

Dion promises to reinstate Canadian Wheat Board

Updated Wed. Dec. 6 2006 2:12 PM ET

CTV.ca News Staff

Stephane Dion stood alongside his agriculture critic and the outgoing CEO of the Canadian Wheat Board and pledged that if he becomes prime minister he will reverse any decision by the Conservative government to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board.

Dion, the newly elected leader of the Liberal Party, said Prime Minister Stephen Harper has effectively trampled on the board by firing its leader and muzzling the board against defending itself.

"If Prime Minister (Stephen) Harper succeeds in destroying the Canadian Wheat Board ... I as a prime minister will reinstate the board," Dion told reporters.

The Conservative government has said it wants to end the decades-old monopoly and make grain farmers' participation in the body voluntary -- a move that some farmers say will kill the organization's effectiveness.

Farmers are divided on the issue, but a majority of the CWB's members, who are voted into office by grain producers, prefer the current framework laid out in the Canadian Wheat Board Act.

Adrian Measner, Wheat Board CEO, has opposed the plan arguing that it will kill the organization. As a result, he was given two weeks notice by Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl.

"It's a serious issues for the farmers of Western Canada because we feel it is being undermined and has to be addressed," Measner said at the news conference, noting that the plan has made the future uncertain, and international investors have become wary as a result.

"It is causing some concerns internationally. We would like to get clarity on this issue as soon as possible."

CTV's David Akin, covering the news conference, suggested the Conservatives could argue they were elected with a strong majority

in Saskatchewan and Alberta, and therefore have a mandate to follow through with the plan.

Easter disagreed.

"Can you the media stand here and look me in the eye and say an election in which an issue that represents 2 per cent of the population -- and that's all farmers not just grain farmers -- should actually be seen as a referendum on the board? I should think not," Easter said.

"In fact the Act itself states ...there should be consultation with the board and a vote of producers and that hasn't been happening."

Meanwhile, the Manitoba government will spend \$80,000 on a non-binding vote on the future of the Canadian Wheat Board in an attempt to send a message to the federal government.

Wheat and barley farmers in Western Canada are required to sell their crops intended for human consumption, or international sale, only to the board.

The board, which is based in Winnipeg, doesn't handle the grain itself or own rail cars or elevators, but the CWB's staff negotiate deals to sell the grain at a single fixed price which it sets.

The board used to be a crown corporation, but since 1998 it has been run by 15 directors. Ten of the directors are elected by farmers, and five, including the president, are appointed by the government.

The federal government guarantees to cover any financial losses the Board suffers.