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***Backgrounder***

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## Great Wine, Better Cheese

*How Canada Can Escape the Trap of  
Agricultural Supply Management*

Michael Hart

### **The Backgrounder in Brief**

*Canada's current supply management system for dairy and poultry farmers, who account for about 0.6 percent of the country's gross domestic product, is unfair to consumers, other farmers and food processors. There are ways to dismantle the process, and precedents from Canada's wine and Australia's dairy sectors to guide policymakers who must undertake the task.*

## ***About the Author***

*Michael Hart*, a former federal trade official, holds the Simon Reisman Chair in Trade Policy at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. He is spending the 2004/2005 academic year in Washington as a Fulbright Fellow at American University and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

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*The Government of Canada is committed to defending the ability of Canadians to operate orderly marketing systems, such as supply management and the Canadian Wheat Board .... [We] believe the world needs more free trade, not less .... At the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO), we are fighting to end the unconscionable trade-distorting agricultural subsidies of over \$1 billion a day that are putting pressure not only on our farmers, but also on farmers in the developing world who need access to our markets to raise themselves out of poverty.*

— Trade Minister Jim Peterson (Peterson 2004)

*Our producers and processors ... need a level international playing field on which to compete .... The current WTO agriculture negotiations offer us the best forum in which to address foreign subsidies and tariff barriers that hinder our ability to compete fairly in foreign markets.*

— Minister of Agriculture Andy Mitchell (Mitchell 2005)

Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive. When it comes to agricultural supply management in Canada, self-deception has been the order of the day for far too long. Consumers are encouraged to deceive themselves into believing that high prices and limited choice are the necessary cost of reliable supply. Producers are eager to deceive themselves that stable prices and assured returns are better than the vagaries of competition. And politicians continue to delude themselves that the price of reform is too high. Is there a way out of this self-imposed mess? Yes, but it has to start by ending decades of self-deception. I will look at the specific examples of the Canadian wine industry and the Australian dairy industry for solutions to the problems caused by supply management in Canada.

In a more general sense, however, a possible solution may be offered by the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO). For Canada, there is little at stake in these negotiations, other than agriculture. In the industrial area, the combined impact of first multilateral, and then bilateral, trade negotiations have provided Canadian producers with quality access to the United States and other developed markets, while giving consumers and industrial users a wide range of competitively priced domestic and imported products.

The principal trade- and investment-related issues that exist between Canada and the United States will not be resolved in Geneva. The Doha negotiations may add some further access to non-U.S. markets and improve the rules, but only at the margins. The same cannot be said for Canada's agricultural sector. The majority of Canadian farmers now operate in a competitive, open domestic market, though they do not enjoy secure access to sufficient quality markets. They cannot invest and prosper to the extent that properly functioning world markets would allow. Multilateral trade negotiations are critical to achieving this goal. Canadian efforts have strengthened access to foreign markets and begun to address the scourge of subsidies and other trade-distorting practices for grains, meat and other competitive producers; however, those efforts are undermined by Canada's stubborn resistance to foreign demands to stop coddling dairy and poultry producers.

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## Not a Big Deal

Trade in all agricultural products — the annual value of imports and exports now averages \$50 billion a year — makes an important contribution to Canada's well-being. Canadian farmers export more than half of what they produce and Canadian consumers depend on imports for a third or more of what they consume. Canada's farm economy, however, is made up of two very different parts. The outward-oriented grains and meat sectors, concentrated in the West and responsible for about 80 percent of Canadian exports, operate largely on the basis of globally competitive markets and find their largest challenge to be the trade-distorting practices of other countries. The domestically oriented dairy and poultry sectors, on the other hand, concentrated in Ontario and Quebec and responsible for a miniscule share of exports and imports, find their biggest challenge to be maintaining the highly regulated and protected markets within which they operate.

The operation of supply management is relatively simple and straightforward. As Barry Wilson explains:

"[D]omestic demand is predicted, the anticipated market is divided among farmers with quota, ... prices are set at levels high enough to cover production costs plus profit, and imports are controlled to ensure that the administered domestic prices are not undercut by cheaper foreign produce. ... The board that issues quota and controls the system operates an effective domestic monopoly under the authority of federal and provincial legislation" (Wilson 1990).

