

We can save our farms

By LARRY MCGUIRE

COMMENTARY

The Island family farm crisis is claiming more victims, and in a very real sense, farmers are the victims in this crisis.

Consumers are becoming more aware that the family farm crisis does not have its causes on the farm. Farmers do not produce the wrong product, nor are they producing them in the wrong way. At every link in the agri-food business, huge profits are being made except at the farm gate. Non-farmers have learned how to make lots of money from farming.

Every link in the agri-food chain, with the exception of the farm link, is dominated by a small number of transnational corporations. Oil, gas, diesel, nitrogen fertilizer, chemicals, seeds, farm machinery — everywhere farmers look they are faced with concentration and corporate monopolies.

The lack of producer market power and producers' inability to demand fair prices or to drive down costs is the real cause of the family farm crisis. Huge corporations in the agri-food business are making billions of dollars in profit. But those profits are not at the family farm gate. This imbalance in market power between farmers who operate in a very competitive world and the agri-food transnational monopolies is the cause of the family farm crisis.

If governments, both provincial and federal, insist that they are helpless against the agri-food corporations, then I have some suggestions that are within the control and the mandates of their governments. Some ideas are old, some are new, but if action is taken they will improve family farm net incomes dramatically. In other words, governments can do something if only they have the political will to do so.

1. A large cash investment is essential. Our high-tech sectors are receiving a cash infusion of \$290 million with the 'hopes' of new jobs being created. At the very least, half of this amount can be invested to save the thousands of jobs that are generated by agriculture. And in so doing, rural Prince Edward Island will survive.

2. Legislate a moratorium on farm foreclosures for a period of three years. This includes banks, the P.E.I. Lending Agency, the Business Development Corporation, and the Farm Credit Corporation. The moratorium should be on principal and interest.

3. Legislate a freeze on payments of property tax on farmland and farm buildings.

4. Decrease the amount of income required to qualify for a farm tax number. Part-time and small farmers have suffered a loss in income due to lower prices and many have lost their tax number. Let us rectify this situation.

5. Legislate the creation of a farmer's co-operative in order to create an 'input manufacturers' co-op and a 'buying co-op'. Seeds, fertilizer, chemicals, farm machinery, gas, oil, diesel — take the control of these away from transnational corporations and you will see a return to profitable farming.

6. Legislate the formation of a co-operative land bank. This co-op would buy land from farmers who want to sell or to retire. The farmer would be paid competitive prices and the land bank would lease the land to smaller

farmers or smaller co-ops on the basis of guaranteed agricultural land use. This land co-op would be aimed at preventing further accumulation of land by corporations or large farms. The control, ownership, and use of our land is imperative. If the present trend continues and banks and governments take land in foreclosures and tax sales and then sell this land to the highest bidder, then I have great fears that the Island will revert back to the days of 'absentee landlords'.

7. Legislate a supply management system for hogs, beef, and potatoes. Exports, free trade, and globalization have failed Island farmers. If we focus on the relative stability of egg, poultry, and dairy farms, if we focus on domestic and local markets, this will help greatly to ease the farm income crisis.

Governments in Ottawa and Charlottetown will say all these moves are contrary to free trade and the World Trade Organization. I answer by saying how does Quebec do so well in protecting its farmers?

How does the European Union do so well in protecting its farmers? And why is it that American farmers are coming off their best five years in farming when Canadian farmers are coming off their five worst years? The answer is simple. The Americans, the Europeans, and Quebec stand up for their farmers.

8. Assist, in every way possible, small and organic farms to continue to earn premium prices for their products. Organic farming and farmers markets have an ever-increasing role to play.

9. We need an 'ecology before economics' farm policy. Farmers have to back away from the heavy reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. We can not fall into the trap that more of the same technology that helped get us into the mess in the first place is the way out of the mess. More chemical fertilizer will not increase soil fertility. More antibiotics will not make healthier animals, and more chemicals will not make our crops free from weeds and insects.

10. The end game must have as its goal that family farmers will be guaranteed their costs of production, plus decent returns on labour, management, and investments. Right now there is a food crisis in the world, especially in food supply and food distribution. The supply of food for the entire world is for less than 60 days. Global warming is making many food-producing areas of the world barren and desert-like. If Prince Edward Island loses its ability to produce food we will be having our own food crisis at our own front door.

Larry McGuire of Morell was born and raised on a farm.

