

Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
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The Future of Prison Farms

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Jon Steinman: And Welcome to *Deconstructing Dinner*, produced in the studios of Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. This show is heard on 35 radio stations across Canada including CFRC Kingston, Ontario. I'm Jon Steinman.

We've lined up a fascinating topic for today's show, a topic that one of our guests, who you're about to meet, says is of great urgency for Canadians to learn more about and take action on.

In February 2009, Canada's Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan alongside the Correctional Service of Canada, announced the closure of all six of the prison farms operated by CORCAN, the branch of the Correctional Service that operates rehabilitation programs that provide employment training to inmates.

The closure of the farms has resulted in a wave of opposition across the country from organizations, unions and individuals who see the farms as playing an important rehabilitative role. They further the growing interest across the country to support local agricultural infrastructure, they produce food for their own operations, and they hold the potential to become even greater models of economic, environmental and social sustainability.

And so with two of those farms being located in Kingston, Ontario, I sat down with Andrew McCann during my recent visit to the area to learn more about the issue. Andrew is an instructor of a food-security course offered at Kingston's St. Lawrence College and an active opponent of the announced closure of the two farms there. I also caught up over the phone with Kingston area dairy farmer, Dianne Dowling who is also the vice-president of the National Farmers Union of Ontario's Local 316.

Increase Music and Fade Out

Now from time to time here on *Deconstructing Dinner*, we share some of the challenges we face when trying to provide you with more in-depth coverage on issues that we believe are not adequately covered in the mainstream media. And putting today's episode together was quite the challenge throughout our efforts to arrange an interview with

Canada's Minister of Public Safety: Peter Van Loan. And while it's not new for media to have trouble accessing branches of government, let's be clear that these challenges should be non-existent in light of what we see as the media's role of providing information that is in the public interest and the role of government being mandated to act in the public interest.

Put the two together, and as far as we're concerned, when media of any kind wishes to ask questions of public employees and the departments they work for, there really shouldn't be anything getting in the way. Just as we have the freedom to file access to information requests, so too should branches of government provide information to the media and field questions from the media. Now the remnants of this principle do remain. Of course every department maintains its own team of media and communications personnel. But really, what's the point if they don't accommodate media requests? In fact this episode, today's episode, was actually postponed just so we could ensure that someone from Public Safety Canada could address concerns over the announced closure of the six prison farms being operated in Canada.

And so following what was a very adequate and accommodating effort made on our part to invite the Minister of Public Safety onto the show, we've instead been forced to share with you the Minister's response to a series of written questions that we sent, and unfortunately only the responses to the questions they chose to answer. And so thanks to this lack of co-operation, for the most part, postponing this show to instead air this week really only allows us to explain this: this lack of co-operation.

Soundbite

JS: When I arrived in Kingston Ontario on June 8, I was met by my host Andrew McCann at the city's train station. Andrew is involved in a number of food initiatives including his role as an instructor with St. Lawrence College's recently launched online distance education course known as Sustainable Local Food for All Canadians. Andrew is also involved with the group Urban Agriculture Kingston

Within 10 minutes of my arrival, Andrew escorted me down one of Kingston's main thoroughfares and right by Kingston's Frontenac Institution, a 900-acre minimum security prison where some of the inmates there are employed in jobs that might involve taking care of the farm's pasture, dairy herd of 160, the adjacent milk processing facilities, the chicken barn which houses 10,000 chickens, or maybe tending to the fields of pasture and mixed crops used to feed the animals. Surrounding the perimeter of the facility on all sides were residential communities, at which point I became quite confident that what I was looking at was also Canada's largest urban farm. A satellite image of the farm is posted on our web site so you can take a look at the extent of this parcel of land.

Now, *Deconstructing Dinner* has for over three years tried to be at the forefront of documenting the ravenous appetite among North Americans to support more locally produced food, and so it came as a shock to be staring at Canada's largest urban farm and

to learn that it is now on track to being closed by its owners: the Government of Canada. You and I.

In February 2009, it was announced that the farm alongside five others would be closed due to reasons that we'll be examining in just a moment. The other farm operations on the chopping block are: Kingston's Pittsburgh Institution, New Brunswick's Westmorland Institution, Saskatchewan's Riverbend Institution, Manitoba's Rockwood Institution and Alberta's Bowden Institution.

After a tour of other farms throughout the Kingston area, I sat down with Andrew McCann who's been actively involved in a campaign that is opposing the farm closures. Andrew shared some of the key concerns facing farmer organizations and labour unions across the country and with the Kingston area being home to many prisons, it was no surprise that the pub where we were chatting on these issues, was directly across from the Kingston Penitentiary, a maximum security prison housing Canada's most dangerous criminals. Sure enough, the penitentiary was once home to its own farm program. Andrew McCann explains.

Andrew McCann: Here in Kingston, this farm right here (out the window behind you, that I'm looking at), Kingston Penitentiary--which is now a maximum security penitentiary where some of the most dangerous people in Canada are--at the time it was built in the 1830s, not too long after that, they started the farm right here. I think that is part of our whole institutional history. Institutions used to have farms that went along with them, whether they were hospitals or farms or nunneries, or whatever they were, people just grew their own food, wherever they were. So prisons had farms. In the past, the farm manager was second-in-charge of the prison to the warden. If the warden was away, the farm manager was in charge of the prison. That's how important that farm was.

