

POLICY BRIEF: Canadian milk prices much higher than in U.S.

Mark Milke for SecondStreet.org | October 2019



Executive Summary

Canadian consumers have long been subject to artificially expensive poultry and dairy products. This is largely due to price-and-supply controls on those products, known as “supply management.” This form of protectionism and price manipulation is enabled by federal and provincial legislation.

This study examines the on-the-ground effect on consumers in one easy-to-measure consumer item: milk. Using available online data from Walmart in the United States and from Loblaws/Superstore in Canada, prices in 15 cities in each country were compared for regular (i.e., non-organic) milk in both countries.

Milk: 29% more expensive in Canada

After converting sizes and currencies to reach a standardized price per litre in Canadian dollars, the prices observed on August 9, 2019 were as follows:

- Canada (CDN \$): Between \$1.10 (Toronto, Ontario) and \$1.87 per litre (Charlottetown, PEI) in Canada with a 15-city average of \$1.30.
- United States (CDN \$): Between 59 cents (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) and \$1.37 (St. Albans, Vermont) with a 15-city average of \$1.01.
- On average, milk prices were approximately 29% more expensive in Canada than in the United States.

Who Wins?: Farmers with net worths of \$4.3 million and \$6 million

Forcing consumers to pay higher prices for dairy and poultry products ultimately benefits some of the wealthiest Canadians. In 2017, the average dairy farmer’s net worth was \$4.3 million and the average poultry and egg farm’s net worth was \$6 million.

Examples of reform from Australia and New Zealand

Consumers and taxpayers were once forced to support the agricultural sector in Australia and New Zealand. Since deregulation in these two countries, consumers and industry participants have benefitted:

Australia: Before 2000, Australia controlled supply and prices in dairy products such as cheese, butter, and milk. In order to end that, a temporary tax of 11 cents per litre was imposed on milk at the wholesale level for eight years—between 2000 and 2008. These funds were given to dairy farmers to persuade them to support the transition from a protected, cartel-like market, to a deregulated market. The reforms worked for both consumers and producers. Despite the new tax, prices dropped as competition was introduced, and later rose again with inflation. For industry participants, farm output increased, as did the nation’s export market.

New Zealand: The nation’s former Labour government, under Prime Minister Roger Douglas, eliminated tariffs and subsidies for dairy farmers almost overnight back in 1984. Despite dire predictions from some opponents, New Zealand’s dairy industry has flourished. Today, the small island nation produces just two per cent of world dairy production, yet it exports approximately 40 per cent of the world trade in dairy products.

Introduction: Robin Hood, the poor, and high food prices

The legend of Robin Hood is well-known to most people as the tale of an outlaw who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Variations of the story began in the twelfth century and later settled into the tale with which we are now familiar. While few Canadians actually support theft from anyone, the idea that the poor should be helped is intuitively appealing; it is, after all, those with less who obviously need more help.

Governments sometimes produce policy that can act as a “reverse” Robin Hood, where the poor are harmed and the wealthier directly benefit. This is what happens in Canada through what is known as “supply management;” the supply of dairy and poultry products, as well as their prices, are set by marketing boards. This is a result of government legislation which allows supply management boards in the dairy and poultry industries to act as “gatekeepers” for the supply and price of everything from milk and chicken to turkey and cheese.

