

Province powers up tingle voltage battle

By Tom VanDusen - AgriNews Staff Writer

Energy Minister Dwight Duncan is leading the charge in finally taking action to ease the stress of tingle voltage for Ontario farmers and their animals.

Duncan announced recently he has directed the Ontario Energy Board to implement measures addressing stray voltage "particularly as it affects the agricultural sector." The phenomenon can be a nuisance in some other industries as well.

The board will assess what needs to be done in consultation with experts and stakeholders, Duncan said. With a provincial election coming up on Oct. 10, Duncan also used the occasion to underline his government's "commitment to the agricultural community."

The announcement was welcomed by the OFA which will work with the OEB, Hydro One, and the Electrical Safety Authority to arrive at a practical standard ensuring electricity that is safe for "man and animal", said president Geri Kamenz.

An Order in Council will allow the government to proceed quickly in dealing with stray voltage issues raised in a private member's bill introduced in the legislature by Maria Van Bommel, Liberal MPP for Lambton-Kent-Middlesex.

In acknowledging that one of the primary objectives of the OEB is to "protect the interests of consumers with respect to the quality of electricity service", the order calls for the board to develop its own "processes, procedures and regulatory instruments" to address stray voltage as currently being experienced by farm customers.

Duncan's resulting directive takes it a step further in directing the board to ensure service in relation to stray voltage doesn't "unduly impact on the operation of the farm."

Noting that one of the primary impacts of stray voltage is on milk production, Van Bommel - who favours a zero tolerance tingle voltage policy - called Duncan's intervention an "important step" in addressing the chronic issue.

One farmer who's been waging a mostly losing war against the effects of tingle voltage is dairyman Francois Cayer of St. Albert. Part of the battle has been the installation of expensive stray voltage blocking systems which are often overpowered by surges from the grid.

Random electrical currents have made Cayer's cows "dance", put them off their feed, plagued them with mastitis and swollen udders, reduced milk flow, caused unexplained abortions and malformed calves and even made them fear entering the barn and lying down in their stalls.

And the unwanted charges haven't always stopped at the barn, sometimes interfering with appliances inside the home and the health of family members.

More than \$200,000 has been spent by Cayer buying replacement cows and covering other losses, money that isn't normally refunded by any program or agency.

Electricity distributors haven't always taken the complaints of Cayer and other farmers seriously, pointing to the customer's in-house electrical system as the culprit. However, many experts agree problems actually originate with aging, improperly grounded distribution systems.

Traditional tingle voltage treatments have sometimes been likened to voodoo, with practitioners offering various concoctions and approaches intended to divert nuisance currents.

One of them is tingle tamer Peter Webb who successfully uses a series of cylinders loaded with his own concoction of minerals and vitamins placed in strategic locations throughout an infected barn to repel "electro-magnetic pollution from man-made sources".

Webb told The AgriNews the only long-term solution is for electricity distributors to invest multi-millions in properly grounding their systems and in upgrading aging lines overloaded due to constantly growing demand from customers.