

Make Informed Decisions

KevinGrier

Market Analysis and Consulting Inc.

79 Pheasant Run Drive
Guelph, Ontario
N1C 1E4

T 519 823 9868
C 519 240 8779
E Kevin@KevinGrier.com
KevinGrier.com



Social License?

Social License is a term that has gained currency for application to the food industry and particularly the livestock industry. The oracles of wisdom in academia, consulting, industry associations and government assert that the livestock industry must achieve “Social License.” The now defunct ALMA espoused the term and the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute also gives it credence. In July 2016 federal, provincial and territorial agriculture ministers were to discuss the issue of trust from the standpoint of maintaining the agrifood sector’s social license to operate.

What however is Social License? The following are some of Rex Murphy’s thoughts on the topic from the National Post, May 20.

Social licence is one of those phrases... that just seem to pop into lexical existence, almost out of nowhere, and instantly take on the authority of unchallenged and long-accepted concepts. They are mouthed in every parliamentary speech, are munched over by the solons of the afternoon panel shows, and crowd the editorial and opinion pieces of all the finest newspapers. Yesterday they were unheard and unseen. Today they are presumed to be the boundary stones of argument and discussion. It is all so fast. One other note on usage: these terms and their semantic kin usually emerge from the fertile lexicography of the social justice camp, which is only appropriate since “social justice” is itself a term from the same fertile semantic factory.

Speaking before the high council of the Sanhedrin at the Calgary Petroleum Club, before he was prime minister, Trudeau (as is his way with nebulous but high sounding concepts) gave the vague, trendy formulation full authority: “Social licence is more important than ever. Governments may be able to issue permits but only communities can grant permission.”

A quick note here on the prime minister’s peculiar play on words. What is a permit? Why, it is an official declaration, in writing, with the force of law, usually from an order of government, that a person or a company has legal permission to do something. It is Permission with a capital P.

But, insofar as Trudeau’s statement can be understood to mean anything at all, the official government permission — the one that counts — under the elastic rules of social

licence really has no force at all. Governments “may” issue permits (permission) he says, but only communities can grant “permission.” A very odd understanding from a prime minister: that “communities” are the final authority, and that government permits function very much like tarted-up suggestion boxes.

... the most intrinsic characteristic of social licence. Its application is infinitely flexible. It is an inexhaustible demand. It will expand its conditions wantonly whenever an original set of conditions has been met.

...the central point of social licence: its preconditions can never be met, and are not meant to be. It is an obstructionist tactic, designed to forestall and delay, till whatever its target has been become so worn down by process and protest and delay that it is simply taken off the policy table.

[They]...would have had more success chasing a moonbeam than satisfying social licence.

It is impossible to describe issues better than Rex Murphy, a Canadian treasure for sure, and thus I will not try to add. Within the framework described by Rex however, the Canadian hog industry, particularly in Manitoba, has had more experience than any other, with the exception of the oil industry, in chasing those social license moonbeams. Unfortunately, as long as the ag academics and industry leaders continue to give it acceptance, rather than call it for what it is, then the industry will continue to fall behind as a result. That is, industry leaders who support this social license concept are hurting, not helping the livestock industry. They are giving credibility to forces that simply want to drag the industry down.

Kevin Grier
May 2017

This article first appeared in the May 22 edition of Canadian Pork Market Report. For a trial to that report or any Kevin Grier report, email kevin@kevingrier.com