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Tuesday, October 20, 2009

Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC)): We'll call the meeting to order.

Mr. Bellavance, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Could we set aside a few minutes at the end of the meeting to debate my motion? Mr. Atamanenko also has a motion, but mine has to do with inviting Mr. De Schutter to appear before the committee by video conference on October 27. That is why I want to discuss it today. It won't take long, but I would appreciate some time at the end of the meeting to debate my motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: It's at the discretion of the committee. We have five delegations in the first part, and then a couple afterwards, so....

We have a number of motions to be dealt with. There are five or six.

I believe, André, unless there's unanimous consent, we'd have to deal with them in the order that they came in. But if the committee agrees, then....

Do you want to comment on that?

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: We would ask him to appear on October 27. Mr. De Schutter was supposed to go before the Committee on International Trade, but his appearance was cancelled. I think that the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food would be a good forum in which to present his food safety report. It would be on October 27, and today is October 20. That is why I wanted to deal with it today.

[*English*]

The Chair: So you're saying he's already in Ottawa that day. Is that what you are suggesting?

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: He was available to appear by video conference. I think he was in Geneva, but he was available when the Standing Committee on International Trade was going to meet. That does not work anymore. He has to talk to his office in order to appear before our committee on October 27 from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Chair, there are some motions on there from me as well. I would leave those aside. Alex's and André's motions are the ones we need to deal with. I think they're of an urgent nature.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Actually, I had a motion in that we haven't talked about yet. It has to do with young farmers.

I don't know that it's fair to start picking and choosing whose motions are important to get on the list. We have a number of motions. Certainly the discussion that we've had around here on competitiveness is as much about young farmers. Let's get to the end of it and we'll decide at the end. I think we should get an agreement on how we're going to move ahead on these motions.

The Chair: Okay.

Could I take here from the discussion, then, that we keep a couple minutes at the end to further this and not delay our witnesses any longer? Is everybody fine with that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

Just before we call our first witnesses, I'll remind you that today's meeting is a study on the fusarium issue. As requested by the steering committee, at Thursday's meeting we'll have witnesses here on competitiveness and producer car loading. We have the CN, Canadian Wheat Board, an individual named Mr. Cam Goff, and Transport Canada. We continue with competitiveness next week.

Mr. Atamanenko.

● (1535)

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): I don't want to prolong the discussion. I just want to confirm that we will look at my proposal because my motion is time-sensitive.

The Chair: We're going to have a few minutes saved at the end, Alex, to deal with business. It's up to you members what issues are discussed.

I'm first going to call our witnesses. We have Mr. Derek Jamieson and Mr. Gordon Harrison, with P & H Milling Group.

I would ask you gentlemen—this is to all the witnesses—to please keep your presentations to ten minutes or less, for the sake of time. Much less would be even better, but we'll leave that up to you.

Go ahead, Mr. Jamieson.

Mr. Derek Jamieson (Vice-President, P & H Milling Group): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Derek Jamieson, and I am representing P & H Milling Group, a division of Parrish & Heimbecker Limited, at the invitation of this committee.

Parrish & Heimbecker is a privately held, Canadian-owned company. Parrish & Heimbecker Milling Group was formed following the acquisition of Dover Industries Limited by Parrish & Heimbecker in February of this year.

The P & H Milling Group consists of the combined milling assets of Dover Flour, New-Life Mills Limited, Ellison Milling Company, and Parrheim Foods, operating seven flour mills in five provinces across Canada, as well as a pea processing facility in Saskatchewan.

I also serve as the chair of the Canadian National Millers Association technical committee, and I am accompanied today by Mr. Gordon Harrison, president of the CNMA.

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to present our views on recent events and background surrounding fusarium-infected wheat. Fusarium is a fungal disease that can occur in wheat and other grains and is more likely to develop if moist warm conditions occur during the flowering stage. The disease produces a mycotoxin on the kernels of wheat, commonly referred to as vomitoxin, or DON.

For many years, this disease was more prevalent in the wheat-growing areas of Ontario and other eastern provinces; however, it is becoming a greater concern in the wheat-growing areas of western Canada, where the majority of Canada's wheat is grown.

One of the impacts of fusarium is blighted or bleached kernels. This can affect the entire kernel or a portion of the kernel, and it is visible to the trained eye. The presence of fusarium-damaged kernels, or FDK, is a grading factor in Canada, and as such the top grades—1, 2, and 3 of Canadian Western Red Spring, for example—are permitted a quarter of a per cent, one per cent, and two per cent fusarium-damaged kernels respectively.

The significance of this is that the Canada Grain Act, through grading standards established by the Canadian Grain Commission, recognizes that fusarium not only exists in the main milling grades used by Canadian flour mills but is in fact permitted in the main milling grades used by Canadian flour mills.

I would like to emphasize that if there are FDK kernels present, there will be vomitoxin, or DON, present as well, and so by interpretation, the Canada Grain Act recognizes and accepts the presence of DON in wheat. I would also stress that while the presence of FDK indicates that DON will be present, there is no proven linear relationship. As an example, one per cent fusarium-damaged kernels does not predict a consistent level of DON.

Currently there are no regulations in Canada governing or restricting the level of DON in hard wheat, which is primarily used for bread and other yeast-leavened products. Canada first established guidelines for soft wheat in the 1980s, and the current guideline is for two parts per million in uncleaned soft wheat for non-staple foods and one part per million in uncleaned soft wheat for use in baby foods.

In light of the absence of hard wheat guidelines, the P & H Milling Group has adopted voluntary guidelines for hard wheat that mirror those in place for soft wheat. Approximately one year ago, as a consequence of discussions regarding Health Canada's proposed guidelines for ochratoxin A, we became aware that Health Canada was also embarking on a process to establish additional guidelines for vomitoxin in grain in Canada. This news was neither a surprise nor a concern to us. The flour milling industry is on record as asking Health Canada for hard wheat guidelines since 1994.

Furthermore, P & H Milling Group, along with several other mills in Canada, participated in a voluntary project in 2005 with Health Canada to assist it in supplying samples of grain, flour, and bran for a study of vomitoxin in Canadian grain and flour.

More recently, also through discussions around proposed guidelines for OTA, we learned of stepped-up compliance and enforcement activities by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. This involves the monitoring of levels of OTA and DON at processing locations, including flour mills and further processors such as breakfast cereal manufacturers. Flour, bran, and other product samples are being shipped to CFIA labs in Burnaby for analysis, and results are being reported back to mills in approximately three to six weeks.

It is the CFIA's current compliance and enforcement activity that is giving rise to a great deal of uncertainty for millers and producers. This activity was begun without prior consultation with industry to advise us of the specific levels of OTA and DON that would be considered to be excessive.

● (1540)

This would have been an important step to take, considering the OTA guidelines are only at the proposal stage and that Health Canada's limited guidelines for DON that apply to soft wheat only are clearly indicated on the department's website as being under review.

The CFIA is an auditor of industry best practices, while industry is responsible to carry out these practices. We require regulations that are clear and guidelines that are meaningful and achievable in order to meet these responsibilities. Since there are no guidelines for either OTA or DON in either federal laws or regulations, the milling industry has been seeking clarification on CFIA's current enforcement policy.

In response to persistent inquiries from the Canadian National Millers Association and other industry sources, CFIA has provided conflicting advice to both industry and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. In some written and oral communication to millers and further processors, CFIA has advised that Health Canada intends to adopt the EU guidelines for DON and that the agency is therefore applying a maximum limit of 0.75 parts per million.

In other written and oral communication, CFIA has advised that since there are no established guidelines for OTA and DON, they are taking a zero tolerance approach, meaning that where laboratory analysis indicates the presence of either mycotoxin the results will be referred to the bureau of chemical safety, food directorate, Health Canada, for risk assessment.

We have no issue with these monitoring activities, and we support Health Canada's objective of proposing new guidelines for DON. We recognize and endorse these efforts to ensure the safety of Canada's food supply. However, we are alarmed and concerned about being subject to enforcement over guidelines that do not exist.

We are equally concerned that our industry, with other industry stakeholders, has taken several steps and opportunities to engage Health Canada and the CFIA to alleviate these concerns and to find interim solutions with very few tangible results so far. My colleague Mr. Harrison will address these concerns in more detail.

I suggest that given this atmosphere of uncertainty and a lack of any interim guidance from Health Canada or the CFIA, it is not surprising that some misunderstandings arose during the recent harvest in eastern Canada. These are the unwanted consequences of heightened concerns and a lack of collaborative efforts to bring solutions that benefit and protect every participant, from the grower to the consumer.

Thank you for this opportunity to present my views.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and thank you for staying well under the time.

Now we'll have the Western Canadian Wheat Growers—

Mr. Gordon Harrison (President, Canadian National Millers Association, P & H Milling Group): Mr. Chairman, I wonder if I might take no more than two minutes to highlight two points.

The Chair: Okay, but no more than that.

Mr. Gordon Harrison: Thank you.

I think it's important that the committee note that while this hearing is around fusarium and it is triggered by events in P.E.I., Health Canada and CFIA are concerned about two mycotoxins in cereal grains, DON and ochratoxin A, and CFIA's compliance and enforcement activity is around both.

The second key point I'd like to make is that the compliance and enforcement activity has resulted in interventions at establishments at retail, milling, and a breakfast cereal manufacturing plant. So the uncertainty, the business risk, that producers and processors face is very real because it has resulted in very significant interventions so far.

Of major concern to the milling industry is the apparent disconnect between this activity and what we understood to be the significance of the Canada Grain Act and regulations and grading standards. We understood historically that the grading standards deemed milling wheat, graded as milling wheat, to be fit as milling wheat. At issue for us is the fact that after the fact, when milling wheat has been delivered to a mill and ownership is taken by a mill, this CFIA activity calls into question its suitability.

