

Ontario Farmer

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Farm groups are getting secretive

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Agriculture decision-making in Ontario is moving underground at a rapid pace, and few people have noticed.

We at Ontario Farmer hadn't noticed the trend until recently when Dairy Farmers of Ontario notified us that media would not be allowed at its Fall Policy Conference which we've covered for 20-some years.

While discussing that occurrence with our staff, we realized that other organizations are increasingly closing up their meetings to not only the media, but to their general membership outside of board and select members.

At Ontario Pork, regional meetings have morphed into policy conferences which have been closed to the media.

And the province's largest farm organization could soon be making all of its decisions behind closed doors. As part of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture's restructuring, our regular reporter has been led to believe all of the meetings will be closed. OFA tells me that decision will be made by the new board, but our reporter says he was told not to expect to attend. That ends a long tradition of open decision-making, and coverage of those meetings by the farm press.

A general farm organization with representation across the diverse sectors of Ontario agriculture needs to have open meetings. There should be challenging, rollicking debate there, held in the open for all to see. It's difficult work being the OFA, and its diverse debate needs to be seen.

The excuses we get usually centre around board members and councillors being more comfortable expressing their views in private. It's a scary day for democracy when those elected by a constituency are afraid to tell those who elected them what they believe.

It's also bad for perception. Making decisions behind closed doors makes your constituency wonder what you have to hide.

Sure, there are always reasons for in-camera sessions. Legal issues and personnel issues are good reasons for some privacy. But debate about the issues of the day and an organization's standing should be heard.

Unfortunately the government and societal trend toward total message control has seeping into agriculture. Message control itself isn't a terrible idea. It quiets confusion about your organization. But when message control inevitably spins to controlling debate, it moves from good communication strategy to a danger to public policy making.

Farm groups have told us they'd be happy to tell us after the fact what went on at the meeting. Our people will call your people, it will all be great. They seem genuinely surprised that wouldn't be good enough. They miss the point. It is often how a decision is made which is the story, not the decision itself.

Farmers may not have a lot of sympathy with the media. Fair enough, but what concerns me is that when the meetings are closed to the media, farmers will not get the information they are used to, information used to help plan their businesses and to help them figure out how rural society works in relation to their families and their properties.