

# Fighting for the Farm

*Resolution of the food crisis  
starts with the farmers*

BY COLLEEN ROSS



We have a farm crisis in Canada. It is not a new phenomenon, brought on simply by BSE and the resulting border closures, or drought, killing frosts, by changes in the value of the Canadian dollar, increasing farm regulations, or by trade negotiations.

Farming has been in an ever-deepening crisis for over 20 years. Although the problems listed above are legitimate causes for concern, they are essentially domestic when in fact a crisis is destabilizing farming everywhere. Low prices for corn, soybeans, cotton, sugar, rice, and other foods and farm products are devastating farmers' incomes around the globe.

For some farmers, the impact is immediate. For those of us in Canada, access to credit can mitigate the pain, in the short term. We can increase our debt load and continue to produce until such time we are literally forced to stop farming by bankruptcy, by emotional, family, and health breakdown, and in some cases by suicide. Sometimes just plain common sense kicks in and we sell out.

The problem isn't the ability of agriculture to generate wealth. Agriculture does that and it does it well. The challenge is to make sure that wealth is distributed appropriately along the value chain. We need to find a way to ensure that more of the wealth generated in the agriculture industry flows back to the farm.

## **A Sector in Crisis**

Agribusiness and agri-food continue to rack up record profits. Yet Canadian consumers are experiencing constant increases in the cost of groceries. Canadian farmers are doing more and more with less and less than ever before, yet we reap no financial benefits from our increasing efficiency. While it costs an estimated \$140 to grow a tonne of corn, that same tonne is selling at barely \$100. Canadian farmers are not only paying for every flake in a box of corn flakes, we are now paying for the box!

The family farm is at the very centre of the agri-food chain. From one end we purchase energy, fertilizer, seed, chemical, and other inputs at retail prices. At the other end we rely on packers, commodity traders, processors, and retailers to purchase our crops at wholesale. Both ends are dominated by a few massive transnational corporations. Governments talk about free trade and "level playing fields," but we farmers face monopolies when we are purchasing and when we are selling. We are in fact price takers, not price setters, and for the most part powerless in the global and domestic marketplace.

In Canada farmers have become the working poor. Net farm income now stands at negative \$10,000-\$20,000 per farm – that’s just how much our annual operating costs exceed revenue on the average farm. According to Agriculture and Agri-food Canada our incomes will drop another 16% in 2006. Farm debt increased almost \$2 billion in 2004-05. As result, an ever increasing number of farms (up to 85% in fact) are subsidized by off-farm incomes. On my own farm, I work part-time, my partner works full-time and we both farm full-time. Farmers – men, women, and our children – essentially subsidize food grown in Canada with our unpaid labour and investment.

It just doesn’t add up – here or elsewhere. For the crisis I’m describing now prevails the world over, thanks to “free trade” and the transnational corporations whose interests it is designed to serve.

## The Free Trade Swindle

Free trade has re-oriented agriculture the world over from a vocation concerned with domestic self-sufficiency into an industry devoted to export. Canada is a major exporter of food, not just of grains, but the majority of our tender fruits and vegetables. In turn, we import food back from countries that have significantly lower costs of production, little to no regulatory regimes in place for pesticide and herbicide usage, and questionable labour laws. Hence, Canada has over time become increasingly reliant on cheap imports of fruits, vegetables, grains, oilseeds, and most meats, often of poor quality.

In Ontario, for example, we are offered strawberries, apples, cherries, peaches, and other fruits during our growing season. Potatoes are shipped in from the U.S. all year round. Milk ingredients from overseas are now widely used in ice cream and cheese, replacing actual milk and cream. This week I found on the store shelves a jar of dill pickles labeled “Made in India.” Even organic food comes in far below our cost of production, traveling all the way from California and beyond. Standards for organic certification in Canada are extremely high, far higher than those legislated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Whether conventional foods or organic, no regulatory body routinely checks for illegal chemical residues in any of the myriad of foods we import into Canada. Something is wrong with this picture.

