

Co-operative ethic builds better society, says outgoing NFU President

After 8 years at the helm of the National Farmers Union, outgoing NFU President Stewart Wells says he will always be committed to the ideals of the organization. “My head, my heart and my wallet will always remain with the NFU,” he told delegates to the national convention in Ottawa.

Wells said people are faced with the choice of two different ways of living. “The first paradigm is that of competition – which leads inevitably to domination, indifference and contempt,” he said. “This is the paradigm we know best because we’ve been living it for the last thirty years in agriculture. These terms epitomize the so-called business model that describes farmers and farming in Canada.”

This paradigm of competition has resulted, ironically, in a decrease in competition in the global marketplace as large corporations consolidate their monopoly power. One of the biggest companies, Monsanto, has recently instituted a blacklist – known as a “Violator Exclusion Policy” - that prohibits selected farmers from being able to access Monsanto’s seed and chemical products. “Under this system, Monsanto and other companies will quickly be able to decide who farms in Canada, and who doesn’t, under the conventional system,” stated Wells.

He noted that farmers in Canada are struggling under a \$60 billion debt load – equal to the debt of the entire Government of Canada. But the country’s 200,000 farmers are only earning \$125 million annually from the markets alone. “It would take 480 years to pay off that principle, even if you applied every cent of net farm income from agricultural production,” he said. “Clearly, it’s not sustainable.”

The second paradigm is that of co-operation – which encourages solidarity, compassion and respect. The NFU is an example of this second paradigm, Wells stated. “The golden age of farming in Canada extended from about 1945 to 1985 – a time when farmers’ marketing boards, grain handling cooperatives, supply-management agencies, co-operatives and credit unions, and farmers’ unions were very strong,” he said. “Forty years ago, provincial farmers’ unions came together to create the National Farmers Union. This was a natural extension of this paradigm of co-operation.”

He concluded that the ethic of cooperation will enable people to dedicate themselves to build a better Canada and to work towards a stronger farming community made up of family farmers.