Currently, there's about 10 people above the farm manager. He is basically a farmer who's been hired by the prison to operate this training program. But for the past 15 or so years, in fact, Correctional Service of Canada has actually hived off all of their training programs so that they're all run by a private-type agency--it's not a crown corporation but it's a specially legislated agency called CORCAN. CORCAN basically runs for-profit businesses that bring money into the prison system. So they manufacture things like office equipment and furniture and shelves and then they sell that to government departments, so they actually compete directly on the market by selling products made by prisoners. One of the arguments about closing down the farms is that it competes with farmers. Well at least its just prisoners feeding themselves. But in the case of the other CORCAN programs, in which they want to shut down these farms and divert the funds into developing more relevant training programs, you're actually competing directly on the marketplace for other government departments--not just feeding the prisoners. So the logic is a little bit flawed in terms of that criticism. But anyway, the way that it's run right now is through CORCAN who's responsible for hiring the prison farm manager. But the prison farm manager then hires, basically, local farmers to work with the prisoners and its minimum security so these guys don't really have security training. They just go to work

and train prisoners and hang out with them. It's an amazingly-- actually peaceful-- environment.

JS: Yet another active and vocal opponent of the announced closure of the prison farm program in Canada is Dianne Dowling, a dairy farmer who farms at the Dowling Farm on Howe Island just outside of Kingston. Dianne is also the vice-president of the National Farmers Union of Ontario's Local 316. She describes the role of the NFU:

Dianne Dowling: My name is Dianne Dowling and I'm the vice-president of Local 316 of the National Farmers Union which is the city of Kingston, and two counties in that area: Frontenac County and Lennox-Addington county in eastern Ontario. The National Farmers Union in this area has been involved in the local food and farm movement for several years trying to promote the production of local food and the demand from local eaters for local food. We feel that every community should be increasing its capacity to feed itself. When we heard that Correctional Service of Canada was planning to close the prison farm program, this was a matter of great concern to our local members as well as members of other farm groups in this area.

JS: The National Farmers Union represents thousands of farmers across the country and the NFU's head office in Saskatchewan is also actively getting behind the effort and opposing the closure of the farms.

When the closures were first learned of in late February, a number of reasons were cited for the decision including the "relevancy" of skills that inmates are acquiring while working on the farms.

On April 2, 2009, as an example, Canada's Minister of Public Safety Peter Van Loan said this: "Those farms were costing a net loss of \$4 million a year. We felt that that money could be more adequately redirected to programs where people would actually gain employable skills, as virtually nobody who went through those prison farms ended up with employable skills, because they were based on a model of how agriculture was done 50 years ago, when it was labour intensive, and not capital intensive, as it is today."

Now, as a farmer herself, Dianne Dowling responds to this suggestion that farming skills are no longer relevant:

DD: Well on several different fronts, I would disagree with the Minister. First of all, the farms are run on a very modern basis so the skills that the inmates are getting certainly would apply to modern farms. Secondly, at least in the Kingston area, our group is involved with a project called The New Farm Project which is encouraging farmers to farm in more sustainable ways and many of the people that are participating are opening up market gardens. So in other words, they are moving to a labour intensive type of farming and a less capital intensive one. There has been coverage in the agricultural press about 'smaller is becoming to be seen as better'. So there is certainly potential for an inmate to say come out of prison and to use the skills that he would have learned in the prison program, if not for a job at least in his own personal life: how to grow his own

food, for example--if they had an opportunity to be involved in the gardening part. But more generally, I think anyone who has ever worked on a farm knows that you learn to work independently, you learn to take responsibility for things--particularly if you're caring for animals. You know, if you don't get up and feed the cows in the morning the cows go hungry. Most people are pretty sensitive to that not being a good thing. They learn equipment skills: how to operate and how to repair. They would, I'm sure, learn a little bit of carpentry and welding and plumbing and electricity. These things are all applicable to for instance a labourer's job in construction. Also, because they're processing the milk and the eggs at Frontenac Institution--at least here in the Kingston area--they would get a certain amount of experience in food processing.

JS: Now regardless of what side of the fence you're on as to whether large capital intensive farming is the appropriate model for producing food, or, as Dianne Dowling introduced, the 'smaller is better' model, what we do know, and certainly as has been documented here on the show, there are many small-scale farms that are just as economically secure--if not more secure--than the large capital intensive farms, which in this day and age, carry incredible economic risks. We also know of the many new models now being used to link up new farmers with affordable land. And really, the list can go on as to the new direction of economically sustainable farming models popping up across North America.

And so it seemed appropriate to contact the Minister of Public Safety Peter Van Loan and ask him to clarify his comment on the relevancy of the skills acquired by the inmates on the prison farms. As mentioned earlier, our effort to arrange an interview with the Minister was not successful, even though we gave his office over a week's worth of a wide open schedule to pencil us in. In our first request to the Minister's media relation's contacts, we requested for only 15 minutes of his time and outlined a list of options available for when we could conduct the phone interview. We received a reply back that they would provide only five minutes of his time and they chose one of the timeslots we had made available. And so, later in the day, we got back and said that five minutes is fine. Although for a one-hour show on the topic, it likely wouldn't provide much room for the Minister to respond to the many concerns we'll be going through today. And then the next response we received read this, "The Minister is no longer available at 11 AM. Unfortunately we needed a quick yes or no". And so that's when we postponed the show and offered to the Minister's office any time over this past week to conduct the interview. And then we received another e-mail that read, "Unfortunately, our Minister's office has indicated that they will not be able to accommodate an interview at this time. On the other hand, should you have any questions, please e-mail them to us."

So seeing that they were not going to be granting a phone interview, we sent off some questions.

Our first question was "What is the value of the prison farm program?" And in their response that question was not answered.

Our second question: "Take us through the process that led to the decision to close the prison farms". That question too, was not answered.

Our third question: "How was the four million dollar loss that was announced to be resulting from the prison farm program calculated?" And ... yes, you guessed it, that question also was not answered.

