



## Strahl reveals options for CWB barley plebiscite



**Minister of Agriculture  
Chuck Strahl. (file)**

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RED DEER, Alta. — Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl planted the seeds of change Monday that he hopes will lead to marketing choice for western barley growers, but quickly reaped plenty of disagreement from those who oppose the idea.

Strahl announced three voting options farmers can choose from in a mail-in plebiscite that will help determine the future of the Canadian Wheat Board's marketing monopoly on barley.

Barley producers can vote to maintain the board's export monopoly, scrap the board's role as a barley marketer or allow the board to be an active participant in a free market.

Strahl said he favours the latter choice and scoffed at the suggestion that it would lead to the board's demise.

"We need to stop the scare tactics (used by) many of our opponents who are against allowing farmers to have the freedom to choose," he said as a few grim-faced producers looked on.

"To suggest that somehow a vote on barley represents the end of the board or will have a negative effect on the grain industry is false and misleading."

Farmers lobbying for marketing choice have argued they could get higher prices if allowed to sell their barley themselves.

Supporters of the board's monopoly say an open market would effectively kill the wheat board because it would be at a disadvantage trying to compete with multinational grain companies.

The board, which has been openly feuding with Strahl for months about marketing choice, was quick to condemn the inclusion of a question that calls for the board to lose its monopoly but remain involved in barley marketing.

Board chairman Ken Ritter said the three-question ballot will make the plebiscite meaningless and confuse farmers.

"This question is not, in our opinion, intended to accurately gauge farmers' feelings on the issue of barley marketing since it perpetuates the belief that the CWB can be effective without its single desk," Ritter said in a release.

"Including an impossible choice is not the way to consult with producers on an issue of such crucial economic importance."

The ballot should contain only two questions - maintain the board's monopoly or scrap it, he said.

That position was quickly echoed by some of the board's biggest supporters - Saskatchewan's NDP government and the federal Liberals.

Saskatchewan Deputy Premier Clay Serby said the plebiscite includes loaded questions.

"The life of the Canadian Wheat Board will continue if you vote No. 1," said Serby.

"Farmers vote to 2 and 3 and it will be sayonara city to the Canadian Wheat Board, without any question."

Wayne Easter, the Liberal agriculture critic, said the ballot questions were unclear.

"What the minister chose to do instead is to go to questions that are confusing and to a great extent misleading, in that even the minister's own report indicates dual marketing can't exist, but the questions Strahl raises leaves the impression that it could," he said.

But the three choices laid out on the ballot sound good to Alberta Agriculture Minister George Groeneveld.

The province's producers have long been in favour of choice in the barley marketing system, he said.

"We did a survey two years ago, I think it was, and it showed about 70 per cent (in favour of choice) at that particular point. I haven't heard anything much different percentage wise since then."

Ken Larsen, a barley grower from Sylvan Lake, Alta., said the plebiscite options show Strahl is trying to undermine the wheat board.

"Mr. Strahl has ignored a report from his own task force. Common sense tells you that it is not possible to have a single-desk seller operating in a system where everyone is free to undercut them," he said.

But Jeff Nielsen, a farmer and president of the Western Barley Growers Association, predicted most

producers will vote for dual marketing.

"We are going to be quite strong in voting for choice. We want to maintain the board as one of the options we can sell to."

The barley plebiscite, which is not binding on the government's decision about the board's future, is to be held Jan. 31-March 6.

To be eligible to vote, farmers must have produced grain last year and must have produced barley in at least one of the past five years.

Farmers who don't meet the first criteria can be included on the voters list if they make a declaration to the board explaining why they didn't produce grain during that year.

Last Tuesday, Manitoba farmers voted 70 per cent in favour of maintaining the board's monopoly on wheat and barley sales in a symbolic provincial plebiscite. Strahl dismissed the results as a waste of money.

The minister has said the government will eventually hold a wheat plebiscite.

The Alberta Barley Commission estimates that western barley farmers grow about 11 million tonnes of barley a year. About half that is produced in Alberta, with most of the rest produced in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

The vast majority of barley is sold within Canada for animal feed and falls outside the wheat board's marketing monopoly.

Any barley sold for export or for human consumption - mainly to brewers for making beer - is sold through the board.

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