

# Report finds no evidence in support of prison goat farm

Problems cited include competition with goat producers, marketing the milk, and dealing with manure

**BY VALERIE MACDONALD**  
*Ontario Farmer*

**K**ingston - A report critical of establishing a large dairy goat operation as a prison farm project in the Kingston area – and recommending that prisoners work on plants instead – has been co-authored by two academics.

Dr. Amy Fitzgerald of Windsor University's sociology, anthropology and criminology department, and Dr. Amanda Wilson with Saint Paul University's School of Social Innovation undertook the recently released report entitled: 'Canada's Proposed Prison Farm Program: Why it won't work and what would work better.'

It was undertaken for the grassroots organization, Evolve Our Prison Farms.

The report, about a year in the making, was published Jan. 31 in *The Conversation*.

Dr Fitzgerald boiled down their report's opposition to the Correction Services Canada (CSC) project during an interview with *Ontario Farmer*. Her reasons were threefold: lack of evidence that prisoners could find employment with these skills or that they would keep them from re-offending; lack of market for the milk produced by the 2,000+ dairy goats; and how the 12,000 to 13,500 pounds of manure generated daily would be adequately managed.

"I ended up learning more about the goat industry than I thought I ever would," Fitzgerald said.

She explained that although agriculture job projection data indicates there is a "gap" now in this kind of farm labour, that will be "cut in half within a few years" while at the same time, greenhouse food production jobs will increase.

In addition, there are no studies that show working with livestock has the benefits associated with that of therapy animals, and there was no data she could find that there is a reduction in recidivism (reoffending) when working with farm animals.

This would be the "largest dairy goat herd in the province" and the manure created is significant, she said. There are no plans to sell it, only to manage it in a concrete lagoon and to contact "neighbouring farms" on which to spread it, she added.

Fitzgerald also noted that it would be difficult for other goat farmers to compete with a prison dairy goat farm of this size and paying only prison labour wages.



**Calvin Neufeld: "It is not going to be like a petting zoo."**

She said the CSC "hasn't been very transparent" about the details of its project and "we don't know what they are going to do with all this milk."

Asked how she came to author the report, Fitzgerald said her "interest in this area was sparked several years ago before prison farms closed" and she wanted to investigate the potential rehabilitative impacts of prisoners working with livestock as opposed to those with therapy-assisted animals.

"As a criminologist, I wanted to see the potential impacts on criminals."

When Calvin Neufeld, founder of Evolve our Prison Farms, wanted investigations in this area, she said she responded and ended up collaborating with Dr. Wilson on the two-part report.

The report's summary concludes, "Our primary hope is that this thorough analysis will cause CSC decision-makers to pause and re-evaluate their plans..."

Like Dr. Fitzgerald, co-author Dr. Wilson said receiving information from CSC was difficult and there, "was not a lot of publicly available information" on the prison farm plan.

When contacted by *Ontario Farmer* with questions, CSC spokesperson Shrider Michael did not confirm the intended size of the dairy goat herd or specify where the milk will be used or sold but did confirm the amount of funding that has been spent.

"To date, CSC has invested approximately \$2.4M for facilities and has incurred \$2.7M in expenditures for implementation and operations, in addition to \$1.5M invested in capital equipment. The location of this portion of the operation is planned to include housing of young goats at Collins Bay Institution and the dairy goat operation to be located at Joyceville Institution. The implementation of the dairy goat operation has not yet commenced."

Shrider also stated that since 2018 when it announced the reopening of



**Growing plants are better alternatives than having prisoners operate an industrial goat dairy, says report co-author Dr. Amanda Wilson.**

the Penitentiary Farms there has been a gradual implementation of the program and 44 offenders "have been involved in various employment program assignments related to the agricultural operations."

There is ongoing training as renovations take place and "offenders have also been involved in various other farm-related activities including crop production, horticulture, beekeeping, maple syrup production, fence repair, green zone/environmental activities, forestry management, and livestock care/operations."

He said that the practice skills and experience and learning will "all contribute to helping (offenders) find meaningful employment once they return to the community."

Some of these prison farm activities are echoed in Part 2 of the academic report's recommendations instead of raising a milking goat herd. Wilson offers three alternatives to raising and milking goats on a prison farm. They are:

- organic fruit and vegetable production for prisons and community organizations,
- horticulture therapy,
- agri-food education and training."

Wilson said, "it would be wonderful to see a prison farm model that incorporated all three of these models" and that she thinks "they would work well together."

Among the concerns she expressed were the housing and management of the animals especially in light of the "death of calves on prison farm lands earlier this winter."

Shrider has stated that care and housing of the goats, plus management of their waste "will be in accordance with industry standards and regulatory requirements for this type of operation" and that CSC is continuing to "seek partnerships with local businesses and organizations, as well as potential sales



**There is no proof that working in a large scale dairy goat prison farm will reduce prisoner re-offending, says Dr. Amy Fitzgerald, co-author of a report.**

within the industry standard and supply chain regulations."

But Wilson maintains growing plants would be the most effective, more feasible and "not requiring a huge investment"

Neufeld, a Kingston-area resident who founded Evolve our Prison Farms in 2016, said he wanted a report on the proposed goat project in part because gaining information has dwindled down to making official Requests for Information.

He said he found there was a good

collaboration involving Fitzgerald and Wilson.

"We didn't just want a report about problems but alternatives," he told *Ontario Farmer*.

There haven't been any academic studies of the benefits of inmates working with large scale animal operations and this "is not going to be like a petting zoo," he said.

A petition has been started opposing the dairy goat milking prison farm project and as of noon on Feb. 8 there were over 17,000 signatures.

## Further recommendations

The report made these recommendations for its proposed food production alternatives:

- the prison farms should have a non-profit mandate;
- the farms should have tangible and direct benefits for prisoners, including that they provide healthy and nourishing food, employ them under fair labour conditions, including appropriate compensation, and provide relevant and meaningful training, education and rehabilitation;
- ideally the farms benefit the broader community;
- the farms be environmentally sustainable and regenerative;
- the use of animals should be limited to therapeutic purposes;
- there be an organic, diverse agriculture model involving a mix of permanent raised beds, intensive market-garden and field crops;
- focus on producing food for prison kitchens, as well as distributed to community food organizations;
- focus on annual fruits and vegetables that can be eaten fresh or with minimal preparation alongside the development of perennial fruits as well as native trees and shrubs; and
- development of season extension through greenhouses and/or storage facilities to promote year-round training, education and employment opportunities.