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## Both sides trying to confuse issue of wheat subsidy

OTTAWA — Western farmers often begin discussions with easterners by saying that they are not typical farmers. Somewhere in the background, behind the comfortable homes, the cars and combines, there is always supposed to be a "typical" farmer in bare feet and rags who would draw tears from a Pakistani refugee.

Jack Burnett Murta probably has better reason than most to be considered an exceptional case, the main one being that he finds himself, at 28 years of age, representing the Manitoba riding of Lisgar in the House of Commons. But he is probably rather typical of a new breed of western farmer adapted to modern conditions and as a western Conservative MP, he now symbolizes a political issue whose importance is almost totally hidden from most Canadians by its complexity.

### Both sides add to confusion

The issue springs from the government's attempt to replace the 15-year-old Temporary Wheat Reserves Act by the Prairie Grain Stabilization Act. It is serious enough to have caused one attempt at ministerial impeachment and several interruptions of parliamentary business. It was also clear last week that many people in Ottawa, up to and including at least one party leader, do not understand what is at stake in practical terms. On both sides, government and opposition, the confusion was deliberately compounded by partisan presentations of misleading or incomplete data.

Jack Murta obviously isn't an impartial witness. But he does stand with his two feet on 2,200 acres of highly productive farm land in the Pembina Triangle about 50 miles southwest of Winnipeg. Unlike any of the party leaders, he can talk about the issue as a farmer.

Murta probably doesn't match the eastern Canadian's traditional image of the western farmer. Although he was raised on the land he now farms, in the streets of Ottawa he looks like any young executive or technocrat. In fact, he is a bit of both. A 1964 graduate of the University of Manitoba's agriculture faculty and now vice-president of the farm corporation headed by his father, he spends most of his time as a planner rather than a dirt farmer.

Although modern production techniques have transformed marginal land on the farm into agricultural real estate worth up to \$150 an acre, productivity is now almost taken for granted and the viability of the operation depends mainly on marketing. The aim is to plant crops that are sold before the seed goes into the ground. The planning function is as essential as rain for an operation as large as the Murta farm which employs four full-time workers and whose total annual crop is worth about \$300,000.

### Wheat becomes less important

The 2,200 acres now worked by the Murtas originally were devoted to wheat, if they were farmed at all. Now the most important cash crop comes from 400 acres of potatoes which are processed in Manitoba, mainly into French fries, and sold in the United Kingdom. Oil crops such as rapeseed and sunflowers occupy about 1,000 acres. There are several hundred acres of corn and only about 300 to 400 acres of wheat. The wheat is an important crop for the Murtas but not as dominant as it would be on most Prairie farms.

The wheat is sold in Canada and overseas through the Canadian Wheat Board. The Murtas harvest the crop in August and September and deliver it to the local elevator as it is required by the board. The basic payment for the crop is made at the time of delivery but there are other payments which depend on the size of the crop, the price that is eventually received for it by the board and other factors.

It is other payments such as this under the Temporary Wheat Reserves Act, amounting now to about \$87 million, that were frozen in August, 1970, when the government decided to introduce its Prairie Grain Stabilization Act. The new act would create a kind of insurance scheme for grain farmers that would stabilize annual incomes and cushion the effects of poor crops. Everyone agrees that an income stabilization plan is a good idea but Conservatives and New Democrats claim that this particular plan could mean less income for farmers in the long run.

### Long-range gains small

Another important factor is that the new plan is loaded at the front end. If and when it becomes law, farmers will be entitled right away to \$100 million in transitional payments even if, as the opposition parties claim, they will fail to benefit substantially over the years.

At this point, for the average person, the details progress into payment schedules, storage charges and other murky technicalities. And the million-dollar figures are so large that they are meaningless. What does it all mean to a farmer like Jack Murta?

According to his own rough estimate, his share of that delayed \$87 million would be about \$2,000. That's the amount that he would have received as additional payments on the 1969-70 crop year sometime in the past six months if the government had not suspended payments under the Temporary Wheat Reserves Act. That's the amount that would be at issue in the courts now if, like the four Saskatchewan farmers who took legal action last week, the Murtas also had decided to sue the federal government for payments which are legally due under the act.

The Murta corporation obviously isn't going to go bankrupt over \$2,000. But there are farmers on the prairies whose credit is extended to the limit and whose need for cash is acute as they face local tax payments at the beginning of November. These are the farmers the opposition parties really were talking to in the complicated procedural wrangles last week in the House of Commons. And these are the farmers before whom the government is dangling the transitional payments of \$100 million attached to its new legislation.