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Prison workers protest closure of farm programs for inmates

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PRINCE ALBERT, Sask. - Prison workers are protesting the federal government's decision to shut down farming programs for inmates at minimum-security facilities.

The federal government announced in February that they are closing all six farming programs at minimum-security institutions citing a \$4-million price tag and a perceived lack of demand for farming skills.

But the Union of Solicitor General Employees and local farming instructors say the program gives inmates essential training and builds character. The union called the closures short-sighted.

"This government of Canada essentially has said that farming doesn't matter, that these aren't marketable skills that farmers are learning that they can take into the community," said Barry Stolar, union's regional vice-president.

"(They haven't said) what they're going to replace it with. We've asked, and they've said, 'We're not sure.' "

Twelve instructors will be out of a job when the farm at the Riverbend Institution, outside Prince Albert, closes by the end of the year.

On Thursday, they staged an information picket.

Already the facility's abattoir, feed lot and hog operations are closed, and the fields were left unplanted this year. Only the dairy and poultry operations are being fully used.

Instructor Andrew Herdin was one of those handing out leaflets in front of Riverbend and the nearby medium-security Saskatchewan Penitentiary.

He said the program provides more than just farm skills.

"We've had offenders who came from really bad backgrounds, and working with the animals changes their attitude. It flips them right around. They become more aware of emotions by taking care of something," said Herding, who said he knows inmates who have gone into agriculture after their release.

Chris McCluskey, spokesman for the Canadian Ministry of Public Safety, described the farm program as outdated and said too few inmates were going into agriculture after being released.

"Farming has changed dramatically over the past 60 years," he said.

"Using the money saved through these closures, the Correctional Service of Canada will be focusing spending on programs that provide more relevant and practical employment skills as part of their