

Farm families 'drowning' under pandemic pressures plead for child-care help^[1]

'We're not being heard,' says Katie Keddy, president of Kings County Federation of Agriculture

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EXCERPTS

Katie Keddy and Amy Hill share a love of the land and both appreciate the joys and challenges of raising families, but this year both farmers are struggling to keep up with their chores while looking after their children.

"We're trying to get in irrigation for the year right now and getting all of our greenhouses planted up, and you can't get that done when you have a one-year-old pulling plants out behind you," said Hill.

"You can't get it done when you have to stop 100 times to do snacks and diaper changes and nursing and all of those things."

Hill co-owns Snowy River Farms, a livestock and vegetable operation in Cooks Brook, near Shubenacadie, N.S. Her son, Ezekiel, is one and her daughter, Ayla, is six.

Keddy has two boys, Charlie, 7, and Ben, 5, and is trying to deal with the planting season at Charles Keddy Farm Ltd. in Kentville, N.S., in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are all going into the most important and busiest time of our years and we're going into this, this year with a reduced labour force," said Keddy.

Both women understand the need to close schools during the pandemic and the decision to restrict contact to immediate family members. But neither believes the federal or provincial governments understand the full impact of those measures on farm families.

"The workload increased much greater than it usually, and it's already a heavy workload at this time of the year," said Hill. "We have felt like we are drowning since early March. Every days feel like you're running from a bear."

Keddy, in her role as president of the Kings County Federation of Agriculture, has been calling on Premier Stephen McNeil to provide financial help to farm families so they can hire someone to mind their children.

She notes P.E.I. now has a \$75 a week allowance to help qualifying families with child-care costs, and in a May 19 letter to the premier she said a program is needed in Nova Scotia "so our farm families can continue to efficiently, and safely produce food for Canadian families."

She wrote him again last week as part of a group of women farmers, the Maritime Ag Women's Network, after hearing McNeil talk publicly about how health-care workers had been able to find child care for their children.

The premier had suggested the issue had been "organically dealt with" through support in the community or small daycares that were looking after the children of front-line health workers.

"While this was in reference primarily to Healthcare workers, others working in essential services, in this instance, Agriculture, are still struggling," said the letter signed by Keddy and Amy VanderHeide, who co-founded the group that represents close to 1,000 women across the Maritime region.

Keddy said she's not received a response from the premier.

"His comments that it is being covered organically by communities, you know it is because it has to be and it's falling primarily on women," said Keddy. "For me, I had to take a step back to stay home with the kids in the beginning."

Keddy said she's been informed federal aid aimed at helping farmers cannot be used to pay for child care.

Hill described herself as "beyond frustrated" by the situation.

"I would love to see Stephen McNeil up there trying to do his press conference while he has a kid requesting snacks and somebody else saying that they're tired and, like, a Paw Patrol episode playing in the background," she said. "That's what it is to try to do a job with

children."

Although the provincial government is working on a plan to re-establish child-care services by mid-June, daycare is not a realistic option for many farm families who would prefer to have their children looked after in their homes.

"There is no organic child care in the province, especially not rurally," said Hill. "It doesn't exist.

"The world is stressed out, and then the agricultural community is just trying to claw their way through this season right now and it feels like the government doesn't see us."

Worried about the future

Keddy is worried a second wave of the COVID-19 virus expected next fall might make a bad situation worse.

"We hope schools will be back to normal in September, but I have my doubts that that'll be case so then we're going into harvest with exactly the same issues," she said.

And that would make what may now look like a rural issue, very much an urban one, according to Keddy.

"You know people are worried about our food supply and that there will be enough food coming along at harvest time, one directly affects the other."

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