



Monday August 28, 2006

Thanks to a groundbreaking new program, help is on the way for some beleaguered farmers coping with deepening emotional distress.

Starting September 1st, farm families in three test areas will be able to access AgResolve, a free, confidential service that will put them in touch with professional support. The experts will offer help with stress reduction, better relationships, improved communication, parenting skills, money management and personal debt counselling.

Consultations will be available for individuals, couples, children and families.

At first, the assistance program will only be available to registered farmers in Haldimand and Norfolk, Cornwall (Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry) and Chatham-Kent. But the hope is to turn the pilot project into a province-wide initiative and perhaps even a national program.

“There’s a looming crisis in agriculture,” says AgResolve Manager Leslie Josling. “Farm families need immediate help while governments and the agriculture sector work on political and economic solutions.

“Farmers are tough and resilient and they can do just about anything with the right equipment. AgResolve will give them the tools they need to become stronger and more successful.

Josling says the program’s name reflects its philosophy and mission. “The resolve in AgResolve speaks to the grit and determination farmers bring to the challenges facing them, and it also highlights the fact they can resolve those challenges with the right professional advice.”

Designed by Haldimand Norfolk R.E.A.C.H., a rural multi-service agency, AgResolve is in direct response to a survey of Ontario farmers in which 84 per cent said there was an urgent need for a free, confidential service to help producers experiencing stress.

After listening to rural families across the province, R.E.A.C.H. customized a tool kit of services with a two-pronged approach. Families seeking farmer-to-farmer support will find it through the Farm Line, a confidential, toll-free telephone support service (1-888-451-2903.)

But professional help will also be available from experts specially trained to meet the unique challenges faced by producers. Farmers will need only phone and ask for AgResolve in Haldimand Norfolk ( 1-800-265-8087), the Cornwall area (613-932-4610) and Chatham-Kent (519-354-6221.)

Funded by a two year grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, AgResolve is endorsed by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario and the National Farmers Union.

According to AgResolve Co-ordinator Rick Gamble, farmers are entitled to the new services. “Through employee assistance programs, benefits like these are provided to almost everyone else, from auto and postal workers to engineers, doctors and nurses,” he says. “It’s time agriculture was included.”

Maryhill cash crop farmer Heidi Wagner agrees. “As you drive through the countryside it is evident the crops are going to be of record proportions,” she says. “But this adds another level of stress for the crop farmers; how to market commodities when prices are at record lows.

“We’re seeing many farmers plunged into debt, trying to make payments on the input costs for their crops, with no relief concerning sale prices or government assistance. The fuel, seed, fertilizer, machinery, land and drying costs are steadily increasing and yet these production costs are not being realized upon the sale of these commodities.

A Rural Community Health worker, Wagner adds, “The stress on the individual as well as the entire farm family is great. Where can they turn for help, both financial as well as emotional? AgResolve will validate these concerns and help farmers work through some personal crisis situations.”

And there’s no time to waste. Agriculture leaders say producers are facing withering stress from not only soaring costs and low commodity prices but long hours and family turmoil. With no immediate solutions on the horizon, experts warn that farmers need peer and professional support to head off an increase in suicides, domestic violence, addictions and stress-related ailments like high blood pressure and heart attacks.

“For a lot of farmers,” wrote one respondent in the R.E.A.C.H. survey, “the rafter in the barn and the rope in the shop is becoming more appealing every day.” Another wrote, “It’s a sad day when a farmer has a huge workload and a hopeless feeling for the future. I am a third generation family farmer and have had all my dreams and confidence drawn from me. What’s the point anymore?”

In the same survey about 55 percent of respondents said they had trouble sleeping; 30 percent felt verbally or physically aggressive; 16 percent were taking more medication than usual; and almost 14 percent were drinking more.

“We’re not under any illusions,” says Gamble. “AgResolve isn’t a magic solution. But farmers as a whole are innovative and persistent. We’re confident they can use these tools effectively to enhance life for themselves and their families.”