

A banner for Greyhound travel. On the left is a close-up of a camera lens. In the center, the text reads "BOOK EARLY AND SAVE UP TO 50% ON GREYHOUND.*" Below this is a search interface with "DEPARTURE CITY" and "ARRIVAL CITY" input fields and a "GO" button. On the right is the Greyhound logo featuring a leaping dog and the text "Greyhound" with a tagline below: "*See full restrictions at Greyhound.ca."

Campaign launched to save prison farm

Published Wednesday June 3rd, 2009

Ottawa urged to rethink decision to close Dorchester's minimum security Westmorland Institution

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DORCHESTER - A last-ditch, grassroots, and 'viral' campaign is being launched today to save the prison farm at the minimum security Westmorland Institution in Dorchester.

New Brunswickers can log onto to www.saveourfarms.ca to rally against the federal Conservative government's plans to close six prison farms across the country over the next two years.

Visitors to the site will be greeted by a photos of farmers' fields, livestock, and a banner that proclaims Farming Matters!: Canadians need a safe, secure, and sustainable food supply.

It has not been announced when the 1,200-hectare farm in Dorchester, which currently employs 62 inmate workers, will close.

The website, which lauds the benefits of prison farms as therapeutic programs for inmates and a source of secure and sustainable food, was launched by the Union of Solicitor General Employees, which represents all prison staff except guards.

President John Edmunds said his union is not fighting for jobs, which are protected by a collective agreement, but for the impact the farms have on inmates and the local food supply of surrounding communities.

"This is fundamentally about saving something that works," said Edmunds, pointing to statements by federal officials who questioned the relevance of the prison farm programs.

"That is a very poor statement to the Canadian farmers because farming has never been as relevant as it is today."

The fight will include a letter writing campaign, an online petition, and the distribution of pamphlets and coffee cup sleeves that promote the website at local coffee shops.

Edmunds took issue with federal government claims that too few inmates go on to work on farms and that prison farms are losing money.

He said a forensic audit of the farms should be conducted before government claims the farms are losing money, and he said the federal government has also failed to keep track of how many former inmates gain employment on farms after they are released.

Edmunds added that the value of the prison farm programs in the rehabilitation of inmates can't be measured by profits and losses or by counting the number of released inmates who work on a farm.

"They are actually working, they are getting up, they have to show responsibility," said Edmunds. "They are responsible for lives even if it is livestock."

"It is teaching them the work ethic so when they do get out on the street they can become responsible law-abiding Canadian citizens once again. That is exactly what our mandate is."

For example, Edmunds said he grew up on a farm before learning a trade and climbing the ranks of a union.

"You never know where you are going to end up when you start working on a farm," he said.

"It doesn't necessarily need to be that they learned to bale hay in prison and they are going to bale hay on the street. It could be something as basic as the work ethic they are learning."

Considering the public's concern over food safety in the wake of the listeriosis outbreak, Edmunds said the federal government should not be stepping away from an important, secure local food source which provides food for the prison populations, food banks, and surrounding communities.

And as the benefits of eating local food become increasingly publicized, Edmunds said the prison farm programs should be expanded and managed by farmers who can maximize production and profits.

"It has always been my contention that you don't hire a bureaucrat to run a farm; hire a farmer," said Edmunds.

"I don't have anything against the people running the farms now, but they could definitely use the help of people who run farms, people who have gone to school to run farms."

Edmunds said today's farming jobs require a high level of skill which can be acquired at large and high-tech farms that are run by the prison farm program.

In March, a spokeswoman with Correctional Service of Canada told the Times & Transcript that a strategic review in 2008 determined that the Dorchester farm would no longer be part of the long-term plans for the institution in Dorchester.

"It was determined that relatively few offenders are finding work in the agricultural field after they are released from prison," said Christa McGregor.

"The farming program itself provided offenders, of course, with farming skills and strong work ethic as well as responsibility and accountability. But we want to be able to provide them with employment skills that they can use once they're released from prison."

The Dorchester farm opened in 1975 with a mandate to feed inmates in the region. It features a dairy herd and milk processing plant, a feed lot, hogs, a slaughterhouse, a vegetable field and poultry and egg laying operations.

The Westmorland Institution operates without the use of physical security devices such as fences, towers or weapons, and security is dependent on continuous interaction between staff and inmates.

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The farms are loosing money. Is there a prison in Canada that is making money, why not close them all then.

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