



“Let them eat concrete”

Ontario’s farmers are fed up with the Greenbelt giveaways

—by Max Hansgen, NFU-O President

The Ontario government is delaying construction of affordable housing by doubling down on the Greenbelt scandal and gifting to even more developers the power to pave over the land that farmers need to grow food for the people of this province.

For this government, it is developers first and farmers, eaters, and the house poor last.

The members of the National Farmers Union — Ontario (NFU-O) are fed up with the ruse that a lack of land is the cause of the housing crisis. Successive government inaction — including the current government — to prevent farmland and housing speculation, encourage municipal density, build public housing, and enforce affordable housing targets for developers are the real reasons so many Ontarians can’t access affordable homes.

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Farmers and farmworkers have not only been negatively affected by soaring housing costs, we’ve also borne the brunt of developer speculation driving up farmland prices. We’ve watched neighbouring farms removed from the agricultural landscape at a staggering 319 acres per day. Farmland speculation threatens sustainable local food systems and has placed farm ownership out of reach for the next generation of farmers.

Instead of listening to farmers, Indigenous leaders, concerned citizens, a Housing Affordability Task Force (which included as a member the former Conservative leader, Tim Hudak), the auditor general, and the integrity commissioner — all of whom have disputed the need for sprawling development on agricultural and ecologically sensitive lands — the Ford government now insists their \$8.3 billion

developer giveaway was not enough. Instead of returning the 7,400 acres snatched from the Greenbelt they’ve decided that other deep-pocketed developers deserve a handout too.

As for the average, hard-working Ontarians that this government apparently cares so much about? In a twist on the famous phrase attributed to Marie Antoinette, Ford might as well be saying, “let them eat concrete.”

We have to disagree with Paul Calandra, Ontario’s new housing minister: this government has proven itself incapable of a viable plan to build 1.5 million homes while respecting our natural heritage and finite farmland.

As the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs told the auditor general, the land already removed from the Greenbelt “will lead to significant adverse impacts on agriculture.” And while the government embarks on another dubious process for further Greenbelt land removals, properties within pre-existing municipal boundaries sit dormant awaiting a competent government that knows how to do the right thing.

We reject a Greenbelt giveaway scheme that takes away scarce resources and skilled construction workers to build unattainable sprawl instead of livable communities.

Tinkering with a corrupt process is not being accountable and endorsing sprawling development is not affordable or sustainable.

A viable plan to deal with the housing crisis would focus on building affordable housing where people actually work and where community infrastructure already exists.

The NFU-O demands the government return the 7,400 acres of Greenbelt land and halt any process that erodes Greenbelt protections or threatens the province’s agricultural operations. ■

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Farmers unite to defeat Canadian Grain Commission's (CGC) unfair change to grading standards

On July 26, 2023 the National Farmers Union and the Wheat Growers Association (formerly called the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association) wrote a joint letter to newly-appointed federal Agriculture Minister MacAulay. We demanded action to reverse the Canadian Grain Commission's impending change to grain grading standards at country elevators that would have 'harmonized' primary and export standards for wheat as of August 1, 2023. Our letter followed an earlier joint statement by the Saskatchewan Wheat Development Commission (SaskWheat) and the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan (APAS) also objecting to the decision. On July 27, the CGC announced it was reversing its decision. No doubt this was due to the strong showing of unity across the political spectrum in farm country.

Had the change gone ahead, the negative impact on farmers' incomes would have been massive. Grain that met existing standards would have been given a lower grade, allowing grain companies to significantly increase their margins by paying less for wheat.

