

The Destruction of Canada's Family Farm

Open Letter To Environmental Groups from an Alberta grain farmer

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Open Letter To Environmental Groups from an Alberta grain farmer, November 27, 2011

I am a Canadian wheat and barley producer; who values and respects democratic process. I want to protect the environment, preserve wild life habitat and I am very concerned about climate change

The Harper government is intent on destroying our Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) (BillC-18) before Canadians have time to become aware of the negative effects this fundamental change to grain marketing will have on the environment and many other aspects of Canadian life and our food.

IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

1. Trees will be bulldozed and burnt, wind breaks taken out, fence rows cleared, wetlands drained as larger farm operations take over control of the land.
2. Wildlife and water fowl habitat will be lost.
3. Energy consumption and climate changing emissions will increase in grain transportation.
4. More climate changing nitrous oxide will be produced.
5. Genetically modified, glyphosate resistant wheat and other genetically modified crops will be licensed for production and more super weeds will develop requiring combinations of even stronger chemicals to control.
6. The genetically modified crops will cross pollinate with other crops and make organic production difficult if not impossible as has already happened with canola.
7. Corporate controlled factory farms will increasingly take over production and control of land with the associated problems of water and air pollution.
8. Genetic diversity of food crops will decrease.

OTHER AREAS OF CONCERN

1. Rural depopulation as family farms become less economically viable.
2. Increased taxes to maintain roads as more rail lines are abandoned.

3. More concentration of wealth in a small group and less equality in society.
4. Erosion of democracy and parliamentary process.
5. Loss of collective bargaining for farmers and workers.
6. Investor groups, both domestic and foreign, buying farmland.
7. Increased multinational control of the world's food.

AND RATIONALE

Bill C-18 will remove the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) single desk selling authority and fire the ten farmer-elected directors on the fifteen person CWB Board.

Currently the CWB is a democratic, farmer controlled marketing agency with marketing strength because all farmers are selling as one and are not undercutting each other. The CWB sells directly to customers in over 70 countries and returns 100% of the sales revenue minus operating costs of 2% back to producers.

Local food local processing

Canadians consume about 30% of our annual grain production so you can be confident all the flour for bread products, pasta and much of the beer comes from wholesome Canadian grain.

Our CWB has a policy of providing equitable prices for domestic processors both large and small. Without the CWB smaller Canadian processors would have to compete against the large processors who would be demanding volume discounts on their inputs. Smaller processors would either be forced out of business or they would have to attempt to source cheaper, low quality grains from other parts of the world to compete against the giants, changing our food system.

Economic justice

The CWB sells about one quarter of our annual 20 million tonnes of grain production in premium markets in Japan, the U.S., and Europe by being careful not to flood these markets, undercut prices and hurt local producers. These premiums are worth a minimum of 500 million dollars annually to Canadian grain farmers.

Our CWB is also about economic justice. The CWB provides fair and equal treatment to all farmers both large and small. Small producers get their fair share of delivery opportunity, access to producer rail cars and their fair share of the premium markets.

Bill C-18 creates a situation of 60,000 individual producers competing against each other for sales to three or four dominant grain traders. These middlemen make their profit on volume times margin and are not concerned about maintaining the premium markets which they will bid away. Bill C-18 and so called "Marketing Freedom" will bestow all the market power from farmers to multinational grain traders and speculators.

Common sense would indicate that passage of Bill C-18 will put more economic pressure on grain producers and many smaller family farmers will be forced out of production. The larger

farmers that remain will be attempting to lower their cost of production by using bigger machinery on bigger fields, using no-till farming practices, and using more chemicals and fertilizers to increase yields.

Political dishonesty

Prior to the May 2nd federal election Agriculture Minister Ritz stated publicly that there would be no changes to the CWB's mandate without a farmer vote. Under section 47.1 of the CWB Act a farmer vote is required before any grain can be added or subtracted from CWB marketing. Some farmers would have voted Conservative with the assurance that they would have the opportunity to have a specific vote on the future of the CWB. In any event, farmers are only 2% of the population spread over 57 western ridings.

