

December 22, 2011

Where is the Truth?

"In the hope that our elected leaders will begin to speak the truth about the causes of the farm crisis, in the hope that those leaders will have the courage to act in accord with that truth and in the hope that agribusiness will be restrained from its plunder of our farms and communities" – so ends the 2005 National Farmers Union Report on the Farm Crisis & Corporate Profits.

Over this past year, our federal government has shown over and over again its willingness to provide multinational agribusiness with the tools it needs to further plunder our family farms and rural communities. In the process the government has not only neglected to speak the truth, but it has continuously worked to undermine the democratic pillars of our society.

Where is the truth about the loss of family farms when our government is willing to place structures which give farmers collective power, like supply management, on the table in trade negotiations? Or when they use trade deals to add precautionary seizure provisions for alleged infringement to intellectual property rights' enforcement? In a 2011 report on agriculture in Ontario, the NFU showed that over the last 16 years supply managed sectors have received much more of their income from the marketplace. Over the same time period, program payments have shifted dramatically towards the largest farms. In 1995, the largest farms received 6% of program payments, in 2008 they received 26% of program payments.

Farmers working collectively, through a single desk or a marketing board, to negotiate prices are able to force more of the money in the food chain down into farmers' pockets. On the other hand, program payments are much more likely to flow from citizens to farmers and on to multinational input suppliers or to traders and buyers who are able to pay farmers less. Supply management does not benefit multinational dairy and chicken processors but it is key to the survival of family farms and rural communities.

Where is the truth about the struggles faced by farmers who sell to niche and direct markets when regulations are harmonized under the Beyond the Border agreement with the U.S? Or when the Minister of Agriculture, Hon. Gerry Ritz, suggests the need for a low-level presence (LLP) policy to protect the export market for Ontario soybeans? The harmonization of regulations and an LLP policy are for the benefit of corporations – making it easier for them to make money in Canada, by sidestepping our own regulatory regime and by forcing Canadians to rely on the regulatory decisions of other countries. Ontario farmers have long known how to protect export markets for non-GE soybeans, having successfully done so since the introduction of round-up ready soys. Harmonizing regulations not only makes our own regulatory regime irrelevant, but it is key to the 'one-size-fits-all' regulatory approach that undermines family farms, small and medium scale processing and local food initiatives.

Where is the truth when farm youth decide to seek careers elsewhere, while our government tramples the democratic rights of family farmers by firing the farmer-elected board and pushing through legislation to destroy the Canadian Wheat Board? Or when trade deals like the Canada-Europe Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, which limit the powers of our elected officials to act on our behalf, are negotiated behind closed doors?

If our elected leaders are not going to speak the truth about why family farms are disappearing then, as farmers and citizens, we need to speak the truth to each other. We need to talk to each other about the profits multinational agribusiness corporations are making from our farms and about how our governments are giving them the tools to extract even greater profits. We need to have the courage to speak up and demand that our governments and our farm organizations act in the interests of family farms and rural communities first. We need to use our collective power, as farmers and eaters, to push back at the plunder of our family farms and our rural communities.

Ann Slater is an NFU Region 3 (Ontario) national board member and the NFU Region 3 coordinator. She farms near St. Marys, Ontario.

Contact: Ann Slater, [519-349-2448](tel:519-349-2448) or aslater@quadro.net