



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

Keeping WCB Coverage Voluntary for Ag

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

The issue of workers' compensation coverage is just another 'iron in the fire' for Keystone Agricultural Producers. This spring, the Workers' Compensation Board began a consultation process to look at expanding mandatory coverage into new sectors and agriculture is on the list. While we put a high priority on making farms as safe as possible for farmers, their employees, and their families, KAP does not believe that mandatory WCB coverage will achieve that goal.

We all know that the family farm is a very unique workplace in comparison to almost all other industries, because it's where we work and where we live. Because of this, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution. Our focus has to be on continually improving safety, but a 2004 report by Deloitte Inc. found no correlation between WCB coverage and improved safety.

Education and awareness programs are the key to building a stronger safety culture on Manitoba's farms. Because every farm is different, we think that voluntary self-assessments and assistance to develop farm safety policy plans are two positive approaches that work with the individual farm's needs.

Farmers do currently have the option to take WCB coverage, and some farmers have found this to be an appropriate tool. However, other farmers have opted to subscribe to private insurance programs. KAP believes it should be a farmer's decision to select the approach that works best. Many of the private programs extend a worker's coverage for 24 hours, as opposed to just the hours of work, and this can be a greater benefit to the worker than WCB.

Agriculture is also in a time of change, and we don't believe that now is the appropriate time to add WCB into the mix. Changes to the Employment Standards Code have just been implemented for farm workers, and more certification programs for pesticide and manure applicators have also been put in place. With this increased training, we should expect fewer injuries on the farm.

KAP believes that farmers need the appropriate education and resource materials to improve safety, and organizations like the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association have

a wealth of resources and access to expertise. We remain committed to promoting the message of farm safety using all available avenues.

There is a role for WCB to play. By better communicating the advantages of its products and customizing the options to meet the needs of agriculture, it may increase the uptake and acceptance by farmers without resorting to mandatory coverage.

It is crucial that farmers be given options for employee insurance and protection. KAP's preferred approach is one where government, farm groups and farmers work together. While we are opposed to mandatory workers' compensation for agriculture, we strongly believe that education, self-management, and training will help to improve safety for farmers, farm families, and farm employees.