Our fourth question, though, was attempted to be answered and asked the Minister to clarify the statements on the relevancy of skills learned on the prison farms. According to Christopher McCluskey, a spokesperson for the Minister's office, "It is not our intent to convey disrespect to farmers. The mission of the CORCAN program is to provide employability skills and training for inmates so they might reintegrate into society by finding employment once they are released back into the community. Almost none of those spending time on prison farms ultimately find employment in the agricultural sector. Farming has changed dramatically over the past 60 years, and the prison farm model is outdated for the current era of capital intensive, technologically reliant agriculture."

Now again, by most accounts, the six prison farms are all pretty modern. There's a barn filled with 10,000 laying hens, a dairy herd of 160, slaughterhouses at a number of the facilities and so here's the perplexing part: located on the Correctional Service of Canada website are the profiles of the many prisons operated across the country. Under the profile of the Rockwood Institution in Manitoba (one of the six farm programs to soon close) it reads this: "Inmates have the opportunity to gain valuable experience in a modern agri-food business." And it continues: "They receive training and acquire professional skills in areas such as: hog raising, milk processing, dairy cattle raising, land maintenance, waste management and recycling, major crops, equipment maintenance and beef production."

So the question arises: which is it? Are these farms modern, as the website suggests, or out of date, as the Minister suggests? Clearly the Minister of Public Safety and the Correctional Service of Canada's positions on the modern nature of the operations are not anywhere near the same.

Audio Clip of Mark Holland: (Speaking in the House of Commons) Communities, agriculture and rehabilitation groups are outraged by the conservative closure of six farms run by Corrections Canada. These farms are productive and profitable, selling produce to correctional facilities, stimulating local economies, and providing offenders with important personal and job skills.

Yet the government is cutting them. Why? Because they don't believe that agricultural skills are "relevant or practical employability skills". Unbelievable (a chorus of boos is heard in the House). Mr. Speaker, when will they reverse these insulting, harmful cuts and make local farming and rehabilitation a priority? (Cheers and applause is heard in the house)

JS: Liberal Member of Parliament for Ajax Pickering, Mark Holland speaking in the House of Commons in Ottawa.

St Lawrence College's Andrew McCann is also shocked at the suggestion that farming skills taught at the prison farms are said to not be relevant.

AM: On March 19th we had a public information session here at St. Lawrence College. There were over 250 people there, many of them were farmers very upset about the abattoir and about the general reason given by Corrections Canada, once they were questioned about it--because they didn't announce it. But once they were questioned about it, their first reason that they gave was that this training is not relevant for the inmates. It's not relevant, although it's on the list of Correctional Services of Canada's top 40 jobs for inmates. Nonetheless, it was said that this is an irrelevant training program and so we're going to shut it down and re-divert the funds to other more relevant training. Well of course it kind of pisses farmers off when you tell them that their livelihood is not relevant. Furthermore we all know that there is a succession crisis in Canada and we're in the middle of a huge local food revival that's absolutely necessary--that of course you and your show are a big part of--and it's totally illogical. But nonetheless that was the argument. So then when farmers at that March 19th meeting started to react to that claim, well then they (Correctional Service of Canada) said no it's a money issue. It's because we're losing four million dollars a year. People started saying what do you mean losing four million dollars a year, what don't you lose money at a prison? Four million dollars doesn't sound like a lot. You're probably actually saving a lot of money by supplying your own food. How much more would you actually spend if you didn't have that food (because they're selling it to themselves at below market cost)? Anyway, the point is--it's a long story with all the money and all the details, but I think the big point is: we've never seen a number on paper. Not one. Nobody has. There's a few quotes that they've given in newspapers but that's it. There's no financial accountability here. There's been no report that's been released to the public that's shown why this is a financial issue and the only thing they say is well we can reuse the money for more suitable programs. Then they flip back to well the training is not relevant. So which reason is it? Et cetera. But I think the big overall point that we're trying to make is: show us the logic on paper. Give us the numbers so that we can respond in some way. And there was a promise to do that and they reneged. They said no we're not going to. We've consulted our lawyers and they've told us that we should not.

JS: This is *Deconstructing Dinner*.

Now this rather confusing and seemingly disjointed reasoning made by the Minister of Public Safety becomes even more perplexing when one comes across yet another mention of the prison farm program on the Correctional Service of Canada website that, again, directly challenges the position of the Minister.

This instance can be found in a Correctional Service of Canada Newsletter titled *Let's Talk* and an article published in 2005 by Bill Rankin, a communications advisor for the

Correctional Service. Titled *Life on the Farm*, the newsletter paints a rather glowing and positive profile of the prison farm program.

And I'll read to you a few excerpts from this newsletter where Bill Rankin writes about one of the farms. He writes: "it's been a working penitentiary farm for many years and is highly valued for the produce it supplies to local federal institutions and food banks in the surrounding area and for the skills passed on to the inmates whose labour and sweat keeps the production going.

"Work starts early on the farm — long before sunrise at this time of year. Roughly 65 inmates are up and on their way to the cattle barns and poultry production and dairy-processing areas before the birds start to chirp, collars turned up against the damp, their breath hanging like fog in the chill air. They're grateful for a hot cup of coffee when they reach the shelter of the barns.

"Frontenac Operations Manager Craig Chinnery is there too, his job being to keep the entire outfit running smoothly. He explains that some of the inmates had never held a steady job in their lives until they arrived at the penitentiary farm. 'We're trying to develop a work ethic in these guys' says Craig 'Get them accustomed to getting up in the morning and putting in a full day's work. And teaching them certified skills they can take with them to the job market.

