

Farmers guardedly optimistic about federal task force

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

York Region farmers are guardedly optimistic over news the federal government is setting up a task force to examine Canada's agriculture industry.

"Anything, we'll take anything," said Whitchurch-Stouffville farmer Paul Draper. "I don't know if the task force will do any good, but we'll take it."

Draper runs a mixed-farming business, including a Black Angus and cash-crop operation on 250 acres on the family farm. Like many Canadian farmers, Draper has held a second job off the farm for several years.

As farmers wait for Prime Minister Jean Chretien to unveil the details of the task force, some are asking themselves if they can afford to carry out the spring planting. "Many farmers are running out of time," Markham farmer Paul Ramer stressed.

The crisis is destroying careers and lives and it's threatening Canada's food supply, added Richmond Hill farmer John Doner.

Facing mounting pressure

from angry constituents, Liberal MPs, including Oak Ridges representative Bryon Wilfert, are now breathing a sigh of relief.

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Establishing a task force is "encouraging news," said Wilfert. "The PM is taking a personal interest in the farm crisis. I hope we can get beyond crisis management."

The task force needn't waste precious time trying to identify why some sectors of the agricultural community are in dire financial straights, said Ramer. "It stops and starts with the need for parity with the United States and with Europe."

Just as important is the need for a national farm policy, Doner added.

While it's hoped the task force

can bring long-term solutions to cyclical decreases in crop prices and a lack of subsidies, Wilfert isn't banking on it. "The reality is we're never going to be able to compete with the Americans," said Wilfert. Comparable subsidies are not in the cards, he emphasized.

The \$500-million federal aid package given to the agricultural community a month ago is perceived by many farmers as too little, too late. It's a pittance compared to what's given to the Americans, said Ramer.

Wiltfert is not a farmer and said, "I don't pretend to know much about farming. But I know this: I like to eat and I know Canada produces the cheapest food in the world. As well, the agricultural crisis is not just a farm issue. It's an issue for all Canadians."

The task force is expected to address the needs of the grain and oil seed sectors. Dairy, poultry and pig farming are financially sound, Wilfert said.

York Region should be a stop for the task force, said Draper, noting the area has 1,200 farms covering about 200,000 acres.

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