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Commodity prices boost farm revenues

BY MATT GOERZEN

But for some, reality doesn't live up to new numbers

Recent high commodity prices have certainly improved the fortunes of Manitoba grain and oilseed farmers, but don't let the numbers fool you, says one Westman grain producer.

"The prices are definitely up, that's certainly not in dispute. But our inputs are very, very substantial," Souris-area farmer Walter Finlay said yesterday.

Finlay's comments follow the release of Statistics Canada numbers that showed Manitoba farm cash receipts rose 17.4 per cent to \$1.24 billion in the first quarter of this

year, compared with the first three months of 2007.

Pushing up provincial farm revenues was a whopping 44.5 per cent increase in crop receipts, which totalled \$675.5 million from Jan. 1 to March 31. The rise reflects the substantial increase in prices farmers have enjoyed in the past year.

Yet at the same time, skyrocketing input costs have steadily eaten into any profit margin gains producers have made. The present cost of

phosphate fertilizer, for example, is about \$1,400 per tonne — more than double from what it was last fall.

"Only two and a half years ago, I paid \$340," Finlay said.

Individual crop producers will have spent substantially more this spring on diesel fuel costs alone. Last year, the Souris producer said he spent nearly \$10,000 on fuel during the seeding season. This year, he estimates that number will rise to about \$15,000.

"It costs me \$1,000 just to fill up my

tractor with fuel now, and I do that every two days," Finlay said.

On April 24, the Canadian Transportation Agency announced that freight costs for grain and oilseed producers will increase by eight per cent in 2008-09 under a recently introduced railway revenue cap for grain, a move that followed a \$3 per tonne increase on April 1.

After delivering \$30,000 in malt barley to his local elevator yesterday afternoon, Finlay noted that \$6,550

had been taken off in freight deductions, leaving him with \$23,500.

Factoring in production costs, he says the numbers look much better than the reality.

"Put this into real dollars, and we're not getting what we were getting back in the '70s for our grain."

Between 2004 and 2007, a combination of low commodity prices, unusual weather patterns and poor crop yields resulted in severe financial difficulties for producers across the province.

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Mishandled documents force Bernier's resignation

BY ALEXANDER PANETTA

OTTAWA — The Conservative government was shaken to its core by the sudden resignation of Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier over a security breach involving secret documents carelessly left at his ex-girlfriend's home.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper told an extraordinary evening news conference Monday that Bernier's controversial relationship with a woman linked to the Hells Angels was not a factor in the decision.

He said it was prompted by an error involving classified documents, and sources say they included briefing material for his trip to the NATO summit where Canada announced it would remain in Afghanistan.

"I don't think it matters who a minister is dating," a grim Harper said in the Commons foyer. "What matters here is that rules respecting government classified documents were broken."

"It obviously was not done on purpose. It was a mistake. But it doesn't matter. It was clearly done and that has to be treated appropriately. There are precedents, and this obviously is a warning to all ministers."

Bernier becomes the first minister in the Harper government forced out of cabinet by scandal. The foreign affairs portfolio will be assumed temporarily by David Emerson — the ex-Liberal and current Conservative industry minister.

The resignation came a scant two hours before Julie Couillard was broadcast on French-language television network TVA telling viewers her former lover left documents

at her house.

Couillard refused to say what they were. She said they were left over at her place last month, and that she returned them to the Foreign Affairs department several days ago on the advice of her lawyer.

A source told The Canadian Press that the package included a mix of classified material and other briefing notes publicly available through the Access to Information Act.

The package, he said, was preparation material for Bernier's trip to the NATO summit in Bucharest — where Canada announced the extension of its military mission in Afghanistan until 2011.

Government sources say sometime Monday afternoon, the foreign minister glumly climbed the stairs outside the Commons to his boss' third-floor Parliament Hill office to warn the prime minister of what was coming.

Just hours before the axe fell on Bernier, the prime minister had dismissed the whole affair.

"I have no intention of commenting on a minister's former girlfriend," the prime minister said to wrap up a new conference earlier Monday with visiting Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko. "I don't take this subject seriously."

He's taking it seriously now. The prime minister has lost a minister once described as a rising star who was touted as a future leader. Bernier was exceedingly popular in Quebec.

His departure makes it a near-certainty that the prime minister will have to shuffle his cabinet. Harper announced Bernier's exit just before leaving the country late Monday night on a European diplomatic trip.

» The Canadian Press

FAMILY SQUABBLE



Two young foxes or kits play fight outside their den on Monday. A litter of at least eight kits share the den with one or two parents near the town of Minnedosa. For more photos, turn to Page A2. (Tim Smith/Brandon Sun)

Education can transform 'time bomb'

Hard work, hope at Day of Inspiration

BY MATT GOERZEN

The best way to help Manitoba's aboriginal population is to educate native youth and put them to work, says a visiting British Columbia chief who spoke during the first-ever Day of Inspiration in Brandon yesterday.

"If the youngest and fastest-growing population in Manitoba are aboriginal, there's a ticking time bomb here," Osoyoos Indian Band Chief Clarence Louie told reporters following his presentation.

"The First Nations people, the aboriginal people and the Metis organizations all have to get together with the provincial government and deal with this ticking time bomb."

Louie pointed to the fact that a large majority of prison inmates in this province are aboriginal, and said that most, if not all of them, are in there because they weren't provided a good education, and didn't have a job.

Manitoba's native leaders need to talk more about creating a sustainable reserve economy, tout the benefits of education, and work with the provincial government to create more training programs that bring aboriginal youth into the work force, Louie argued. The best way to do that, he said, is to inspire people to want more out of life, and out of themselves.

"Every educated person I know wants to work," he said. "You don't go to school or learn a trade to go on welfare."

The noted B.C.-based aboriginal business and economic leader was among several entrepreneurs and professional people who brought a message of inspiration and hard work to hundreds of young aboriginal men and women at the Western Manitoba



Chief Clarence Louie, president and CEO of the Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corporation, poses for a photo after speaking on the subject of entrepreneurship during A Day of Inspiration at the Western Manitoba Centennial Auditorium in Brandon on Monday. (Tim Smith/Brandon Sun)

Centennial Auditorium.

Part of the event's goal was to explain and demonstrate to aboriginal youth the opportunities that education can provide, mainly through the example and encouragement of other First Nations people that have gone the distance.

Montreal-based musician, orchestral leader and Mohawk John Kim Bell tried to enlist youth to use success as a way to bolster the cause of First Nations.

"Unfortunately, 500 years ago we had a very weak immigration system here, and we allowed the Europeans to come over," said Bell, eliciting laughter from the audience. "We can't uninvite the white man, we have to live with them. But we have to find a way to have them stop from persecuting us."

"And a reasonable way, a logical way — the way for you as the next generation — is education and economic development. The

more successful you are, the more successful your family will be. The more successful you and your family will be, the more successful your community will be."

An Order of Canada recipient, Bell has conducted Broadway shows in New York, led the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and helped established the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation.

The message of hope and self-improvement offered by Louie and Bell had a considerable impact on Jimmy Leslie, an aboriginal student from Brandon's Vincent Massey high school.

"They took their time to talk to us about aboriginal communities that need our support," Leslie said. "It was very inspiring."

When he graduates, Leslie said he'd like to own his own business.

"Like a mechanic business."

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Former foreign affairs minister Maxime Bernier speaks during question period on May 5. He offered his resignation to Prime Minister Stephen Harper yesterday. (File photo)



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