrived at university wanting to study nature and the environment. He discovered a passion for plant biology and completed a PhD at the Institute of Cell Biology and Genetic Engineering in Kiev. He came to Canada for a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Guelph. Since then, he’s worked at the University of Victoria and held various positions in private industry, gaining a broad range of experience in business and research in the process.

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