After the election the Harper government stated that the federal election was the vote and there would be no vote for wheat and barley producers. The CWB held its own vote and 62% of wheat producers and 51% of barley producers voted to maintain the CWB single-desk selling authority.

The government has dismissed the farmer vote and is proceeding to force Bill C-18 through Parliament without public hearings in the country, and by using closure to limit debate in the House of Commons. They are also making inaccurate statements about the CWB.

CONSEQUENCES:

Farms have been getting larger; however the CWB has helped to keep many smaller family farmers in production and in control of their land. The demise of the CWB will hasten the exit of small family farms and turn control of the food producing land over to large vertically integrated corporations, investor groups, and large corporate farms.

These larger operations will clear the trees and drain the wetlands to accommodate their large equipment and lower their costs. It is unlikely they will keep the trees, wind breaks, wetlands and wild life habitat when their shareholders can make money by destroying them to make crop land.

There is also the development of investors, both domestic and foreign, buying farmland. They do not live in the rural community and are not concerned with stewardship of the soil, air, and water but rather they want a monetary return on their investment. They will bulldoze and burn the trees and drain the wetlands. Climate change, environment and wildlife habitat are of no concern to them.

Thousands of small, independent family farms will tend to produce a large variety of crops and there is a greater chance of maintaining genetic diversity. There are less than a handful of vertically integrated, multinational grain companies that dominate the global grain market. They provide the inputs such as seed, fertilizer and chemicals and they purchase the production. In many cases they will contract with the farmer to provide the inputs and purchase the production. This tends towards fewer varieties, monoculture and less genetic diversity.

Transportation

As a farmer advocate on rail transportation policy, the CWB has been instrumental in

maintaining affordable rail service to many communities on the prairies. The railways have pushed to abandon rail service on branch lines and transfer more trucking costs to farmers and road maintenance costs to municipalities. Bill C-18 eliminates the CWB as a strong advocate on behalf of farmers. Trucks are several times less energy efficient than rail in moving bulk commodities such as grain. Bill C-18 will put more trucks on the highways hauling longer distances. Energy consumption and climate changing emissions will increase. The CWB has been the only organization with the expertise, the resources and the incentive to challenge the railways. The CWB has an incentive because they are democratically controlled and paid for by farmers. The private grain companies will not challenge the powerful railways, they will merely pass on all costs and risks to farmers.

Genetically modified crops

Because the CWB is customer oriented it listened to farmers and other people and was instrumental in blocking the introduction of Monsanto's genetically modified, Roundup Ready wheat. Monsanto is now preparing another attempt at introduction of genetically modified glyphosate resistant wheat.

This will lead to the selection of super weeds that are also resistant of glyphosate and require even higher applications of more toxic chemicals and combinations of chemicals to control the super weeds. Studies have been done in some U.S. states and every sample of water from every stream tested positive for traces of glyphosate. Air samples also showed traces of glyphosate.

What is the long term effects on the environment and human health of this chemical? Genetically modified wheat would also contaminate and destroy organic production of wheat just as has happened with canola.

Global warming

A recent scientific study reported in the Western Producer newspaper and published in the Journal of Environmental Quality documents that no-till farming puts 60% more nitrous oxide into the atmosphere than conventional tillage per unit of yield and that nitrous oxide "is a potent greenhouse gas with the ability to trap heat in the atmosphere 300 time greater than that of carbon dioxide." Most large farm operators use no-till farming practices because it simplifies management requirements and skills. Another recent study questions the assumption that no-till sequesters more carbon in the soil than conventional tillage.

Food security

Big business believes they have succeeded in eliminating the CWB and that they will control and capture the profit from the 6 billion dollar western Canadian wheat and barley production. We are now seeing them putting the supply management sector of dairy and poultry production in their sights. Although the Harper government has stated that they support supply management, they have just applied to join a Pacific trading block that would require that they end supply management. This would destroy many more small family farms. Their production might be replaced with production from corporate controlled factory farms in the U.S. or from low cost producers in Mexico, New Zealand, and Argentina.

