

Corrections ignoring public

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The death penalty has returned to Canada.

In February this year, Correctional Service of Canada issued an execution order for the six prison farms across Canada, including the two located within the city of Kingston.

Other than a concession related to the abattoir at Joyceville's Pittsburgh Institution, all appeals for a reprieve are being ignored.

Furthermore, CSC is not waiting for the previously stated shutdown date of March 2011, but began closing the program, bit by bit, two years in advance, making the sentence "death by a thousand cuts."

For example, the abattoirs at the prison farms in Alberta and New Brunswick have been dismantled. Very few crops were grown at the Alberta prison farm this year and there are no more feeder cattle or hogs at the New Brunswick prison farm. CSC plans to auction the dairy cattle at Frontenac Institution (Collins Bay) in June 2010. Like the Titanic headed for the iceberg, CSC is resolutely moving in the wrong direction.

Peter Van Loan, Minister of Public Safety (responsible for CSC), gives two reasons for closing the prison farm program -- inmates are not being hired to work on farms after their release (so the skills they gain in the program are not useful) and the program costs \$4 million annually. To use farmer talk -- hogwash!

Among many other tasks, inmates involved in the farm program repair and maintain equipment, operate food processing equipment, keep records and learn meat-cutting -- skills that can be used in industries such as food processing and construction. As well, they learn essential skills that apply to any job -- for instance, taking responsibility, being punctual, working in a team, solving problems and relating to others in a work environment. In fact, without those skills and attitudes, certificates and qualifications are irrelevant.

The eggs and dairy products produced at Frontenac Institution and meat processed at the Pittsburgh Institution abattoir are used in federal prisons in Ontario and Quebec, and hundreds of dozens of eggs have been donated to the local food bank. The farm at Frontenac spends about \$900 000 in the local economy, helping support businesses such as farm equipment dealers, feed mills and tradespeople. As the sign says, the inmates are paying their way through agriculture.

Since the decision to close the prison farm program became public last February, a coalition including farm and social justice groups in the Kingston area has been working to reverse that wrong-headed and short-sighted decision. Other than announcing that CSC will not do anything directly to close the privately-operated abattoir at Pittsburgh Institution, Minister Van Loan has been unwilling to consider alternatives such as enhancing the prison farm program with green technology, more greenhouse production or cheese-making. (To read about innovative and successful prison farm programs in other jurisdictions, research "green prisons" online.)

CSC has repeatedly ignored requests for the financial information behind the \$4 million figure. And they have not made public the section of the department's strategic review that relates to closing the prison farm program.

They will not answer the question -- what is the full rationale for ending a program that is good for the inmates and gives good value to taxpayers?

The coalition believes, and many members of the public agree, that the prison farm program makes a valuable contribution to the prison system, to the rehabilitation of the inmates involved, and to the safety of the public. Two dozen groups, representing thousands of Canadians, have signed a national campaign position statement calling on the government to halt the closure process and to consider alternatives.

Make your opinions known to Prime Minister Harper, to Minister Van Loan, to your MP and to local or national newspapers. A letter to an MP (Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, K1A 0A6) requires no postage. Go to saveourfarms.ca or nfontario.ca/316 for more information.

We need to act now to save the prisons farms before the dismantling is irreversible.

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