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## Time is running out on nation's prison farms

OWEN ROBERTS

Farmers are some of the most versatile people around. Besides being good at growing food, they're mechanics, welders, carpenters, financial managers, among other things. And if they raise livestock, they're adept at certain animal-health procedures, too.

So it's bewildering that Ottawa wants to shut down the country's six prison farms because, it says, the farms aren't providing inmates with marketable skills. If inmates truly farm on these farms, there's no question they're learning some of those skills. Plus, it's an established fact Canada has a huge shortage of skilled farm workers.

So, what's up?

That's what the Union of Solicitor General Employees wants to know. It's just launched a very public, national communication campaign called Save Our Farms ([www.saveourfarms.ca](http://www.saveourfarms.ca)), to keep the farms running and preserve the jobs of the union members who work on them.

But more than that, the union is calling on Ottawa to expand the prison farm program. It wants new, dynamic farms to be created that are appealing to Canadians concerned about local food and food security to support its campaign.

According to the union, the prison farm system is a Canadian tradition in minimum-security penal institutions, dating back to the 1800s. It claims prison farms have delivered "useful skills training and character-building for those inmates identified as having a likely chance of successful rehabilitation and reintegration into the community."

That sounds probable, but at this point in the campaign it's not substantiated. It's lacking testimonials and spokespeople who can provide a prison-farm-related turnaround. Those may be hard to come by, especially given the union's own admission that for the most part the narrow scope of existing farm programs has resulted in relatively few inmates being able to find work in agriculture or agri-food upon release.

Indeed, the campaign needs reason beyond sentimentality. Even though Canada somehow found \$10 billion to bail out General Motors these days it's unlikely Ottawa will open the purse strings to save prison farms -- or anything -- simply because they're a trade-off.

In part, the union recognizes that, so it's taking another timely and emotional approach by positioning the prison farms as one of the public's hungers for food that's local and safe.

In this way, it sees the ledger going from red to black, and even turning the prison farms into what it calls profit centres. The vision includes developing dairy farms to make cheese, or bakeries to turn prison farm grain into bread. It says greenhouses could extend the growing season and pave the way for introducing ornamentals that would be sold at local nurseries.

All these products would be kept affordable because Ottawa would be paying the farmer-inmates wages.

"Under our plan, inmates would be taught the latest theories and practices of crop management and animal husbandry, with an emphasis on sustainable, organic, locally-orientated farming.

In the winter months, such relevant courses as business practices, computer skills, accounting, crop science and basic veterinary could be taught, says the campaign.

That sounds great, and it sounds like farming. The infrastructure is certainly in place through open learning programs from community colleges and universities to deliver some of what the union hopes to see.

It makes me wonder, though, why the union waited until now to bring forward such a progressive plan, especially if it knew the program was lacking to the point where Ottawa no longer sensed value in it.

Anyway, local food advocates, farm groups and prisoners' rights advocates need to be heard from on this. If prison farms are the union claims, the plan needs many vocal, visible friends, and it needs them right now.

Owen Roberts teaches agricultural communications at the University of Guelph. His column appears Mondays.

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