

FINDING MORE FARMERS | GROUNDSWELL OF INTEREST

Applauding new interest in finding more farmers

The average age of Canadian farmers is 52, and that average has been steadily increasing for at least the past 20 years. The statistics were accepted, though not welcomed, and there wasn't a concentrated effort put toward changing them — until lately.

Now there is a new and refreshing groundswell of interest, on the part of farm organizations and governments, in attracting new entrants to farming. The indications:

- Jean Pierre Blackburn, minister of state for agriculture, travelled across the country earlier this year seeking information on challenges facing young farmers. He is expected to release recommendations shortly.
- The National Farmers Union last month announced a campaign for new farmers that involves promotion of agriculture education and a system of mentoring.
- The House of Commons agriculture committee says it plans to begin hearings in February into issues affecting young farmers and expects to file a report in spring.
- Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan commissioned and recently received a report on ways to attract new entrants to agriculture.

Add these developments to the steadfast support for young farmers on the part of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and other groups, plus the activities of various provincial young farmer organizations, and there could finally be enough impetus to get programs in place.

Realistically, a comprehensive program to attract new entrants to farming will likely take years to bear fruit, so now is the best time to begin.

To develop such a program, the impediments to farming entry have to first be assessed. Several of the above-mentioned initiatives have done so. Among the barriers are prohibitively high costs to enter farming, its fluctuating and unpredictable returns and the lack of adequate risk management tools. As well, farming has a negative image in

many quarters. Farmers themselves don't often celebrate successes, which fosters perceptions that agriculture is poorly paid with few rewards. The successful don't talk about it and the unsuccessful complain about it.

Al Scholz, author of the APAS-commissioned study, listed several ways to attract young farmers and new entrants to the business of farming: succession planning; business training; mentoring and apprenticeship programs; messaging and improving image; providing financial tools; encouraging immigration and coordination of efforts.

It's a short list but it carries a lot of freight.

Scholz provides directives and details in the study, entitled *Strategies and Recommendations for New Entrant and Inter-generational Transfer Program Needs*. It makes for interesting reading.

The first item, succession planning, is a crucial one. While there is room in agriculture for more than the current number of farmers, it's obvious that many of those most attracted to farming grew up on farms or were otherwise closely associated with the lifestyle. For them, succession is the best way to enter the business and take ownership.

Unfortunately, succession plans are not easy to implement for reasons ranging from family dynamics to tax implications. But any plan to encourage new, younger entrants to farming must also include ways for older farmers to exit with enough income for retirement.

"While attracting new entrants to farming has been identified as a new crisis situation, there is a current leadership gap in addressing the challenge," wrote APAS in a recent news release.

Now that the issue has gained the attention of many stakeholder groups, perhaps that leadership gap can be addressed. Everyone involved in agriculture should encourage and participate in such efforts.

Bruce Dyck, Terry Fries, Barb Glen, D'Arcy McMillan and Ken Zacharias collaborate in the writing of Western Producer editorials.

NEW AWARDS | LET THE CEREMONY BEGIN

Introducing the Kenneths: new awards recognize unfulfilled potential

NATIONAL VIEW



BARRY WILSON

The agriculture committee, Gerry Ritz and Michael Ignatieff are the first award recipients

As year-end approaches, there is the urge to commemorate the best and the worst of the year gone by. In that spirit, I launch the Kenneths,

awarded to the agriculture-related people and institutions that, to put it kindly, did not live up to potential or expectations.

Let the ceremony begin.

• The first-ever Kenneth goes to the House of Commons agriculture committee, the dozen MPs who gather on Parliament Hill to hear witness, assess legislation and policy and to make recommendations to Parliament.

Or not. The committee in the last quarter of 2009 descended from partisan chaos into farce as filibusters, personal attacks and partisan time-wasting tactics prevented votes except on such cutting-edge issues as declaring May 29, 2010 the national day of the honey bee. Meanwhile, an opposition pro-

posal to recommend government payment of SRM removal costs languishes because of a Conservative filibuster and a committee report on agricultural competitiveness issues remains barely debated because of partisan rancor from both sides.

For 2010, party House leaders might want to consider changing the personnel mix.

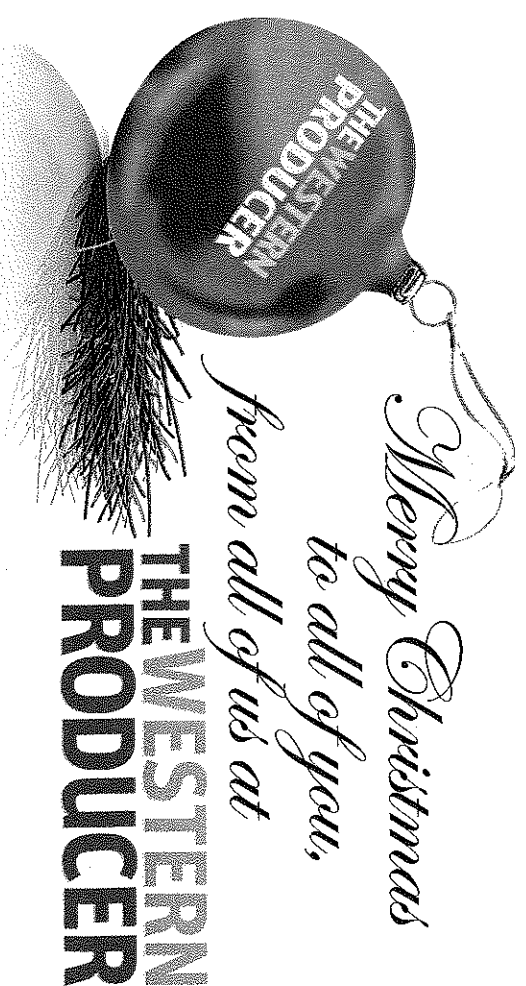
• The second Kenneth goes to agriculture minister Gerry Ritz for his hog sector rescue plan that is largely based on indebted, money-losing hog producers borrowing more money to increase their debt load in hopes they can stay in business on borrowed money until the market turns around.

The first obligation of farmers who borrow is to pay off government advance payments that were an ear-

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lier attempt to keep them around.

The most pernicious part of the program is the way exit money is being distributed. A reverse auction has hog producers competing against each other to see how little they need per hog to finance an exit. Lowest bid wins.

Logic would dictate that farmers with some equity could bid low to escape. Farmers with no equity and most in need of help are the least likely to be able to bid low, leaving them stranded and failing.

• The third Kenneth goes to Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, who ended 2008 as a new leader proclaiming his intention to win back rural Canada by paying attention and articulating rural-friendly policies.

Then he more or less disappeared on the rural file, making an appear-

ance at the Canadian Federation of Agriculture meeting in March, holding private meetings with farming groups through the year and, late in the year, holding a Parliament Hill news conference on closure of rural post offices (much to the mock-merriment of CBC reporters who had expected him to talk about something important.)

Ignatieff did little publicly to fulfill his rural pledge.

• The fourth and final Kenneth is the inaugural year goes collectively to most farm leaders who decide that the best way to deal with a government that has told farm groups to get on side or get out of the way was to get on side.

In a year of farm stress and often mediocre government response, it is silence has often been dea-