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Chair

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC)): I'd like to bring this meeting to order. This is the sixth meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security. We're continuing our study of prison farm closures.

I would like to welcome to our committee quite a number of presenters.

Ms. Dowling, would you mind starting?

We will have all of you limit your comments so that we can complete them in about half an hour. That will mean from three to five minutes for each person, if that's okay. I've discussed this with some of you.

Introduce yourself, please, and give us your name. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your position. We'll keep moving around the table, because we have quite a large number of presenters.

I welcome all of you.

We'll begin with Ms. Dowling.

Ms. Dianne Dowling (President, National Farmers Union, Local 316, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

I want to thank the committee for this opportunity to explain why farmers support the continuation of the prison farm program.

I'm Dianne Dowling. I'm the president of Local 316 of the National Farmers Union, which is the local of the union in the Kingston area.

About a year ago, our local, along with Urban Agriculture Kingston and the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul, developed a position statement asking the federal government to do the following: to put a freeze or a halt on dismantling the prison farms while we had a chance to discuss it; to do a full review of the costs and benefits of the program; and to consider possible enhancements or enlargements to the program instead of closing it.

We asked several farm and food groups, as well as social justice and labour groups and other individuals, to sign onto this position statement. We have representation from the Federations of Agriculture, locally, provincially, and federally, as well as the National Farmers Union, the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, and food groups such as Food Secure Canada and the Toronto Food Policy Council. There is a longer list, which I could supply if you wish.

Therefore, the campaign to revitalize the prison farm program at Corrections Canada has engaged thousands of farmers and citizens who are in support of keeping the program going and in fact revitalizing it.

You might ask why farmers care about the prison farm program. Our initial concern was about the potential loss of the farmland. There are six prison farms across Canada. Two of them are in the Kingston area. They are very obvious to the citizens of Kingston because they are on major roads and they represent a very large tract of valuable prime agricultural land, of which we do not have a surplus in the Kingston area, where we specialize in rocks and trees.

This land has been federally owned for decades and it remains preserved as farmland today. We see this farmland as a precious public asset. Considering that we're facing worldwide issues such as peak oil, climate change, and uncertain political and economic times, and for the sake of the food security of Canadians, we need to keep every acre of farmland that we have in this country.

We also care about the possible loss of critical farm infrastructure. At several of the prison farms, there are abattoirs that are used by local farmers, at least in the Kingston area, to enhance their operations. Because the abattoir is there, they are able to sell their meat to local customers and therefore realize more profitability in their businesses.

The prison farms have also been major customers of the agribusinesses in our area: the feed mills, the farm equipment dealers, other suppliers, and, of course, tradespeople in the area. I'm told that Frontenac Institution spends about $900,000 a year on these farm services. Of course, this helps support those businesses for the rest of us farmers in the area; if they were to lose such a major customer it would have a very detrimental effect on agribusinesses in our area, which could be harmful to other farmers.

We've been working for many years at trying to build the local food system in our area. We believe that every community should increase its capacity to feed itself. The prison is a community and the inmates are helping to feed themselves. We applaud that. We do not regard it as competition to our local farmers. For instance, the dairy farm at Frontenac has a herd of 130 milking cows. The average dairy farm in Ontario is about 60 cows, so that's the equivalent of two family farms, and I don't think that's a major source of competition to the milk market.

There's another area of concern. CSC regional commissioner Ross Toller told you on Thursday that CSC is moving to larger food tenders to take advantage of so-called economies of scale. If the prison farms are closed and are not supplying milk, eggs, and meat to CSC, we do not believe that the average Canadian farmer will be in a position to fill that market.

The food tenders are offered on a system called MERX. You have to be a member of MERX, at a fee, and the tenders are in the millions and hundreds of thousands of pounds of product. I don't think local farmers are going to be able to take advantage of the gap left by the prison farms going out of business. Furthermore, the contracts have to be compliant with NAFTA, which means they could go anywhere in North America.

