

NEWS

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Campaign mounting to keep local prison farm operating

Farm supplies food to prison population

BY KATIE TOWER

The Sackville Tribune Post



Westmorland Institution maintenance worker Reg Tower (left) and Dorchester Penitentiary employee Robert Estabrooks cook up some hamburgers, made fresh from locally-grown beef, during Friday's campaign rally at St. Ed's Hall to keep the doors of the prison farm open. (Tower)

Reg Tower has seen firsthand how beneficial farming has been to the hundreds of offenders who have come through the doors of Westmorland Institution.

During the past 20 years that he has worked at the institution in the village of Dorchester, he has witnessed hundreds of inmates developing skills they probably would not have acquired had it not been for the prison farm program there.

"Those guys take a lot of pride in taking care of those animals and also being able to feed themselves," said Tower during a campaign rally last week at St. Ed's Hall in Dorchester to keep the prison farm open.

This past February, with little warning, the federal government announced it would be dismantling all six of Correctional Service of Canada's farm programs by next year.

Dorchester's prison farm is slated for closure by March 2010, although several of its operations have already been eliminated including the loss of its 95 beef cattle and hundreds of pigs.

But the farm will not close its doors without a fight. Last Friday's 'Save Our Farms' campaign, which brought out hundreds of area residents, was launched by the men and women who oversee, instruct and work with the inmates in federal prison farm programs, members of the Union of Solicitor General Employees (USGE-PSAC).

Tower, a carpenter in the maintenance department at Westmorland, said the government's rationale behind the decision, that the facilities no longer provide employable skills to inmates because of the decline in the number of farms across the country,

is ludicrous.

He insisted the farm programs breed character and develop strong work habits. Offenders learn the importance of personal responsibility in taking care of animals and making a farm work, he said, and it teaches them about early-rising, hard work and the value of timeliness and self-reliance.

"Most of these guys, when they first come to Westmorland, don't even have a reason to want to get out of bed in the morning. The farm provides them with that," he said. "It was building in them a strong work ethic and a sense of accomplishment."

He pointed out those skills are just as valuable, if not more so, to an inmate than teaching them other trade skills.

Heather Reid, president of the local union, agreed with Tower.

"They say they don't have transferable skills but that is simply not true," she said. "They learn compassion for animals, they learn respect, and they also gain a sense of accomplishment and achievement."

Reid, who works as an administrative assistant in the farm office, said the 1,000 acres of cleared land and 500 acres of wooded land at Westmorland provide space for beef and dairy farming, vegetable gardens, a poultry operation and a hog farm.

Jeannie Baldwin, regional executive vice-president of PSAC, said the local prison farm supplied all the institutions in the Atlantic region with their eggs, beef, grain, dairy products and vegetables. Now they'll have to get those products elsewhere.

And she said that's exactly where she begins to question the government's decision to close the prison farms.

Rather than eliminating the farms, Correctional Service Canada should be moving in the other direction, she said – increasing the availability of such programs and widening their scope.

"This is going in the opposite direction to what this government says it believes in," said Baldwin.

With a growing 'green' concern for sustainable agriculture and organic food, she said government should be continuing to support ways in which Canadians can lessen their carbon footprint.

"We have produce that's being grown here, we have beef that's being grown here . . . we are supposed to take responsibility for growing our own food. This decision just doesn't make any sense."

She also believes little thought was also given in Ottawa to just how integrated prison farms are with their surrounding communities. The institutions not only provide jobs, but they also make sizable local purchases and support community activities.

"Sometimes you just don't know what you got until it's gone," said Baldwin. "Even many people in the community were not aware of what this institution was providing."

Patricia Jones says she is not one of those residents; she is very aware of how valuable the farm is to the community. She said the program provides inmates with skills they can later fall back on.

And she said she's stumped as to why the government has chosen to close them down, at a time when government should be putting its support behind small farming operations.

"I think the government should be supporting local businesses, and this is a local business," said the Johnson's Mills resident. Dorchester Mayor Mel Goodland said the village council is putting its backing behind PSAC as it fights to keep the farm's doors open.

"It's a huge disappointment to the village to hear of the closure," he said.

As mayor, he is deeply concerned over the job losses at the farm as well as the loss of food donations to the community's food bank and other non-profit organizations.

As a farmer, Goodland said he is disturbed the government seems to think so little of farming.

"You'd think at a time when the population is growing and the demand for food is growing that the government would increase its support for farming, not try to close farms down."

Baldwin urged all those who attended last week's rally to show their support for the cause. She provided them with Stephen Harper's phone number and e-mail address and encouraged them to send the prime minister their feedback.

"You people have got to send some messages," she told the crowd. "You need to call him and you need to tell him that 'farms matter and this community matters.' He needs to hear from you and from your family members about how important this farm is to you."

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