

CWB restriction fair to farmers

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As minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, I would like to clarify the purpose of the direction the government recently gave to the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB), which requires it to refrain from spending funds to advocate for the single desk.

The purpose of this action is to ensure that the CWB focuses on its main job, which is marketing farmers' grain. Nothing in the order prevents a director, including directors who do or do not support the board's monopoly, from speaking their mind publicly. The CWB is an institution responsible to Parliament, established by federal legislation and assisted by federal funds. It should not be spending to advocate positions contrary to federal policy.

In the past there has been little debate about marketing choice because the board's monopoly dominated the field, using farmers' money -- against the will of many who believe in greater marketing freedom -- to advocate its continuation as the sole buyer of wheat and barley in Western Canada. Our action simply places board directors on a level playing field with farmers who have long wished to have a voice for marketing choice.

I'm glad to see that our directive to the board has encouraged public comment rather than stifling it. As I have said many times, I welcome a public debate about the future of a strong and viable wheat board for farmers who prefer it, and marketing choice for those who don't.

Chuck Strahl

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Ottawa