

## News

# ‘Bloody bad business’: prison reform advocate calls for Canada’s last prison labour-operated abattoir to finally close

As the expiration date looms for the CSC’s partnership with Wallace Beef Inc. to operate the slaughterhouse, Conservative MP Scott Reid warns that the closure of the abattoir would have severe negative impacts on local beef farmers.

BY STUART BENSON



A look inside the abattoir at the Joyceville Institution, where prison labour is used to operate a commercial facility as part of an ‘on-the-job’ training program for inmates. Photograph courtesy of Calvin Neufeld

A prison reform advocacy group is renewing its calls on the federal government to finally close Canada’s last remaining prison labour-operated abattoir at the Joyceville and Pittsburgh institutions in Kingston, Ont., after its contract is set to expire on Sept. 30.

Last month, Evolve Our Prison Farms released the second edition of its report criticizing the slaughterhouse, in which it claims to expose violations of inmates’ human rights as well as legal, institutional, and ethical violations. The first edition of the report was released in August 2021. The report’s author, Evolve Our Prison Farms founder Calvin Neufeld, told *The Hill Times* that the newest edition contained more information and context, as the year had allowed him to more thoroughly digest the information contained in the more than 1,000 pages of Correctional Services Canada (CSC) documents on which the report is based. It also gave him the opportunity to tailor the report to respond to the evolving arguments the government has made in defence of its continued operation.

The report, *Bloody Bad Business: Report on the Joyceville Institution Abattoir (2nd edition)*, was submitted to Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino’s (Eglington-Lawrence, Ont.) office, as well as CSC on Aug. 18. It included documentation that Neufeld alleged exposes a wide spectrum of infractions at the abattoir currently owned by Wallace Beef.

The report claims to show evidence of illegal activities, including money laundering, contraband smuggling, abuse, improper slaughtering of animals, dumping of abattoir blood into the prison’s water treatment plant, and blood

contaminating the fields around the prison and the banks of the Rideau River Watershed.

The current contract between the CSC and Wallace Beef Inc. for the abattoir operation is set to expire on Sept. 30, after it was extended for a year in September 2021.

“I’ve been listening to the exchanges in the House of Commons, and the rebuttals from some of the MPs saying this is about skills training, it’s good for the inmates, and the farmers rely on it,” Neufeld said. “The hope is that this report will give them pause to reconsider the value and the political implications of renewing the contract.”

*The Hill Times* made multiple attempts, through emails and telephone calls, to receive a response from Wallace Beef owner Bruce Wallace to the report from Evolve Our Prison Farms, but did not receive a response.

On Sept. 3, *The Hill Times* briefly spoke with Wallace over the phone and he confirmed he had read Neufeld’s report, but said he was entering a meeting and would call back. Wallace did not call back despite repeated attempts to reach him by phone, and did not respond to follow-up emails detailing the allegations.

Conservative MP Scott Reid (Lanark-Frontenac-Kingston, Ont.), whose riding includes the Joyceville Institution, has been a vocal critic of the CSC’s operations, previously speaking out against the government’s controversial prison goat farm. Reid told *The Hill Times* the abattoir shares the same issues as almost all of the operations overseen by CORCAN—a special operating agency within the CSC that offers employment and employability programs to offenders—including

the failure of CORCAN programs to prepare inmates for the labour market and to secure jobs.

However, Reid argued that the closure of the abattoir would cause severe negative effects on the local agricultural community, specifically the local beef farmers, due to a narrow range of other small-scale slaughter operations in the region.

Neufeld also pointed to possible violations of human rights in associating “coerced and underpaid prison labour with a commercial enterprise,” and the “fundamental inappropriateness of training prisoners to kill.”

“When they stopped using the abattoir to feed prisoners [in 2010], it became an entirely commercial operation using federal funds and prison labour; it’s unheard of,” Neufeld added. “It’s just grandfathered in without anybody raising questions about the human rights implications of maintaining this.”

The abattoir began operation in 1960 and provided beef to Ontario CSC institutions until 1995, when it introduced a public-private partnership with Wallace Beef Inc. The partnership allowed the facility to reduce its operating costs and allowed Wallace Beef to sell the meat commercially, along with supplying it to prisons in Ontario and Quebec.

