

Final year for Canada's tobacco farmers?

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Canada's last remaining tobacco farmers are in trouble, and some say this could be their last year.

Mark Bannister (L), vice-chairman, and Brian Edwards (R), president of the Tobacco Farmers in Crisis association, stand in a tobacco field about to be harvested. (CP PHOTO/Steven Martin)

Canadian tobacco farmers have found themselves in an unusual dilemma over the past several years. They grow a product that is legal, but is blamed for the premature cancer-related deaths of 45,000 Canadians every year.

Every province except Alberta has passed some form of smoking ban in public places such as bars and restaurants. With more laws restricting smoking and promotion of smoking, there are fewer tobacco farmers.

While there were more than 4,500 tobacco farms in Canada in the 1960s, today there are only 680 -- grouped north of Lake Erie, near Delhi, Ont.

As farmers turned away from tobacco, tobacco crops declined. In 1998, 151 million pounds were produced in Canada. This year the crop target is set for just over 85 million pounds.

Tobacco farmers in 1990 earned an average income of \$79,062. According to Statistics Canada that dropped to \$57,876 in 2000.

"This could be our last year," said Joe Stachura, a tobacco farmer of 25 years in Delhi. "We have no idea what our future holds for us."

Fred Neukamm, chairman of the Ontario Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers' Marketing Board said: "What we are trying very hard to convince government of is that, as they pursue these types of aggressive (anti-smoking) policies, there has to be a balance in addressing the needs of the farmers that those types of policies are really displacing."

In March, Ontario set aside \$50 million in a transition fund for tobacco farmers looking to get out of the business and pursue alternative crops such as beans and sweet potatoes. But the farmers say much of the infrastructure designed for tobacco farming -- such as the kilns which cure the tobacco -- can't be used for any other crops.

Ontario Agriculture Minister Leona Dombrowsky said some farmers are adapting to cultivating different crops, such as sweet potatoes. Dombrowsky said there will be two benefits: "There will be the production of sweet potatoes for consumption, and... lower-grade potatoes will be used for the production of ethanol."

The province is pushing gas companies to ensure all gasoline contains five per cent of ethanol by 2007 to reduce greenhouse gases and to support agriculture.

Bankruptcy and depression are taking their toll on the growers, many of whom have left the family business after decades of tilling. Mark Bannister, a tobacco farmer in Vanessa, Ont., since 1980, said: "People are scared."

Bannister, vice-chairman of the Tobacco Farmers in Crisis association, said trying to get tobacco farmers to grow other crops will only saturate other markets.

"If, say, 400 acres of strawberries were planted here, we would ruin the strawberry industry for Canadians," he said. "We can't be planting 10,000 more acres of tomatoes or peppers or sweet corns. Nobody makes money then."

Gazing out at row upon row of tobacco crops, Bannister said: "The tobacco industry is the Titanic."