

OP-ED: Minority government good for ag.

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In rural papers across Canada, columnists are speculating on the implications of a minority government for Canadian farm policy.

My call is that it will be a good thing.

Of the many problems facing Canada's farmers, most are trade related: Washington's NAFTA-illegal, 14 month trade ban on Canadian beef and cattle exports; renewed attacks on Canada's supply management system and the Canadian Wheat Board; Ottawa's fear of "subsidy" accusations by foreign governments in the construction of domestic farm support programs.

In a majority government, farm policies that defend trade sovereignty have an uphill battle. It makes no difference how committed the agricultural minister is. Since the mid-80's it is the "power ministers" at the caucus table - finance, trade, foreign affairs - that call the shots.

Support for strong domestic farm policy often means angering trade partners or spending public funds. You get the picture: farmers get the pointy end of the stick more often than not.

For the first time in a long time, those with their hands on the tiller must now depend on a crew of mixed political stripes to get this ship to sail. In the case of agriculture, strong support for sovereign and sustainable farm policy by the left (New Democrats) and Quebec (Bloc) will be a good thing for farmers.

Canada's new agriculture minister, Andy Mitchell, has no track record on farming to date, but the former bank manager should have a healthy respect for the problems facing farmers. Undoubtedly he will draw heavily on his parliamentary secretary the able Wayne Easter.

A farmer from Prince Edward Island, Easter has demonstrated his support for Canadian farmers on numerous occasions and has both the standing and experience to make a difference in the farm portfolio.

Several farm issues immediately emerge as priorities for the new government.

On the top of the heap is BSE.

It doesn't matter that a North American Free Trade Agreement Chapter 20 challenge takes 215 days to run its course - it's time to start the clock.

The "it's too lengthy" argument has been used as an excuse for doing nothing for more than a year. If Canada had called for a NAFTA panel ruling against Washington's illegal closure of the American border to Canadian beef and cattle - a border which has remained 60 percent closed since September 2003 - when we were entitled to do so a year ago, the border would have been fully open by last January.

Instead, concentrated, US-based meat packers in Canada (Cargill and Tyson) are making unprecedented profits, as are their American counterparts. As are American ranchers.

Canada's farmers face bankruptcy.

When respected industry spokesperson Charlie Gracey returned from a trip to Washington several weeks ago to get the straight goods on the timeline facing Canadian producers, he was "disappointed but not surprised" to learn that "no one in the Canadian Embassy or within the USDA (United States Department

of Agriculture) had any knowledge as to when the rules regarding the resumption of trade in live cattle would finally come out of the USDA".

And when the rule does emerge from USDA, it must still run the gauntlet of careful review by many government departments, the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of the US Trade Representative.

Canada can't even start the countdown until the matter clears the USDA, and meanwhile American lobby group R-CALF has already declared it will again challenge the rule in court.

"This information persuaded me that CCA (Canadian Cattlemen's Association) has not been candid or forthright in its many messages that something was about to happen within a very few days or weeks" said Gracey. "CCA has never had any reliable knowledge about this and would have served the interests of its members better if it had acknowledged this instead of fostering false hopes and expectations".

A long, drawn-out U.S. rule-making process driven by politics not science? Too bad. Under international OIE guidelines, Washington can do pretty much what they want with few real penalties. But under NAFTA, they can't.

Under NAFTA, Canada had the right to have that border open - or to extract trade penalties - just as soon as that international panel gave us the thumbs up a year ago.

One of the reasons Ottawa hasn't invoked them is because the CCA - elected by ranchers to serve the interests of ranchers - has let the federal government completely off the hook.

There are some in the industry who even today claim BSE is a market issue and markets must be left to sort things out.

To which Gracey replies: "The market has been broken and invalidated by this sabotage. This is not a market issue. This is a policy and trade issue. And it is incredibly ignorant to portray it as anything else".

Ottawa ultimately must answer for Canada's failure to invoke NAFTA to open the border to Canadian beef. But a large portion of the blame must also be worn by the leadership of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association itself, who appear more afraid of angering the Americans and their trade bureaucrats than their own members.

Overhaul of their leadership structure is something Canada's ranchers must grapple with. That is if there are any left standing to fight.