Finally, Derek spoke about process and the need for constructive dialogue. I think the committee should note that after a lot of discussions and representations with CFIA and Health Canada, we have proposed, as industry, a very comprehensive working group. It was proposed a week ago Friday. It's significant that both Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and Health Canada have agreed to form this working group, so to the best of our knowledge we finally have an appropriate forum in which all interests—producers, processors, handling, and transportation—will be represented.

Thank you.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before we move on, I should have announced that we have Mr. Allan Ling, Ms. Monique McTiernan, and Mr. David Mol by video conference from Charlottetown.

Welcome, lady and gentlemen.

We'll move on next to the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association, and we have Mr. Geoff Hewson and Mr. Blair Rutter.

Mr. Geoff Hewson (Vice-President, Saskatchewan, Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the opportunity to present our views on the issues surrounding fusarium head blight.

Just a little bit about me: I am Saskatchewan vice-president of the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association and, along with my family, farm 7,500 acres in southeastern Saskatchewan.

In our presentation today we wish to focus on three areas. First, we'll talk about the grading standards that we face. Second, we'll talk about the need for a greater research effort into the development of more fusarium-resistant varieties in wheat and other cereals. Last, we'll discuss the possible new standards for vomitoxin or DON for the Canadian milling industry.

Fusarium head blight is one of the most serious quality issues facing wheat producers in Manitoba and eastern Saskatchewan. The stringent grading standards in place have contributed to a shift away from wheat acreage in the eastern prairies. For example, wheat acreage in Manitoba has declined by 40% in the 15 years since the first serious outbreak of fusarium occurred in 1993. By comparison, wheat acreage in Alberta has declined by only 15% over the same time period.

In recent years a more virulent strain of fusarium has become more prevalent on the prairies. According to the Canadian Grain Commission, this new strain accounted for 68% of all fusarium infections on the prairies in 2007, up from 6% a decade earlier. At one time there was a good level of correlation between the fusarium-damaged kernel count and the degree of vomitoxin or DON in the resulting flower. However, with this new strain, there is less predictability and less correlation between the level of kernel damage and the level of DON. As a result, we understand the Grain Commission is considering the tightening of grade tolerances for fusarium-infected wheat. Currently the tolerance for No. 1 spring wheat is 0.25% of fusarium-damaged kernels by weight, increasing to 5% fusarium-damaged kernels allowed in feed wheat.

In our view, tightening the visually based standards will unfairly penalize those farmers whose wheat is infected with the less virulent strain of fusarium. If the standards are tightened, then we would propose that farmers be granted the option to have their wheat tested and graded on the basis of the actual DON level present in their wheat sample. Providing an objective test-based grading option would ensure the value that farmers receive for their wheat is based on its true intrinsic quality and not on its appearance. It would provide farmers with a clearer market signal and allow us to make better decisions in terms of our cropping decisions, variety choices, and management practices.

The growing problem of fusarium points to the need for a greater research effort in the development of varieties that better resist this fungal disease. There are some fungicides on the market that can lessen the severity of infection; however, these are not fully effective and of course come with a cost, of more than $7 per acre.

In recent years varieties with better fusarium resistance have appeared on the market, largely thanks to the breeding efforts of Agriculture Canada researchers. This work continues, and we would encourage the devotion of greater resources to this increasing problem.

Part of this research could include the application of biotechnology. Farmers have already seen the significant economic and environmental benefits of biotechnology, including reduced pesticide use, lower fuel costs, reduced soil erosion, and higher yields. We believe biotechnology has the potential to play an important role in minimizing the effects of fusarium and in enhancing food safety.

Last, the Wheat Growers would like to provide comment on proposals to implement standards for DON levels in processed cereals, including flour and other products. We understand there are currently no regulations specifying tolerances for DON. We submit that the absence of such regulations is largely due to the exceptional food safety record of the industry. Farmers, grain handlers and marketers, the Canadian Grain Commission, and the milling industry have been successful in managing and mitigating the risks associated with fusarium-infected grain. To our knowledge, there has not been a single human health incident arising from DON in Canadian flour or food products.

To provide even greater consumer protection, the Wheat Growers are not opposed to the implementation of new regulations stipulating maximum DON levels in flour and food products. However, given Canada's outstanding food safety record in this area, we do not see a need for a hasty or haphazard approach. The Wheat Growers recommend a thorough consultation process with the industry, incorporating an examination of all mycotoxin concerns before any new regulations or compliance measures are implemented. Existing Canadian Grain Commission grading standards on fusarium should remain in place until this review is concluded.

● (1550)

The Wheat Growers would also ask that any standards be implemented in concert with the adoption of like standards in the United States, given the extent of the cross-border trade in grain, flour, and bakery products. To impose standards in Canada that are tighter than those in the U.S. would simply place our millers, and by extension Canadian farmers, at a competitive disadvantage.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our views with the committee today.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move on to the National Farmers Union with Mr. Nigel Smith. I don't believe Mr. Tait is here today.

Mr. Nigel Smith (Youth President, National Farmers Union): No, he couldn't make it today. It's a long haul from Saskatchewan on the farm.

The Chair: You have ten minutes or less, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Nigel Smith: I'd like to thank the committee for having the National Farmers Union represented here. We represent 6,600 family farmers across the country and we work toward advocating farm policies that enhance farmers' economic power in the marketplace, promote environmental sustainability, and strengthen our rural communities.

We had a little background earlier on what fusarium is, but I'll gloss over that a bit more. It's also known as a scab, and it affects not only wheat but barley and other small grains in temperate and semi-tropical areas. Fusarium is a plant pathogen that has particularly serious implications for farmers, crops, livestock, and the general public. Scientific journals around the world are reporting increased fusarium damage in crops; it's not only happening in Canada. It wouldn't be inappropriate to compare this world-wide phenomenon with H1N1 or other pandemics that are spreading. It's something that everybody is going to have to deal with here.

We don't want to only look at what it is, but also how we can prevent it and lower the incidence of it within our crops. Once fusarium is in the soil, it's there for good. There's no getting rid of it, though there are various measures we can take to mitigate its effects on the crops. These kinds of things include tillage management, and residue management using tillage. The NFU has also seen public research from Canada come forward with information that shows there could be linkages between the use of glyphosate, which is a very popular herbicide in Canada, with the incidence of fusarium.

One of the main things we'd like to see come out of this would be more research into the area of this correlation. There's been a dearth of public research into this and is one of the things we're looking for most, particularly on the glyphosate issue. We feel that we need public research into this, because private research will probably have more to do with fungicides rather than actually addressing the root cause in the same way. As Mr. Hewson mentioned earlier, fungicides come with additional costs per acre as well and don't serve farmers that well.

We've been writing letters on this issue since 2003, looking for some answers and for some direction from the Government of Canada. At the same time, we're concerned about the tightening of standards on this issue, as the complications for farmers would arise there. As we already heard, the effects of the mycotoxin that develops, or is a consequence of fusarium, can really affect the bottom lines of farmers. The price of wheat can be downgraded by 40% if the grain is seriously affected by it.

● (1555)

The most obvious course of action would be to do more research on this. We haven't seen a whole lot of research done on this issue, particularly on glyphosate. We'd like to deal with it at the farm level and try to minimize it there. If we could get more information out to farmers on the possible effects of this, then I think we'd be headed in the right direction.

I'll just make one more point. The Farmers Union would like to see a suspension of further registration of glyphosate-resistant crops until the linkage is further understood and we see more research on this. We need a sober second thought on moving ahead with further registration of crops that could, in fact, be making this problem a lot worse for farmers.

I'll stop there.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Mr. Smith.

I understand the Atlantic Grains Council and the Island Grains and Protein Council each have a presentation. Is that correct?

Mr. Allan Ling (Chairman, Atlantic Grains Council): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

I'm Allan Ling. Actually, what we're going to do is make a joint presentation by the Island Grains and Protein Council and the Atlantic Grains Council.

Can you hear us in Ottawa?

The Chair: Yes, everybody can hear you.

Mr. Allan Ling: Again, good afternoon.

We do apologize for not being there in person, the reason being that Mr. Mol and I are both farmers, and we're running about three weeks behind in our soybean harvest because of all the rain we've had in October. We could not take the chance of being away if today happened to be fine—which, of course, it isn't again.

Anyway, the reason we're doing a joint presentation is that the Island Grains and Protein Council is a full member of the Atlantic Grains Council, so we wanted to make the presentations together. David and I will be going back and forth as we go through this.

My name is Allan Ling. I'm a farmer from the central Queens area, and chairman of the Atlantic Grains Council. We grow a variety of crops on our farm, milling wheat being one of them. Of course, in the last two years, none of our wheat has made grade because of the DON-level fusarium head blight.

With us today is our executive director of the Atlantic Grains Council, Monique McTiernan. She is bilingual, so if there are any questions in French, that's fine. She's our executive director who works out of Moncton.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present our case on this very important disease that has hit our region as well as other parts of Canada.

I'll just give you a little bit of history on the Atlantic Grains Council. It was incorporated back in 1984. Basically, it's the only regional voice to lobby and represent grain and oilseed producers in the region. The council is run for producers by producers. We're made up of some five full members and a bunch of associate members. We have been involved in a little bit of research and in the production and marketing of grain and oilseeds.

For the last 30 years, the council has been working together with farm members in building a strong grain and oilseed industry for the Maritimes. We take great pride in having redeveloped the milling wheat industry, which at one time in this region was quite stagnant—quite dead, actually—but has come back quite well. We have local mills, including Dover Mills in Halifax, with a capacity in excess of 100,000 tonnes a year, which we would like to be able to fill with a lot of our products.

