

FEATURE

Internal documents detail costs piling up for prison dairy program

The alleged justification for this prison agribusiness investment is reducing recidivism by instilling ‘transferable’ skills in prisoners, but only 12–16 positions have been created by the tens of millions of dollars spent, and CSC says it ‘does not track’ the post-release employment outcomes.

BY CALVIN NEUFELD

Joyceville Institution, a federal penitentiary near Kingston, Ont., has begun milking in a new 88-cow dairy program that took the Correctional Service of Canada seven years and \$36-million to set up. The prison’s milk is being sold to Dairy Farmers of Ontario, and pooled with the general supply sold to the public.

Among the buyers of that milk is a Chinese corporation, Feihe International, whose Canada Royal Milk infant formula factory in Kingston was announced in 2016 and completed in 2019. According to government documents, it was not Feihe’s intention to use cow milk from a prison in its formula. The prison-produced milk in the company’s supply chain was only supposed to come from goats.

Officials have pleaded ignorance or outright denied the plan to farm thousands of goats at Joyceville Institution to supply infant formula exports to China. Finally, a long battle with access to information has lifted the veil on documents that the government improperly withheld and redacted for years.

The plan, conceived by the Liberal government in 2016 and funded in 2018, was for a commercial goat dairy enterprise at Joyceville Institution, beginning with 800 kids and expanding to 2,200 milking goats “to sell goat milk to Feihe International Inc. that will produce infant formula in Kingston.”



An incarcerated farm worker shovels cow feed in a prison dairy research program at Joyceville Institution in Kingston, Ont. Jo-Anne McArthur photograph courtesy of We Animals



Conservative MP Scott Reid, left, and prison farm researcher Calvin Neufeld visit the holding pen to the now-shuttered prison abattoir at Joyceville Institution in Kingston, Ont. Jo-Anne McArthur photograph courtesy of We Animals

Since 2022, Conservative MP Scott Reid—whose Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston, Ont., riding housed the operation until the 2025 election when his riding was reduced to Lanark–Frontenac—has raised questions in the House of Commons about the ethics and legality of prison-produced milk entering commercial and export supply chains. In response, the government has offered only the blanket assurance that carceral competition in dairy markets “complies with all of Canada’s international obligations.”

Officials have denounced critics, obstructed investigations, evaded interrogations from parliamentarians, and refused to admit that the Chinese company is—or was—the intended buyer for the prison milk, even while a Privy Council Office official joked in a June 2018 email about the “cows and goats that inmates will use to make infant formula for Chinese babies ... Public safety – fun and games even after someone loses an eye.”

The release of the government’s iron grip on the documentary records was achieved in 2024 when the federal information commissioner forced the govern-

ment to pull back the curtain on what had been unlawfully withheld from the public since 2018 when the first access to information requests were filed.

Previously redacted sections of 2017 briefing notes explicitly document the plan for “selling raw goat milk to Feihe” from the prison, and for the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) to “build a partnership with this company.”

The government allocated \$4.3-million in the 2018 federal budget for operational setup over five years. The intended buyer of the goat milk was undisclosed to the public, as was the additional \$5-million for the construction of the industrial goat barn that was to be covered separately under the CSC capital budget.

The cost to taxpayers, then, to supply a Chinese corporation with prison-produced goat milk—as there were no other potential buyers or markets specified in documents—would have come to just under \$10-million had it gone according to plan and according to budget. It did neither, and the reason was cows.

Cow dairy was excluded from the planned prison agribusiness because it was too expensive, too

complicated (requiring quota, unlike goat milk), and ultimately irrelevant to the government’s goal of increasing goat milk production for Feihe.

The exclusion of cows did not sit well with a co-operative that owned cows with genetic lineage from a dismantled penitentiary farm herd. Two of the co-op’s directors, appointed by the government as advisers to the prison program, openly lobbied for then-public safety minister Ralph Goodale to change his mind and buy the co-op’s cows.

Goodale reversed the decision to exclude cows, and approved CSC’s purchase of cattle from the advisory panel members. As a public relations move, it had the desired effect, garnering positive media attention and diverting questions away from CSC’s seismic shift into commercial goat milk production. Goodale lost his seat in 2019, and has been Canada’s high commissioner in the United Kingdom since 2021.

Reid raised questions in the House of Commons about the cow purchase twice this past fall, asking on Sept. 27, 2024: “This is such an obvious conflict of interest that the minister owes us an

explanation. Why did he allow the purchase of cows from members of the advisory panel?”

