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Growers hope for deal to save CanGro plant this week

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NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE – Several tender fruit growers are anxiously waiting to learn if doomed fruit-canning plant CanGro Foods Inc. in St. Davids will be saved by a white knight buyer.

The final decision on whether Queen's Park and Ottawa will financially support the plan pitched by an undisclosed buyer to purchase the plant is expected this week, Niagara Falls MPP Kim Craitor said.

The Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Trade is currently reviewing the feasibility of a plan to reopen a plant and create a Niagara brand, Craitor said.

But the 150 growers who supply pears and clingstone peaches to the St. Davids fruit processing operation, destined for closure, need to know immediately whether to tend to this year's crop or prepare to pull out acres of trees.

Fruit trees need to be sprayed for disease and pruning needs to start in the next few weeks, peach growers say.

"We're committed to staying in this business," said peach grower Ken Andres, whose 80-acre orchard is on Creek Road in Niagara-on-the-Lake. "The uncertainty is killing us. We're at the point where we need to be spraying and pruning. The trees are going to suffer if we don't."

Andres, who grows 25 acres of clingstone peaches, said he's encouraged that all four levels of government – Niagara-on-the-Lake, Niagara region and the federal and provincial governments – have been involved in a series of meetings to save the plant during the past few months.

He said he hopes a deal can still be reached. "It's just a matter of putting it together with all these different players. All the right people are at the table."

Niagara-on-the-Lake peach grower John Thwaites, who has 25 acres devoted to CanGro, said he's optimistic the plant can be saved.

It's about time the government helped growers who are confined by the **greenbelt**, he said. "I'm hopeful that the government can help, but I'm quite frustrated with the lack of support the province has given growers. They've locked us in a **greenbelt** and sort of left us hung out to dry," he said, pointing to last June's closure of the Cadbury Schweppes juice, jam and jelly plant in St.

Catharines, which affected about 105 growers and 2,000 acres of land."

That sense of optimism coupled with urgency are the feelings of most growers – canning fruit producers and their fresh market colleagues who face more product competition if a deal isn't reached, said

Len Troup. "There's rumours of a near deal and growers are hopeful it can be done," the chairman of the Tender Fruit Producers said. "It completes a balance of the industry. It balances all of the fresh market as well and everyone is hopeful something will get done. We're still waiting for that white knight."

In January, CanGro Foods announced it would close its fruit-processing plant in St. Davids, which employs 149 people, and a vegetable plant in Exeter if a buyer could not be found.

Workers received notice they'll be staying on the job until June, Craitor told Osprey News last week.

Two investors have pitched independent proposals to Queen's Park to buy the plant. Both are being considered by the province, Craitor said.

Craitor said plans to buy the plant are solid and are being seriously considered by the province. But it's going to take support by all parties, including government, the growers and the United Food and Commercial Workers Canada, which represents CanGro employees, to make it work, Craitor said.

"The important thing is that we all know there is a deadline and I think we're close," Craitor said. "If there's going to be a solution, I think that we're close now"

