KEEP THEM FED

Ryan Meadows feeds cattle and horses on the family ranch east of Aldersyde, Alta., late last month. | [redacted]

Change to pulse board questioned

Saskatchewan Pulse Growers proposes appointing two directors to its farmer-elected board

[redacted]

Saskatchewan Pulse Growers is coming under fire for its plans to appoint up to two additional directors to its seven-member board.

SPG has drafted a motion to that effect that will be tabled at its annual general meeting in Saskatoon on Jan. 13, 2020.

Jean Harrington, a former SPG director and owner of Prairie Farm Brokerage, is all in favour of expanding the board.

"A board with only seven people is too easily taken over by a single point of view and a strong personality," she said.

But she worries that appointed directors brought on as experts can also easily sway the farmer-dominated board.

"It becomes very questionable what their motives are since they aren't farmers," she said.

Vicki Dutton, another former SPG board member, shares those concerns.

"I still lobby for an elected Senate," she said.

"We elect people for a reason because that makes them accountable."

She too would like to see the board expanded to nine people but would prefer that experts be brought to the table in the form of an advisory council to provide guidance.

SPG executive director Carl Potts clarified that the motion would give the board the ability to appoint up to two additional directors but it would not compel it to do so.

"From time to time we may need additional diversity or experience or skills on the board," he said.

There are also geographic considerations. SPG may want to appoint a director from an area of the province that is currently not represented on the board.

"It's more about the ability to fill gaps," he said.

Another consideration is being able to spread the workload around. SPG's board members also sit on the boards of Soy Canada, Grain Growers of Canada, Pulse Canada and Farm & Food Care Saskatchewan.

Dutton agreed there needs to be a lightening of the load because the current commitment is keeping some busy farmers from running for election. But she wants the load to continue to be carried by farmers.

Potts said SPG has a strict code of conduct that forbids any conflict of interest and ensures all board members have a fiduciary responsibility to the province's farmers.

"That's a core principal of governance," he said.

But Harrington said that doesn't prevent one powerful individual from exerting undue influence over the rest of the board.

"That is exactly what happened with Pulse Canada," she said.

"Their board has been fully owned and operated by Murad Al-Katib for at least eight years."

Al-Katib is the president of AGT Food and Ingredients, one of the world's largest pulse processing companies.

Another irritant for her is that Pulse Canada chief executive officer Gord Bacon is also the CEO of the Canadian Special Crops Association (CSCA), the group that represents the trade at Pulse Canada's board table.

"It's a conflict of interest, straight-up," said Harrington.

"Would you let the guy run the industry arm and the umbrella organization? Does that make sense?"

Al-Katib was unable to comment on Harrington's contention because he was travelling.

Pulse Canada chair Allison Ammeter called it an unfair statement.

"How does one person have undue sway on a board of 14?" she said.

The board consists of four directors from SPG, four from Alberta Pulse Growers, two from Manitoba Pulse & Soybean Growers, one from Ontario Bean Growers and three from the CSCA, including Al-Katib.

She noted that most boards have one or two people who are more outspoken than the others.

"They just maybe have their opinion heard more clearly because they're good communicators, but should we punish somebody for being a good communicator?" said Ammeter.

She said Al-Katib represents one of the biggest pulse processors in the world.

"I would hope we're hearing his voice. I think I'd be a little bit ashamed if we weren't hearing his opinion on things as well as some of the other people who are doing a lot of the trade."

Ammeter said there is no intimidation by Al-Katib.

"I don't think he has the same pull on a board of farmers that he might if it was a board of buyers," she said.

"I don't think anybody is worried, 'oh, if I speak against Murad he's going to boycott me and not buy my lentils.' There is none of that."

Quinton Stewart, chair of the CSCA, agreed that it is silly to allege Al-Katib controls the board and is driving a trade-friendly agenda, given that 11 of the 14 board members are farmers.

"Everyone is entitled to their opinions but those numbers would suggest otherwise," he said.

He also shrugged off the criticism of Bacon, noting that he has been wearing those two CEO hats for 13 years without any kerfuffle.

Over the years he has seen Bacon advocate on behalf of growers, the trade and even government and he has shown an aptitude for forging consensus between all three interests.

Ammeter said there is intentionally a lot of crossover between the CSCA and Pulse Canada so that both organizations are aware of all the grower and trade issues.

"We cross-pollinate on purpose," she said.

She said Bacon has played an instrumental role in both organizations.

"Gordon started Pulse Canada. He is Pulse Canada and has been for 18 years."

Ammeter said the pulse industry is where it is today because of the leadership of people like Al-Katib and Bacon.

Harrington agreed that the industry owes him big-time, but that doesn't make it right that he has his fingers on Pulse Canada's strings.

She doesn't want to see the same thing happen at SPG and will be expressing those reservations at the annual general meeting in the new year.

Potts said the board is open to all feedback it receives at the meeting. The motion needs the approval of 50 percent plus one of the votes cast at the meeting.

If the motion is approved by members, the SPG board will decide whether it wants to seek approval for the amendment from the Saskatchewan Agri-Food Council.

The goal would be to have the amendment in place in time for 2021.

The term of the appointed directors has yet to be determined. The initial thought is it would be a one-year term if it was a farmer director, who could then run in the next election, or a three-year term for a non-farmer director.

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Alta. fires researchers to cut costs

Former government employee, researcher regret decline in agriculture investment

[redacted]

The Alberta government Grinch stole Christmas from about 50 Alberta Agriculture employees last week.

Managers and extension staff were either terminated or given terms of "working notice" in offices across the province as the government moved to cut costs in the department as it has or intends to do in most other sectors.

"Alberta has a spending problem, and tough decisions need to be made to chart a path back to balance and ensure we can provide high quality services into the future," said Agriculture and Forestry press secretary Adrienne South.

"Spending restraint of less than three cents on the dollar is being implemented."

The terminations and notices were rude shocks to affected staff members contacted last week, though few were willing to share details. Affected employees were escorted out the door and would be able to obtain personal belongings only later, after making an appointment.

More job losses in the department are expected this spring, several sources said.

News of the terminations did not sit well with former Alberta Agriculture researcher Ross McKenzie, who retired six years ago. Loss of Alberta's only irrigation specialist, based in Bow Island, rankled him, as did the loss of experienced researchers and extension workers elsewhere in the province.

"All these people we've been training to move into professional positions, after going through school and getting after-university positions … for me it's heartbreaking," he said. "There's just a lot of people across the province with a wealth of knowledge and they do work that private industry doesn't do, so it's just a fundamental mistake.

"My sense is that the present minister of agriculture, his goal is to eliminate all research that Alberta Agriculture is doing and that seems to be the consensus with the Alberta Agriculture researchers that are still in place, that are left."

Alberta Agriculture Minister Devin Dreeshen announced plans last month to hold meetings in the new year to get input on the future of agricultural research in the province.

"Something that we campaigned on in the last election was a move away from what the previous government did towards government-led research and government priority research (and move toward) farmer-led research. So in changing that mindset, it has opened up this research consultation," Dreeshen said at the time.

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