



COMMENTARY

“The Voice of Manitoba Farmers”

203-1700 Ellice Ave. ~ Winnipeg MB ~ R3H 0B1

ph: (204) 697-1140 ~ fax: (204) 697-1109

kap@kap.mb.ca ~ www.kap.mb.ca

Growing Forward One Step at a Time

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By Ian Wishart, KAP President. Cell: (204) 856-6964.

February seems to be a month for meetings and consultations. Keystone Agricultural Producers (KAP) will be consulting with federal and provincial governments about the new *Growing Forward* programs, which are going to replace the current Agricultural Policy Framework (APF). Whatever is developed for *Growing Forward* will set a course for how agriculture moves forward over the next five years.

The priority for governments should be including farmers and farm groups in a meaningful consultation, where producers' voices are heard. Even beyond that, the most important step is for them to take the feedback from producers and actually incorporate it into *Growing Forward*. While the APF did have some successes, there were also failures -- and these were identified by farm groups in the earliest stages of our APF “consultations”.

This round of consultations is meant to help identify some of the gaps that still exist, and to show how *Growing Forward* is meant to address them. Farmers will also notice a different approach in *Growing Forward*. Instead of the APF's five “pillars,” we're now seeing three broad categories based on outcomes: business risk management, best practices, and innovation & competitiveness.

We know what's coming ahead in business risk management, since that's already been announced. Best practices should include programs individual producers relating to environment, biosecurity, or on-farm food safety and traceability. Innovation and competitiveness would focus more on sectors and commodities, and research, development, and marketing. Government's goal is to create a one-stop-shop that would streamline administration and put a number of programs all under one umbrella.

One of the major complaints about the APF was that the programs weren't bankable, timely, and predictable. They were not connected to one another, and they were often poorly communicated to farmers.

Consultations are still on the go, and one of the major questions is still unanswered: Who will deliver the *Growing Forward* programs? There may be real savings if some are administered jointly under the “best practices” category – especially if it means that farmers have better access to more dollars from different programs.

The one area where we are still concerned is the administration of environmental farm plans. The current structure is separate from government, so the confidentiality of a farmer's information is protected. The board that oversees EFPs is farmer-directed, another reason that producers support it. To change this structure, or to roll it into another government program, would be a step backward from the successes that EFPs have had in Manitoba.

It's clear that there is still a lot left to be done before *Growing Forward* is ready to move forward. KAP will continue to put farmers' opinions on the forefront, and help to keep our members informed about the new programs and what they might mean for our farms.