Of course, we were startled to hear that inmates on the farm program did not gain employable skills. We feel that they gained hard skills like operating equipment, repairing it, and looking after it and that they also gained skills in the food processing that goes on at Frontenac, for instance. Probably just as important—or more important—are the attitudes of punctuality, teamwork, responsibility, and so on.

● (1535)

All of those characteristics are transferable to other jobs and, in fact, are critical to keeping a job. If you have a welding certificate, you might get the job, but you're not going to keep it if you can't get along with your employer or your colleagues.

I will be so bold as to say that Canada and, indeed, civilizations throughout history were built on the work of people who were farmers. Surely that is recommendation enough for CSC to maintain the prison farm program. Farmers and non-farmers alike in the Kingston area, from whom I've heard by the hundreds through their petitions and their participation in our events, are in complete disagreement with the statement that farming does not give inmates employable skills. We certainly endorse the return of trades training to the prisons and feel that it would tie in very well with the farms, because inmates could practice the skills on the farms.

The previous minister of public safety referred to the prison farm system as a 1950s model with outdated technology. I'm a dairy farmer myself and I toured the farm last fall. The dairy operation at Frontenac is modern and well managed. They participate in provincial management programs and they work with the University of Guelph on a calf-feeding program. It is certainly not a 1950s program.

We urge the minister and members of this committee to visit the prison farms in Kingston, as they are the closest to Ottawa—

[*Applause*]

Ms. Dianne Dowling: —and to see this effective, humane, and practical training and rehabilitation program in action. See for yourself that this program works, and at what I would consider to be a modest cost. I urge the committee to look at the value of the program, to reverse the decision to close it, and to work with interested Canadians to expand the program with innovative and useful initiatives.

I thank you for this opportunity to speak with you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Leeman, are you prepared to make a statement?

Mr. John Leeman (LifeLine InReach worker and Ex-lifer Farm Program Participant, As an Individual): Thank you.

My name is John Leeman. I'm an offender who served a life sentence and I wanted to come here today to speak on behalf of the inmates who have benefited from the farm.

When I was in higher-security facilities, we had a lot of trades in them. I was a person who was very motivated to do them, but as we all know, when you are in higher security, it's more about focusing on punishment. The shops only open up for maybe two hours in the morning and maybe an hour and a half in the afternoon. They may be locked down for periods of time.

I will stress this, because I ended up picking up all four welding tickets while I was inside. I also got my autobody licence while I was in higher security. There used to be almost every shop that you could have to teach inmates a trade. While I was in, I watched these shops —welding, carpentry, painting, and masonry—all disappear. Among all of them, the farm program has succeeded. I believe the reason that the farm had one so is the reintegration process.

I grew up in a foster home on a farm. I milked by hand, so when I went to the dairy farm, the first thing I was doing was looking for a pail and a stool, and I found out that wasn't going to happen. Even with the welding tickets that I brought in there from the machine shops, to use when the machines were breaking down, I was never able to utilize the trade I had; I found out while I was in there that a farm boss had to teach me how to re-weld some of the stuff, because welding two plates gets you your ticket, but it doesn't give you the experience.

As I say in every talk I give, I take my hat off to the farmers; they've taught me life skills. They taught a lot more than just farming; it was the work ethics. Being up at four o'clock in the morning is pretty shocking for anybody coming down through the system. I've been out for 19 years now—

[*Applause*]

Mr. John Leeman: —and I utilize those tools today in my daily work ethics.

I would like to see some people from Parliament come down to see just how that whole operation runs. It's a phenomenal thing. It's not geared to just one specific inmate; it runs from a two-year sentence right on to the longest sentence you could ever get. We've seen guys who never got along together taught by the shop bosses how to be team players and take animosity out of the institution. I've been reading the papers today and I still see the same messages coming back in the newspapers: they are rewarding the same things. The insight is there.

