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Farmers are paying for a transportation system that isn't working

Farmers can do everything right through the growing season and still lose out if their crop cannot get to market.

That is the reality of growing grain in an export-dependent country. More than 70% of Canadian grain is sold abroad, and approximately 94% moves by rail.

For pulse growers in Alberta, rail and port service disruptions leave few practical alternatives. Alberta pulse crops move through the same corridors as other western grains, so a disruption at the Port of Vancouver hits pulse sales as hard as it hits wheat or canola. Grain backs up, delivery opportunities shrink and overseas customers look elsewhere.

That is why earlier this year, Grain Growers of Canada joined partners in the Ag Transport Coalition's *Too Much on the Line* campaign, to put a number on that risk.

The resulting analysis found that a one-week disruption affecting rail and port operations during peak shipping season could cost the grain sector nearly $540 million, with more than 90% of that loss coming from missed sales rather than extra costs.

A lost grain sale does not wait for us once service resumes. Buyers have their own timelines to meet and other suppliers ready to fill the order.

The damage can also begin well before a strike or lockout. As uncertainty grows, railways may begin reducing service, exporters become more cautious and customers start making other arrangements. The analysis found that a looming work stoppage can erase up to $112 million in sales before it officially begins.

Farmers pay for those losses too, with fewer delivery opportunities and lower prices. Repeated disruptions also cost Canada something harder to rebuild, a reputation as a reliable supplier, built over years and put at risk by a single missed shipment.

Those findings put a number on something we had already seen firsthand. The current approach to labour relations in transportation keeps failing the people who rely on it. That is exactly the case we made when we launched the campaign, timed to land while the federal government was consulting on changes to Canada's labour relations framework.

We were not alone in that assessment. In June, the Senate Transport and Communications Committee reached the same conclusion.

In response, the grain sector has put forward practical recommendations. We want to see a special mediator appointed early enough to keep negotiations moving and ensure both parties are bargaining in good faith. When an agreement cannot be reached, the federal government also needs a clear process for weighing the wider economic harm and resolving a dispute before the supply chain shuts down.

The critical question now is what the government does with our recommendations and the committee's findings.

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Preventing labour disruptions, however, is only part of the challenge. The people who keep grain moving also need infrastructure capable of supporting them.

The Port of Vancouver Gateway Strategy, announced this year, is one of several steps needed to move growing volumes of grain from farm to market. For Alberta pulse growers, that gateway is the main route to overseas customers.

Grain Growers of Canada welcomed the strategy and its focus on rail capacity, reliability and resilience. At the same time, we urged the federal government to prioritize one of Canada's most critical supply chain bottlenecks, the aging Second Narrows rail crossing, which remains outside its current building and investment plans.

Alberta pulse growers rely on that same rail network to reach export markets, and the crossing's limited capacity and lack of redundancy put the entire gateway at risk.

Infrastructure and labour relations are two sides of the same problem, and I have spent much of my career working on both, including in the rail and marine sectors before joining Grain Growers of Canada this spring. One lesson has remained consistent: shipment by shipment, reliability earns trust, but a single disruption can destroy it.

Canada's customers need to know we can deliver. Farmers need to know the system will work when their crop is ready to move.

With labour reform and transportation infrastructure both on the federal agenda, Ottawa has an opportunity to address both sides of that equation.

Several infographics were designed to promote awareness and encourage participation in the campaign.