Farmers argue that, on the whole, the system works. In their view, they have a stable income — that is, high profit margins — while consumers have reasonably priced basic foodstuffs, albeit at prices that may be somewhat higher than they would be under open market competition. Perhaps, but the longer the system stays in place, the greater the rigidities that it engenders, for example, in creating barriers to entry into the industry, and retarding adjustment to changing technology, consumer preference and other competitive conditions. In the absence of market-based competition, there is no basis for determining prices and incomes that reflect market circumstances.

Maintaining the status quo for these two farm sectors is unfair to consumers, who are condemned to higher prices and limited choices; unfair to other farmers, whose chances at better access to foreign markets are sacrificed in order to protect dairy and poultry farmers; unfair to food processors, whose access to quality inputs is limited to what local suppliers will produce at regulated prices, and even unfair to efficient dairy and poultry farmers, whose opportunities to expand and become more productive are hemmed in by the system's constraints. Some facts gleaned from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC), industry, consumer, and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) websites may help to underline these points:

- Cash receipts in 2003 from dairy farming totaled \$4.5 billion, representing about 8.5 percent of total farm receipts of \$35.7 billion, though contributing
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less than 0.4 percent to Canada's gross domestic product (GDP). Poultry and egg farming adds a further \$2.4 billion or 0.2 percent to Canada's GDP (AAFC 2004a and 2004b).

- Domestic shipments of finished dairy products in 2003 totaled \$11 billion, of which \$315 million was exported. Imports totaled \$548 million, or 5 percent of domestic consumption, made up largely of cheese from the European Union (EU), New Zealand, and the United States. Only 8 percent of Canadian poultry meat production is exported, while 6.5 percent of consumption is imported, largely for the food processing and fast food industries (AAFC 2004a and 2004b).
  - Tariffs on dairy and poultry products, even after the mandatory 15 percent reductions agreed to during the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (predecessor to the WTO) negotiations, border on the obscene — 298.7 percent for butter, 245.7 percent for cheese, 238 percent for chicken and 168 percent for eggs. Meanwhile, minimum access commitments (that is, WTO-scheduled commitments to permit specified quantities to enter at low tariff levels) are limited to a small percent of the market — from a high of 8 percent for cheese to less than 1 percent for ice cream and yogurt. The quantity of imported yogurt, for example, works out to the equivalent of a rounded teaspoon per Canadian per year. (Annual tariff-rate quota of 330,000,000 grams divided among 32,000,000 Canadians — a little over 10 grams each.)
  - Dairy and poultry farmers may only produce for commercial markets on the basis of rigorously maintained quotas. These production quotas have market values that have become embedded in the high cost structure of poultry and dairy farms. In Ontario, for example, it currently costs producers about \$27,500 to gain the right to ship 26 litres of industrial milk a day — the amount of milk produced by a typical dairy cow (Penner 2004). Statistics Canada reported a quota value in 2003 of \$17.6 billion for all dairy farming operations in Canada (Statistics Canada 2004).
  - The cost of making dairy and poultry products has steadily declined as a result of improved technology and genetics, but regulated prices rise relentlessly as the producer-dominated provincial boards respond to pressures from farmers. The average dairy farm today generates a 25 percent operating profit, twice the average of all farms and three times the average for non-farm businesses, while providing a low return on equity because of the astronomical value of quotas (Consumers Association of Canada 2004).
  - The OECD estimates the value of support to Canadian dairy producers to be \$2.7 billion in 2003, equal to more than 60 percent of the value of total dairy production that year (OECD 2004). The Financial Post's Terry Corcoran calculates that the 7.8 percent price increase authorized by the Canadian Dairy Commission in December 2004 amounted to a "government-dictated \$400 million annual transfer from consumers to farmers, at a rate of \$24,000 per farm per year" (Corcoran 2004).
  - The two industries have steadily rationalized over the years and become more efficient. Immediately after the Second World War, some 500,000
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farms in Canada produced milk for sale. By 1970/1971, that number fell to 122,000. Today, only 18,500 farmers are entitled to produce milk for market consumption. Half as many cows produce the same volume of milk as 30 years ago; the average farmer milks three times as many cows, and produces five times as much milk. The average Canadian dairy farmer today milks about 60 cows, his farm generates some \$225,000 in milk and cattle sales, and it has a quota value of over \$1 million. The number of poultry farms has similarly declined to the point where the Chicken Farmers of Canada now represents only 2,800 farms producing product for commercial markets, while turkey farmers number only 550. (AAFC 2004a).

