

Rail strike threat alarms producers

ALBERTA BARLEY COMMISSION WANTS FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO IMPOSE BINDING ARBITRATION

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The weather may be out of their control but barley producers are trying to exert some influence over distant labour negotiations.

The Alberta Barley Commission is calling on the federal government to impose binding arbitration to prevent a work stoppage involving Canadian National Railway Co.

The Teamsters Rail Conference, which represents 2,700 CN conductors, yardmen and traffic co-ordinators, is currently negotiating with the rail company. Members of the union, who have been without a contract since July, have voted in favour of strike action, and CN has prepared a contingency service plan.

But both sides must give 72 hours before a

strike or lockout can occur.

"We'll lose market opportunities if this strike takes place," said Trevor Petersen, an Alberta Barley Commission director who farms near Penhold.

He pointed out that crop failures elsewhere in the world have opened the door for Canadian farmers — provided they can get their grain to those markets.

"The potential for a lot of our barley to be exported this year is a lot greater than what it was last year," said Petersen, adding that this could help counter the impact of poor growing conditions in 2010.

But a rail strike would jeopardize this.

"If we can't provide it, they (foreign customers) will look somewhere else."

Plus, said Petersen, Canada's reputation as

a reliable grain supplier would be tarnished.

Darcy Kirtzinger, a policy and research co-ordinator with the commission, said if feed barley is allowed to accumulate here, prices will drop.

He added that the threat of a rail strike comes at the worst possible time for farmers — including those who grow crops other than barley.

That's prompting other producer groups to lobby the Canadian government as well.

"The policy organization that we have working on our behalf in Ottawa — it's called the Grain Growers of Canada, and they represent a number of different commodities — they have urged a lot of their different members to write a similar letter to try to gain support in Ottawa."

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STRIKE: *Address similar situations in future*

Petersen agreed that the impact of a rail strike would extend far beyond barley producers.

“A large portion of our canola is shipped overseas, so that’s going to affect that; a lot of peas go overseas,” he said, adding that wheat producers would also be hurt. “Everything we grow on the Prairies is exportable.”

Petersen didn’t want to speculate on the timing of the labour crisis, but said it’s tough not to see a link to ag exports.

“You kind of feel that way as a producer.”

Kirtzinger said the Alberta Barley Commission is not only seeking a federal response to the current labour problem, but one that would address similar

situations in the future.

For Petersen, the threat of stalled grain shipments is just the latest in a series of frustrations that have plagued producers this year.

“It’s quite aggravating. The whole summer, it’s been a fight.”

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