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Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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• (1535)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everybody. As discussed before, we're going to try to do motions on Tuesday up front, but we're only going to allocate an hour to it because we have witnesses here coming in at 4:30 p.m. Many of you probably have a list of various motions that we have on deck. Does everybody have a list of those motions?

We have an order here. Is Bev Shipley here?

Bev, we already discussed your motion on the young farmers. There was some discussion on it, so I'm going to open it up for discussion. Did you want to start off on it again?

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): I'll just keep it really brief, Mr. Chairman.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Oh, I'm sorry.

Before we get into motions—it's my mistake, committee—we have to deal with budgets. We have two budgets that we have to approve. Is everybody familiar with the two budgets? One budget is \$9,100 dealing with the crisis in the hog industry, and the other one is \$10,600 dealing with program review. I guess we vote on them separately.

Are there any questions on the first one?

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): How much is that, Mr. Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): It's \$9,100. I don't think I have the breakdown here. Does everybody have the breakdown of where that comes from?

Mr. Bev Shipley: I have it down in number two.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Is everybody okay with that?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Could you please explain it? Are these witnesses already coming, or are they going to come?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): The clerk will explain that.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Isabelle Duford): For the program review, these are for the witnesses who have been invited to appear, so that's for the meetings to come.

In terms of the budget for the hog crisis, those are witnesses who have appeared, so that's to recover the cost. Since we hadn't had a

chance to adopt the budget for that meeting, we're doing it at this time.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Are there any more questions on the money for the hog sector? Apparently we've already done the meeting; we're just trying to pay for it, I guess.

Brian.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): That's fine, Mr. Chair. We've all got this \$9,100 and \$9,100. We all got the crisis in the hog industry; we didn't get the second one. We got two of the same.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): So you have the one on the hogs, though, do you? You just don't have the other one?

Is everybody okay with that? I don't know if we need to bring it to a vote. Unless there's anybody who has a problem with it, we'll figure it's unanimous that we agree on that one.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): The second one is on the program review. That's the one that's coming up, I guess. Are there any questions on that one?

No questions? It's straightforward? Unless there's any problem with it, we'll just figure it's passed unanimously. Okay?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay, back to the motions.

Mr. Shipley, you have the floor to speak on your motion.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I won't go over a lot of the stuff that I did last time.

I talked to my colleagues, and one of the things that came up during the discussion is that it seemed pretty open and maybe too broad, and was there an opportunity to maybe streamline and focus it, Mr. Chairman, just a little more? The other part of the question was, what sort of timeline, in terms of the description of the motion, were you looking at? I'll leave that to some open discussion, but if we were to have six or seven weeks of discussion on that study, that would give us a full venue to bring in appropriate witnesses. I'm open to discussion around the time and the number of meetings. I think it's one we could start, with a goal of six or seven weeks. At the end of it, you would have it wrapped up and then we could have a report on it, Mr. Chairman.

The motion does say that the standing committee focus on the study of the future of farming with a particular focus on young farmers. Maybe to help in terms of some of the discussion that came out in the last meeting, I could propose some sort of friendly amendment that may help bring it around a little bit. And I would propose this as a friendly amendment, Mr. Chair:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada study government and industry initiatives around the future of farming, primarily focusing on young farmers and their involvement in agriculture.

I leave that for comments and discussion, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Does everybody understand the amendment? Is there any comment on it?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Could you read that again?

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Chair, I'll read it again:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada study government and industry initiatives

—so both the government and the industry initiatives—

around the future of farming, primarily focusing on young farmers and their involvement in agriculture.

• (1540)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Do we have an amendment to his motion?

Mr. Bev Shipley: It would certainly have to be in French and English, but I was just proposing that a friendly amendment be added. It would be based on the discussion—

Hon. Wayne Easter: He can amend his own motion if there's unanimous consent, right?

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): That is exactly what I was going to ask you. As a general rule, in order to amend his own amendment, he needs the Committee's unanimous consent. So, I am waiting for you to ask whether there is unanimous consent, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Maybe somebody else could complement the motion.

Mr. Bev Shipley: You guys and your rules.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Chair, I can propose a motion for a friendly amendment to Mr. Shipley's bill so that our committee studies both government and industry initiatives that encourage youth to be involved in farming.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): This falls in line with what we're planning to do for half of next year pretty well, right?

Mr. Bev Shipley: Yes, we start at the first of the year.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Is there any more discussion?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Could Bev give a few examples of what, on the government side, we know about some potential things that are being thought of? Could he give a few examples of what he thinks we might look towards that are currently in place in the industry side?

Mr. Bev Shipley: Certainly an example looking at the industry side...I think we want to bring in some of the commodity people who, for example, have talked to us about how you get beginning farmers involved. What have they done as an industry to help in terms of being able to get beginning farmers involved? The other part of it would be, how do we work with that industry in terms of bringing beginning farmers on?

They aren't always just young farmers, and that's why the wording of it. I guess "young" is terminology, but I mean those who are 20 to 40 or 45 years old even, who come back from working and want to get involved in agriculture. I think we'd have the commodity groups involved with that discussion.

Also, I think you have to look at the credit. For example, what credit arrangement is there that financially would be available to help beginning farmers get involved? What aspects are there in terms of where the future is leading—for example, renewable fuels. Where is that leading and where might we be able to enhance some aspects of it in terms of not just young farmers but all farmers? I think some of these actually start back, for some of us who grew up in agriculture, with Junior Farmers and 4-H. Those are young farmers who have taken an interest. What do they see as a vision for agriculture in the future?

I'll leave it at that for now.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thanks, Chair. I'll just add a few things to Mr. Shipley's comments.

For example, in my riding, I've noticed that egg farmers are particularly young, which is a good sign. Why is that? Is that industry targeting young farmers? Is there something that makes egg farming much more attractive to youth? Is there something we can encourage?

As well, taking a look internationally might be interesting too, because I don't think this problem is common only in Canada. Certainly, I think that seeing what types of initiatives other countries have taken to encourage youth involvement in farming would be helpful to the committee.

I'll mention one other case that I'm thinking of, which is dairy farmers. I believe that for the dairy farmers in Ontario, quota is a barrier. The price of quota is a barrier to young farmers getting involved in dairy farming. The Dairy Farmers of Ontario have initiated a program whereby they choose 10 young farmers, I think, and they put in place a process by which young farmers borrow quota—they have a certain amount of time to pay it back—so that they can ease into dairy farming.

I think it would be useful if the committee knew of these types of initiatives in each of the different commodities. Are they successful? Are they not successful? Are there government initiatives to enhance these initiatives that might be taken by industry?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I'm sure there are going to be a lot of functions and seminars going on in the next half year, whether it's young farmer conferences or whatever. I think if we're going to make a good stab at this in the second half of the year, we should be pulling together a really good schedule that is going to take advantage of what's out there.

Mr. Hoback.

• (1545)

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

Actually, this comment kind of goes in line with what the theme of this is. We have the Outstanding Young Farmers coming to Ottawa in the first week of December. I don't know if that's too quick for us to tie it in with something here, but I thought I'd bring that to your attention.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): On that, Randy, do you have the dates?

Mr. Randy Hoback: I'd have to locate that, but roughly, it's from the first to the sixth.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): My understanding was that we had the flexibility of a day. Maybe we can get some of them to come in here or we should go down to the meeting or something.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Either way, they're the cream of the crop.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay. You're going to get that information to the clerk.

Are there more comments on this motion? This is the amendment.

Let's vote on the amendment from Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thanks, Chair.

The amendment simply includes looking at government and industry initiatives, at both.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thanks, Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): I would like to make one comment before we vote. There is no way anyone could be against this kind of motion. The problem I see with it is consistency between our work and the government's work.

On November 9, Minister Blackburn Minister of State for Agriculture began extensive consultations and a cross-Canada tour

on that very subject. I am not against this; it is not a bad initiative. I believe that he has already visited a number of young farmers. In fact, I can tell you what the precise reason for the tour is. He began this cross-Canada tour in order to take the pulse of stakeholders concerned about the significant challenges facing young farmers. He has already made stops in Guelph, Truro, Saskatoon and Abbotsford. I don't know whether this has already occurred, but he is supposed to go to Saint-Hyacinthe, in Quebec, and he will likely be making other stops as well. At the end of his tour, the Minister hopes to be able to have better identified the issues for young farmers starting out in the industry, something that is of concern to the federal government.

I just want to relate the Minister's press release of November 9 back to Mr. Shipley's motion. The press release says:

The roundtables will focus on identifying key issues for young people who want to farm and on charting solutions that will help new and young farmers start their business, capture more opportunities to grow and diversify their businesses.

So, I am wondering whether the Committee should not wait to see the results of this cross-country tour by the Minister, who will certainly be able to provide us with some information. We may have an opportunity to know publicly what young farmers are asking for and what they would like to see happen. After that, if we feel there is a need, we could pick up from there and perhaps invite the Minister and young farmers to come and talk to us about their concerns, as we have done on a very regular basis.

However, would it be relevant to use the Committee's time to carry out a study at the same time as the one Minister Blackburn has just launched? I think we may have a scheduling problem, because it seems we would be adding that to our agenda fairly quickly and that the work would be carried out over a period of six or seven weeks. Such a comprehensive study would obviously take up a great deal of the Committee's time, even as the government is doing its own work on this issue.

As a committee, we would be shooting ourselves in the foot. This brings back bad memories for me. It reminds me of the lengthy study we did on "Product of Canada" labelling. All the parties worked together and conducted a serious study of this issue. However, after we had already been working on this for several weeks, like everyone else, I recall seeing the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food at a farm in Ontario, in a beautiful setting, announce publicly that changes would be made to "Product of Canada" labelling. They listed all the changes that were coming. We had not even completed our study yet. And the proof that the government paid no attention to the Committee's work is its decision to opt for a standard of 98%, despite the fact that, here in committee, there was consensus on an 85% standard. There you have an example of a flawed process: ultimately there was duplication of effort, and the end result did not meet expectations—far from it.

I am obviously in favour of looking at issues relating to young farmers. We actually tabled a motion on a number of occasions aimed at helping young farmers. This would be an opportunity to revisit these issues. At the same time, I cannot help but wonder why my colleague is bringing this forward now, knowing full well that the government has already begun the same kind of exercise. We may end up just wasting our time. That is what concerns me. We may also end up wasting the time of the good Minister, who is undoubtedly doing great work by conducting this cross-Canada tour. And he will probably bring back relevant information about what young farmers are suggesting—if you will permit me a little irony, of course.

I understand that this is important, but I am wondering whether the Committee should devote this much time to a study when the government has already begun its own work on this.

• (1550)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you.

I have Mr. Easter and then Mr. Lemieux, but I'm thinking of going to Mr. Lemieux first, if it's all right with Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: We're on the amendment, correct?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Yes. Do you want to go first?

Hon. Wayne Easter: It doesn't matter.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I just thought Mr. Lemieux might want to comment on what's going on with Mr. Blackburn, what the agenda is, and how it's going to affect this committee.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Okay, no problem.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thanks, Chair.

What I'll say is that Mr. Bellavance and all members of the committee know that the committee is fully capable of acting independently of the government and should be acting independently of the government. There are many motions where the government already has a position on something but this committee chooses to study it anyway.

