

Farmers back wheat board

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EDMONTON (CP) -- About 150 farmers withstood biting cold winds on the steps of the Alberta legislature Friday in a show of support for the Canadian Wheat Board.

Ken Larsen, a grain farmer from central Alberta, said he thinks farmers will be the big losers if the wheat board collapses.

"I think if we lose the wheat board, we're going to lose a lot of income," said Larsen, who held up a pro-wheat board placard.

"I don't like the way (federal Agriculture Minister) Chuck Strahl has put forward such a manipulative and dishonest question on the barley plebiscite."

Strahl announced this week that barley producers have three choices in a vote being held between Jan. 31 and March 6: to maintain the board's export monopoly, scrap the board's role entirely or allow the board to be part of a free market for barley.

Strahl has dismissed suggestions from critics who say a free market would lead to the demise of the wheat board in the face of stiff competition from private grain companies, most of them giant U.S. firms.

The agriculture minister was at a trade meeting in Geneva on Friday, but his parliamentary secretary, David Anderson, responded by saying it's the opposition parties that are twisting the facts.

"They were the ones that howled for a vote. They wanted a plebiscite," Anderson said from Ottawa. "I think they know they're going to lose that vote, so they're trying to discredit the whole process."

Anderson said Prairie farmers want choice when it comes to marketing their grain.

Stewart Wells, president of the National Farmers Union, got a loud ovation at the rally as he accused the federal Conservatives of being underhanded in their attempt to end the wheat board's marketing monopoly.



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Farmers opposed to changes to the Canadian Wheat Board hold a protest in front of the Alberta legislature in Edmonton on Friday.

"We've had this endless stream of dirty tricks and manipulation and the gag orders and the firings," Wells told the cheering crowd. "For the first time in my life, I'm actually afraid for democracy in this country."

Liberal agriculture critic Wayne Easter suggested foreign grain buyers will take control of Canada's grain trade if the wheat board fails. Easter said the federal government has twisted the wording of the barley plebiscite question to lull farmers into believing that the wheat board can survive if it's forced to compete with other grain marketers.

"We're saying to you, Stephen Harper, today: Ask a clear question. Ask a fair question," Easter shouted into a microphone.

But Anderson said it's time for the Opposition and the National Farmers Union "to quit misleading western Canadian producers."

Meanwhile, Strahl issued a statement Friday evening about an order instructing the Canadian Wheat Board to pay its interim president and chief executive Greg Arason.

"Five weeks after I appointed Mr. Arason as interim president and chief executive officer of the wheat board, and the CWB's board of directors accepted his appointment, he has yet to be paid," Strahl said.

Some board members have been unwilling to pay Arason and provide him with the necessary signing authorities to do his job, Strahl said.

Arason, a former wheat board boss from 1998 to 2002, landed the interim post after the government fired Adrian Measner from the job in December.

Measner had been critical of the government's pledge to end the board's monopoly on the sale of western wheat and barley.

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