

## March 5 - Closing prison farms contrary to supporting local food markets

Posted 4 months ago

The federal government's recent decision to phase out six prison farm programs across Canada worries me. I had wanted to focus this week's column on something light to do with St. Patrick's Day, but I can't help but comment on this more serious issue. So imagine we're sharing this conversation while imbibing fizzy green beverages and let's open the dialogue with what's really on the table.

Of the six institutions to have these programs phased out, two are in the Kingston area. Roughly 110 inmates (of 300 across Canada) participate in the farm programs that produce beef, dairy and eggs consumed within the local prison system, and sold to the public. In addition, 10 inmates are employed in a local abattoir that will likely be forced to relocate should the 50 prison-farm-raised cattle processed each week be eliminated.

The Correctional Service of Canada seeks to update inmate training initiatives "that will provide more relevant and practical employability skills."

It should be noted, however, that a 2007 task force report showed Corrections Canada could gain \$2 million from the sale of farmland in Ontario.

I have a distinct childhood memory of discussing the farm program with my mother as we drove past Collins Bay Penitentiary. After she assured me it definitely was not the Disneyland castle I imagined it to be, she explained that the inmates on the tractors were nearing the end of their sentences and had earned the privilege of learning to work on a farm. They might find employment doing similar work when they had completed their prison time.

My child mind romanticized how a prisoner, someone who had heretofore been caged behind bars, was lucky enough to be out in the sunshine, riding a tractor and smelling the soil being turned behind them – and they didn't even try to hop the fence and escape.

Today, the average farm size has increased by 22 per cent compared to 20 years ago, and the skills necessary to sustain larger farm operations are precisely the ones inmates are taught in the training programs.

The discipline and work it takes to farm probably can't be matched with other training opportunities – it should be noted that no alternative training methods were suggested.

But what will happen to the rich agricultural land - perfectly situated within a large suburban/urban area. When we are trying to support local farmers and use less fossil fuel by buying locally-produced fruits and vegetables and locally-raised livestock - would that land be reserved for community food production? Or would it become another cement platform for McMansions?

Meanwhile, other arms of the government, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture support a federal-provincial-territorial initiative for training new farmers. Today, in Ontario, the number of farmers under 35 years of age has declined by more than 50 per cent compared to 10 years ago. The average age farmers is 52 and, a 2002 study completed by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, predicted 80 per cent were planning to sell or transfer their farms by 2012. At the same time, there is a recognized need for more farmers to meet the increasing demand for locally grown, sustainably produced food.

This program, based in Guelph, identified that a significant challenge for new farmers was a lack of farm business management training courses geared specifically towards new, small-scale farmers. Need I point out the obvious?

Of the many barriers to farming like access to good farmland, prohibitive start up-capital, and seasonal costs, the saddest and worst is that there is little to no profit in agriculture.

Unless Canadians begin to support and understand that our health and nutrition depends on knowing where and how our food is produced, the land and the people with the knowledge to work it, will slowly be buried under "development."

Think ancient Rome and the rise and fall of an empire.

---

Copyright © 2009 Napanee Guide