In fact, look at some of the motions coming up today. Mr. Easter has a motion on prison farm operations. The government has studied this. The government has done consultation on this, but there's a motion here for the committee to look at this. There's something on business risk management being part of AgriFlexibility. There are all sorts of things the government has studied as the government, but this committee chooses to conduct its own study. If it's important to the committee, the committee should study it. And I think that's where Mr. Shipley's coming from, and that's where I'm coming from on this amendment.

The future of farming is very important to this committee. This is what I'm certainly hearing when I speak to farmers. They are very concerned that the youth are not getting involved. So as farmers get older, what happens to that family farm when the present farmer is no longer able to farm, for whatever reason? I think it's very important and I think this committee should study that.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Lemieux.

Before we go to Mr. Easter and Mr. Hoback, who just came in, I guess it's December 3 that the young farmers are going to be on the Hill. So unless you're implying that maybe we should have the minister in at the same time to give us an update.... Is that what you're suggesting, Mr. Bellavance? Maybe later?

Go ahead, Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I know Mr. Blackburn is doing his travels, but one of the problems with this government is the secrecy it operates in. If I recall correctly—and maybe the parliamentary secretary or somebody on the government side can tell us what happened to it—the previous parliamentary secretary, Guy Lauzon, went across the country and did some kind of a study on farmers. I know he met with the producers in my area and some other areas across the country. I understand, according to the media, it cost a fair bit of money. But I haven't seen a copy of that study. I'm wondering if maybe the parliamentary secretary could make that available to us.

As well, at the last meeting the parliamentary secretary mentioned some kind of advisory committee that was being set up—I believe it was the beef industry groups that were here—and yet the parliamentary secretary refused to tell us the names. So I wonder if he's willing today to table the names of the advisory committee on beef that the government has set up, whose names they want to keep secret—I don't know why.

But maybe he can answer those two questions, Mr. Chair. Information that taxpayers paid for in terms of Guy Lauzon travelling across the country would be valuable, I would think, in terms of the young farmers program.

• (1555)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Bezan, on a point of order.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): We need to be practising the rules of relevance. The motion itself is talking about a study on young farmers. Mr. Easter is going on at length about a number of other studies the government has participated in. I think we should get back to the matter at hand, which is this motion and the amendment on the motion, and have a vote.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I don't think that's a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. James Bezan: It is a point of order, right out of Marleau and Montpetit.

Hon. Wayne Easter: The Guy Lauzon study was on farming, which would be inclusive of young farmers. So I would expect we should be provided with that information—actually, taxpayers paid for it.

On the new grouping, I would expect they want young farmers in the beef industry, hopefully. I would like to see the names to see if there are any young farmers on this so-called secret advisory committee to the minister on beef, which the parliamentary secretary mentioned a couple of weeks ago.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Storseth, do you have a point of order?

Mr. Brian Storseth: On Mr. Bezan's point of order, he hasn't been in committee for some time and he wouldn't necessarily realize that we've given Mr. Easter some leeway because he has really struggled when Mr. Valeriote has not been here to help him.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): What's your point of order?

Mr. Brian Storseth: I was just defending Mr. Easter, that's all.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Oh, okay.

We're going to go back to Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm glad to see everybody's having fun here this afternoon.

In relation to Mr. Bellavance's concern, I think if the Outstanding Young Farmers happen to be here in December, as they're down for three or four days, if that could be arranged, that would be good. The intent, though, is that we're finishing off the competition, and the report on competitiveness in agriculture is to come forward by the end of the year. We agreed as a committee that that's how the schedule would be laid out.

I'm looking at this, and from our past discussions, we would come back towards the end of January, when we return after the Christmas break. If we can put something in on a day when the Outstanding Young Farmers are here, that would be wonderful. But the whole intent is to move this on.

As my colleague Mr. Lemieux has said, this committee has an opportunity to work with the minister in terms of what his consultations are. But it doesn't take away at all from what has been brought to us by other witnesses who have come forward in the discussions that we've had around competitiveness in agriculture. It has been a natural lead-in, which is what brought me to bring the motion forward. If there's a concern about the sustainability of agriculture and concern about that sustainability in different sectors of the industry, I think we need to investigate all those sectors to find out what is working and what isn't working, what is good within an industry, and the government programs that would support that.

I think we have an opportunity to spend a few weeks at this, but give it a timeline so we know we have a starting point and an end point. I'm suggesting again that we would look at it for six or seven weeks.

I think unless there's more discussion, we could bring it to a vote, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): This is the amendment, of course. Let's bring the amendment to a vote.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Now we're going to go to the main motion.

The clerk will read out the main motion, and we'll go from there.

The Clerk: The motion as amended reads:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food study government and industry initiatives around the future of farming, primarily focusing on young farmers and their involvement in agriculture.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Is there any further discussion on that motion?

Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: I made some comments earlier, and it was not just idle talk on my part. This is a real concern for me; I feel very strongly about this. No one could possibly oppose the idea of the Committee studying an issue like the future of young farmers. However, I repeat: on November 9, Mr. Blackburn, the Minister of State for Agriculture, began a cross-country tour to look at that very issue.

Mr. Lemieux says that we are independent of government and that we can carry out any study we like. That may be so, but reflecting on the examples he cited, I must say I do not recall seeing any press releases or major announcements on SRMs or on prison farms. Here, though, we are talking about a study that will undoubtedly yield specific proposals to government by young farmers. The government will probably want to respond to those concerns—at least, I hope so.

Once we have seen what the government has in mind in terms of helping young farmers, it would be very appropriate at that time for the Committee to conduct a study. That is what I am suggesting. When Mr. Blackburn has completed his tour and we know what came of it, why not ask the steering committee of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food to consider that and bring it back to the Committee? That would give us a chance to see what the government intends to do. We will already have a good idea of its plans, assuming that the government is transparent. If it passes on the information collected from young farmers, we will have a good idea of what their concerns are and what they are proposing. We could then hear from the Minister who will have met personally with young farmers and other young people. We could then bring in a lot of valuable and interested witnesses. That would be a lot more efficient than doing our work at the same time as the Minister, who will be making stops across the country and meeting with people.

I agree with Wayne. We don't even know whether the results of this exercise will be made public. I have no idea. If the Minister has nothing to say after holding these roundtables, if he has nothing to offer and does not intend to do anything, the issue will just become a dead letter. If that happens, it would then be very appropriate for us to take up this matter. Even if he proposes solutions or government measures to help young farmers, nothing would prevent us from looking at them and carrying out our own review.

However, I believe it would be premature to do that now, given that the Minister has begun this tour. If he had not decided to do that, I would not even be discussing this. I would immediately have said that this is a very good topic for the Committee to look at. Unfortunately, however, I feel we would just be duplicating the work that is now ongoing, when we could actually be looking at other issues. We know how the Conservatives operate. They will be bringing forward suggestions before we have even submitted our report to government. Before we have even made recommendations, they will come along and suggest a whole series of measures that do not necessarily jibe with what we were going to propose, at a point where we have not even completed our work.

I have been through this once before. To do the same thing again would be highly regrettable, in my opinion. Why not wait for Minister Blackburn to complete his cross-country tour and see the results? I invite Mr. Shipley to ask the steering committee to put that on its agenda. I will be the first one to defend the idea of talking about young farmers.

● (1600)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Bellavance.

Mr. Easter, did you say you had a comment?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, I did, and it will take a little while.

We support a study of young farmers coming into the industry. We support that unequivocally. The key to bringing young farmers into the industry is to have a healthy agricultural industry and a government that supports the industry. This government has a record of absolute failure on a number of issues.

I'll go through some of them again today. The key question for young farmers coming into the industry is the state of the industry and the Canadian government's support for it, as compared to the support of other governments around the world. Sadly, this government has failed to support the agricultural industry. As some will know, I raised a question in the House today—

An hon. member: No one was paying any attention.

Hon. Wayne Easter: That's fine. You don't usually pay attention to agriculture issues, but that's par for the course with this government.

The minister sloughed off the response. But if there's anything that shows a lack of support for the agricultural industry, it is Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's performance report itself. The fact...

I hear a member on the other side saying it's irrelevant. No, it is not. The whole thrust of my remarks is that if young farmers are going to come into this industry, one, they need to see a government that supports the industry—this one does anything but, and there has never been a government that has neglected the industry so badly—and two, the industry itself has to be healthy. If any part of the industry is unhealthy right now, it is hogs and beef.

I'll now go back to the performance report.

● (1605)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Is this relevant to the motion?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, it is, because of government expenditures. The bottom line is whether there is support from the government for this industry. Obviously there is not. Under business risk management in the performance report, which the department itself tables as an assessment of the security of the food system—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I have a point of order. There is a question of relevance here. We're talking about a motion that has to do with a study of young farmers. I sense a filibuster. If Mr. Easter feels so strongly about this issue, he should vote against the motion. That is how he will speak loudest. Let's move on with the vote. This is important committee work, and he is filibustering.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay, Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: This is not a filibuster. This is laying a foundation for an assessment of government support for young farmers coming into the industry. We are trying to find out what the government needs to do.

In the performance report—

Mr. James Bezan: I have a point of order. In Marleau and Montpetit, the rules of relevance begin on page 530, chapter 13. We're debating a motion about the possibility of a study. Mr. Easter wants to start the study right now, and that is fine, after the motion passes and the committee begins its work. But until then, you should not be allowing any of these interventions by Mr. Easter.

Let's talk about the motion. Let's vote on the motion and continue with our business. Witnesses will be here later. You have a number of motions—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Bezan, you need to know that on any motion, whether we like the rules or not, every committee member can speak.

Mr. James Bezan: That's right, but you have to be relevant. There are rules for debate and you need to enforce them.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I'm sure Mr. Easter will take your advice and finish off what he's doing.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Absolutely. I believe at 4:30 we are starting with witnesses, so we have considerable time to debate this issue and vote on it.

As I was saying, the fact of the matter is that on business risk management programs for the hogs and beef industry, in which many young farmers in my riding are participating, the government cut back on income support by \$961,400,000. That's a serious issue at a time when the hog and beef industry is facing the worst crisis, certainly in hogs, that we've ever had in Canadian history. The government doesn't use the funding that is available to it under business risk management.

Mr. Randy Hoback: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We're back to another point of order.

Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Again, Mr. Chair, as my colleague said, it's about relevance. He just keeps wandering and wandering.

And I can understand, Mr. Chair. I know you understand the importance of young farmers and getting them in the industry. Why would we waste the committee's time with this type of irrelevance? Let's get to the motion and let's move forward and deal with this motion.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): As the chair, I hope we will get to that.

And we also have Carol Hughes with us. Welcome to our committee.

She would like to speak on it too.

So Mr. Easter, perhaps you can do your best, and then we can finish up with our speakers and we can vote on this.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, we will stay on topic.

One of the key issues for young farmers coming into the industry is in fact to have a secure safety net program. If you recall, there was a lot of criticism over CAIS. The new government said they would scrap that. All they did was change the name and it became a new name, AgriStability. In fact, what we're learning now is that in the beef and hog sector, which can hopefully be a potentially strong industry again, very few qualify.

