

**Built by generations of farmers, the Canadian Wheat Board
must not be lost to right-wing ideology**

Op Ed by Terry Boehm

The Canadian Wheat Board at its most basic level is Western Canadian wheat and barley farmers' marketing agency. Farmers pay for its operations and direct it through a majority of farmer elected directors (ten are elected and five are appointed by the government). There is no cost to the government. All it requires to function for farmers' and Canadians' advantage is legislation that grants the authority to market wheat and barley through a single desk.

Essentially what the single desk means is that buyers of Western Canadian wheat and barley must deal with the CWB. This allows CWB to capture price premiums for farmers in the global and domestic market place. All returns go directly to farmers with the exception of a small operating fee. Payments to farmers are generally based on pooled or averages of all sales and payments are made throughout the year. Multiple peer-reviewed economic studies have proven that through the single desk of the CWB farmers earn more and by extension the Canadian economy as a whole benefits. The CWB gives farmers market power in an international grain trade dominated by less than a handful of giant multinational grain companies.

Gerry Ritz and Steven Harper have declared they will end the CWB single desk on August 1, 2012. Let's be clear: this will be the end of the CWB. They will be recklessly turning the clock back one hundred years, leaving farmers at the hands of the robber barons of the grain trade who are now even more powerful.

The Canadian Wheat Board is 75 years old, but it had an even earlier genesis. During the First World War the Canadian Government created a Wheat Board to deal with the run up of grain prices and the inability of the private trade to deal with the situation. Farmers earned unprecedented amounts at that time. In 1920 the government disbanded the board and grain prices collapsed. Farmers agitated for its reinstatement to no avail. These same farmers created the Progressive Party, and a central part of its agricultural platform was to re-establish a wheat board. During the mid twenties sixty-nine Progressives were elected federally. The Liberal government of Mackenzie-King absorbed many of them by the late 'twenties. Those who refused to be co-opted became members of the Ginger Group that led to the formation of the CCF, later to become the NDP. Meanwhile farmers formed the Wheat Pools and created a central selling agency to market their grain. This agency collapsed with the onset of the grain depression in the 1930s. The single desk CWB was part of the R.B. Bennett Conservative platform in the 1935 Federal Election. He lost, but the Liberals instituted the CWB, and in 1943 it was marketing wheat, oats and barley through the single desk.

CWB orderly marketing and single desk selling bring hundreds of millions of dollars to farmers in premiums each year. It also brings several times this amount in benefits by acting as farmer advocate: putting a hold on freight rates for all grains and making sure blending, despatch, foreign currency trades and premiums go directly to farmers.

Harper and Ritz will end all of this and transfer these benefits and funds to some of the richest corporations of the world. They call this "marketing choice" and "freedom". Companies like ADM, Bunge, Cargill, Louis Dreyfus and way down the list, Viterra, will capture the premiums for themselves and likely dilute the quality of Canadian grain, as we have seen in Australia where they disbanded the Australian Wheat Board in 2006. Harper and Ritz are acting on ideology alone without even any knowledge of what the CWB does. Harper then campaigns that he is the best one to manage the economy.

The current CWB Act requires a farmer vote before any grains are removed or added in whole or in part to CWB purview (section 47.1). Ritz and Harper are refusing to allow farmers to decide about the future of the single desk and are afraid to allow democracy to function. They know that the vast majority of farmers support the single desk and that farmers have consistently elected pro single desk directors since 1998. One also needs to understand that for years now the Harper government has imposed a gag order, disallowing the CWB from speaking about the advantages of the single desk and of the CWB itself. The CWB is an institution that allows Western farmers some form of economic justice for the fruits of their labour. Steven Harper wants to destroy that and our Canadian sense of democracy in this fight. We must not let him get away with this! We need to all fight for this cause and for all that it represents!