Moreover, these cheap imports get marked up significantly by wholesalers, manufacturers, processors, and retailers. The costs of production are not reflected in the prices that we pay for groceries. (We even see that domestically. Look at the BSE crisis. Canada’s ranchers literally gave their cattle away, yet supermarket retail prices for beef did not go down. Packers and retailers made record profits.)

*“Government policy is premised on the ‘fact’ that food is a commodity, which is why there’s no such thing as a food policy in Anglo-American countries, & no such thing as an over-arching government ministry or department of food.... food is fragmented according to its money-making & job-producing role .... So we see departments of agriculture, which design subsidies so that less than three per cent of farmers grow fruit & vegetables, while their government colleagues in the next building ask us to eat more fruit & veggies.”*

Wayne Roberts<sup>\*</sup>



<sup>\*</sup> “A Food Empire Bites Back,” Toronto Food Policy Council Newsletter, March 9, 2006. Photos (left) courtesy of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, (right) courtesy of Laura Berman, GreenFuse Images.

At the far end of the chain, the farmers in countries from which we import share none of the wealth either. In countries such as India, where I recently visited, farmers represent 70% of the population. (Farmers now make up less than 2% of Canada's population.) Farming produces foods that are essential to their families. When agriculture shifts from sustaining, bio-diverse models aimed at local or regional markets, to export-oriented, chemical-dependent monocultures, these subsistence farmers go hungry. Alternatively, they pour into urban centres ill-prepared to support the rural exodus and experience a different kind of abject poverty.

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Food is a foundation of a nation's security, yet Canada now faces the very real risk of being unable to feed its own population. Greedy corporations and their servants – our elected representatives – have bartered away our food sovereignty and security through the North American Free Trade Agreement and the decisions of the World Trade Organization.

We have been told that liberalized trade in agricultural commodities brings about efficiencies that strengthen national economies and benefit individual consumers. What in fact we are getting is an upsurge in rural poverty and despair at home and around the world. We are also getting an upsurge in “technologically enhanced” food.

## BioTech Treadmill

As farmers grapple with their inability to control market share, we often grasp at technology to improve our bottom line. The application of biotechnology to agriculture has now become the norm in Canadian farming practices. The majority of soybeans, corn, and canola grown in Canada are genetically modified to resist glyphosate, the key ingredient in RoundUp and similar products. Whereas this looks like a quick fix for farmers, there has been no cost-benefit, no yield benefit, and the amount of herbicide now being used is higher than ever. Glyphosate resistance is commonplace, resulting in the need to use other chemicals and to increase the concentration.

Similarly, North Americans consume high amounts of food containing unlabelled genetically-modified ingredients. The coincidence of GM foods and the rising rates of childhood cancers, in childhood diabetes and obesity, in food allergies, and other serious health issues is suspicious, to say the least.