When a farmer brings wheat to the elevator, there are several different measurements (grading factors) that determine its grade. These include bushel weight, number of wheat kernels of other classes, total foreign material, and so on. Delivered grain must meet or exceed the specifications for each grading factor to receive a grade at the elevator. Higher grades obtain higher prices. Due to variations in growing conditions, and thus for wheat crop quality across the prairies, grain companies have the capacity to blend country deliveries to ensure the export standard is met when they assemble shipments at their port terminals. Thus, having benchmarks for country elevator grades slightly lower than the official export grades does not compromise quality standards for bulk wheat when it is loaded onto ships for export. The CGC's attempt to require export standards at country elevators would have allowed grain companies to reap all the economic benefit from blending shipments across the prairies by paying less for the same quality of grain. This would not

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affect the quality of export shipments – grain companies would have simply gained millions of dollars at the expense of farmers.

The *Canada Grain Act* mandates the CGC to regulate in the interests of grain producers. The CGC was ready to proceed with changing grading standards contrary to its mandate and in spite of opposition from virtually all the producers – farmers who take time away from their operations to provide their insight on behalf of prairie farmers – on the CGC's Western Standards Committee. The CGC was ready to proceed with the change even though it has been unable to provide historic cost-benefit analysis on the impacts of this change on either the producer or the grain handlers.

This situation illustrates the importance of the CGC's current mandate, and the need for farmers to be vigilant and organized in defending our own interests when regulators are unduly influenced by agribusiness corporations. Farmers need to remember this multi-million-dollar close call if and when amendments to the *Canada Grain Act* are introduced into Parliament. The NFU will be prepared to defend the current CGC mandate and demand that any changes to the Act must benefit farmers. ■



NFU solidarity with Mexico in GM corn trade dispute

—by Cathy Holtslander, NFU Director of Research and Policy

On June 8, and again on August 23, 2023, NFU President Jenn Pfenning wrote to Honourable Mary Ng, Minister of Export Promotion, International Trade and Economic Development, urging her to keep Canada out of the CUSMA trade dispute initiated by the United States seeking to reverse Mexico's decision to ban imports of genetically engineered (GM) white corn, which is used for direct human consumption (dough and tortillas). We asked the Minister to respect Mexico's decision, as its measures were put in place in order to uphold its food sovereignty, including the traditional Indigenous farming system known as milpa. We also noted that Canada does not export any corn to Mexico, and our farmers do not produce white corn, whether GM or conventional.

In its February 13, 2023 announcement clarifying the extent of its ban, the Mexican government said (translated): *Mexico is the center of origin of more than 55 corn breeds. The Mexican Government's food security policy consists of preserving this biocultural heritage. It also promotes the preservation of the agroecological practices of our peasant communities, the milpa and the wealth of its culinary heritage.*

Mexico also stated that its decree is *strictly limited to corn. Canola, soybean, cotton and the rest of the raw materials are not subject to this regulation; noted that it does not affect trade or imports, among other reasons, because Mexico is more than self-sufficient in the production of GMO-free white corn; and that Mexico will carry out scientific research on the possible impacts of genetically modified corn on people's health. Such studies will be carried out with health agencies from other countries.*

In the NFU's letters, we noted Canada's obligations under the UN Convention on Biodiversity, signed in 1992, which include commitments to *establish or maintain means to regulate, manage or control the risks associated with the use and release of living modified organisms resulting from biotechnology which are likely to have adverse environmental impacts that could affect the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, taking also into account the risks to human health; and to respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and*

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local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices.

We also noted that on June 21, 2021, Canada's law implementing the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* came into force. It would be inconsistent for Canada to engage in a trade dispute to counter Mexico's right to protect Indigenous peoples' food and agricultural heritage.

As a centre of origin for corn, it is critical for Mexico to do what it can to prevent loss or degradation of this genetic and cultural heritage. Corn as we know it was developed by Indigenous farmers. And milpa is an ancient farming practice for growing corn, often with other crops such as squash and beans, that was developed and is maintained by Indigenous peoples in Mexico. Milpa incorporates biodiversity and social and cultural traditions with deep significance.

Canada has acknowledged that our corn exports would not be affected by Mexico's import ban. Canada's rationale for joining this dispute is to push for an interpretation of the CUSMA trade agreement language that would be favorable to the biotech sector. This would create a precedent for it and other trade agreements which would further limit nations' ability to implement their own decisions regarding GM foods.

