

RUMINATIONS - Prison farms: Should they stay or should they go?

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I find the announcement by the federal government to close the six penitentiary farms across Canada outrageous.

I am not the only one; there has been a strong reaction across Canada. My non-scientific poll as well as the attendance at St. Lawrence College on March 19, would suggest that many people feel the same way. The government report suggests that the farms no longer provide inmates with viable training or marketable skills and it is costing the taxpayer \$4 million to keep the farms running.

Hogwash!

This is an excellent opportunity for municipal, provincial and federal governments to work together and put our tax money into a sustainable vision for our future. We have all heard the message to promote and “buy local.” Well, here is an opportunity for all levels of government to “talk the talk and walk the walk.”

Presently, the six national prison farms supply a great deal of the food used within the national penitentiary system. That means much of the food required to feed the penitentiary population comes from within the system. Locally, the two prison farms are located at the Frontenac/Collins Bay and Pittsburgh/Joyceville penitentiaries. These farms not only help feed the national inmate population, they also contribute to our local businesses and society.

The local chicken farm gives over 2,000 dozen eggs per year to the Partners in Mission Food Bank. The Pittsburgh abattoir provides farmers with a government-inspected place to take their livestock for local direct sales. Consider that the consumer will not be able to buy locally processed meat if farmers have no place to take their livestock for processing. As a farmer, this is one of the biggest hurdles we face in trying to sell locally.

The Pittsburgh Institution supports local 4-H programs and buys some of the 4-H beef animals. Frontenac Institution milks about 130 cattle per day producing about 4000 litres of milk. This herd is in the top 80 percentile of dairy herds across Ontario. That is definitely good animal genetics and good farm business management.

The lands you see around Frontenac prison are prime agricultural lands. The loss of such land to a city like Kingston is extremely foolish. The value is obvious to me — prime agricultural land — there is just not that much of it around here. You may recall my earlier column where I showed the decline of farmland and of farmers to work the land. Prime agricultural land such as Frontenac’s prison farm will outperform my farm’s production easily, any day of the week. I could only dream of having such a productive farm.

Remember agri-business is big business! We are losing more farmers than gaining new ones. In the not too distant future, we will need people who want to work the land and who have the necessary background to work in agriculture. We will need the very people that the penitentiary farms are training.

We will also need a source of food near cities, as the cost of food production and transportation will climb.

Now it seems obvious to me, that if someone were to make a statement about cost saving, he or she would know the cost to out-source the food for the penitentiary populations. This question was asked during the debate at St. Lawrence College yet, it seemed no one had looked at that expense.

How can we believe the government will save us \$4 million dollars if they have yet to determine what it will cost to feed the prison population? What costs went into that \$4 million price tag?

This report began to look at the viability of prison farms almost two years ago and since that time, the economic climate has changed considerably. The suggestion is to provide the inmate population with certified training programs in manufacturing areas, which will provide them with job opportunities upon their release.

Am I the only person to notice manufacturing jobs are disappearing?

Farming skills span animal husbandry, operation and maintenance of heavy equipment to bookkeeping and business skills. Certificates are available for safety, heavy equipment operation, and chemical knowledge for pesticide and fertilizer use, organic and natural farming practices, and animal husbandry and breeding programs. Certification proves an inmate has acquired skills in the agri-business sectors.

Do not forget prison farms provide a workplace where there is animal therapy and good old-fashioned hard work (physical) therapy thrown in for good measure. Winston Churchill said, "There Is Something about the outside of a Horse That Is Good for the inside of a Man."

As for the idea that farm programs do not give enough viable training, since when does teaching a person responsibility, pride in a job well done, having a strong work ethic, and dependability become the wrong thing to do?

I take pride in my farm background, knowing that being responsible for the well being of my animals has taught me the value of life, the value of getting up and doing my chores. I know my ability to run and maneuver a tractor and hay wagons through gates is the beginning of my being able to work and drive heavy equipment. Knowing when, where and how to find the grease-fittings on equipment for routine maintenance is a useful skill for anyone. In this day of economic uncertainty – knowing you can do many things is a good thing!

The skills learned in and around a penitentiary farm will give a person the knowledge and skills to turn their life around if they choose to do so.

A letter from an inmate at one of the local pen farms at the public meeting was read. To paraphrase, he appreciates the chance to earn respect from the people he works with and enjoys the responsibility that comes with looking after animals. Inmates are not forced, but rather choose to work on the farm. They chose to learn something that they can take with them, which include a work ethic and understanding that dependability, and responsibilities are good things.

Those skills are always transferrable.

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