"Most of them really enjoy the work. In fact, they often prefer to stay here rather than go back to their living quarters after work hours!"

JS: Again, that's from a newsletter written in 2005 about the prison farm program and a link to that article will be made available on the *Deconstructing Dinner* website at deconstructingdinner.ca and posted under the July 2, 2009 episode.

Soundbite

JS: Today's episode of *Deconstructing Dinner* is titled *The Future of Prison Farms*. In February 2009, it was learned that the six prison farms being operated across Canada would be closed. The fierce opposition to the closure has led to the creation of a national campaign which we'll learn about at the end of the broadcast. Campaign info is also on our website.

As mentioned at the beginning of the show, when I was taken by past the 900-acre Frontenac Institution in Kingston, Ontario, it occurred to me then that I was looking at was, and likely is, Canada's largest urban farm. This of course raises yet another concern over the announced closure of the prison farm program: the now-vulnerable farmland itself.

Here again is Kingston area farmer Dianne Dowling:

DD: There are probably close to 2000 acres in two different farms here in the Kingston area that are prison farms and we figured that if they were closing the farm program, well, that would make the farmland . In the Kingston area there are some areas of very good farmland but not very much, and you don't have to go very far north of Lake Ontario to mostly be into what we would call 'trees and rocks'--with small pockets in between where certainly people could have market gardens or something like that--but not extensive farmland of Class 1, 2, or 3, like the prison farms are. So we just feel that this area can't afford to lose even one acre of good farmland and so we were concerned about the vulnerability of the farmland.

JS: I also posed this question to Andrew McCann of St. Lawrence College. Is the Frontenac farm the largest urban farm in Canada?

AM: Wow. Good question. I'm not sure. It very well must be. It's huge. You saw it today. It's 800 acres of farmland right in the middle of town; probably 700 acres of actual fields; large barn facilities; the dairy operation I mentioned; the chicken barns. It's a really dynamic, diversified farm that's being farmed conventionally. But these guys aren't pushing it. They're not stressing the soil. There's really good crop rotation there. And the cows are not being pushed hard either. They're just milking twice a day. It's almost like an organic dairy, but it's not. They're certainly using some antibiotics--I don't think they're using hormones. In any case, I don't know the details but from talking to the farm manager Ron Amy, it just struck me that this is a good farmer who has the respect of his staff and definitely the engagement of the inmates. And he told stories that it wasn't always like that. He said when he came in 1980 that there were actually guards working there because you couldn't actually get the inmates to do anything unless there was somebody watching their every move. Gradually what they've done is they've shifted it so that these inmates are empowered and they take responsibility. One of the most compelling arguments in terms of the dynamism of this large urban farm--Canada's largest urban farm--is that the inmates feel respected when they go to work. I think that's really the message that we got was that they feel respected because they're working with farmers instead of guards and it's a certain kind of relationship with the guards, which probably makes sense in the context of a prison. When they're working with these farmers the farmers just treat them like staff people, with the respect of other human beings. That's a really important thing for the guys who are committed to the farm. Some of them have written letters. There's a group of them who are organizing. There's somebody else who's talking to a lawyer to find out if they can try to block this from the inside in some way. So there's some mobilization on behalf of the inmates as well.

JS: Andrew McCann

Now the list continues of reasons put forward by Canada's Minister of Public Safety Peter Van Loan as to why the farms would be closed. In an interview for Kingston's daily newspaper the *Whig-Standard*, Van Loan is quoted as saying this, "What we're going to do is stop competing with local farmers in terms of whatever agricultural products were produced on the prison farms. Those can now be obtained directly from farmers in the local community".

Here again is Andrew McCann and Dianne Dowling responding to that comment.

AM: The argument seems to be that any production of food is competition for farmers. So, if you don't produce that food on your prison farm then there's a market. There's going to be increased demand for farm products. It doesn't really make a lot of sense. I mean, we're not talking about an actually really large amount of food that's being produced: it's six farms across the country. This is not serious competition for Canadian farmers. On the other hand, it's a huge asset for the prisons themselves and for some very specific local communities like Kingston. Not only is it the abattoir and the other infrastructure, but just think of it from a farm service business point of view. These two farms in the Kingston area represent two of the biggest customers for the farm supply companies. So if you shut them down it's just one more move to undermine the existing farm business infrastructure that all the other farmers rely on. So there's a lot of reasons. That's true in all the communities across Canada to one degree or another where the farms are located. So I'm not really sure what the logic is there because it's really going to hurt farmers if those farms are shut down because of all the infrastructure that they provide in many different. And certainly in the small market-share that they represent in terms of increased food purchasing by the prisons is not going to matter to farmers, Canadian farmers.

DD: No, we don't see them as competing with us. We think every community should increase its capacity to feed itself so what the prisoners are doing is helping to feed their community which is the inmates in their prison and other prisons in their area. Because of the supply-managed dairy system in Ontario, the 130 cows that are in the herd at Frontenac institution--I think somebody figured it: out it would mean about a liter of milk per dairy farmer in Ontario competition. So it's not a big source of competition to us. In my mind, specifically as a dairy farmer, when Minister Van Loan says 'we'll stop competing with local farmers', well I don't believe that the prison system will purchase food locally. I don't expect to see their buyers down, for instance, at the Kingston Farmers' Market buying produce because as a federal institution, if they're buying from outside, they have to tender it on a NAFTA-friendly basis--which means all of North America.

JS: Dianne Dowling of the National Farmers Union of Ontario's Local 316.

Now this perplexing comment made by the Minister of Public Safety did too form the basis for two questions that we sent to the Minister. And our question read this: "Would a decision to purchase local product by a federal institution not contravene NAFTA-friendly policies that require the institutions to go to tender?"