Just to give you a bit of history of our milling wheat industy, you have to bear in mind that the Maritimes region is very small compared with Saskatchewan; but at the same time, it's very, very important to this region, to our industry, and to the economy of the region as well. Since the demise of the livestock industry in the Maritimes, particularly the last two or three years, producers have been looking at another crop to work into a rotation rather than, let's say, barley. So the milling wheat looked like a pretty good example. Thus our industry has grown from 2004 to 2009 by approximately 50%. We came from 14,400 acres up to in excess of 28,000 acres in 2009.

The problem we're facing now is that producers are going to be turning away because of the problems we've had in trying to make grade. One of the problems producers are facing is a bit of inconsistency in the testing of the finished product. We send a result or test, let's say, to the P.E.I. Grain Elevators Corporation, and then the same test could go to another company, and different results come back.

So we have some pretty major problems that we want to get to work on. The Atlantic Grains Council, we think, has been leading the way in that.

At this point I'm going to stop for a few minutes and turn it over to David, and I'll let David introduce himself.

● (1600)

Mr. David Mol (President, Island Grains and Protein Council): Thank you, Allan.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity as well to make this presentation.

I'd also like to thank Mr. Smith for referring to our area as having a semi-tropical climate. We have yet to see that here, but it would help to dry my soybeans, I'm sure.

I have 35 years of pedigreed seed production, as well as a close relationship with the plant breeders in the area. I grow 1,500 to 1,600 acres, of which about 800 acres are in wheat. A cornerstone of my seed business is milling wheat. I'm also no stranger to fusarium head blight. In the mid-1980s, I had my storage quarantined by CFIA. At that time, it was a new problem. Standards were not well established, so with toxin levels above one parts per million, I had 700 tonnes held back. The following year, tests of Ontario wheat crops showed significant levels above the one parts per million level. Because a much larger amount of wheat was involved, a more in-depth analysis of the problem was made. The result of that analysis was that two parts per million were determined to be safe, and product flowed at that standard into the system.

Here we are today, 20 years later, with all the resources available to this great country, and we're still debating the issue. The reality is that science has not provided products to eradicate or adequately control these pathogens, particularly in a moist climate. Either that or we've not received the varieties that would be considered totally resistant.

This problem, as I see it, is part of a larger problem facing Canadians and world agriculture: climate change is forcing new environmental problems on our traditional cropping practices as well as more pressure on the existing varieties. We're going to have to be more versatile with types of crops. If we want to continue to grow wheat in eastern Canada—by which I mean parts of Manitoba east—then standards that are realistic yet safe should be established.

I am happy to see that this is receiving national attention. Only when we come up with standards will I be able, in my own operations, to plan future variety selection and investments.

Just last week, I had a friend over from Scotland who's intimately involved in the milling industry there. The EU is also having discussions about new standards. He told me that if the proposed standards were adopted, most of the milling industry in Scotland would disappear. So it's not a local problem. It seems to be a problem that is evolving in a lot of areas of wheat production, and we need to get down to business on it.

I'll turn it back to Allan.

Thank you.

● (1605)

Mr. Allan Ling: Thank you, David.

As we move forward, we believe our best method of long-term control will be through variety breeding to develop new varieties that are resistant to some of the problems we face. However, we all know that this takes a long time.

We would like to acknowledge the work being conducted by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada across the country on this major national issue. The council strongly urges that this work continue and that it be strengthened significantly, with consideration given to regional variation in resistance and environmental conditions, to name two factors that may have an impact on disease suppression between regions. However, the council has monitored the erosion of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada support services in the Atlantic provinces. We have gone from having seven to ten scientists, with adequate technical support, working full time on grain and oilseed issues at our three research stations to having one scientist on site. Work is conducted only in Charlottetown. This issue has been brought to the attention of the Minister of Agriculture by the council in the past.

Grower education is also key to fusarium head blight control. Growers are and have been using good seed, crop rotation, fungicide application, timely harvest, combine adjustment, and storage at safe moisture levels. However, the impact of each step is limited by weather conditions during the growing season that can have a significant impact on disease development, despite the use of good agricultural practices.

We also need to be on a level playing field with our American counterparts. We sometimes feel that we don't have the same crop protectants as the Americans. In this region, we certainly have to pay more for our crop protectants than they pay even in some places in this country.

The Atlantic Grains Council wants the regulatory authorities to recognize that the amount of fusarium head blight, as well as DON, that may be present in a particular crop is not directly under the influence of the grower. It is not intentionally or unintentionally introduced into the grain supply; it's a naturally occurring toxin.

The Canadian Grain Commission recognizes this and for this reason has established grades that limit the amount of fusarium head blight allowed in a particular grade. For example, in No. 1 Canada Eastern Red Spring wheat, the maximum of fusarium head blight is 1%. Grain grading is helpful in that it allows for the rapid assessment of wheat and allows the placing of wheat into various grades of known quality.

Increased concern on the part of the wheat processing industry concerning DON has significantly changed how wheat is handled in Atlantic Canada. While the levels of fusarium head blight and DON in the region have varied over the years, approximately eight of the last 30 years could be described as severe. What has changed in the last two years are the increasing requirements for DON testing that are in place. For wheat to be accepted for processing, the established cut-off line for DON is two parts per million. The council was not involved in any consulting concerning DON levels, so it can only speculate that the indication provided by Codex agreement to move to a 0.75 parts per million DON level in flour has influenced how regulatory authorities in Canada are approaching this issue.

As farmers, five years ago we hardly knew what the word vomitoxin meant, because it was all fusarium head blight. We looked visually at our wheat when it was taken to the elevators.

We understand that this is a very important health and safety issue for the general public, and under no circumstances are we suggesting raising the acceptable levels. But we have not seen any sound science to justify lowering the current levels of DON. These levels appear to have provided safe and healthy food to Canadians for many years. If Health Canada changes these levels, the bakers will change their contracts, which will force millers to do the same. This again will fall on our producers' shoulders. Grains will have to be destroyed or left in the field.

● (1610)

Our producers are just trying to make an honest living. Let's not pull the rug from underneath them. And I guess I would echo the wheat growers' idea that if any changes are to be made the whole industry be fully consulted and be able to participate in any changes that may be coming at us.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, the council would like to challenge you to hear from Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency concerning their approach and intent on regulating DON in food. If there are any changes in levels of approach, the council would urge that such measures be in step with our major trading partner, the U.S.A., and emerge from a base not only of sound science but what is also practical in the real world of crop production, storage, and handling.

Mr. Chairman, AAFC has been a valuable partner and has played an immense role in the development of agriculture in the region. We want to see this continue. The Atlantic Grains Council, in conjunction with the Grain Growers of Canada, believes it is for the public good that work continue and are presently asking the federal government to double A-base research dollars for Agriculture Canada over the next ten years towards field crops. We urge the committee to ensure all those knowledgeable on the issues of fusarium head blight and DON are consulted and their views are developed into workable solutions.

The council appreciates the opportunity to make this presentation and hopes that by working together we can build a strong Atlantic agriculture industry for the benefit of the whole country.

Thank you.

I don't know if you could hear that last few minutes or not, but our TV went dead here.

The Chair: Mr. Ling, we can hear all of you on this end. Can you hear me?

Obviously they can't.

We'll continue on. Maybe we could have our people try to get hold of them.

I've had a suggestion from Mr. Easter to go to five-minute rounds.

Is everybody agreeable to that?

Okay.

We'll start with Mr. Easter for five minutes.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

They can't hear us in P.E.I., I guess. I had some questions for them.

To explain, what seems to have happened in the P.E.I. experience in this new crop is there was confusion with Dover Mills on the parts per million allowed. As a result, a lot of the crop wasn't even allowed to be used for feed, because the...for whatever agency, the regulators look that you might feed 100% wheat. Nobody feeds 100% wheat. They wouldn't look at the tolerances in the mix. So a lot of wheat has been dumped in gravel pits in P.E.I., and some of it, in fact, has gone to burners to be used for heat.

I think, Mr. Jamieson, you had mentioned that you're alarmed and concerned about the guidelines that do not exist.

Mr. Hewson, you noted that there's an apparent disconnect with the grading standards for milling wheat.

What I find here on all this, as we tried to check it out in P.E.I., is there seems to be a lot of confusion. You've got the Canadian Grain Commission that has a certain standard. You've CFIA that is imposing certain rules. You have the millers, and at the end of the line it's the farmers who are taking the brunt of it all. They're either dumping their wheat, they're getting a lower price, they're not able to sell it according to grade, or whatever.

So what I'm asking you is what has to happen here? I think we're all in agreement with the longer-term approach—we have to find resistant varieties, maybe new crop protection products, whatever. But what has to be done in the short term to take out, as Mr. Jamieson says, this lack of guidelines so that producers on the ground and millers are all dealing from the same rule book?

● (1615)

Mr. Gordon Harrison: Producers and processors need clarity and a thorough examination of the health risks. The health risks that we're supposedly trying to address need to be explained in layman's terms that we can all understand. We certainly need to get it right the first time. We can't decide five years from now that we didn't get it right and stand the whole grain supply chain on its ear once again.

So the members of the Canada Grains Council, and others at the table here, have recommended a two-year delay in the adoption of guidelines for ochratoxin. We've also asked that Health Canada bring forward proposed guidelines for DON so the industry, the whole supply chain, can look at these together.

We need to have a reality check on whether we're dealing with an acute health risk or a chronic health risk. We understand it's a chronic, long-term dietary intake issue. I personally believe we have time to look at this rationally over a reasonable timeframe of 18 to 24 months. That has been our recommendation to Agriculture Canada and Health Canada. As I mentioned, they have accepted, in principle, terms of reference that will involve all of us here today plus many others, including research scientists and academics. So we need a fact-based examination of this.

