

Agricultural Production in PEI: Hope for the Future

Excerpts from a presentation by Steven MacKinnon at
the Citizen Hearing on Food Issues, 2004

All of us, both farmers and consumers, have lost control over our food system. There are many business interests and policy makers who have taken almost total control of the food system. They stand between farmers and consumers to such a degree that there is a wide gap between us. Consumers now rarely see the farmer. They mostly just see the grocery store.

We have seen a drastic reduction in the number of family farms on PEI over the last 35 years. For example, in 1920, we had more than 2,700 dairy farms; in 1980, we had 981; today, we have about 256. We have also seen most small family-run grocery stores disappear and be replaced by two major food chains.

The government has allowed big business to use agriculture to make huge amounts of profit at the expense of small family farms and the food security of all Canadians. In 1969, a new agricultural policy was drawn up for Canada mainly by people sympathetic to big business. This policy, *Canadian Agriculture in the Seventies: The Report of the Task Force on Agriculture*, was implemented in PEI through the Comprehensive Development Plan and was founded on the notion that bigger is better and that family farms are no longer relevant. Thirty years later, this policy has been very successful. Food is seen by big business and government in terms of profit only.

Another nail in the coffin of small farms has been the Free Trade Agreement. The Canadian government's promotion of free trade convinced many farmers that they would thrive with open borders and indeed, we have tripled our agricultural exports. But between 1990 and 2002, we lost 16% of Canadian farms and Canadian farm debt has gone from 22 billion to 44 billion dollars.

So, farmers are definitely worse off and consumers didn't receive any benefits. The winners were banks, multi-national corporations, and large agricultural businesses. Some negative effects of these policies include the following: environmental problems, poorer food quality, factory farms, fewer family farms, weaker rural communities with very little structure, a disconnection of the general population from the land and food production, very little profit for small family farms, large margins for big business, and a smaller tax base to pay for education, health care, roads, etc.

We cannot continue down this road. We need to be conscious of how our decisions affect our food security, family farms, and our community. We cannot change the past, but we can learn from it. There will never be an easier or less expensive time to do it than right now. And I mean today.

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The good news is that it's still not too late to turn things around. But what is first needed is a conscious change of attitude. Yes, we still have to pressure politicians to do the right thing, but in my experiences, I have never really seen much leadership in government. So, if you want a cleaner and safer environment, healthier food, stronger communities, a larger tax base, a future for your children, better paying jobs, a feeling of connection and belonging, and the building of trust, then each of us—myself included—must make decisions in our everyday life that will reflect this. One of our most powerful tools is our almighty dollar. We must be aware of where our dollars are going.

There are many ways for this to happen. The following is only one example:

Interested people would come together and define their goals, such as to support small family farms, to foster a more sustainable and healthy environment, to obtain better quality food, and to build a stronger community. They would then identify the family farms in or near the community that were capable and willing to work with them to reach those goals. Next, the group would determine its need for food and work with the farms to arrange for its provision. They would develop markets for food such as beef, pork, potatoes, vegetables, etc. The arrangements could also grow to include firewood, lumber, compost, tractor work (working up home gardens, snow blowing, etc.), and other goods and services.

Can you imagine if the money spent by the people in a community could be kept in that community, and if this caught on in all the communities on PEI—how different the place we live in would look compared to what we see today? There would be a much brighter future for us and our children. And, probably one of the most important things that we would regain is a true community spirit.

So the question we are left with is not whether or not things *can* be changed for the better, but whether or not *you* are willing to make it happen.