This question was not answered.

And the other question we asked: "Minister Van Loan has suggested that the closure of the farms will benefit local agriculture, however, farmers in the region have suggested that closing such a large farms will hurt the many supporting industries who serve other

regional farms. Have any feasibility studies on such possible impacts to regional infrastructure been completed as part of the decision to close the farms?" And this question too was also not answered.

Soundbite

JS: Now throughout this process of researching the announced closure of Canada's six prison farms, it was somewhat surprising that the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food did not appear to have been brought into the dialogue regarding the closure of the prison farms, at least not publicly.

Now in an ideal world that might have prevented some of the uninformed reasons that contributed to the decision to close the farms. But in Canada, and certainly as of late, that's wishful thinking. Our Conservative-led government does not seem to be that in touch with the world of agriculture and food. As an example, it was only back on June 8 when the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food's subcommittee on food safety convened. In the room was Brewster Kneen, a familiar voice to *Deconstructing Dinner*. Along with his wife Cathleen, Brewster co-publishes *The Ram's Horn*, a monthly journal of food systems analysis. He's also the author of the book *Invisible Giant*, which is an in-depth look into one of the largest agri-businesses in the world: Cargill. Brewster was speaking on behalf of the Canadian Health Coalition and suggested, as is often done here on *Deconstructing Dinner*, that smaller farms and less globalized food systems provide greater food safety.

Now the transcript of this meeting is rather fascinating, and a link to it is on our web site, because taking a very vocal exception to Brewster's comments was Conservative Member of Parliament Randy Hoback. Randy represents the riding of Prince Albert Saskatchewan, a riding which is also the home to one of the prison farms whose slaughterhouse has already been packed up and in the process of being closed down. At this June 8th subcommittee meeting, Randy Hoback was insisting that large-scale capital intensive farming is the model of today and the model of the future, and so at one point during the dialogue, Brewster Kneen said this, "When we talk about exports, that is not what feeds the majority of the world's people." And Randy Hoback's response? "Yes it is".

Now, clearly Mr Hoback is unaware of the myriad ways in which export-driven agricultural policies are increasingly being recognized as doing the complete opposite of feeding the world and, instead, are being pointed to as a significant cause of creating hunger and malnourishment. Mr. Hoback seems to also be unaware that 33 million people in the United States and two and a half million in Canada go hungry every day, yet both countries are major exporters of food. And the list could go on as to why this idea of exports feeding the world is said by so many to be an outright myth. But the Conservative Party of Canada and Canada's Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food believe in the idea nonetheless. So much so that Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food's Gerry Ritz does not consider the thousands of members of the National Farmers Union as being real farmers. On April 30th, Randy Hoback rose in the House of Commons and set

up Gerry Ritz for a rather telling comment on the Minister's position on the importance of Canada's prison farms.

Audio Clip of Randy Hoback and Gerry Ritz Speaking in the House of Commons:

Randy Hoback: Mr. Speaker: Our farmers are facing real, tough issues. The US has enacted its discriminatory labeling rules. EU and South Korea are breaking WTO rules by not allowing our beef into their markets and input prices are all over the place and yet, Mr. Speaker, what is the National Farmers Union processing today? Yes. The rights of criminals and convicts. We saw them working with US protectionists earlier this year and now its prisoners. Could the Minister of Agriculture tell this House what he thinks the priorities of farmers are?

Speaker: The Honourable Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food

Gerry Ritz: Thank-you Mr. Speaker. This is an exciting new direction for the membership drive for the NFU. Of course they do require a captive audience since they really don't represent any farmers (laughter is heard in the House). While they're busy lobbying for criminals and bad guys we're out there building a new set of rules and regulations for farmers that benefit them domestically and in the international marketplace. Mr. Speaker, we're opening new markets for our farmers; we're getting the job done (applause is heard in the House).

JS: Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Gerry Ritz.

Now let's be serious here. For the head of any agricultural department of any country to consider an organization representing thousands of farmers as not representing real farmers. Well, I don't think there's any risk in calling that outright ridiculous and, frankly, political suicide. But then again, Minister Ritz is not new to walking on thin ice. Canadians became well aware of the Minister's wish for Liberal Member of Parliament Wayne Easter to, quite literally, drop dead. Easter is the Agriculture Critic for the Liberal Party of Canada and a vocal opponent of Conservative party policies on agriculture. Easter represents the riding of Malpeque on Prince Edward Island.

Not long after the listeriosis outbreak in 2008 that killed over 20 people across Canada, Minister Ritz was heard saying during a conference call that "this is like death by a thousand cuts... or should I say cold cuts." Following that comment, the Minister was told that there may be yet another death in Prince Edward Island, and upon hearing this information, the Minister said, "please tell me it's Wayne Easter."

Now many Canadians became quite familiar with that comment by Minister Ritz as the controversial comment spread quickly throughout the media and ended up on the Prime Minister's desk. But what most Canadians do not know, is that this was not the first public comment made by the Minister that toyed with the idea of Wayne Easter dropping dead.

Here's a short clip from January 2008 featuring Wayne Easter and Gerry Ritz in the House of Commons:

Audio Clip of Wayne Easter and Gerry Ritz in the House of Commons:

Wayne Easter: The government of Canada has a responsibility to act. Why will the Minister not put forward bankable, real funding for hog producers (applause is heard in the House).

Speaker: The Honourable Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Gerry Ritz: Well thank-you Mr. Speaker. I hope that members around him know CPR. He's going to need it one of these days, his eyes are going to pop out.