I just can't emphasize enough that I feel, as a former inmate, that this is a bad mistake for inmates. It has more than just a trade.... As I say, not everybody is going to come out and become a farmer, but a farmer teaches a lot more than just farming. There are a lot of related trades in there that are being implemented in the community today.

Thank you.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Flanagan.

Mr. Bill Flanagan (Dean, Faculty of Law, Queen's University, As an Individual): My name is Bill Flanagan and I'm the Dean of Law at Queen's University.

I'd like to thank the committee for permitting me to speak to you today.

At Queen's law faculty, we have a correctional law clinic that has operated for well over 30 years. For many years, our students have participated in this program, advising inmates and working in the prisons on prison appeals and disciplinary matters. So at the law school, we have a very large interest in the local prison population, and a long-standing relationship with the federal penitentiaries.

I didn't know a great deal about the prison farm issue until last December, when I attended a Save Our Prison Farms coalition town hall meeting in Kingston. It was a remarkable meeting. It was a unique coalition of farmers, correctional staff, local residents, students, seniors, aboriginal leaders, and church groups, all of whom spoke passionately about their commitment to saving our prison farms.

I found the meeting personally very moving and it inspired me to want to visit our prison farm at the Frontenac Institution. I contacted CORCAN and asked if I would be allowed to visit the facility.

At the time, I was told that due to the ongoing public controversy surrounding the prison farms, public visits to the farms had been curtailed. I contacted Peter Milliken's office and requested his assistance in approaching CORCAN to see if I could tour the facility. It was only after his office intervened that I was finally permitted a tour of the prison farm.

When I was able to tour the farm, I was deeply impressed by what I saw. I had the chance to talk with the correctional staff and several inmates, all of whom spoke with great passion about the value of the farm in helping inmates to learn life skills and work skills that helped them reintegrate into society upon their release.

I know that the government takes the position that these programs are not cost-effective because few inmates find work in the agricultural sector upon their release, but I am not persuaded by the government's rationale. To me, it is clear that the government policy is being driven primarily by ideology and has little to do with cost-effectiveness.

We know that for many years crime rates have been steadily declining in Canada; however, with the government's law and order agenda and a growing range of mandatory sentences, prison populations are projected to increase in Canada by over 10% in the next few years.

As reported in yesterday's news, notwithstanding huge federal deficits, the budget for Corrections Canada is projected to rise by 27% in the next two years, to over $3 billion and a 25% increase in the number of employees, so I would submit that the government is not shutting down these farms to save money. On the contrary, the government is prepared to needlessly throw millions of dollars more into our prisons.

Why, then, in the face of such public opposition and clear evidence of the utility of these programs, is the government determined to close the prison farms? The only explanation that makes sense to me is that we have a government bent on punishment and increasingly indifferent to rehabilitation. We have a government that wants to get tough on crime and tough on prisoners because they think this will garner them votes. I can assure you that there are no votes for this in Kingston and the Islands.

[*Applause*]

Mr. Bill Flanagan: Instead, there is an extraordinary coalition of highly motivated citizens, many of whom you see here today, who are repelled by the government's contempt for farming as a rehabilitative program for inmates and are repelled by the government indifference to the well-being of these inmates.

We do not want to lose our prison farm in the heart of Kingston and have it replaced by a "super prison" built to house an ever-growing prison population. The people of Kingston have long lived with prisons in our midst, and we want these facilities to be places that provide fair treatment to offenders and ample opportunity to develop the skills that will help them re-enter society and not reoffend.

Prison farms play an important role in a humane criminal justice system. I ask you to listen to the many diverse voices of those of us who care deeply about this issue and save our prison farms.

Thank you.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lally, please.

Sister Pauline Lally (Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul, As an Individual): My name is Pauline Lally. I'm a sister of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul in Kingston.

I'm sitting here and looking up at this beautiful picture, and I'm thinking of what Dianne just mentioned, which is that Canadian history is built on people who were farmers. It's right here in front of us.

