

A matter of faith. And professionalism...

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Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

The stuff you find yourself doing in your 50's is like a surprise package tucked away behind a tree halfway or so (ok, ok!) down life's road. Just when you feared you'd tire —or it would get boring! — the nurturing instincts you've honed on your kids are stirred by what you find at your doorstep. And you can't help but pick it up and run with it.

Just as sending out into the world a young and capable person with a caring heart who will make their community better and stronger is a parent's fondest dream, contributing to the understanding and adoption of policies that will sustain the farm sector is an Agrologist's highest responsibility.

Sometimes, you open the door to a set of twins. As in my case: [The Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project](#) and [The Farmers' Resolution to Exempt Water from the NAFTA](#).

The threat facing Canada's farmers is twofold: economic concentration pre and post farm gate and — Bob Speller's excellent 2002 report *Future Opportunities in Farming* notwithstanding — political apathy. Like a bull calf in a squeeze, farmers know what's coming next.

The reason economists don't like concentration is because concentrated market players can break competitive rules. And this leads to an inefficient distribution of wealth. To the detriment of the middle class. As capital concentrates, breaking the competitive rules (market manipulation) becomes easier because a) there are fewer guys to haul into the locker room and b) since the goal of capital is to grow, lessening "unprofitable" areas of competition by drawing pre and post competitive lines — e.g.: we will compete on advertising and packaging but not in what we pay for materials — is central to the game plan. This is no surprise; capital's inherent nature to move toward its own empowerment is why we have competition laws.

There is no question but that industry concentration has reached into the pockets of Canada's farmers and — in many instances - reduced their income dramatically. And this lessening of competition goes well beyond margin capture; it creates barriers to the entry of independent regional players — barriers tied not to scale economies but to the anti-competitive practices of concentrated players such as tying arrangements, predatory pricing, etc.

Dairy farmers, ranchers, poultry farmers, feed lot operators, crop farmers — all farmers who buy from and sell to increasingly concentrated markets — have at least considered jumping into the marketing chain to take over functions now handled by others in order to do them better and/or cheaper locally. A regional slaughter facility, for example. Or a co-operative dairy processing plant. Problem is, in a concentrated sector, the big boys can easily use predatory pricing to destroy the economics of even the most efficient of new plants. Add to this contract tying arrangements that stipulate (in writing or out behind the barn): "if you sell to anyone else, you will never sell to us again" and even the most cooperative farmer is reluctant to throw in their lot — and that of their family - with a new, start-up player.

Back to the doorstep.

Aside from the obvious — Premier Ralph Klein's cold feet notwithstanding, more aggressive challenges of Canada's agri-food sector under the Competition Act* are warranted — the most effective way to strengthen farm margins under attack by concentrated agri-food players is to a) build consumer loyalty, b) turn stewardship into value (capture premiums for local, for organic, properly construct farm subsidies) and c) seize a larger share of high-valued domestic markets (e.g. fresh and processed organics are the fastest growing segment of Canadian food imports). From Cuba's farmers, we can learn the tricks of

large-scale crop organic, what respect for farming looks like, and the efficacy of speaking with one voice. In return, we can share with them some Canadian expertise – e.g. world leadership in dairy production — and build bridges to new, cooperative market development opportunities.

The most effective way to deal with political apathy is community empowerment. Through the Farmers' Resolution to Exempt Water from the NAFTA, we are building a table with 1,000 legs upon which the Canadian public can stand — shoulder to shoulder with Canada's farmers — to defend sovereignty over Canada's water resources. Finally providing the political will for change. And in the process, building the consumer loyalty that ensures strong domestic markets and the political will to deliver Canadian farm policy that actually understands and respects Canada's farmers.

Cooperation in support of and supported by community. Because — as the men and women who settled Canada's prairies learned — community is life; without community, we fail to thrive and we disappear.

And the faith aspect? I guess it comes down to the fact that for some reason these twins were deposited on *my* doorstep. Picking them up was inevitable. That being the case, the walk on financial soap bubbles became just an (apparently necessary) part of the path.

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag. holm@farmertofarmer.ca, www.farmertofarmer.ca

* Any six Canadian citizens — the proverbial butcher, baker, electrical supply dealer etc. — can petition the Director, by way of a simple letter, to investigate what they feel may be an infraction under the Competition Act.