

Prison Farm (R)evolution: A Conversation Between Prison Farm Activists Calvin Neufeld and Shaun Shannon

S*ave and Evolve: Prison Farm (R)evolution was an online videoconference jointly presented by Calvin Neufeld (Evolve Our Prison Farms) and Shaun Shannon (Save Our Prison Farms). This interview is based on a transcript of the event, which was held on 5 February 2020, and has been condensed and edited for clarity.*

Together these prison farm activists explained the history of the prison farms, the experiences of prisoners who worked there, the closures under the Harper Conservatives, the reopening under the Trudeau Liberals, and the injustices today that are uniting prison farm activists in a renewed struggle.

The former prison farms produced food for prisoners and included individualized animal interaction. Beginning in 2020, Corrections Canada intends to establish the new prison farms in Kingston, Ontario as industrial goat dairy using prison labour to supply raw milk for a multinational infant formula factory, according to media reports.

This public discussion was an appeal to Canadians to learn what's really happening with the new prison farms, to unite against the exploitation of prisoners and animals in the prison industrial complex, and to share the vision for the evolution of Canada's prison farms. Since the time of this interview, Evolve Our Prison Farms has produced a report examining the privately managed abattoir operation at Joyceville Institution (Neufeld, 2022).

Calvin Neufeld (CN): I care very much about the prison farms, the legacy, and I care about effective, quality programming for prisoners, and the human rights of prisoners. Evolve Our Prison Farms (EOPF) has received statements of support from lawyers, criminologists, climate scientists, sociologists, and social workers, all of them endorsing Evolve's model of green plant-based agriculture and animal-assisted therapy to replace the current model of farming and slaughtering animals.

Rather than bringing back the benefits of the former program and making them even better today, Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has taken the opposite approach, discarding all the benefits of the former program and

introducing a whole new injustice which will exploit prisoners and prison labour, as well as animals and our environment.

We're at a crossroads of a beautiful vision of what could have been, while barreling towards the terrible reality that we're facing today.

Shaun Shannon (SS): I was saved by the old prison farm program. If it wasn't for that program, I would be dead, or I'd be back in prison, and I will go to my grave saying that. It changed me. Before I showed up at Frontenac Institution, I was broken and that was the garage that fixed me. And it wasn't the program, it wasn't the guards, it was the animals and the interaction with the animals. If it wasn't for that interaction, I wouldn't be where I am today.

This new program that they want to have, there's not going to be any of that interaction and it's sad because it's not going to offer anything that it should offer. That's why I'm fighting.

On the former prison farms, we milked 250 cattle twice a day, and we provided all the milk for all the federal institutions in Ontario and Quebec as well as all the eggs for all the institutions in Ontario and Quebec. We had chickens and cows at Frontenac. At Pittsburgh, which is at Joyceville Institution, they did all the beef, so they did all the meat for the prisons in Ontario and Quebec.

CN: The animals were slaughtered there at Joyceville because they have a slaughterhouse right there on the prison grounds where prisoners slaughter and butcher the animals. The milk and meat were processed on site and fed into the prisons, with the surplus going to food banks. So, the benefits of the former program were first of all that prisoners could take pride in feeding themselves and their community, and secondly that there was more of the one-on-one working with animals.

SS: Each prisoner was responsible for a string of 10 to 15 cows, so if something went wrong, they could trace back and know who was looking after the cattle. They kept an eye on everything that was going on. And you got close with the animals, they had names, there were no numbers. They all had their own names and their own personalities and intricacies. Basically, it was like they were your animals. Guys were getting out of there and not coming back to prison. They weren't coming back because the program worked. Now they've changed it so it's not going to be anything like that at all.

CN: The new program, fulfilling the Trudeau government's election promise to bring back the prison farms, couldn't feed prisoners anymore because food production in the prisons has been privatized. So, they had to find an external market for products from the prison farms. At the exact same time the government was investing millions of dollars to bring a Chinese infant formula factory to Kingston to open up new markets for a struggling dairy industry. Feihe International, a Chinese multinational corporation, is the top domestic infant formula producer in China.

While the cow dairy system in Canada is subject to a supply management system, goats are not controlled by quota, and Feihe wants milk from 150,000 goats, a number far exceeding Canada's entire current supply. So, in order to meet the needs of that facility, the federal government decided to establish the new prison farms as an intensive goat dairy operation, milking as many as 3000 goats in a fully indoor factory farm. This means no interaction, no names, just numbers, carousels, milking machines, automation.

