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Work with farmers, don't over-regulate them

Guelph, March 2005. Farmers are disgruntled with governments because they are increasingly choosing to regulate farmers rather than develop other solutions. More and more regulations designed to safeguard the public interest are being added every year.

Governments have chosen regulation to solve or prevent problems because it is a good method of demonstrating assurance to the general public. But the actions of farmers and rural people are showing that the burden of regulation has become too heavy.

And while the CFFO is sympathetic to this discontent among farmers, we do not believe in simple solutions. For example, some say that enshrining property rights in the Canadian Constitution will provide all that's needed to solve rural problems. We believe that this action will cause more problems than it will solve. Here are a few examples of what could take place if private property rights are emphasized too much:

- Ontario's drainage legislation supports the creation of drainage systems. Enshrined property rights would make it much harder to create and maintain these multiple-property drainage projects.
- Municipalities have a responsibility to decide on land use to the benefit of all. More emphasis on individual property rights will make it much harder to protect our best farmland for the business of farming.
- Agriculture can occasionally cause discomfort because of noise, dust and odour. Stronger property rights will give farming's many neighbours stronger legal routes for complaining about these discomforts.

Rather than choose either increased regulation or entrenched property rights, the CFFO believes the best way to fix things is through treating farmers as equal partners. Farmers have persistently demonstrated that they are more than willing to develop on-farm solutions to societal concerns when approached in a spirit of partnership from governments.

The original efforts of the Ontario Farm Environmental Coalition in developing Environmental Farm Plans are a shining example of how farmers have voluntarily disciplined themselves to reduce their impact on the environment. Governments came alongside this farmer-led approach and worked cooperatively with funding and expertise. The CFFO believes this approach shows much more respect to farmers and will create much greater success than can be achieved through regulation.

Farmers and rural residents can't be blamed for their frustration with heavy-handed government regulation. The CFFO stands ready to work with those who believe that farmers need a new deal from government. That new deal needs to be based on respect and a willingness to work together in partnerships that stress on-farm solutions.