

Former prisoner has reservations about current project

Shaun Shannon was formerly in charge of the Kingston prison farm's dairy herd

BY IAN CUMMING
Ontario Farmer

Shaun Shannon spent 23 years in the Kingston penitentiary for bank robbery.

"In all honesty I was good at robbing banks and really enjoyed it," he said in a July 31 interview with Ontario Farmer. "But I paid the price."

In his last five years locked up, from 1990 to 1995 inclusive, "I, a city boy, started milking cows there on the prison farm and by the end I was in charge of the dairy barns," he said. "It saved my life."

The Kingston farm facility, without quota, had 300 milking cows, in two tie-stall units of 150 milking in each, and a large layer operation "that provided all the milk and eggs to all the prisons in Ontario and Quebec," said Shannon.

The milk was pasteurized on-farm before being consumed by any of the prisoners, in Kingston, or elsewhere.

There were 25 inmates working with the cows, heifers and calves, a dozen in each barn. They did their own milking, feeding and AI, it was a top quality herd and it provided Shannon a couple of days out from behind the prison walls per year, in those last years, "when we showed at Kingston Fair."

The law regarding prison labour

has been made harsher today, with no top-ups to a standard prison wage.

But back then, he and the other two dozen inmates "were getting \$10 a day over our regular \$3 to \$4 a day," said Shannon. "That was big money to us and provided an incentive. There is no incentive allowed today."

The self-sufficient model marketing milk and eggs without quota was always a sore spot with marketing boards, and processors wanting to sell into prisons. So it was only a matter of time before their continual tag team lobbies to government to shut them down, rumblings of which were heard behind the prison walls, caused a federal government to cave, said Shannon.

He wasn't there a decade ago when the emotional shutdown happened and the cows were loaded, but his phone rang that night with some of his tough former fellow workers from the prison hallway phones, "who were bawling their eyes out," said Shannon.

He educated himself on how and why that had to happen, and read chapter and verse of the CSC Food Services Modernization Act, the legislation at the time which closed all loopholes for prisons to be self-sufficient in food, or to sell farm produce to a commercial enterprise.

With other international agreements preventing exports of their prison manufactured products. Canada also prohibits any imports, "made wholly or in part," by prison labour.



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About eight years later, when there appeared to be some movement to revitalize the farms, Shannon jumped in to help, but was appalled at the insufficient knowledge of the others about the legislation, as they made public proclamations of them milking again.

When Shannon told them to read the legislation, "it means you're going to have to dump the milk unless you get the laws changed." There's been no move to do so on any front.

"I was told to keep quiet and not to speak without their permission," he said.

There had been "23 years of

guards telling me what to do, but never what to say, so I left them," said Shannon. "They wanted my testimony on how the prison farm had helped me, but they didn't want me to get in the way of them getting federal money."

Perhaps there is a caveat around the legislation, such as the proposed 34 kilos of research milk quota offered by Ontario—a figure also cited in an email by DFO board member Nick Thurler, before saying that the final amount had not been determined—but that isn't going to keep a lot of prisoners busy, as compared to before when they milked 300, said Shannon.

"Plus, they are going to have to

dump the milk," which can probably be justified if they are doing drug trials, he said.

When it comes to whether or not the proposed 1,800-milking goat facility can or cannot legally provide product to the Chinese plant to export, Shannon is leaving that determination up to trade lawyers.

But he gets emotional about how small goats are the worst thing you can have on a prison farm, both from an animal welfare and a prisoner safety perspective.

Whoever proposed that goat project "never spent a month locked up, surrounded by a hard core prison gang," said Shannon. "Because then he would know."

He had learned quickly, working with the dairy herd, that many prisoner's fists and feet were used on calves, if they had the chance, and that you had to find those select few who could be trusted to handle them with care.

With 1,800 small milking goats, plus young ones, combined with no incentive pay, "what will happen to those goats, if you put hardened gang members among them?"

If people think that some folks are acting irrationally with the COVID-19 lockdown, they should experience the inside of a penitentiary, said Shannon. The stinking of cow manure was something that could and did occasionally trigger an inmate, or a gang, to beat on someone smelling, said Shannon.

"I'm sorry, but goats stink way worse than cows."

Obesity cures are far more complex than diet, exercise

A new study suggests treating obesity as a chronic disease needing long-term support

BY ANNA SHARRATT
Postmedia

"Exercise and diet" - that's the advice doctors have given patients living with obesity for far too long, says Dr. Sean Wharton, an internist in Burlington, Ontario, who treats people living with obesity.

Wharton is one of the authors of new clinical guidelines, two years in the making, for treating obesity in Canada. It is the first major update to obesity treatment guidelines since 2007.

The Canadian Adult Obesity Clinical Practice Guidelines

(CPGs) were developed by Obesity Canada and the Canadian Association of Bariatric Physicians and Surgeons, and authored by more than 60 Canadian health professionals, researchers and individuals living with obesity. The recommendations were published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ).

The authors assessed over 500,000 published peer-reviewed articles on obesity.

In essence, the guidelines recommend that the condition be treated as a chronic illness, not something cured by simple diet and exercise. This should also help end the stigma around obesity.

"Science tells us the drivers of weight gain are complicated and unique to the individual, and also that the human body

is hard-wired against weight loss. Historically, we have told people whose weight affects their health merely to eat less and move more, which on its own is ineffective and even dangerously simplistic advice," said Dr. Arya M. Sharma, scientific director of Obesity Canada.

"The CPGs represent a turning point in the way Canada needs to approach the treatment of obesity, and that is to acknowledge obesity as a complex chronic disease requiring life-long support, as we do for diabetes, heart disease and others - this is the best evidence to date on how to do that," said Sharma.

"We're definitely hoping physicians and people work on their own biases," said Wharton.

"Our fixation on diet has been failing us for 50 years,"

Wharton added. "Going on a diet guarantees you're going to lose a little bit of weight but you'll gain a significant amount back."

Instead, Wharton said obesity needs to be treated as a neurobiological issue, driven by hormones that influence people's eating habits and behaviours. To that end, patients need approaches to managing how those hormones react in their bodies.

This can be achieved through bariatric surgery, which reduces the size of the stomach, but also affects hormones and gut bacteria that affect hunger. Medications such as glucagon-like peptide 1 (GLP-1) agonists can also increase the levels of hormones that make people feel full after eating, while antidepressant/anti-addictive

medications can also manage cravings and hunger pangs.

Wharton would also like to see the language around obesity change. Instead of diets, "medical nutrition therapy" can help bring about changes to eating patterns. This means eating to solve a condition without obsessing about calories. He says if a person makes sensible nutritional choices, the "lower calories will come."

A new approach to obesity is especially important during the pandemic, as the illness is seen as a major risk factor for diabetes and COVID-19. Research has shown that the adipose tissue of people who live with obesity can lead to inflammation that complicates these conditions and can lead to more severe symptoms.