

# Bowden prison farm plants final harvest

BY SHERRI ZICKEFOOSE, CALGARY HERALD MAY 1, 2009



Former agri-business manager Gary Briggs shows some of the crops grown on the federal government's inmate-staffed prison farm at Bowden, in this file photo.

**Photograph by:** Archive, Calgary Herald

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CALGARY - Convicts working Bowden's prison farm this spring will be planting its final crops, ending an era of manual agricultural labour.

The central Alberta correctional institution is among half-a-dozen inmate-run farms being put out to pasture by the federal government because they are said to be "outdated" and operating at a loss.

The farms are bleeding a net annual loss of \$4 million, according to Correctional Service of Canada.

The six prison farms are being phased out over the next two years.

That includes the 316-hectare Bowden Institution farm, 105 kilometres north of Calgary.

The farm consists of a composting operation, a cattle feedlot and field crop production of hay and barley. There are 39 inmates, supervised by three staff, who live on the farm

annex, a reduced-security wing of the medium-security facility.

Few inmates have gone on to work in agriculture, said Chris McCluskey, spokesman for federal Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan.

"Almost none of those spending time on prison farms ultimately find employment in the agricultural sector," McCluskey said.

"Farming has changed dramatically over the past 60 years, and the prison farm model is outdated for the current era of capital-intensive, technologically reliant agriculture."

Money saved through the closures will be spent on programs offering "more relevant and practical employment skills to inmates as part of their rehabilitation," he said.

Closure of the farms will also allow prisons to purchase more food from Canadian livestock and agricultural producers, he said, "thus benefiting local farmers, instead of competing against them."

Members of the National Farmers Union gathered in front of Parliament Hill to protest the decision Thursday, trucking in cattle with them.

The group is accusing the federal government of wanting to make profits that could be worth millions of dollars off the potential sale of the Crown-owned land.

Officials say there are no plans in place to sell the land.

"Our concerns are that the federal government is devaluing the work of farmers, saying that it has no benefits for inmates," said Kingston, Ont., member Peter Dowling.

"We think that not only is it good for public safety, it enhances public safety," he said. "Staff we've talked to see the results of the work, it's valuable to prisoners. Inmates are doing a good job, enjoying the work, caring for animals, and meeting the challenges.

"If you're a farmer, those skills are going to be used anywhere."

According to the union that represents parole officers, tradespeople and clerical staff, the farms are key to helping cultivate good work habits.

Rising early, working hard and taking care of animals are some of the skills offenders learn, said Stan Stapleton, regional vice-president of the Union of Solicitor General Employees.

"They learn responsibility, good working skills and how to operate large machinery and repair things," he said.

"We want to give these offenders something they can use on the outside. From the perspective of giving them skills on the outside, the closing of the farm isn't the greatest idea," said Stapleton.

"The ministers have made that decision wrongly, in our opinion."

A 2007 task force report prepared for former public safety minister Stockwell Day concluded the government could earn \$2 million by selling Ontario prison farm property.

Canada's other prison farms are located at Riverbend in Prince Albert, Sask., Winnipeg's Rockwood, Westmorland in New Brunswick, and Kingston, Ont.'s Pittsburgh and Frontenac institutions.

Nearly 300 inmates across the country are responsible for milking cows, harvesting crops and fixing equipment.

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