All may be well so long as there is a world surplus and there are no extreme weather events, natural disasters or political disruptions to production and transportation. In a private

market the lowest cost producer and the weakest seller sets the price when there is surplus. However, can the lowest cost producer feed the world's population?

When producers are forced to leave farming because of low prices not only is their expertise lost but it takes a long time to re-establish the production unit. Is society better off with a corporate controlled, vertically integrated, centralized food production system that sources and transports food all over the globe, or is it better to have a de-centralized food production system with many thousands of local producers producing food for local consumption even if the cost is somewhat higher? Harper's actions will firmly entrench the corporate system.

Energy efficiency

I have read that the type of agricultural production practiced in "developed countries" consumes ten units of non-renewal fossil fuel energy to produce one unit of energy in the form of food. If this ratio is correct, then clearly our type of food production is not sustainable in the long term. There was an international conference a few years ago entitled "What Will We Eat When the Oil Runs Out" that dealt with this issue and the concept of peak oil. Cheap energy is not so cheap anymore and it will very likely become more expensive in the future. We need to be developing food production systems that are far less dependant of fossil fuel and more in tune with nature. We need more farmers and not less. The Harper government is determined to head in the wrong direction.

Public policy

The dismantling of the CWB is more than just an economic question for 2% of Canadians. The consequences of this Bill will have an impact on many other areas of Canadian and international life. The Harper government has done no credible research on any of the impacts of this irreversible legislation. They want to get it proclaimed before the broader public becomes aware of the ramifications of this Bill. It is expected that it will pass third reading in the House of Commons this coming week and then go to the Senate, which Harper has stacked, for speedy passage. It will take determined involvement and political pressure by urban Canadians, who are concerned about food quality, climate change, the environment, and wild life to stop the Harper steamroller on Bill C-18. Calling for Senate hearings all across Canada to give all citizens an opportunity to understand the consequences of this legislation would be a positive first step.

Our Family Farm

Our farm is in the Peace River area of Alberta and my brother and I homesteaded this land in the mid 1960s. At that time, climate change was not a concern. None the less, when we cleared the trees we left two, ten rod (50 meter) wide windbreaks of trees on every quarter section and many areas we did not clear. There are several hundred acres of trees and wetlands remaining on our farm providing habitat for moose, elk, deer, bear, birds and much other wildlife. My son has taken over the operation of the farm and I am helping him.

The CWB adds \$10,000 to \$20,000 to our farm income annually through its single-desk selling authority. Farmers can save \$1200 per car (producer cars) in handling and elevation charges by loading their own rail hopper car. In the case of our farm we might ship 6 or 7 cars a year. This is a significant saving for our farm. Without the CWB to ensure car supply, port terminal space for unload and a sale, producer cars will be history. Approximately

12,000 producer cars were shipped last year from the prairies and many originated off of farmer owned short line railways which will also be history.

The destruction of the CWB will force many smaller family farm operations to sell or rent to a larger operator who wants big fields for big, wide equipment. The farm operation next to ours is a prime example. They farm many thousands of acres. As smaller farmers exit farming they buy or rent the land and proceed to clear off all the trees from corner to corner. They have done this with thousands of acres in the vicinity of our farm within the last few years.

The destruction of the CWB will have an impact in a number of other areas such as biodiversity, energy consumption, and control of the global food system by a small number of private multinationals, rural depopulation, elimination of collective bargaining, undermining democratic process, increasing inequality in society, and food sovereignty.

Grain producers make up less than 2% of voters in western Canada and unless urban Canadians weigh in on this, Bill C-18 will be passed before Christmas and the CWB will be dismantled. The multinational grain traders, agri-chemical companies and the railways will be getting the Christmas present and farmers along with most Canadians will be receiving the lump of coal.

I served as the elected representative to the CWB Advisory Committee for three terms (11 years). When the CWB Act was amended in 1998 I was elected by farmers to two terms as a CWB Director (8 years). I was Chairman of the Canadian International Grains Institute. I was the Vice President of the National Farmers Union for three years and I served as President of the NFU for two years.

Sincerely:

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