JS: It's certainly odd that they introduce these people as being 'honourable' and even more odd that that clip you just heard, well that was found on Gerry Ritz's own website at gerryritzmp.com.

Soundbite

JS: You're tuned in to *Deconstructing Dinner*, a syndicated weekly one hour radio show and podcast produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman. Today's episode is archived on our web site at deconstructingdinner.ca and posted under the July 2nd 2009 broadcast. There's also a wealth of links and more information found there on today's topic titled *The Future of Prison Farms*.

Back in February 2009, it was discovered that Public Safety Canada had decided to close the six prison farms operating across the country--farms owned by the Government of Canada: you and I. The farms are located in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and New Brunswick, and operated by CORCAN, a profit-driven wing of the Correctional Service of Canada. Inmates at the minimum security institutions are employed on dairy farms, in milking parlours, egg production facilities, beef operations and abattoirs among others. The farms are able to provide some of the food produced to the prison system at costs well below what the commercial market would charge. They provide an important rehabilitating role to the inmates as will be expanded on in just a moment, and the Minister of Public Safety Peter Van Loan has nevertheless announced that the farm program is losing money and does not provide "relevant" employable skills to the inmates. During my recent visit to Kingston, Ontario, which is home to two of the six farms, I sat down with Andrew McCann who's been actively involved in the movement that is opposing the closure of the farms. I also spoke with Dianne Dowling, a dairy farmer in the Kingston area and the vice-president of the National Farmers Union of Ontario's Local 316. And we've been looking into the many benefits that these farms provide. Certainly one that was introduced earlier, but deserves more attention, are the positive rehabilitating effects for the inmates found by working on the farms and with animals. Here again is Dianne Dowling, followed by a short audio clip from a video produced in New Jersey about a prison farm program operating there.

DD: We also feel that the farm program offers a big bonus in rehabilitation because we've heard from some of the inmates. They say things like working with the animals is like an anger management course because if you walk up to a cow angry, she's going to probably kick you back. You'd get immediate negative reinforcement for that. In a more positive way, just working with animals is very rewarding. We hear the inmates saying 'these are my calfs', 'these are my cows'. They really take ownership and concern about them. Another thing they say is that the staff at the farm treat them like employees which they really appreciate instead of being treated like prisoners and so this is helping them to learn how to relate to an employer.

Audio Clip from the New Jersey Star Ledger:

(The sound of steel machinery grinding)

Female Voice 1: (reporting) This milk is one hundred percent Jersey, from Jersey-born cows raised and milked on Jersey farms. Even the farm staff never leave New Jersey: they can't, they're incarcerated. The New Jersey Department of Corrections is the largest farmer in the state, supplying milk and processed foods to state departments at lower rates than commercial farms. Working on the farm is a privilege for minimum security prisoners who've almost completed their sentences.

Male Voice 1: I miss a day of work just so I can come out here. If I have a choice, I'll come everyday.

Female Voice 1: (reporting) Prisoners are up before dawn to feed and milk the cows and work all day. But it's a good gig. Way better than being in a prison cell. And many prisoners from strictly urban cities grow to love it.

Male Voice 2: This is Chiquita. This is the one that loves to be pet. Right mama, you love to be pet. This is my baby here.

Male Voice 3: You've got to be real gentle with her...

I'm from Trenton actually. I'm from the urban. I've never been on a farm. Never thought I would. But it's not as bad as you would think. If I go out in the pen and start running circles they all will start following me and jumping. They're just like kids.

Male Voice 4: Everybody has to realize that these guys do have a true meaningful value and when they work here they learn it and they feel it and it's rewarding. It's rewarding to them and to the staff.

Male Voice 2 : (singing) Hey little baby likes shortening, shortenin' mama's little baby likes shortening bread...It's gonna be alright....

JS: That was the audio of a video produced by Nyier Abdou of the *New Jersey Star-Ledger*. A link to that video is available on the *Deconstructing Dinner* web site.

Located on the Correctional Service of Canada's web site is a testimonial from Frontenac Institution's Craig Chinnery who recounts the story of one inmate in particular who was known as a difficult case until he started working in the cattle barns. As Chinnery explains "He'd never set foot on a farm in his life and staff members were at first doubtful about his ability to fit in. But not only did he prove them wrong, he actually became one of their hardest workers and devoted much of his extra time to caring for the cows."

Here again is Andrew McCann:

AM: It's a hugely important part of a healthy rehabilitative (prison) culture. To grow your own food, to interact with the animals, to interact with the plants. It's therapeutic.

I went on a tour of the Frontenac Institution here in Kingston just last week and and just talking to some of the inmates (which is just an experience in and of itself that I don't get to have very often), and also talking to some of the farmers--who are not guards they're farmers who work with these minimum security prison inmates and train them how to farm, and the one farmer pulled myself and the person I was on the tour with aside and said: 'You know what it is? The reason these inmates do so well in here? There's no violence when they're working with the animals,' (This was in a dairy barn. They call it the dairy cows) 'and why they're so calm here and it's so therapeutic for them?' He said it's because these cows are like their mothers. For these guys they've had a rough go of things, by and large, and there's not very many people who they generally respect in the world and who respect them, but often it's their mothers who they have a connection with and these cows are all mothers. And here they are giving birth to calves and milking all the time and it's such a beautiful, natural connection. (He didn't say it like that; he was just kind of a gruff farmer. He just said in kind of gruff voice 'it's cause they're all mothers'.)

He said it about three times and it just hit me again and again and I thought: wow, that's amazing.