I thank you for this opportunity to speak to you on a subject close to the hearts of Kingstonians. When Bishop Horan asked the Sisters of Providence to come from Montreal to Kingston in 1861, it was to establish a congregation for the sick and poor in their homes, the aged and the orphaned, and the inmates in Canada's oldest penitentiary, and that's what we've attempted to do for almost 150 years.

When we started, more punitive measures to deter criminals were the norm. However, as Gandhi explained, the norm of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth could render most of the world blind and toothless.

I am not soft on crime. Some dangerous offenders belong behind bars. But I am big on rehabilitation, and that's what the farm programs do: rehabilitate.

Education and experience have taught us that a commitment to rehabilitation reduces reoffending rates. That's why our penal system has moved slowly over the past 150 years toward a restorative system appropriately called "corrections".

But tell me: what is "corrections" correcting in closing the prison farms? Our system has been held up to the rest of the world as an example of a penal system that works. Until now. we have been proud of that. People from all over the world have toured our prison farms because they work.

Why would we stop something that is working? Why would we stop something that is sustainable, that services milk, meat, and eggs to all the federal penitentiaries in the area as well as supplying surplus eggs to food banks?

We are here today because of our grave concern that the current government is about to take away the most successful program in the system. In reading the Correctional Service of Canada's own document, called "Let's Talk", which I have provided for you today, you will understand that, as it states, this farm is "highly valued for the produce it supplies to local federal institutions and the food banks in the surrounding area and for the skills passed on to the inmates whose labour and sweat keeps the production going".

In the same document, Craig Chinnery, the operations manager, explains that many of the inmates had never held a steady job in their lives until they arrived at the penitentiary farm. He says:

> We're trying to develop a work ethic in these guys. Get them accustomed to getting up in the morning—

Like you said: getting up at four o'clock.

> —and putting in a full day's work. And teaching them certified skills they can take with them to the job market.

The article continues, stating:

> These inmates seem happy and eager in their work. It's obvious that they take pride in the operation.

They are learning real work ethics. They are learning to take pride in a job well done.

Corrections Canada also understood the rehabilitative value of animal therapy. Said Mr. Chinnery, and again I quote him from the document on Correction Canada's website:

> The animal/human connection is a good thing....
>
> ...[it] has a calming effect on many of these guys.

Last May, I visited the farm outside the walls of Collins Bay penitentiary. On the prison farm, there are no walls—only fences for the animals. A cow had given birth to a calf. The calf had died. The mother could not get up, so obviously she was going to die as well. And there, under the birthing tree, was an old, burly inmate, complete with his long hair and his forearms covered with tattoos, giving what l'd call palliative care to that animal.

● (1550)

He was crouching there, stroking her muzzle, and talking softly to her. That is the true rehabilitative value of this program. No laundry work or classroom can provide that for inmates. If we are truly interested in safer communities, we must look closely at any program that, as Correctional Service of Canada states, has a calming effect.

CSC goes on to explain:

> The work instills a sense of responsibility in the inmate who must provide daily care for the livestock. There's a general feeling of accomplishment amongst both the inmate farm workers and the instructors as a result of their work.

Obviously, there's more than one good product coming from this farm operation, but that's the most important one: the positive changes in an inmate's life.

These were not my words but words taken from the Correctional Service of Canada website, and they reflect how much these farms were once valued. Now they will be closed without any expert review.

Prophetic voices pronounce justice. Restoring perpetrators to society is just. To do this safely, we must concentrate on healing and rehabilitation within the philosophy of restorative justice. The healing power of animal therapy is understood, and must, if anything, be expanded.

Rehabilitating inmates is CSC's responsibility, and it reflects our wonderful Canadian values. We therefore ask that a moratorium he placed on any dismantling until independent experts have had an opportunity to review the value of the farm program.

We trust that you, as Canada's public safety committee, will take our concerns seriously and put a stop to any dismantling and any transformation of our system until independent experts, chosen carefully for their skills and impartiality, have an opportunity to research the direction proposed by the current government and the “Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety” document.

