

## Water and NAFTA: A sweetheart message from Canada's farmers March 2004 Column, Country Life in B.C.

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Heading back to Ottawa this February for the second year in a row, briefcase bulging with the Resolutions of some 150 Canadian farm organizations, I reviewed my pitch to the politicians with whom I was to meet. Former Solicitor General Wayne Easter – a Prince Edward Island farmer who is certainly no stranger to agricultural policy. Dennis Mills, an MP from Toronto who credits his election to the House of Commons to constituent concerns over the water/trade issue. Bloc Quebecois MP Stephane Bergeron. New Democrat MP Joe Comartin. And indirectly – through his staff — Prime Minister Paul Martin.

The message is a simple one: Whether you love the NAFTA or hate the NAFTA is not the point. Whether you support or oppose water exports is not the point. The point is sovereignty. Canada must have absolute discretion over the management of her water resources. In perpetuity. To accomplish this, water must be excluded from the NAFTA. Prior to the signing of the FTA and the NAFTA, the federal government assured Canadians water was not part of the trade agreements. Turns out it is.

And the issue goes well beyond exports. Any time an American company uses Canadian water, NAFTA guarantees their rights to uninterrupted use. Be it an American petroleum company injecting water into the ground to extract the last 10-15% of oil and gas in Canada's oilpatch (water flooding), an American firm involved in managing the water supplies of a Canadian municipality through a public-private-partnership, an American firm using Canadian water for hydroelectric generation, an American firm extracting and bottling groundwater, an American firm using water in its manufacturing processes, any time an American firm accesses Canada's water for a commercial reason, their NAFTA rights are clear (and clearly superior to those of Canadians): Continuity of use. Proportional sharing. No price discrimination. No interruption of normal channels of supply. National treatment. Oh yes, and of course Chapter 11 – the right to compensation from the Canadian government for lost profits if any of these rights are denied.

I told the politicians in Ottawa that Canadians are worried sick about this issue. And that farmers, more than any other sector of Canadian society, understand the need to protect water sovereignty.

I explained that although the problem was a grave one, the solution was readily at hand: water must be added to the list of goods, services and investments explicitly exempted from the terms of NAFTA. Like certain species of fish from the maritimes and raw logs of all kinds.

I told them that through the Farmers' Resolution to Exempt Water from the NAFTA, Canada's farmers were building a solid, non-partisan platform – a table with 1,000 legs – upon which the Canadian public can safely stand and say "we support Canada's Farmers in this."

And that once we had resolutions from 1,000 farm organizations, that's exactly what would occur.

I explained that we were drawing powerful allies. That both the BC and Alberta Provincial Women's Institutes – traditional defenders of "home and country" — had agreed to help get this message across by sponsoring local farm meetings. And that we were appealing to provincial Women's Institutes across Canada to do the same.

After I finished meeting with the Ottawa politicians, I hopped a train to Montreal and explained all this again to a packed (standing room only) audience at an evening conference put on by the University of Quebec at Montreal.

It's pretty simple really. It's not about renegotiation. It's about plugging a leak Canadians were promised wasn't there to begin with. There can be no issue more worthy of public policy defense than retention of absolute sovereignty over Canada's water.

Defining the frontier where the rights of the market end and the rights of communities (and of nations) begin is quickly becoming a global priority. Water is that frontier.

Out in front, Canada's farmers are standing on guard. And in communities across this land, Canadians are praying for their success.

A thousand resolutions. Not many, really, when you think of it. Not for a vast country like Canada. Farm organizations that have already taken leadership in this are listed on the website [farmertofarmer.ca](http://farmertofarmer.ca) (click on the water link). The resolution is there as well. In both official languages. Add your voice. Become a part of shaping history. For home and country. For Canada.

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