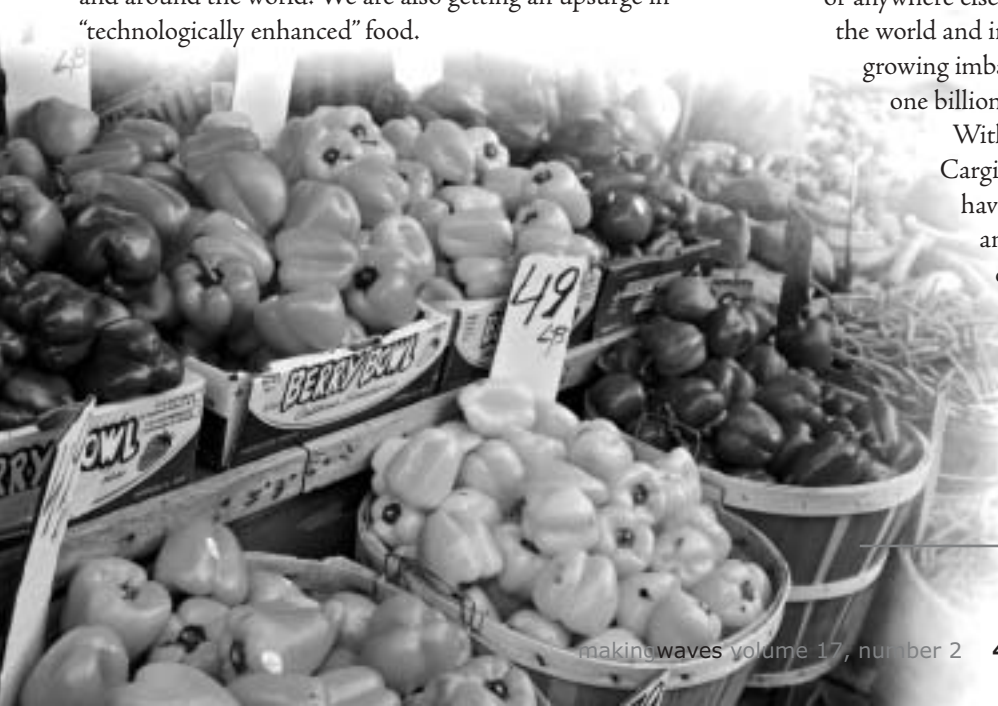
The only beneficiaries of the biotech treadmill have been the Monsantos of this world. They control the seed and the chemical inputs that go with them, and then use Technology Use Agreements and closed-loop contracts to force farmers to sell back their produce at predetermined prices.

So why do farmers keep growing them? Because it has become an easy way to crop in an economy where nothing pays and off-farm jobs constrain the time available to plant and manage a crop properly. For farmers just growing corn and soybeans for cattle feed, GM seed is a simple solution to weed control. Plant the crop, spray it a couple of times, and wait for harvest.

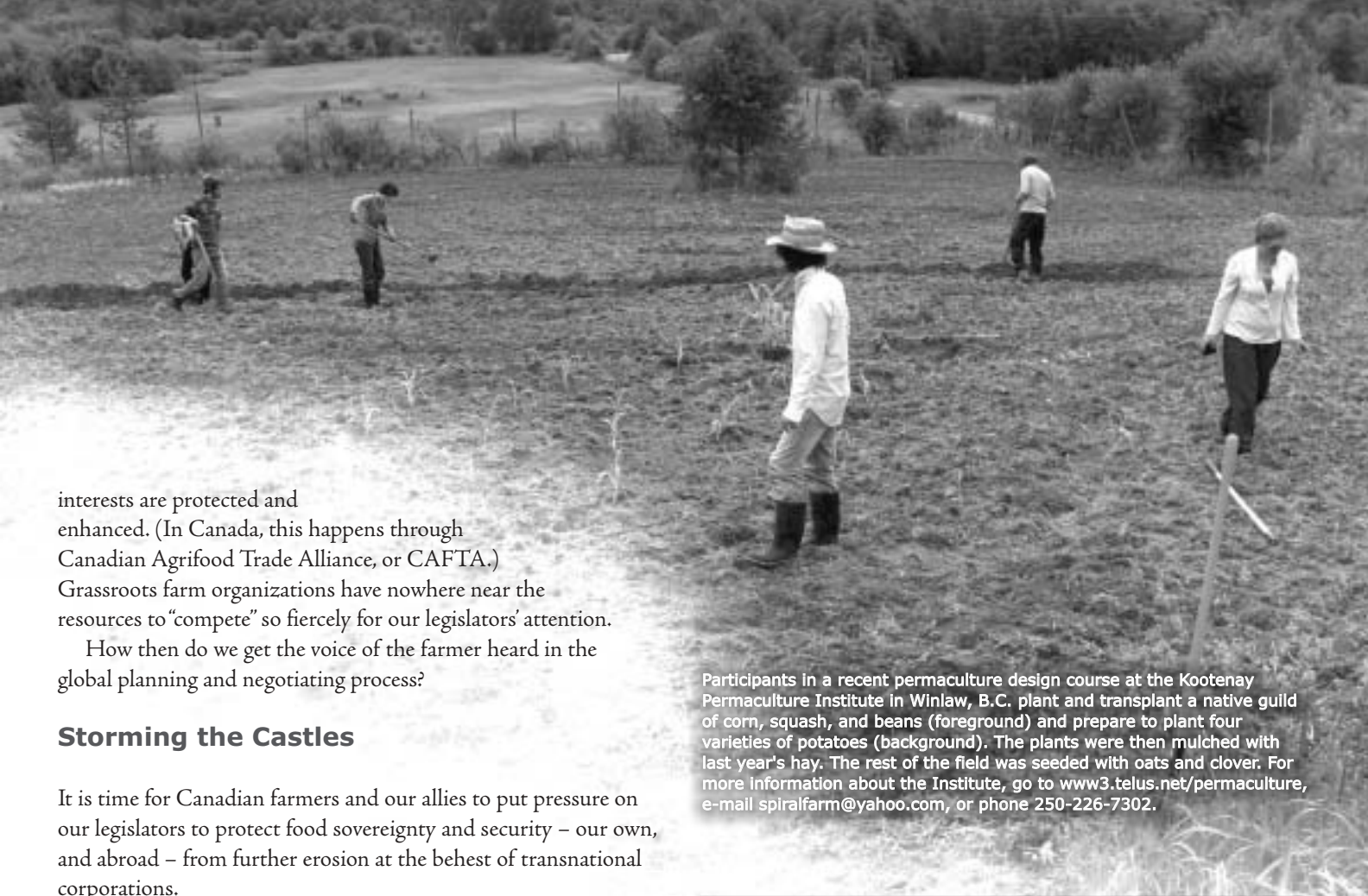
But more and “better” technologies, higher crop yields, better trade deals, new techniques, or bigger farms have not and will not solve the farm crisis, and will not “make poverty history” in Africa or anywhere else for that matter. The cause of the crisis around the world and in our very midst lies, for the most part, in the growing imbalance of market power between the world's over one billion farmers and agribusiness transnationals.