The regulatory end point that regulators need in order to deal with human health and safety has to be achievable. We need to have guidelines that have the force of law so we know where we stand, guidelines that people can comply with so it's actually possible to comply. All of us are now dealing with an ad hoc compliance and enforcement approach. It's not possible to comply, and we've pointed that out.

We have an opportunity now to have a more rational discussion around that. But we need to have an end point that recognizes the limitations on producers, like the vagaries of weather and climate. We need a regulatory end point that recognizes that in the grain sector we need to blend grain in the handling and transportation system for many reasons; we need to blend grain in the milling process; and we need to blend grain in the feed manufacturing process. So we need to have a fundamental recognition of what goes on in agriculture for many reasons.

Lurking in the background is the European Union precedent set on prohibition of blending. If we try to go at this and include a general prohibition on blending, we're in serious trouble.

● (1620)

The Chair: Thank you.

Your time is up, Mr. Easter.

I understand that our members are back from Charlottetown.

Mr. Allan Ling: Yes, we are.

The Chair: Technology being what it is, those things happen. We did hear the end of your presentation, just so you know, and look forward to some questions that may come to you.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I wonder if someone could ask them to explain the situation in P.E.I., because it was very serious and a big loss for the industry. We didn't get the opportunity to ask that.

The Chair: Certainly. Maybe you can explain that to one of your members. There will be time for that.

We'll move on to Mr. Guimond from the Bloc for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Guimond (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is a pleasure to sit alongside my colleague André for the first time and to attend this meeting of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. Trust me, I am very happy to be here, as today's topic is of interest to me.

I am a farmer, myself, a dairy producer in Rimouski, in eastern Quebec. I am glad to see farmers here standing up and talking about the fusarium problem, which is prevalent, even where I am from in eastern Quebec. I am a dairy farmer, and I produce barley and fodder for my livestock. Believe me, we have had a lot of problems because of fusarium in the past four or five years. Our animals have had health problems, which have cost our farm a lot of money.

As a farmer, I thought I was alone, the only one with this problem, but after talking with my neighbours in the area, I see that a lot of farmers are struggling with the same thing. It is encouraging to see that we can discuss it in a forum such as this one.

Mr. Smith, you talked about the issue with great emotion, and I fully understand. You represent some 4,000 farmers, is that right?

[*English*]

Mr. Nigel Smith: About 6,600.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Guimond: Are you here today on behalf of all your farmers who are affected by this problem?

[*English*]

Mr. Nigel Smith: Of course.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Guimond: What do you want from the federal government in terms of addressing the fusarium problem? Do you have clear requests?

[*English*]

Mr. Nigel Smith: Yes, we do, for more independent research into the issue funded by the government. Basically, at the ground level what can we do to minimize the incidence of fusarium, and what cultural practices can we employ to deal with the problem that isn't going to go away anytime soon?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Guimond: Do you agree that guidelines are not enough and that we need a comprehensive plan to deal with this scourge?

[*English*]

Mr. Nigel Smith: Oh, yes. As I said, I think there are a lot of different ways we can go about combatting fusarium, but at the same time it's not going to be a quick fix. It's something that we have to deal with on the farm. It's something that we're going to deal with throughout the food chain.

The Farmers Union perspective is that one of the best things we can do is to study more linkages between our farming practices, such as how seed is sourced, what we're putting on crops, what we're putting on the soil, that can have an impact on fusarium.

We're trying to focus on glyphosate here, and the possible linkages. I didn't mention earlier that there have been academic studies that link use of glyphosate to the incidence of fusarium. We don't quite know exactly why this linkage occurs, but it's something we'd like to see more study into.

● (1625)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Guimond: I have a more technical question. What do you do with the infected grain?

[*English*]

Mr. Geoff Hewson: Thank you for the question, Mr. Guimond.

There are many ways it's dealt with, depending on the level of severity. On our farm and on many farms, as the member from the Atlantic Grains said, it's by setting your combine differently, such as at a low level. The fusarium-affected kernels are typically lighter. If you set your combine in a certain way, increase the fan speed of your combine, it will blow the kernels out of the back of the combine. I suppose in the cleaning process as well, at terminal locations, more of the fusarium would be cleaned to a certain degree there. But it goes through the system, I guess, and the big thing is it is blended down to levels that are tolerable in the system.

That's my short answer. I'm not an expert on what happens to it after it leaves the farm gate.

The Chair: Your time has expired, Mr. Guimond.

And I want to welcome you to the committee. It's always good to have somebody here, or anybody, with agriculture experience, so welcome.

Mr. Atamanenko, five minutes.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Thank you very much to all of you for being here.

Nigel, you mentioned the linkages, and you used the example of glyphosate.

I'm wondering if our other guests might want to comment on whether there are other linkages that you feel we should be researching. Do you feel this is a direction we should be going in?

Blair, also feel free to offer your comments.

That's my first question, and maybe I'll stop there. If we have some more time I have another question, but I'd like your reaction to the glyphosate and other linkages.

Mr. Geoff Hewson: I'll make a few short comments and then pass it over to Blair.

I am aware of some of the studies that have been done into glyphosate. From the research I've done into it and my personal experience, the two major factors are varieties and climate. If you have a combination of adverse climate conditions, excessive moisture, lots of humidity, combined with a susceptible variety and, perhaps, an area that has had issues in the past, that's where you'll find your greatest problem.

Where I see the biggest gains going forward, and from all the research I've read into it too—I don't have anybody to quote right here—finding varieties that are resistant to it is probably the solution.

I'll hand it over to Blair.

Mr. Blair Rutter (Executive Director, Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association): The only comment I would make on the linkage to glyphosate—this is a scientific question, so it's a territory that's a little dangerous for me to tread—is that the introduction of glyphosate has certainly encouraged greater minimum tillage practices, which means a lot more crop residue straw left on the fields. Since this is a soil- and residue-based pathogen, the mere fact that farmers are now using glyphosate has certainly led to much better weed control and minimum tillage practices so we don't have the fuel costs of tillage. There are fewer passes over the field and less pesticide use. There have been tremendous advantages from using glyphosate. I think it is possible there would be a link to increased incidence of fusarium due to the increased trash left on the field.

Again, this is an area I'm not familiar with, so that's more speculative on my part than anything based on scientific study.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Thank you.

Any comments from Charlottetown or our gentlemen here?

Mr. David Mol: Thank you.

Yes, I had also pencilled in minimum tillage as being a real plus to greenhouse gas emission controls. At the same time, one of the practices we've always used was removing the straw off the field that had a fairly heavy fusarium infection. I suspect as well that there may be a linkage to changed tillage practices. Again, I don't have any studies to rest on, but for other disease processes in the farm, plowing was considered a way of mitigating or getting rid of some of the pathogens. There may be a link.

● (1630)

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Would it be safe to assume that since we've adopted new practices there's more incidence of fusarium, or would we have to do some studies since we've basically stopped plowing and had minimum tillage?

Mr. Allan Ling: I don't think we have any evidence to back that up. I can give you a personal example. A neighbour of ours who does plow all his land that he puts into crop has the same problem as we do on our farm, where we use minimal tillage. This was only his second year growing wheat and his problem was as severe as ours. There may well be a linkage, but at the same time we've been encouraged to do minimum tillage in particular in this part of the country to reduce erosion and stuff like that.

We feel as producers that we're using a lot better tillage practice today than we were ten years ago, for example. But there may well be a linkage; there may well be.

The Chair: Thank you.

Your time has expired, Mr. Atamanenko.

We'll move to Mr. Hoback for five minutes.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, everybody. It's good to see you all here.

I have some friends in this room, of course.

Allan, it's good to see you again. I haven't seen you for a couple of years. You're looking good.

Mr. Allan Ling: Thank you.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Nigel, I see it's your first time here. Welcome. Just relax, take your time; you'll do well.

My first question is actually for you, Derek. Have the standards changed on fusarium this last year? There've been no changes, as far as I know.

Mr. Derek Jamieson: No. The only—

Mr. Randy Hoback: Did you change your standards in your contracts?

Mr. Derek Jamieson: No.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Okay. From the contract that you have, to the handling agent, whether it be the grain company or directly to the farmers, there's been no change in the contract this last year that says you need to have a different tolerance level on fusarium?

Mr. Derek Jamieson: No, we haven't changed our practices at all. We still follow the voluntary standards we established for ourselves based on the standards that exist for soft wheat.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Okay. So on hard red wheat, there are no standards as far as we know?

Mr. Derek Jamieson: There are no standards or regulations. We have one internally.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Okay.

Do you enforce that internal standard in your contracts that go out to the producers?

Mr. Derek Jamieson: Yes.

Mr. Randy Hoback: How do you communicate that to the producers so they know when they're growing that crop to deliver to you that they have these standards to meet that aren't necessarily in the act?

Mr. Derek Jamieson: I guess the simplest way for me to answer is that most of my experience is in Ontario. We have three mills in Ontario, and that's where I'm based.

Fusarium is not a new issue in Ontario. I'm sure the chairman is well aware of fusarium challenges in Ontario for 20 years or so. So it's recognized by the grain trade industry, and those standards, even though they're voluntary, are also recognized. They're written into our contracts. It's handled that way.

If I could, quickly, I just want to support the comment earlier about varietal development. Anecdotally, looking at Ontario, new varieties have made a huge difference in reducing the financial impact on farmers by fusarium, compared to, say, 15 years ago.

Mr. Randy Hoback: I think a lot of people would agree with you on that, Derek.

I want to focus again on the process. That's where I'm going in my questioning here as we look at some of the other microtoxins that possibly could be an issue and as we look at whether we should or shouldn't have regulations and what those levels should be.

Gordon, do you have a process in mind? You have to keep in mind that it's not just the miller, but also the grain-handling company. It could be the railcar, or it could be the farmer. We're not 100% sure where we're seeing the breakdown on infection.

Mr. Gordon Harrison: We do have processes in mind, and the processes are happening on several fronts.

