

## Prison abattoir avoids chopping block

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Ottawa won't turf from prison property a successful abattoir operating in Kingston and it doesn't plan to sell valuable agricultural land at six prison farms that will be shut down.

Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan made the pledges yesterday, an apparent attempt to counter criticism from national farm groups and other organizations that have condemned a decision to close six penitentiary farms, including two in Kingston, that employ 300 inmates.

"I had instructed Correctional Service of Canada people to do whatever possible to, first of all, see that none of our actions resulted in the closure of that abattoir," Van Loan told theWhig- Standard in an interview yesterday.

"We can't keep it open -- that's not our decision, but we shouldn't do anything that would result in its closure."

Van Loan said the abattoir provides useful employment skills that are in demand in the private sector so Corrections hopes to maintain its relationship with the private operator.

Businessman Bruce Wallace has operated the abattoir on the property of the minimum-security Pittsburgh Institution at Joyceville for 14 years in a novel arrangement with the Correctional Service of Canada.

He plans to keep it open. "It's just going to be the same,"

Wallace said yesterday. "We still will train some inmates."

Ten inmates from Pittsburgh Institution work at the abattoir gaining valuable job skills. They are paid by Corrections but supervised by Wallace. The abattoir slaughters local cattle and sells some of its beef back to local prisons.

Wallace's operation appeared to be in jeopardy when Corrections revealed in February that it would phase out the prison farms over the next two years.

He was called to a meeting last week with top Corrections officials, who explained the plan to allow the abattoir to continue operating.

Wallace said he doesn't believe the closing of the Pittsburgh farm will affect his operation.

The National Farmers Union, federations of agriculture and community groups that promote sustainable local food supplies have criticized the prison farm closings. They expressed fear that valuable agricultural land would be lost.

The 455-hectare prison farm at Frontenac Institution in Kingston sits on some of the best land in the county.

"We don't anticipate disposing of any of the land and I expect in terms of agricultural land, there'll be efforts to have all (six properties) rented out for the immediate future to other farmers," Van Loan said in a telephone interview from London, England.

He insisted the shutdowns will benefit local agriculture.

"What we're going to do is stop competing with local farmers in terms of whatever agricultural products were produced on the prison farms," he said. "Those can now be obtained directly from farmers in the local community so that benefits the local agricultural community."

Van Loan couldn't say what inmate jobs will replace the farm work that is being phased out.

"There are already are all kinds of skills, training and development programs throughout our correctional system," he said. "Different prisons have different programs (and) these are always evolving and changing to respond to market needs."

He said the agricultural training didn't give inmates useful or marketable skills once they were released.

"The reality is, nobody was getting jobs in the agricultural sector after working on the farms," he said.

Andrew McCann, who teaches an online program through St. Lawrence College on sustainable food, said the decision to keep the abattoir open is good news locally but he believes it's a measure designed to placate beef farmers.

"The other farm organizations also would like to see the whole (prison) farm program maintained and revitalized," he said.

McCann is part of a coalition of groups and individuals who believe they might be able to bring enough pressure to reverse the prison farm closings. He is a member of Urban Agriculture Kingston.

"This is the time when we should be investing in agriculture," McCann said.

People involved in the campaign hope to create a formal, national coalition by June. It's hoped the group will have a full-time resource person, a website and a national strategy to press Ottawa.

"I'm happy to listen to ideas that anybody has but ... someone will have to make a compelling case to me about what purposes that the farms serve and we have to find activities that are more than just keeping prisoners busy," Van Loan said.

The other prison farms slated to close are in New Brunswick, Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The government says the prison farms lose \$4 million yearly.

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