This committee, when I believe Mr. Bezan was chair, in terms of trying to provide some security to the industry as a whole, including security that young people could feel confident coming into the industry, made some recommendations in terms of what could be done to make the safety net system work better. Of course those recommendations were never lived up to by this Government of Canada. But worse yet, what we're finding out now is that the cheques rolling out under that AgriStability program, which was supposed to replace the scrapped CAIS, are only 60% of what was expected.

So here, Mr. Chair, is a real dilemma for young people coming into the industry. The safety nets that the government had claimed they were going to bring into place are not in fact there to be good safety nets, to give some young people some assurance coming into the industry.

To add to that, if we recall what the Prime Minister said during the election, he promised there would be a cost of production program starting at \$100 million a year. Cost of production really sounds good. If you're a young farmer coming into the industry, then, "Man, I'm going to get my cost of production. I'm going to be all right. I'll be secure." But it's another case of the Prime Minister breaking his word, of cost of production never being delivered, and in fact, it was given the slice entirely during the last budget, and cost of production no longer is on the government agenda. It's just another case of the Prime Minister, as I said, breaking his word.

Then, of course, AgriFlexibility is something that—

• (1610)

Mr. Brian Storseth: A point of order.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): A point of order, Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: If you'll give me a moment, I'll give Mr. Easter a chance to have a glass of water for a second.

I'd like to point out once again the sanctimoniousness of Mr. Easter. In July 2005 he tabled a report that dealt with what he perceived as being issues with the agriculture industry in our country. In that report he did talk about his recommendations for young farmers. On page 31, it reads "That governments consult primary producers and their representatives in the design and review of farm support programs." It's done.

On page 32—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Storseth, I don't think it's a point of order, but—

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, if you'll just give me an opportunity. I don't know how you can rule on relevance until I'm finished.

It reads: "That the federal government improve Canada's pesticide licensing process and specifically the performance of the Pest Management Review Agency." That's done.

"Those Canadian governments pursue bilateral and regional trade agreements to provide more targeted market access for Canadian products." That's done.

"That governments undertake campaigns to educate citizens about the benefits provided to the country by Canadian agriculture." That's done.

"That the federal government act to differentiate "made-in-Canada" food products—"

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): This is not a point of order. Mr. Storseth—

Mr. Brian Storseth: There are two more pages, and Mr. Easter is just upset that our government and our minister actually have done something, when he sat on his hands for 14 years.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Storseth, yours is not a point of order, and I think Mr. Easter is getting off track a bit.

Mr. Brian Storseth: I was just getting to the relevant thing. The best part is still to come, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): My two colleagues, I wish we could get back on track. We have some new members at our committee and they would like to speak too.

Mr. Easter, perhaps you could wrap it up, and then we can go to the NDP.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chair, I will.

I'm glad to see the government is reading my report, "Empowering Canadian Farmers in the Marketplace". It's just too bad they won't act on it a little more strenuously.

Anyway, to the point I was going to raise on AgriFlexibility, Mr. Chair, when I travel through Ontario and a wee bit in Quebec, there's strong support for an AgriFlexibility program that can actually be used as a companion program for ASRA in Quebec and business risk management, or RMP, in Ontario.

The minister promised there would be an AgriFlexibility program; however, it doesn't meet the requirements the farm industry had asked for in terms of AgriFlexibility. As a result, there is concern among farmers that it's not being used properly. In fact, we're beginning to see now that AgriFlexibility is really a slush fund for the minister to do the little things he wants to do instead of being used as a companion program for RMP and ASRA, as was the intent of the industry in the beginning.

An hon. member: You're never in your riding.

• (1615)

Hon. Wayne Easter: I am in my riding, guys. I meet with hog and beef producers quite often. Maybe that's your government's problem.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Easter and colleagues, we just hope young farmers are not watching this right now.

That being said, Mr. Easter, perhaps you could wrap it up, because the NDP hasn't had a chance to speak on this motion yet. It would be nice for them to say a few words.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I have two more points, Mr. Chair.

We've had the hog and beef industry before this committee, as I said, and they expressed a real concern. The beef industry came together—and it's not a big amount of money—to get some assurance and bring some stability to the industry. They asked for something as simple as \$31.70 a head for OTM cattle, an SRM disposal compensation program, at a cost of only \$24 million. The Conservative members rejected it. That would have given some assurance to people coming into the beef industry that the government cares, but the government, of course, rejected that out of hand.

The biggest area on beef and hogs—and we raised it with the hog producers when they were here—was that a number of things could be done that would not affect us in terms of the WTO and trade issues; that is, eliminating the viability test. In fact, that nearly \$1 billion that's in the safety net programs could have been used and paid out to producers without affecting us on a trade basis. We could have used the better of the Olympic average or the previous three-year average for reference margin calculations. The beef and hog industry support that, but the government continues to reject it.

Mr. Chair, if the government had moved in a couple of areas and used the money that's available in the Agriculture and Agri-Food documents, it would have helped the industry and perhaps given some security and a better foundation for people to come into this industry.

The last point I would make, Mr. Chair, also goes to what the Conservative members on this committee rejected. That was the

proposal from the Canadian Association of Agri-Retailers. They talked about the security measures in place in the United States.

An hon. member: That isn't relevant.

Hon. Wayne Easter: It is relevant.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Our committee today consists of nine males and two females. The ladies didn't get to speak yet. I would hope we would let them speak.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I need 30 seconds, Mr. Chair.

The reason this point is relevant is that if a young farmer is going to grow grain, corn, or crops—and certainly there's increase in the organic area—a lot of them are going to use fertilizer. Because the Government of Canada rejects the crop input security tax credit they have asked for, it means this cost gets passed on to primary producers. It's a case of the government again showing they really don't care about this agricultural industry and therefore it's one of the reasons young farmers are turning away from the industry.

I have about 10 more points I could make, Mr. Chair, but given the time I will stop there.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Maybe we'll have time for that later, Mr. Easter. Thank you very much.

Mrs. Hughes, you're next.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Thank you very much.

Thank you for the enlightening speech. I hope I didn't lose my train of thought too much.

But I want to actually support my colleague from the Bloc with regard to his comments about Minister Blackburn being out there and doing this tour in trying to help young farmers. I don't think any of us here are opposed to doing a study on young farmers and looking at the sustainability and profitability of the farming industry at both levels. We certainly wouldn't be here talking about these types of studies had the Liberal government and the Conservative government dealt with this efficiently since they had and have been in power.

Again I think it's important, in accordance with the comments made by my colleague from the Bloc, to say that I too am kind of leery about going forward at this point with this motion, given the fact that there is some work being done out there. I think the study would be in a better position to look at proper direction once a report is tabled, unless, of course, our colleagues on the other side are basically of the opinion that the report that will be tabled may not be tabled in its entirety and may not be transparent. If that's the case, then I could see why they would want to move forward on such a study. Maybe they would like to clarify that for us.

I'm from northern Ontario, and I can tell you that at a recent event I had a young farmer come up to me and say how difficult it is for them to actually start up. If they were listening today, I think they'd be pretty disappointed with hearing all the interruptions on the other side with regard to my colleague on the Liberal side and some of the comments he was making. Unfortunately, as I said, both sides have continuously refused or basically ignored the needs of farmers in this country, or we wouldn't be here trying to argue this at this point.

The reason I won't be voting in favour of this today is to ensure that you have the proper information on the tour that's just being conducted and that this motion be tabled after that fact.

Thank you.

• (1620)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mrs. Hughes.

We're going to go to Madame Bonsant.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: Thank you. It's always amusing to witness testosterone contests.

Mr. Chairman, I agree with my colleague. If Mr. Blackburn is visiting young farmers, he will be able to take the pulse of the community directly on the ground. My riding is large and primarily agricultural. I have been to every corner of it and I can tell you that one thing is mentioned over and over. If we had really taken the time to look at what is happening in the farm industry, we would not be where we are now. Young farmers are having trouble making a go of it, because of oil and the weather. Forecasts may be made this week only for people to discover next year that there is a shortage of water, rather than a surplus of it. You have to keep starting all over again. If Mr. Blackburn wants to go on this tour, then he should do so and table a report, but not a year from now; he should not just take his time like the Minister of Justice; we are still waiting to receive the RCMP report.

We try to find solutions to problems, but all we ever see is partisanship. It's shocking. In my riding, farmers are committing suicide because they don't know where to turn. And in this Committee, we have clowns who sit here playing with people's lives. I don't find that funny. If you haven't gone to see your farmers, to find out how things are going, I can tell you that I have. I talked to a man who saw his friend standing at the top of a grain elevator. He wanted to jump because he wasn't receiving any help. And you say you are concerned about the fate of young farmers? I doubt that very much; you're not even concerned about what's happening to older farmers. It's terrible. I have good reason to be a sovereignist!

Mr. Chairman, no one can be against motherhood and apple pie, but we can be smart about this. We should get down to work and set about trying to change things. I am a new member of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. I now know what happens when a bunch of petty males sitting around this table decide to engage in pitched battle. But that is not what being a member of Parliament is all about. A member of Parliament is there to help people, young and old. Even if there is a tour ongoing and they are canvassed on this, do you think they will laugh in our face if we ask them to come back? They will tell us that Mr. Blackburn came to see them and will repeat what he said. Then we will propose something

else to them, and they will respond by saying they were told something different and that something else was going to be done. It will be exactly like what happened with "Product of Canada" labelling. When the young people came to see us, they said they wanted it to be 85%. But you just went your own sweet way and set the standard at 98%. So, what is the point of our hearing witnesses? It's a slap in the face for them.

Furthermore, people appeared before the Committee to explain organic products. But you paid no attention to their testimony. What is the point of all these reports if you have absolutely no interest in helping these people? That is what is really shocking about all this.

I, personally, went to meet with farmers. You, too, are farmers, but you are lucky enough to be in receipt of a good salary and be able to pay young farmers. The farmers in my riding are not that lucky. You have two salaries, but that is not the case for young people. They are looking after their parents and trying to work seven days a week, but it just doesn't work. They're discouraged. Just for once in your life, could you stop thinking about Afghanistan and turn your minds to the young people out there who are trying to get started in farming and make a life for themselves? Also, a lot of people who leave the urban environment to live in the country receive no help whatsoever. It's fine to talk about young farmers and to have all sorts of good intentions, but you don't actually put your heart into it. That's the truth; you can't deny it.

I have been here for less than a year, and I haven't seen anything actually be resolved. Mr. Storseth and Mr. Easter, all you have been able to say is that you did it. So, what are we doing here? Young people need our help, and it is up to us to give them the help they need.

• (1625)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you very much, Madame Bonsant.

This motion was discussed at a previous meeting, and I think we'd do everybody a service if we could get the motion done today. We only have a few minutes left.

André, would you like to say a few words, and then Mr. Shipley? I would appreciate it if you would speak for just a minute each, so that we can tidy this up and vote on it before our witnesses come.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: I wanted to make a suggestion. It's about Minister Blackburn's cross-Canada tour.

