

French fry company may look elsewhere for potatoes if deep-wells not permitted

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Cavendish Farms president Robert Irving, left, and Blaine MacPherson, company vice-president of agricultural affairs, speak before a committee of MLAs probing the issue of high capacity wells. Irving says his company may be forced to look for potatoes...

Cavendish Farms says it may be forced to downsize its operations and investments in P.E.I. if government does not lift its moratorium on deep-water wells.

Company president Robert Irving appeared before a provincial legislative standing committee Thursday in Charlottetown, which has resumed its probe into the issue of high capacity wells for agricultural irrigation.

Irving told the committee of MLAs his company is the largest private employer in the province, with an economic impact to P.E.I. of over \$1 billion. He explained how Cavendish Farms and Cavendish Produce together purchase more than half of all raw potatoes grown on P.E.I.

But the Island's potatoes are not meeting the stringent consistency and quality demands of the french fry market. That's why his company is now at a crossroads, Irving said.

"Do we continue to invest in the Island with an unpredictable supply of quality potatoes at higher cost, or do we reduce investment and start growing elsewhere, where a supply of quality, lower cost potatoes are available?" Irving told the committee.

“We believe our future is here in Prince Edward Island, but the P.E.I. government needs to lift the moratorium on irrigation wells as we go into the future.”

The question of whether to allow deep wells to be drilled and used for potato crops has sparked intense public interest and heated debate over water use in Prince Edward Island.

Environmental advocates and the agricultural industry groups have waged a public relations battle over the question of whether P. E. I. has enough groundwater to support industrial irrigation of potato crops.

Scientific data compiled by the provincial Department of Environment suggests P. E. I.’s groundwater is replenished at a relatively high rate.

The department told the committee in February only seven per cent of water available for extraction within environmental regulations is being used.

Nonetheless, watershed groups, environmental activists and social advocacy groups have formed a coalition to oppose any new irrigation wells until further peer-reviewed scientific testing is done to ensure the wells would not deplete P.E.I.’s groundwater — the province’s only source of drinking water.

The P.E.I. Potato Board, which has been jointly lobbying government to lift the moratorium with Cavendish Farms, told the committee Thursday it supports the notion of a third party reviewing the province’s scientific data.

“We’re saying, let’s settle this once and for all,” said Gary Linkletter, chair of the P.E.I. Potato Board.

“Get someone credible, probably from another province who’s got a good record, who has knowledge of these things, get them in, review the Department of Environment’s data, do other research as needed and get a definitive answer – will this hurt P.E.I.’s environment? If it won’t, then continue on.”

Linkletter stressed repeatedly only one per cent of P.E.I.’s water is used for agriculture — the same amount used by golf courses, which are not facing the same scrutiny.

He also argued not all potato farmers would use irrigation if the moratorium were lifted, as it is a costly venture. He estimated installing a well, with all equipment and an environmental assessment, would cost over \$200,000.

But potato growers who would choose not to irrigate may not be able to count on a contract with Cavendish Farms.

Irving told the MLAs his company would likely not enter into contracts with growers without irrigation if the moratorium were lifted.

“We would want them to irrigate,” Irving said.

“We’re looking for quality. It’s not about pressuring a grower. He’ll get better yield, he’ll get better strength of a good storage and he’ll make more money and company will supply our customer.”

Linkletter stressed P. E. I.'s farms would never be 100 per cent irrigated, but he believes farmers should be permitted to drill a well and irrigate if they need it. "We're just wanting them to have the option," he said.