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WHO Tobacco Control Meetings Won't Address Key Canadian Issues, Farm Group Says

Simcoe, Ontario/Mandarins from Health Canada and other federal government departments are set to begin meetings in Ottawa tomorrow with counterparts from around the world to prepare a progress report on the implementation of certain articles of the World Health Organization's Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC). But, according to a group representing the majority of Canada's tobacco farmers, the bureaucrats are focusing on the wrong provisions of the tobacco control accord, at least from the Canadian perspective.

"Cigarette smuggling remains one of the biggest problems with tobacco control in Canada today and Article 15 isn't even on the agenda for this meeting," says Brian Edwards, president of Tobacco Farmers in Crisis, a non-profit group representing most of Canada's 700 remaining tobacco growers. (Article 15 is the FCTC provision on illicit trade in tobacco products.)

"Nor is Article 17 on the agenda for the Ottawa meeting," Mr. Edwards adds. Article 17 commits the federal government, which ratified the FCTC in November 2004, to provide support for "economically viable alternative activities" for tobacco workers and growers.

"And, for nearly two years, we haven't even been able to get a commitment for an exit program while our members are dealing with crushing debt loads and broken promises about the amount of tobacco we'd be able to sell to continue to meet Canadian demand," he says.

The talks in Ottawa will focus on drafting "a progress report on drafting of the guidelines for the implementation of Articles 9 and 10," according to a WHO communiqué. Articles 9 and 10 deal with the regulation of the contents of tobacco products and regulation of tobacco product disclosures – two topics that "have long been discussed, debated and dealt with in Canada," Mr. Edwards says.

Meanwhile, Canada's tobacco farming families and communities are reeling from the impact of conflicting tobacco control policies that have resulted in the unchecked growth of cigarette smuggling, which robs federal and provincial government treasuries of more than \$1.5 billion a year in lost taxes, according to an Imperial Tobacco Canada recent study release and other sources, and the unrestricted use of foreign tobacco in cigarettes sold in Canada.

Largely as a result of these two factors, the amount of tobacco left for Canadian farmers to grow and sell has been slashed by 50% since 2002 – from 108 million pounds in 2002 to 55 million pounds in 2006 – despite Tobacco Advisory Committee assurances in 2002 that crop sizes would remain stable for the foreseeable future. Those promises led farmers to agree to continue investing in infrastructure, including a \$65 million mandatory kiln-burner conversion program. Today, at an average 58 years of age, many tobacco farmers are carrying debt in excess of \$400,000 with dramatically reduced incomes and asset values. The precipitate decline in crop size means most farmers today are able to grow barely 20% of the quota they and their families invested in buying.

TFIC Chair Hank Chromczak says he and many of his group’s members are bewildered by the government’s hands-off stance on the rise in use of foreign tobacco. “They say it’s a free trade issue, not a health or tobacco control issue. But cheaper foreign tobacco means cheaper cigarettes – the so-called ‘value brands’ now have 45% of the Canadian market, up from 8% in 2002”. Mr. Chromczak says his group wonders how that fits with the WHO FCTC Article 6, which commits the Canadian government to use “price and tax measures” to reduce tobacco consumption “by various segments of the population, in particular young persons.”

TFIC has been diligently lobbying both federal and provincial governments for a comprehensive, fair and orderly exit strategy that would enable a majority of the remaining tobacco growers in Canada to get out of growing without declaring bankruptcy or otherwise harming their families and communities. In mid-2005, they presented a comprehensive “Blueprint for Action” that would enable the federal government to better meet its tobacco control objectives and set the groundwork for a final phase-out of government-sanctioned tobacco growing in Canada. TFIC has also presented funding options for the program that require nothing from the \$9 billion a year governments currently collect in tobacco taxes.

“We’re also dismayed that the federal government appears to have all the time in the world to meet with representatives from abroad but apparently is unwilling to meet the needs of its own citizens,” Brian Edwards adds

For more information on Tobacco Farmers in Crisis, the devastating situation facing Canada’s tobacco farming community and TFIC’s Blueprint for Action, contact:

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