The press release says that the Minister will be organizing roundtables. However, Mr. Blackburn has decided to do that in only five provinces, or half of Canada. He is only doing part of the work. Perhaps we could do the other part? I know he will be convening roundtables in Ontario, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. So, people in Alberta, Prince Edward Island and Manitoba will not have an opportunity to be heard. Five provinces are being left out, although I do not know exactly why. Maybe he intends to invite people from the Maritimes to join him in Nova Scotia.

Once he has completed his tour, I would suggest that the Committee take a look at the report I hope Minister Blackburn will be tabling. If we invite him and other stakeholders to appear, we can do the necessary follow-up by conducting our own study. I think that would be the ideal way to proceed.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Bellavance.

I think we can take those suggestions to the steering committee and deal with them that way.

Mr. Shipley, you can tidy up your motion—

Mr. Bev Shipley: I have a quick clarification, Mr. Chair.

You know, I've farmed all my life. When I started, it was really difficult to start farming. That was a few years ago.

Aside from all the stuff that's been talked about here, the minister is out talking about agriculture. This motion is specific to beginning young farmers. So I ask, Mr. Chair, that we set those discussions aside, that we work within this committee to deal with the focus on beginning and young farmers, and that we call the vote on it.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): The vote has been called.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, can we have a recorded vote, please?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay. Are there any other questions on the motion?

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Can I get some clarification on what my colleague from the Bloc has just—

An hon. member: The vote has been called.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): No, I asked if there was any more comment.

Do you want clarification?

• (1630)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Yes.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): He is suggesting that when the minister is done, if there are any gaps that weren't visited throughout the country, the steering committee would look at them and suggest that the committee go and visit those areas.

Is that right?

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Well, given the fact that it's not part of the motion—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): It has nothing to do with the motion. It's a suggestion that the steering committee look at it.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Can you refresh my memory as to the timeline of when the motion would actually take effect? When would this study actually come forward?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We've discussed this before. What we're hoping is that in the second half, after Christmas, we would get right into the whole thing, the future of farming and young farmers. That was the kind of mandate we wanted after the Christmas break. This motion is a prelude to it, I guess.

Is everybody in agreement with that? Does that clarify that, Ms. Hughes?

Hon. Wayne Easter: The steering committee would decide the timeframe based on the motions there before it—

Mr. Bev Shipley: It was asked of me, Mr. Chair, if I had some guidance, so I'm giving you some guidance. The steering committee makes those decisions.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I know. They make recommendations to the main committee.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Chairman, I have a point of order. It is past 4:30 p.m. The agenda says that the Committee's business is to end at 4:30 p.m. We have witnesses waiting to talk about program review. Since that part of the agenda was scheduled to begin at 4:30 p.m., I suggest we abide by the agenda and vote on the motion at the next Committee meeting.

Voices: No.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We've gone past the time—

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: It's not a matter of yes or no. We have to follow the agenda. At 4:30 p.m., the time set aside for the discussion was up. It is now time to move on to the next item, which to hear from our witnesses. We can deal with the motion at the next—

[English]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, you called the vote and it's a recorded vote.

Why are you so threatened by this?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I think we've called the vote. Somebody also said it should be a recorded vote. So I think we're going to go ahead with the vote and record it as is.

An hon. member: Good idea.

Mr. Chair: So let's get on with this, guys. Okay?

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, can we have the clerk read the motion? Thank you.

The Clerk: Once again, the motion as amended reads:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food study government and industry initiatives around the future of farming focusing on young farmers and their involvement in agriculture.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): There's one more little bit of business I have to deal with before we bring the witnesses here.

It was brought to my attention that the young farmers are going to be here on December 3. Now I know that properly we should take this to the steering committee. Right now, on December 3, we have GMOs slated. There is a day the following week available to us to do GMOs. Why I'm bringing this up now is that we have to tell the witnesses sooner rather than later.

Is it the will of the committee that we invite the young farmers here then, or do we wait until whenever?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Often, Mr. Chair, when we've had the Young Farmers of Canada here, we've had them to a lunch meeting or something like that. We could do something along those lines. We could call a special meeting. Otherwise, we have to move the GMOs back a day. If they're in town, we should take the opportunity to meet them.

If the steering committee makes a conference call on it and makes a decision, that's fine by me.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): You're suggesting that maybe we could continue with our regular business and maybe meet separately or even go around to their meeting or something to that effect.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I think it's useful to have a formal setting with them, as we've had before. We've had sandwiches with them or whatever. We do need to hear them, and I suppose it would be better if it were on the record. We could call a special meeting, for that matter.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay. If that's all right with everybody, we'll continue with our schedule as is, and we'll have a special meeting with the young farmers.

Is everybody in agreement? Are there any comments?

• (1635)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Unless it's a problem for...

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Yes, Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thanks.

I'd like to put forward a motion that we continue with our committee business. The opposition burned through, basically, an hour on a motion.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We've decided that we're going to move forward.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I've put forward a motion, Chair, that I want us to continue with committee business, because the opposition has burned through an hour.

I'm going to comment on my motion. My comment is that we don't leave enough time for committee business. We are always behind on committee business, and the opposition just burned through an hour. We can deal with the rest of these motions in about five minutes if the opposition will just cooperate and stop the filibustering.

There's my motion, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Lemieux, that is their prerogative. You know that, right?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, he was off topic.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): It is their prerogative if they want to talk about the motion. You know that.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: That's fine, Chair. My motion still stands.

Hon. Wayne Easter: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, there was an agreement at this committee. It is in the minutes, and it is on the schedule. At 4:30 we are to hear witnesses. That is what we agreed to do. There's the Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers' Coalition. There's the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food. That is who we are here to hear at 4:30. That was the agreement. I expect it to be....

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Easter.

I'm going to ask the witnesses to come forward, and unless—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: On a point of order, there's a motion on the floor, Chair, and you can't ignore it. The motion is that we continue with committee business.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We're not dealing with any more motions.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I've already put a motion on the floor. You must deal with it.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): The only thing you could do now is question the chair.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Chair, there's a motion on the floor. You must deal with the motion. The motion is that we continue with committee business.

Mr. Brian Storseth: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, if I could just make one salient point, it is the fact that this can take five minutes if the opposition chooses not to filibuster for the next hour.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Well, the clerk has informed me that, yes, you can go forward with your motion. But I'm very disappointed in how this meeting is going, because we have these witnesses who have come forward. To do these motions right, it's going to take at least another hour. That's the way it works here. Anyway, it's your call.

Are you suggesting that the witnesses leave the room?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, I think the witnesses can wait until we conduct some more committee business, Chair.

I think you're in an unfortunate position. The opposition has burned through an hour's worth of time over a motion that they all voted for.

The motion stands, Chair, and we need to bring it to a vote.

You all voted for the motion, but you burned through an hour.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay, can the clerk read the motion?

The Clerk: As I understood it, it was that the committee keep going with committee business.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: That is correct.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chair, I believe when you started the meeting you said that the committee would go until 4:30. There was no objection from the government side at the time. So a debate on one motion has taken place and it's been voted on.

Mr. Chair, we've seen this constantly from this government. When they want to play games, the usual chair never shows up. We usually do business at the end of the meeting so the witnesses are not jeopardized—

An hon. member: It was your idea.

Hon. Wayne Easter: No, it wasn't. It's so that witnesses are not jeopardized in case we go longer on committee business.

We on this side have followed the rules and have followed what we thought was an agreement. As usual, the government members compromised that agreement. It's one of the reasons we have no trust anymore in either the chair of the committee or in some of the government.... So that's the reality of the world.

You guys play games by the chair not being here as he was supposed to be. If he has problems—

An hon. member: He told you.

Hon. Wayne Easter: He said he may or he may not, but this seems to be what happens every time we are to debate a controversial issue, so that you can change the majority on this committee. So it's no damned wonder that we don't—

An hon. member: Wayne, you're the one who's filibustering.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Order.

Mr. Easter is speaking on the motion.

Are you finished, Mr. Easter?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: This is a pathetic spectacle. It's strange: when we want to spend a little more time talking about certain things, we encounter filibustering and dilatory tactics, but when it comes from the government, it's another matter all together. We have seen this over and over again, whether it be with respect to the listeriosis issue or any other one, for that matter.

I believe members of Parliament have every right to express themselves, even when people don't like what they have to say. On occasion, I, too, have not been very happy when the Conservatives have monopolized the discussion. These are clearly dilatory motions. What Mr. Lemieux has just moved is a dilatory motion. That is a shame. People have been called here to testify. They made the effort

to come and are now witnessing this unfortunate spectacle. They have a copy of the Notice of Meeting and they can see that, according to the agenda, Committee business was scheduled between 3:30 and 4:30 p.m. They were patient enough to wait. They knew that at 4:30 p.m., they would be appearing. They only have one hour to tell us what they think about existing programs. That is not a lot of time. Meanwhile, they are witnessing all of this.

Personally, I am not particularly bothered by this, but Mr. Lemieux will have to live with his decision—a decision that means these people will not have an opportunity to appear. We obviously do not intend to wait until there are more Conservatives here so that they can push through a motion every time they decide to. We are not going to play that game. The people who are here today will be able to tell everyone exactly what transpired. From what I can see, the Conservatives have decided to hold up the process. We are already 10 minutes behind. We should actually have started to hear their testimony at 4:30 p.m.

● (1640)

[English]

Mr. Brian Storseth: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm sorry to interrupt, but this is in fact a dilatory motion. Marleau and Montpetit, at page 458 in chapter 12, "The Process of Debate", state, "Dilatory motions can only be moved by a Member who has been recognized by the Chair", which has been done, "in the regular course of debate...". They say, "Dilatory motions include motions: to proceed to the Orders of the Day" and also "to proceed to another order of business", which is what this motion is. Marleau and Montpetit state further that dilatory motions cannot be debated.

So we go to a vote on this.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): No. Any motion can be debated.

An hon. member: No, no. This cannot be debated.

Mr. Brian Storseth: This is a motion to proceed to another order of business that was already on the agenda.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Bellavance, are you finished?

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: No.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Go ahead. We're going to continue to debate your motion.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Then I challenge the ruling of the chair.

Mr. Brian Storseth: That also is something that we go directly to a vote on.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Bellavance.

Mr. André Bellavance: No—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Are you challenging the chair?

Mr. Brian Storseth: I'm challenging the ruling of the chair, because you're wrong.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Go ahead.

Mr. Brian Storseth: I did.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): There has to be a vote here.

Monsieur Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Excuse me, Mark, but I would like to hear the Clerk's interpretation of what Mr. Storseth just said about Marleau-Montpetit.

The Clerk: In my opinion, the motion proposing that the Committee continue its business is not a dilatory motion because it does not talk about moving to another item on the agenda. However, if the motion stated that the witnesses should be heard now, that would relate to another item on the agenda. So, if the Committee continues its discussions on the same topic, it is an ordinary motion and not a dilatory motion, in my view.

Mr. André Bellavance: We can debate it then.

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. André Bellavance: Which means that the Chair is correct.

We just heard the Chair's ruling, and that ruling is supported by the Clerk.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Let's have clarification. As far as the clerk is concerned, the chair was right. But you're ruling the chair out of order anyway, so that's your prerogative.

We have to bring that to a vote, apparently.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chair, the rules don't matter to the governing party if they don't suit their purpose. That's exactly what we're seeing here. It's what we see in Parliament. It's what we're seeing in the country.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We don't need anymore discussion.

