



COMMENTARY

“The Voice of Manitoba Farmers”

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Ministers' Meeting Needs Decisions

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Canada's federal, provincial and territorial agriculture ministers are meeting in Quebec City in early July, and this is the meeting where rubber will have to hit the road if we're going to have any hope of the new *Growing Forward* programs being in place for April, 2009. While the business risk management programs like *AgriInvest*, *AgriStability* and *AgriInsurance* have been put in place for this year, there are still gaping holes in the framework that need to be filled with real programs.

Otherwise, farmers can only expect another five-year framework that will only be able to deliver three years of programming, once all the governmental decisions are made and staff are directed to develop and implement. We can only hope that governments have learned from that negative experience, and are willing to move ahead so that we can actually hit the ground running with programs that are defined, readily available, and well communicated to farmers.

Despite all of the challenges within the previous Agricultural Policy Framework, one of the great success stories in Manitoba was the Environmental Farm Plan. Thousands of farmers took workshops and committed to making positive changes on the farm. EFPs triggered millions of dollars in environmental investment from producers across the province. Now, time is running out. All of the governments' share of money for producers to implement beneficial management practices has been allocated for this year, and it doesn't appear likely that any more is coming.

If there is a gap in EFP programming, we are extremely concerned that the entire process will lose momentum in Manitoba. Right now, farmers are engaged in the process and are willing to invest the time and money to participate. If governments can't get their ducks in a row on time, it weakens and erodes some of the credibility of the program. Since EFPs were introduced in our province, the Farm Stewardship Association of Manitoba -- run by a board with strong farmer representation -- has been a trusted environmental partner for producers, and this can't be lost in the shuffle.

The future of EFPs is just one question that ministers will need to resolve as part of their discussions on *Growing Forward*. They'll also have to give direction relating to research, food safety, innovation and how national programs can be adapted to meet regional needs.

But, *Growing Forward* is just one area that needs ministerial attention. Ministers will have to look at the financial crunch in the hog and cattle sector, ongoing WTO negotiations, expanding environmental programs to include things like Alternative Land Use Services, carbon offset trading for agriculture, the changes to Made in Canada labeling, and how to address the continual surge in input costs.

No doubt it will be a full agenda. Farmers should be watching the ministers' report from their meeting very closely to see whether we'll actually be growing forward in 2009 or just spinning

our wheels while the details of all these issues are being sorted out by governments and their staff.