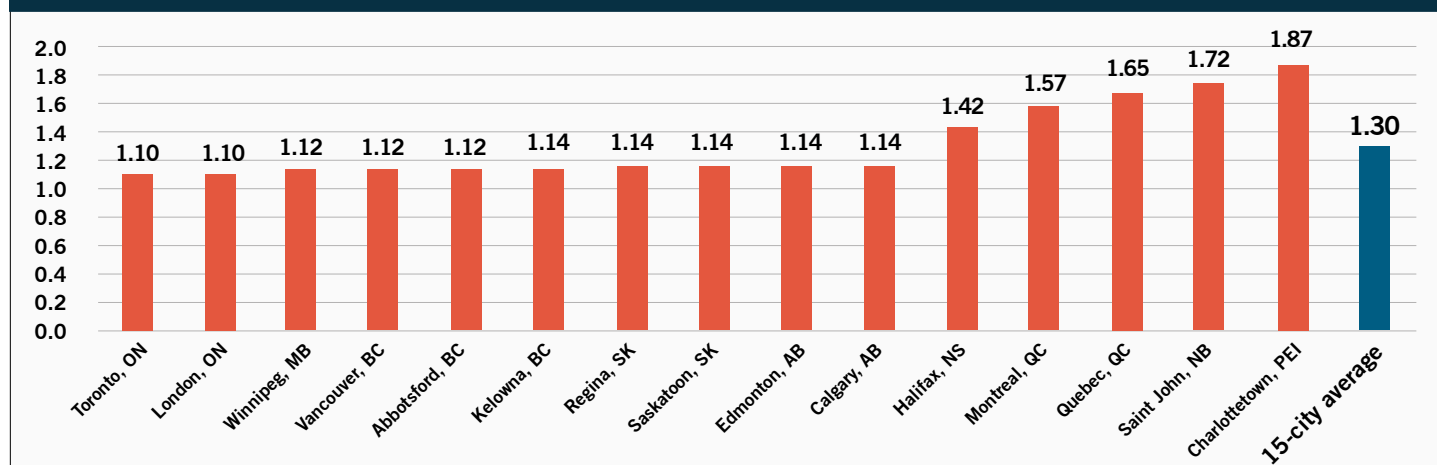
At the same time, the federal government imposes significant duties on dairy and poultry products from outside of Canada, leaving Canadians with little choice but to pay higher prices for dairy and poultry products.

The U.S. Walmart/ Canadian Superstore milk comparison (August 2019)

The results of this reverse Robin Hood policy can be seen in milk price comparisons between the United States and Canada. The following charts compare 2019 milk prices from 15 Walmart stores in cities and towns in the United States (quantities have been converted to litres, and all prices are in Canadian dollars). On the Canadian side, 15 Loblaws/Real Canadian Superstore locations (and affiliated chains in Quebec and Atlantic Canada) were used for comparison.

In Canada, based on a normal (i.e., non-organic) four-litre jug/bag of 2% milk, the results show the fifteen Canadian cities ranged in price from \$1.10 per litre in Toronto to as high as \$1.87 per litre in Charlottetown. The 15-city average was \$1.30 per litre of 2% milk (figure 1, all prices in Canadian dollars).¹

Figure 1
Canadian milk prices by city per litre, 2019 (CA \$)



Sources: Walmart and Superstore/Loblaws/Atlantic Superstore/Provigo. Regular 2% milk, non-organic. American 3.78 litre and Canadian four-litre jugs/bags converted to per-litre comparisons. American prices converted to Canadian dollars at August 9, 2019 Bank of Canada exchange rate. Note: Walmart Canada comparisons were not available.