Hon. Wayne Easter: If you don't like the rules, break them, and if you have a majority you get away with them. That's what you're doing.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We're going to bring this to a vote.

The witnesses are here. I don't think they need to see anymore of this charade. I think we just have to bring it to a vote.

It's going to be a recorded vote. I guess you guys are saying that the chair's ruling be sustained.

• (1645)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, that's your question.

Mr. Brian Storseth: That's your question.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: The question is whether your ruling should be sustained.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Let's vote on the motion, that the chair's ruling be sustained.

(Ruling of the chair overturned: nays, 6; yeas, 5)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I thought that the motion could still be debated

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, the motion is that we continue with committee business.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Those in favour of continuing with committee business?

Hon. Wayne Easter: I'm asking for an interpretation. If the motion is to continue committee business, this agenda is committee business. It starts at 4:30.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Easter, according to the clerk, apparently they can overrule an agenda.

Hon. Wayne Easter: They can overrule the rules. I understand that.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We were in the middle of a vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): That being said, we're going to go back to motions. I think we're going back to Wayne Easter's motion.

Did you have a comment?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Yes, I want to make a comment, Mr. Chair.

I'm speaking quite honestly here. I'm not sure why the opposition is so nervous. It's unfortunate that it's coming down to this. They seem to feel there's some sort of plot at work here. There is not. It's just that we didn't appreciate being filibustered for an hour. That's it.

Their motions are the next motions on the table. We are not threatened by this, and I don't understand why they are so worried. It's unfortunate that you are stuck in this position.

That's the only comment I want to make.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you for your sympathy, but I have taken on bigger battles. At the end of the day, whether one interprets it as filibustering or giving information, it's not for me to decide.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: They spoke for an hour on a motion that they voted for.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): It's a very important motion, apparently, on the young farmers, but anyway, hopefully we can move on.

We'll move on to Mr. Easter's motion.

I'm sorry, Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: I would like to put an end to this circus by moving that we hear the witnesses who have taken the time to come.

I therefore move that we go back to our agenda and proceed to hear from the witnesses, at least until 5:30 p.m.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We have to vote right away on that motion. Let's deal with the motion.

Do you understand the motion, that the witnesses now be heard? It is moved by Mr. Bellavance.

(Motion negatived)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Order. We're going back to business, and we have Mr. Easter's motion on prison farms.

Does everybody have that motion? Maybe Mr. Easter wants to begin by reading it.

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

The motion reads:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food undertake a study into the activities of Corrections Canada's prison farm operations; and that the committee travel at least to the facilities located in Kingston, Ontario, in order to hear testimony from those involved in the operation of the facilities from across the country; that the study's conclusions and recommendations be reported back to the House; and that the committee comment on the government's attitude toward the farming community as reflected in the statements by the Minister of Public Safety.

Let me start with the comments from the Minister of Public Safety, because while the government members on the other side argued earlier that I was filibustering, the fact is that I was not. If you're going to bring young people into the industry, you have to have a government that shows it cares about the farming community. If there was ever a statement by the minister of the crown that shows that the government doesn't care, it was the statement made by Peter Van Loan when he was trying to defend himself against the closing of prison farms across the country. Why that's important to this committee is that about 300 farms in the Kingston area depend on that farm. I've been there. It's efficient; it's productive.

But Minister Van Loan had this to say about prison farms and inmates who work and learn on prison farms:

We felt that money could be more adequately redirected to programs where people would actually gain employable skills, as virtually nobody who went through those prison farms ended up with employable skills, because they were based on a model of how agriculture was done 50 years ago, when it was labour intensive, and not capital intensive, as it is today.

What Minister Van Loan has clearly shown is really the government's attitude towards the farming community in general and its condescending attitude that shows through. The fact of the matter is that I've been on that prison farm; in fact, I was in charge of it as Solicitor General. I know it makes money and I do know the abattoir on that farm provides services to 150 farms in the area and close to 300 businesses. The farm has one of the most highly productive herds—it's called the pen farm dairy herd. If the farm is sold out from under the prison farm system, we will lose one of the top producing herds in the country, genetics that go back to 1942, genetics that win prizes at shows across the country. And the government wants to close it down.

I think the motion is important from the point of view that it shows the government attitude.

The other point that I guess I might as well make is that while the minister said they're losing \$4 million—which they're not, but that's nothing new from this government, because it's all about messaging; it doesn't matter if it's true—Corrections Canada, in response to an order paper question from me, did not reference the \$4 million annual losses that the minister has referenced without providing any evidence to support that claim. I believe it's another case that this government has become extremely good at, which is about messaging, whether it's factual or not.

Corrections Canada, in its response to the order paper question I presented, stated:

Alongside farming skills attained by those participating in the program, offenders also gain employability skills such as responsibility, teamwork, accountability and punctuality.

• (1650)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Chair, I have a point of order. Just before the witnesses feel this might go on to 5:30 and might think they should leave, I want to make the offer that certainly we on this side of the table would like to hear from our witnesses. We are willing to stay an extra hour to listen to our witnesses at the end of this meeting. I thought they should hear that before they slip away.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): The meeting is going to be over at 5:30—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Well, I'm making the offer, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): No, you have already made a motion that we do this business, so we're doing this business, so I don't know what you're trying to do here. I know what you're trying to do, but it's not going to—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: All I'm trying to do, Chair, is move ahead efficaciously with committee business. We were blocked for an hour, but we're glad to stay and listen to witnesses if the concern is that the witnesses will not be heard.

Hon. Wayne Easter: You know, Mr. Chair—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Just one second, Mr. Easter. Everybody in this room and this committee knows the meeting is going to 5:30. That's when the meeting is going to end. You made the decision that we're going to stick with the business and that's what we're going to do now.

Mr. Easter has the floor, and it's his motion.

• (1655)

Mr. Randy Hoback: I guess you guys aren't too sincere, are you?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Go ahead, Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I guess we are sincere, Mr. Hoback. We're very sincere. The meeting was supposed, as we said in the beginning, to start at 4:30 to hear witnesses.

An hon. member: You've been playing games all day, Wayne. You've been playing games with your witnesses. That's all you've done—play games. I'm tired of it.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I haven't played a game here.

Mr. Chair, back to the motion.

There's no sense in your trying to cover your butt now, because you caused the witnesses to have to go without being heard.

Mr. Randy Hoback: You've cost an hour of time, wasting our time. You keep it up.

An hon. member: It was your decision.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Back to the motion, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Easter, I'm sorry for the interruption. Go ahead.

Hon. Wayne Easter: The point is, Mr. Chair, as I said, that I was on that farm and saw that the people have learned teamwork and skills.

What really struck me most about the last time I was on that farm is how some of those inmates get up at 5:30 in the morning, really learn rehabilitative skills from working with cattle, and take great pride in the operation. As a number of them said to me, although they may not be employed in farming when they leave, it's the attitude they learned by working with cattle, with equipment, and with crops that has improved their personality or attitude so they'd be able to get out into the workforce and find a reliable job. In fact, there is one guy there from Summerside who said if it weren't for his being moved to this prison farm, he wouldn't have learned the computer skills he's learning now, and in three years when he gets out he thinks he'll be able to get a job in bookkeeping or accounting with those computer skills.

My point is, Mr. Chair—and I'll close at that, but there are a lot more points I could make—I really think the Minister of Public Safety in this country, with his remarks, has quite literally insulted any working farmer, not to mention those involved in agriculture generally. So that is why I have two points: one, we should go to visit the operation, because it shows how misguided the government is in terms of their closing down those farm operations; and two, with respect to the mandate of this committee, it's an operation that's productive and it's utilized by the farm community in the area. In fact, the main ones pushing for the prison farms not to close come from the farming community in the Kingston area, and we should support them in doing that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Easter.

I think Mr. Bezan has the floor now.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I do want to speak against this motion.

Wayne, I have experience with prison farms because there is one in my riding. I do spend some time there talking to CORCAN, talking to inmates, talking to Correctional Services management.

There are a number of issues surrounding the prison farm in my riding. One is employability skills that the individuals are getting off the farm. There's no doubt they have had a great experience working on the prison farm. The prison farm in Stoney Mountain includes a very good dairy farm, and it used to have a hog operation, a 2,000-head feedlot, and an extensive grain farm. Unfortunately, the inmates coming out of there, when they go back into the public, are having difficulty finding employment. There are only so many jobs out there in the agriculture sector that they can apply for, and many of them want to return to their home communities where a farming job is not an option.

If we want to have a proper transition of inmates back into society, so they are productive participants in society, we have to give them employable jobs back in their home situations, where they'll have family support, where they can take pride in having a job and earning an income and not having to look at criminal ways to generate revenue.

I think it's important. I know from my discussions with CORCAN that they want to make sure these guys do have some marketable skills. They can pick up some of the things from a farm, like welding skills and things of that nature, but we need to do more in skilled trades and education and maybe changing the business way CORCAN operates. That's what they're looking at: how do they teach inmates on a prison farm like Stoney Mountain with more skills in heavy equipment operations, how do they get them doing more in fabricating, specific machining skills, and so on? That's where they're headed.

I think we have to support that because it's about making sure the inmates, when they go back into society, have skills they can offer to their local community. That's the big reason for doing this. It has nothing to do with what Mr. Easter has been alluding to. I think all of us have seen the benefit of the prison farms in our communities, although with respect to Stoney Mountain, the surrounding area is changing as well. One reason they don't have a hog operation anymore is because of the nuisance of odour and flies and everything else that's associated with that, when the town borders the prison. It's the same thing with the dairy herd; it has been cut back, and the feedlot has been reduced almost in half because of the issue of nuisance odours and flies. So we have to be cognizant of the communities surrounding the prison farms as well.

For those reasons, I think we have to support the decision by CORCAN management at Correctional Services. I think we have to support them in knowing what's best for the inmates and getting them better established for returning into society.

• (1700)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

We'll now go to Madam Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I support this motion. Having worked in the probation and parole services for about 13 years, I know how important it is to ensure that criminals coming out of jail have some skills. Over and over again, at both the provincial and federal levels, we have seen the difficulties they have in getting counselling, in getting proper support when they come out, and in getting proper skills while they're in.

These farm prisons have proven to be quite a benefit to society, not only to the criminals but also to the community. There are mechanical skills and welding skills; it's not just about farming. Even if they go to a city, some of these skills will benefit them. If they're fairly young or have few skills, at least when they come out of prison they will be confident that they have learned something, that they can be productive in society. That's why we should not close these farm prisons.

I'm going to read a bit of what my colleague Alex Atamanenko would have liked to share with you. He believes that the objective of our prison system is to enhance public security and to increase the inmates' chances of a positive return to Canadian society, and he thinks it would be hard to imagine a better way to achieve both of these outcomes than through farm prisons. Many of the mechanical skills learned in these programs, such as welding and equipment operating, are readily translated into other livelihoods, such as construction and road building. Most important for the inmates is the opportunity to be involved in meaningful work, which can only bring value to their lives and enhance their chances of rehabilitation. In light of the growing demand for leadership on food security and food sovereignty issues and concerns about the future of farmland, Mr. Atamanenko considers it incomprehensible to contemplate closing the farm prisons.