Thank you.

[*Applause*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Doherty, are you going to be making a statement?

Sister Bridget Doherty (Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul, As an Individual): No.

The Chair: You're not going to be making a statement? Okay.

A voice: It was an arrangement that we had...[*Inaudible—Editor*].

The Chair: I hope that everyone in the back can hear me. We normally do not allow any participation by observers in our proceedings here at the committee, so I would kindly ask you to hold back your enthusiasm and applause. I know it's all orderly, but it's just not normally practised at the committee.

Thank you.

Mr. Edmunds.

● (1555)

Mr. John Edmunds (National President, Union of Solicitor General Employees): Thank you, sir.

Thank you for allowing me to speak here today.

I am John Edmunds. I am the national president of the Union of Solicitor General Employees. I represent the people who work on the farms to train the offenders.

I can sit here today and talk about what the farm program does, but through my normal course of action in a day I'm not getting the answers that I require. The government has come out with a very public statement saying they're losing $4.1 million a year on the farms, yet I stood at 269 Laurier in September as part of a 2,000-person protest asking the then Minister of Public Safety to produce said document, to produce an audit to explain where the money is going.

Right now there are just too many questions that remain unanswered for me as a representative of over 15,000 people inside the federal system, those people being in law enforcement essentially. Everybody is focusing on the loss, but I'm trying to find out what the actual cost of the farm is and what the loss of the farm will cost the Correctional Service of Canada.

If we look at something as simple as a 250-millilitre container of milk that is produced for anywhere between 23¢ and 28¢ and sold to the government, what is that going to cost us when we go to the free market to try to buy these products? What's going to happen when the farms are no longer there and we have a riot at one of our institutions? At this point in time we can change our orders and we can pick up what we need and get it shipped.

I want this committee somehow to please stand up and ask the questions that I can't get answers to.

It's being said that the training people receive on the farms is not relevant in this day and age, and it's been quoted here that the farms are from the 1950s. Up to about a couple of years ago, I believe $500,000 was reinvested in the Bowden Institution. Where's that good government spending? We're putting money into these institutions, into the farms, but now, with a stroke of the pen, we're losing them.

The sunset on this is winding down fairly quickly. There are two herds that I believe are going to be auctioned off in June and July, one in Winnipeg and one in Kingston. These herds have been around for years. The bloodlines are of value. They're going to be split up and sold, one cow at a time.

Where do we go from here? I'm not going to say that I believe we're going to have super prisons on the grounds in Kingston or on any other farm site, but I do believe that shutting down the farms is a grave mistake. The rest of the civilized world is looking at Canada. We even have places in the United States—and I'm not a big supporter of corrections in the United States, but even they have expanded a farm program to go green, and they're actually doing what the sign at Frontenac Institution says, which is “paying our way through agriculture”.

I think these are the things we're missing, and I'm hoping this committee can get answers, because it's very frustrating to ask the questions and not get the answers. Every time you ask the question, the answer is that it's a sensitive cabinet document.

This is a committee of cabinet. This is a committee of the House of Commons. I'm hoping that you people here have the authority and the ability to, one, stop the closure of the farms, and two, ask the questions and get the documents out to the public.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. McDermott, please.

Mr. Larry McDermott (Former Rural Forum Chair, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all on the committee and my fellow speakers for sharing this opportunity with me.

I was a elected municipal official for 28 years. I'm the former rural chair of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. In fact, I was the founding chair just a few short years ago. I'm also a councillor with the Shabot Obaadjiwan First Nation and a commissioner with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

In fact, just a little over a week ago, I spoke to the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities against Racism and Discrimination, from a rural and an aboriginal lens. I'd like to share a few statistics from that presentation to highlight the circumstance that I'd like to outline in the few minutes that I have.