Then people said, "wait a minute, what about the cows"? The members of the Prison Farm Advisory Panel (who own, and want to sell back, the descendants of the former "Pen Herd" cows) said "no, this isn't right, we want you to buy our cows". CSC claims it will obtain a special allotment of research quota to add a small number of cows to the program. It's very clear, in writing, that the milk from those cows is not going to prisoners or to the market. It's not going to anybody.

From the beginning, EOPF has recognized the importance of those cows, that heritage, the history, and how they are symbolic of the prison farm program, and how they – those cows, the individuals – healed people like Shaun. So how do we bring back the prison farms today? If they're not feeding prisoners anyway, then why have the cows there at all, except for the therapeutic benefits? And if that is the case, the program should adhere to a model of animal therapy, which is a recognized, structured, intervention approach.

I work with sanctuaries all over North America that have effective animal therapy programs for at-risk youth, for people who have been incarcerated, for military personnel and police personnel who have post-traumatic stress disorder. This is a therapeutic program, and it makes absolute perfect sense for that to be the way that we see those animals go back to the prison farms, while also using the land to do any number of things that will model agricultural climate solutions. Let the prison farms be a pilot project in justice, healing for prisoners, healing for animals, healing for our environment.

What we're seeing instead is the exact opposite – it's going to be the exploitation of prisoners for eternal markets, for private corporations, for international trade, in a factory farm. No individualized animal interaction, and no therapeutic benefits, with a few cows thrown in for no reason, not feeding anyone. They also brought in beef cattle at Joyceville Institution last summer, and those beef cattle have all been shipped off to slaughter via auction. Then they purchased a second batch of bull calves in December 2019, and CSC confirmed to us in July 2020 that 14 of the 19 bull calves had died. No cause was given, and no investigation is planned. We're very concerned about the overall lack of any of the benefits of the former program and lack of responsibility towards the animals who were originally supposed to be there for the empathy, the therapy.

We are about to see fundamental changes to prison labour in Canada, which was previously used almost exclusively for internal purposes. It was not very good programming, but its products were for government use, chairs or desks or post office boxes or clothing for the institutions. The new prison farms are opening a door for this entire program to specifically and exclusively serve external markets and international markets, and wealthy, powerful, private corporations.

SS: With no incentive pay. The prisoners don't benefit from any of this like they used to. Working for CORCAN, you used to get an incentive pay, you used to get \$1.25 extra per hour to milk the cows. And every other CORCAN shop had incentive pay, the industrial metals, the canvas shops, the metal shops, the paint shops. With CORCAN you used to have incentives, and they've taken all that away.

CN: And that's big, because after deductions, prisoners on average make about \$3 or \$4 a day. That incentive pay of an extra \$1.25 an hour made a big difference in a system that charges prisoners for phone calls, hygiene products, Tylenol, etc. There's only one incentive pay left, and that's if you work in the slaughterhouse. There you get \$3 an *hour*, not \$3 a *day*. So, they are paying prisoners to work there, the kinds of jobs that nobody wants to do.

SS: [Sarcastically] Just think of the work experience, just think that when they get out, they'll get a good job in a slaughterhouse.

CN: Slaughterhouse work is very traumatic and has one of the highest turnover rates. People don't last in those jobs.

SS: I worked in a slaughterhouse when I first got out in Alberta. I sat in a bobcat with a raincoat on because I was pushing guts off the floor, and I lost it after a couple of months. I lost it, I couldn't do it anymore. How can you do that? I couldn't do it every day. I just lost it. I said enough is enough. I broke down.

CN: Incarceration is a traumatic experience from start to finish. The majority of people who are in prison have a history of trauma, mental illness, and substance abuse. Then we're traumatizing them through incarceration, and then making them work in jobs that expose them to further trauma and setting them up for jobs on the outside that will perpetuate the same kinds of trauma.

It's well-documented that slaughterhouse work is also criminogenic, that people who work in slaughterhouses have higher rates of violence, violent crimes, and domestic violence. What we're really doing is exploiting a work force that has little real choice.

SS: The rehabilitative aspect of animals, of any type, is so amazing. They've got guys on death row in the States that they allow to adopt cats, and when these guys adopt these cats, their whole attitude changes. They become a different person. People don't understand – you get an animal and your whole attitude changes. I just can't understand why CSC can't see that putting 3,000 goats in a factory is not going to work.

