

PHOTO CUTLINE: "Ernie Michaleski, a farmer from Dauphin, Man., said opposition to government plans is growing among farmers, who have recently been loyal Conservative voters."

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Don't fire wheat board boss, farmers tell Ottawa

Prairie growers gather in Winnipeg in last-ditch show of support for CEO

JOE FRIESEN 15/12/06 Globe and Mail

WINNIPEG -- Hundreds of prairie farmers travelled to the heart of the Canadian grain trade yesterday to demand that a \$300,000 a year CEO be allowed to keep his job.

The wheat producers, carrying placards rather than pitchforks, staged a last-ditch protest aimed at saving the job of Canadian Wheat Board boss Adrian Measner.

Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl told Mr. Measner two weeks ago he was considering firing him for refusing to back Ottawa's plan to dismantle the board's monopoly on grain sales.

As the crowd chanted his name, the quiet, unassuming CEO from Holdfast, Sask., climbed onto the back of a pickup truck and looked out over signs that said "CWB -- Our board, our business" and "Strahl -- Keep your hands off our CWB."

Mr. Measner, his eyes looking tired and his voice at times choked with emotion, vowed to stay in his job as long as possible.

But moments before he emerged from the board's Main Street head office, he faxed a four-page letter to Mr. Strahl that will almost certainly seal his fate.

In the letter, Mr. Measner said he cannot support the direction the Conservative government has taken.

"Based on my 32 years of experience, and based on the direction given to me by the farmer-elected board of directors, I will continue to support the single desk [model of selling]," his letter says.

He asked Mr. Strahl to stop meddling with an organization that he believes should be at arms-length from government, run by farmers, for farmers.

In an interview in his office yesterday morning, Mr. Measner outlined his thoughts as he faced what could well be his last day on the job.

"This isn't how I wanted to end my career," he said. "It's a bit hard to understand, because I'm caught in the middle of an issue that I personally can't resolve.

"I will continue to work for the farmer-elected board. There's no option in my mind."

He arrived at the board as a computer programmer fresh out of the University of Saskatchewan and rose through the ranks to eventually run the \$4-billion-a-year organization. His staff holds him in high regard for his honest, straightforward style.

But he is clearly uncomfortable in the spotlight, and sought yesterday to deflect attention from his imminent dismissal.

"I don't want us to get sidetracked on me; I want us to focus on who's in charge of this organization and who should be charting its future.

"I think farmers need to stand up and say, 'No. This is our organization, and you're not taking it.' "

Mr. Measner said Ottawa is trying to impose its will on Western Canadian farmers by refusing to follow the rules that require a plebiscite before any change to the monopoly.

Mr. Strahl has promised to hold a vote on the barley monopoly, but has not said whether he will do the same for wheat.

The Conservatives campaigned on a platform of marketing choice in the last election and swept nearly every seat on the Prairies.

Mr. Measner said that after what he has seen in the last two months, he has no intention of running for Parliament, but he intends to be a thorn in the government's side.

He was overwhelmed to see several hundred farmers, many wearing jeans and baseball caps, protesting on behalf of someone who wears a suit to work every day.

"It's very unusual but very appreciated. It's a tremendous thing. If farmers can work together and speak with a single voice, they're a lot stronger and they'll have a lot more impact."

Marty McNabb, a farmer from Minnedosa, 210 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg, said he supports the board. "We've got to make the government listen," he said, with a toothpick dangling from his mouth. "An open market might be good for some, but not for everyone."

Ernie Michaleski, a farmer from Dauphin, Man., said opposition to government plans is growing among farmers, who have recently been loyal Conservative voters.

"It's so far out of touch with reality and common sense," he said. "There are Conservative voters who aren't going to be able to vote Conservative after this."