First I'll say, from a rural perspective, something you probably already know, which is that economic activity is hard to come by in rural Canada, for the most part, so the loss of a few jobs and a small amount of economic activity that may look minuscule on the grander scale can have a profound effect on our rural communities.

From an aboriginal perspective, some of the statistics that I shared are as follows: 87% of those incarcerated in Saskatchewan are aboriginal women. Across the country, the statistics show that 30% of the women are aboriginal. By the way, that 87% in Saskatchewan is 87% of the women, just for accuracy's sake, but these are startling statistics when you consider that the aboriginal population is actually 4% of the population of Canada. It is a hugely disproportionate share.

I should add that male and youth statistics don't get much better. We could talk at length about the factors behind this, but years of policy, residential schools, and other forms of discrimination are some of the things that have contributed to this disproportionate share that we find in our prisons.

I believe that the honour of the crown is at stake here. We need to look collectively at how we got to this point and collectively how we are going to solve this tragic problem.

If I may, I'm going to quote from a friend of mine, who offers that one aboriginal healing paradigm realizes that the real essence of creation lies in what is going on between things, not merely on individual incidents, because when society has focused its attention solely on incidents, like our present model of justice does, it reduces the wrongdoers' humanity to the level of their wrongdoing and not on restoring relationships, where the focus should be. Prison farm livestock and agriculture teach wrongdoers that they are mutually interdependent on each other. Both have value. Both have worth.

Let me now expand the circle to include all prisoners, regardless of background. My wife worked with prisoners in several federal penitentiaries, and her conclusion is emphatic: prison farms teach prisoners important life skills that prepare them for life as contributors to society.

There are statistics associated with work in similar circumstances, such as community gardens. The U.S. has been referred to. In the city of Los Angeles, the recidivism rate was improved by 50%—and this study is readily available—through the use of community gardens. In a hard-core place like Los Angeles, you hardly think of farming or even gardening, but it worked.

● (1600)

I want to conclude by offering my hope that Parliament will view this issue from what one elder says is our longest journey—from our heads to our hearts. I hope you'll look long and hard at this situation, because we know that the relationship on a farm with living things does something that academic solutions.... Some of the ideas we have for correction, some of the ideas we have for truly changing and preparing an individual to return to society, just simply don't stand up to the value of a prison farm and the impact that a prison farm can have on its people. Yes, I want to stress that this is important from an aboriginal perspective, but it's also important for all prisoners.

I thank you.

Merci. Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move now to Mr. Perry, please.

Mr. Dave Perry (Agribusiness Instructor for the Abattoir, CORCAN Agribusiness, Pittsburgh Institution, Correctional Service Canada): I'd like to thank the committee for allowing us to speak here today.

I'm a sixth-generation farmer, president of the Frontenac Cattlemen's Association, a director of the National Farmers Union, and an agribusiness supervisor for these prison farms.

I've worked on both sites in Kingston. I supervised the dairy operation for a number of years. I currently supervise the abattoir. It's the only abattoir between Toronto and Montreal that wholesales meat into the community. There are other small abattoirs where you can take an animal if you're a farmer, have it processed, and take it back to your freezer, but you cannot sell it into the community, and we do that.

We also train inmates. We train 14 to 16 or sometimes 18 inmates in the abattoir, and any inmates who complete that process and want a job in that field are able to find one. They might not all want to follow through or they may go to another area, but there are jobs out there for them. We have tracked them ourselves. We have just currently toured a large meat plant north of Toronto, Holly Park Meat Packers, and they're employing two of the inmates we trained. There are notices on meat shops and butcher shops in Kingston—I know of four—looking for meat cutters, so once these inmates complete this program, there are going to be jobs there for them if they want to pursue them.

We provide a service at the abattoir for about 350 area farmers. They can take their animals there. They can have them processed for themselves, or the operator will purchase that animal and distribute that meat into the community. There's quite a local food movement in the Kingston area. Without that abattoir, the local food movement is dead. There will be no local meat for the area. It can come from the United States or western Canada or wherever, but it will not be local. There are 150 businesses that rely on that abattoir to provide them with meat.

