

Clock is ticking on fate of tobacco growers

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“Tobacco’s days are numbered.”

Those are the words many involved with the crop have been coming to grips with recently.

“We’d be ridiculous to think that tobacco is going to be grown here forever,” said Mark Bannister, vice-chair of Tobacco Farmers In Crisis.

The group consists of volunteers, some of which are tobacco farmers themselves, who have been working on behalf of Canadian tobacco farmers to make sure they are given an “equitable exit package.”

As selling prices at Delhi’s Tobacco Auction Exchange continue to be low, TFIC Chair Brian Edwards said his organization is working harder than ever.

“(Tobacco farmers) need some light at the end of the tunnel,” said Edwards. “Right now they don’t see any.”

Edwards said as the cost of growing the crop – increased hydro costs and by mandatory kiln conversions – means farmers “have reached a point where the crop size doesn’t meet the expenses they’re paying out.”

Although Edwards no longer grows tobacco he said he sympathizes, having grown tobacco for about 30 years himself.

“Growers have reached their limit,” he said. “They’ve got nothing left to give.”

Both Bannister and Edwards said the TFIC has been working “feverishly” to organize meetings with government officials and health organization – such as Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada – to make their cause even more worthy.

“These are organizations we’ve had ongoing talks with for months,” said Edwards.

“I never thought, in my wildest dreams, that I would be sitting across a table from Neil Collishaw (research director with Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada) and getting along with him,” said Bannister.

After a meeting with the members of TFIC, tobacco farmers and Collishaw, Bannister said he believes the organization understands the plight of the farmers, their families and communities.

“(Collishaw) now understands that stopping production of tobacco in Canada is not just 700-800 tobacco farmers that are affected,” Bannister said. “The effects are huge. They will not only be felt by the farmer, but also every community where those tobacco dollars used to help the economy.”

With health organizations behind them, Bannister said TFIC is lobbying to see better content control in what is being put inside each cigarette.

“The framework is there,” said Bannister. “Tobacco control and policies are not going away. They need to be addressed at both levels of government.”

As spring nears TFIC realizes the anxiety many still growing tobacco will be feeling. “My gut tells me there will be a crop this spring,” said Bannister. “But I don’t know how much longer after that.”

To help ensure tobacco farmers receive some compensation for exiting an industry, Edwards said he wants to see a working group formed through government before the end of this month.

“The government needs to live up to its promise of getting this working group organized and going,” he said. “We need to get it up and running yesterday...A full exit program is needed.”