

Prairie drought, Canadian crisis?

August 2002 Column, Country Life in B.C.

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

In Alberta, a rancher watches his cattle get thinner and thinner and watches the sky for rain. When he finally trucks them to auction, they're turned back by the inspectors. Too thin. He trucks them back home, unloads them, shoots each and every one of them, then turns the gun on himself.

In less dramatic ways, this tragic story repeats itself across the Prairies. In the dust bowl (much of Alberta and Saskatchewan; worse than the dirty 30's), fifty-something ranchers circle the auction ring, eyes hard and faces grim as herds carefully built-up over the years are sold-off for \$800 a cow/calf pair because of scanty pasture grasses, no water and no feed.

In Ontario, farmers donate shipments of hay. In Ottawa, Bank of Canada Governor David Dodge praises the strength of the Canadian economy and targets growth at 3.5 a year through 2003.

When reporters question such optimism in the face of collapsing financial markets, Dodge quips: "The markets are more important to Bay street than they are to Main Street" and promises consumer confidence will buoy the economy. Cheerleading meant to placate global investor concern with Canada's falling dollar is sweetened by Dodge's announcement of a quarter point hike in interest rates and the promise of more to come. And like the dove that flutters free from the silk scarf dropped by the man in the shiny top hat and gloves, the Canadian loonie magically rebounds the very same day.

Unfortunately, the magicians waiting in the wings for many farmers are their bankers. Ready to turn them into ex-farmers.

In the "dirty thirties", farmers weren't burdened by crippling debt. Now they are. That makes this drought – already worse on soil moisture levels alone – much more serious. For the past decade, farmers have replaced earned farm income with farm debt. Trying to pay down debt with expansion or diversification has added more debt. Like the frayed elastic waist on an old pair of gaunchies, there's just no stretch left in the fabric of many farm families.

Farmers and ranchers across Canada are in trouble. Not because markets are failing them, but because governments are failing them. So long as Bay Street continues to have more political clout with Ottawa than Main Street - or County Road #7 for that matter – matters of urgent farm policy will go unaddressed.

Canada's farm sector is in crisis. No one is speaking for agriculture. It is *past* high time that farmers raised one voice...

Back in the 1970's public servants worked hard to construct good public policy and were proud of it. In the 1980's, things changed dramatically. Public servants were replaced by bureaucrats whose job is to manage issues to meet the priorities of caucus. And the favourite mantra of those who wish to keep the farm sector divided (so much the better to manage you with, my dear) is "farmers will never agree on anything".

They're wrong. On most issues, it's simply a matter of not wading too far out into the details swamp. The water/trade issue is a perfect example.

Some farmers may feel water exports are worth considering, others may draw the line at exports but support inter-provincial transfers, others undoubtedly feel strongly that all water exports (to another province or to another country) should be prohibited.

The point is, despite disagreement on domestic water policy options, all farmers agree that water decisions should be made in Canada. By Canadians. In a democratic and sovereign manner unfettered by the international trade dictates of the NAFTA and its un-appealable Chapter 11 rulings. Most importantly, in a manner that entrenches not threatens farm water supplies.

One voice is needed. Getting farmers in commodity groups and institutes across Canada to call for an exemption for water under the NAFTA is a natural place to begin *the voice training*.

Whether you love the NAFTA or you hate the NAFTA, water should not be part of the NAFTA, the fix is an exemption and the time is now.

The text of the resolution farmers in BC are asking farm groups across Canada to sign is on page ____ and will appear in every issue of Country Life in BC from now until the end of the year. So far, it has been passed by the BC Fruit Growers, the Mainland Dairymen's Association and a number of BC farmer and women's institutes. The BC Cattlemen's Association has it in committee.

Take it. Pass it. Send it to me. This is how change happens. And when the farmers of Canada speak, I guarantee you that the PM (whomever he is at the time) will listen. And so will Canadian consumers.
holm@farmertofarmer.ca