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York farmers happy with government aid

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

Local and provincial agriculture advocates are hailing an announcement of \$80 million in funding to help Ontario farmers endure flagging commodity prices and poor weather conditions.

"It's never enough, but it'll go a long way," said Don Fieldhouse, secretary-treasurer of the York Region Federation of Agriculture.

The new money, announced

Wednesday by provincial Agriculture Minister Helen Johns and her federal counterpart Lyle Vanclief, is a top-up to market revenue insurance programs.

Prices for Canadian produce have taken a battering over the past couple of years as a result of American subsidies and competition from foreign markets.

Farmers have lobbied vigorously for the revenue insurance money, a move that has, until recently, been resisted by the feds.

"This is a major breakthrough for

us," said Jack Wilkinson, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

He said the \$80 million announced this week, in conjunction with an earlier agreement from the feds to pump \$1.2 billion into agriculture across the nation, will help bridge the gap for farmers who have been struggling to pay their bills while dealing with falling revenues.

"I think if it's done right and we put the two (funds) together, it's going to go a long way," Mr. Wilkinson said.

He said all along, farmers have really just been lobbying government for stability in turbulent times.

With these funds and an agreement with the federal government on continuing assistance, "you have security for everybody: From the lender to the supplier to the farmer," he said.

What's crucial now is for the feds and the province to get money out to farmers who are still seeking compensation for losses suffered last year, Mr. Wilkinson said.

"The big thing now is to get it out fast," he said.

For Mr. Fieldhouse, announcements of government funding signal a change in thinking on support for farmers, particularly in Ottawa.

"I think the whole attitude toward agriculture is changing," he said.

"I think the message is getting through to (Prime Minister Jean) Chretien that there had better be a change in thinking, or there won't be any agriculture."

The announcement comes at a time when York Region farmers are looking at another year of poor market prices and challenging growing conditions, Mr. Fieldhouse said.

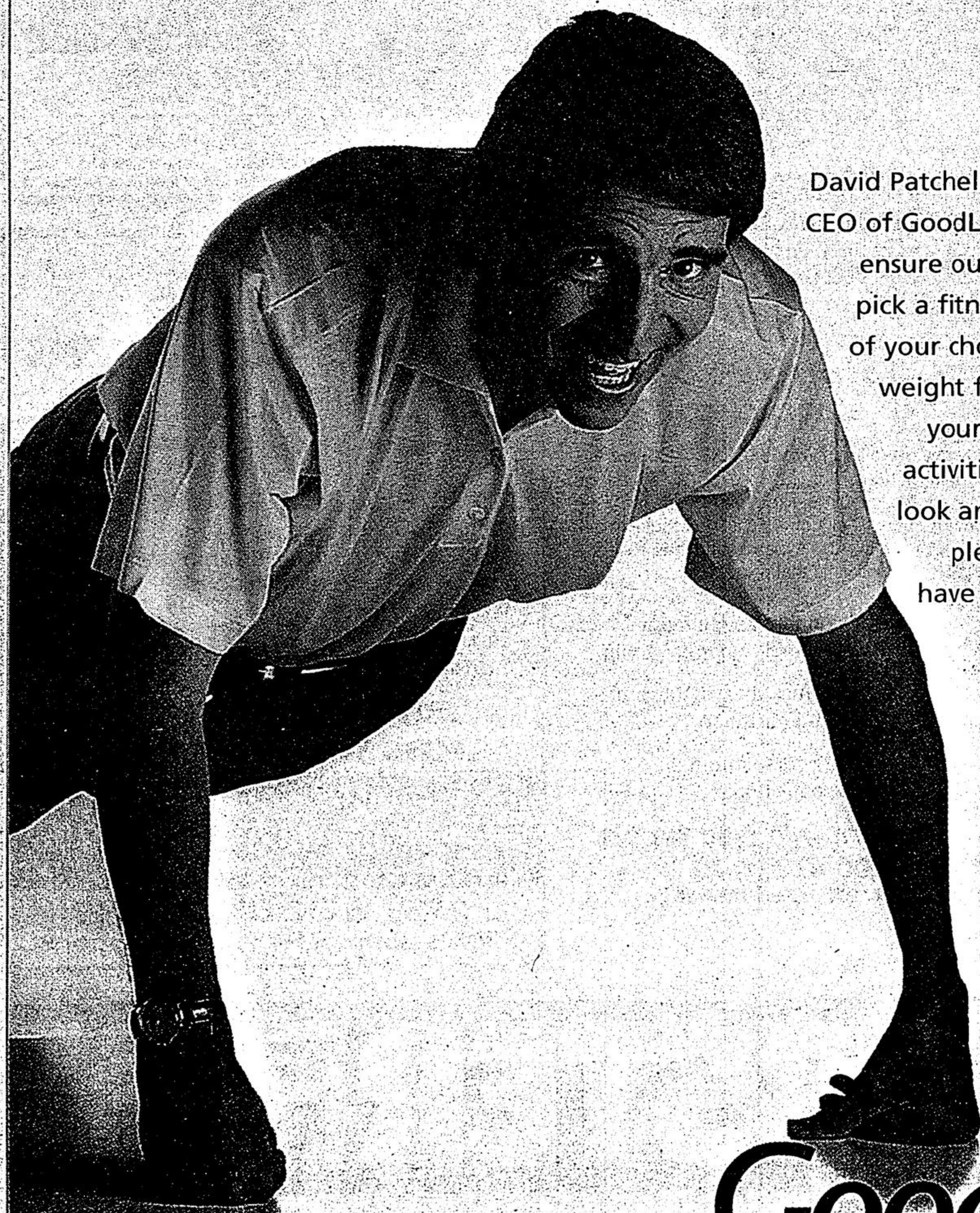
"Crops are certainly going to be down unless we get some serious rain soon," he said.

York North MPP Julia Munro agreed the funding will provide much-needed stability to York Region farmers.

"We know that the farmers ... have been hurting for some time," she said.

No details on how the funds are to be disbursed have yet been released.

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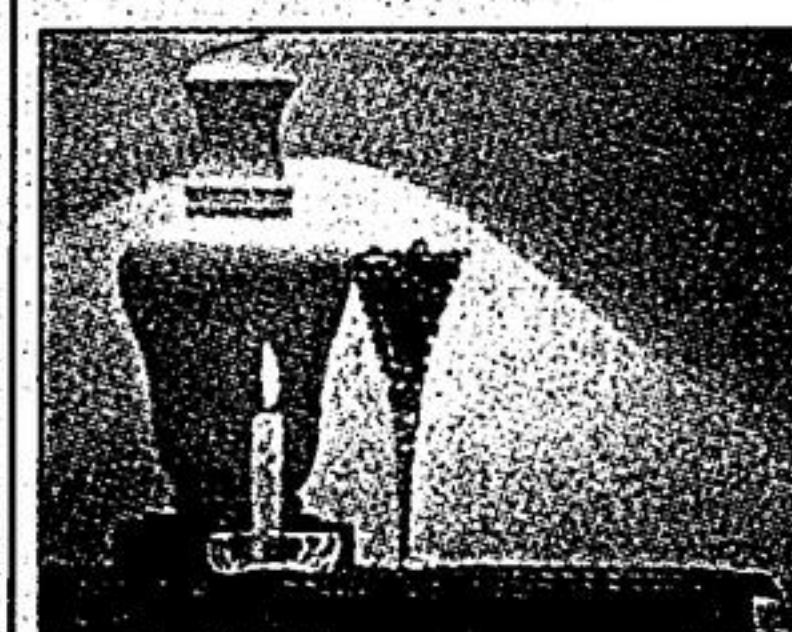
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