

Speaking Notes for Stephen Vandervalk
Vice-President Grain Growers of Canada
Agriculture Ministers meeting, July 8th, 2010
Delta Bessborough, Saskatoon

Thank you for the opportunity to be here and share a few thoughts from the Grain Growers of Canada. Our organization represents over 80,000 farmers who grow canola, wheat, barley, pulses, oats and corn across the prairies and Atlantic Canada.

I would like to quickly touch on six policy issues that are important to our members.

First off, trade and market access.

We sincerely appreciate the Federal Government's efforts in negotiating quite a number of bi-lateral trade deals, such as Columbia.

The creation of a Market Access Secretariat has also been very positive for many of our existing markets.

We are optimistic that the Canada-EU trade deal will assist us with market access, not only on tariffs, but more importantly on non-tariff barriers, such as low level presence and approvals of GM traits.

We are also asking for a strong dispute resolution process because a trade agreement is only as good as your ability to enforce it.

However, bi-laterals never get at the problems around trade-distorting domestic support and export subsidies. Those issues can only be solved in the multi-lateral process at the WTO. We urge you to press our Government to work on other countries, especially the US, to get back to the WTO table.

Our second issue is Safety Nets.

The Grain Growers believe very strongly that we should not revert to the old system of ad hoc cash payments, but must have a structured suite of programs that provide a core level of support for when farmers are hit with either weather or other unpredictable losses of income.

This policy environment should assist us in bridging between bad years and good years.

We have heard very clearly from many producers about the lack of predictability and bankability of the current Agri-Stability program and have had some mixed responses to raising the cap on Agri-Invest.

The question is whether improvements can be made with the existing programs or whether we should look in a new direction.

In light of this we see the Whole Farm Income model as proposed by the Canadian Canola Growers Association as one that needs to be seriously looked at by the federal and provincial governments as either a replacement for Agri-stability, or as an option or add-on.

The one thing we cannot, in anyway have, are farm support programs that increase the chances of countervail claims, and so we strongly caution you to look at any new proposals through that lens.

Thirdly, Marketing Choice

While we believe there should be a western Wheat Board for farmers who want to use it, the Grain Growers firmly believe that our producers must have the option to market their own wheat and barley; just like we sell our own canola, peas, lentils, oats, canary seed and every other crop we grow.

As we've seen in this province, open markets generate investment, jobs and greater market opportunities for farmers. We see similar opportunities for growth and prosperity under a voluntary Canadian Wheat Board.

Fourthly, grain transportation

In western Canada, we need to see regulatory changes that allow railways to be held accountable for their service performance. Prairie farmers are largely captive to the rail system, and so when service performance is poor, we bear the brunt of the costs and lost sale opportunities.

The Rail Service Review Panel is now preparing its report. We ask the federal government to move swiftly on recommendations from the Panel that will improve railway service performance.

Fifthly, Public Research

The private sector does play a key role in research but over 90% of its investment is only in canola, corn and soybeans.

The Grain Growers of Canada is in a coalition with the Grain Farmers of Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada and we are all calling for A-base research funding to return to 1994 levels by 2020. With the world demand in food rising, now is the time to invest in agriculture.

And finally, we urge you to strongly support, and endorse, a regulatory environment in Canada, based on sound science.

Thank you, and I look forward to questions.