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**national farmers union**

***In Union Is Strength***

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**Op-Ed article:**

**Can others learn anything from the hog disaster?**

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Successive governments have failed hog farmers over the years, and the latest Conservative announcement does nothing to change the trend.

The politicians and “hog establishment” continue to talk about the perfect storm of high dollar, high feed costs, country of origin labeling and swine flu, and the perfect storm mantra is parroted non-stop by the media as the conventional wisdom. Of course none of these factors have helped the hog farmers, but they are not the actual cause of the catastrophe. Continuing to focus only on these immediate problems perpetuates the blinders that decision makers have been wearing for the last two decades.

There are two longstanding related factors that led hog farmers to the brink and set them up for this long painful fall. And these two factors are very closely related.

The systematic destruction of single desk selling for hogs was the first key factor. By removing the elements of farmer-market power, fairness, and price transparency, provincial governments undercut the hog farmers in the 1990s in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Ontario. Destroying single desk selling by farmers was the government’s part of the bargain with the corporate pork industry who promised slaughter plants and unlimited foreign sales. The destruction of the single desk selling was done in each case without a vote of the farmers affected—the hog industry viewed family farm operations as the problem—not the solution. The National Farmers Union spoke out against the undemocratic destruction of single desk selling, but others opted to continue their friendship with the governments instead.

The deal that the governments made with the corporate pork industry clearly ushered in a new era—an era where farmers and governments were supposed to trust and rely on multinational corporations to make all of the key decisions. And the mantra “Get big or get out” immediately replaced any notion of fairness, equity, or price transparency. (This mantra can now be replaced by “Get big And get out.”) Interestingly, while decision

making power was transferred to the corporate sector, there was no corresponding transfer of corporate responsibility to farmers. Are the multi-national pork traders and retailers lining up to offer grants or low-interest loans to affected farmers? Are the farmers demanding that the corporate interests be part of the solution by ceding some of their incredible market power back to the farmers?

This leads us to the second underlying factor which is the so-called “free trade agreements”. The trade agreements are very much related to the destruction of single desk selling in that they are both part of the corporate pork industry wish list—the same companies that demanded the removal of any farmer market power continue to lobby for trade agreements which will further undercut primary producers but will ensure corporations more opportunities to increase profits. The same international agreements touted right now by the industrial players intentionally limit possible aid and programs for farmers—forcing those farmers to go bankrupt or become totally beholden to the corporate interests. Canadian industry lobbyists are still calling for support for a Doha deal that would further cut available Canadian domestic support by 40 to 60%. Put another way, the intent is to open up the Canadian domestic markets, make Canadian farmers reliant on foreign markets and then cut off domestic support to seal the deal. The next time you hear any Canadian promoting the Doha deal ask them what Canadian programs will be reduced by 40 to 60 %.

And this brings us to the latest Conservative government announcement of less than 10% of the request from the Canadian Pork Council. The Conservative government is openly saying that they refuse to sufficiently help Canadian hog farmers because of international trade restrictions put in place by free trade agreements.

With no plan in place, the latest Canadian taxpayer money is to be administered on an ad-hoc basis as sort of a post-mortem attempt at managing the supply of hogs—to kill and not replace part of the Canadian herd. Real supply management systems, supported by the NFU, do not use taxpayer funds to make the system work—Canadian eaters pay fair prices for top-quality farm produce with no boom and bust cycles over time. Unfortunately, Canadian trade boosters advocate the destruction of real supply management in favour of what is now happening to the hog sector.

It was easy for the NFU to predict the crash of the Canadian hog industry. When the system is destabilized by the destruction of single desk selling and the move to total reliance on the corporations and their trade agreements, other day-to-day risks of feed costs, dollar changes, trade barriers and disease cannot be managed by the individual farmers.

The pork sector is the most extreme example of “trying to run farming like a business.” The irony is that all those smaller on-again-off-again dispersed low-capital family farm barns gave us a stable, profitable hog/pork sector. The rationalization, industrialization, and corporatization of the process destroyed it. Farming isn’t like every other business; the pork industrialization experiment is proving that.

If others cannot learn from the hog industry crash we will all be forced to experience the same family-farm devastation with grain and other livestock. The increasing reliance on the corporations and their trade agreements, coupled with the deliberate shrinking of the government's willingness to act in the public interest will also doom the other sectors of primary food production. The attacks on the single desk selling of grain, the attacks on the Canadian Grain Commission, the captive supply of cattle by Canada's two huge cattle packers, the corporate funded support of the "free trade" agreements, and the "get big or get out mantra" are exactly parallel to the forces that destroyed Canada's family farm hog producers. Let's learn from past mistakes, change direction and move ahead with Canadian policies that work for Canadians.

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