

MPs slam gov't over CWB (RP)

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper says the Canadian Wheat Board must 'respect the opinions of all western farmers, not just those who agree with it' -- even as his government hedges on holding a farm plebiscite to determine the grain monopoly's future.

The Conservatives are pressing ahead with an election promise to make participation in the wheat board voluntary, a change that supporters of the monopoly believe would fundamentally undermine the world's biggest wheat marketer.

The proposal has the combined majority opposition in the House of Commons up in arms.

Agriculture critics from the Liberals, NDP and Bloc Quebecois held a joint news conference Tuesday to denounce recent government moves as 'unprecedented, unethical and undemocratic.'

Among their complaints:

- A task force, appointed last month by Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl that they say is stacked with proponents of the government's position.
- A gag order on the wheat board executive that stops it from using board resources to promote the current single-desk, or monopoly, position.
- A government decision to remove more than 16,000 farmers from the voters list for the next board executive elections, because those producers haven't sold through the board in the last two years.
- Strahl's refusal to commit to a plebiscite of producers on wheat board changes, something critics say is mandated in Section 47.1 of the Wheat Board Act.

The opposition MPs want the Commons agriculture committee to hold emergency hearings next week to hear from wheat board advocates who they say are being muzzled.

Strahl issued a statement Tuesday, defending the decision to remove 36 per cent of the 44,578 producers on the preliminary board voters list because they made no deliveries in the past two years.

"It is my belief that this decision will result in a more equitable election process that empowers Western grain farmers,' said Strahl.

Speaking with reporters, Strahl refused to commit to a plebiscite before any board move to a voluntary basis. Western wheat farmers have been compelled by law since 1943 to sell only through the board.

"I haven't ruled out a plebiscite," said the minister. "We'll see if there's a need for one.'

He said there are a number of changes that could be made in the board's mandate by a new executive, by cabinet decree and by government regulation.

But Western farm groups have banded together to press the government for a vote, and a coalition met with Strahl in Ottawa to suggest how the plebiscite question could be worded.

"Was I reassured that there would be one? No," said Ken McBride, president of the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan (APAS) after the meeting.

"(But) the minister indicated he has not ruled that out."

McBride, joined by representatives from Alberta and Manitoba general farm organizations, said there was a good 'back-and-forth discussion' with the minister.

"It's extremely important that producers, all producers, no matter which side of the issue they stand on, have a chance to get involved in this debate and then bring it to a head. Let's ensure that there's a vote and make sure that there's a majority decision and that's what we'll live by," McBride said.

APAS also issued a call to Saskatchewan farmers Tuesday, urging them to 'stand up for their rights and demand a vote' by contacting their member of Parliament.

In the Commons, Harper told NDP Leader Jack Layton the government is not gagging the wheat board as much as forcing it to respect the opinions of all farmers.

"The wheat board is an organization that represents farmers who have a range of opinions on this question," Harper said.