CN: What it reveals is that the return of the prison farms is not about what's good for prisoners. It's an institutional agribusiness. We know that with a minimum of creativity and innovation you can make money off 1,500 acres of prime agricultural farmland between the two prisons in Kingston where the farms are. Anything at all would be good compared to what they're doing with 3,000 goats. They were given \$4.3 million from the federal budget to reopen the farms, and then they're investing almost \$10 million of CSC's own existing capital budget to build up the infrastructure for this industrial goat dairy operation. So, they're spending nearly \$15 million just to get it started. And then there's the supervising, the employing, purchasing

animals, more animals, all the equipment, the supplies, the ongoing operational costs. The price tag is going to be enormous, and I don't know if they're ever going to make a return on that investment. This prison farm plan is going to spell the end of the prison farms.

We are very concerned about what it means for prisoners, for animals, and for our environment in an age of climate crisis. The city of Kingston, cities all across Canada, and our federal government, have all declared a climate emergency, yet CSC has introduced a federally funded program that's going to be beef, dairy and factory farming for international markets. It's the wrong model, it has no relevance to rehabilitation, and it introduces a very slippery slope of exploiting prison labour in a whole new way – for private profit.

What we're seeing is political and industry interests interfering with this prison farm program, which should be about what is good for prisoners, first and foremost. This is a rehabilitation program. This is not just any farm.

SS: What people have to realize is, someday these guys are going to get out of prison. Do you want some guy getting out of prison who's going to be a bitter, angry person, or do you want a guy who's going to have his head on his shoulders and not snap and tear your head off? I was that guy before I went to Frontenac. I'd get out of prison, and I was the worst guy to be around. Thank God I went to Frontenac. Thank God, thank God...

If I help one guy get his life back on track, then I've succeeded. I just want one guy to get the benefit that I got out of that program, and I'll be happy. These farms are all about helping the guys inside. They should not be about making a profit off them.

CN: That's part of our worry about this whole thing, because people who fought for the prison farms care about prisoners, they care about animals, and almost everybody cares about this climate emergency, right? So, anybody who cares about these things would not support this new prison farm model, which is just wrong. The politicians and the media have not been actually reporting and being honest and transparent about what the new prison farms are, and what the implications are. We're at this point now when this thing needs to change. Now. Immediately. Or shut it down.

SS: Shut it down because it's not going to work.

CN: We want the benefits of the original program, made better today in light of everything that we know and everything that's possible. We've got a clean slate. If we allow that factory to be built, if we allow that pipeline of infant formula to be fed by our prison system, then where do we go from there, and how do we stop it then? We need to stand up now. We need to do something about it, because we know too much now about how prison labour can be used and turned into what's been described as modern-day slave labour.

SS: We're turning into the States, we're turning into the prison system like in the States, where the guys are just factories. They work guys until they're practically dead and they treat them like dirt. This is going to be the same thing; it's going the same way with this program. If we let it continue, then it's just going to open the door for them to do this in every other prison.

CN: Who knows, it's possible that every prison in Canada will start feeding that facility. They need 150,000 goats.

We need to come together and remind everybody what prison farms are about, what the benefits were, and what prison farm activism means. It's about holding our institutions and our governments to account and saying no when they're doing something that is obviously wrong.

Now how do we use the prison farms instead? How do we inspire a vision for what the prison farms can be today?

SS: There shouldn't be one hungry person in Kingston. They've got enough land there to feed half of Ontario with the cash crops they could come up with and the vegetables they could put out there. And it makes the guys in prison feel good to actually do something and help people out.

CN: And they want to do something. This would give purpose, meaningful work. Feeding yourself, your community. We want there to be a way around the food service modernization that CSC has implemented. We need to introduce an allowance to allow prison farms to feed their own institutions and to ensure that there's not one hungry person in the surrounding communities. What's happening in Kingston is a pilot project that's going to determine the reopening of prison farms across Canada. Is this going to be a pilot project in injustice, or is it going to be a pilot project in justice?

And that means it has to be good for prisoners, good for animals, and good for the environment. Anything else is not justice.

SS: You don't want guys coming back to prison. Canada's recidivism rate is atrocious. Norway's recidivism rate is only 20% because they treat prisoners like human beings. They've got programs that work. In Canada they're so far behind the times, all they care about is making money. And that's wrong. CSC's mandate is rehabilitation, and this is not rehabilitation as far as I'm concerned.

CN: The prison farms are a way to begin planting that seed of change and doing something right. This is not just about doing something right for prisoners, even though they're the ones most directly impacted, and the animals obviously. But this is also about changing the system for the sake of people who work within the system, the staff, the guards, who are exposed to dangerous working conditions, trauma, high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. If the prison farms could be truly restorative, truly healing, it would transform the lives of prisoners and CSC staff and society too.