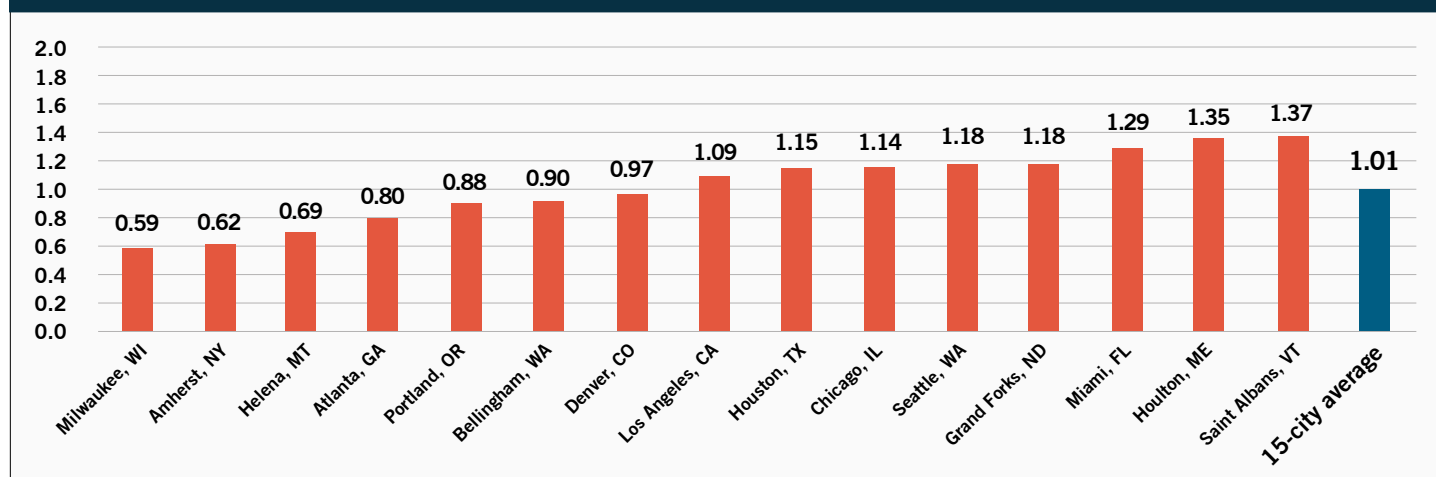
American milk per litre: 22% lower

In the United States, based on a normal (i.e., non-organic) one-gallon jug of 2% milk, converted to per-litre prices in Canadian dollars, the prices ranged from 59 cents per litre in Milwaukee to as high as \$1.37 per litre in Saint Albans, Vermont. The 15-city average was \$1.01 per litre of 2% milk (figure 2, all prices in Canadian dollars).²

A 2018 survey of milk prices

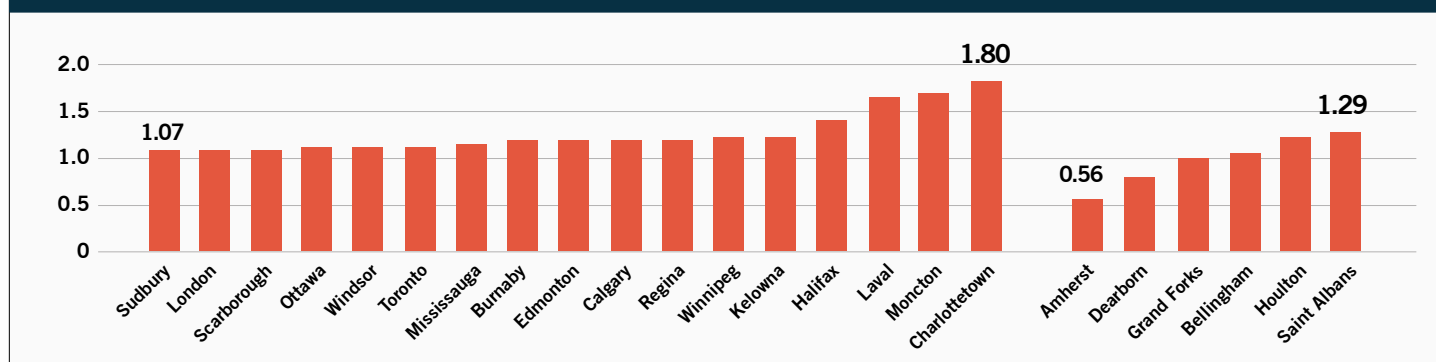
A 2018 survey of six American cities by Field Agent showed similar results, ranging from 56 cents per litre in Amherst, New York to \$1.29 in Saint Albans, Vermont. In comparison, prices on the Canadian side ranged from \$1.07 per litre in Sudbury to \$1.80 in Toronto. (Figure 3, all prices in Canadian dollars).³

Figure 2
American milk prices by city per litre, 2019 (CA \$)



Sources: Walmart and Superstore/Loblaws/Atlantic Superstore/Provigo. Regular 2% milk, non-organic. American 3.78 litre and Canadian four-litre jugs/bags converted to per-litre comparisons. American prices converted to Canadian dollars at August 9, 2019 Bank of Canada exchange rate.

Figure 3
Comparisons, per litre, 2018 (CA \$) 2% milk



Sources: Field Agent, 2018 Survey

The much higher top-end milk prices in Canada and the higher average cost are due, in part, to supply management. As Canada West Foundation President Martha Hall Findlay has pointed out, supply-managed prices have resulted in less efficient farms in Canada and prices that rose above the inflation rate over the past 30 years. In the United States, American farms consolidated during the same period and consumer prices for dairy goods rose by less than the price of inflation.⁴ As other Canadian reports have found, supply management has led to consumers effectively subsidizing dairy and poultry producers through higher prices. One 2015 study found that the average Canadian family with children pays \$585 more every year for milk, cheese, butter, chicken, and their Thanksgiving turkey.⁵

Where the consumer subsidies go: To \$4 million and \$6 million farmers

In 2017, the average dairy farm’s income was \$150,050 and the average poultry farm’s income was \$264,429.⁶ (Note that net income is arrived at *after* farm salaries are paid, including salaries paid to the owners.) The average dairy farmer’s net worth was \$4.3 million in 2017 with the average poultry and egg farm’s *net worth* at \$6.0 million in 2017 (figure 4).⁷ Consumer subsidies for dairy and poultry products are going to some of the wealthiest Canadians.

