

Tobacco growers fume at Finley

They ask why is buyout plan taking so long?

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SIMCOE – Tobacco growers have brought their anger and frustrations to the front steps of Haldimand Norfolk MP Diane Finley's office.

"It's been two years and still nothing."

"You're dragging it out."

Those were the words some tobacco growers shouted when Finley addressed the more than 75 growers and their families who gathered Thursday morning for a protest.

The protest was organized in response to the ongoing delays in producing a buyout package for the tobacco industry.

Growers also learned last week that some tobacco manufacturers could raise the price of cigarettes yet again. Such a move would cancel a special levy, which growers understood might be added to cigarettes to finance a buyout for growers.

"The anxiety is showing and people are getting worried and sick about this, sick," said Linda Vandendriessche, a director with the Ontario Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers' Marketing Board who was at the protest at Finley's office. "This industry is under pressure and we need help."

Finley greeted the protesters shortly after they assembled in front of her office. Farmers put several bales of tobacco, which was either rejects or no-bids at Delhi's Tobacco Auction Exchange, at Finley's feet prior to her address.

Finley told growers she was supposed to be in a tobacco related meeting that day, but when informed of the protest "figured (she) needed to be here."

While Finley assured the crowd that she has "made considerable progress" in developing a buyout package, she wanted growers and their families to understand the four reasons work is progressing so slowly.

"(No.) 1, so many agricultural sectors are in deep trouble," Finley explained. "(No.) 2, there is a political thing about tobacco, it's considered a dirty word. (No.) 3, tobacco has been the most profitable crop for any years...and (No.) 4, tobacco is such a localized crop, only grown here in Ontario."

Regardless of the reasons, Finley assured growers Canada's Minister of Agriculture is "very, very aware of the situation" and "considerable progress has been made."

Despite her words, growers spoke up.

"The biggest partner in tobacco is the government, who manages to rake in \$9 billion per year," yelled one grower.

"Why cant the money made from the tax of the product be use to pay for a buyout?" asked another grower. "It's been discussed," said Finley, "as well as many other ideas."

When asked about why companies will be allowed to raise the prices on cigarettes again, Finley said they "are private businesses that can set prices whenever an where ever they want."

Finley also encouraged those at the protest to "go to MPPs" with the same message.

"Get your provincial government to step up to the plate," said Finley. "We are willing to get a buyout package together, but there will be nothing if not given the assurance of the province's participation. The province has gotta get on side with this."

Gord and Shari Hamilton said they hoped something would come out of the protest.

“There’s an urgency for a buyout,” said Gord, who has grown 27 crops of tobacco just outside of Vanessa. “Something has to move forward. For two years we’ve been living in limbo with no real answers... (Growers) need local politicians, like Diane Finley, to champion our cause for us, but instead we’re blockaded and not listened to.”

“I’d like to get all the politicians to come down here and live a week in our lives,” added Shari. “Then they’d know first hand the stress we’re dealing with.”

Brian Edwards, chair of Tobacco Farmers In Crisis, said “something needs to be done now.” He pointed out that growers are frustrated with the no-bids and rejects – which are averaging 18-19 per cent – at the auction exchange.

“Farmers are overwhelmed,” said Edwards. “We’re seeing marriage breakups, bankruptcy, depression and even worse with tobacco farmers and their families. Something has to be done.”