I agree with my colleague, and that's why I believe it is important to keep these farm prisons active. We should not be looking at destroying them but at building more. It's important to do this, and I'm supporting this motion.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Ms. Hughes.

Now to the Bloc, Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I note that the Conservative government is against anything and everything that deals with rehabilitation. That's why I am not surprised to see that they want to shut down prison farms. However, it seems to me that they should, like any other responsible government, try, at the very least, to make things right again, if possible. In this world, nothing is perfect.

Before arriving at the conclusion that these farms should be shut down, there could have been an attempt to make the necessary improvements. But rehabilitation simply isn't part of the genetic makeup or ideology of this government which, on the contrary, has an ideology similar to that of the Republicans in the United States. It is clear that, in their case, the results are not particularly convincing.

It would be very much in their interest to look at the exceptional rehabilitation rate in Quebec, in particular. Criminals must be severely punished; that is clear. However, rather than keeping them in prison or imposing the death penalty, as is the case in some U.S. states, I think they should be reintegrated into society, where possible, and become productive members of society.

There is no prison farm in my riding, but there is a farm school. Problem students go there to learn about work on the farm. There are all kinds of animals. Doing that work does not necessarily mean these young people will end up working in the farm industry later on, but it does give them an opportunity to learn discipline. On the farm, schedules are very important in terms of caring for the animals. Caring for animals is a tremendous responsibility. And a farm is an exceptional place to learn that kind of discipline. The young people there have no choice: they are working with living beings, with nature and they have to come to terms with all of that. The results are very rewarding.

As a member of this Committee, I would like to visit a prison farm, as the motion proposes, to see with my own eyes what goes on there. I have no doubt that people will talk about improvements that should be made. I am in favour of the idea of our looking at this, but before we shut them all down and throw the baby out with the bath water, I think we should take our responsibilities and go and see what goes on at these prison farms.

So, I support this motion.

• (1705)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Bellavance.

We're going to go to Mr. Lemieux.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The first comment I want to make is that programs have to be targeted. We would like to rehabilitate people who are in prison, but we also want them to be able to make full use of their talents in society.

[English]

There are not many prisoners who move, after their period of incarceration, to work on farms. We're already recognizing, as a committee, that it's very challenging to enter farming. Prisoners face the same challenges, if not bigger ones. Basically I'm saying that we should be developing skills and talents for them to actually fit into a trade or a line of work once they leave prison, and not many of them go into farming.

The second thing is that it's not free to the correctional system. They must purchase, maintain, update, and overhaul farm equipment. There's a lot of money tied up just in the capital costs of running a prison farm, and there are six of them. It's a program that costs money. That money can be used to better fund other programs and to support better programs.

The third thing I want to say is that Mr. Easter mentioned that all surrounding farms will lose because of this, but I actually think they will gain because of this. The prisoners are working on prison farms and they probably consume most of what they produce. If those farms were not there, the prison would be buying local produce, supporting farms in the surrounding area. So I want to correct that, because I don't believe that was an accurate statement that Mr. Easter made.

Chair, there are a number of reasons that it's not considered to be in the best interest to move ahead or to continue with prison farms.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Lemieux.

We're going to go back to Mr. Easter on this motion. Would this be your finishing up?

• (1710)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, unless there's anybody else who wants to speak first.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Do you want to wait until somebody else speaks first?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Well, yes, I'll just conclude. It will only take me a couple of minutes.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay, go ahead.

Madam Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I just want to reiterate the importance of doing such a study and the importance of ensuring that there are skills now. Mr. Lemieux mentioned there are not too many people going on to farms. I did indicate a while ago that the skills they actually obtain aren't just for farming. The important part is to make sure there are some skills there for people to access and that they're there immediately, whether it's services for counselling or whether it's assisting people in learning skills to go out into the workforce. I think those are extremely important.

I have a cousin who actually committed suicide. He had been in and out of prisons. I asked him, "What is it? What is the problem?" Of course, he had an alcohol problem. However, when he was asked to get some help, when they offered him the services that could have helped him out in life, they offered that a week before he was discharged.

As I indicated, I worked for 13 years in the criminal justice system. It's not the fact that you're going to warehouse them and then ship them out; you need to make sure you have services and programs and things of interest in order to rehabilitate them.

On a study such as this, I think it would be important to hear about the sustainability of it and the results that come from it, because on that side of the House they say that they're tough on crimes, but being tough on crimes is putting people in jail, and it's costing the

taxpayers even more than if they were actually creating their own food and eating their own food as well as providing some of that food to food banks. You're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't. But if you don't, at the end of the day, the repercussions are even greater.

I certainly hope you would look at supporting this motion.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Madam Hughes.

We're going to go to Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: I want to follow up on Mrs. Hughes' comments.

Essentially, we aren't talking about shutting down the programming that goes on in the institutions like Stony Mountain Institution, where the farm is located. They're still going to be there getting their programming. It's still minimum security where they're at. They're still going to be living for the most part independently, cooking their own meals. They're still going to be able to go out and get training. CORCAN is still going to bring forward some of those activities rather than being involved in farming. They're going to be setting up other businesses where those individuals can go there and work and get hard skills so that they can go out and market themselves when they're released.

They're already starting to do this with a number of the inmates. They're allowing them to go and actually do on-the-job training and work at work sites off the prison with employers who are going to take them on after they leave the prison system. For that reason, I think this is something that is doable. It's making sure that they're getting all the skills and all the training that they need to be successful when they leave prison.

The farm program...although it's a great program. I've talked to inmates who have enjoyed being part of it. They know from the standpoint of animal husbandry skills that they have limited possibilities of being hired in the farming community, especially if you look at the situation in the hog industry or the cattle industry. There aren't that many jobs out there, or they live in communities where those jobs don't exist.

We have to make sure we provide them with the skills and the training so that they can go out there and transition successfully.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

Mr. Easter, for final comments on this.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

On James' last point, the Minister of Public Safety and James seem to have missed the point on the fact that working with animals is probably one of the best rehabilitative things that inmates with problems can do. James went on earlier to say that maybe the farms are losing money and maybe the inmates not going out to work on farms—

Mr. James Bezan: I never said that.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Well, the minister has, and we can't believe him. He has never provided the evidence.

In any event, whether or not they go to work on another farm here is not the point. They come out understanding farm skills, understanding farm operations, with skills in terms of punctuality, teamwork, etc., so that they can work in another job. That in itself is important.

I think the real issue here, in terms of why these particular prison farms are closing.... I might say, Mr. Chair, that the 2007 study, "A Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety", is the only study that has been done and released, and it never even referenced the prison farm. As in so much of what this government does, they move ahead on perceptions and assumptions without any real evidence. That's what we're seeing here again.

I think the real point...and the Minister of Public Safety said it in response to an order paper question tabled on October 6 on what the plans were for the land on which the prison farms currently reside. The answer was, and I quote, "Future additional capacity needs may make it necessary for some of the land to be used for prison constructions." In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Peter Van Loan stated on October 16, "It wouldn't be prudent to dispose of the land if you may have potential plans in the future to build super regional prisons."

So the real objective here, Mr. Chair, in closing down these prison farms, which give rehabilitative effect to inmates, which give training and skills in terms of farming, which teach a lot of skills in terms of teamwork, etc.... I think the real impact is that the government doesn't care about that. They might want to sell some of the land as an asset to cover the deficit they're driving this country into. They may want to use some of the land to build a super-prison, so we can throw more people in jail without the rehabilitative impact that provision farms can provide. That's really the whole thrust of this government.

As the Minister of Public Safety said, and it's indicative of the government as a whole in terms of everything from their agriculture policy to everything else, they really don't believe.... As Mr. Van Loan said, "We felt that money could be more adequately redirected to programs where people would actually gain employable skills...". It's just another insult to the farming community.

For all those reasons, Mr. Chair, I believe we should do this study. I do expect the government members will likely vote against it, because if there's one thing about these government members, it's that they don't want to find out the facts.

Thank you very much.

● (1715)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Easter.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Briefly, I think we have to remember that prisons aren't supposed to be profitable, and we understand that. I think the government has a hard time understanding that.

We talk about the skills these people gain. When we consider how many immigrants come to Canada to work on farms because the

farm industry has a hard time getting people to come to work, that should be taken into consideration.

I do have a question, if someone could answer it. Since that side seems to be quite favourable to removing the prison farms, what are you planning to do with regards to the prime farmland? I'm wondering what the plans are for this prime farmland.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I have nobody else on the list of speakers. The question has been called.

(Motion negated)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): At this point, I have a couple of things to bring to your attention. For one thing, the next motion is Mr. Atamanenko's motion.

I have received some information here, one from the House of Commons. This room is available only until six o'clock. Other rooms are available past six o'clock, but they have to know now. I've also been talking to our vice-chair, Mr. Bellavance, and because I have to leave, he's willing to chair a meeting to hear witnesses. It's my understanding from the clerk that what we need to go forward would be three government members and one opposition member. That being said, if there's agreement by the committee to continue with the witnesses at 5:30 p.m., we'd have to let the House of Commons know now. And if it will take more than half an hour, we'd need another room.

Is there any discussion on that?

Mr. Bellavance.

● (1720)

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: I made a suggestion. Since it is already 5:20 p.m., I agree that we should not deal with my motion immediately. We could instead hear from our witnesses right away, but my suggestion is as follows.

Because our witnesses from the Quebec-Ontario Grain Farmers Coalition have travelled to Ottawa to appear, we could hear them between now and 6:00 p.m. At the same time, because officials—of course, I'm always very pleased to hear from them and ask them questions—are here in Ottawa, nothing would prevent us from hearing from them at a subsequent meeting. They did not have to travel to be here today.

However, if we proceed immediately, we could at least hear from witnesses appearing on behalf of the Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers Coalition until 6:00 p.m.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Your suggestion is that we go on right now and only until six o'clock to hear witnesses. Would we continue afterwards or simply leave it at that?

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: We could hear the witnesses from the Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers Coalition until 6:00 p.m., which would give them pretty much the amount of time they were scheduled for, in any case. Approximately one half-hour had been set aside for them.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Is everybody in agreement with this, if we want to get this thing rolling?

Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I have to leave at six o'clock, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Maybe we'll do that right at six o'clock then. I could probably stay in the chair until six o'clock.

Is it agreed that we'll bring on the witnesses and if it's all right—

[Translation]

Mrs. Carol Hughes: We should ask the witnesses if they are able to stay until 6:00 p.m.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Sure.

Mr. Bellavance, you're willing to put your motion aside for now so we can hear witnesses.

Is it all right for the witnesses to come forward? Is there unanimous consent?

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: My idea was that we would hear from the witnesses at the end of the meeting.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Excuse me. We usually have a break in between, but I was hoping we'd go right to the witnesses.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Could you tell me whether Mr. Bellavance intends to table his motion now or tomorrow?

Mr. André Bellavance: No, that's fine.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I heard you say you wanted to table your motion now.

[English]

We already said we support it, André. You can put it forward. You can trust us. Watch.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Let's try to leave this meeting on a good note.

Mr. Lemieux, we're not going to have any more cross-pollination here, okay?