This reverse-Robin Hood economics policy, and variations of it, have been in place since 1872. However, modern supply management dates back to the 1960s, stemming from federal and provincial legislation, which allows for such supply management boards to exist.⁸ The three pillars of supply management boards are highly interventionist. They are:

1. Matching supply to demand (literally “production planning”, including domestic quotas)
2. Pricing mechanisms (price control)
3. “Predictable” imports (restrictions on imports)

For an example of how marketing boards work, consider dairy products. The Canadian Dairy Commission, ten provincial supply management boards, and provincial representatives are all signatories to the National Milk Marketing Plan. Based on that plan, an associated committee determines a quota on how much milk each province can produce. That quota is then further apportioned among individual dairy producers. These in turn must sell all their milk to their respective provincial marketing boards. In addition, high import tariffs are imposed on imported products to discourage their importation.

Figure 4
Dairy farms and poultry farms
Net income and net worth, 2009 to 2017

	Dairy cattle and milk production farms	Increase 2017 over 2009 (\$)	Increase 2017 over 2009 (%)	Poultry and egg farms	Increase 2017 over 2009 (\$)	Increase 2017 over 2009 (%)
Net income 2009	\$107,892			\$141,765		
Net income 2017	\$150,050	\$42,158	39%	\$264,429	\$122,664	87%
Net worth 2009	\$2,501,173			\$3,891,989		
Net worth 2017	\$4,271,343	\$1,770,170	71%	\$6,029,743	\$2,137,754	55%

Sources: Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0102-01 Farm financial survey, financial structure by farm type, average per farm

The federal government has reduced tariffs somewhat in the past three years and will allow slightly more agricultural items to enter Canada due to various new free trade agreements with Europe, Pacific Rim countries and the new Canada-U.S.-Mexico free trade agreement (CUSMA).^{9,10} However, low quotas and high tariffs will still remain on non-CUSMA countries, while some increased quotas will provide opportunities to U.S. farmers who wish to export into Canada.¹¹

The problem of supply management will still remain for Canadian consumers, and the “reverse Robin Hood” policy is still in effect: “Canada has preserved the supply management system for another generation of hardworking Canadian dairy farmers,” is how the federal government describes the outcomes of CUSMA.¹² The Conference Board of Canada estimates the impact of the three free trade dairy sector concessions to be between just eight per cent and ten per cent of the Canadian market.¹³ That means tariffs as high as 298 per cent will continue for the vast majority of dairy and poultry products imported into Canada.¹⁴

Cartels hurt 36.7 million consumers with benefits to 13,000 farmers

Merriam-Webster defines a cartel as a “combination of independent commercial or industrial enterprises designed to limit competition or fix prices.”¹⁵ Canada’s government-backed supply management boards are essentially a cartel. If the government wants to help consumers, supply management should be abolished for the same reason other cartels are already illegal: they cement an undesirable nexus between politics and money; they promote crony capitalism, lock out competition and, in the case of supply management boards, collude to raise prices on an essential human need – food.

The result of supply management policy in Canada is that in 2017, 36.7 million Canadians¹⁶ who were not dairy or poultry farmers subsidized the 10,062 (dairy farmers) and 2,996 (poultry farmers) who were.¹⁷ That hurts the poorest Canadians, those whose incomes are overwhelmingly spent on the basic necessities of life.

Examples of reform from Australia and New Zealand

Consumers and taxpayers were once forced to support the agricultural sectors in Australia and New Zealand.

Before 2000, Australia controlled supply and prices in dairy products such as cheese, butter, and milk. The approach was similar to Canada; a combination of marketing boards (statutory marketing authorities, or SMAs) controlled supply but also provided subsidies to promote the export of milk.¹⁸ However, reforms began in the 1980s which included replacing guaranteed prices with “stabilized” prices in some sectors (wheat and wool). Further deregulation in the 1990s and 2000s meant that the majority of state statutory marketing authorities were dismantled by 2010.¹⁹

The reforms also included ending any distinction between “market milk” and “manufacturing milk”, with milk prices “equalized regardless of end use”²⁰ wrote Jon Berry and Alan Oxley, a trade expert and diplomat, respectively. This allowed milk to be treated as milk whether intended for the domestic market or the international market.

