

Red Herrings and other fishy stuff.

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag. August 16, 2006

Just back from Cuba, I would of course like to respond to the matters raised in Barb Glen's August 10th column in The Western Producer.

First of all, in canceling my column, I respect the fact that decisions made by the Publisher of the Western Producer may or may not reflect the position of individual staff members. Secondly, I want to go on record as defending the ongoing reputation of the WP as one of Canada's top farm papers.

But I suspect, in this instance, the Western Producer has been unduly influenced by concentrated economic and political interests opposed to the single desk selling authority of the Canadian Wheat Board, and it is in the interest of no-one to let this matter lie. It begs further discussion.

As an Agrologist and journalist, I have read and re-read the reasons given by the Western Producer for canceling my column, but confess I simply do not understand them.

As the Western Producer explained to its readers August 10th):

... a columnist, Wendy Holm, was at a rally last week where she took an active part in the proceedings. But then we learned, to our surprise and consternation, that many people thought Holm was a Producer reporter. She later identified her connection to the Producer when asking a question at a press conference. Since Holm had clearly chosen a side in the debate, people questioned this newspaper's credibility. In our view, the problem was caused by a misrepresentation about the columnist-newspaper relationship. That prompted us to cancel Holm's column. We cannot risk being seen as biased in covering such an important story. .

Can we say red herring? The loss of my column has little to do with reader confusion of my role with the paper ("Is she staff?" "Is she freelance?") and all to do with the vested interests of concentrated agri-food players who can finally taste the end of the Canadian Wheat Board

What happened is that Chuck Strahl's office promptly complained to the Producer that my presence at the farm rally was indicative of bias on the part of the paper. This put the paper in a self-described "very serious situation." Ergo, to be seen to act decisively, my column of 2 years was unceremoniously dropped.

To respond to the matters raised by the Producer:

First of all, the issue of identification. Do I identify my connection to the Producer? Of course. I proudly include the hat of "Monthly Columnist, Western Producer" when speaking to farmers. Writing that column in defense of strong farm policy is an important aspect of my professionalism, and I have treasured the opportunity to do so from the pages of the Western Producer since 2004.,

Secondly, have I ever misrepresented this relationship? Of course not. When questioning the Minister in his media conference following the rally, I clearly identified myself as Wendy Holm, Freelance Columnist, Western Producer. This can be easily confirmed from the inevitable tapes that are made of such events. What could be more clear than that? There was no misrepresentation. I was there wearing exactly that hat.

On August 1st, The Western Producer cancelled Holm's Opinion column that has appeared monthly on Page 7 (Op-Ed page) for the past 2 years. This essay is in response to published comments by the Western Producer concerning same. Along with Holm's unpublished August column The Big Lie, it is posted at <http://www.theholmteam.ca/Columns.html>.

Thirdly, do readers associate me with the Producer? Of course, and rightly so. For the past 2 years my column has appeared on the Op Ed page of the Producer in the second issue of every month like clockwork. The opinions I express in my column are strong and individual and - I would argue - important. Indeed, my column is the reason some have subscribed.

The nature of my relationship with the Producer is also a red herring. Whether I was an employee receiving a salary or as a freelance columnist paid on contract to produce one column a month for \$150 is inconsequential.

And finally, as noted by the Producer, none of their columnists are staff. They are all contract. A disclaimer always appeared at the bottom of my columns that I was a freelance columnist and as such my views did not reflect the views of the paper. So where does the confusion arise?

As far as my participation in the farm rally, I traveled to Saskatoon on my "own nickel" because I felt obligated as an Agrologist to do so, and all in attendance knew it.

Years ago, many small advertisers meant papers were truly independent. Today, concentration in the agri-food sector means large multinationals can exert significant influence through investment in advertising and political campaigns. Large grain companies do not like the Canadian Wheat Board. Figure it out.

My column was cancelled in response to inappropriate pressure from the Minister's office and those who have a vested economic interest in breaking the single desk selling authority of the Canadian Wheat Board.

The cancellation of my column in the Producer is not about me. It is about the rights of Canadian farmers to a solid defense of farm issues. If they can drop my column, they can drop anyone's column. What does that do to the voice of independent farm writers?

What U.S. wheat interests have been unable to accomplish with GATT and the WTO, Harper is poised to deliver with his package of regulatory and legislative changes that will remove the single desk selling authority of the Canadian Wheat Board. Apparently innocuous to the uninformed, Bill C-300 will deliver up the CWB's head on a platter to the concentrated American wheat lobby, led by multinational grain interests.

It's like waltzing the beef sector into the waiting arms of R-Calf. It's irresponsible governance.

Defending the single desk selling authority of the Canadian Wheat Board is about defending the future of Prairie agriculture. And that's about farmer's rights.

As an Agrologist, defense of such matters is MY mandate.

This is not right, nor should it be over. Let's talk.

Wendy Holm is an Agrologist, economist and farm columnist.
She can be reached at holm@farmertofarmer.ca.

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