JS: Also expressing their concern with the closure of the farms are many of the inmates themselves, and one inmate in particular authored a thoughtful letter that was read aloud at a forum in Kingston back in March where the community was invited to discuss the announced closure of the prison farms with government officials. The letter was written by inmate Chris Parmar, and *Deconstructing Dinner* received a copy of that letter and Kootenay Co-op Radio's Terry Brennan donated his time to read that letter for airing here on the show.

Terry Brennan Reading Chris Parmar's Letter:

I have worked on the Frontenac Farm for 2 years now where I started by driving tractors and cleaning the barns. I have worked my way up to working in the admin. Office as an Inmate clerk. I do computer work where I log and print milk & egg orders for institutions in Ontario and Western Quebec, I track inventory, perform cattle counts in addition to maintaining a register of all cattle happenings every month, I do filing, I take calf pictures

for registration purposes with the Holstein Association of Canada, I do computerized monthly roll-ups for institutional orders of milk and eggs and juice. This is just like working in the community because you start at the bottom and then work yourself up to a more advanced job.

Working at the Frontenac Farm is a rewarding job for being in prison because you are treated like a real employee. The staff at the Farm are very easy to work with and they treat you like an employee not like a prisoner.

Since working as a clerk at the farm I have learned many different ways of improving some of my skills such as communication, listening, teamwork and my views or ideals. These jobs help offenders get up and go to work each day and be responsible in their choices. We come to a minimum institution like Frontenac to be able to work outside and be able to prove ourselves and to better our skills and have a better chance of returning back to society.

If you take the Farm away or close it for good what then! What would you offer the inmates to improve their skills? You have said that the Farm does not provide us good working skills and it will not help offenders get employment when they're released. I would like the public to know that we did have trades, schooling and computer trade courses but they were taken away and closed down except for schooling to grade 10.

So I ask what is your plan for the offenders to have them ready for the community if they're always inside their cells or a classroom which is where we will be if you close the Farm?

The Frontenac Farm or other prison farms help offenders be more reliable, responsible, have better work ethics and make them more ready to work in the community. I ask what your intention is because I would really like to get straight answers rather than the excuses we've been hearing where agriculture and the farms are being blamed for so-called poor training skills. And do not forget that these farms have been running more than 60 years and helping offenders get prepared for release. They make money at Frontenac Institution even though this is not what is being said. They help feed offenders by supplying all the Institutions with milk and eggs at a much cheaper price than if the kitchens would have to buy these products elsewhere. If closed down this would cost the taxpayers more money.

I am hoping that whoever made this bad decision to close the farm will think again.

Offender,
Chris Parmar

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner and that was a letter by Chris Parmar an inmate at the Frontenac Institution in Kingston, Ontario.

Now we did contact the Correctional Service of Canada to learn of the rehabilitative programs that will take the place of the agricultural and farm work programs. And in their response they said this: "Correctional Service of Canada is currently working towards developing alternative employment training that will meet the needs and realities of offenders in order to help them successfully reintegrate into society. Business cases are being developed to provide alternative offender training that directly responds to the labour market needs in each of Correctional Service of Canada's designated 5 regions. In the meantime as the farm operations are gradually phased out over the next two years offenders will continue to work until such time as the enterprise is completely shut down. Offenders will have the opportunity to seek other employment elsewhere in the institution textiles, manufacturing, a wide variety of wood and metal products, construction and services such as printing and laundry. Although farming activities will cease, training in heavy equipment is one example of the type of employment training that could be offered to offenders currently working on the farms. Small engine repair and small manufacturing facilities may also be considered."

Now clearly this is an issue of urgency for those who do oppose the announced closure of Canada's six prison farms and in response to this urgency, a national campaign continues to develop. And as Dianne Dowling suggests, vocal opposition has already proven to be an important tool in ensuring that at least one of the operations in Kingston that employs inmates will remain.

DD: At one of the prison farms in our area there was an abattoir which was staffed by inmates and has non-inmate managers and staff as well. It's well-used by local farmers for their beef (to have it slaughtered here locally and then sell it to either individual customers or to stores or restaurants). Because it's a local abattoir, it gives the farmers a lot more control over the price that they can get for their meat and so on. So this was a very important issue to the farmers. We're happy to say that because of raising the concerns about the prison farm program closing and about the abattoir closing the Minister in charge of corrections, that's the Minister of Public Safety Peter Van Loan, agreed that the abattoir would not be closed as part of closing the farm program. That was something that we were happy to have accomplished.

JS: Now the decision to maintain the abattoir was nevertheless, only one consolation, and so on June 8th Dianne Dowling joined a group of opponents of the closures and travelled to Ottawa to meet with Minister Van Loan.

DD: We had a half-hour meeting with the Minister of Public Safety Peter Van Loan and Representatives from the National Farmers Union, the Federation of Agriculture, and the Cattlemen's Association from the Kingston area. He listened to our points. He did have to go to a cabinet meeting so we didn't have time to finish off what our requests were, although we passed them on to his staff and also to another MP that was there. We certainly didn't change his mind. He was quite firm in his opinion that the program was costing money and that people weren't coming out of it with farm jobs and therefore, in his mind, they're still going ahead with the plan which is to have the whole program wrapped up and dismantled and so on by the end of March 2011. Which means that not a

lot is happening this year but certainly into perhaps the fall. It will have an affect on fall cropping plans plowing and that kind of thing. Certainly they have already scheduled to sell the dairy herd by the end of next June like a year from now. This is very troubling to us because once these things are dismantled and gone they'll never be able to put those back together again. It'll be kind of like we're trying to stop the Titanic from hitting the iceberg now, rather than waiting too long.