Reid was concerned with what appears to be “underpaid inmate labour and de facto coerced inmate labour,” but he said to address this, inmates should be paid a market wage.

“Slaughterhouse work is the least desirable of all [labour] at the prison farm, but a higher wage would cause inmates to regard the employment as desirable and provide a larger pool of gen-

uinely voluntary job applications,” Reid said. “Moreover, once this becomes sought-after work, CORCAN would be in a much stronger position to enforce other forms of control over the workers at the abattoir—such as making sure that it does not return to being an avenue for illegal drugs to enter the corrections facility.”

In 2003, the abattoir was temporarily closed after inmates reported “inappropriate activities,” according to Evolve Our Prison Farms. Allegations ranged “from improper slaughtering and meat handling practices to money laundering and drug-related activity to the general business relationship” between Wallace Beef and CORCAN. At the time, the company denied the allegations, according to a CBC report, which noted the allegations “of questionable practices came from an inmate.” The allegations triggered investigations by the Ontario Provincial Police, Kingston Police, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food (OMAFRA), according to a October 2003 *Globe and Mail* report, as well as Ontario’s Ministry of Natural Resources and CSC’s “Pen Squad” investigative unit, Neufeld’s report noted. The result was a month-long closure of the abattoir followed by a temporary agreement, and interim security protocols.

The political and economic calculus of keeping the abattoir open has changed, Neufeld said, in part due to his organization’s updated report, as well as the expected retirement of Wallace Beef’s owner. Conservative MP Michael Barrett (Leeds-Grenville-Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, Ont.) also noted in the House on April 8 the operator was retiring. Finding a new private partner would require a “huge influx of resources and public funds into essentially rebuilding the place,” Neufeld said.

Referencing July 2021 phone conversations with OMAFRA, Neufeld said its area meat inspection manager told him that anyone taking over the CORCAN abattoir contract would constitute a new operator and need a new licence, which would require bringing the facility up to the current building and codes.

Neufeld argued that if the government is going to need to invest in essentially building a whole new abattoir to bring it up to code, they should at least do so offsite and close the one on the prison grounds.

“The most cost-effective solution, and the easiest political move, is to do nothing,” Neufeld added. “The government doesn’t need to admit it’s been a problem all these years or anything like

that; just let it come to its natural conclusion.”

Neufeld isn’t alone in his calls for the abattoir to close, arguing that neither the inmates nor the correctional staff want it, pointing to attempts by prison officials to end the contract with Wallace Beef as early as 1997.

“You can see how hard the staff on the ground for decades have been trying to get rid of this place,” Neufeld said, citing two more instances in the report in 2003 and 2018 when prison officials expressed concerns about continuing the contract.

The report also cited several academics and criminologists who argue the abattoir is harmful to the inmates’ rehabilitation and public safety in general.

“Certain prisoners who have worked in the abattoir have detailed dangerous and denigrating working conditions, as well as trauma related to inflicting or witnessing violence against animals,” reads a quote from University of Windsor criminologist Amy Fitzgerald. Other experts cited include Queen’s University philosopher Sue Donaldson, and University of Toronto criminologist Philip Goodman.

“The report makes it very clear and is based on very established evidence that this is the kind of work that leads to higher rates of unemployment, substance abuse, violence, and crime,” said Neufeld, adding that the evidence was in direct contradiction to Mendicino’s comments in the House of Commons on April 8, when the minister said the abattoir provided prisoners with the “tools” they need to reintegrate safely.

In response to interview requests from *The Hill Times*, neither Mendicino nor his parliamentary secretary, Liberal MP Pam Damoff (Oakville North-Burlington, Ont.), were available to comment.

A statement from the CSC said the service was working to determine the next steps as the lease agreement expires at the end of September, noting the operation has met the needs of the local farming community over many years and provided on-the-job training opportunities to offenders. However, the department declined to comment on the report itself.

Likewise, Neufeld said he hadn’t received a response from Public Safety, and in response to his questions the CSC told him that the Evolve Our Prison Farms reports were “not affiliated with CSC or its views,” and that it would not be commenting on their contents.

“There’s no defence for this, so the only defence is silence,” Neufeld said.

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