The Canada Grains Council has a working group. It's a whole value-chain working group that includes producer organizations, handling and transportation, and the milling industry. ANAC is also a member of the Canada Grains Council.

We are hoping to provide, within a six-week timeframe, basic facts into CFIA's working group—which meets for the first time next Monday—on what we have in place today along the whole supply chain, what is being used today, what tools are available today, and what additional measures might we all possibly take in the short term to deal with this. That's one process.

CFIA has a process that is attempting to develop more information around where we are at risk: incidence geographically, levels, etc. They'll speak to that, I'm sure.

The third process is a new one. It is an industry-government working group that is modelled after one that has assisted Environment Canada in its regulatory responsibilities for many years. It is a very comprehensive working group. It will probably have 36 members on it and will take a whole supply chain approach. We're glad that it has been accepted. We've recommended timelines of about 18 to 21 months. That's very tight for all the work that needs to be done, but I think we'll all know a great deal more.

Our whole thrust, in all our communications to Health Canada and CFIA and ministers over the last 14 months, has been that we have to get this right and get it right the first time, and we have repeatedly identified the need to avoid punitive and unreasonable costs to farmers.

● (1635)

Mr. Randy Hoback: Thank you.

Then, in the short term, as far as the farmers that are harvesting the crop this year are concerned, there should be no penalty, because there are no guidelines. Basically, to be fair to them, they haven't had the ability to know what the goals should be.

Mr. Gordon Harrison: I would support your statement that there should be no sudden change in the regulatory environment that would cause producers financial harm. The fact of the matter is that we have new oversight. Things have changed with CFIA. CFIA has an active compliance and enforcement program that we take issue with. Mills are faced with new constraints that are being done on an ad hoc basis.

The mill in New Brunswick has a directive that's all its own. It's unique among all the milling industry. It has been told to adhere to a certain standard based on something in the U.K. I can't tell you how frustrating and difficult it is. That mill is very small, very close to producers, very regional.

I've shared documents with the committee through the clerk—a couple more are being translated—that I hope will give you a fuller picture, but things definitely have changed for the industry and for producers because of CFIA's compliance and enforcement activity. There's no getting around that.

The Chair: Your time has expired, Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Valeriote, you have five minutes.

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Hewson, I'm going to sum up what I understand to be the problem, and you can correct me if I'm wrong.

As I understand it, there are no written standards with respect to DON or fusarium; there is a standard of two parts per million that is more a voluntary one or a custom that has arisen that people are following; suddenly, someone somewhere—I presume at CFIA—has imposed a standard without any scientific evidence to back it up; there are producers who are suffering as a result of the imposition of that standard; and that standard, whatever it may be, is stricter than that in the United States, which is also causing problems.

Can you tell me where I'm wrong in that summary?

Mr. Geoff Hewson: I think I may let Blair answer that question.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Blair, can you tell me where I'm wrong?

Mr. Blair Rutter: You are correct that there are no DON standards, regulatory standards, in place in Canada, not officially, but as the millers have spoken to today, there is this ad hoc approach to compliance that is certainly impacting their members—

Mr. Francis Valeriote: And that's two parts per million.

Mr. Blair Rutter: I'm not in a position to confirm or not confirm what the standards are that they're being asked to comply with. It sound like they're variable.

Most of the examples they've referenced relate to Atlantic Canada. I'm not familiar with mills in western Canada or whether the Canadian prairie farmers have been affected to the same extent from this—

● (1640)

Mr. Francis Valeriote: But I'd like to get to the point here.

You're nodding your head no.

Somebody said two parts per million. Is that fusarium or is that DON? Is that the blight or is that DON that is two parts per million?

Mr. Gordon Harrison: Two parts per million of DON in uncleaned soft wheat, one part per million in uncleaned soft wheat destined for baby foods or infant foods. Those are guidelines that are labelled as under review on Health Canada's website. They've been around for years. Their origins date back to the early 1980s with the Ontario situation and Health Canada is taking on board, we understand, what's going on within Codex, multilateral examination of this, and will be bringing forward proposed new guidelines for DON.

The issue is that CFIA, in trying to exercise its obligations, is searching for thresholds that would be a significant finding for DON in flour or bran, for example, or a breakfast cereal, and they are looking at breakfast cereals as well as other things. In the absence of those, CFIA has said on more than one occasion that they're referencing the EU limit or proposed. On more than one occasion they've said we're taking a zero tolerance approach, so when we find a level we have to ask Health Canada for a risk assessment, which is a standardized procedure that Health Canada has applied. We've seen examples of it, but that too is a discipline, it's not a science.

So what we're wrestling with—there's a whole supply chain—is this transition period in which regulators internationally are saying we need to exhibit more oversight on this, and while we have sympathy with CFIA's difficulty in not having the appropriate benchmarks, we have huge frustration with this act of compliance and enforcement. Our view is that the CFIA should be in research mode. This is the issue. They should be in research mode, not in enforcement mode, and we would support that research mode.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: And do you all agree? Somebody mentioned a moratorium right now on making any changes to the current standards that are being followed. Do you all agree that this moratorium should exist until CFIA and others have completed their research and established standards?

Mr. Geoff Hewson: Yes.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: When we speak of research, are we talking about research just into what standards ought to exist or are we talking about research into creating new varieties by cross-breeding or whatever other process might be applied? Can you tell me what kind of research would be helpful and would that be done at the university research level? Would that be done at your level? What kind of help are you seeking with respect to research?

Mr. Gordon Harrison: I think Nigel said that they're looking for active research, publicly funded research, in particular into varietal development. This is what growers have said in P.E.I. as well as here. We need to have research into methods of detection and quantification. Producers do not have the ability at farm level to quickly and accurately assess the levels in their crop, in their bins. There is not, for either DON or for ochratoxin A, the other mycotoxin we're talking about, readily available technology that can be applied, and processors have no analytical capacity for ochratoxin A whatsoever.

So we need research on a number of fronts, but probably the principal one would be in varietal development, resistant varieties. That will assist tremendously, and whether that's achieved through conventional breeding or, as some would advocate, through rDNA or biotechnology, is really ultimately not terribly relevant in my view. What we need are resistant varieties, and significant work is going on.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: And there has been no incidence of death or ill health, given the current voluntary standards that are being followed.

Mr. Gordon Harrison: It's a question I would put to Health Canada, but I have an e-mail from Health Canada to that effect, that in North America no acute adverse human health outcome is associated with acute sudden intake levels. But Health Canada could speak to that.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Thank you.

The Chair: Your time has expired, Mr. Valeriote.

Mr. Storseth, five minutes.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to compliment Mr. Valeriote on his increased knowledge. He sounds more and more like the agriculture critic from the opposition, so congratulations.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Brian Storseth: I would like to start out by thanking all the witnesses for coming forward. This is a very important issue, a growing issue, obviously, in western Canada, more and more so. And it's something I wish we could dedicate more than two and a half hours to.

For those of us who have done a lot of research on this, and obviously live in farm producing areas, it seems to me that....

Maybe I'll start with Mr. Harrison, or Mr. Jamieson, or Mr. Hewson; they could all answer this question.

I think it was Mr. Hewson who said it exactly right, that it's susceptible varieties plus increased humidity. The right conditions create more significant problems when it comes to fusarium.

Now, it seems to me that the answer to that—we may look at some of what may or may not be causing it—is more research and development into genetically modified crops and finding varieties that are less susceptible to this and stronger. That seems to be where our biggest gains have been over the last 10 to 15 years, and we should continue to push that avenue so we can continue to have better and stronger varieties.

Can I have your comments, perhaps starting with Mr. Hewson and moving this way?

● (1645)

Mr. Geoff Hewson: Like Blair, I'm certainly not a scientist, not by any stretch of the imagination.

Mr. Brian Storseth: You're the closest we have right now.

Mr. Geoff Hewson: I'll use that power wisely.

In terms of traditional wheat research and plant breeding—I'm not an expert on that either—you find a variety, whether it be a wild grass, whatever it is that shows resistance to fusarium, and you crossbreed it with existing varieties. It's a very haphazard approach. You're trying to get an end product that growers will want to grow, agronomically grow. Obviously if it has a terrible yield, then it doesn't matter if it's the most resistant to fusarium variety in the world; farmers won't grow it.

Where biotechnology offers solutions to that is in the ability to target specific genes and only switch them over, whereas if you're crossing, say, more of a grassy species with a milling wheat species, you may be getting all kinds of undesirable characteristics. Hopefully the process would be sped up because of the precision of only spreading the genetic characteristics you want.

I definitely feel it has a fit. Definitely private industry, different companies have certainly invested research into this, and there's more to come from that. Obviously there is the intransigence of a lot of our customers to buying genetically engineered wheat, and that has to be overcome before any of these varieties can be brought to bear because it's no use having wheat that you can't market.

Blair, do you have anything to add to that?

Mr. Blair Rutter: No, that's fine.

Mr. Geoff Hewson: That's all I have to say for now. Thanks.

Mr. Derek Jamieson: Generally I agree with your comments. The milling industry's view on biotechnology is that when our customers are ready to accept it, we are. Generally, we—meaning P & H Milling Group—get probably an average of a request every month at each of our locations for a declaration that we are not using bioengineered wheat, even though it doesn't even exist in Canada. But our customers are insisting on those declarations. So as long as the consumer is resistant to it, it's going to be a challenge.

But personally, I think consumer reluctance is based on two things. One is a bit of an ignorance of the science. We all worry about Frankentomatoes or whatever. But I think the other thing is that consumers never see what they perceive to be a benefit coming from biotechnology. If the health benefit could be communicated, then I think that attitude would change, and it would change very quickly. And I do think that holds a lot of promise to eradicating or minimizing diseases like fusarium.

