

No flue exit plan in sight

Target deadline unlikely to be met

By Jeff Helsdon Staff Writer

Friday September 08, 2006

[Tillsonburg News](#) — With less than one month to go until a tobacco board target date, there is still no word on the exit plan growers are hoping for.

Earlier this summer, Ontario Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers' Marketing Board chairman Fred Neukamm told the News he would like to see the broad terms of an exit plan in place by the end of September. September is here and it doesn't appear a plan will be announced in the near future.

“With the meetings that have taken place, and what the tobacco board has said in the paper, I don't think there will anything by the end of September,” said Brian Edwards, president of Tobacco Farmers in Crisis. “I would say there's discussions going on, but no announcement.”

Haldimand-Norfolk MPP Diane Finley, also the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, said discussion on the exit plan is an ongoing process. She said the file is a personal priority for her and “very active”.

“I can tell you that first hand,” she said. “We are aware of how difficult it is out there and that's why we're working so hard on it.”

Finley said she didn't yet have a timeline. She wouldn't confirm if the plan would be in place by the end of the month, or even prior to the time when growers need to decide if they will plant a crop next year. She said she wouldn't want to set expectations at this point.

“All I can you is I certainly have been stressing the urgency of it,” she said.

Edwards said the manufacturers and government reap \$12 billion from tobacco while the growers are struggling to make a living. In 2002, when farmers were forced to upgrade their kilns at the urging of the government and manufacturers, growers were told the crop size would be stable at 108 million pounds. Now, after farmers invested thousands of dollars in kiln retrofit costs, the crop size is almost half the 2002 level.

“It turned out to be nonsense,” Edwards said of the promise. “People can't pay the bills, can't make the mortgage payments. Now, who's going to buy this equipment?”

Finley did confirm the government received the tobacco board's exit plan proposal and it and a number of other options are being considered. Finley said the agriculture ministry is the lead on the initiative, but it also involves a number of other federal ministries from treasury to her own ministry.

Edwards said the Tobacco Farmers In Crisis proposal is similar to the tobacco board's. Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada also submitted an exit plan.

“We’re all in agreement tobacco farmers would like an exit plan for those who want to quit farming,” he said.

From the outset, the board has been pushing for a meeting of all stakeholders that would be affected by an exit plan. Finley said no date has been set for such a meeting. She said the other possibility is the meetings could take place on a separate one-on-one basis. While a Canadian Press story this week quoted Finley as saying an exit plan may not involve cash payouts, she said her remarks were misconstrued. She said assistance could take a number of forms, including the possibility of a community assistance program.

Asked if an exit plan would include cheques for farmers, Finley said, “I would certainly hope so”.