



FEATURE

Corrections cutting jobs as prison farm costs blow past \$40-million

CUSMA negotiations may spell further trouble as the carceral agribusiness competes in Canada's supply-managed dairy sector, and implicates prison labour in a supply chain of powdered milk exports.

BY CALVIN NEUFELD

At a time when the Correctional Service of Canada is eliminating librarian jobs from prisons to save \$2.4-million, the cost of opening a prison farm has exceeded \$40-million.

This includes \$2.5-million on farm equipment, \$10-million on farm operations and maintenance, and \$29.5-million on building housing for prison cattle.

This sizeable investment stands out as Prime Minister Mark Carney's austerity measures are severing not only the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) librarians, but also teachers, employment co-ordinators, and post-secondary education programs in prisons.

A recently eliminated program giving 50 prisoners access to college courses in Quebec reportedly cost \$210,257 in 2024-2025, or approximately \$4,000 per prisoner given higher education. The \$40-million farm, by comparison—which trains prisoners in "day-to-day" dairy operations—will have 12-16 participants "once at full operational levels," according to CSC's 2024 estimate.

The agribusiness at Joyceville Institution and Collins Bay Insti-



Conservative MP Scott Reid visits the prison dairy research program at Joyceville Institution in Kingston, Ont., on Feb. 19, 2025. Photograph courtesy of Scott Reid's office

tion in Kingston, Ont., opened in 2018 with \$4-million in federal funding for the implementation of a 2,200-goat dairy to sell milk to the Feihe International (Canada Royal Milk) Chinese infant formula company. The government funding was specifically for "a dairy goat operation only," and did not include the estimated \$5-million cost of the goat barn, which was to be absorbed within CSC's existing capital budget. Other than the federal funding, none of these details were disclosed to the public, only emerging through access-to-information requests by this journalist.

Internal communications reveal how, over three years of fraught implementation efforts, the "very political" goat farm failed to launch. It was temporarily paused in 2021, with CSC stating that "the dairy goat program will resume once the

effects of the COVID-19 pandemic can be fully assessed."

Since then, under persistent questioning by 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—the Liberal government has refused to say that the goats are cancelled, only that there are no goats "currently." This "fuzzy language," in Reid's opinion, "is unsatisfying." Access-to-information records are less fuzzy about the "future goat barn," which CSC staff described in 2025 as "still a probability."

With the surprise announcement in March 2018 that CSC was getting into the goat dairy business, the government closely monitored media speculation about the then-unconfirmed connection to the \$380-million Chinese infant formula factory

in Kingston. A couple of months later, in June 2018, a surprise second announcement redirected the media's attention to the snap decision by then-public safety minister Ralph Goodale to add cows. Several members of the government-appointed Prison Farm Advisory Panel were shareholders in a co-operative whose goal was to sell cows to CSC. Today, it is estimated that 40 per cent of the cows in CSC's dairy herd have lineage to the co-op.

Since CSC purchased its first six dairy cows in June 2019, invoiced by CSC's advisory panel chair, \$527,700 has been spent purchasing cows from the co-op and public auctions. The greatest share of prison farm spending, however, has been building the facilities to house them.

After pausing the goat program, CSC issued a

\$10.48-million contract in March 2022 for the 18-month construction of a cow barn at Joyceville Institution, to be completed by October 2023. As complications arose, the barn's cost more than doubled, and the timeline nearly tripled. By 2025, more than \$21-million had been spent building the barn, including taxes and design fees, and \$7-million more had been spent renovating other structures to house non-milking cattle, heifers, and calves.

Downplaying the delays, CSC played loose with claims of completion. Responding to a media inquiry in November 2024, CSC stated that "the facility construction is complete." Responding to a parliamentary inquiry by Reid, CSC stated that "the cattle barn was completed in September 2024" and dairy operations began the following month.

Ongoing investigations tell a different story. Far from being completed in 2024, construction continued long after the dairy operation began. By early 2026, Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) disclosed that the barn's "final completion and project close-out is anticipated by the end of the fiscal year (March 31, 2026)," stretching the barn's construction to a full 48 months.