The NFU is working with allies in Canada, USA and Mexico in solidarity with the Mexican position. If Mexico prevails in this dispute, it will strengthen the ability of all countries to assert measures that support food sovereignty and Indigenous rights. ■

Bunge-Viterra merger has drastic implications for Canadian farmers

—by Cathy Holtslander, NFU Director of Research and Policy

Just five companies known as the “ABCD group” control 90% of the world grain trade – and the B in this group is about to get much bigger.

B is for Bunge, which has announced it is in the process of buying Viterra. The other ABCD companies are Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus, which have dominated the grain trade for over a century, with China’s COFCO joining the list more recently. Canada’s grain elevation and handling has been dominated by Cargill, Viterra, Richardson, Paterson and Parrish & Heimbecker from the early 2000s until 2015. After the Harper government gave Bunge and the Saudi Agricultural and Livestock Investment Company (SALIC) the former Canadian Wheat Board’s assets, this new company, G3, moved into fifth spot. Viterra is a subsidiary of the Swiss conglomerate Glencore, and is 40% owned by the Canada Pension Fund Investment Board. Its headquarters are in Regina. Bunge’s acquisition of Viterra would leap-frog it into first place in Canada, and into third place after Cargill and COFCO on the world stage.

Viterra (with its roots in the prairie Wheat Pools) and G3 are dominant in wheat, while Bunge is dominant in canola, soy and corn. The merged company would gain massive market power over the largest crops grown in and exported by Canada.

Until 1997, farmers owned close to 60 percent of Canada’s grain handling system through their co-operatives, and until 2012, controlled all exports of prairie wheat and barley through the farmer-directed Canadian Wheat Board. With farmers in charge, the profits from sales were returned to our rural communities and were engines of rural prosperity.

In the recent public consultations on Canada’s competition policy, the NFU recommended changes to require the Competition Bureau to stop harmful mergers, including outlawing mergers that result in any company having more than 20% of market share in any sector.

The *four-firm concentration ratio* (CR-4) refers to the market share of the four largest firms in a sector. If it is less than 40%, a sector is considered competitive; above that, anti-competitive behaviour can be expected, as

efficiency gains are captured as profits and used to further accelerate consolidation. If the Bunge-Viterra merger goes ahead, we are looking at **a CR-4 ratio above 80%** in Canada’s grain handling sector.

Today, farmers produce larger quantities and higher value products than ever, but the vast majority of the wealth created is captured by the ABCD traders and the highly concentrated input, farm machinery, financial, and food processing corporations. Canada’s competition policy has not limited their market power. Past merger reviews have merely shifted assets among already-powerful players. The growing gap between the value farmers create and the value we receive from the marketplace amounts to billions of dollars every year, accelerated by the gap in market power between farmers and the multinational ag companies.

In light of the Competition Bureau’s failure to prevent rapid consolidation in the grain and oilseed sector, the NFU encourages the federal government to make a counter offer to purchase Viterra and return its assets to Canadian farmers and workers through a new co-operative. This would be in the national interest, ensuring food security and maintaining the proceeds from grain and oilseed exports within the Canadian economy.

The federal government demonstrated its capacity to make large investments in 2018 when it bought the yet-to-be-built Trans Mountain Pipeline for \$4.5 billion in 2018, and invested approximately \$21.5 billion in construction since then. For just \$US 8.2 billion, Canada could own the world’s eighth-largest grain trading company. Instead of waiting for the Competition Bureau to hive off pieces of Viterra, G3 and Bunge to the other big players, the federal government could create true competition in the grain sector by ensuring the farmers who produce the commodities will own and control the assets they have created, and regain the market power needed to safeguard farmers’ interests in the international marketplace. ■

For more background see [Canada Pension Plan Investment Board buys 40% of Glencore Agri](#) in the June 2016 NFU Newsletter.