

Let farmers decide about wheat board, Tory MP says

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JOE FRIESEN

WINNIPEG -- A Conservative MP from Manitoba is breaking ranks with his colleagues over the Canadian Wheat Board, saying the government is ignoring its own polls that show two-thirds of farmers in Manitoba and Saskatchewan don't want to see major changes to the board.

Inky Mark, MP for Dauphin-Swan River-Marquette, said the future of the wheat board is by far the most important issue in his constituency and he's proud to be a dissenting voice in caucus.

"There's a huge support base for the wheat board here. At least, at a minimum, two out of three votes, if not higher," he said. "Whatever changes should take place should be made by the farmers, not the politicians -- that's basically what I hear everywhere I go. Let the farmers decide."

Mr. Mark said he has urged his caucus colleagues to reconsider their campaign pledge to end the wheat board monopoly on export sales of wheat and barley, but to no avail.

More than 60 per cent of Manitoba farmers support the wheat board, and the number may be even higher in his riding, he said.

"It's probably at least two out of three support the board. . . . Saskatchewan's about the same. I've seen lots of numbers, both government and non-government. Alberta's a different kettle of fish -- about one-third supports the board and two-thirds want to dismantle it," Mr. Mark said.

The wheat board falls under Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl's portfolio, but Mr. Mark said responsibility for the issue lies with Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"It's not Chuck Strahl," Mr. Mark said. "He's basically following orders."

Mr. Strahl recently announced plans for a plebiscite among barley producers early in the new year, but has said he has no immediate plans to hold a vote on whether to keep the board's monopoly for wheat.

A spokesman said yesterday that implementing marketing choice for wheat and barley remains a government priority.

The issue has been hotly contested in the prairie provinces. Farm groups in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where about 75 per cent of western wheat is grown, say the wheat board gives farmers clout in an industry dominated by a handful of multinational companies. Their opponents say they want the freedom to sell their wheat independently, and believe they can earn more money without the board. The wheat board has annual sales of more than \$4-billion, and exports wheat to 70 countries.

In Saskatoon yesterday, the NDP premiers of Manitoba and Saskatchewan said they will hold their own plebiscites on the future of the wheat board if the federal government refuses to act, even if such a vote would be largely symbolic. They said farmers should be allowed to determine their own future.