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Grits cooks up national food plan

By **CHRISTINA SPENCER**, PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU

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OTTAWA — The federal Liberals will serve up a comprehensive national food policy if they form the next government, party Leader Michael Ignatieff said Monday, announcing the party's latest strategy to woo rural voters.

While the Conservatives quickly pronounced the policy indigestible, experts say it may be smart politics to seize the farming agenda — even for a traditionally urban party.

The five-course Liberal policy buffet, made public as Ignatieff toured a farm in King Township, Ont., would commit \$80 million to a “buy local” fund to boost farmers’ markets and homegrown food; \$40 million to help poorer children eat better; and \$50 million to improve food safety through stepped-up inspection. It would also revamp farm financing and improve fertilizer and pesticide management.

Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz ridiculed Ignatieff for making his announcement at a farm in the Greater Toronto Area. The Liberals are seen as drawing their support from high-density urban centres.

But Betsy Donald, associate professor of geography at Queen’s University, thinks a country-wide food policy — particularly its emphasis on “buy local” — would appeal to both urban and rural Canadians.

“Many of us have been promoting a national food policy for years as something that’s more holistic and integrative and linking it more explicitly with health and the rural economy,” she said.

“There’s such an insatiable demand now for local food in our cities.”

Pollster Nik Nanos said while the policy is aimed at farmers, “the appeal also cuts into urban areas.”

And food safety, the other part of the Liberal policy salad, resonates with women voters, Nanos added.

Food has become a hot topic for all political parties. This week, the House of Commons agriculture committee launched cross-Canada meetings to hear from farmers. Its particular concern is how to attract and retain young people in agriculture.

Donald said a focus on farming is logical for any political leader.

“This is a societal issue for the good of all Canadians. It’s not just rural economic development.”

The Liberals’ latest policy promise is part of a broader pitch to rural Canadians that has included help for doctors and nurses who want to work outside cities and reforms to the gun registry to streamline registration and make a failure to register firearms a non-criminal ticketing offence.

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