

Prison unions protest farm closures

CORRECTIONS: Labour organization launches a nationwide campaign to save agricultural sites

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John Edmunds is president of the union that represents federal non-guard prison workers but he grew up on a farm near Odessa.

The Conservative government's plans to close down the country's prison farms is something he feels personally, and it is now the target of a nationwide campaign by the Union of Solicitor General Employees.

"I grew up baling hay and I was driving a tractor when I was 10 years old," Edmunds said yesterday, the day the union's website, saveourfarms.ca, was launched.

"I see the value of these farms and the programs they provide. People say this is the union trying to save the jobs of its members, but if the farms are closed, the jobs aren't going to disappear, they'll just go into other programs in the government. The farms will disappear forever.

"This isn't about jobs, and I think that's starting to filter out to the people at large."

The Stephen Harper government announced plans to shutter six prison farms, including operations at Frontenac and Pittsburgh institutions, claiming in part that the farms weren't providing inmates with marketable skills.

On its newly-launched website, the union not only protests the closures but defends the role of the farms, saying prisoners do develop skills and that the farms are a key part of the prison supply chain.

They keep Corrections self-sufficient when it comes to products like milk and eggs and locally, the farms donate surplus goods to the food bank.

"We have something that is wonderful operating right here ...and we don't understand why they want to close it," Edmunds said.

"Are the prisons supposed to start shopping for food for the inmates in Loblaws or Loeb's?"

Edmunds said getting rid of the farms over the next two years, as the government has indicated it plans to do, "is one of the worst decisions they have ever made." He hopes a swell of support will force it to reconsider.

The website offers tips on protesting the closures, which have already met fierce opposition from farmers' and prisoners' advocacy organizations, who argue they teach inmates the value of hard work, give them valuable skills and expose them to animals in a way that many offenders would never otherwise experience.

The site also offers organizations the chance to be included in efforts to save the programs.

It is more than a local concern. Edmunds notes that Harper expresses support for agriculture during every campaign, but said the move to close the prison farms belied that.

"He's from western Canada so he should know the value of agriculture," he said.

"That's what's getting people upset. Every election campaign he gets on the stick about how important it is to be supporting the farmers, but (now) the truth is coming out."