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## N.B. prison farm to close doors

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### Lack of job prospects in agricultural field leads to closure of Westmorland Institution Farm

**A10** By Cole Hobson  
Times & Transcript Staff

DORCHESTER - The Westmorland Institution will soon be without its farm operation.

Long known as a viable job and skill training operation for inmates in the minimum security facility, a recent Correctional Service of Canada decision will see the Westmorland operation phased out.

Christa McGregor, a spokeswoman with CSC, said following a governmental strategic review in 2008, it was determined the minimum security prison's farm, which currently has 62 inmate workers, would no longer be part of the long-term plans of the institution in Dorchester.

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

"It's important that they find full-time work, so they can have a steady income and avoid a criminal lifestyle."

In total, six similar institution farm operations across Canada are part of this phase out; along with Westmorland, there are two locations in Ontario, and one each in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

McGregor said there is no specific timeline for when the Westmorland farm will close its doors, aside from the fact that all six farms will be closed within two years.

The Westmorland Institution farm has a dairy herd and milk processing plant, a feed lot, hogs, a slaughterhouse, a vegetable field and poultry and egg laying operations.

The output from the farm is used to feed prisoners in Westmorland as well as neighbouring institutions. The operation was opened in 1975 and consists of 1,200 hectares (2,965 acres) of land.

As for what will be done to feed inmates in the future, McGregor said they are "exploring options at this time."

The news of the impending closure caught some who work with ex-inmates by surprise.

"I've never heard anything but good (about the farm)," said David Way of the Moncton Community Chaplaincy for Ex-Offenders, which is involved with reintegration programs. "I've never heard one negative comment since I've been involved in this and, even before, I've never heard anything but good. To me it makes sense to have it."

CSC has said it will reinvest the money used for the farms -- which is \$4 million nationally -- into other job training programs.

"We do have other employment programs that involve construction, welding, manufacturing, office furniture, textile, clothing and linens and then services such as janitorial service and food services," McGregor said.

That's good news for Joffre Theriault, who is the owner of the Cannell House in Moncton and the president of the Atlantic Halfway House Association.

"There's no question that keeping offenders busy is very important," Theriault said. "All I can say is I hope that there will be something substantial to replace it."

Currently, the only other employment initiative at the Westmorland Institution is the roughneck program, which is for the drilling industry, McGregor said.

While it remains to be seen, specifically, which new initiatives will be put in place at the prison, Way said the fact that not many were finding work in the agricultural field isn't any surprise. In fact, he said it's a common problem that may have nothing to do at all with the field of work.

"I think people that leave prison, regardless of whether they're a welder or electrician or farm worker or whatever, will always have a challenge getting work," he said. "I don't think that would be a valid excuse. It's not the skill or lack of skill or their experience that makes it difficult for them when they get out. Once people or perspective employers find out they have a record it's like 'goodbye.'"

Meanwhile, the decision to cut the institution farm operations across the country isn't sitting well with the National Farmers Union.

"Having a prison farm is an opportunity for inmates to gain technical and social skills," said Barb Somerville, spokeswoman for the New Brunswick NFU. "These skills are not redundant skills, they're not skills that can't be used in other ways.

"There are fewer farms than there used to be, but they are no less important than they've ever been. Feeding Canadians is as important as it ever was and the prison farms contribute to the quality of locally grown food that is available to the institution and the surrounding communities."

McGregor countered that the decision was not meant as a slight against the country's farmers and farm industry.

"This decision is not to diminish the invaluable work and contribution of Canadian farmers in this country," she said. "This decision is about what's best for the majority of offenders who return to communities and need to find full-time employment so they can live a crime-free life."

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This doesn't make sense-not only would you gain marketable skills that are transferable, you're feeding everyone at the prison, and more than likely becoming rehabilitated in the process of watching something grow, and creating something organic and REAL at the other end.

We complaint that recidivism rates are high, but then we look to close programs that might help someone who has gone the wrong way take a different look at life? You can't grow food by your hand, and then eat it yourself, and NOT have a renewed perspective.

Idiocy.

5  THUMBS UP 0  THUMBS DOWN

**Bud White, Moncton** on 09/03/09 08:45:20 AM ADT

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