



## COMMENTARY

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## Parties Must Deal With Rural Transportation

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*This is the second in a series of four columns on agricultural election issues put forward by Ian Wishart, President of Keystone Agricultural Producers.*

As the federal election date draws near, political party leaders are out on the campaign trail—jetting around, riding the rails, and putting kilometers on tour buses. They’ve booked high-quality, reliable modes of transportation in order to get them from point A to point B because they’ve got busy schedules, and only the best service will do.

Unlike campaigning politicians, producers don’t have the luxury of choosing from a long list of options when it comes to transportation of goods in and out of their rural communities. What they do have is a list of concerns about shipping their products by rail and truck, and following this election they want to see their transportation needs addressed.

With changes to grain handling and transportation systems, producers must transport their grain greater distances by truck. This puts increased pressure on highway infrastructure, but there has not been enough government funding invested in upgrading and maintaining road systems. The expansion of other agriculturally-based industries such as renewable fuel production means there are going to be more trucks on the roads, and the infrastructure must be ready to handle the increased traffic. Producers would like to see more of the dollars collected from excise taxes on fuel funneled back into infrastructure, specifically “grain roads.” This is vital to agriculture in Western Canada and the next government must make it a priority.

When producers in Manitoba ship their products by rail, they are a captive market due to serious issues including rail line abandonment, increasing costs, and poor service. Producers and other agricultural stakeholders across Canada need access to quality rail service, and it is up to the next government to take steps to ensure rail infrastructure and service meets the needs of the sector.

Producers can’t afford to settle for poor rail service because it ultimately results in lower returns and fewer market opportunities. That’s why they want full participation in the level of service review that is in progress and expected to span two years. They also want the government to perform a full costing review of the freight rate and revenue cap.

The basis of the revenue cap is formed by cost figures that have not been reviewed since 1992. This is a concern because the rail transportation landscape has changed dramatically over time due to increased efficiencies, fewer kilometers of track, and fewer grain shipping terminals. Producers are overpaying for poor rail service and the revenue cap must be opened to greater scrutiny and revision.

It's clear that transportation is a top issue for producers, and before the vote on October 14, they should take the opportunity to speak to candidates about plans for increased efficiency and accountability in Canada's rail and road systems.

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.