

An uphill battle: Farmers told to put heat on politicians

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By Richard Mahoney
FOURNIER — Farmers affected by the fall-out from the Lemieux landslide have launched a campaign for government assistance. But from the outset, they know that theirs is a daunting task.

"We're fighting an uphill battle," South Nation River Conservation Authority general manager Dennis O'Grady, urging about 40 farmers attending a meeting last Wednesday to exert pressure on politicians.

"Get after the politicians. Get on the phones and write letters. The politicians in Toronto don't believe that this is an emergency. Call the ministers. If you don't, you won't get a dime," O'Grady stated. "There is no money out there," he said, relating that "the bureaucrats have been ducking for cover" since the June 20 slide. "Go over the bureaucrats' heads," he told the group. "If you don't, you won't get anything out of them."

Provincial and federal ministries were to meet local authorities this week to discuss possible assistance for the 37 homeowners living upstream of the slide. The SNRCA says those homes are in a high-risk landslide area.

But the provincial envi-

ronment ministry has said it is "not sure" whether it will help farmers living downstream of the slide, he added.

Recalling that the province did find money to provide water in Manotick recently, O'Grady observed, "I would hope the government would not discriminate against agriculture. But that is the kind of thinking we are up against."

"LUNAR SITE"

One after one, the farmers rose at the meeting at the South Plantagenet Township hall to express concerns about tainted water, and the silt which will inevitably cover their fields following next spring's floods.

At least 20 South Plantagenet families living downstream of the landslide rely on the South Nation River for water. "Their source of water has been taken away by an act of God," said emergency committee president Gregory Ryan. "There are solutions, but they all cost money."

While the water is murky, and sediment is clogging water lines and filters, to date no tests have shown that the water poses a health hazard.

South Plantagenet Councillor and SNRCA director Gary Bradley remarked that

in the wake of the landslide, the flood zone, which encompasses anywhere from 12,000 to 20,000 acres "could be a future lunar site."

The meeting agreed that the campaign would have to be waged with facts and figures, not dire predictions.

"We get the distinct feeling that the government thinks Ontario ends at Coburg," Bradley commented. "We need a logical plan. I feel it is a disaster, after you get over the initial shock, you realize that it is." Nature did not flush all the debris that flowed into the river during the last major slide in 1971. "If nothing is done, it will be 2085 before this one is cleaned up, and then it won't matter."

Both O'Grady and Bradley encouraged farmers to detail their problems. "We need a game plan as opposed to saying the sky is falling," the councillor said.

"I don't accept there is no money there," Bradley declared. "We have to make the government face this issue. We need numbers, specifics."

Riceville area farmer Cornelius Bauer related that his water system has so far spared him of any water

quality problems. But such a system would cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000 to build today.

Bauer noted that there was no regulations that would prevent him from building in the flood zone. "It's ridiculous. I see all my assets going out the window. Try to get something from a bank with all this...before it was the flood, now it's the landslide."

The emergency committee chaired by Gregory Ryan is comprised of vice-president Robert Vallée, Conrad Labrèche, Michel Charbonneau, Victor McKinley, Germain Chartrand, Doyle Harrigan, Ken Wilkes. South Plantagenet Reeve Claude Gravel, who chaired last Wednesday's meeting, has been elected secretary.

If funds are acquired, the committee will try to ensure that money will help bonafide farmers. Commenting on the potential abuse of funds, Gary Bradley remarked: "Once you throw the feed in the trough, every pig goes for it."

MP Don Boudria and M.P.P. Jean Poirier were represented at the meeting by the MP's assistant, André Tessier, and Liberal riding association president Jean-Marc Lalonde.



(photo by R. Mahoney)

CALL FOR ACTION -- "Get after the politicians," South Nation River Conservation Authority general manager Dennis O'Grady urges farmers affected by the Lemieux landslide.