With the complicity of our governments, Monsanto, Cargill, Weston, ADM, and other giant corporations have accumulated control over our food at every level and are using that power to steal from farmers and consumers everywhere.

Representatives from multinationals have seats at all trade and policy meetings, but grassroots farm leaders do not. Corporate lobbyists follow international trade ministers around the globe to ensure their shareholders'



(left) Vegetables at Kensington Market, Toronto. Photo courtesy of Laura Berman.



interests are protected and enhanced. (In Canada, this happens through Canadian Agrifood Trade Alliance, or CAFTA.) Grassroots farm organizations have nowhere near the resources to “compete” so fiercely for our legislators’ attention.

How then do we get the voice of the farmer heard in the global planning and negotiating process?

## Storming the Castles

It is time for Canadian farmers and our allies to put pressure on our legislators to protect food sovereignty and security – our own, and abroad – from further erosion at the behest of transnational corporations.

One way to do that is to get better organized. Farmers and the supporting public need to confront the insidious, agri-political agenda that has disfigured the food system, and impose instead an agenda that upholds the family farm here and abroad. The National Farmers Union (NFU) is an organization that represents thousands of Canadian farmers producing the complete range of agricultural commodities. Its goal is to achieve agricultural policies that will ensure dignity and security for both farmers and consumers and to promote the family farm as the most appropriate, safe, and efficient means of agricultural production.

But the NFU is quite marginalized as an organization. In order to be able to speak freely, we don’t take government money on principle. The farmers who lead the NFU must also be policy analysts, researchers, lobbyists, and most importantly, activists. We make up the lack of resources out of our own pockets, putting our own farms and families at risk.

So support from friends in urban Canada has never been so important. NFU already has the highest number of non-farming associate-members of any farm organization in the country. This is fundamental to our participation at high-level meetings and for local organizing and educating. As more urban Canadians realize the gravity of the threat to safe, wholesome, Canadian food and the people who grow it, organizations like the NFU can become their means to leverage real change from this country’s political leadership.

