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Farmers clog traffic to pressure federal government

BY SARAH PARKER
Staff Writer

Grain farmers took their tractors and combines to the streets across Ontario yesterday to make a point with the federal government.

Their message: pay up and subsidize farmers just like in the USA.

Some local farmers drove their tractors and combines down major roads throughout

York Region, including Highway 7 in Markham, and Leslie Street and Bayview Avenue and Richmond Hill. They headed straight toward MP offices to seek support.

According to Gormley farmer John Doner, Ontario farmers are facing a poor crop yield this year, reaching only 75-80 percent of last year's yield.

"Without the federal gov-

ernment's help, we cannot continue to produce food below the price of production," said Doner, who helped lead the York Region charge.

Oak Ridges MP Bryon Wilfert gave the farmers his support yesterday and said he has done so in the past, but added that responsibility is not solely that of the federal government.

Farming falls under joint jurisdiction of Ottawa and the provinces, he said, and they need to work together.

In 1999, Wilfert said he asked for a \$300 million infusion into Ontario farming, of which 60 cents of every dollar would come from the Ottawa and 40 cents from the provinces.

Wiltfert said the Ontario government is supposed to act first, but has not.

He hopes the federal gov-

ernment will put its share of the money out on the table first to initiate provincial involvement.

Alberta and Quebec have successful provincial programs, said Wilfert, and therefore Ontario can too.

Doner claimed free trade with the United States is crippling agriculture in Ontario. American farmers receive government subsidies for production and are also turning profit with the truck loads of corn they are shipping into Canada, he pointed out.

Ontario farmers do not receive government subsidies, but that has to change in order to level out the playing field. Otherwise, said Doner, farmers in this province are at serious risk of going out of business.

Before free trade, government subsidies were not neces-

sary in Ontario to help farmers turn a profit because most food was bought and sold locally, said Doner.

But now with foreign competition, Doner said farmers need to be placed on the same playing level as Americans. And he said only the federal government can help fix this.

Meanwhile, Wilfert urged urban dwellers to become aware of the farming crisis because local farmers provide the food on their tables.

Current food prices don't always cover the cost of production, said Linda Draper of Black Angus Cattle and Cash Crops on Reesor Rd. in Markham.

Her husband, Paul, was out on his tractor yesterday morning leading the Markham contingent of farmers in protest.

"We're suffering," she said. "We need help."



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Protesting farmers slowed down traffic along Highway 7 in Unionville on Friday. They were at the offices of MP John McCallum (who was not there) to ask that Canadian farmers receive the same subsidies as their U.S. counterparts.

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