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In Union Is Strength

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FEDERAL AG POLICY FRAMEWORK SHOULD INCLUDE WOMEN'S INPUT

Current federal agricultural policy must be changed to meet the needs of farm families in general and farm women in particular, according to a comprehensive research study prepared by the Women's Research Team of the National Farmers Union (NFU).

"Farm Women and Canadian Agricultural Policy", written by researchers Carla Roppel, Dr. Annette Desmarais and Dr. Diane Martz and funded by Status of Women Canada's Policy Research Fund, is now available on the federal Status of Women website:
http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubs/pubspr/0662430093/index_e.html

The study was initiated in June 2003 and included a series of six participatory workshops involving 105 farm women from across Canada. Annette Desmarais, a professor at the University of Regina and one of the authors of the study, noted, "Rural women found that trade liberalization, new technologies, off-farm jobs, increased debt, family pressures and the farm income crisis have impacted farm families negatively. They identified five key areas of concern, including:

1. the quality of life in rural communities;
2. health and environment;
3. the farm financial crisis;
4. increasing control over the food system by large corporations; and
5. government policy direction."

The report's recommendations call for changes to the federal agricultural policy framework aimed at strengthening the voices of farm families, solving the farm income crisis and bringing stability to rural communities.

"It is a critical report that comes at a time when government policy is becoming less transparent," said Colleen Ross, NFU Women's President. "Government is spending more time talking with so-called industry stakeholders but less time listening to actual farmers. Meaningful grassroots input into government policy development is rare. This report illustrates that government needs to create real connections to what is actually happening on farms in Canada today."

Wendy Manson, a farmer from Conquest, Saskatchewan and one of the participants in the research project, said: "Women's vision for agricultural policy rests on four pillars: financial stability; domestic food policy; safe healthy food and environment; and

strengthened social and community infrastructures.” She added that the agricultural policy that farm women envision “responds to the needs of their families and their communities, and addresses social, cultural and environmental aspects of life and community, as well as economic well-being.”

While women play a crucial role in the day to day operation of farms in Canada, this is not reflected in the aims and objectives of federal agricultural policy. Legislation and policy that is supposed to benefit farmers is actually doing the exact opposite. The study casts doubt on the federal government’s stated intention of achieving gender equity “at all levels” of policy decisions, as outlined in its document entitled “Setting the Stage for the Next Century: the Federal Plan for Gender Equality.”

“Women engaged in farming are keenly aware of the ramifications that trends in agriculture have on themselves, their families and their livelihoods,” concluded Ross. “They understand what works and what doesn’t. Their unique experiences and analysis are critical if we are to implement a positive long-term agricultural policy in Canada.”

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