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In Union Is Strength

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AAFC Science and Innovation framework offers little for farmers

Farmers need a “fair share of the food dollar” – not more expensive technology, says Colleen Ross, Women’s President of the National Farmers Union (NFU). She pointed out that farmers are not suffering from a lack of efficiency or scientific innovations, but from a lack of income and market power.

Ross made the comment after attending the “National Symposium on Science and Innovation” in Gatineau, Quebec recently. The symposium was sponsored by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC), and marked the culmination of a cross-Canada series of consultations on a “Science and Innovation Framework”. According to federal Agriculture Minister Andy Mitchell, the goal of the strategy is to ensure Canada’s science investments “equip everyone involved in Canada’s agri-food chain to remain globally competitive.” (www.agr.gc.ca/cb/index_e.php?s1=n&s2=2005&page=n51122) The symposium attracted large numbers of AAFC scientists, academics, industry and commodity board representatives, but very few farmers.

But Ross said farmers’ reward for embracing high-cost, high-tech production methods has been record low farm incomes. Meanwhile, profits of agribusiness corporations are at record high levels. She said the so-called national strategy on Science and Innovation developed by the AAFC bureaucracy offers nothing new.

One of the main architects of the federal strategy is Gaétan Lussier, a former President of Weston Bakeries Quebec (1988-1994), former president of Culinar Inc (now part of Saputo Inc), and a former federal and Quebec Deputy Minister of Agriculture. Most recently, Lussier was appointed head of the External Advisory Committee on Smart Regulation (EACSR), a task force charged with harmonizing Canadian legislation and regulations with those of the United States and other major trading partners.

The push for harmonization was a central theme of the symposium, according to Ross. “Many speakers called for harmonizing standards to accommodate trade liberalization, more technologies in agriculture and a so-called ‘cultural shift’ aimed at lessening resistance to ‘foods with novel traits’. Certainly, the overall message was that AAFC is already doing everything right – that it just needs to partner more with industry, have less hoops to jump through for regulations of products, and gain greater public support.”

Ross said Lussier “set the tone” for the symposium, which failed to critically analyze the role of “science” in society or examine where the benefits of “innovation” end up. “Mr. Lussier, in an almost reverent tone, told the symposium that consumers in Canada need to ‘thank us (scientists) for our success in creating a low-cost food supply’,” said Ross. “There was no mention of farmers’ role in supplying that food.”

“Science and Innovation” is the latest “pillar” in the federal-provincial Agriculture Policy Framework (APF) to be activated. The NFU believes science and innovation should serve the public interest, with increased investment and maintenance in regional publicly-funded research facilities, including new hirings of research scientists, and increased public ownership of the research results,

While Andy Mitchell did acknowledge farmers are being squeezed financially, he failed to suggest practical solutions. Instead, he warned the industry representatives that “farmers are running low on durability – AAFC can attract the very best in science and innovation, but who is going to buy it?”

Ross pointed out that Mitchell went on to talk about the importance of a rules-based trading mechanism, market access and a marketing regime that creates a level playing field. Ironically, none of these suggestions were considered solutions in the recent “Empowering Canadian Farmers In the Marketplace” report which Mitchell himself commissioned, “Every initiative under the APF should use that report as both the foundation and the filter if farmers are ever going to be empowered in the Canadian marketplace,” she concluded.

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