Some hon. members: [Inaudible—Editor]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Excuse me, we have witnesses here.

We're going to hear a presentation from the Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers' Coalition.

Mr. Van Tassel, you have the floor.

Mr. William Van Tassel (President, Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers' Coalition): We'll start with Mrs. Fletcher. Ladies first.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Oh, I'm sorry.

Madam Fletcher, you have the floor.

Ms. Erin Fletcher (Manager Public Affairs and Communications, Grain Farmers of Ontario, Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers' Coalition): Mr. Chairman, members of Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Erin Fletcher. I am a member of the Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers' Coalition, representing 41,000 farmers from Windsor to Rimouski. I am the manager of government relations and public affairs for the Grain Farmers of Ontario.

I am joined by William Van Tassel, who is the president of the Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers' Coalition.

I feel very fortunate to be in this industry. The recent trends are positive for agriculture. The local-food movement has encouraged consumers to buy locally, and in these difficult economic times, the demand for our food is not going anywhere—as our population grows, the demand for our food increases.

We have been encouraged at times by the commitment the government has made to agriculture in Canada. We appreciate the efforts of the ministry in expanding marketing opportunities internationally for our products. We are also encouraged by the replacement of CAIS with the Growing Forward agenda. This is a step in the right direction.

While the trends in agriculture are positive, the challenges are numerous. As we have witnessed in the past couple of years, commodity prices have fluctuated wildly, as has the Canadian dollar. In many cases, the cost of production has exceeded the price of commodities. As grain farmers in Ontario and Quebec, we are subject to international market trends and competitors that directly subsidize farmers. And this has been the case for many decades. Another challenge in farming is the overlap of provincial and federal responsibility; one jurisdiction points to the other when confronted with difficult policy decisions.

We do wish to remind you that we have significant experience managing through economic turmoil and volatility. Also, you cannot look at agriculture one year at a time, as not too long ago we were barely able to stay in business—grain prices were significantly lower, and inputs like fertilizer and oil were high and contributed to declining and negative margins.

So we are here to offer our experience to the government on agricultural programming. At the last federal-provincial-territorial agriculture meeting in July, the provincial ministers asked the federal government to undertake a review of risk management programs and to involve industry in the study.

The Ontario-Quebec Grain Farmers' Coalition will be focusing on the federal agricultural program called AgriFlex. AgriFlex, or the agricultural flexibility program, was announced in budget 2009. We were disappointed in this announcement, however, as the business risk management component was excluded.

• (1725)

[Translation]

Mr. William Van Tassel: Thank you, Erin.

AgriFlex was intended to complement the Growing Forward agenda and to include the Business Risk Management component. This announcement was a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done.

I am here today to ask that the risk management component be included in the AgriFlex program. The reasons for doing this are compelling. AgriFlex, with the BRM component, was the result of a comprehensive consultation process with agriculture stakeholders across Canada, and was finalized in the summer of 2008. AgriFlex counterbalances the ineffectiveness of AgriStability and AgriInvestment in sectors that have low prices on a sustained basis, such that margins are weakened. Table 1, which way we will come to at the end, provides all that information. However, I am not sure you all have a copy of it, because it was not translated.

AgriFlex with the BRM component would be a cost-sharing and risk-sharing partnership, allowing farmers to weather the many ups and downs of agricultural markets, including cost of production and currency fluctuations. AgriFlex with the BRM component was intended to complement the "Growing Forward" policy framework currently being implemented by Agriculture Canada.

"Growing Forward" has its limitations, as national programs can be too rigid to accommodate regional or commodity-specific situations. As Canada is a vast country, agricultural programming needs vary from region to region. AgriFlex with the BRM component is a proactive program to support provincial programs that effectively address safety net issues. They are the opposite of the emergency, ad hoc type of assistance we have seen in recent years. Often ad hoc programs include allowable net sales, called ANS, which means that the ones who were better off receive more than those who are really in need.

Implementing AgriFlex with BRM is a prudent measure, as it would stretch existing government dollars much further, by getting the money to those who really need it. Programming funds that are committed to meet short-term needs not addressed in the current "Growing Forward" framework would be used by AgriFlex to more effectively reach producers who need them most.

Significantly, AgriFlex with the BRM component does not require new federal money, but will mean current funding is spent more effectively. Here, we are referring more to the figures for the period from 2005 to 2007, as there may have been slight changes in recent

years; but we are referring to ad hoc programs that came out previously.

And we are not alone in how we feel.

At the last three federal-provincial-territorial meetings, provincial Ministers asked the federal Minister to review business risk management or BRM programs. The provinces are willing to talk to the federal government. Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan and Alberta have all expressed a willingness to partner with the federal government to develop agricultural programming.

This is an opportunity for the federal government to come to the table in a true partnership and show leadership. AgriFlex is a good public policy. The agricultural industry worked together to develop this proposal, which is intended to complement the federal government's current suite of agricultural programming.

Annex 1 provides figures for 1985 and 1986 as regards corn production. We went back in time to do a simulation, in order to see how the AgriStability and AgriInvestment programs are working. In 1984, prices were quite good and there were no payouts. Reference margins were fairly high. In 1985 and 1986, prices dropped, and the two programs worked because the reference margins were still quite high. Of course, we are talking about an "Olympic" average. Over the years, the margin disappears and the program no longer responds. Even in 1990, the average price of corn was \$122.30. Rather than a total contribution of \$309, it was \$60.38. That means that this program may work well in the very short term, but in the long term, it is not effective.

For cattle and pork producers, after a year or two of bad prices, the program no longer responds. AgriFlex could be used to support productions that are at risk, where there is a real need.

In conclusion, once again, we ask that a business risk management component be included in the federal government's AgriFlex program, so that provinces have the flexibility they need to effectively administer agricultural programming.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1730)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you for that presentation. You kept it right under time, which gives us time for one round.

What we're going to do is have five minutes for each party. We're going to start off with the Liberals and Wayne Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thanks, William and Erin. I'm glad we finally got you on committee after the games the government played earlier.

You said in your brief that AgriFlex is good policy. I guess the problem is the definition of AgriFlex.

I debated the minister in the last election. I was of the assumption that the minister was looking at AgriFlex as I was, because the two major parties committed to AgriFlex, and I believe that some of the other ones did as well. I believed the minister was committed to AgriFlex being allowed for RMP in Ontario and for ASRA in Quebec. As I understand it, Minister Ritz is not allowing it for those two programs. Is that correct?

Mr. William Van Tassel: Well, for me right now, AgriFlex is a program without flexibility. We were pushing for that. We thought before the election that the four parties, I believe, had agreed and had pushed for AgriFlex. But it didn't come out as we thought.

If you go back to 2005 to 2007, there was \$1.5 billion, normally, of federal money going to ad hoc programs. It was very inefficient. That's why we pushed for AgriFlex. It could go to fund programs where the need really was. Also, since it's for regional programs, normally it's less countervailable. If you look at the ASRA program, the Americans already tried to countervail it on the hog side, and they never did, because it's a provincial program. That's the reason we were pushing to make it more regional.

I was under the assumption also that it would have been for risk management, for the RMP.

• (1735)

Hon. Wayne Easter: There's another case, as I mentioned earlier, of the minister not living up to the commitments he stated during the election. I think you were here earlier when I talked about the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada performance report. The sad reality is that in this report there is room in terms of business risk management programs and the few changes in liability tests to help the hog and beef industry. There's room within those moneys. This government's spending is way down from previous government spending under safety net programs. And AgriFlex could certainly help the crop industry in Ontario and Quebec and elsewhere across the country.

The Ontario government has come out, as has the Quebec government, and supported them with their 40% of what was hoped would be AgriFlex money. The 60% that was expected from the Government of Canada didn't come through. I understand you're in the third year of that in Ontario.

Give me the timeframe within which you're operating and what the implications are for this futuristic, far-reaching program should the federal government not commit itself to living up to what was its word during the election campaign.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I have to keep the times close today because of our time constraints. Mr. Easter, that will be your last question.

You have one minute to answer his question. That's not to say that you couldn't add on to someone else's question, but that's it for that one.

Ms. Erin Fletcher: To answer your question specifically about Ontario, the risk management program was a pilot program. It was completed in 2009. We are understanding that we need a commitment by January for the continuation of the program in order for it to be carried out in its fullest capacity in 2010.

To date, it has been a provincial program with no federal contribution, but it has had quite a significant utilization rate in Ontario.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): You have half a minute, Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you very much.

I think what your answer spells out is the limiting factor here in terms of moving ahead with programs that farmers support and the inflexibility of the government in terms of working with the farm community. What we're finding is that if you dare challenge them, the door will be closed and no further discussions will come to mind.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Easter.

We're going to move on to the Bloc.

Mr. Bellavance, you have five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your testimony.

I want to reassure you. You are not the only ones who believed that the Conservative government was really going to introduce an AgriFlex program.

During the election campaign, and even after that, just before the budget, that is what the Conservatives announced. I remember seeing, among the list of election promises, a truly flexible program that was in the works and that the provinces could use to meet their specific requirements. I have no recollection whatsoever of having heard either the Minister of any other Conservative candidate say that income support would be specifically excluded from such a program.

I'd like to take you back to that period. When you say that the four parties agreed to set up an AgriFlex program, that is because you heard it somewhere. I imagine you were given assurances, it was your perception or, at the very least, you heard someone on the Conservative side say, during the election campaign, that this new program would really be the one you were seeking and, in particular, that it would not exclude income support.

Mr. William Van Tassel: That was my perception and I was fairly certain that it was going to happen. It was announced in *La Terre de Chez Nous*, a farming magazine in Quebec. When Mr. Paradis came to meet with the UPA before the election, he said that there should be enough flexibility to include risk management.

• (1740)

Mr. André Bellavance: You are referring to Christian Paradis, the current Minister of Public Works.

Mr. William Van Tassel: Yes.

Mr. André Bellavance: At the time, I guess he must have been Secretary of State for Agriculture.

Mr. William Van Tassel: Probably.

Mr. André Bellavance: One is always a little skeptical about things said in an election campaign. However, you were quite confident that you would see this kind of program implemented, as you had been asking.

Mr. William Van Tassel: We may be naive, but we were very pleased because the announcement was made and the four parties agreed. So, yes, we thought it would work.

Mr. André Bellavance: Welcome to the wonderful world of politics and unfulfilled election promises.

And that was not all. The budget also announced \$500 million for the AgriFlex program. Initially the money was to be spent over four years, and then finally, it was going to be over five years. We also realized—you have to read the fine print—that, in actual fact, only \$190 million of the \$500 million would be new money. The rest was coming out of standard programs. Finally, we heard the worst news, which was that the program would not include income support.

It is two years now since the new programs were implemented—AgriStability, AgriInvestment, AgriInsurance and so on. CAIS was sharply criticized.

Have you been able to make any comparison today between CAIS and the new programs? Mr. Van Tassel, I even heard you testifying about the problems CAIS has caused grain producers.

Has there been any improvement as a result of these new programs, or are we still at the same point? Have we just exchanged four quarters for a dollar? I am sure you are familiar with that expression.

