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Canada should rethink its food labelling laws.

By Cheryl Jolly, President, Western Canadian Wheat Growers

Changing Canada's food labelling laws could lead to increased demand for higher value grain and meat products, and more dollars for farmers while at the same time, improving the health of Canadians.

Maybe it's time for some new approaches to the farm income problem. Farm leaders often talk about the need to improve safety nets, lower input costs, fix grain transportation, or reform the Canadian Grain Commission and the Canadian Wheat Board. To be sure, these are all important issues, but perhaps we need to look beyond "ag policy" issues and increase our focus on food, health, or energy policies that can have a significant impact on our farm sector.

Take for example, Canada's food labelling laws. Did you know that in terms of allowing health claims, Canada's food labelling laws are among the most restrictive in the world? In Europe and the United States, for example, food manufacturers are allowed to make far more specific health claims than is the case in Canada.

What this means is that food manufacturers in these other countries are continually seeking ingredients and processes that can allow them to make more health claims. This creates a "demand pull" for products with ingredients that have specific health attributes. Growing more of those crops that provide these specific health attributes could offer Canadian farmers a good opportunity to improve their bottom line.

Let's face it. Canadian farmers are going to have a tough time competing against low-cost grain producers in Argentina, Brazil, Ukraine and Kazakhstan and a host of other emerging competitors. Instead, I believe our success will lie in producing higher value, higher margin food ingredients. However, we're not going to get that opportunity if consumers aren't made more aware of those ingredients that can contribute most to better health.

For example, in Canada, manufacturers are allowed to say that food is low in saturated fat, is high in fibre, low in cholesterol, or – my personal favourite – "light", but are limited in their ability to say how that product attribute brings about a specific health benefit, such as reducing the risk of heart attacks, cancer or other diseases.

As a result, consumers get all sorts of data on certain nutritional attributes (e.g. this product contains five grams of fibre per serving), but few of them have any idea how to correlate that information to their specific health issues, whether it's obesity, heart disease, cancer risks, Alzheimer's, osteoporosis or other health concerns. Consumers, with few exceptions, don't read scientific journals.

Labelling laws can help. We've all seen the warning labels on cigarette packages. I'm sure they've had an impact on consumer behaviour. Why wouldn't the same be true (in reverse) for food labels that describe specific health benefits?

For example, studies from leading medical bodies have found that greater consumption of grain-based foods fortified with folic acid can lead to fewer birth defects if taken by women before conception. According to the U.S. Wheat Food Council, studies have shown that folic acid in grain products is better absorbed by the body than folic acid naturally occurring in fruits and vegetables. In my view, grain-based manufacturers should be able to advertise such benefits on food labels, as long as they are backed up by studies from approved health research authorities.

We're not asking the Canadian government to change labelling laws that allow manufacturers to make exorbitant claims. However, the fact that food labelling laws in Europe and the United States are less restrictive than in Canada suggests we might be taking an overly cautious approach. With skyrocketing health care costs and concerns over obesity, particularly among children, the Canadian government should be re-examining the purpose and effect of its current food labelling laws.

Changing Canada's food labelling laws could be a win-win-win. It's an opportunity for Canadian consumers to become healthier, for Canadian farmers to become more profitable, and for Canadian taxpayers to lower health care costs.

The Hon. Reg Alcock, President of the Treasury Board and Minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board has recently announced the federal government's "Smart Regulation" review. As part of this initiative, the government is looking at bringing more of Canada's regulations in line with the international community in an effort to protect the health and safety of Canadians and to make our businesses more competitive. Taking a hard look at Canada's food labelling laws would be a good place to start.