We are very concerned at the overall lack of responsibility that's being demonstrated with this whole program, so we question whether or not there's any way to bring animals responsibly into CSC. We want this whole thing to change immediately or stop it and then begin again with a clean slate, committed to choosing the best possible model and the most responsible way to introduce a program that preserves the core benefits of prisoner interaction with animals. That's what we're not seeing. I'm very worried about the wellbeing of the 3000 animals...

SS: Putting 3000 goats into an institution like that, they're going to have nothing but problems, period.

CN: Correctional Service of Canada tried to get goats last year. It was a disaster, start to finish. They had nothing but problems. So, now they are trying again, but this time they are trying to acquire the goats over the next two years, which to me reveals that they know just how much trouble they're going to face trying to make this thing happen. But they seem very determined to proceed, no matter the problems, the roadblocks, stumbling blocks, ethical issues, even legal issues.

The export of goods produced in part or in whole using prison labour can be prohibited under international trade laws (GATT/WTO). Government sponsorship of infant formula is inappropriate when Canada is a signatory to the international breastfeeding code which prohibits the promotion of infant formula, yet Feihe International holds 300,000 seminars a year in China promoting its product to parents (using celebrities too). The CEO of the Canadian Dairy Commission, who was instrumental in bringing the Feihe factory to Kingston and promoting that company in Canada, took the earliest opportunity after his retirement from the Canadian Dairy Commission, to take a paid position on the board of Feihe China, raising conflict of interest concerns.

This is a highly problematic situation, crossing into what is, at the very least, grey legal and ethical territory. But because of the political and industry interests involved, CSC is determined to push ahead, and the prison farms are going to be the victims, the prisoners are going to be the victims, the animals are going to be the victims, society, and our environment, are all going to be the victims of this.

SS: People have to open up their eyes and look into the real story, because it's corrupt. What's going on right now is corrupt. It's got to change. It's sickening. It's maddening, that's what it is. It's frustrating.

CN: Correctional Service of Canada is notoriously closed off. There's not a lot of transparency. So, getting answers to any aspect of the prison farms is extraordinarily difficult. And we're only within the first few months of this program being reinitiated. Already there have been deaths and unexplained circumstances and potentially some sexual abuse as well, according to reports that have reached us, which is very hard to confirm unless we actually get either a prisoner or a CSC staff member to speak with us directly about it. But whether you're CSC staff or a prisoner, you're at risk if you talk about things that go on behind the prison walls. Then what's going to happen when it's a factory farm? Indoors, no public oversight, with minimal supervision and a constantly rotating workforce because these are prisoners who are within a year or two of their release. So, there's depersonalization across the board and what we're seeing here is that in this new prison farm model, both prisoners and animals are being reduced to units of production whose value depends on their productivity and their profitability. Instead, an animal-assisted therapy program, a sanctuary program, would help

prisoners learn the value of life, that you are valuable just like those animals are valuable. It's just the opposite mirror.

That infant formula factory is the reason they are reopening the prison farms. Come on, Canada, we can do better than this. The bar in prisons is set so low. We need to set the bar high. That's where we should be investing our care and attention as a society, to do right. If we do right within our prisons, how much better are we going to do in every other aspect of society?

SS: The problem is, society doesn't care about the prisoners. You're not treated like a person. You're treated like a piece of dirt, and the politicians say, well they're criminals, that's how they should be treated, like that's poppycock – we're human beings. You're a human being no matter what you've done, you're a human being. So, I made a couple of mistakes along the line but that doesn't mean I should be treated like crap, you know? And that's the way the people perceive prisoners, that we're all crap and we all deserve to be treated like we're being treated, and who cares if they're going to have to work like slaves to do this and do that. That's what they deserve. Nobody deserves that.

CN: If we care about public safety, we have to prioritize rehabilitation. If we care about human rights, we have to prioritize rehabilitation. And if we don't? If we say as a society that they deserve what they get, lock them up and throw away the key and treat them any way you want, the worse the better, then I believe that when people come out worse than when they went in and commit some further crime, then as a society we are responsible. We share in that responsibility.

