

## FARM POLICY | YOUNG FARMERS

# Negative image turns youth away

**Committee hears doom and gloom** | Two farm leaders insist optimism prevails in agriculture and work needs to be done to dispel negativity

CROSSFIELD, ALTA.

Two voices stood out as contrarian optimists amid a flurry of negative comments from young farmers about their future in the industry during a recent parliamentary hearing.

They argued that young people are enthusiastic about farming if only they receive the proper message.

The problem is not prospects for young farmers entering the business but the negative image of farmers that deter young entrants, Rod Scarlett, general manager of the Canadian Young Farmers' Forum, told members of the House of Commons agriculture committee April 27.

"There seems to be a pervasive feeling among some farmers that the young generation shouldn't be encouraged into the field," he said as MPs started a cross-country series of hearings into the plight of young farmers.

"There may be legitimate reasons, but they must be overcome in order for the industry itself to have a successful succession."

He insisted that young farmers who are aware of the opportunities in the industry are optimistic.

Lee Townsend, a beekeeper from Stony Plain, Alta., and Wild Rose Agricultural Producers director, told

*More needs to be done to spread the message and educate our youth that there is a future as an agricultural producer.*

LEE TOWNSEND

WILD ROSE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS DIRECTOR



*That sends a strong message to those in the industry that there is support, there is concern and there is a future. A strong and vibrant industry image will only serve to attract new entrants.*

ROD SCARLETT

CANADIAN YOUNG FARMERS' FORUM GENERAL MANAGER

MPs that the gloom and doom they were hearing from other witnesses about prospects for young farmers were largely the result of poor messaging about the importance and vibrant nature of the sector.

"More needs to be done to spread the message and educate our youth that there is a future as an agricultural producer," he said.

In a later interview, the two farm leaders insisted the image of pessimistic young farmers or potential young farmers is misplaced.

"In the organizations we are involved with, the pervasive attitude is optimism, not pessimism," Scarlett said, despite the first-hand stories told to MPs.

"They recognize there are image

problems and that older farmers are not optimistic, but they are looking beyond that to the potential that exists."

Townsend, 30, said younger producers are increasingly prominent in the Alberta bee industry.

"They see a future and they are transforming the industry," he said.

Scarlett said the Young Farmers' Forum lets entry level producers exchange ideas and enthusiasms with like-minded young producers.

Many of the pessimistic young farmers may be more isolated from their peer group, listening mainly to the pessimism of their elders.

"I think there has been a poor job done by farm groups in promoting opportunities and prospects for the

next generation," he said.

"They mainly hear from farm groups about the problems and get discouraged."

He said young farmers in his organization are enthusiastic about exchanging positive information with other young farmers, and farm leaders and politicians could help by promoting a positive image of the industry to the public.

"It is important that we promote a positive image to the consumers of our products," he told MPs.

"That sends a strong message to those in the industry that there is support, there is concern and there is a future. A strong and vibrant industry image will only serve to attract new entrants."

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# Help us build industry, says young farmer

PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE, MAN.

Gwen Donohoe from a farm near The Pas in northern Manitoba showed the kind of optimism and enthusiasm the touring MPs wanted to hear.

She told members of the House of Commons agriculture committee April 29 when they visited Manitoba on a young farmer tour that she sees a future in the business despite advice from family, community and teachers that farming is not a good choice for bright educated students.

Donohoe said she is tired of hearing negative views about agriculture as a career.

"We are the solutions you seek," said the youth director of the Manitoba Rural Adaptation Council as well as a University of Manitoba student involved in the family farm.

"We just need the support and resources necessary to deliver those solutions."

She advocated leadership training, mentoring, more access to credit and capital and a risk management program designed to let young people make mistakes but survive to learn from them.

"Give us responsibility and the tools to become leaders," she said.

Donohoe urged MPs to recommend compensation for the goods and services farmers provide beyond food production.

"That (program) has to be designed to make us more profitable."

Other assessments were negative.

Drew Baker, a 23-year-old with five years of farming with his family at Beausejour, Man., has found it tough slog since he decided to follow his heart into the business. Finding capital and credit to buy land was difficult and returns are low.

"My dad warned me about it repeatedly but I'm more stubborn than my

*Give us responsibility and the tools to become leaders.*

GWEN DONOHOE

MANITOBA RURAL ADAPTATION COUNCIL

dad thought," he said.

Baker doubted whether he would tell his own children to farm someday.

In an interview, he said he could make more money elsewhere but would rather make less doing what he loves.

"But for the long term, I'm hoping things get better but I'm looking at the trends and it doesn't look good."

Kate Storey, an organic farmer who promotes a smaller scale farm model, has an educated 23-year-old son who wants to farm.

"Unfortunately, my son cannot afford a business that does not provide a fair wage," she said. "The question is do you want young farmers? Do you want our food to be produced by farmers or employees?"

Kyle Foster, 34, from Arborg, Man., criticized the slow pace of payments from government support programs that are based on comparisons with historic averages and are calculated after the tax year is complete. Payouts can be two or three years behind.

He cited one neighbour who had to sell his farm and received an AgriStability cheque 11 months later.

"If he had that money earlier, he might still be farming."

Witnesses demanded that Canadian competition law and the Competition Bureau be strengthened to reduce the power of agribusiness suppliers and buyers in the marketplace.

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