

Watering the grassroots.

June 2002 Column – Country Life in B.C.

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

Farmers leaving the field, a feature article in the February issue of Stats Can's *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, presented the following grim commentary on Canada's farm crisis:

"Farmers, in general, have not seen an increase in profits since 1996. Farm operating expenses have risen to all-time highs, offsetting the modest gains in cash receipts. As a result, net farm income was \$2.6 billion in 2000 (adjusted for inflation), about the same as in the previous three years and only a fraction of the \$11.1 billion high set in 1975..."

"Farmers appear to be coping with current economic conditions by making an orderly exit from the sector, or rebalancing their employment by switching their main job to something other than agriculture..."

"The year 1999 marked the beginning of a... pronounced downward trend when farm employment as a main job plummeted 6% from 1998. In 2000, the rate of decline accelerated, dropping employment by a further 13%. This was followed by another decline in 2001, so that by the end of the year, farm employment was 313,000, 26% below where it had been only three years earlier – the largest drop in about 35 years."

"Not only have principal farm operators switched out of farming as their main activity, but spouses and children appear to have moved to off-farm work as well. In 1998, in every 100 farming households, about 143 people were mainly employed on the farm. By 2001, this number had dropped to 131."

"As a group, farmers are relatively old, with a large proportion approaching retirement."

Substitute the word "teachers" or "doctors" for "farmers" and this story would have made the top of the 6 o'clock news in every city in Canada. Food security and rural economic development rank right up there with education and health as key public policy priorities. Yet beyond the farm press, Stats Can's commentary of the 2001 census went largely unreported.

NO SURPRISES HERE

The census analysis should come as no surprise. As regular readers of this column know, a similarly dire message was presented in the most recent analysis of measures of support for agriculture amongst OECD member nations. Canada's own data shows government support for farming – measured on a per capita basis - declined by close to 40% during the 1990's and now falls 45% below the OECD average support levels. During this same period, per capita support for American farmers increased by 22%, placing them 14% above OECD average levels.

Measured on a per hectare basis, government support to Canada's farmers dropped by 32% over the past decade and now falls 74% below average OECD support levels. By the year 2000, per capita support to Canadian farmers sat at 55% below American levels; a per hectare basis this gap increases to 58%.

THE US FARM BILL

The US Farm Bill will dramatically widen this gap. (And what is VanClief's response to the US Farm Bill? Incredibly, it is criticize the Americans. But as Canadian farm analysts who've looked closely at the US

Farm Bill confirm, the measures of support for American farmers contained in the new legislation are fully consistent with WTO guidelines. VanClief's posturing is simply that, posturing. Empty rhetoric from a politician who failed at farming, appears less-than-comfortable in the company of farmers, believes Canada has "too many farmers" and has actually stated publicly that the solution to the farm crisis is for more farmers to leave the land.)

Not one other sector of our economy would put up with the treatment that Canada's farmers have and are suffering at the hands of Ottawa and the provinces.

WATER AND EMPOWERMENT-THE RESOLUTION

It is past time to regain some empowerment for the farm community. To do so, farmers need to raise one strong and effective voice. The most effective way to mobilize such a voice is to start with an issue that every farmer can embrace – retaining sovereignty over our water resources.

Go back and read my May column or visit our website www.farmertofarmer.ca and click on the water link. Take the resolution to your commodity group or farmer's institute (or both) and get it passed. Send it to me with a note that says how many farmers your association represents.

When we have resolutions returned from across Canada, I will personally take them all to Ottawa and professionally and strongly present them on your behalf.

Water is a non-partisan and non-political issue. Whether you love the NAFTA or hate the NAFTA, signing this resolution just makes common sense. Canada's consumers – who are in a fit of despair over the water/trade issue - will love you for it. More to the point, raising ONE FARM VOICE on water will empower further dialogue on issues of priority to Canada's farmers.

Canadian consumers enjoy the second lowest food costs of all OECD nations. Its high time Canadian farmers enjoyed the respect of government and the Canadian public. This water initiative can make that happen. Please get in touch with me if you have questions: 604-947-2893 or holm@farmertofarmer.ca.

The 2001 Census of Agriculture can be found at: www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/95F0301XIE/index.htm

Next month: Reflections on writing my 100th farm column!