I suggest that an agricultural advisory committee be formed to help make these decisions. There's a citizen advisory committee, so why not have an agricultural one? I believe there are people who made this decision who do not understand agriculture. Maybe they're not interested in it, but they certainly do not understand it. We could help them with that. When the announcement was made, it was a great slap in the face for farmers to find out that agriculture is no longer important in today's society. As I said, I'm a sixth-generation farmer, and there are others out there in the same area.

On the news two night ago, we learned the Canadian government has just donated $120 million to Afghanistan to build a dam for irrigation purposes, while they say they're coming up $4 million short here. If that's the case, I would think they could come up with the $4 million we need, if that's the correct number.

There are some members of this committee who are in favour of closing these farms. I think they actually know better, and I would urge them to take the actions required to stand up and save these prison farms. They are very important. Wherever I travel in Ontario, I run into an inmate I have trained over the years. That person will come up and greet me like a neighbour because he's so happy that we were able to work together while he was serving his sentence.

Unless you actually go there and tour and see what's going on, you have no understanding of the situation and how they work in agriculture, working with animals and even growing plants. Many of these inmates, if they so wish, have their own garden plots. They can grow vegetables so that they do not have to use the cafeteria or purchase vegetables through the institutional stores, which is a saving, and they actually donate surplus vegetables to the food banks.

I would also like to urge the current minister to tour these sites.

In closing, I just urge the total committee to do the right thing and save these prison farms before it's too late.

Thank you.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perry.

Last but not least is Mr. Amey.

Mr. Ron Amey (Acting Production Supervisor, CORCAN Agribusiness, Frontenac Institution, Correctional Service Canada): Thank you.

Good afternoon, members of the committee. My name is Ron Amey. I am acting production supervisor of Frontenac Institution. I am responsible for the day-to-day operations, the budgets, and new ventures.

I supervise over 10 staff members, who oversee up to 70 offenders involved in a full agriculture and food-processing operation.

I have seen many changes over the years. I started in 1981 as an instructor at Frontenac Institution. At that time it was a work camp, and inmates had to work on the farm. We escorted them to the farm, and they were under constant supervision.

Today the offenders have their own alarm clocks. They get up, get breakfast, and report for work at 5:30 in the morning. They start their duties just as they would at any job. Many offenders attend school during the day and after class return to work, finishing at six o'clock at night and completing a twelve-hour day.

The atmosphere has changed dramatically. We have an employer-employee relationship. Production has increased to the point that we have one of the top herds in the area. Now offenders ask to come to the farm for the benefits offered: fresh air, a sense of accomplishment, and the skills they can learn. Physical work is a stress reliever.

This is not a 1950s operation. Offenders are exposed to modern technology. We have computerized milkers and a TMR mixer. We have just implemented an acidified milk program through the University of Guelph; this is something that was developed in Sweden, and the inmates have come online with that and helped us out quite a bit with it.

They're exposed to many areas of job skills: construction, mechanical maintenance, welding, fabricating, and clerical work. Farmers are a cheap bunch; we use the talents that we have and we construct our own equipment. We work as a team, with interactions among others to perform our duties. A lot of these fellows don't usually work too well together, but once they are in a minimum security setting like this and see what is going on, they interact better. They have more reliance on others, so if one fellow is not there, the other guy knows he has to do the work. They learn responsibility, the care of animals, having someone depend on them, and meeting deadlines.

I'll talk about job ethics, meaning getting to work on time and keeping a job. Many have never even held a job. The human-animal bond, as we heard here earlier, helps to de-institutionalize offenders. We had the story of one offender. He came to us with substance abuse and anger management issues and a violent past. With us, he formed a bond with the cattle, was able to function in a group environment, came to grips with his problems, and eventually worked his way up to one of the top positions on the farm. This inmate is now on parole in downtown Ottawa.

