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Alberta Agricultural Producers Speak Out on Canada's Position at WTO Negotiations

May 16, 2006 – (Calgary, Alberta) Several Alberta agricultural producers fear Canada's position at the World Trade Organization's current round of negotiations will make it impossible for Canadian farmers to compete in the global marketplace.

Contrary to the purpose and goals of five years of negotiations by the WTO and an election promise by the current Conservative government, Canada's WTO negotiating team recently began asking "for flexibility in not reducing" over-quota tariffs on a number of agricultural commodities.

The request came only days after representatives of the Alberta Barley Commission, the Alberta Beef Producers, the Alberta Pork Producers, the Alberta Winter Wheat Producers Commission and the Western Barley Growers Association wrapped up a series of meetings in Geneva in April calling for a reduction in quota tariffs and trade-distorting subsidies. Indeed, the groups – known as Team Alberta – left Geneva believing Canada's negotiating team was planning a much different stance.

In an April 29, 2006 media release from Geneva, Mike Leslie, the general manager of the Alberta Barley Commission said, "I was pleased to see . . . that the new Canadian government was ready to honour their pre-election commitments moving forward with progress for all agricultural exports."

While campaigning in December 2005, Conservative leader Stephen Harper said "we support the phased reduction of all trade-distorting barriers and the elimination of all agriculture export subsidies . . . frankly the Liberals have not been engaged on this file. Canada said little during the latest round of trade talks, while countries like Australia and New Zealand have taken the lead in bringing the United States and the European Union to the table."

Today, Darcy Davis, chairman of Alberta Beef Producers, says "Canada's new strategy has been deemed to be a stalemate and our government has effectively removed our nation from the bargaining table at upcoming trade talks. This has seriously eroded our chances of seeing changes in beef markets such as the European Union, and has greatly reduced our country's credibility with major international trade partners in all industry sectors."

Furthermore, Dale Soetaert of the Alberta Winter Wheat Producers Commission says Canada's position amounts to "wanting the best of both worlds – our government cannot expect other countries to open their borders to our exports, but still keep the policies and tariffs that restrict other countries from exporting to Canada."

Team Alberta strongly believes in the principles and potential of more free trade and more market choices for all Canadian farmers. What's more, says Jurgen Preugschas, chairman of Alberta Pork Producers, "we thought that was what the federal government supported as well. Now, the federal government is being deliberately vague and unrealistic in its directives to the WTO negotiating team. These negotiations are extremely political and we need to see our political leaders participate in them."

Some Team Alberta members have launched an aggressive letter-writing campaign urging Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Minister of International Trade David Emerson and Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Chuck Strahl to attend the upcoming WTO trade negotiations and re-inject Canada into the bargaining process.

“We must get Canada back at the table,” says Jeff Nielsen of the Western Barley Growers Association. “Canadian farmers are already losing more than a billion dollars a year in income because of trade-distorting tariffs. It could be even more if we are frozen out of the alliances and deals being made at the WTO negotiations.”

The WTO’s current negotiations began in 1986 at the Uruguay Round negotiations, which lasted until 1994, and were seen as a way of dealing with largely ineffective GATT rulings related to domestic and international subsidies. Negotiations intensified with the 2001 Doha Ministerial Declaration (reached in Doha, Qatar) when both objectives and deadlines were defined. For the past five years, a series of difficult negotiations among developed and developing nations have addressed a wide range of views and needs of WTO-member governments such as further substantial reductions in tariffs, domestic support and export subsidies.

In March 2003, negotiators missed a deadline for producing actual targets, formulas and other “modalities” for countries’ commitments. A revised framework was agreed upon in August 2004, but no official deadline was set. Many member countries hope negotiations in May and June 2006 will result in new agreements, but in his introductory statement to the Trade Negotiations Committee on May 1, Director-General Pascal Lamy warned that finding consensus in the negotiations “remains doable, but only if a sense of urgency – which I feel is not always shared by all – starts appearing in each and every delegation.”

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