Participants in a recent permaculture design course at the Kootenay Permaculture Institute in Winlaw, B.C. plant and transplant a native guild of corn, squash, and beans (foreground) and prepare to plant four varieties of potatoes (background). The plants were then mulched with last year’s hay. The rest of the field was seeded with oats and clover. For more information about the Institute, go to [www3.telus.net/permaculture](http://www3.telus.net/permaculture), e-mail [spiralfarm@yahoo.com](mailto:spiralfarm@yahoo.com), or phone 250-226-7302.

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That leverage is required – *now* – to protect and enhance the systems remaining in Canada that actually benefit farmers, namely supply management mechanisms. In Canada, supply management covers milk, eggs, turkeys, and poultry. It enables the government to enact import controls, protecting Canadian farmers from foreign-produced, subsidized imports. It guards against overproduction, while at the same time measuring the average cost of production and setting the prices paid to farmers accordingly.

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The Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) is an example of a second crucial mechanism, called single-desk selling. Although the CWB does not always return farmers their cost of production, it has a reputation second to none on the international marketplace for supplying high quality, properly segregated, consistent grain. It is also an effective advocate on behalf of farmers for access to transport and grain handling facilities. Some farmers want to broker their own deals with the handful of multinationals looking to purchase their crop, but no farmer has the market clout that the CWB has earned. Three-quarters of CWB permit-holders strongly favour strengthening the CWB's role in marketing.

The threats to supply management come from both outside and inside Canada. Concessions made through NAFTA have already resulted in the importation of less expensive dairy. The ongoing Doha Development Round of the WTO is exploring further compromises to supply management in exchange for what is naively described as “more international market access” for Canadian farmers. In fact, it pits western grain farmers against those who farm within supply management, primarily in Québec and Ontario. There are no guarantees that such deregulation will ever benefit western grain farmers. What it does guarantee is death to thousands of family farms that would be forced to compete on the world market.

The greatest threat to supply management and the CWB in Canada comes from this country's current government, unfortu-

nately. It foolishly promised to dismantle the CWB's monopoly in selling, and has hired an ex-CAFTA representative, David Anderson, to make it happen. It takes organizations like the NFU to galvanize opposition to such folly, making the public aware of what their representatives are throwing away, and making the likes of Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl aware of the interests he is truly serving. They aren't yours.

The NFU also enables Canadian producers and consumers to work with and learn from other farmers around the globe. (Canada currently leads the way in teaching others what *not* to do.) Farmers are forming international coalitions with such farm organizations as Via Campesina. This key NFU partner shares our mandate and vision for the future for sustainable farm livelihoods, food security, and food sovereignty. Via Campesina insists that farmers must represent farmers. They are recognized globally as a powerful group of farm activists who organized the massive farm demonstrations at the WTO Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong last December, shutting down high level trade talks and contributed to the extension of the moratorium on Terminator Technology (genetically engineered sterile seeds) at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity last March in Curitiba, Brazil. Actions like these put desperately needed pressure on trade negotiators who have not the least interest in farmers' incomes and food security. Via Campesina is the face of the farmer and peasant on the world stage.

Finally, conscientious consumers must understand that every dollar they spend on food as a vote – a vote for Canadian farmers or a vote for cheap imports of questionable quality. Farmgate sales and farmers markets are a simple but crucial way for urban Canadians to ensure that they are supporting the people who grow their food. Asking for produce “Grown in Canada” and boycotting the imported produce that proliferates on our store shelves during our growing season sends a clear message to retailers. Consumer groups that lobby for food labels that specify the origins of ingredients and GMO ingredients are another great way to restore sustainability to our food system.

Analysis of community food security must start with the issues facing farmers. Strategies to address these issues must be done in partnership with farmers. But for the voices of farmers and the people in rural communities to be heard – to storm the castles of government and agri-business – we need community partners concerned with ensuring healthy food for all of the people. Only in partnership can we create a new agriculture that sustains farmers and rural communities and provides nutritious food for us all.



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