

Keystone Agricultural Producers



Bill 14

The Water Rights Amendment Act

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Presented by:

Ian Wishart
Keystone Agricultural Producers

1-1313 Border Street
Winnipeg, MB
R3H 0X4

Phone: 204-697-1140
Fax: 204-697-1109
Email: kap@kap.mb.ca

The Voice of Manitoba Farmers

On behalf of Keystone Agricultural Producers (KAP), I am pleased to share our organization's position with respect to Bill 14 – The Water Rights Amendment Act. KAP is a democratically controlled general farm policy organization representing and promoting the interest of thousands of agricultural producers in Manitoba. Our membership consists of farmers and commodity groups throughout the province, and our organization is proud to act as the voice of Manitoba farmers. The increasing rights and responsibilities afforded to Water Stewardship enforcement officers are a concern to our members for a number of reasons, which we wish to highlight in this presentation.

If officers are allowed on farms without permission or knowledge from the owner, KAP believes this power will destroy any spirit of cooperation that may exist between department officials and the public. Goodwill and cooperation is essential for the department of Water Stewardship to communicate with farmers and the public. Enforcement officers carrying sidearms and trespassing on private property is no way to foster good relations.

Other unintended consequences of Officers being on farm property without the owners permission may be the unknowing transfer of animal diseases or noxious weeds from one farm to another, and this could have a serious impact on individual farms as well as the entire industry.

Would the Department assume the full liability as a result? Biosecurity issues must be given high priority, and we recommend

that the Department of Water Stewardship consult with farmers and farm organizations on ways to mitigate these risks before passing this bill.

The amendment also draws a parallel to the introduction of previous water-enforcement officers from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which was generally not positively received by the farming community. When DFO officers were given similar rights to enter farms unannounced to conduct inspections, they were also given the right to carry sidearms. While the role of these officers has been scaled back, the negative impression remains strong in the farming community

We are concerned that, by introducing officers with the sweeping powers proposed, the government may unintentionally make a connection in farmers' minds between these water-enforcement officers and those that previously came on-farm unannounced, carrying guns. While not specifically referenced by this amendment, KAP must also strongly urge government to not allow these officers to carry sidearms. Ultimately, KAP believes that this will have a serious negative effect on farmers' perception of the department and the role of the enforcement officers and could put our shared goals of environmental protection at risk.

While KAP recognizes the enforcement role that these officers must play, we believe that the Act must allow for the officers to work constructively with farmers and landowners. Some of the rights

afforded under these amendments could jeopardize this relationship before the officers are even out on the landscape, and this must be recognized and addressed by government. KAP recommends that a comprehensive education campaign be undertaken to inform farmers about the role of water enforcement officers, and to ensure that the officers themselves are adequately trained about agricultural considerations, like biosecurity. They should also be encouraged to work cooperatively with landowners whenever possible.

As members of the committee are aware, KAP continues to put a high priority on water quality issues. We believe that the vast majority of Manitoba farmers will never have a water enforcement officer coming on-site to investigate a complaint or infraction. However, we also believe that government must be aware of the existing perceptions and concerns of the farming community so that these officers can fill their role in a way that is accepted and supported by farmers and landowners.

Thank you.