



## COMMENTARY

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### “The Voice of Manitoba Farmers”

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## Manitoba's Rural Infrastructure

*By Ian Wishart, KAP President - Cell: 856-6964*

It seems every time you turn around, rural Manitoba loses another piece of grain handling or transportation infrastructure. Arborg saw the loss of the Viterra elevator in April, and as of September 12, Canadian National Railway (CN) will no longer deliver producer cars to nine of their loading sites. The future of these sites is still in question, but if they are salvaged it could be a huge loss for producers who want to ship their own grain in the future.

There was one very positive event in June. That was when the Boundary Trail Railway Company (BTRC) began operating, with the shipment of 73 producer cars of wheat for area producers. BTRC is the first producer-owned short line railway in Manitoba and its successful launch has prompted farmers around the Interlake and near Rathwell and Nesbitt to assess the possibility of purchasing their own community owned and operated railway lines.

As farmers are well aware, our system for shipping grain has changed dramatically within one generation. The same quest for efficiency that has driven producers to farm more acres with larger equipment drives grain companies and the railways to focus their service at large throughput elevators and the main rail lines. The problem is that this has forced farmers to truck grain further and further as more of their local elevators disappear. This takes a toll on the roads in our rural communities as well as our bottom lines when it adds to our fuel costs. If the high fuel prices we saw last year are any indication, we can expect to see this cost continue to rise in the near future. Another consideration related to losing rail service is the increased environmental impact of burning fuel to truck our grain to buyers situated further away from our operations.

For those farming on the Prairies, our success is tied to our ability to efficiently market and transport our grain to overseas customers. Because of this fact, it is time that we as a farm community step up and take responsibility for preserving the infrastructure that will allow us to ship our grain as fuel prices eventually increase. At a recent meeting to discuss the viability of farmers purchasing the CP line from Rathwell to Nesbitt, BTRC President, Kevin Friesen, made it clear that positive community support is the most critical requirement if a producer-owned short line is to succeed.

The railways and grain companies also have a responsibility to aid in this process. These companies have been a big part of our communities for a long time and their growth and long term viability is connected to the general economic stability of our farms. We

understand that due to the structure of their operations they may not be able to profitably operate using branch line infrastructure. Simply put, let us do it then.

All levels of government also have a significant economic interest in preserving rail line infrastructure because they must pick up the tab to cover road construction and maintenance costs due to increased grain truck traffic. Also, a large chunk of taxpayers' dollars were invested in these resources, and protecting them for the public's good is a moral responsibility of government.

Looking to the future, as farmers re-invest in their local infrastructure they need a strong commitment from the railways to provide a level of service that is workable. Also we would like to see federal and provincial governments support farmers in these initiatives through policy as well as access—which we saw with BTRC. Farmers looking to create short line operations should be looking for that support as well.

Keystone Agricultural Producers is Manitoba's largest general farm policy organization, representing over 7,000 farm families and 22 commodity groups throughout the province. Our strength is our democratic structure, and our mission is to represent and promote the interests of the province's farm families.