

Opinion

Scandal brewing over feds' prison farm plan

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Helen Forsey

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Word of problems with the government's plans for two Kingston-area prison farms is finally reaching the Hill with a new report out by two academics.

"Canada's Proposed Prison Farm Program: Why It Won't Work and What Would Work Better," was released on Jan. 31, and immediately sent to Corrections Canada officials and federal Public Safety Minister Bill Blair. The report presents a detailed critique of the CSC's current plan to convert the farms at Joyceville and Collins Bay penitentiaries into an intensive livestock operation, using prison labour to produce goat milk for sale to a private corporation to make baby formula for export.

The plan itself is not new; it has been quietly developing ever since 2018 when the government announced, with great fanfare, that it was finally "reopening"

the prison farms that the Harper government had closed almost a decade earlier. But instead of a program similar to what was there before, the current plan imposes a commercial model that will serve private interests instead of the public good. And although the COVID-19 situation has meant some delays in implementation, work continues on industrial facilities to accommodate some 2,000 milking goats and their young in massive barns rigged out with the latest automated equipment.

The recent 100-page scholarly report, written by criminology professor Amy Fitzgerald of the University of Windsor and Amanda Wilson, sociology professor of St. Paul's University in Ottawa, exposes multiple fundamental flaws in the CSC plan. The authors assert that implementing it could contravene human rights, and that the likely consequences for prisoners are "not in alignment with the stated purposes, [i.e.] vocational training and rehabilitation as means to reduced recidivism." Not only would the proposed program exploit prisoners; it would also increase public health risks from zoonotic diseases, create serious problems of air and water pollution from the quantities of manure, and represent unfair competition with commercial livestock farmers.

Weeks after receiving this damning report, there has still been no public response from the government or the Correctional Service. They seem to cherish the illusion that if they keep mum, the problem will all go away.

On the few occasions in the past when people have succeeded in raising questions about the plan, they have likewise been met with silence and denial. Last April, as the COVID threat grew, *The Hill Times* reported on an initiative by the grassroots group "Evolve Our Prison Farms" to have the two farms immediately focus on producing plant-based food in order to provide prisoners



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Last April, as the COVID threat grew, *The Hill Times* reported on an initiative by the grassroots group Evolve Our Prison Farms to have the two farms immediately focus on producing plant-based food in order to provide prisoners with healthy socially distanced work and help combat food insecurity. Senator Kim Pate and NDP MP Jack Harris both said that proposal had merit, calling it 'a very good idea.' *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade and Jake Wright

with healthy socially distanced work and help combat food insecurity. NDP MP Jack Harris and Senator Kim Pate both said that proposal had merit, calling it "a very good idea."

The government response to the corresponding petition was eventually tabled on Sept. 24. It asserted that the "new model for penitentiary farm operations" had been developed after "broad public consultations and review," that it included a number of non-goat-related activities, and that everything was "being implemented in accordance with all relevant legislation and policy." As the facts and the recent report make clear, those claims are questionable. And the goat operation remains the core of the CSC's plan.

What will the promoters of that plan do now, faced with this latest thorough and scholarly critique? When contacted for this article, the minister's office said it was preparing a statement, but at press time that statement had not yet arrived.

Mark Gerretsen, Liberal MP for Kingston and the Islands, did respond promptly to the request for comment on the report. "I have always been a supporter of prison farms, along with thousands of my constituents," he wrote. "I'm proud of the work the government has done, in collaboration with local advocates and experts, to re-open the prison farms." However, it was unclear if Gerretsen was also proud of the potential contraventions of human rights, the failure to meet rehabilitation and training objectives, and the negative impacts on the broader community detailed in the report, since he did not mention it.

Other parliamentarians have been much clearer. Green Party MP Paul Manly, his party's public safety critic, had this to say when

he sponsored a fresh petition in August, asking that the goat plan be cancelled: "An industrial-scale goat farming operation at these facilities will reportedly supply milk to an infant formula factory in Kingston, Ont., which is owned by the Chinese corporation Feihe International. People who work at these farms will be paid less than a dollar an hour, putting cheap prison labour in competition with farmers in the open market. In addition, intensive animal agriculture is associated with higher carbon emissions and environmental pollution. Any push to follow the U.S. model of exploiting cheap prison labour for corporate profits calls into question Canada's commitment to labour and human rights."

The CSC's plan flies in the face of the goals that prison farm supporters like myself have fought for over the past 11 years—prisoner rehabilitation, training for life skills and employment, therapeutic involvement with animals, and food production for prisons and communities. Since 2018, as bits of information leaked out about the new corporate model, many became increasingly uneasy, wary of the official assurances that everything about the plan was beyond reproach.

Calvin Neufeld, Perth-based researcher and spokesperson for Evolve our Prison Farms, has worked diligently to get beyond those bland assurances, but real information has been hard to come by. The criticisms in the report by Fitzgerald and Wilson come from facts pried out of the Correctional Service through scores of access-to-information requests.

And it's high time those facts were exposed. Over the past three years, many critics have been silenced, ignored or shunned; others

have apparently been seduced by the repeated claim that "The prison farm program has been restored and the cows are coming back." That claim is simply window-dressing for a coverup, and a betrayal of the tireless work of prison farm supporters over the past decade.

There are good reasons why the Fitzgerald-Wilson report is entitled: "Canada's Proposed Prison Farm Program: Why It Won't Work and What Would Work Better." Those reasons include the prospect of legal challenges from various constituencies, and legal liabilities associated with the operation, particularly now that CSC has been made aware of the risks and impacts.

But it is still possible to turn this thing around, and this report may be the crucial link to that happening.

The political implications on both sides of the House are significant. The opposition parties are now in a position to hammer the government on all the problematic aspects documented in the report.

So far, the government, CSC, Kingston authorities and others who might stand to lose face have largely succeeded in keeping the whole controversy suppressed. Now, with the facts finally emerging into public view on Parliament Hill as well as in local communities, the farm press, and academia, the veil of silence and denial is shredding.

CSC and the government should cut their losses now, cancel the goat factory and replace it with a genuinely progressive prison farm program that will serve the goals of rehabilitation, justice and food security.

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