

THE *Western Producer*

Environment wave could help keep farmers afloat

this document web posted: Wednesday November 2, 2005

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Preston Manning built a coalition that not only got him heard in the cities of the East, but brought real political changes.

Farmers could do the same thing, if they made common cause with urban environmentalists and built a coalition of sustainable interests, the former leader of the Reform party told a conference.

"It can be done," Manning told Manitoba's Agriculture Renewal Alliance about creating unlikely coalitions that can have influence and impact.

"It's part of our heritage."

Manning said environmentalism is a growing trend among people in cities, but farmers don't have to fear it. He said agriculturalists should present themselves less as farmers and rural people and more as "stewards of the land," an image that has brought Europe's farmers strong support from urban people.

Europeans give large subsidies to farmers because they believe it helps to preserve the rural environment.

The same could occur here, but farmers need to get into the media spotlight and play the steward-of-the-environment role.

"Do you have a Dr. (David) Suzuki with a sunburned neck and a farmer's cap appearing regularly on TV?" challenged Manning.

He said urban people will support rural people if they see farmers in a positive light.

"I'd have no opposition at all in going to urban audiences and saying 'look, for 100 years the country carried the city ... For the next 100 years the city's going to have to carry the country. The investment's going to have to flow the other way.' "

Manning said farmers and rural people need to be able to put a number to the amount of environmental good they are doing.

"You've got to be able to measure some environmental output as a result of your stewardship that somebody can pay you for," said Manning.

"I actually think, in the long term, that may be one of the solutions to getting more income flowing the other way. I'd really like to see somebody refine that, develop that vision, because I think it's more than part of the solution."

That was music to the ears of Ian Wishart, a farmer who is an executive member of Keystone Agricultural Producers. KAP has spent years working on environmental stewardship programs, such as environmental farm plans.

"I think his concept of the linkage fit very well into the approach that Keystone's been taking, which is alternative land use services," said Wishart.

"What we're trying to do is establish a market for the stewardship, as he called it. We call it environmental goods and services that farmers produce on the landscape.

"I think it's a perfect fit."

KAP is hoping to soon announce a number of pilot projects where farmer-performed environmental services can be measured and recorded. It hopes the program could work across the country.

Manning said successful social movements need to be able to see long-term "waves" rising in society and jump on them.

He said the western alienation that arose because of government decisions and the imposition of the National Energy Program gave Manning his chance, and "Reform was a surfboard built to ride that wave."

Wishart said he thinks environmentalism creates a similar opportunity for farmers.

"I think we're on the right wave."