

# Tobacco fight continues

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Close to 100 rallying tobacco growers who braved an unrelenting downpour Friday morning were told by Brant MPP Dave Levac that they are enduring "the perfect storm" as they fight for a national buyout package from their doomed crop sector.

Standing before the gathering, organized by the grassroots group Tobacco Farmers in Crisis and joined by the Ontario Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers' Marketing Board, Levac declared his continuing support for their plan for an exit package involving both levels of government.

The growers had dropped three bales of tobacco in front of his office in the new Millard, Rouse and Rosebrugh building on Nelson Street, and used them to prop up a sign reading: Billions for government, multinationals and cigarette companies, pennies for farm families.

Group leaders Brian Edward and Mark Bannister thanked Levac for his continuing efforts on their behalf, then departed into the pouring rain.

In a later interview in his office, Levac noted their crop size keeps swirling downward every year, while farmers are sinking into debt and caught by the cross currents of anti-smoking legislation and high tobacco taxes.

To top it off, he said, they've been abandoned by Imperial Tobacco, the cigarette manufacturer that once bought the bulk of their crop, but has changed the blends and is bringing in cheap imports.

"That's the perfect storm," he said. "We have to mitigate the damage that's being done in this industry to the tobacco farmers and their communities."

Levac also lauded Tobacco Farmers in Crisis for showing grace under pressure as they continue a grassroots and lobbying campaign to win a desperately needed exit package.

"There's a very large collective intelligence wrapping an emotion," he said. "They continue to press their point in an intelligent rational way."

Earlier that morning, the growers also rallied outside the constituency office of Brant MP Lloyd St. Amand with the same three bales of tobacco and the sign.

They considered the stop partly a show of gratitude for St. Amand's work to get them a special appearance in front of the House of Commons standing committee on agriculture earlier in the week.

They knew St. Amand was in Montreal at the Liberal leadership convention and that he had arranged for a staff member to read a statement from him showing support for their cause.

"I well understand the frustration which tobacco farmers are feeling, as well as the tremendous uncertainty with respect to next year's crop," staff member Sherri Pate read, as listeners crowded around under umbrellas in the rain.

"With the current situation, it is virtually impossible for tobacco growers to know how to proceed come spring."

St. Amand said the federal government must understand that it has greatly benefited from the efforts of tobacco farmers, reaping along with other levels of government about \$9 billion per year in taxes.

"To date, the only real loser in the ongoing crisis has been tobacco farmers themselves, and it is absolutely critical that tobacco farmers receive the details of a comprehensive exit strategy as soon as possible," he statement continued.

"It is time for the federal government to act, not to talk. The so-called high level meetings have gone on and on, and the discussions are becoming circular with no apparent end in sight."

Edwards and Bannister said they appreciate the work of St. Amand in Ottawa and Levac at Queen's Park.

The exit strategy is desperately needed now, Edwards said, because the traditional five-year agreements struck between the tobacco board and the manufacturers have come to an end.

This year's agreement has no forecast for 2007, in which the manufacturers give a projection of purchasing interests.

"The manufacturers want to end the present auction system and we've got way too big an infrastructure for our crop size," Edwards said. "We need help now."

Bannister said the banks have stopped dealing with growers because "there's no reason to believe there's a future for us."

Edwards quipped to the gathering that "our mood is exactly like the weather — dreary and we don't know how much more of it is coming."

The mood of Friday's gathering was much lighter than two weeks ago, when Tobacco Farmers in Crisis rallied outside Haldimand-Norfolk MP Diane Finley's office in Simcoe. They want the Conservative government to get beyond the endless meetings and deliver an exit strategy with firm timelines.

"Diane, if things don't get done, this is going to get personal," one grower told her.

Tobacco Farmers in Crisis is looking for a five-year exit package of up to \$1 billion for 650 growers. The suggested package includes a complete buyout of quota and obsolete equipment, as well as a program to assist growers and their communities make the transition out of tobacco.

Edwards said farmers will continue to hold rallies outside the constituency offices of MPs and MPPs in tobacco-growing areas until a package is won.