I will just add that even if we were to change that view today, you're probably 8 to 10 years—would you agree?—away from seeing a bioengineered wheat that would be effective.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Certainly. And I agree with you that we have to tackle the fearmongering that goes on in regard to these issues. It's important to have people like you come out and say that they see a potential future in this field. It may be eight to 10 years away, but if we don't get started now, it's going to be 10 to 20 years away.

I would like to talk to you about....

Do I have a couple of minutes, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You just have a few seconds to wind up, if you could, Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: To Mr. Harrison or Mr. Jamieson, I was surprised to hear some of the comments you made about CFIA and the somewhat ad hoc basis on which enforcement seems to be coming on. This sometimes can be a bit of a pattern that is somewhat unfortunate. I would like to hear more comments from you on that.

I have more questions, but the chair seems to cut me off at five minutes all the time.

● (1650)

Mr. Gordon Harrison: May I respond?

The Chair: You can respond to that question, Mr. Harrison.

Mr. Gordon Harrison: I'll do it very quickly.

CFIA and Health Canada don't like it when I use the term “ad hoc”, but our take has been that it's been uncertain. They have been making interim decisions. They will tell you that they are obligated to be doing compliance and enforcement under the Food and Drugs Act. Our view is that they aren't as obligated as they think they are. I think they have more discretion than is being exercised. Our issue is the lack of transparency about it all.

Everybody needs clarity. You can't hear from a regional office of CFIA that they are applying the proposed EU limit for this, for DON, and for others. You have to know exactly what you're doing. As Derek mentioned, CFIA's role is more of an audit function. CFIA is not in every food processing facility doing oversight.

It has been uncertain. We use the word ad hoc, but they're not happy with that. I understand that. I try to use it less and less, but we sure need a lot more clarity.

The Chair: Our time has expired.

There was a request at the start, if you remember, to save a few minutes to discuss some business. Our next witnesses are scheduled for five o'clock. I would suggest that we release our witnesses, go right on to committee business, and be ready to go as close to five o'clock as we can. So we'll do that.

I'd like very much to thank our witnesses, all of you who are here in person and those who are here by video. It was great to have all of you here from Charlottetown.

Thanks very much. I'm sure that everybody found it very educational.

We'll move to committee business.

We have an order of sequence, which is the order in which they came in. I'm open to how you want to proceed.

I believe that the first motion on the schedule to be dealt with is Mr. Shipley's. I think the next one is....

My apologies. It is Mr. Atamanenko's, which deals with AgriFlex, then Mr. Shipley's, then Mr. Bellavance's, I believe.

No, it's Mr. Easter, then Mr. Bellavance, then Mr. Atamanenko.

How do you want to proceed?

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: If I understand....

The Chair: Yours is number two. Mr. Shipley is three.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Are we doing them one by one?

The Chair: Well, I want to see the direction. If there's unanimous consent, we can stray from the order in which we received them. If not.... That's up to you.

Mr. Atamanenko.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: My other motion on AgriFlex is first, I understand. Is that correct?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: I guess I would have the flexibility of changing. I would like to have my second motion discussed rather than the other one, if possible.

The Chair: We'd have to deal with it in the order in which it came in, Alex, unless there's agreement to swap them.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Because it's my motion, can't I just swap it myself? Do we have to have agreement on that?

The Chair: That's not the way we....

Mr. Brian Storseth: Actually, after it comes to the committee and we table it, it's not even a motion any more, Alex.

The Chair: I think we discussed that. You suggested that you were looking for unanimous....

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: My suggestion was that if we could get unanimous consent, we discuss this because of the urgency of the negotiations going on right now at WTO. That was my request. I'll just leave it at that. Obviously, it has to be unanimous.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): On a point of order, I would ask whether we could have the clerk distribute the motion. I think we all have bits and pieces of the different motions that have been tabled.

The Chair: Everybody has received them at some point.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: At some point we have, but it would be good to have a package.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: I presume it is Mr. Atamanenko's second motion that he is talking about.

The Chair: I have Mr. Bellavance on before you, if this is discussion, Francis.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: André.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: I want to clarify something. When I spoke earlier, I was not trying to push ahead of everyone with my motion. Furthermore, I did not raise the issue at the steering committee meeting because Mr. De Schutter was supposed to appear before the Standing Committee on International Trade. He could testify on October 27. Today is October 20. That is the reason I wanted to deal with it right away. If we consider a series of motions, one after the other, and the debate goes on a long time, we will not get to my motion. Although I can bring it up again on Thursday, I am asking the committee today.

I want that to be clear. Do I have the unanimous consent of the committee to debate my motion after Alex's?

● (1655)

[*English*]

The Chair: Well, you'll have to ask the rest of the committee. I wasn't in any way trying to say that we needed to discuss the other ones. If you have unanimous consent, obviously we can stray from the normal order. The past practice has been that as motions come in we deal with them in that order, in fairness.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: I understand that.

[*English*]

The Chair: But at the same time, if we have unanimous consent we can stray from that. I have no issue with that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: I am asking. Is it possible to debate my motion?

[*English*]

The Chair: First of all, you'd have to ask for unanimous consent to do it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: That is what I am doing.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I thought you were talking about bringing a witness forward.

The Chair: He is. That is what his motion—

Mr. Bev Shipley: I don't have the motion.

The Chair: I guess it is being circulated.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I have it now.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Chair, does this actually have to be done through a motion? It's just a question of your scheduling as the chair, is it not?

The Chair: If the committee agrees here today, with or without a motion, to bring him forth, absolutely the witness can come forth.

Am I hearing unanimous consent to bring Alex's motion forward?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Hold on. I think there is confusion here.

Mr. Bellavance wants to bring his motion forward and he is talking about bringing other motions forward. If Mr. Bellavance wants to bring just his motion forward, then that can be up for discussion, and we can see whether there is consent for that. If Mr. Atamanenko wants to bring his motion forward, he should do that separately, and we should see whether there's consent for that. But I don't think we should link the two together. I think that's what's causing the confusion.

The Chair: They are not linked, to my mind. Mr. Bellavance is requesting his at this point. We either have unanimous consent or we don't. If we do have it, we deal with his. Then Mr. Atamanenko has the same opportunity to ask, and we can deal with that then.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'll just finish my comment, if I may.

Mr. Bellavance's motion is time-sensitive, because it's very date-fixed. When we start moving other motions around, though, my concern is that—

The Chair: Let's deal with this one first.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'm kind of answering where I'm going with this.

The problem in deciding who has the more urgent motion and which one comes before the other is that this one is very specific. There are two dates available; today was one of them and the other one is the 27th. If Mr. Bellavance is asking consent to move his motion forward, then yes, we should see whether there is consent for it.

The Chair: I believe that's all you are asking, isn't it?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I think there's an actual timeline associated with it.

The Chair: I would take it then that we have unanimous consent.

Did you want to add to that discussion, Mr. Storseth?

Mr. Brian Storseth: I just wanted to suggest that we move Mr. Bellavance's motion for unanimous consent, right now.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I would like a clarification. Is that the only person who's going to be a witness for two hours?

I think we should read the motion. It reads: That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food invite Mr. Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, to brief committee members on his report on food security and sovereignty in a video conference on October 27, 2009, from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

That would mean that we have no witnesses other than this one individual.

The Chair: That is correct.

Mr. Bev Shipley: We had an hour today with five witnesses, based on an issue around fusarium and DON. We are now going to bring on another three or four witnesses for an hour to deal with it from the departmental side.

I don't have an issue, André, with this. Spending two hours, though, takes away from what I think we need to be doing on other business.

The Chair: I think we have unanimous consent to deal with the motion, but I have just a reminder that out of the steering committee there were recommendations, which we'll probably have time to discuss on Thursday, that suggested witnesses and issues for that day.

Is everybody clear with that?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Chair, I'd like to bring up the matter of the steering committee.

I think it's important that all members of this committee realize that the steering committee only provides advice to the main committee. As the main committee, we must review what the steering committee has submitted, and we must either accept it, amend it, change it, or whatever we want to do with it. I think we need to leave time to do this, and I don't think we're treating anything in a proper manner here, when we're basically chockablock at today's meeting with witnesses. Now we're trying to cram in some committee business on the side.

Mr. Chair, you've raised now the steering committee report, which we haven't looked at. I think we should just go back to witnesses. That's what today was scheduled for. Let's show due diligence and respect for the witnesses who have come, because what's going to end up happening is that we cut into witness time, when in fact today was scheduled for fusarium.

Let's complete our study on fusarium. If the committee wants to do committee business, let's schedule committee business and not try to do two or three things all at the same time, shuffling things around and ending up shunting our witnesses off to the side, when they've traveled to be here. They've prepared to be here.

● (1700)

The Chair: Okay. That's a fair point.

Again, there was a request made for unanimous consent to deal with Mr. Bellavance's motion. Do I have it or not?

Some hon. members: Yes.

An hon. member: No.

The Chair: We don't have unanimous consent.

Mr. Atamanenko.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Do I have unanimous consent for my motion?

The Chair: It would be number five in the order.

We don't have unanimous consent for it either, Mr. Atamanenko.

There's a point of order.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): I think there are two issues. One is whether we can move the motion forward to discuss it, and the other is whether we approve the motion. Mr. Shipley had a problem with the wording of the motion, but I'm not sure he had a problem with moving it forward to discuss it.

The Chair: Yes, but someone else did.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Someone else did?

The Chair: Mr. Lemieux had a problem with the first one, and Mr. Hoback with Mr. Atamanenko's.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: At what point did the chair indicate that there would be time set aside to discuss these motions? Was it at the beginning of the meeting?

The Chair: It was requested at the start of the meeting, and everybody agreed. We just spent the last 15 minutes—

Mr. Francis Valeriote: With all due respect, Mr. Chair, you set the agenda at the beginning of the meeting, which everyone agreed to, and now suddenly you're veering away from a commitment you made at the beginning, if I'm getting this right.

