

Prairie Centre Policy Institute
Weekly Commentary

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
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Farm Organizations Need to Re-think their Roles **Western Wheat Growers will be missed**

The Western Canadian Wheat Growers (WG) is history. The organization proudly advocated free markets and free trade. No doubt their anti-trade, pro-monopoly opponents feel quite gleeful about the demise of this once powerful voice for freedom. But they shouldn't be too happy. What happened to the WG is an indication of the crises facing all farm organizations.

But, as a Chinese sage noted, "A crisis is one part chaos and one part opportunity." What opportunities can rural interests find in the crisis that killed the WCWG? Here's one.

Even in rural communities, farmers are a minority, to be sure an important and vital one. But most rural people don't farm. Many, of course, are employed in businesses that support agriculture and in value-added processing. But the growing trend is towards the creation of non-agricultural businesses in rural areas.

These types of businesses are especially prevalent in the communities south of Winnipeg. They are growing at such rapid rates that they are begging for workers. When was the last time you heard that from rural communities?

I strongly believe that farm groups should take a much larger role in the entire area of rural policy and development. Single-issue groups, commodity associations like the WG, have a role. But in their fight for market share and their own interests, the entire suite of issues facing rural communities becomes lost. Not to mention the enemies they make.

The solution to the farm income crisis in some communities may not be agricultural at all. Look at what the Louisiana Pacific forest plant has done for the economy of the Swan River Valley; many members of farm families work there and the income generated keeps their farms viable. More money in rural communities, regardless of the source, benefits everybody, including farmers.

In 2002, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation surveyed the views held by U.S. legislators of rural issues. Entitled Perceptions of Rural America, the study concluded that, "Policy makers identify improving the economy of rural areas as the single most important thing to do to assure the viability of communities and the people who live there."

Survey participants came up with the following goals that cut across ideological and partisan lines:

- Increasing resources to family farmers and rectifying the inequities in the Farm Bill;
- Expanding access to broadband Internet;
- Improving rural health care;
- Generating incentives for new business starts and job creation in rural communities; and,
- Preserving the rural environment.

In other words, whether you are Conservative, Liberal, NDP or Sask Party, or whether you farm or not, shouldn't matter. These common policy issues provide an opportunity for a wide array of

interests and individuals to come together to form a new rural agenda. Without the need for direct government subsidies. Getting the policy right will promote development.

Various community development corporations seem the logical parties to take on this task on. But they rely on government funding, which precludes them from becoming effective agents of change. They inevitably tend to support existing, entrenched interests.

The threats to rural communities are best met by coalitions that will advance a set of common development objectives. Successful communities have created diverse and dynamic economies that can adapt to new realities.

Don't let it happen; make it happen.

-- *Robert D. Sopuck*

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