JS: Now two online sites that Canadians can visit to learn more about how to get actively involved in opposing the closure of the prison farm program as at saveourfarms.ca which is hosted by the Union of Solicitor General Employees. And there are also resources on the National Farmers Union of Ontario's web site and here again is Dianne Dowling describing the NFU's past and current campaign efforts:

DD: I guess we started out with a local response because in the Kingston area the prisons are very obvious and a daily feature of life in this area. They're both in very highly visible neighborhoods and areas of the community. Lots of people work there. Lots of people drive by. And so on. So there was local response immediately. We had a public forum in March. Close to 250 people came to the meeting. There was a panel of people from corrections and also some of the agricultural organizations in the area to ask questions and to give answers. We followed that with a day of action on April the 30th. We did a little bit of guerilla gardening on the outskirts of the farm at Frontenac Institution, planted a few seeds there, and some of our farmers took a couple of our cows to Parliament Hill trying to draw attention to the issue and spread the word among the public that we were concerned about losing this national asset that we don't want to see go down the drain. We began to realize that they could easily ignore a campaign based on a local groups in the Kingston area. So we are trying to make a national campaign. We've asked labour and social justice and various kinds of agriculture and food groups across Canada to join--of course, any group that would support our position is welcome to add their name to what we've called The National Campaign Position Statement. Basically we're asking them to freeze the dismantling and to re-look at the decision and actually, rather than close it, enhance the program: have more small-scale sustainable type of operations--cheese making perhaps, green technology-type projects on the farms both for training for the inmates and also as kind of a demonstration to the rest of the farmers what kind be done. So some of the groups are the Canadian Federation of Agriculture; the National Farmers Union for all of Canada; and the Council of Canadians; a group called Food Secure Canada who are interested in food security; the Toronto Food Policy Council. And we've had support from the Vancouver Food Council as well. You're based in BC and none of the prison farms are in BC but we think this is an issue that all Canadians should be worried about. We see in the news things like global land grabs in Africa and in Asian countries where other countries are buying or leasing huge areas of land because they can see a coming food crisis. And concerns like climate change, peak oil, and so on. As I said before, we think every community should be working on increasing its ability to feed itself. So this issue has implications for everybody across the country--we think.

JS: Dianne Dowling of Dowling Farm on Howe Island located just outside of Kingston, Ontario. Dianne is the vice-president of the National Farmers Union of Ontario's Local 316.

A number of resources to assist Canadians wishing to support the campaign can be found on-line at nfontario.ca or at saveourfarms.ca

And in closing out today's episode, we'll leave you with one last segment from my interview with Andrew McCann, of St. Lawrence College, who I sat down with during my recent visit to Kingston in early June.

AM: I don't want to sound too critical of Correctional Service of Canada. I think there are many people actually--and this is the real tragedy, I would guess that the majority of people within Correctional Service of Canada who understand the role that these prison farms play actually would like to see them stay open. There is some agenda at work that I think, quite frankly, we just don't quite understand. There's certainly no evidence, that I'm aware of, but there is certainly a speculation that this is the first step in the privatization agenda for Canada's prisons.

First you privatize--or you get rid of--the farms. Next you privatize the food services, which is a lot easier to do if you're not getting your own food. And so you outsource it to Sodexo Marriott or Aramark or whoever specializes in prison food and you ship it in from another town. It's microwaved meals as opposed to food that the inmates have grown for themselves. Then, once you've privatized the food services, well you're well on your way to privatizing Canada's prisons and following the US model. Which is a little bit shocking, especially considering that these prison farms are actually a model that other countries are emulating around the world. There's been visits from the Japanese and the Hungarians. New Zealand right now is in the process of ramping up their prison farm program and changing them to be organic farms.

So we're kind of moving in the wrong direction here. Which is really surprising--not just because of the specifics of the prison farm situation, but also because of the whole sustainable, local food movement that's gained such momentum across Canada and the real possibilities--especially at Frontenac Institution, and I'm sure some of the other institutions in New Brunswick, Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan--for partnerships with the local farming and broader food community. What kind of exciting opportunities might there be? The farm manager at Frontenac was talking about the possibility of community gardens on the farmland and some kind of collaboration in terms of training.

So there are real possibilities. This is a really key message that I can't stress enough. We're not just interested in complaining about a Conservative decision and being negative. We're not just interested in the status quo. What we're really interested in is revitalizing these farms and making them part of the local food system. They're already part of a local food system that's quite functional. But we want to ramp that up and figure out ways to make it a little more connected with the broader community farm and food movement in the areas where the farms are located.

One of the important parts and one the reasons so many of us have put so much time and energy into this campaign to revitalize the prison farms is because we see it as a multi-issue cause that brings together social justice, farm, food, organizations, rehabilitation prison justice, and all sorts of members of the communities where the farms are located and Canadians across the country. But it also acts as lightning rod. Or: it shines a light on the general short-sightedness of the Canadian government's policies on agriculture and food. That's good because we need as many opportunities as possible to say: 'Look, we need a re-think--across the board--on farm and food policy in Canada and this is just another example of how we're moving in exactly the opposite direction.

Listen to the people, whether they be inmates or whomever, whatever kind of Canadian citizen. The people are saying 'we want sustainable, regional food systems'. So why move in the other direction? Then, as federal government, how do you actually move to integrate and reconsider food policy across the board--connecting it to health, environment, agriculture, food, trade, and all these different issues. Many people are advocating for that re-think of Canadian farm and food policy. And this gives us an opportunity to send that message within the context of a very specific, concrete example. I think that's an important part of this: to try to make those broader connections.

Soundbite

JS: And that was this week's edition of *Deconstructing Dinner* produced and recorded at Nelson British Columbia's Kootenay Coop Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant Jon Ryan