Mr. William Van Tassel: In my opinion, it's exactly the same thing. At the present time, we have the AgriInvestment program for periods when production margins decrease by less than 15%, but it's very little. It covers the same programs. I don't see a big difference. In terms of grain production, prices have gone up. So, we did not really have any need for that money, because prices were very attractive.

So, I really haven't seen much change with these programs, especially in Quebec. In terms of stocks at the beginning and at the end, that has already been changed. So, there was no change to be made in that respect. As far as we are concerned, very little has changed.

Mr. André Bellavance: You had false hopes with respect with the AgriFlex program. You even heard an influential Minister, who became the Harper government's Quebec lieutenant, say that income support would be part of a true AgriFlex program. After that, you had to ask for an explanation.

Did you go back and ask what had happened and why they didn't keep their promise—why income support was ultimately excluded from the program? What was their answer?

Mr. William Van Tassel: We really never got an answer. A program called "Cost of Production Payment" was announced in Saskatchewan several years ago to help out producers, because of

increased production costs. That program was replaced with AgriFlex, but the cost production component of the program was removed.

We requested a meeting with the Minister, but we were never invited to meet with him.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Bellavance, I'm sorry, your time is up. Thank you.

We're now going to go to the NDP. Madam Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Thank you.

My thanks to the witnesses for coming. I appreciate your patience through this big fiasco today.

From the comments you've made, it's evident that you know—and you would of course know because you are farmers—the direction the government needs to take. I'm assuming this isn't the first time you've come to talk to members of Parliament. I'm sure you've lobbied on this issue before. I'm interested in what you heard from the Conservative side and the Liberal side with regard to what you are asking for. Has it been positive?

● (1745)

Mr. William Van Tassel: I'm a farmer, so I've learned to be patient. I look out in the springtime and I always hope I'll have something good in the fall. You have to be patient to be a farmer.

What comments have I received? Some said it could be countervailable. They said there were different responses possible from the WTO. We said that regional programs have already been tested and that they weren't countervailable. For the WTO, we were saying that the amber box is not full yet. There is \$4.3 billion that can be put in the amber box and there is still room. So there were different comments brought forward.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: So you were getting some resistance.

Mr. William Van Tassel: Yes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: You mentioned that the provinces are asking for this as well. Have you received any feedback from your ministers at the provincial level about whether they're head-butting with the government? Have they started to make headway on this?

Ms. Erin Fletcher: We have a meeting tomorrow morning with Minister Dombrowski, the agricultural minister for Ontario. Her comments have always been that she requires the support of the federal government to bring forth a risk management program for grains and oilseeds.

Tomorrow there are a number of other organizations that are also asking for similar risk management programming for veal, horticulture, pork, and cattle. We're all going to be approaching her together, which is something that's always asked for when one wants unification in agriculture. We've provided this now for a risk management type of ask. We have provincial support for programming, but she needs the federal government to be on side.

Mr. William Van Tassel: If we look at 2008-09, the grain farmers wouldn't be getting any money out of it. The prices were good for the last year or two. But go back a few more years more and you'll see the prices were bad. We would like to have a program that works in the long term.

Instead of ad hoc funding in which the money is spread out evenly and often goes where it's least needed, this year we would like to send the money where the need is. We want a bigger bang for the buck. That's why we're going for it. I agree that the price of grain was not bad over the last few years, but in the future we don't know where it will be. That's why we're trying to get programs that work in the long term.

Ms. Erin Fletcher: Yes, AgriFlexibility will probably put money into hogs and cattle this year.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I believe the Cattlemen's Association was before the committee last week, or a couple of weeks ago, and they also indicated that they need a national business risk assessment program that works for livestock producers. This is basically the same thing. I'm wondering if you could comment.

They also said they are asking for this: "...offer the better of the Olympic and previous three-year average on reference margin calculation; eliminate the viability test;...increase coverage to 70% of negative margins;...remove the caps from AgriInvest and AgriStability". They had also mentioned two points specific to Ontario, which were to enhance reference margins by allowing inclusion of BSE payments and allow producers the better of AgriStability tier one or AgriInvest.

If these changes to the existing program were made, how would that impact on you? Do you have anything to add to that? What are your comments with respect to these?

Mr. William Van Tassel: They have the problem of declining margins, so they're trying to work within the program to try to make it better. BSE is...*[Inaudible—Editor]*...so we can't really work on it here. They're trying to get out of the problem of declining margins by working on that, but we're working it a different way, say by going to regional programming more.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): *[Inaudible—Editor]*, Mr. Shipley.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I thought I'd make a couple of comments, and then I'll turn it over to Mr. Shipley for a question.

When I'm speaking with farmers, oftentimes I hear that they want a level playing field but they also want flexibility. I think of it in terms of the national programs providing the level playing field, and the regional programs, the provincial programs, providing the flexibility. We try to make the national programs as flexible as possible, but it's impossible to cater to every single province and their regional priorities. I find it appropriate that Ontario is supporting the RMP for crops, but for Alberta or Saskatchewan, for example, it might be a different commodities that are supported.

We did extensive consultations before launching AgriFlex, and one message was that it should be a program that looks forward and enhances competitiveness. BRM programs don't enhance competi-

tiveness; they help farmers in difficult times. We need programs that look forward as well, and that's what AgriFlex is focused on. We've undertaken a number of initiatives that some people might not be aware of. Through AgriFlex, for example, we're spending \$32 million on the federal Canada brand advocacy initiative to raise the issue of what Canadian products are. This helps us in international markets to publicize and support and move forward with the Canada brand.

Another one is \$50 million for agri-processing. Agri-processing is an important part of the value chain. We're able to support that through AgriFlex so they are able to move product from the farm gate to the consumer's plate. That helps the farmer. If they're able to do that more efficiently and effectively, that helps the farmer. AgriFlex allows us to move ahead on initiatives that will increase the competitiveness of the agricultural sector.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Shipley before I use up all my time.

● (1750)

Mr. Bev Shipley: I want to go to Erin, if I could.

On the risk management program, you mentioned that the utilization rate is high. Would you explain what the utilization rate is? Is that the number of people in it, or the payouts to the farmers?

The other one is ASRA. It was mentioned by my colleague across the way that waiting for ASRA is the 40%, and waiting for the federal, 60%. How long has ASRA been in place on its own? I understand that the RMP has been on its own.... How many crops is RMP actually funding? That will help you with the response in terms of how much money has come out of it.

AgriInvest is a bit of a template from the old NISA, which I think was a great program, fortunately, under the first agriculture policy framework set up under the previous government. Now it is set in place, with the agreement of the provinces. When we say we can't move or we have lack of flexibility, we can only make that flexibility happen with the agreement of the formula by the provinces. We can't unilaterally move ahead on those programs.

I'm wondering if there is clear understanding on that. That might be something you'll have discussions on tomorrow.

I want to get those answers before my time evaporates.

Ms. Erin Fletcher: When I made that comment about RMP utilization rates, I meant that it was to have been a three-year pilot program, and over those three years we had only two where producers were asked to pay into the program, which would be a good indicator of how many producers are going to be using the program and the year-over-year retention rates. We had an 86% retention rate in 2009 over 2008, in a year in which prices actually improved to the point where there's not going to be a payout in any crop other than corn in the RMP this year. So there was 86% utilization.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Were there any last year?

Ms. Erin Fletcher: Do you mean payouts? I'll have to get back to you on that. There were some payments through RMP last year.

Mr. William Van Tassel: You asked about ASRA. It was designed in 1975 and brought in towards the end of the 1970s in Quebec. Most of the time, there was federal money going in, because the federal programs were sent through ASRA. So it was there.

Mr. Lemieux, you talked about a level playing field. We're also talking about a level playing field, but we're looking at our neighbours down south, because this was brought forward on corn. Corn is very much touched by the American Farm Bill. That's why we said there has to be a level playing field and there needs to be certainty out there.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): We have about five minutes left. We had decided to continue meeting until 6:00 p.m., but we will not have time for another round. If members who have not yet had an opportunity to speak would like to ask a short question, so that as many members as possible can question our witnesses, we could take these five minutes to—

Mr. Scarpaleggia or Ms. Bonsant, do you have any questions?

On the Conservative side, are there any questions?

I do have some questions. So I will use the remaining five minutes to ask my own questions.

Mr. Van Tassel, you said earlier that it took some time to compare the Canadian Agricultural Income Stabilization Program to the current programs—AgriStability and AgriInvestment—which replaced it. You were saying that you did not see a big difference in the way these programs are being implemented.

However, when they were introduced, the idea was to correct the problems associated with CAIS. Having been the agriculture critic back in 2005, I know that you, the grain producers, wasted no time coming to see us. In any case, you came to my office. The fact is that, because of the “Olympic” average, you were never able to access CAIS.

Everybody knew that. If you came to see me, as agriculture critic for my party, that means you also went to see everybody else. So, everyone must have been aware. Why, then, were changes never made?

● (1755)

Mr. William Van Tassel: The issue was declining margins. We still see the problem today, with respect to cattle. We are trying to solve it. It's the same thing for pork. It was the same problem several years ago. That's why I am saying that the two programs are similar. The only small difference relates to AgriInvestment and the first 15%—100% and 85%. However, the real problem is declining margins.

Could we introduce artificial margins, to be sure that something could be taken out? Possibly. But at the present time, you have to have a good production because of declining margins. Production may be very good for several years and then decline. I will give you the example of potato production. Although I am not a potato producer, I believe that, through this program, it would likely be possible to make a living from that production.

However, when you've been through two or three years of bad weather, it doesn't work anymore. That was the problem previously and it's the same problem today. That's why I'm saying that it's pretty much the same program.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): You also referred to the fact that with ad hoc programs, several million dollars may be invested in one-time initiatives. As I recall, you suggested that, if a truly flexible program were in place, which is what AgriFlex was supposed to be—a program that would apply to ASRA in Quebec and programs in Ontario and the other provinces—these ad hoc programs would no longer be necessary.

That means that the same money would be paid into AgriFlex—money that, in any case, is now being used to fund what could be called “disaster” programs. These are one-time programs put in place at a given time because of a specific situation, and under which the government provides financial assistance to mitigate the problems. You are saying that it would ultimately be no more costly to introduce a truly flexible program than to operate the way we are now.

Mr. William Van Tassel: It would probably cost less. We looked at Statistics Canada sources and noted that ad hoc payments—which are payments in addition to those made under CAIS—average \$2.5 billion year. That represents about \$1.5 billion for the federal government. We have suggested taking \$1 billion of that amount to fund a program that would really meet people's needs.

What is better? An ad hoc program funded using \$1 billion from outside that would be added on to ANS, or allowable net sales, or what we are proposing? As a general rule, people who are doing better have higher allowable sales. How does that work? Does that solve the problem? Hardly, because the person who needs it most gets none. That's why we are calling for a specific program that really resolves the issues. And that program is AgriFlex.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): Thank you very much. That is all our time for today. We are very pleased that you were able to provide your testimony, even though you had to witness some tussling. That happens in politics. What matters is the good news, and the good news is that you were able to provide your testimony and that we were able to hear what you had to say on the subject.

Mr. William Van Tassel: Thank you very much. It was very interesting.

[English]

It was a very interesting afternoon.

This meeting is adjourned.

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