- The Canadian market and industry are both mature and offer little prospect for growth, other than through further rationalization and exports. The Montreal Economic Institute notes that per capita consumption in Canada declined nearly 15 percent between 1986 and 2003 (Montreal Economic Institute 2005). Further consolidation should translate into lower prices, while exports can only increase if international circumstances are made more transparent and market-oriented.

Canadians appear relatively apathetic about these facts. Polls sponsored by the Dairy Farmers of Canada, for example, consistently demonstrate that 90 percent of Canadians say supply management is in their best interest. Four out of five Canadians say that the price of dairy products is fair and reasonable and that they would be prepared to pay even more to ensure sustained Canadian production. The Chicken Farmers of Canada reports similar levels of support. The Ontario and Quebec governments and, to a lesser extent, the British Columbia and Nova Scotia governments can, of course, be relied on to defend their dairy farmers. The Prairie provinces, on the other hand, blame these programs for limiting the exports of their grains and red meats.

### **Farm Fundamentalism**

The reasons for this depressing state of affairs are not hard to find. In most markets, prices are set by the most efficient, most productive and most competitive producer. For years, agriculture has operated under different rules, with legislators determining that it is the average, or even marginal, supplier whose costs of production should determine prices and incomes. Many farmers naturally support this effort, often justifying it on the basis of what has become known as farm fundamentalism (Wilson 1990, Bovard 1989), a creed that holds that:

- Farming is more than just a business, it is a way of life, essential to the social, political and economic fabric of a country.
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- Costs of production should be calculated on the basis of those of the marginal, least productive farmer; governments owe farmers a fair price.
  - Productivity gains achieved through new technology, better management and other improvements should not lead to lower prices; prices should only go up.
  - No farmer should ever fail; when a farm fails, part of the soul of the country dies with it.
  - Farmers have a more rugged, self-reliant life-style; however, every problem is a crisis requiring government help.

Congress adopted this creed in the 1930s and has followed it ever since, as did many other governments, to the point where agricultural economics became debased beyond credibility (Bovard 1989). Over the years, governments routinely guaranteed farmers specific, often high, prices and then dumped the resulting surplus on world markets at fire-sale prices. As artificial supports drove up crop prices, overproduction eventually depressed world prices and decreased export opportunities at anything but highly subsidized prices.

While not averse to these sentiments, Canadian governments also have a long record of seeking cooperative, rules-based arrangements to reduce unfair competition and to lower barriers to the international exchange of agricultural products. These goals have often been frustrated by the inability of the European Union and the United States to agree on how to resolve the problems, largely because of conflicting policy goals and approaches. While the air has often been thick with mutual recrimination, neither side has historically exhibited much flexibility in tackling their own problems, each preferring to cast stones at the other.

The introduction of supply management, backed up by strict border controls, in the Canadian dairy and poultry sectors in the 1970s was, in part, a response to frustrating circumstances beyond Canada's control. Canadian politicians, reacting to the pressures of short-term difficulties, were prepared to introduce solutions that turned out to have problematic long-term implications. Like their counterparts in the United States and Europe, they were convinced that government programs could help smooth out short-term price and income fluctuations without damaging long-term trends. But like their counterparts in the United States and elsewhere, they became captive of the myths of farm fundamentalism. The policies propping up these myths raised and stabilized farm income, while also involving a long-term commitment to the management of prices and supply and the development of increasingly rigid, unresponsive markets.

