

**Flue farmers fuming. Tobacco farmers gathered at the Simcoe office of Haldimand-Norfolk MP Diane Finley, far left, on Queensway West yesterday morning, dumping a few bales of their crop on her front steps and demanding federal movement on an exit strategy.**

NATHAN TAYLOR PHOTO

## **Frustration among flue farmers growing MP says progress is being made**

By Jeff Helsdon Staff Writer  
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The situation for tobacco farmers is becoming more desperate as they await word on an exit package. "The uncertainty, it's just eating you up as a farmer," said Tobacco Farmers In Crisis president Brian Edwards. He said he's getting phone calls from farmers who have had to seek professional help, are telling him about marriage breakups and have had their banks asking for power of attorney to pay the bills.

"Bills have to be paid, Christmas is coming and there's no timelines for a buyout," he said.

"The level of anxiety is getting higher and higher with each day that goes by," said Fred Neukamm, chairman of the Ontario Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers' Marketing Board. "We need to resolve this quickly. "People are getting worried, they're getting scared and they want answers."

Edwards said a recent retail price increase from the manufacturers, ranging from \$1 to \$3.80 per carton, would add another \$300 million to manufacturers' bottom line. And that price increase is only adding to the growers' frustration.

Federal and provincial governments raked in \$9 billion in tobacco taxes last year, according to TFIC figures. Edwards said much of the tobacco used in the cigarettes was cheaper, imported tobacco. In addition, estimates are illegal manufacturers made at least another \$1.5 billion in profits.

In the meantime, growers are facing a slow market and shrinking crop size.

"There's way too many farmers for the crop size we're growing," Edwards said. "There's no escape. Who is going to buy farms in this environment?"

Neukamm agreed the market wasn't good. He said it has improved since its start, but is still up and down and not at the level he would like to see it.

Board representatives have been maintaining a regular presence in Ottawa and Queen's Park to push for an exit package. Neukamm believes Finley, the only Cabinet member from the tobacco belt, is on side.

"I think she understands it, but there's a lot of machinery in government to be moved," he said. Neukamm said the clock is ticking and growers need to make decisions on what they will be doing next year. "If there's going to be any production, we need to know and know what it will look like," he said.

"I wish I could give people a timeline, I really do," Finley said. "We're trying to develop a long-term package which takes some time."

She, along with Oxford MP Dave MacKenzie and Elgin-Middlesex-London MP Joe Preston, have been stressing the urgency of the situation. Finley said a number of options are being looked at, but the federal government needs agreement from the province, manufacturers and growers for any possible exit strategy. Edwards said the \$1 billion figure, which is attached to TFIC's Blueprint for Action proposal and is similar to the value of the board's proposal, is only one per cent of the revenue governments receive in tobacco taxes. It's also less than the amount paid to tobacco growers in Australia and the United States.

Calls are made to Finley's office every day about the need for an exit plan and she said she has personally spent a lot of time on the issue in the last week. She even reported some progress.

"I'm pleased with the progress that has been made," she said. "It's still the sense of urgency that needs to be pushed."

The frustration facing the farmers culminated in a rally yesterday outside Finley's Simcoe office.