Lastly, to facilitate the transition from a protected, cartel-like market such as Canada’s, a temporary tax of 11 cents per litre was imposed on milk at the wholesale level for eight years, between 2000 and 2008.²¹ The tax

raised about \$1.7 billion (Australian dollars/\$1.5 billion Canadian).²² The funds were used to provide payments of between \$72,000 to \$143,000 to individual dairy farmers.²³ This allowed dairy farmers to adjust to the coming deregulation. As Dairy Australia (the organization composed of Australian Dairy Farmers) notes, Australian dairy farmers now operate in a completely deregulated environment.²⁴

The reforms worked for both consumers and producers.

- **Consumers:** By 2000, Australia had imposed an 11-cent tax per litre of milk at the wholesale level. The imposition of this new tax occurred at the same time as deregulation. Despite the new tax, increased competition and efficiencies in the market led to an initial drop in milk prices by 24 cents per litre (or 16 per cent). After that, prices trended upward in line with inflation until 2008. Prices then dropped with the removal of the 11 cents per litre tax in 2008 and “flattened out” ever since.²⁵
- The important thing to note, is that despite the initial imposition of an 11 cent per litre transition levy (tax), per-litre prices for milk dropped by 24 cents in the first year. This drop was due to producers adjusting to world market prices and to full competition. It is estimated that Australian consumers saved \$118 million dollars in the first year of open markets, with milk dropping in price, on average, by 18 per cent for brand name products and by 29 per cent for generic brands.²⁶ More recently, supermarket competition has been fierce, leading to the aforementioned “flattening” of milk prices.²⁷
- **Producers:** The average output of each farm (measured by the gross value of output per farm in real terms) nearly doubled between 1978 and the middle of this past decade.²⁸ Also, as the Australian Dairy Farmers noted, 40 per cent of Australia’s milk is now

exported.²⁹ More recent estimates place the proportion at 36 per cent (as of 2017/18) and its worth at \$3.6 billion annually.³⁰

2017 comparisons: New Zealand dairies: 431 cows per farm; Canadians dairy farms—86

Canada’s practices are also in contrast to New Zealand. Again using the dairy sector as an example, one can observe that New Zealand farmers prosper but do so in a free and competitive market without government protection or subsidies.

The history of New Zealand’s approach to farm subsidies is different from Canada’s. Whereas supply management in Canada acts to restrict supply and, in conjunction with tariffs and restrictions on imports, drives up prices for consumers, New Zealand taxpayers subsidized farmers directly with some tariffs also in place. As of 1984, however, both systems of supports were dismantled--almost overnight by reforms to government that began under the left-leaning administration of Prime Minister Roger Douglas and his Labour Party.³¹

As Saskatchewan economist Marvin Painter explained in his study comparing Canada and New Zealand, Kiwi dairy farmers “have become world cost leaders in the production of milk and have diversified along the value chain into the processing and marketing of dairy products.”³² With reference to New Zealand, Painter writes that “Since 1974, the average herd size has increased while the number of dairy herds has decreased.”³³

Writing in 2007, Painter noted how the average New Zealand dairy farm had 315 cows compared to an average of 62 cows on Canadian dairy farms. In other words, New Zealand’s farms are more efficient. As of 2017, the average Canadian dairy farm had 86 cows.³⁴ In New Zealand, the average dairy farm had 431 cows.³⁵

New Zealand's free market in dairy products has not led to the obliteration of the industry, but the opposite. While New Zealand accounts for just two per cent of world dairy production, New Zealand has approximately 40 per cent of the world trade in dairy products, and 98 per cent of New Zealand's milk production is exported.³⁶

Learning from reforms to Canada's wine industry in the 1980s

The reforms from Australia and New Zealand are not the only ones that Canadian governments might consider. Another example of how competition can benefit both the consumer and the producer comes from how the federal government approached Canada's wine industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this after the first Canada-United States free trade deal was signed by both countries and took effect January 1, 1989.

That free trade deal allowed for the full importation of American wine into Canadian markets, whose domestic wine industry (centred mainly in British Columbia and Ontario) had formerly been protected by a range of duties and tariffs. In the 1980s before free trade, Canadian wine--whether from the Okanagan Valley or from Ontario's Niagara region--was considered low-quality "plonk", a derogatory term used by wine lovers to describe low-quality wine.

After the 1989 Canada-U.S. free trade agreement ended government protection for domestic producers, vineyards and wineries were forced to compete. However, to ease the transition, the government of the day, subsidized the replanting of low-quality grapes with higher quality grapes. That helped overcome localized objection to American competition, allowing more free trade and more choices and price competition for consumers.

