

# Losing ground...

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Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

"Why do you do it?" the morning radio host good-naturedly asked the farmer being interviewed as part of CBC's "Connection to the Land" theme on Easter Monday. "With all the problems out there, why do you still farm?"

The answer that came back from the Dawson Creek rancher was also good-natured: something about being your own boss, working outdoors, making your own decisions...

The satisfaction that comes from taking soil, water, sunshine and smarts and turning it into food. Doing something right the first time and taking pride in it. Getting up in the morning with a list of chores in your head and dropping off to sleep with tomorrow's list forming in your brain. Reading the sky and the markets and the politics and the neighbours and making the right decision more often than not. Looking at your sweetie and your kids and knowing that because you're farming, you share things other families don't. Beyond the planting and the harvesting and the pickling and the 4-H fall shows, you share a family commitment to your farm and its productivity — to keeping the land "in good heart..." A sense of responsibility for the future and your place in it.

When it comes down to it, farmers farm because they value their own opinion and gut instinct more than the next guy's, and that's a good thing...

What bureaucrats don't "get" about farming - what sets bureaucrats and farmers apart — is that sense of independence. Farmers love it. Bureaucrats hate it. And that creates all sorts of problems; because they don't understand it, they work against it, not with it.

Good farm policy in Canada should be a piece of cake! We are blessed with smart farmers, good soils, good climate and (mostly) ample water. This, in the presence of strong science, solid farm extension, timely market information and good policy (what we pay our taxes for government to bring to the table) should result in an economically robust and environmentally sustainable farm sector. Farm kids that can't wait to get farming. Communities that respect their farmers and the sustainable contribution they make to the social and economic fabric of society.

A far cry from where we are. What's wrong with this picture? The talk-show host's question "why do you farm?" is a good one. Why indeed?

Farmers farm because despite their often-pessimistic exteriors, they are optimists at heart. They think if they can manage to do it better, harder, smarter next year, they will be farther ahead. Or not as far behind. They believe in tomorrow and their ability to influence it. Or did. And therein lies the rub...

Once upon a time, when politicians still recognized and respected what it is that makes farmers farm, and when bureaucrats were still civil servants working on the public cuff for the betterment of communities and nations, farmers' belief in their own instincts and their ability to shape tomorrow was all that was needed to ensure the health of the sector and its communities. Not any more.

In the past 15 years, Canada's farmers have gone from being the darlings of caucus to the beggars at the door. Strong, sustainable and (appropriately) protective farm policy development has been abandoned in favour of an MBA-based approach that points business plans and discounted cash flow analysis at micro-problems rather than recognizing and addressing the big picture policy issues facing the sector (like industry concentration pre and post farm-gate; why *DO* two foreign multinationals control virtually 100% of Canada's dairies?).

In the place of policy, farmers have been thrown a kaleidoscope of financial programs dreamed up by bureaucrats who've never set foot on a farm that produce "unexpected" results, require mountains of paperwork and a two day short-course to understand/qualify for and frequently fail - sometimes within months - only to be replaced by yet another "new program."

Politicians have no respect for farmers, bureaucrats have no respect for policy development and farmers are losing ground.

To make matters worse, the voice of farmers has weakened as federations of agriculture (a policy-driven, political model) give way to agricultural councils (a commodity-driven, organizational model), which governments then swamp with administrative tasks formerly handled by bureaucrats. BC Agriculture Council - the organization that replaced the BC Federation of Agriculture - oversees the Agricultural Environment Partnership Initiative, the Agricultural Environment Sustainability Initiative, the Farm and Ranch Safety and Health Agency (FARSHA) and the Farm Organization Support Funding Program, issues Farmer Identity Cards, coordinates Environmental Farm Plans, partners with AG AWARE and spends "major time" liaising with federal and provincial governments. Oh yes, they're also responsible for policy development: as the web site's 3 presentations before standing committees in as many years attests...

Now that the risk of public embarrassment has all but evaporated and most of the good guys have left the building (this month, BCMAFF's Ron Bertrand and Dave Sands retire WAY too early; the scene repeats itself across the province; 40% staff cuts have emaciated an already anorexic Ministry), there is little risk of anyone calling anyone to account. The provincial government's treatment of the Brunswick Point Lands (Delta) is but a case in point.

"Why do you farm?"

Farmers are hearing this question too often lately. From their bankers. From their university-bound children. From their own quiet thoughts as they stand at the edge of a spring field and instead of feeling pride in the welling up of the earth, feel a tightness in their chest akin to fear...

Wendy Holm, P.Ag. 604.947.2893 [holm@axion.net](mailto:holm@axion.net), [www.farmertofarmer.ca](http://www.farmertofarmer.ca). (If you haven't already done so, make sure your farm group signs the water resolution - page \_\_\_\_ of this paper. It is about sovereignty, community respect and "voice." We have till next Valentines Day to do 'er...)