

## Minister talks tough on grain backlog

Alberta's Olson calls for fining railways

**Bill Mah, Edmonton Journal**

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Railway companies that fail to meet their grain-shipping commitments should pay financial penalties, says Alberta Agriculture Minister Verlyn Olson.

Western Canadian farmers have complained since the harvest that they are unable to ship this season's bumper crop to market because of a severe railway backlog.

Olson said railway fines might speed things up.

"It's frustrating that elevators and farmyard bins are filled to the rafters literally while empty ships are lined up at ports in Vancouver and Prince Rupert waiting for rail cars to bring them enough grain to fill their cargo holds," Olson said Friday, on a conference call with journalists.

He said it's time to take action because Alberta's reputation as a global commodity supplier is at risk.

Olson said producers and grain companies face immediate penalties when they don't meet grain delivery obligations. He wants similar direct and immediate monetary sanctions for rail companies for missed service levels such as failing to deliver a specified number of cars to a shipper on time.

"The vast majority of grain elevators across the prairies don't have a choice about which rail companies they do business with," he said. "There's no competitive incentive for rail companies to up their game."

Current legislation includes possible fines, but only if a government arbitrator rules an agreement between a shipper and rail company was broken. "If the system isn't working, everyone should feel the pain a little bit," Olson said.

He acknowledges rail transportation falls outside provincial jurisdiction, but said he will press the issue during a meeting Monday with federal Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz, the Canada Grain Commission and other agricultural representatives. Ed Greenberg, spokesman for Canadian Pacific, said in November the company is doing all it can to move the harvest and is shipping record amounts of grain.

A CN spokesman has said that adding more cars will only slow down the system, akin to adding more vehicles to a highway at rush hour.

Olson said despite coffee-shop talk that crude oil and other commodities are taking precedence over grain, reports from industry experts and the rail companies suggest that doesn't appear to be the case.

"Basically, everyone's unhappy with rail transportation right now. ... The oil companies are unhappy with delays. The coal industry would be another that probably has issues."

Ritz announced on Feb. 3 that Ottawa plans to keep closer tabs on rail companies by requiring them to report monthly on their performance instead of every three months. [bmah@edmontonjournal.com](mailto:bmah@edmontonjournal.com)

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