

Farms in crisis: MP

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commodity prices and a lack of government support have taken them deeper into a financial crisis.

"There is a crisis on the family farm. I've discussed this with the Greater Toronto Area MPs and with rural MPs. The farmers need help beyond crisis management," said Wilfert, whose constituency includes Richmond Hill, Whitchurch-Stouffville and northern Markham.

Doner said his mission is to tell the federal government that the agricultural operating costs are out of control. "We don't have a plan and we're losing our shirts," he said.

Another message is expected to be delivered to Progressive Conservative leader Joe Clark today. "We'll tell Joe that Canada's future food supply is threatened," he said.

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If the federal government doesn't come forward with an aid package for the agricultural industry, many farmers will be forced off the land, thus jeopardizing the domestic availability of food. "The food supply in Canada affects every Canadian," said Doner.

Farmers are attracting the support of MPs, members of the Senate and, of course, provincial and federal agriculture federations.

Jack Wilkinson, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, is stressing that timing is critical as many lending institutions are concerned with farmers' ability to repay their loans.

"With spring planting a few weeks away farmers need to know soon if they're going to have money to plant a crop this year," Wilkinson said.

Farmers are united behind three basic conditions necessary to ensure sustainable and sovereign food production in Canada:

an immediate cash infusion to help them plant crops this spring, a national policy and parity with U.S. producers.

The U.S. has increased financial support to its farmers by 283 per cent in the past two years, according to Canadian Federation of Agriculture President Bob Friesen.

"We need programs in Canada that will respond to the farm need," he said.

"A policy will do more for us in the long run than an injection of cash," said Doner. "Our long-term problems are not going to be cured by cash. We have to look further ahead."

Certain problems are predictable, Doner pointed out. "We know we're going to get rain, hail and grasshoppers. But, nobody saw this crisis coming; it caught us by surprise because we don't have a business plan."

Another critical issue in the agricultural industry is age. The average farmer in Alberta is 60, while the average Ontario farmer is 57. "This should be a real worry for the public. Their food producers are getting old," said Doner.

Meanwhile, western farmers are in terrible shape, said Holtrop. "They haven't experience such financial hardships since the Dirty '30s," he said. Bankruptcies in western provinces are common and hope of recovery is dwindling. "Big (farming) blocks of Saskatchewan are failing now. It's sad," said Doner.

Back in York Region, farmers are also taking their message beyond Wilfert and speaking with Liberal MPs Eleanor Caplan (Thornhill) and Karen Kraft-Sloan (York North).

"We're reminding them that farms are operating in York Region. We have dairy, beef, poultry, grain and vegetable operations and they all need the government's attention," said Doner.

York Region boasts 1,200 farms with a total acreage of about 200,000. "Agriculture is serious business, country and region-wide," said Doner.

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