Then-parliamentary secretary to the public safety minister Jennifer O’Connell said: “Regarding the claims being made, there has been no preferential treatment or conflict of interest. All decisions have been open and transparent and made to ensure the value for money for Canadians.”

Goodale’s approval of the addition of cows was granted on the condition that it be achieved “at no extra cost” within the \$4.3-million budget. With the advisory panel’s assurance that this was “feasible,” since cows and goats were “mutually supportive” and could be milked together “under one roof,” CSC redesigned the goat barn into an expanded “dual function barn” before discovering that milking the two species together would not meet agricultural codes.

After CSC realized the error, it was estimated that constructing separate goat and cow barns would cost \$11-million. By 2020, the construction estimates had risen to an alarming \$26-million, compounding the “political sensitivities related to this project.” CSC quietly announced the decision to “temporarily pause” the goat program in 2021, saying that the goat dairy “will resume” after the cow dairy is established.

The cow barn took priority since the cows that CSC had hurriedly begun purchasing in 2019 under media fanfare had been kept in “inadequate” temporary housing for two years, creating an “urgent” situation.

In 2022, Public Services and Procurement Canada awarded a \$10.48-million contract for the construction of CSC’s cow barn.

By the time construction began on the first dairy barn at Joyceville Institution in March 2022, CSC had spent four years and millions of dollars revising plans to accommodate the addition of cows, including renovating existing barns as temporary housing, redesigning new barn architecture, repackaging procurement tenders, relocating the planned construction site, and figuring out what to do with cow milk that CSC has no use for since it has national contracts for all milk used in prisons.

The advisory panel’s proposal had been to use cows’ milk to feed goat kids, to “offset some longer term kid feeding costs.” Far from offsetting costs, the cow cost overruns forced CSC to pause the goats, leaving the quandary of how—and why—the cows would be milked.

With no internal use for the milk, the only cow dairy quota option available to CSC was “research.”

To qualify for research quota from Dairy Farmers of Ontario, CSC partnered with the University of Guelph and McGill University to conduct cow dairy research at the prison. Guelph withdrew from the 2023 partnership the next year, leaving the Ontario quota covering the Quebec university’s research. CSC confirmed in late 2024 that it only

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‘Easier to advertise cookies than spinach’: Conservatives outspent the Liberals seven-to-one in 2024 advertising

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that the focus on digital advertising over television and radio was the best strategy available for a cash-strapped party.

“Unless you have enough for a multimillion-dollar television campaign, it doesn’t make sense,” Arnold explained. “You can push even half a million much further on digital, you can be more targeted, and you can test things out, too.”

Arnold said the Liberals had been lacking the “resonance with the public” for any message to be effective, partially due to the negative sentiment toward its primary messenger in the past two years.

“It’s a lot easier to advertise cookies than spinach,” Arnold said, explaining that it would now be far easier for the Liberals with Carney as their messenger than it was when Trudeau was at or below 20 per cent in the polls.

“They didn’t have a product that was popular with the public, and they didn’t have enough money to put behind it to change that perception,” Arnold continued. “Now they have both of those things, which is why the spending is paying off more than it did before the election.”

Earncliffe Strategies’ Zubin Sanyal, who led Trudeau’s digital strategy during the 2021 election, told *The Hill Times* that the money allocated to television ads is the best indication of any party’s confidence in its leader to present a winning message.

“When it’s on television, it has to be the leader; the message has to be in their voice,” Sanyal explained. “However you may feel about Poilievre, he is an expert communicator, and the Conservatives’ television spending shows how confident they were in his ability to deliver their message and that permanent campaign mode.”

Without that confidence, the Liberals had been smart to run “lean and digital first” to downplay their then leader, and ensure the party’s coffers had money left “when the rubber hit the road” and the election arrived, Sanyal said.

Conservative digital strategist Cole Hogan agreed that given the year the



Pollara’s Dan Arnold says much of the Conservatives’ advertising spending focused on attacking the former prime minister last year proved ‘pretty useless’ during the election. Handout photograph

Liberals had in 2024, “they had no real reason to be advertising on television,” and had been smart to focus their attention on digital.

“The Liberals probably didn’t want to have Trudeau in a lot of their ads, but on digital, you can focus more on the party brand or maintaining email lists and donors,” Hogan explained, noting that Trudeau appeared in only a small portion of the Liberals’ digital ads last year.