The popularity of supply management with the affected farm sectors and the relatively limited criticism by other domestic interests have made Canadian governments highly sensitive to any international efforts to undo the border regime critical to these programs. As a result, Canada took great pains in the bilateral Canada-U.S. negotiations, in the trilateral NAFTA negotiations, and in the multilateral Uruguay Round negotiations, to preserve its right to maintain supply management. None of these agreements in any way eroded that right. But the

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pressure to eliminate the restrictive border regimes that are the back-bone of supply management from the range of permissible farm programs has mounted ever since, particularly on the part of the United States, both bilaterally and in the Doha Round.

More ominously, Canada can no longer count on other countries that share its views and will join it in efforts to preserve its viability under international trade rules: At one point, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Korea, and others shared Canada's enthusiasm. No longer. They have begun to lower supports; Canada has not. The special pleading by Trade Minister Jim Peterson and Agriculture Minister Andy Mitchell during talks in the summer of 2004 in Geneva to finalize a framework in which to pursue the Doha Round fell on deaf ears. Their brave words to continue to fight to preserve supply management sound increasingly hollow. "In terms of supply management, and in the case of the Wheat Board, I have to be honest with you, we were under attack," Mr. Peterson told journalists. "It was one against 146. We had absolutely no allies at the negotiating table" (Reguly 2004).

### **Canadian Wine, Australian Milk**

What should Canada do? There are two precedents that indicate what course Canada should follow: The first is the transformation of the Canadian wine sector from a weak, inward-looking industry to a prize-winning international competitor; the second is the successful elimination of a similar (dairy) regime in Australia.

In the case of wine, Ontario, and to a lesser extent, British Columbia, sheltered the wine industry for many years through forced consumption (wineries had to use such locally grown grapes as the Lambrusca varietal, suited for little more than grape juice or jelly) and through trade barriers, as well as through forcing monopoly retail outlets to rely on differential markups and discriminatory listing practices. The result was a product few would drink except for Sunday communion or under bridges.

Imported wine was more than twice as expensive and thus not accessible to most people. Not surprisingly, Canadians preferred beer or hard liquor which, while over-priced, was at least drinkable. Various efforts at reform in the 1970s were staunchly resisted by the provinces. Ontario, for example, reneged on a federal accord reached during the Tokyo Round of GATT negotiations in the 1970s to open the market to competition and engaged in some other creative policies in the early 1980s, thoroughly annoying the U.S. and Europe.

U.S. officials made it clear during the bilateral free-trade discussions in the 1980s that an accord on wine was essential to the agreement as a whole, and the federal government made that clear to Ontario and British Columbia. The result was a commitment to phase out the various protections over the course of six years and introduce national treatment to the wine sector. Both the federal and provincial governments committed relatively modest funds to an adjustment program for vintners who wanted either to get out of the business or to modernize.

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When it was clear that protection would not continue, the smart money decided it was time to plow the Lambrusca grape stock under and replace it with European, Californian, and other varieties more suited to making wine; some vintners even brought in people who actually knew how to make quality wine and knew what it should taste like. The less ambitious sold out to the more resourceful. The results are on display in the Niagara and Okanogan regions and, increasingly, elsewhere. Enterprising vineyards are producing quality wines, some of which have won international awards, and Canadians are consuming increasing quantities, both domestic and imported. Everyone is ahead: farmers, vintners, importers, and consumers. Protectionism really served no one well.

The example from Australia may be even more pertinent. Like their Canadian counterparts, Australian dairy farmers relied on domestic supply management and high levels of protection to sustain them. In 1999, they worked with the government to implement reforms that would gradually eliminate dairy quotas and replace them with a market-based system. Under the Dairy Structural Adjustment program, the government introduced various steps to deregulate the industry and to help farmers adapt to more market-based circumstances. A modest consumer tax — 11 cents per liter, scheduled to be phased out in 2008 — helps to generate the funds needed to aid farmers in either leaving the industry or adapting to the new circumstances.

