

The grower and water



Wendy Holm P.Ag.

Consider this... If you rely on water for farming, and someone else in your drainage basin is also dependent on water - e.g. for oil and gas extraction, to make snow on a ski hill, to use in an industrial process - and they happen to be American, or have American investors, they have you hooped. (That would be you standing with barrel stays encircling your body...)

Under NAFTA, as under FTA before it, the right to access water resources is clearly entrenched and clearly enforceable. Canadian farmers relying on Canadian water to provide food to Canadian communities stand behind the Americans when it comes to water rights.

This is clearly absurd.

And clearly contrary to the wishes of Canadians as expressed in the 1986 federal election, when this matter took high profile, centre stage.

"Water is not included," shouted the headlines.

"Trust us! the politicians said." And Canadians did, but it was, and now we must move quickly to fix it before agreements like the Security and Prosperity partnership muddy the waters, clouding our right to redress this wrong.

Part of the confusion around this issue has centered on the way it has been portrayed by Maude Barlow in her role as head of the Council of Canadians.

Barlow is responsible for the mythical "first drop" theory - which goes something like "once we begin exporting water, water

will - abracadabra - become a good and we will not be able to turn off the tap." Not the way it works at all.

This misinterpretation has led to some lassitude: "Well, so long as we don't export..."

In fact, there is no first-past-the-post event required under the NAFTA. Water is a good.

There already are recurring trans-border water sales (non-treaty Columbia River water, bulk tanker shipments) and besides, the issue is NOT limited to exports but in fact applies whenever an American firm, or investor, USES water in Canada.

This is of far more serious concern to farmers. And it has been given virtually no mention in public discussions.

On March 24, 2002, standing in my hotel room in Havana's Hotel Nacional with 21 Canadian farmers for our last pre-dinner drink and social hour, I was asked by a

beef rancher from the Peach River how to take what they had seen - impressive government and community respect for farmers - and make the rubber hit the road back in Canada.

Where does respect for farming come from? How can we get it back?

Farmers need to speak in one voice, I replied.

My favourite wise cracker - must have been Ron - retorted "Ain't gonna happen.

Put three farmers in a room and you have four opinions.

Farmers are bloody-minded. That's why they farm."

Never having actually spoken with them about the water/trades issue, I nevertheless used water as an example: Whether they love the NAFTA or hate the NAFTA, whether they think selling water is a good thing or a bad thing, no matter how they voted in the last election, every farmer in Canada

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will agree retention of Canadian sovereignty over our water resources is fundamental to the future of farming.

Get farmers together, I said, explain there is a fix, and they will support a resolution calling for one because they all agree: you may share your water if your neighbour needs some, but you don't put their hand on the pump.

And so The Farmers Resolution to Exempt Water from the NAFTA was born and has now been moved, seconded and resolved by over 200 Canadian farm organizations. (All are listed on the website www.theholmteam.ca)

In a non-partisan and NAFTA-neutral manner, The Farmers Resolution to Exempt Water from the NAFTA calls for two simple amendments that will remove Canada's water resources from the reach of NAFTA's National Treatment, Quantitative Restrictions, Agriculture and Chapter Chapter 11 provisions.

Canada needs to simply stand up and call the shots – pushing the Americans down the chute of public opinion (What choice do we have? Canadians have spoken!) and presenting them with two doors: all the NAFTA goodies minus water or none of the NAFTA goodies.

Since Canadians never gave government the mandate to put Canada's water on the table, farmers simply need to call for the fix

and consumers will be right behind them, cheering and applauding. Why?

Because Canadians are afraid of the implications of this water/trade issue and feel powerless to do anything about it.

Time for farmers to take the leadership here. Communities around the world are coming to realize the importance of food sustainability. But it is food sovereignty – the right of a nation to define and defend domestic farm policies in the face of a proliferation of new trade rules - that is essential to supporting and sustaining a healthy farm sector. Just as Canadian sovereignty over our water resources is essential to supporting and sustaining healthy communities.

Go to www.theholmteam.ca. Follow the links to the Farmers' Resolution. Print it out. Bring it to your farm meeting. Pass it and send it me so I can place it on file. Forward it to your Member of Parliament and the Agriculture Minister. Raise the issue in public discussions. Make a difference. For Canada's sake. We are hovering on the cusp of another election. Now is the time to act. There is not too much time on this one.

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