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Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Union fighting government's plan to close prison farm

By: Lindsey Wiebe

3/06/2009 1:00 AM | [Comments: 0](#)

PLANS to shut half a dozen prison farms across Canada, including one in Manitoba, are raising the ire of the union representing corrections staff. Thirty-six inmates work on the farm at the Rockwood Institution, the minimum-security penitentiary in Stony Mountain.

The Correctional Service of Canada plans to shut the country's prison farms by 2011. Few inmates who work on the farms have found agricultural jobs after getting released, and the millions spent could go towards other types of training, the agency says.

The decision to close the farms "is a direct slap to the Canadian farmer and the Canadian economy," said the Union of Solicitor General Employees (USGE) national president John Edmunds.

"I would think that with the high price of fuel and trying to go to a greener economy and a greener climate, that farming has never been more relevant," he said.

Edmunds said skills developed through farming, like a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility, are useful in all kinds of jobs.

The USGE says the Correctional Service has no data on how many people find agricultural jobs after going through the program. The union wants the farms revamped to focus on sustainable and organic practices.

The USGE represents everyone from tradespeople to administrative staff with Correctional Services. No jobs will be lost in the farm closures, said Edmunds, who admits getting involved in an issue like this is unusual for the union. Last month, the National Farmers Union rallied in Ottawa to protest the farm closures.

The federal government says there are no plans to sell the property.

Rockwood's farm started in 1962. It includes a feedlot, composting setup, grain farming, and a dairy operation with more than 60 cows. Food from the farm is used at federal prisons. The composting program handles a trailer-full of organic waste daily from Canada Safeway alone. Most of the composted matter gets spread on the fields, where inmates grow grain to feed the cattle.

The composting operation is one reason the farm should stay open, said Ken Friesen, USGE regional vice-president for Manitoba.

"Why not think about some of these newer approaches and newer ideas that still fit within that agricultural mode, but will give different skills?" he asked.

The decision to end the farm program came after a review last year, said Correctional Service spokeswoman Christa McGregor.

The program costs \$4 million a year to run and "wasn't meeting the employment realities that offenders were facing in today's labour market," she said. "Once they were released into the community, very few were actually finding jobs in agricultural businesses."

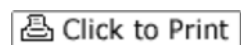
McGregor said the money saved will go toward new employability programs for inmates. She said it's too soon to know the cost of paying for food currently produced at the farms, or what programs might replace farming.

There are two prison farms in Ontario and one each in New Brunswick, Alberta, B.C. and Manitoba.

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