

STORIES BY BARRY WILSON
CROSSFIELD, ALTA.

Wyatt Hanson proved to be the main attraction on a panel made up largely of parents explaining to MPs why they think agriculture cannot attract their children.

He is young, 17, a long-time 4-H member and a third generation son of Alberta ranchers with a love of the cattle business.

When he spoke, he said he has watched his family's operation near Airdrie, Alta., decline from a large purebred operation to a commercial cattle ranch and now a custom grazing operation.

He once dreamed of being a rancher, but after watching the decline of his parent's operation despite their hard work, investments and changing business models, he changed his mind.

"This led us to the conclusion that we love the cattle and we love the lifestyle, but there is no paycheque at the end of the day," he told MPs on the House of Commons agriculture committee April 27 during a visit to Alberta on a cross-country tour to examine young farmer issues.

Hanson, a Grade 11 student, told MPs he has decided to attend university to earn an international business degree.

In an interview after the hearing, he said he wants to start an international business.

"I would like to do something I can make a profit at."

He said farmers should receive a greater share from retailers of the price consumers pay for food.

Alberta Conservative Blake Richards asked him what is different now from when his grandfather and parents got into the business.

"When they took their cattle to market, they made enough money to buy about 20 vehicles," he said. "Now, we could make a down payment on one."

Hanson said few of the young people he knows in 4-H plan to make agriculture a career.



FILE PHOTO

FARM POLICY | YOUNG FARMERS

Who wants to farm?

Golden opportunities or impossible dream? | Convincing new generations to take up farming is proving a difficult task. A parliamentary committee is touring the West to find out why

"There is no motivation for us to be a farmer."

The first witnesses at the hearing included parents who complained there is no incentive for young people

to take over the farm, which is undermining aging farmers' chances to retire.

Margo Staniforth said she has a 27-year-old who wants to return to

the farm, but she recited a litany of problems: regulation, high debt, low incomes and uncertain prospects.

"My question to the committee is, does this sound like a business you

would want your kid to return to?"

Gordon Butler from Youngstown, Alta., said a daughter wanted to return to his cattle operation but decided against it when she learned about the burden of regulation and the lack of property rights.

"The regulations have just about brought this industry to its knees and it will kill it," he told MPs.

For example, he said he negotiated with the Chinese after BSE to sell 2,000 head of cattle that had been individually tested for BSE. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency refused to allow it.

"The CFIA is a runaway," he said. "You are the guys we elect to keep things under control."

Too much regulation was a theme of many at the Crossfield hearing.

"You guys can deregulate and put in property rights," Butler said. "I'm not looking for subsidies. I want less government."

Ontario Liberal Francis Valeriote said it was tough to listen to the hard-luck tales.

"You'd have to have a hard heart to sit around the table and not feel the grief that is being expressed."

Although it was a hearing on young farmer issues, some witnesses used it as an opportunity to argue their organizations' positions on what young farmers need.

Doug Scott from the National Farmers Union said preservation of farmer collective marketing strength and a reduction in farm program payment caps to \$500,000 would help young farmers.

Darrell Stokes, a Canadian Wheat Board defender, said young farmers need the board's bargaining power.

Darcy Davis from the Canadian Cattlemen's Association said trade deals to open markets will strengthen young farmers' bottom lines.

Rod Scarlett, general manager of the Canadian Young Farmers' Forum, said members of that organization are more optimistic than the tales around the table, in part because they are able to talk to other optimistic young farmers.

FARM POLICY | YOUNG FARMERS

Low retirement rate closes door on career

Design ag programs for young | Farm supports should favour youth and small farms and encourage older farmers to retire

LANIGAN, SASK.

Fourteen years ago, Rooney Godin looked at the farm industry he had been raised in and saw opportunity in all the grey-haired farmers around him.

"I decided to farm," the chair of Saskatchewan Young Agricultural Entrepreneurs told MPs April 28 who were on a cross-country tour to discuss young farmer issues.

"Fourteen years later, those guys are still farming."

However, he said there still is opportunity in the business because those older farmers will have to move on some day.

While panels of farmer witnesses offered various opinions during the three-hour hearing, one of the underlying themes unique to the Saskatchewan session was the complaint that older farmers who hang on are a big reason why it is difficult to

attract new entrants.

Jason Ranger cited studies that showed as many as 30 percent of farmers say they will never retire.

"If we could find a way to encourage the over-65 crowd to sell or rent their land to young people, that would be a way to get more young people into farming," he said.

Barb Stefanyshyn-Cote said program payments and farm supports should be designed to favour young and beginning farmers who have to compete with established farmers for land.

As farmers get older, she suggested, their access to government support would decline until by retirement age, they would be on their own.

"By the time they hit 65, let's retire them. Don't stay there until you die."

Godin said government and the industry could entice young people to consider farming as a career by changing the sector's public image.

The mechanisms to support small farmers are being eliminated.

KALISSA REGIER
NATIONAL FARMERS UNION YOUTH PRESIDENT

"In Canada, everyone sees farmers as 65," he said. "Take a younger farmer and make him the focus of the campaign."

National Farmers Union youth president Kalissa Regier said government programs should be more supportive of small farmers because most beginning farmers are forced to start small due to entry costs.

However, she said focusing policies on consolidation and large operators in the past few decades has taken its toll. There has been a

sharp decline in the percentage of producers under 35.

"This study is being conducted two decades too late."

Regier said most young people are discouraged from farming because all their lives they have watched farmers struggling and smaller farmers throwing in the towel.

"The mechanisms to support small farmers are being eliminated."

Around the table at the Saskatchewan meeting, as at hearings across the West last week, farmers agreed that existing safety net programs are not working for farmers, particularly young farmers.

Government-backed loan levels are too low to finance most entry costs, existing larger farmers receive the most benefit from support programs, AgriStability requires historic margins that beginning farmers do not have and AgriInvest requires investment funds that young farmers

do not have.

There were disagreements about whether the Canadian Wheat Board wheat and barley monopoly hurts or helps young farmers and whether caps on program payments should be raised or lowered.

And as often was the case, older witnesses were more pessimistic than younger witnesses.

Ed Sagan, a third-generation grain farmer from Melville, Sask., said the growing debt load, loss of government support and input companies' increasing power concentration all make the business unattractive.

"I have discouraged my children from farming," he said.

"I have insisted they get a good education to give them other options. There will not be a fourth generation of Sagan running the farm."

That probably was welcome news for the witnesses urging the older generation to move along.