

October 19, 2006

PAGE: C8 / FRONT (BUSINESS)

CWB debate marked by farmers' criticisms

Saskatchewan News Network; Regina Leader-Post

REGINA (SNN) -- More criticisms are flying from farm groups on both sides of the Canadian Wheat Board debate as the federal government moves closer to ending the board's marketing monopoly.

On Wednesday, the Western Barley Growers Association -- whose members want to be allowed to sell their grain outside the board -- called for the resignation of CWB chair Ken Ritter and CEO Adrian Measner. The barley association said the CWB contravened a recent government order restricting the grain seller from promoting its monopoly on western wheat and barley exports.

The barley growers allege the CWB wrote information that was included in a press release Tuesday from Prairie farm organizations that want a vote before the government makes changes to the wheat board.

The groups from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, backed by the National Farmers Union, met with Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl this week to press for a plebiscite and issued a statement and background information explaining why.

"Not only has the CWB broken the law, and resignations must be tendered as a result, but these four farm groups have lost all integrity and credibility in this debate as far as I'm concerned," said barley growers president Jeff Nielsen in a media release.

But Ken McBride, president of the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan, dismissed the criticism, saying the information regarding a plebiscite was something they put together.

"What we presented is a compilation of a number of documents," McBride said. "There's lots of information out there that people can avail themselves to and we took those opportunities."

Wheat board spokesperson Maureen Fitzhenry said no one at the board authored a document for the farm groups. She said a wheat board analyst did produce a 22-page internal discussion paper about a month ago on how a plebiscite might work, as it has with other topics in the past, and the groups would have had access to that information.

Nielsen, a farmer at Olds, Alta., said the board may have written its report before the government directive to the board was issued, but he still is frustrated with the organization.

"It's not their mandate," he said in an interview.

"They had to ask somebody in their office to write this document and they're using Canadian Wheat Board time for a matter that doesn't involve marketing of Western Canada's grains."

Nielsen said he wants an end to the monopoly because it would give him the "basic right of choice."

But McBride said he hopes the barley group's charges will serve to show Strahl there are strong opinions on the wheat board that must be heard through a farmer vote.

The federal government is waiting for a task force to report on how it can best move forward on the promise to allow farmers to market their grain outside the board, and has not committed to a farmer vote before changes are made.

The provincial governments in Manitoba and Saskatchewan say there should be a plebiscite.

(REGINA LEADER-POST)