Hogan predicts that since selecting Carney as its new leader this past March and the party’s success in the last election, the Liberals’ advertising spend will be more “neck-and-neck” with the Conservatives.

“This is something the Liberals were very good at in 2015, but that’s just the natural flow of things for opposition parties who are a little hungrier than when they’re in government,” Hogan explained. “I think the Liberals just rediscovered that politics is ‘pay to play’ because organic reach just isn’t enough.”

sbenson@hilltimes.com
The Hill Times



Liberal strategist Zubin Sanyal says the spending on television ads is the best indicator of a party’s confidence or lack thereof in its leader’s ability to communicate a winning message. Handout photograph



Conservative strategist Cole Hogan says the Liberals may have rediscovered their successful 2015 digital playbook, and predicts a more competitive advertising race in the future. Handout photograph

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Up to 10,000 hens were kept in this barn at a prison farm until the facility closed in 2011. With the reopening of the prison farms, this barn was renovated to house 800 goat kids that would form the nucleus of a goat dairy. The program was later paused and the barn sits empty at Collins Bay Institution in Kingston, Ont. Jo-Anne McArthur photograph courtesy of We Animals

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had the one partner and did not disclose the reason for Guelph’s departure.

To meet McGill’s research requirements, mid-construction revisions were made to the cow barn, extending the construction period well beyond the 18-month contractual completion date of October 2023, and increasing the barn’s cost to \$19.5-million, including taxes and design fees.

The cow barn is still not complete, and CSC has now budgeted a further \$3.2-million for additional amendments and to settle delay claims by the contractor into 2026. Despite the dispute, CSC negotiated access to move cows into the functional facility, and the service confirmed by email the first shipment of prison milk into commercial streams—the first in Canadian history—took place on Oct. 30, 2024.

Since the pause of the goat program, the official position has been that CSC “currently” has “no plans” as to its resumption. As recently as March 2024, however, CSC meeting minutes note that the site services “are run to the overall farm location in anticipation of a goat barn,” and a November 2024 briefing note from CSC to then-public safety minister Dominic LeBlanc states that, “[a]lthough only one barn is being constructed at this time, the site can accommodate two barns ... should a decision be made to proceed with the expansion [into] goats.”

Farm program ‘unlikely to lower criminality,’ CSC advised

According to the documents, the “advantages” of the partnership between CSC and Feihe are twofold: “First, the production would be sold to the Feihe plant and secondly, it would offer employment opportunities for offenders upon release.”

The alleged justification for this prison agribusiness investment is reducing recidivism by instilling “transferable” skills in prisoners through dairy work, but only 12-16 prisoner farm positions have been created by the tens of millions of dollars spent, and CSC says it “does not track” post-release employment outcomes.

The recently unredacted documents also reveal that CSC told the government from the outset that there is no

evidence that “agri-business employment programs” would reduce recidivism or increase employment. CSC strongly recommended against the government’s “non-evidence-based” proposal on the basis that it could “actually make public safety results worse,” and even increase recidivism by diverting limited resources away from proven and effective correctional interventions.

Not only would a farm program be “unlikely to lower criminality,” according to CSC, it would be “expensive and inefficient,” and it would likely “have negative economic bottom lines.”

CSC’s predictions, which the government chose to ignore and black out from access to information releases, proved accurate. The irrecoverable cost of the farm program’s implementation exceeds even the \$36-million in disclosed direct spending to date on operations, equipment, and construction. Parliamentary inquiries by Reid are uncovering millions of dollars more in hidden costs, such as the seven-year accumulation of procurement and consultancy fees.

Canadians have footed a steep bill to put prison-produced milk into their grocery chains, and into international infant formula supply chains, and the subsidies continue as the cow barn is now projected to lose more than \$12,000 per month, with operating expenses exceeding maximum milk revenues.

As for the promise of resuming the goat program, CSC maintains that there is currently “no plan” but refuses to say that it is cancelled, keeping options open pending a ministerial decision.

Meanwhile, CSC has been applying for more federal funding to keep the cow dairy afloat, and McGill’s researchers in CSC’s barn have been giving cows “access to toys and seeing how it impacts the life of the animal,” and tracking “how many hours a cow stands, lies down and walks.”

Calvin Neufeld is a researcher and investigative journalist. In 2024, he published *Prison Farms Exposed: Revelations from Access to Information*, based on six years of investigation, 130 Access-to-Information requests, and 40,000 pages of government records. In 2025, he was awarded the King Charles III Coronation Medal for his work.

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