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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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THE WESTERN PRAIRIE DROUGHT: ONE FAMILY'S STORY

SEXSMITH, Alta.—Neil Peacock and his family raise cattle on their ranch six miles from the Big Smoky River, near Grande Prairie in Northwest Alberta. But a punishing drought affecting his farm and many throughout north and central Alberta means that Neil may be forced out of cattle production, and forced to liquidate and disperse a cattle herd that his family have struggled to create and to adapt to the local conditions.

“My pastures are burnt down to dust—there is almost no grass. Recent rains have helped a bit, but it's too late for most of the pastures and most of the hay land. I'm out there baling hay, but I'm getting less than a quarter of what I'd usually get,” said Peacock.

Worse still, hay prices are rising and cattle are eating valuable hay at a time when they'd normally be eating grass. “Without pasture grass, I'm forced to feed hay in July and August. My total hay requirements this year will be up 60%, because I'll have to feed right through.” On top of that, prices are way up, and non-farmer ‘hay brokers’ are buying what hay does exist, counting on making a profit selling it to desperate farmers. “Unless something is done, there is no way I'll be able to afford to overwinter my herd on purchased hay,” said Peacock.

Neil is the third generation in his family to raise cattle in Alberta. Neil's herd is 90% purebred Pinzgauer cattle. “Most of the cattle herds in Canada are uniquely adapted to their place—to weather conditions, local feed, and demands of particular markets. If I'm forced to sell off my herd, that is a loss forever. It is extremely difficult or impossible to replace these cattle and these genetics,” said Peacock.

Drought conditions on the western prairies are setting records. Government of Canada drought maps (for example, see attached) show that large parts of Alberta are “record dry” (the red areas on the map). And most of the rest of Alberta and parts of western Saskatchewan have had “extremely low” or “very low” precipitation over the winter, spring, and summer.

Across the prairies, a cool, dry spring in most areas has meant hay crops that are below average, leading to tight hay supplies and rising and potentially volatile prices. Poor grain crop yields in drought-affected areas will mean a shortage of crop straw for winter bedding for cattle. And near-record low prices for cows and calves has left cattle ranchers and farmers financially-depleted and indebted and unable to shoulder the additional burden of buying high-cost feed.

“I'm looking at losing my herd, and a large part of my investment in my farm. The same is true for hundreds of families in Alberta and western Saskatchewan—many of whom could lose their farms entirely. If the farmers go and if we lose these near-irreplaceable herds, the whole cattle and beef sector will be damaged and weakened for years to come. Something has to be done here, and fast. This is a disaster,” concluded Peacock.

In addition to farming and working off-farm, Peacock holds a volunteer position as a National Farmers Union Board member. In that capacity, he is working to obtain assistance for all farmers hit by drought. Word of assistance from Ottawa, however, has so far not come. The NFU wrote to the federal Agriculture Minister on July 3 asking for swift action to help farmers hit by drought. **Today, in a follow-up letter, the NFU reminded the Minister that swift action is critical and asked for immediate and adequate aid to pay for hay purchases, hay trucking costs, and alternative pasture rentals for ranchers and farmers scorched by the drought.** Letter available by request.

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For More Information:

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Backgrounder to the NFU's August 6, 2009 news release

This drought map and similar ones are available and updated daily at:

http://www.agr.gc.ca/pfra/drought/pr_e.htm