The Chair: I'm not veering away from any commitment.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: I thought you indicated at the beginning of the meeting that we would set aside time to deal with these.

The Chair: We just did, Mr. Valeriote. In order for them to stray from the order in which they come in—I thought I explained this clearly now—you need unanimous consent.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Are we now going to deal with all these motions?

The Chair: No, we're not. That wasn't the request to start with, at the beginning of the meeting. The plan is to deal with them on Thursday, or at the next meeting; that was quite clear. There was a special request to deal with these two motions. We had the request, and they were turned down. Don't blame that on me.

Is there a point of order?

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Chair, I want to say again that I am not trying to jump the queue with my motion. It is only because there was a date when Mr. De Schutter was available. Out of fairness, I want to make sure that on Thursday, the committee will have time to deal with everyone's motions and that that will be included in the agenda. Can you assure me of that?

[*English*]

The Chair: I have no issue with the business. As is normal, we usually try to save time for the end of the meeting. Is that fair enough?

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: My motion cannot be dealt with after October 27. That is my concern.

[*English*]

The Chair: I understand. If we have witnesses, we can let our witnesses go at five o'clock and move to committee business.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Can we have it on the agenda that we will be discussing motions, please?

Thank you for your cooperation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, and we also have a housekeeping budget item that I don't think will be debated long. It's just another thing we have to deal with. There was just no urgency to deal with it today, as the clerk informed me. That's why it wasn't on the agenda.

Can we move to our witnesses?

Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: A point of clarification, for the record.

This Thursday we will take the last 15 minutes at committee, as we usually do, to make sure we look at Mr. Bellavance's motion. Is that what we're committing to do right now?

● (1705)

The Chair: Yes, we're committing to that at the end of the meeting.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you.

The Chair: And just so everybody is clear, we'll be dealing with them in the order they came in, unless I have direction to do otherwise.

I thought our witnesses were moving to the table. Sorry for the delay, ladies and gentlemen.

We have, from the Department of Health, Mr. Godefroy and Mr. Salminen; from the CFIA, Mr. Paul Mayers and Mr. Charlebois; and from the Canadian Grain Commission, Mr. Cam Dahl and Mr. Norm Woodbeck.

Rather than stick right to the order here, who's ready to go first?

Mr. Godefroy.

Dr. Samuel Godefroy (Director General, Food Directorate, Department of Health): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, honourable members.

Given the time allotted for our discussions, we have elected to restrict this brief introduction to providing the honourable committee members with a brief overview on how Health Canada sets safety standards for contaminants, such as those naturally occurring toxins that have been discussed by the committee this afternoon, in foods that are destined for human consumption, and the way we operate in collaboration with the CFIA to protect Canadians' health vis-à-vis food contaminants.

Health Canada is the federal health authority that is responsible for establishing policies, setting standards, conducting health risk assessments in the context of food safety investigations, and providing advice and information on the safety and nutritional quality of foods available for sale in Canada. The department's role in setting food standards is driven by our mandate to ensure that the safety of the Canadian food supply is, and continues to be, a major contributor to protecting Canadians' health. Health Canada standards are the main reference for the enforcement and compliance activities undertaken by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Part of the work that is undertaken by Health Canada scientists is to ensure that chemical contaminants, including naturally occurring toxins, are not present in the food supply at levels that would pose an unacceptable risk to Canadians' health.

[*Translation*]

The procedures we follow are those of international authorities, namely, the Codex Alimentarius Commission and the World Health Organization. The procedures include three main components: risk assessment, risk management and risk communication.

Risk assessments are conducted using all available scientific data, including epidemiological data, analytical and exposure data, and toxicological data. These assessments must be based on exposure scenarios, which, despite being hypothetical at times, are also as realistic as possible.

It is crucial to take into account the Canadian context in terms of the consumption patterns of all age groups. Where relevant, exposure estimates may also take into account population groups considered susceptible, especially children, infants, pregnant women and anyone who may be at high risk as a result of acute or chronic exposure, meaning long term. These estimates may take into account cumulative and/or combined adverse health effects, as well.

[*English*]

As a result of these science-based assessments, various types of risk management activities can be used to protect Canadian consumers from potentially high levels of contaminants in food. These may include corrective action at various stages of the food production process, including at the farm level, the removal of certain products from the retail market, or, if required, the development of maximum levels for a contaminant or a toxin in a specific food.

Such maximum levels are developed for those foods that are considered to be significant contributors to total exposure to the consumer for that specific contaminant. These levels are also considered as systematic references for enforcement actions undertaken by the CFIA.

Now, if it's concluded that the development of maximum levels or standards is the most appropriate risk management strategy, then a number of steps must be followed. Those steps include the scientific assessment of the risk to human health that focuses on the Canadian context, the assessment of the impacts of the proposed standards on the food supply chain, including the farming community, broad consultation with industry and other stakeholders, and also consideration of trade implications based on Canada's international commitments.

It should be noted that, like other food regulatory agencies around the world, Health Canada has not established maximum levels for all contaminants, or, if you will, for every combination of a contaminant in a food commodity. The absence of a standard or the absence of a maximum level does not, however, mean a lack of oversight or a lack of accountability. Similarly, the absence of a maximum level or a guideline does not imply either a zero tolerance or that a standard from another country should be applied.

In the case where there is no established maximum level or a standard, the results of regular inspection and surveillance activities conducted by the CFIA are provided to Health Canada scientists for assessment. This is particularly important if these results indicate elevated levels of a particular contaminant in a specific food commodity, which immediately triggers an evaluation to assess the potential risk for the case in question.

It is important also to note that the approach used in these risk assessments is not arbitrary but also follows internationally established processes. The outcomes of these assessments guide the development of the appropriate risk management measures to be followed by the CFIA, under the authority of the Food and Drugs Act.

We would be happy to answer any questions that the honourable committee members may have on how these processes are followed with respect to managing risks to human health associated with some of the natural toxins that were brought before the committee today, like ochratoxin A or deoxynivalenol.

I'll turn it over to my colleague from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency for his introduction.

Thank you.

● (1710)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Salminen, you have nothing to add to that? Okay.

We'll move to CFIA, to Mr. Charlebois and Mr. Mayers.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Charlebois (Executive Director, Food Safety and Consumer Protection Directorate, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, my name is Robert Charlebois, and I am the Executive Director of Food Safety and Consumer Protection at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

I just want to take a few minutes to explain to the committee what fusarium toxins are and why we test for them. I will also let you know what the allowable limits are for these toxins as there are different thresholds depending on what the end product is to be used for. Finally, I will try briefly to bring some clarity to the recent report in *La Presse* about grain being rejected in Prince Edward Island.

[*English*]

Deoxynivalenol, or DON, commonly referred to as vomitoxin, is a toxin, as we heard, that may occur in a variety of grains—wheat, for sure, but barley, oats, rye, and maize. It could develop in humid and warm conditions during the flowering season.

Health Canada, as we just heard, sets the standard for food safety in Canada, so they have set the allowable threshold for these toxins in food. Current guidelines permit a maximum of two parts per million of vomitoxin or DON in uncleaned soft wheat. So that's the current guideline set by Health Canada. That type of soft wheat is used for the manufacture of food products such as cake, cookies, biscuits, and cereals.

The threshold for using infant food, however, is lower, at one part per million. These standards have been in place for more than 20 years and have not changed recently.

For grain intended for feed, this is a bit different: CFIA sets the level. Current action levels for vomitoxins are at one part per million in complete feed for the diets of swine, young calves, and lactating dairy animals, and five parts per million in complete feed for cattle and poultry because they are more resistant. These standards have not changed for over a decade as well.

● (1715)

[*Translation*]

Levels of these toxins are monitored by the CFIA because they can cause serious health problems in humans and animals when ingested, even at very low levels, specifically, parts per billion to parts per million. In humans, DON and other mycotoxins can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, severe hemorrhaging, immune suppression and even cancer. The effects on livestock can include feed refusal, vomiting, impaired reproductive function, reduced fertility, lung disease, cancer and, in some cases, even death.

The CFIA conducts targeted inspections and sampling at the milling level if the grain is intended for human consumption. Compliance levels are typically high. For feed, the CFIA has tested for these types of toxins and mycotoxins for many years, including random and targeted sampling.

I have been describing the regulatory limits for these toxins and inspector programs for soft wheat. For hard wheat, Health Canada has not yet established a regulatory standard or limit for the presence of DON or vomitoxin. Thus, the levels of 2 ppm and 1 ppm are for soft wheat.

Given the potential health risk of vomitoxin, the CFIA is conducting monitoring, albeit limited, for this contaminant in hard wheat. This is done in accordance with section 4 of the Food and Drugs Act, which presents a general prohibition on the sale of unsafe food. Even where no specific standard or guideline has been established by Health Canada, section 4 of the Food and Drugs Act must be taken into account.

[*English*]

Where vomitoxin is present in a sample, these results are submitted to Health Canada for a health risk assessment. Based on that assessment, CFIA will consider enforcement action—where warranted only, for sure. That is the general approach that we're using.

To go back to the P.E.I. issue, recently some articles were published in the media that CFIA had suddenly changed the threshold for these toxins. This is not accurate. As I mentioned earlier, the standard for food is not set by CFIA. The soft wheat standard is established by Health Canada and it has not changed. Nor did CFIA change the allowable limits for these toxins in animal feed. We have not been engaged in any recent enforcement actions related to this risk in Prince Edward Island.

I also want to make it clear that, contrary to media reports, CFIA did not instruct mills to refuse wheat from P.E.I. farmers. The more recent report suggests there was a miscommunication from the wheat buyer that led producers to believe they would have to meet higher or altered standards than the ones set by Health Canada or the CFIA in the case of feed. The error was acknowledged at a later date.

