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Prison farms teach valuable skills

By **Suzanne Atkinson**

KINGSTON - It ranks in the top 20 per cent of Ontario's dairy herds for management, is quick to embrace new technologies and make them work. It won Frontenac County's most improved herd award in 2005 with a jump of 147 points and supplies milk and eggs to Corrections Canada institutions in Ontario and Quebec. And if a recent report is to be believed, it is among six prison farms in Canada which not only aren't making money, but aren't supplying inmates with the skills they need upon release.

But Eastern Ontario has jumped quickly to support the prison farm system. Late last month an adhoc group of farmers were staging a roadside barbecue in front of the pen, Kingston Council had supported the farm and the National Farmers Union was planning to meet with Corrections Services Centre staff.

The ball got rolling when more than 200 supporters gathered at St. Lawrence College to hear just how the prison farm and its abattoir work with the local community.

Its abattoir services 300 local farmers, processes 60 animals per week and supplies 150 local butcher shops.

The farm donates produce annually to food banks across the province.

Its Class 2 farmland is among the best in the county, if not the region.

And the inmates who staff its barns, complete its Holstein Canada registrations, track inventory and order product say they've "learned to be responsible," in their choices.

"We come to a minimum institution like Frontenac to be able to work outside and be able to prove ourselves and to better our skills and have a better chance of returning back to society," 'offender,' Chris Parmar said in a letter read at that meeting.

"This is a well managed farm. Prison farms are as much a part of the agricultural community as any other," asserted veterinarian Rob McGregor of the Thousand Islands Veterinary Service at Ganonoque.

"It is a tight ship."

Still, the Corrections Canada report says the country's six prison farms lose \$4-million annually. It plans to close those farms over the next two years.

There were assurances there is still time to save the farms.

Riding MPP Randy Hillier speaking for the government, assured that "the minister understood the importance of the abattoirs, the value for the surrounding community... that farmers would be driving animals further and further to get the animals processed."

"As far as the minister is concerned those lands will stay with Corrections Canada and will be rented out for farmland," Hillier said explaining that in future, they may be needed to expand the prisons.

MP Scott Reid agreed that if the Frontenac institution was making money, "then (there's) a good case to break it out, keep the ones that are making money."

City councilor Vicki Schmolka said that while the city doesn't have a position on the planned closure, the likelihood of it ever falling into the hands of a developer for subdivision was slim.

"When government decides it wants to declare property surplus, there are rules." First, she said, if it were surplus, it would be offered to federal, provincial then municipal governments and must pass through many tests and re-zonings.

Speaker after speaker espoused the value of the institution's abattoir and farm, reminding MP Scott Reid that \$50-million in the federal budget has been earmarked for increasing slaughter capacity, with one even asking how many "farmers" are incarcerated.

The "none" answer drew a round of we-told-you-so guffaws.

But it was the 'why' questions that weren't answered.

"There's something more here," the Union of Solicitor General Employees' national president whispered.

"They're not telling us the truth," John Edmunds said. "They did a windmill test at Frontenac. They brought it down and no one knows the reason."

Others complained that the skills the institution intends to teach are not only skills removed from programs over the past 20 years, they're skills now in decline with the shrinking job market.

"With farming you can get a job anywhere because they don't have all these regulations," Edmunds pointed out.

"It's not the money they're talking about - \$4-million. They don't care about that," said Tony Abreau a relief instructor for Corcan. "When they start buying that food it will cost them at least 50 per cent more on top of what they're spending." And a dairy farmer asked if they planned to import that produce from the US.

No officials could answer that question.

John Sergeant of Corrections Canada explained that inmates are spending less and less time in Frontenac, and in that short time the facility must provide them with the skills they need to re-integrate into society.

"Today our inmates go into construction. They need a whole variety of certifications. You can't just walk onto a construction site," he said.

What are those job skills?

Machinery repair and welding; the very training removed over the past 20 years, staff pointed out.

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