Canada's wine industry not only survived free trade, but thrived. A 2006 analysis from Statistics Canada noted that between 1997 and 2005, planted acreage had already

doubled, and real GDP growth in the wine industry was the eleventh highest among 215 industry groups. Canada's wine sector showed average annual real growth of 7.1 per cent compared with just 3.0 per cent for the nation as a whole. The wine market also expanded in Canada: each consumer bought 14.2 litres of wine annually as of 2005, up from 10.3 litres per capita in 1993.³⁷

Three decades on, the improvement in Canada's wine sector is obvious to anyone rudimentarily familiar with Canada's vineyards: higher quality wine, more customers, increased employment, significantly increased wine tourism, international awards and more vineyards, not fewer. As Statistics Canada noted, "With the introduction of the FTA, it could have been thought that domestically produced wines would be displaced by popular California wines, putting Canadian wineries out of business. In fact, the opposite occurred."³⁸

Free trade in wine was a net benefit to Canada's existing wineries and led to an expanded market overall, in addition to better selection, quality and prices for consumers (with tariffs and duties removed on imported American wine) and an expanded market. Similarly, Canada's dairy and poultry producers, if eased out of the protectionist shell they are now in, will find a newfound ability to thrive given increased access to markets with tens of millions, or hundreds of millions, of potential new customers.

Getting to a subsidy exit: Hooking up consumers and producers directly

Compensation to dairy and poultry producers is likely the only way to cut through the "Gordian knot" of an existing producer interest. That producer interest—a government-sanctioned privilege—exists care of government policy and government policy will need to change to end it. With the 11 cent per litre tax on milk in Australia as the guiding example for most analysts, Martha Hall Findlay estimates that an equivalent Canadian tax on consumers could range between 17 cents to 50 cents a litre depending on

estimates of how much compensation is given to dairy farmers.³⁹ Jon Berry and Alan Oxley give no estimate for the tax, but recommend a similar fund (and thus a levy/tax) for Canada to transition dairy and poultry farmers away from the current supply management model.⁴⁰

On the exact tax, policymakers should keep this reality in mind: existing supply management policy has already led to decades worth of incomes and net worth significantly above the Canadian average for dairy and poultry producers. Consumers have thus already delivered subsidies to producers via artificially high prices at the till. Such past payments to producers should be accounted for in any transition payments to dairy and poultry farmers. In other words, the phase-out subsidies should not be overly generous. The potential for increased sales and exports under a deregulated model should also be considered. Producers are just as likely to benefit from a phase-out of the cartel model as consumers are.

A temporary tax to ease producers away from the cartel model, set between the Australian price (11 cents per litre) and the lower end of the Hall estimates (17 cents per litre) is a reasonable compromise between producers and consumers, as both will benefit. The policy goal for government should be to “hook up” producers and consumers directly, with no further assistance from governments after the temporary tax on dairy and poultry products to end Canada’s food cartels.

Conclusion

In summary, Canadian consumers pay artificially high prices for milk when compared with Americans because of supply management. This is also true of poultry items in Canada. The benefactors are wealthy dairy and poultry farmers. While this situation has been known for decades, politicians have been reluctant to address it. The Australian model provides Canadian politicians with one

possible option that is fair for producers and consumers. Competition will drive down dairy and poultry prices, just as occurred in Australia (with milk) despite a temporary tax to fund the transition.

A change in policy that frees up consumers would also free up producers. As New Zealand and Australia demonstrate, there is a worldwide market for dairy and poultry products. At-home, self-imposed restrictions on dairy and poultry producers give other countries a reason to deny Canadian exports. Abolishing supply management can lead to a win-win scenario where domestic dairy and poultry producers will have greater access to world markets.

About the Author

Mark Milke, Ph.D. is an author, policy analyst, non-profit consultant and columnist with six books and dozens of studies published across Canada and internationally in the last two decades.

Mark is a founder and senior fellow with SecondStreet.org. He is also president of the Sir Winston Churchill Society of Calgary, has a Ph.D. in International Relations and Political Philosophy from the University of Calgary, is past President of Civitas—a Society for Ideas, and is an occasional lecturer in Political Science.

Mark’s ongoing policy work has been published by think tanks in Canada, the United States and Europe including the Fraser Institute, the American Enterprise Institute and Brussels-based Centre for European Studies. He has been interviewed by the New York Times and Wall Street Journal and all major Canadian media.

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