

# CSC should abandon its industrial goat farm fiasco

The feds still haven't responded to a 100-page scholarly report by professors Amy Fitzgerald and Amanda Wilson on why Canada's proposed prison farm program won't work and what would work better.



Helen Forsey

Opinion

Scandal continues to brew over the Correctional Service Canada's plan to convert its two Kingston-area prison farms into an industrial dairy goat operation for the commercial market (see "Scandal brewing over feds' prison farm plans," *The Hill Times*, March 8.)

In fact, the brew is heating up.

CSC itself is stirring the pot with its March 17 letter to *The Hill Times* under the heading, "Clarity needed on prison farm program, says CSC." Clarity is what I'm calling for too, along with a large and growing number of critics. But clarity on the part of CSC is in short supply.

In case anyone had doubts about the claim in my column that the authorities respond to every criticism with bland and irrelevant assurances, CSC has obligingly provided their letter as an example. With great dignity, Public Safety Minister Blair's office has declined to follow suit, despite having told me on March 5 that they were working on a statement.

Highlighted in my article was the 100-page scholarly report by professors Amy Fitzgerald and Amanda Wilson (<https://evolveourprisonfarms.ca/prison-farm->

report/), detailing and analyzing a multitude of alarming facts gleaned from CSC's own records through access to information requests. There's good reason why that report was entitled, "Canada's Proposed Prison Farm Program: Why It Won't Work and What Would Work Better." You'd think that title would have caught the attention of those responsible.

Yet in the weeks since Feb. 1, when the report was sent to CSC, CORCAN, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair, his parliamentary secretary Joel Lightbound, and Liberal MP Mark Gerretsen, there's been not a peep out of any of them about the scathing criticisms documented by the two professors.

Did anyone in CSC or the government even read the Fitzgerald-Wilson report? If they didn't, what possible excuse is there for such irresponsibility? If they did, why are they studiously avoiding even noting that the report exists, let alone responding to it?

In her letter to *The Hill Times*, CSC's acting manager for issue management and media relations, Isabelle Robitaille, says CSC "want[s] to provide clarifications." What she offers instead is a well-practised muddying of the waters, conflation of statistics, and evasion of the real and serious issues.

Rather than addressing the facts and criticisms in my article and in the academic report, Robitaille repeats the CSC's standard media lines, obfuscating and distracting from what is actually at stake. She calls my documented information "speculation," offers a flurry of irrelevant details, and paints the whole penitentiary farm program in glowing colours.

Robitaille states: "CSC announced on March 5 that it was pausing the planned goat program." Fact: My article reported exactly that. I also noted CSC's statement in the same press release that "The dairy goat program will resume once the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic can be fully assessed." In other words, the goat plan remains in place, but Robitaille refrains from mentioning that fact.

Her letter states: "CSC is continuing its dairy cow program, already in development." Facts: The "dairy cow program" is not the major element of the CSC/CORCAN plan. Their official documents show provision for up to 2,200 goats, and up to 90 cows. CSC cannot get quota for the cows' milk, nor do their private food service contracts allow them to use the milk in

the prisons. CSC claims it will acquire "research quota," but with no evidence that they have done so, what may happen with any cows' milk produced is one of many unanswered questions.

Robitaille notes that, "The piece published states that plans were already established for a large goat dairy whose milk would be supplied for export." Yes, because that is the case. Facts: official documents obtained through access to information and cited in the Fitzgerald-Wilson report provide reams of detail on the planned goat operation, including the scale, location, building specifications, automated milking parlour design, and the entire lengthy Nutrient Management Plan for handling an anticipated output of between five and six thousand kilograms of manure per day (from the goats, not from CSC).

Robitaille states that "CSC has not yet procured any dairy goats, nor has it entered into any contracts with potential buyers of goat milk." This may be true. However, Gerretsen has stated to the media and to membership of the Pen Farm Herd Co-op that the expected buyer of the goat milk is the Chinese-based Feihe Corporation (Canada Royal Milk), whose Kingston plant makes infant formula mainly for export. CORCAN's farm manager told Ontario Farmer magazine that the "milk is destined for Feihe," and the president of Ontario Goat says that there is currently no other market for goats' milk. If not Feihe, who else is CSC expecting will buy the milk from the massive operation they're developing?

The letter states that "speculation as to how [the goat program] will be operated is not grounded in fact." Facts: Documents like CORCAN's Nutrient Management Plan for the Joyceville facility, their request for proposals for bulk dairy coolers, environmental assessment reports for construction aspects of the project, and the construction costs itemized in CSC's existing capital budget, are not "speculation"; they are documentary evidence that detailed plans are in place for an industrial-scale goat dairy operation.

Robitaille states: "The article claims that a large dairy operation would not provide employment benefits for offenders," and offers "agri-food" industry data that are not only wrong by three degrees of magnitude, but also completely unrelated to the program planned for the prison farms. She lists eight agricultural

activities, from fence repair to forest management, that offer "on-the-job training" to help prisoners build "essential skills." Facts: Fitzgerald and Wilson cite accurate statistical data showing a lack of paid jobs in the dairy sector. The majority of actual job opportunities in "agri-food" for which inmates are getting "on-the-job training" are in the abattoir that CORCAN owns at Joyceville, and the report notes the "dangerous and denigrating working conditions" and potential trauma for inmates involved in slaughter work. The authors then detail the multiple reasons for their conclusion that the planned goat operation does not meet the criteria for the program's stated objectives—providing vocational training and rehabilitation as means to reduce recidivism.

What Robitaille omits from her response is even more telling than what she includes. She fails to mention the information in my article about human rights and the exploitation of cheap prison labour for commercial ends. She is silent about the environmental problems of air and water pollution from the manure, and the potential threats to public health from zoonotic diseases. And she manages to avoid any reference whatsoever to the academic report which exposes just how problematic the whole plan is.

In this case, Robitaille has a lot of help. CORCAN and the rest of CSC, the minister's office, Gerretsen, Kingston City Council and its Economic Development Corporation, even individuals who should have spoken up and gotten out of the mess while they could—all now have a heavy stake in keeping the facts about the goat plan from public view. The comprehensive and longstanding efforts to cover this up are in some ways as troubling as the facts themselves.

The CSC letter begins with the hope that the information in it "will be useful to readers." It concludes with the assertion that "We welcome any future opportunities to provide information about any of our operations."

Perhaps that means they are turning over a new leaf. Maybe they'll stop blocking access-to-information requests by concerned members of the public. Maybe they'll stop mixing peas and oranges in their public statements, like conflating job opportunities in agriculture with overall employment in "the agri-food industry." Maybe they'll stop the involuntary transfers of prisoners who tell the truth about this or other outrages, and stop using economic sticks and carrots to make sure nobody else breaks the silence.

Maybe CSC will start telling the truth and abandon the industrial goat farm fiasco once and for all.

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