Correctional Service of Canada itself recognizes the rehabilitative value of animal-assisted therapy in correctional institutions, and has strict guidelines:

CSC recognizes the “potential for abuse” of animals in the prison context and asserts that “there needs to be close monitoring. The welfare of animals engaged in animal-assisted therapy programs is a crucial concern and should be given primary consideration when developing and implementing the program”. CSC affirms that “the therapy animal is in every way an individual” and “animals benefit from this as they are often saved from certain death and given a second chance”.

These animals who are being brought onto the prison farms under an animal agriculture model are there under a death sentence one way or another, and their babies are as well. The realities are that to harvest milk from animals, and to harvest meat from animals, it involves slaughter. There is no other way to run an animal agriculture operation.

But this is a program of prisoner rehabilitation and therapy, so how does that impact prisoners to have to ship all these babies out to the slaughterhouse?

SS: When I had to go in and take a baby calf away from her mother, I was putting my life at risk, because the cows were wanting to kill me when I would go in and try to take the calf. They knew what we were doing, and they were going to do whatever was in their power to stop that. That affected me. Of course, it affected me. It was like, whoa man, what am I doing here? They would cry, the mother and the baby would be talking to each other, and it's, oh my God. That hurt, that affected me.

CN: We have heard from many prisoners who are upset about what's happening. One prisoner collected feedback from 150 prisoners at Joyceville Institution, 75% of which voted for Evolve Our Prison Farms' proposal. He was reprimanded for this and soon after transferred to another institution. One prisoner included a note saying "It's nice to be asked considering I'm in prison. It would be nice to see a farm system based on loving kindness and not exploitation and slaughter. I personally could not be present in any area where animals are being killed. I have suffered a trauma so profound because of the offence I committed that just the thought of seeing any living thing die is unthinkable to me".

You, Shaun, were used by CSC at media events as an example of a former prisoner who was helped by the old program, but when you started expressing concern about this new model, you were pulled away from the cameras and disinvited from future events.

Prisoners have the right to a voice, and they've been denied that. There have been consequences for some people who have supported our campaign in different ways. It makes you sick and it makes you very worried about trying to give prisoners the voice that they actually do deserve in a system like that.

The whole system is in desperate need of an overhaul. We see an intelligent, creative, and evidence-based approach to the prison farms as

planting that seed of change. We need to protect the prison farms for their own sake from industry and political profiteering, and we need to protect the human rights of prisoners, and this is also about planting that seed of change to do something right for a change, instead of just more and more wrong being introduced in whole new ways.

SS: It's just too big of a fight to let go. I can't stop now. I can't stop. When I jumped into this, I jumped into this knowing that I was going to be in this for a long, long time. Because I'm taking on the government, I'm taking on CSC. To fight CSC, it's going to be a lifelong battle for me. I hope it doesn't take that long, but I'm prepared for it to take that long.

CN: We have to say no to government doing what is obviously, transparently wrong. Prisoners are part of society. That whole idea of "reentering society" is false. Our prisons are part of society. It's the dusty, neglected corner of society. We have to clean it up. We have to care about what happens there. If we don't care what happens there, we're never going to change the rest.

Of course, what we're seeing across the board, globally, is the globalization of industry and agriculture and these monolithic institutions. The family farms are giving way to industrial scale farming, and the whole world is going in the opposite direction of the direction we need to go in to become sustainable, responsible and a compassionate world, a compassionate, connected society. Introducing intensive animal agriculture on Canada's prison farms is part of that very monolithic, monoculture type of mentality, instead of a more permaculture type of mentality, where there are layers, interconnectedness.

I'd like that permaculture mentality applied to the prison farms in terms of the layers of justice: justice for the animals, for the prisoners, for the environment. All of it interconnected. The whole of the prison farms should be good, the whole of it good, justice and healing and diversity at every level. Instead, we're seeing the opposite.

This needs to change. We need to hold our government to fulfill its promise to deliver the best possible model for our prison farms.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Calvin Neufeld is Canada's only full-time prison farm activist. A passionate defender of human rights, animal rights, and environmental justice, Calvin founded Evolve Our Prison Farms in 2016 to ensure that the restoration of Canada's prison farms will result in an ethical and healing model. The campaign investigates, exposes and resists any form of exploitation, harm or profiteering, while advocating evidence-based, restorative and therapeutic alternatives.

Shaun Shannon was incarcerated for 23 years, including five years working on the prison farms in the 1990s. He credits the prison farm program with saving his life and keeping him out of prison after his release. As a spokesperson for the former Save Our Prison Farms campaign and an active member of Evolve Our Prison Farms, Shaun has been fighting passionately for the past decade to see the restoration of an effective prison farm program.