

Alberta's farm safety bill called part of predictable process

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Safety trainer says Bill 6 isn't about improving farm safety; it's about who pays for accidents on the farm

Mention the words "Bill 6" in Alberta farm country and there is usually an immediate reaction.

Officially known as the Enhanced Protection for Farm and Ranch Workers Act, Alberta's NDP government passed Bill 6 late last year amid farmer protest.

One round of discussions has already taken place involving groups of people appointed by the government to hammer out the details.

Those details might be years in the making, said one veteran of safety training programs.

Howard Versteeg, president and lead trainer for Gateway Safety Services, has been in the business for 18 years and has seen safety programs develop in industries such as construction and the oil patch.

He said the pattern is always the same.

"They consult. They complain. They consult. They complain. And then eventually they come up with rules and then they go back and try to enforce them. That might be 15 years down the road," said Versteeg.

He also believes safety isn't the main goal behind Bill 6.

"People think it's about them," he said about Alberta farmers concerned about Bill 6 and its implications.

"It's about money. As a taxpayer, I don't think I should have to pay for a farm accident. As of Jan. 1, I don't have to any more, technically."

That was the day that paid farm workers in Alberta who were injured on the job began to be covered through workers' compensation (WCB), as legislated by the province.

WCB is funded by employers, and employees then give up the right to sue.

Versteeg said that is a key reason behind Bill 6.

“There’s a lot more (to the legislation) than the NDP and ways of life and how I live (as a farmer.) It’s about money, lawsuits, lawyers and who’s paying for all this. That’s the unfriendly side of safety,” he said.

“When the NDP got in, this was coming. Whether the Conservatives, NDP or Liberals got in (after the last election), this was coming. There was no way to stop this. It was going to happen.”

Concerns about Bill 6 among farmers, ranchers and the agricultural sector led to formation of the Ag Coalition, which represents a wide range of the industry.

Kent Erickson, a farmer and co-chair of the Ag Coalition, agreed that the full implementation of Bill 6 might take years, in no small part because it involves so many parts.

“Obviously this is a labour bill. I think they are going to want to take their time,” Erickson said about the government’s agenda.

The Employment Standards Code, Labour Relations Act, Occupational Health and Safety Act and WCB are all part of Bill 6.

Erickson said people appointed to the six roundtables tasked with working out the details are still discussing things such as the definition of a farm and what constitutes best management practices in farming and ranching operations.

The Ag Coalition held meetings in late June to get more input from farmers, he said. Many expressed apprehension about unionization of farm workers and the potential for strikes that could debilitate farm operations.

Versteeg said the main thing he hears from farmers while providing safety training is simple confusion.

“They don’t understand it, what it means to them,” he said.

“No one really knows how it’s going to apply. But that’s typical of safety (programs). It takes time to bring it in, so (the government) has just started the process.”

Versteeg thinks farms are generally safer than they were years ago, but the injury rate is still much too high.

“We have 20 to 25 people die every year in Alberta from farm accidents,” he said.

“It’s a pretty high stat. Most industries don’t kill much more than one a month. It sounds crude, but death will occur.”

Versteeg said Bill 6 will allow the province to track accidents and any long-term disability they create.

Until now, those disabilities were not tracked, and all Alberta taxpayers covered the costs in terms of medical care, welfare or other income assistance.

As a veteran of safety legislation implementation in other industries, Versteeg offered this advice to farmers as Bill 6 rolls out.

“You’ve got to let it flow, and when they ask you to put your input in, put your input in. Don’t ignore it and say, ‘I’m not doing it’, because if you do that, they’re going to tell you what the rules are,” he said.

“You want to tell them what you think is acceptable, and then come together with an answer.”