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JANUARY 21, 2008

OMAFRA LIVESTOCK PROGRAM BIASED AGAINST DIVERSIFIED FARMS

The \$40 million livestock and horticulture assistance program recently announced by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) is biased against diversified family farms, says Grant Robertson, Ontario Coordinator of the National Farmers Union (NFU).

The Ontario Cattle, Hog and Horticulture Payment program stipulates that in order to be eligible, farmers must have “at least half of their total commodity sales from cattle, hogs and/or horticulture.”

Robertson said the program penalizes farmers who have diversified their production in an effort to respond to declining markets for livestock. “There are many farms that fail to qualify simply because beef no longer accounts for the majority of their income,” he stated. “They’re still losing just as much money on all their cows as everybody else in the conventional marketplace, but under these rules, they’re simply ignored.”

Because the price of beef and hogs have fallen sharply, the criteria of commodity sales should not be used as the benchmark for determining eligibility, said Robertson. “This program is biased against diversified family farms, and in favour of large, specialized intensive cattle and hog operations.

Robertson said the rules of the program appear to suggest that an operation which has even slightly more than half its eligible sales from beef or pork could receive assistance on overall farm sales regardless of commodity. If this is the case, it would be highly unfair to those family farms which do not qualify under the current criteria.

Robertson said the program must be altered to ensure that diversified family farm operations are not excluded from assistance simply because their income from beef or pork declined too much. Robertson has written to Ontario Agriculture Minister Leona Dombrowsky requesting a review of the program’s eligibility criteria.

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