



JoAnne Buth: a life in agriculture

Cigi's newly retired CEO didn't have a plan, but
walked through new doors as they opened

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Reading Time: 6 minutes

Published: July 23, 2019



JoAnne Buth looks back at a career of change as she enters retirement.

Photo: Supplied

JoAnne Buth is an expert in removing mosquito ovaries. Her favourite insect is the weevil. She's one of the newest members of the Canadian Agriculture Hall of Fame.

And if you keep reading you'll learn lots more about the recently retired CEO of Cigi — the Canadian International Grains Institute

— and her auspicious agricultural career that didn't start on a farm.

It's May 22 — her second to last day on the job — Buth greets a reporter with her usual smile and calm demeanour in her corner office on the 10th floor of the Canadian Grain Commission Building just metres away from Portage and Main.

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Buth unsurprised by China's Canadian canola ban

How she got here in August 2014 was circuitous and not part of any grand plan.

"It's like following a thread," said Buth, who loves working with fabric, including weaving.

"Sometimes when I change jobs, it's a matter of a door opens and you go through it. So it's taking those opportunities. When something comes up you say, 'yes, I am going to do that rather

than holding back.”

From a modest upbringing, Buth, a former senator and president of the Canola Council of Canada, pursued her youthful fascination with nature and science, never expecting or planning to reach such heights. It's obvious from what she accomplished Buth capitalized on her intelligence and work ethic.

“I started work at the age of 15 at Eaton's fancy meat department as a meat wrapper,” Buth said. “I lied about my age. I put myself through university.

“But my first job in university (while working on a master of science degree in entomology) was with the City of Winnipeg in the Insect Control Branch and I managed the bug line.”

City kid

Buth didn't grow up on a farm. Her parents farmed north of Beausejour near a community called Greenwald, but moved in 1950 during the great Red River flood, to Vernon, B.C.

“So no farm, although I did an aptitude test at one time and it said I should either be in the military or a farmer,” Buth said.

Buth's favourite times were playing by the creek in summer.

“As a kid I had an insect collection,” Buth said. “As a kid I was pressing plants.

“I was always interested in plants. At the U of W (University of Winnipeg) I got a biology degree but almost all my courses were in botany. I really had an interest in plants and then in insects.”



During her time with the Canola Council of Canada and Cigi, Buth spent a

lot of time working with international customers for Canadian grain.photo:
Canola Council of Canada,

Buth's father died when she was 12. She and her family moved back to Winnipeg, living in the Wolseley neighbourhood when it was a working-class part of the city rather than the trendy spot it's since become.

After earning a bachelor of science degree in 1976, Buth completed a master of science degree in entomology at the University of Manitoba in 1982.

After that she was information officer at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Winnipeg research centre until 1984.

Then Buth attended the University of Saskatchewan's veterinary college for a year, dropping out after realizing her goal of becoming a researcher meant three more years of vet school, plus three more for a PhD

From 1985 to 1990 Buth worked for Dow.

"I picked up enough there to become a weeds specialist," she said, starting in that position with Manitoba Agriculture based in Carman, moving up to be a manager a few years later.

The next stop was the Canola Council of Canada as vice-president of crop production and biotechnology for eight years, followed by another five as president.

Senator Buth

Her next career move was an unexpected one even for one with a wide breadth of experience — an appointment to the Canadian Senate Jan. 6, 2012 by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Buth suspects her brief interactions with Harper in 2009 when the council and federal government were negotiating to keep Canadian canola flowing to China played a role in her appointment.

They rubbed shoulders again a year later during a helicopter tour to view flooded Saskatchewan farms.

After playing telephone tag with the Prime Minister's Office's director of appointments for a few days they connected. Buth thought he might want some suggestions for possible appointees. She was surprised when he popped the question: "The prime minister would like to know if you'd be interested in being a senator," Buth said. "And I just thought this is crazy. I took a couple of days to think about it. Again, part of that is a door opens and I thought maybe I could make a difference in agriculture." Twenty months later Buth resigned even though by law she could've kept the position until age 75.

There were several reasons. One was the partisanship in the upper house.

In addition, several senators, including Mike Duffy, were accused of cheating on their expense accounts.

It wasn't a pleasant time to be a senator.

"What I found hard was the constant criticism you get from taxpayers who don't feel there is value in the Senate," Buth said.

"You were constantly defending yourself.

"I think what led me to leave more was I didn't feel like I could make much of a tangible difference," she said, adding she likes to be able to tackle problems immediately.

"The Senate is much more of a long-term (process)," Buth said.

Despite its many critics, Buth continues to believe the Senate plays an important role in Canadian democracy, but would be even more effective if elected, she said, adding that's unlikely any time soon as that would require a constitutional change.

On to Cigi

Knowing Cigi was changing post-Canadian Wheat Board, and that then CEO Earl Geddes was retiring, Buth applied for the job and got it.

Cigi, created in 1972 to train foreign customers how to better use Canadian field crops, had been funded by the wheat board and federal government.



Buth during a visit with end users to a Prairie farm. photo: Canola Council of Canada

Now Cigi's funding boils down to what its grain company-members agree to kick in, matched by farmers through their provincial wheat organization checkoffs.

The current budget is \$7.5 million a year, including, \$2 million from the federal government.

"When I started at Cigi I went to see each of the grain companies' executives and I said, 'What value does Cigi bring to you? What would happen if we didn't exist?' I wanted to know if they had thought about it," Buth said. "I think all of them said Cigi has value and you would notice it if it were gone right away."

Buth led Cigi through a priority-setting process, resulting in a renewed focus on wheat, reflecting where most of the funding comes from.

Cigi employs 28 people, down from 42. Some of that was through

attrition, but there were layoffs too.

“Those decisions are extremely difficult — letting people go — and it’s the worst part of any job I’ve had,” Buth said. “It eats away at you because staff here are extremely dedicated...”

Cigi and Cereals Canada, which share many of the same members, are currently looking at merging. Buth’s advice to her successor is to listen.

“You really have to listen to what your members are saying and you really have to ask the hard questions, because you better know what’s happening,” she said.

Future plans

There are at least two things Buth knows she’ll be doing in retirement: getting married in July and learning to sail this summer at Lake of the Woods.

Asked if she might do some consulting, Buth firmly replied: “I hope not.

“I just think all I’m going to do is spend the next six to nine months figuring it out. You might never hear from me again.”

Buth will also remain chair of the Manitoba Agriculture Research and Innovation committee, which makes recommendations to the provincial agriculture minister on research projects to fund.

“I’m not afraid (of retirement) but I think I have a certain amount of apprehension about what is it that I want to do. The upside of that is I can explore anything,” she said.

As for mosquito ovaries, well that’s always a conversation starter at cocktail parties.

Buth’s master’s degree was on mosquitoes that spread equine encephalitis.

“I dissected millions of ovaries,” she said.

“You just open their abdomen with two little needles and the ovaries just fall out because the whole purpose of a mosquito is reproduction. There’s not much in there except ovaries. They are very small. Then you put them under a microscope.”

Why is the weevil Buth’s favourite insect?

“Weevils have a long snout and come in different sizes and I just think they are just one of the most comical creatures out there,”
Buth said. “They have personality.”