

Farmers need to speak in one voice.
Opinion, The Western Producer: February 10, 2005
Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag. (715 words)

When children are at risk, the responsibility of the community is clear: support, defend, protect.

Farmers have no fewer rights on a public policy level. Yet these rights are being systematically dismantled.

Strong words? Perhaps. But it is a time for strong words and strong actions. As an Agrologist with more than 30 years of professional practice, I have never before witnessed a farm crisis of this magnitude.

Century farms are on the block. Once-proud men and women are disillusioned and in debt. Farm capital carefully built up over generations is gone. And there is no end in sight.

This should not be happening. Agriculture is a primary sector. Modern day alchemists, farmers take soil and sun and seeds and smarts and turn them into food to sustain communities. Government's role with respect to primary sectors is to nurture them with solid public policy support.

Yet since the mid-1980's, support for Canadian agriculture has plummeted. Canada's farmers are today living the legacy of that abuse.

While Ottawa gives lip service to strengthening communities, the traditional pillars of rural Canada are crumbling.

It would appear no one is looking after the interests of Canada's farmers and that puts the future of Canada's communities at risk.

Failure to support: While the rest of the world is reconstructing domestic farm support programs to meet World Trade Organization guidelines, Ottawa has cut support to agriculture faster and deeper than most Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member nations.

During the 15-year period ending 2002, Canadian farm support dropped by a shocking 57 percent per hectare. In the United States, support rose by 14 percent.

As a result, Canada's farmers now receive 51 percent less support than do American farmers, amongst the lowest of all OECD member nations. The story is the same on a per farmer and a per capita basis. No matter how you slice it, Canada's farmers are losing ground.

Failure to defend. There is no more poignant example of this than BSE. Ottawa's failure to defend the trade interests of Canada's ranchers to put an end Washington's NAFTA-illegal blockade of Canadian beef and live cattle, now in its 21st month, should be actionable. No other sector of our economy would put up with such abuse.

By picking sectoral winners and losers, bureaucrats are playing political roulette with the fate of Canada's farmers, Canada's food security and the future of Canada's rural communities.

Failure to protect. Farmers know better than most that water sovereignty is critical to agricultural sustainability.

In public discussions preceding both the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canadians told Ottawa sovereignty over our water resources must not be compromised.

As it turns out, it was; there is no question but that water is included in both the FTA and the NAFTA, giving American firms trade rights to Canada's water – rights that are superior to those of Canadians.

Water flooding in Canada's oil patch but one example. If the company injecting water deep into ground wells to extract the last 10-15 percent of oil and gas is American or has American investors, their rights to continued use of that water are fully protected by the NAFTA and are superior to the rights of Canadian ranchers.

Failure to support. Failure to defend. Failure to protect. A legacy of neglect that has undermined the profitability of Canadian agriculture and made our farmers vulnerable to foreign domination by concentrated agri-business giants like Cargill and Tyson, which now control Canada's meat packing sector, and Parmalat and Saputo, which now control Canada's dairy sector.

Canadian agriculture is in crisis. Commodity politics are undermining farm politics. Politicians have little respect for agriculture. Consumers are disconnected from the land and from the men and women who produce the food that sustains communities.

To remedy this, farmers need to speak in one voice. And there is no more attentive ear than that of a minority government.

Take away the profits of farming and you take away the sustainability of communities. It's that simple. And that critical.

If Canadian farm policy were a child, it would be apprehended. It is past time to call government to account.

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag. is an Agrologist, resource economist and author based on Bowen Island, BC.
holm@farmertofarmer.ca, www.theholmteam.ca.