

## No timeline for tobacco exit package, says Finley

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**Local News** - The federal government has no timeline for implementing an exit strategy for area tobacco growers, Haldimand-Norfolk MP Diane Finley said Thursday.

I wish I had a timeline, the Tory MP said in interview at her constituency office in Simcoe. My big effort right now is to convey the sense of urgency to my colleagues.

Finley, the minister of Human Resources and Social Development, was supposed to be in Ottawa for meetings Thursday, but changed her plans after learning about a rally planned for her office.

About 100 frustrated tobacco producers staked out the office. The farmers placed three bales of tobacco in front of the office door and demanded answers about when the government will act on the crisis facing their industry.

It's pretty bad when you see somebody cry when they're trying to sell tobacco, said Brian Edwards, president of Tobacco Farmers in Crisis. Our equity has been destroyed.

Finley spent about 30 minutes talking with the producers, who expressed their frustration at the slow pace of formulating an exit strategy.

This is only going to help me persuade folks in Ottawa how serious this situation is, Finley told them. I haven't let up on this since Day 1 and I don't intend to.

The frustration some producers are feeling became evident after Finley spoke, with one saying: Diane, if things don't get done, this is going to get personal.

Finley said the government is working on an all-encompassing solution to the tobacco crisis and asked farmers to also press the provincial government to become part of the solution.

The federal government is talking to the province, trying to get them to sign on, Finley said. I'm encouraging everyone to contact their MPPs.

The provincial government would be responsible for 40 per cent of the cost of any exit strategy under an agreement between the province and federal government, Finley said.

During an interview, Finley couldn't say when Ottawa might announce a plan to help tobacco producers. She said when a plan is announced, assistance would begin to flow immediately.

Some of the growers on Thursday said they want out of tobacco; some would like to stay in the industry if they're assured of a market for their product. They say either option requires help from the federal government in the form of an exit strategy that includes financial assistance. There are about 650 tobacco growers in Canada.

Finley said Ottawa wants a solution that will be fair to all growers, determine a fair buyout price and take into account what happens after farmers are paid to leave the industry.

The growers said they make \$80 from each bale of tobacco sold, while the government collects \$6,000 in taxes. That's not fair, said Tillsonburg-area tobacco farmer Hank Chromczak.

Were trying to make government aware how desperate the need is for an exit strategy, Chromczak said. Even if we wanted to leave, we can't.

Edwards estimates a total buyout would cost the federal and provincial governments \$1 billion. In the past year, the two governments collected \$9 billion in tobacco taxes. He said farmers can't wait any longer for government action.

The average farm debt for those in debt is \$400,000, Edwards said. The average age of the producer is 58.

Our farms are our retirement.

Switching to grow another crop offers no easy answer for struggling tobacco farmers, Edwards said.

The other agricultural commodities are in trouble. Why would we compete with someone in another crop who is just trying to survive?

Edwards said governments have discouraged tobacco use while ignoring the effect on growers.

Tobacco farmers are not part of that (anti-smoking) policy. We're the collateral damage of that policy. We have no exit. We're trapped.

Part of the reason growers feel trapped is because of debts incurred for equipment used to produce tobacco. In 2002, growers wanting to stay in business were told they would have to purchase new kiln burner technology to meet manufacturers' demands. Growers who purchased the equipment were promised they would have a place to sell their tobacco.

Today, farmers who invested in the technology are finding it difficult to find buyers. Each tobacco farmer has a quota, which dictates the amount of tobacco they can grow in a season. Producers are finding it hard to sell their quota, leaving much of this year's crop unsold.

Mike Bokla, a Delhi-area tobacco farmer, said governments shouldn't find it difficult to come up with money to help struggling growers.

If the government can subsidize these health zealots to demonize our product then they can subsidize us and buy us out, Bokla said.

John Vandven, a Simcoe-area grower, said farmers producing a legal product have been hurt by anti-smoking policies.

Were not doing anything illegal, Vandven said. It's a legal product. If you don't want us to carry on doing business, buy us out.

Chromczak said growers need action before Parliament breaks for Christmas. He said banks are calling in some farmers debts and growers need to decide if they will be planting a crop next year.

If there's nothing announced before then, we're looking at the new year, he said. That does not give anyone time to react.