

Western Producer Article - Ag Committee Tour - May 13, 2010

MPs have different take on message

MPs tour Canada | Some farmers are optimistic, others aren't, but most agree current farm programs aren't working

STORIES BY BARRY WILSON
WIARTON, ONT.

When politicians listen, the message they hear clearly depends on the ear of the listener.

On May 4, as the House of Commons agriculture committee wound down two days of Ontario hearings on young farmer issues, Liberal Frank Valeriote said the message MPs heard through the West and Ontario was clear.

Agriculture is in trouble, many young people cannot afford to get into the business and many farm parents don't want them to, said the Guelph, Ont., MP.

"I'm hearing an embracing of the farm life but for many, an inability to make a living," he told one panel of producers.

"I'm deeply concerned and it will take more than a tweaking of existing programs," he told another Ontario witness panel.

Conservative MPs on the committee had been hearing a different message as they travelled across the country.

"It's interesting how two people can take two different messages out of what they both have heard," said Alberta Conservative Blake Richards. "I'm hearing a very positive message from our young farmers."

Wiarion, Ont.,-area farmer Grant Caswell, 28, has worked off farm for 10 years hoping to work full time on the family dairy and beef farm in future.

He said it is frustrating to see people working on some farms with stable incomes while some days "we're losing our shirts."

Valeriote picked up on the comment.

"I find it curious that you say you are losing your shirt and the other side is saying things are fine, stay the course," he said.

Partisan jibes aside, MPs at the Ontario hearings in Ilderton and Wiarion last week heard arguments to support both positions.

At Ilderton, Ont., Joe Dickenson said farming is a tough sell for young people.

Most programs "do not work for them," he said. In grade 9, his teacher presented a list of incomes by profession and agriculture had an average income of \$12,000.

"Why would anyone want to get into that, with a return below the poverty line?" he asked.

Adam Robson, who bought a farm with his brother and a cousin, said they all have off farm jobs to pay the bills.

He said just one in 10 of his school classmates went back to the farm, and they are all in trouble."

But MPs also heard some optimism.

Dickenson said he is trying to buy two more farms, including a dairy operation in Saskatchewan. In 2008, he added \$550,000 to his debt load.

"If I didn't think there is a future in agriculture, I wouldn't have taken that loan," he said May 3.

The next day at Wiarion, Dutch immigrant and hog farmer Harry Koelen said it is a struggle but the industry still has a future for young farmers who want to enter and are prepared to be innovative.

"Sometimes, we have to get very creative," he said.

“We can’t do things the way Grandpa did. I wouldn’t say it’s impossible (to enter the business). When I hear people discouraging their kids, I say if there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Ontario Conservative Pierre Lemieux, parliamentary secretary to agriculture minister Gerry Ritz, said that is the spirit that will keep the industry going.

“If farmers really thought it is the end of agriculture, they would not be investing in innovation and productivity,” he said.

Wayne Ferris, an accountant with a history in the industry and a business doing farm tax work, said farmers are prepared to earn less than non-farm business people or workers because they value the lifestyle.

But they cannot afford to work for nothing.