

[Bleak future for prison harvest](#)

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[THE SASQUATCH](#)

August 2009

(Vol I No. 3)

Here's an idea: take non-dangerous offenders serving time in minimum-security federal prisons, get them outside, working the land, raising animals and growing food for themselves and the nearby community. It sounds almost crazy enough to work.

In fact, it has been working in Canada since the late 1800s. Canada has six prison farms across the country, including one in Saskatchewan.

Riverbend Institution is a minimum-security federal prison, located adjacent to the Prince Albert Penitentiary. The Riverbend prison farm has been operating since 1962 and currently has 50 inmates and 11 staff members working on it. In true farmer fashion, inmates rise with the sun, put in seven to 10 hours each day, feeding and milking the cows, tending chickens, caring for plants in the greenhouse and, until March of this year, slaughtering their own animals. All the food goes to feed the inmates at Riverbend and prisoners at other federal penitentiaries. Any surplus is donated to local foodbanks.

To many in the environmental and social justice movements, this is an ideal alternative to incarceration – one that promotes food security and prisoner rehabilitation. But in February, the Correctional Service of Canada announced that all six prison farms, found in Ontario, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta, will shut down by 2011.

A national campaign called [Save our Farms](#) was launched with support from prison workers and the Union of Solicitor General Employees. The campaign is requesting, through Freedom of Information, official documents on the reasons for closing the prison farms.

Correctional Service of Canada spokesperson Christa McGregor says the prison farms no longer prepare inmates for today's labour market.

“While they gain farming skills and work ethic and responsibility, few were finding employment in the agriculture field once released,” she said. “The majority of inmates are released into big cities and finding employment is important so they don't return to a life of crime.”

McGregor says inmates are better served studying trades such as construction or machinery repair. In addition to the farm, the Riverbend Institution currently offers construction and welding training – programs that would presumably be expanded once the farm operation is closed.

This plan doesn't sit well with the president of the National Farmers Union, Stewart Wells. "This attitude by the government wrongly implies that farming does not require a considerable amount of skill and professionalism and also suggests that farming and food production itself is an outmoded and irrelevant activity," said Wells. "Both suggestions are completely false."

Regina defence lawyer Noah Evanchuk is concerned with the closure of prison farms and says the move exemplifies a shift in government ideology. "The decision to cut prison farms is heavy-handed," said Evanchuk. "It's just a further way of punishing prisoners. The responsibility of the justice system should not be merely to punish, but also to reform, rehabilitate and promote a sense of responsibility among those convicted of crimes."

Over the last four years, Evanchuk has had about a dozen former clients serve time on the prison farm and has received many more requests from inmates to be placed there. But only those who are deemed a low risk to escape and considered a low public-safety risk after undergoing a security risk assessment are placed on the prison farm. Many of the inmates at Riverbend are serving time for drug trafficking or property crimes. No one convicted of a violent crime or with any gang ties is allowed to serve their time there.

Evanchuk says many of his former clients have trouble finding work because they have criminal records, not because they aren't equipped with the right skills. "Prison farms are about more than just employment skills; they are about rehabilitation," says Evanchuk. "The farm acclimatizes inmates to go back into society. What kind of person do you want coming back into society? You want someone who has gained a work ethic, a sense of responsibility and learned to be productive."

The federal government still does not know exactly when the Riverbend farm will close for good, but all prison farms will be phased out by March 31, 2011, erasing yet another small farm from the Saskatchewan landscape.