

## Keeping Control of Our Farmland

As any farmer knows, making money by actually farming land is often a long shot and if your farming operation is backed by a group of foreign investors, it is unlikely simply growing and selling crops will generate the return your investors expect. In 2006, The Highland Companies backed by the Boston-based Baupost Group hedge fund, arrived in Melancthon Township with a plan to become the largest potato farming operation in Ontario – or at least that is what they said they were planning to do. It is no surprise that the real reason The Highland Companies was buying prime farmland in Melancthon Township was to remove and sell the much more valuable aggregates below the farmland. Afterall, the gross return on an acre of potatoes is in the neighbourhood of three to four thousand dollars, while the estimated value of the aggregates under the farmland is over three million dollars.

For the most part, in Ontario, the land our food is grown on is owned and controlled by the local farm families that work the land. However, across the world, there is a growing trend of farmland passing out of the hands of local farmers and into the hands of foreign governments, investment companies and corporations. The Highland Companies is not the only company buying prime farmland in Ontario with the intent to develop the land rather than produce food. The loss of local community control over valuable farmland can have potentially disastrous consequences for our sovereignty, our economy and our environment along with our food supply.

Like investors hoping to gain control of farmland in other parts of the world, The Highlands Companies came to Melancthon Township with deep pockets. The \$8000 per acre offered to farmers was 30% higher than the going rate at the time. Faced with a farm income crisis, high input costs and heavy debt loads, it is easy to understand why some farmers made the decision to sell. When wealthy investors push land prices up, local farmers wanting to purchase a new farm or to expand their operation end up shut out of the market and land continues to flow into the hands of profit-motivated investors from outside the community.

The National Farmers Union 2010 report, 'Losing our Grip: How a Corporate Farmland Buy-up, Rising Farm Debt and Agribusiness Financing of Inputs Threaten Family Farms and Food Sovereignty', suggests that the Canadian model of numerous, relatively stable and autonomous family farm operations independent with, and interlinked to, communities is being dismantled at an accelerating rate. One of the recommendations in the report, is for provincial governments to enact land ownership restrictions wherein farmland can only be owned by individuals who reside in the province in which the land is located, or by incorporated farming operations owned by individuals who reside in the province.

The proposed mega-quarry in Melancthon Township has caught the attention of both rural and urban people concerned about its impact on our water, our air and our environment and the loss of prime farmland to development pressures. With the Ontario election around the corner, the awareness of this mega-quarry provides us all with the opportunity to have discussions on the importance and value we place on farmland and food sovereignty.

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