

## **Prison farm closures irk union**

*Two Kingston operations among six to be axed by Corrections Canada*

**Rob Tripp, Kingston Whig-Standard, March 2009**

Union and farm leaders yesterday condemned a decision to close six prison farms - including two in Kingston.

"Our six Corcan farms are going to be gradually phased out ... over a period of two years, starting immediately," Christa McGregor, speaking in Ottawa for the Correctional Service of Canada, said yesterday.

Corcan is the prison service's manufacturing arm.

McGregor said the decision follows a strategic review done last year to ensure that spending is focused in areas where it's most needed.

"It was decided that this was one of the programs that's possibly not meeting the needs of offenders," she said. "We recognize the need to provide offenders with marketable employment skills for today's employment realities, so we will be looking at developing alternative training that will provide more relevant and practical employability skills."

The farms employ 300 inmates across the country. McGregor couldn't provide any details about what kinds of inmate training would take the place of agricultural work or how swiftly it would be created.

"It's very early right now," she said.

McGregor said no decisions have been made about the future of the farm properties.

The decision to close the prison farms "absolutely makes no sense," said John Edmunds, national president of the Union of Solicitor General Employees.

Members of his union supervise inmates in the farm operations.

"Does this mean the Harper government doesn't believe in farming, the cornerstone of our country?" wondered Edmunds.

"The government's giving orders to shut down the farm annexes across Canada that are in federal corrections, saying that it's not a good trade now, I guess, it's not meaningful employment.

"It's a joke."

McGregor defends the decision.

"[Inmates] do gain farming skills from this program and they also gain employability skills such as responsibility, teamwork, punctuality, but it's believed that relatively few offenders gain work in this area and we want to be able to provide programs to inmates that reflect the realities of the employment world, the current needs in the labour market," she said.

Edmunds disagreed.

"This is just a slap in the face to farmers," he said, rejecting the notion that the farm work does not teach valuable skills.

"It's an awesome training ground," he said. "It teaches people good work ethics.

"You have to be responsible working on a farm [because] you're not just responsible for yourself, you're responsible for livestock."

Andrea Cumpson, an Inverary farmer and president of the local chapter of the National Farmers Union, was saddened by the news.

"It's a huge loss, certainly disheartening to think this is where we're going as a community at a time when there's awareness of eating locally and supporting local farms," Cumpson said.

She said the Frontenac Institution farm, a 455-hectare complex, sits on the some of the best agricultural land in Frontenac County.

"We find it quite upsetting that agriculture is undervalued," she said. "It's hard to understand where some of these decisions are coming from."

She noted that the security of Canada's food supply and control over production are vital and are issues where government is expected to lead by example.

This decision "doesn't make sense," she said.

Edmunds said he doesn't blame the commissioner of Corrections. He believes the decision is an edict from the Conservative government, which accepted the findings of a private task force it commissioned two years ago to review the prison system.

The report was critical of current inmate training programs.

"There is a need to move from employing large numbers of offenders in general maintenance jobs to providing more meaningful skills development to prepare the offender for employment upon release," the report stated.

It did not specifically call for the elimination of agricultural training programs.

The 2007 task force report concluded Corrections Canada could pocket \$2 million from the sale of farmland in Ontario, part of a plan to create super prison complexes, including a facility to be built on the grounds of Millhaven Institution with 2,200 cells, roughly the size of five prisons.

The report suggests closing and consolidating a number of aging prisons.

Pittsburgh Institution, home to one of the farm operations, was identified as one prison that would close. It opened in 1963 as the Joyceville farm annex.

Bruce Wallace, who has operated an abattoir at Pittsburgh Institution for 14 years, was told last week that the prison farm will close, meaning he'll likely have to move his operation.

"That's all we heard," said Wallace, who doesn't know when he will have to relocate his operation, Wallace Beef.

Wallace, a private businessman who runs the operation in a novel relationship with Corrections,

employs 10 Pittsburgh prisoners full time. They are paid by Corrections. Wallace employs another five full-time workers he pays who are not inmates. Inmates who work in the abattoir gain valuable skills.

"I've had some [prisoners] leave here and get into this business, whether a packing plant or abattoir," he said. "It's not only that they're given a job, [it's] creating a work ethic."

If Wallace Beef is disrupted or forced to close, it will have a ripple effect locally.

All of the roughly 50 cattle processed each week come from area farms.

The meat is sold locally to restaurants, butcher shops and to Corrections.

The prison service buys some of the beef for its kitchens at six area prisons.

Frontenac Institution's farm opened in 1962 as the Collins Bay farm annex. It was renamed Frontenac Institution in 1975.

It was the second of six farm camps opened across the country. Cumpson said it is a sizable tract of prime farm land within city limits, exactly the kind of property that should be maintained for agricultural use.

"It's really important that land be protected ... we need to be able to feed ourselves," she said.

She rejects the notion that farm jobs don't teach prisoners valuable skills.

"That doesn't make sense to me," she said.

Giving inmates usable job skills is vital to keeping them out of prison in future. Studies done by Corrections show a strong correlation between recidivism and unemployability.

A 10-year review of newly admitted male offenders, beginning in 1995, showed that 65% of the prisoners were unemployed at the time of arrest. For men under age 25, joblessness is higher, at 77%.

McGregor said senior Corrections officials from across Canada are meeting in Ottawa today to discuss the phase-out plan for the prison farms.

#### Prison farms to be closed

- Pittsburgh Institution, Kingston
- Frontenac Institution, Kingston
- Westmorland Institution, New Brunswick
- Rockwood Institution, near Winnipeg.
- Riverbend Institution, near Prince Albert, Sask.
- Bowden Institution, Alta.

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