

Farmers are worried to death...

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"Farmers are worried to death" the rural Alberta mayor said, the stress in his voice coming across clearly over the truck radio. The CBC host murmured his assent. As I navigated the twisty roads of Bowen Island's north shore, the statement hung in the air and wouldn't go away.

Worry is rarely fatal, but financial and emotional stress and the disillusionment it engenders are. To the farm family, to the community and to the future.

Farmers are risk-takers. They regularly pit stewardship skills against the vagaries of weather and markets and crops and disease to produce food for communities and a sense of pride in themselves and their family for a job well done. An honest return for an honest day's work. Making an important contribution to a sustainable tomorrow.

In return, there is an expectation on the part of farm families that communities - through the governments they elect - will in turn stand up and defend farmers from risks they are powerless to control and cannot insure against. BSE is one example, avian influenza another.

In the case of avian influenza, we are moving into the second month and yet, at press time, there is still no comprehensive package on the table to compensate Fraser Valley farmers for the dramatic losses they will incur as a result of this outbreak. And those losses will be significant. A similar depopulation order for avian influenza in the US triggered a disaster payment which - if paid out at the same rate in Canada - would amount to \$170 million in compensation.

In the case of BSE, the risk that proved unmanageable was not so much the BSE itself - one verified case, the smallest incidence of reportable veterinary disease ever recorded - but the politics of international trade and protectionism (by Washington) and the politics of "not angering the Americans" (by Ottawa).

Despite recent openings, the border remains more than 60% closed to traditional exports of Canadian beef and cattle to US markets. And Canada's farmers have been bearing the brunt of it for almost a year.

To understand what farmers are up against, one need only read the political clap-trap that is US Senator Tom Daschle's April 7th letter to US Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman demanding withdrawal of legislation to ease restrictions on live cattle and beef from Canada.

Signed by ten high-profile US Senators - including Hillary Clinton, Ted Kennedy and Democratic Presidential Candidate John Kerry - the two page diatribe argues America 'should not become a dumping ground for beef and cattle no other major... importing country, except Mexico, will accept.'

Citing numbers of cattle tested, the Senators argue American inspection standards are superior to Canada's - an argument easily dismissed when relative herd size is factored in; on a percentage basis, the level of BSE testing is identical in both countries.

Trying to distance America from its own BSE-positive status, the Senators argue there has been no documented case of BSE in "native cattle" and hence there is "no scientific evidence" that BSE exists in "native cattle herds". As international panels of scientific experts confirm, there is one North American herd and one risk profile. The risk of infection was removed when both countries changed feed regulations in 1997. Until the last cow born before the feed ban is slaughtered, the issue is merely one of detection.

But facts have little place in the politics of protectionism. Wrapping themselves in the flag, the ten Senators close by calling on Veneman to maintain trade restrictions on Canadian beef as a way of “protecting and safeguarding America’s borders and... the health of America’s agriculture.”

To his credit, Canadian Ambassador to the US Michael Kergin delivered a strongly-worded diplomatic response nine days later, ending with the rebuke: “Canada, which happens to be the top foreign destination for US agricultural exports, expects that the USDA will establish its final rule on the basis of fact and science.”

He might well have added: “An expectation guaranteed by and protected through NAFTA.” And had Canada played that card – called for a NAFTA Chapter 20 panel ruling - Canada’s ranchers and feed lot sector wouldn’t be facing border restrictions today..

Back when Gene Whelan was Agricultural Minister, he brought clout to his position at the caucus table because he had the full and unequivocal support of his constituency. And that carried political weight.

Bob Speller’s good instincts and firm commitments notwithstanding – agriculture is today a minor voice at the caucus table. On matters of trade, those who stoke the furnaces of Bay Street call the shots... If defense of Canada’s farmers – e.g. mounting a Chapter 20 NAFTA challenge to open the border to Canadian beef - risks “angering the Americans”, Ottawa is stunningly silent.

When strong and independent farmers – through no fault of their own - find they can no longer pay the bills, dreams crumble. And when rural dreams crumble, they take down with them the future of rural communities.

If Ottawa doesn’t quickly act to ensure the economic sustainability of Canada’s primary producers, the road ahead will be a grim one as a) farmers leave the land, b) the economic, social and environmental sustainability of rural communities falters and c) prices to consumers – now hostage to foreign suppliers – go thru the roof. It’s as simple as A-B-C.

Explain this to those who would seek your support in the upcoming federal election.

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