[*Translation*]

The Canadian government's policies around vomitoxin are all established in the international context of shared sound science. Canada actively participates in the work done by the Codex Alimentarius Commission on additives and contaminants, which puts a focus on vomitoxin.

This body is responsible for developing the code of practice for the prevention of mycotoxin contamination in cereals. The Codex Alimentarius Commission is an international body established under the joint auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization. It develops food standards, international guidelines and texts, such as the code of practice I just mentioned.

Canada's participation in such bodies is consistent with the high priority the Government of Canada places on protecting the health of consumers. Monitoring for vomitoxin is an important element of our overall food safety program.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have for me.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to the Canadian Grain Commission with Mr. Dahl and Mr. Woodbeck.

Mr. Cam Dahl (Commissioner, Canadian Grain Commission): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. It is a privilege for me to be in front of you again today.

I have a very good ten-minute presentation, but I'm not going to give it to you today. You have a handout that highlights some of the Canadian Grain Commission's activities in fusarium and fusarium-damaged kernels as well as some of the history of fusarium infection in both eastern and western Canada.

I would like to take a couple of minutes to highlight a couple of points from that handout. Then Norm and I would be happy to answer your questions.

First, I'd like to emphasize that grain safety is part of the Canadian Grain Commission's mandate, along with the requirement or mandate on maintain grain quality and grain quality assurance.

You will see in your handout some tables that show the fusarium tolerances for both eastern and western wheat and how those tolerances have changed over time.

Since about 1980, the Canadian Grain Commission has employed the grading system to manage the flow of DON, which appeared in eastern Canada in the early eighties, into the food and feed chain. These tolerances started out very tight, but as the understanding of the relationship between DON and fusarium-damaged kernels grew, we were able to relax those tolerances.

I'd also like to highlight that we do not arbitrarily set the tolerances for fusarium-damaged kernels in the grading system. These are set in consultation with the eastern and western standards committees. These committees include all parts of the value chain, from farmers to processors; they also include the scientific input from the Grain Research Laboratory. So the standards that are set and reviewed over time are science-based and arrived at through consultations with people representing the entire value chain.

We have some interesting information on the history of our findings on DON. It's important to note that the grading system has been effective in managing the flow of DON into the system. Also important is some of the ongoing research. I know some of the previous witnesses have remarked on the need to move to DON-testing at the elevator or on the farmer's field. That is something we are actively working on.

Currently, the reason we use fusarium-damaged kernels in the grading system instead of DON is that the required tests simply take too long to be practical at the elevator or on the farm. These tests can take up to an hour to perform. But we are actively working with the industry and with private companies to evaluate equipment, with the goal of introducing DON tests on the driveway.

We also continue to work with the international community. The Grain Research Laboratory continues to work with the international scientific community on understanding the relationship between fusarium-damaged kernels and DON. These relationships might be changing over time, along with some of the types of fusarium infection. The relationship between DON and fusarium-damaged kernels is something our Grain Research Laboratory places a great deal of emphasis on.

Finally, I want to talk a little bit about the work we're doing with farm groups. We're happy to be able to work with the Atlantic Grains Council. Allan has mentioned problems on differences or variations in different tests from labs, and we're working to resolve some of those issues. We're also working with farm groups in Ontario to develop new scientific equipment.

That is a short version of my ten-minute speech. Norm and I will be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

● (1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Cam.

As we all know, we're going to have bells go off here for a vote soon. Could we have just a two-minute round? I want to give everybody a question and move on.

Is everybody okay with that?

Mr. Valeriote, one question, please.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Mr. Godefroy, thank you very much for your presentation. As I understand it, your job at Health Canada is to determine what is or isn't unacceptable risk in this case of the presence of DON, and you manage a risk assessment, risk management, risk communication program. You look at, perhaps, world expectations and standards at the Codex committee and the WTO. You also indicated that you had to make sure you complied with agreements Canada may have with those organizations.

Is it of a current state, right now, this issue, that to live with the current standards—I think it's two parts per million that earlier witnesses had testified to—would we be in violation of any agreements or obligations if we put a moratorium on any changes right now until the passage of 18 months, until such time that you have completed your risk assessment and established a standard that, in communication with producers and millers, people could live with?

● (1725)

Dr. Samuel Godefroy: Thank you, honourable member.

The discrepancy with other standards does not really present itself in terms of violations of international agreements. Our work at Health Canada is to ensure that the standards that are in place are protective to human health. As was mentioned by previous witnesses, we have in effect two standards, the two parts per million for soft wheat and the one part per million for, again, soft wheat, destined for essentially baby foods.

Those standards, as was mentioned, are actually under review simply because they were set a number of years ago, over 20 years ago. We have new scientific evidence that is at hand for Health Canada scientists. The scientific evidence that is available both on the hazards associated with this toxin and also on the level of occurrence of the toxins in the Canadian food supply warrants such evaluation. The evaluation is actually right now under way, and that's what Health Canada, right now, has committed to doing as part of its program on microtoxins. We have, right now, a plan to complete the scientific evaluation during the course of 2010, and at that point we will be able to make a recommendation on whether the standards that were previously set are adequate and if essentially additional standards may be warranted for other food commodities—because again, those standards cover only two commodities, or a very narrow number of food products. That's what the assessment will help us determine.

In the meantime, when there is no standard, the previous explanation that I have provided to the committee on how we manage collectively with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, any type of health risk that may be inherent to the presence of contaminants, including natural toxins, that type of process would apply.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bellavance or Mr. Guimond.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you.

Mr. Dhal and Mr. Woodbeck, you are aware that the government introduced Bill C-13. Obviously, it affects the Canadian Grain Commission. The relevance of visually inspecting grain is being questioned. Would discontinuing this type of inspection affect the detection of this toxin? Could you please explain, either way?

[*English*]

Mr. Cam Dahl: My understanding of the proposed legislation is that it would not see a change to the establishment of grade. Those are the grades that farmers receive when they deliver to primary elevators, and if they disagree with those grades, there's an opportunity to appeal to the Canadian Grain Commission. The fusarium-damaged kernels are a part of that grading system. There is no anticipated change to the establishment of that kind of grading system, and that would also apply to the grades that we give as the Canadian Grain Commission in the certificate final for vessels that are loaded for international customers. We provide assurances and a certificate final for our international customers on vessels that are going abroad. Again, my understanding of the proposed legislation is that would not change and neither would the establishment of the grading system itself, which includes the fusarium-damaged kernels that we're talking about today.

● (1730)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Atamanenko, do you have a question?

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Thank you.

This is for Mr. Dahl or Mr. Woodbeck, or perhaps for others. Has anybody established the difference in the presence of contaminants between, for example, organic wheat and non-organic wheat?

The reason I ask is because the topic was bought up in the previous panel in regard to glyphosate, that perhaps there was a residue in the tillage and we were changing the tillage. Have there been any studies done in this respect?

Mr. Cam Dahl: I'll let Norm correct me if I'm wrong, but the quick answer to that question is that it's not something we have looked at.

The Chair: I'll give you time for another short question, Alex, if you want, because used you only 30 seconds.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Would anybody else like to comment on that, or is that basically where we're at now?

Dr. Samuel Godefroy: It is pretty much the same situation. At least in the scientific information that we have seen, there is minimum information right now that makes the comparison between organic products versus non-organic products vis-à-vis the presence of these types of contaminants. There are other studies that were done for other types of chemicals, but not necessarily for these types of contaminants.

So the information is limited. We really don't know whether there is a difference.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: So when we talk about more research, would this be something that would be worthwhile pursuing?

Dr. Samuel Godefroy: It would be considered a data element that could be useful.

The Chair: Thank you, Alex.

Pierre, you had a quick question.

The bells have started ringing.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Just given the witnesses we had before, there seems to be confusion. First of all, are these standards of one part per million or two parts per million actually hard and fast standards, enforceable standards upon which grain can be rejected?

Secondly, on enforcement, is it that this not been enforced very much before and all of a sudden it's being enforced now? There seems to be a disconnect between what I'm hearing here and what we heard at the producer level and from the millers.

I'm not too sure who to direct my question to in the 15 seconds I have.

I heard from Cam, I think, that there's a lot of consultation going on here, but I'm not convinced of that, given what we heard from our first set of witnesses.

Dr. Samuel Godefroy: The standards that are currently present in our regulations are still enforceable. They are current. However, as was mentioned by previous witnesses, first of all, they are under review, because we're collecting data about them, but they're also narrow in the type of food commodities they cover.

From the previous discussions we heard this afternoon, it seems that the discussion tends to cover more commodities that are not covered by these standards, rather than those commodities. So again, we are looking here at standards that exist for uncleaned soft wheat and for all the different other foods, non-staple foods specifically. We are talking about non-staple foods and the uncleaned soft wheat that is destined for baby food.

There are no standards that have been established at this point in time by Health Canada for other commodities, specifically hard wheat, and this is essentially the work that is being undertaken, on top of reviewing the adequacy of the previous standards.

Mr. Cam Dahl: I'd just add that some of the confusion might be coming from the difference between the establishment of standards for DON, which is what my friends from Health Canada are talking about, and the grade table standards, which are how farmers are graded on whether the wheat is No. 1, No. 2, feed, or not eligible—and again, some of our friends in P.E.I. actually slipped even below feed. Those grade table standards have included fusarium-damaged kernels since the mid-1980s.

There is a difference between the standards set by Health Canada for DON and the Canadian Grain Commission standards for fusarium-damaged kernels.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to have to adjourn. The bells are ringing.

Thanks to all our witnesses. I apologize for the short time, but there is not much we can do about it.

Thanks very much again to our witnesses from Charlottetown for staying with us to the end.

The meeting is adjourned.

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