But even this target was not met. CSC conceded this earlier month that although "the contractor has rectified all technical deficiencies in the facility," and "PSPC has issued incremental certificates of substantial performance acknowledging rectification of deficiencies," final completion has not been achieved after more than four years. Until this occurs, CSC does not own the barn and must negotiate access for its use while PSPC and the contractor "serve as custodians."



The barn in September 2024. *Photograph courtesy of Calvin Neufeld*

Thousands of pages of access-to-information documents reveal that what CSC brushed off as "minor deficiencies" include flooding issues; a manure pipe that kept freezing; pumps that kept failing due to "design issues"; pipe joints that "kept blowing ... likely due to staff dry running pump"; "components that are failing due to design/operator mis-use"; cistern overflows; non-compliant fire alarm systems; thermostats failing due to corrosive waterspray; threats of shutdown by the Electrical Safety Authority over electrical wiring that was not to code; HVAC modifications; replacement of heating systems; replacement of hot water tanks that could not achieve adequate sterilization; relocation and extension of the gas line; replacement of electrical door operators; and a far longer list than word count allows.

Most or all deficiencies were attributed not to contractor fault but to unforeseen requirements, design defects and omissions, CSC-requested changes, and

user error. As a result, the general contractor has brought five claims amounting to at least \$3.2-million against CSC and the Crown. These claims remain unsettled and under negotiation.

Throughout and despite the litigation and the seemingly endless rectification of deficiencies, the barn somehow passed inspections by Dairy Farmers of Ontario and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, qualified as a research facility, earned a free allotment of 100kg of research quota, and allowed CSC to begin operating a 90-cow dairy with McGill University experimenting on the prison cows. The prison's research milk is being sold into commercial streams.

Until recently, when asked what research was being conducted, CSC provided answers. The first study in 2024 was "Transitional Housing research" (observing how cows adjusted to moving from one type of barn to another) followed by "Environmental Enrichment research" (observing how cows interact with toys and scratchers). In 2025, CSC said McGill was conducting "cow personality tests" to evaluate how cows socially network.

But when questioned this past March, CSC did not say what research, if any, is being conducted.

Conservatives call prison farm 'insane,' and CUSMA clouds loom

When the soaring prison farm costs were reported in *The Hill Times* last year, Conservative agriculture critic John Barlow called it "insane." He later criticized the Liberal government for "literally attacking agricultural research" by shut-

ting down established research centres across the country while spending tens of millions of dollars on a research farm at a prison.

Similarly, the unions representing CSC employees might question why the Liberal government is attacking jobs and evidence-backed education in prisons while spending tens of millions of dollars training prisoners to milk cows.

Problem-ridden as this has been, darker clouds may loom with the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) trade negotiations. It might not escape the notice of U.S. negotiators that this federal agribusiness competes in Canada's supply-managed dairy sector and uses prison labour in the production of milk that is entering international markets, including the U.S.

Since 2024, the prison-produced milk has been sold into the commercial stream controlled by Dairy Farmers of Ontario. That milk flows not only to Canadians, but also to the Chinese infant formula factory, which has been exporting powdered milk to China since 2020. In 2025, the manager of Canada Royal Milk, Chenggang Han, said the company expected to begin exporting infant formula to the U.S. that year, and would expand into Mexico with the aim of supplying up to 60 per cent of North American demand. The company did not respond to requests for comment, but its website boasts that their products nourish babies across North America.

CSC's dairy research farm only produces a fraction of Canada Royal Milk's total supply, compared to CSC's future goat farm, which will contribute a significant share of the company's requirements, but the fact remains that Canada is exporting dairy products with prison labour in the supply chain.

For this, Canadians have paid more than \$40-million, money that could have kept every prison librarian, educator, and employment co-ordinator employed.

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.

The Hill Times



Constituency office manager Sandra Finigan, left, MP Scott Reid, Kingston Mayor Bryan Paterson, and Calvin Neufeld at the prison dairy research program at Joyceville Institution. *Photograph courtesy of Scott Reid's office*