The result has, to date, been encouraging. Rationalization of the industry has accelerated, productivity has increased, and the industry has become more export-oriented. Dairy Australia says:

“Australian dairy farmers now operate in a completely deregulated industry environment, where international prices are the major factor in determining the price received by farmers for their milk. ... [T]oday, over 55 percent of Australian milk production is exported — primarily as manufactured products — at international market prices” (Dairy Australia 2004).

Throughout Asia and Eastern Europe, consumers can now enjoy Australian yogurts and cheeses, markets that Canadians could also serve.

Do these lessons hold for the Canadian dairy and poultry sectors? It is not hard to imagine what would happen if the federal and provincial governments followed a similar course. There are some farmers doing well under supply management, but others, particularly small farmers, barely make ends meet. With little competition from outside, consumers are condemned to what the industry will produce: largely unimaginative, undifferentiated products, with a small amount of high-end goods competing with the relatively small amounts of high-end foods allowed to be imported, at relatively steep prices. Imported specialty cheeses, for example, are in short supply and command premium prices of as much as \$60 a kilo at retail. Only two kinds of butter are available to the Canadian consumer (salted and unsalted), rather than the wide variety available in Europe and the United States. Chicken that has some taste commands a premium price. As long as markets are controlled, consumer choice and competitive prices will take a back seat to producer preferences. As with the wine industry, no one wins; all but a few producers remain committed to the system

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and invest more in political activity than in modernization. And, in the absence of a strong consumer lobby, politicians cater to the producer lobby rather than to broader interests.

As with the pre-free-trade wine industry, trade negotiations offer an opportunity to escape from this trap by providing countervailing political forces: Canada's trading partners; the producers of grains, red meat and other internationally competitive commodities; the food processing industry, and consumers. All would support a phased elimination of supply management, particularly if it was made part of a Doha Round package that included significant reforms and improvements in market access for the full range of farm products, as well as a sensible adjustment program funded by the federal and provincial governments.

Dairy and poultry farmers do have some basis for complaint. The high quota values now embedded in their cost structures make adjustment to global markets more difficult. From their perspective, governments have created these quotas and have an obligation to assist them in moving away from them. Most Canadians would have no quarrel with this plea, although some may want to remind the farmers that many of them have profited handsomely from supply management. It is also no secret that the value of the quotas contains a large risk premium against the possibility that government policy might change. The prudent buyer of a quota looks to a pay for it in a relatively short time, suggesting that the cost to government of any adjustment program should not be exaggerated. Political reality dictates that without sufficient adjustment assistance from government, little is likely to be accomplished. The amount necessary would require a combination of both political calculus and economic analysis, a mix not unfamiliar to Canadian ministers and farmers.

## Conclusion

A liberalization program, accompanied by a modest adjustment package compensating farmers who want to leave the business, would drive the marginal farmers out of business a little faster (as noted, since the Second World War, the number of farmers producing milk for market has dwindled from about 500,000 to 18,500). Most such farms would be larger than current operations, though smaller units could survive by producing specialty products for niche markets. There would also have to be a shakeout on the processing side in order to create room for enterprising specialty producers. This is not a bad prospect, with winners all around, including marginal farmers who are holding on to their own detriment because the incentives to get out are not sufficient.

Is this scenario plausible? Perhaps not in the short term. The perceived political costs weigh heavily, particularly in current political circumstances. Minority governments are not known for their political courage. However, in the long run it will become increasingly difficult for a dwindling number of dairy and poultry farmers, constituting less than 1 percent of the Canadian economy, to hold out against both domestic and international pressures. For farmers, the Doha Round is less a threat than an opportunity. Today their numbers and their circumstances remain sufficiently potent to provide scope for gaining a useful

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adjustment package from federal and provincial governments. History, however, is not on their side. Five or 10 years from now, when they may face the next round of pressures from bilateral or multilateral negotiations, their numbers and their circumstances are likely to be a lot less interesting. Now is the time for dairy and poultry farmers to screw up their courage and see what they can negotiate. And we should all wish them well.

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