The intention is not and never was to train inmates to be farmers. We strive to release a better citizen into the community. For over a hundred years, we have been supplying food to area prisons, and we have been paying our way through agriculture.

I hope I can answer any questions that you may have.

Thank you.

● (1610)

The Chair: I'd like to thank all of you very much.

You've actually stuck fairly closely to the time. Some of you may not be familiar with the procedures here; what we usually do now is start with the official opposition—the Liberal Party—and then go to the Bloc, the NDP, and the government. We'll keep rotating around, and almost everyone will have a chance to ask you questions. Because there are so many of you, don't feel offended if you don't get asked a question. I'm just warning you about that.

The time for the first round is seven minutes, and the following rounds are five minutes each. Without further ado, we will go to Mr. Holland, please.

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me start by thanking the witnesses.

When you look at the variety of backgrounds from which you come and the variety of perspectives you're offering, it's hard to think of a better case for keeping the prison farms open than the one you've given us here today. I hope all committee members are listening and keeping open minds on the matter before us.

I'll start where we left off in the last meeting, when we had department officials with us. What we found was that they have no statistics whatsoever. They have nothing on rehabilitation, or on recidivism, as an example. They have nothing comparing the prison farm program to other programs to tell us about its relative efficacy.

What we hear today comes from individuals who are coming forward and giving us anecdotal stories about how positive the program is and how well it works. I asked department officials for any examples at all that they could give us to show that this program isn't working. Given that the principal objective of corrections is rehabilitation, you'd think that if they cancel the program, when it's one of the most effective I've ever seen....

I have to say, Mr. Leeman, that it's looking into the eyes of people like you and other inmates that gives me the passion I have for this project, because never before have I seen a program that has had such a dramatic impact upon inmates and upon their rehabilitation.

I'll leave rehabilitation. They have nothing there, and I think the anecdotal case has been made overwhelmingly.

The next point they make concerns employment skills.

To Mr. Perry and Mr. Amey, first I should say that I appreciate the courage of all witnesses here today. I know there was a tremendous amount of pressure not to testify. I know that we asked you to appear today. I am deeply appreciative of that.

Could you talk to the fact that they talk about the number of people who haven't gone directly into agriculture? I've been to the Pittsburgh facility and the Dorchester facility; in fact, I've been to pretty much every prison farm facility in the country. I saw other programs that had people building birdhouses or sewing pockets onto vests for military vehicles. No one asked how many of them went off to jobs building birdhouses or sewing pockets onto canvas material, yet in agriculture it seems to be a question only of jobs directly in agriculture. We have no statistics for how many jobs they get, period; in other words, we have no statistics for the relative success of that program over other programs.

What we do know—and this is off the CORCAN website—are the top ten occupations with vacancies in Canada. I will list those for you and you can tell me, from operating these programs and being on the front line of them, how you feel these programs relate to the top ten vacancies. The list includes truck drivers, sales, wholesale sales, retail sales, delivery and courier drivers, cooks, food and beverage servers, customer service clerks, estheticians, and janitors.

Can you talk about the skills that are learned through this program that are directly applicable? Second, can you talk about your experience in terms of the success of inmates getting employment with this program versus some of the other programs that are in the Correctional Service of Canada today?

● (1615)

Mr. Ron Amey: We have quite a diversified industry. We go from the seed right up to growing it, and then right to the very end, with the product shipped out in a bag.

One big draw that we have is in the milk plant. The inmates learn safe handling of food. We offer a course on what is called a bagging machine, an IS-6. DuPont of Canada supplies this machine, which we use to package our milk. They come down yearly to maintain this machine, but they also teach its operation. Two years ago we put 12 inmates through that training. That is one of our biggest employability procedures. We have known three inmates who actually got jobs in Toronto, Peterborough, and the Renfrew area. Those skills can be used anywhere.

We offer training in lift truck operation. We have lift trucks in our shipping and receiving, so that's something these fellows can gain.

Mr. Mark Holland: Can you tell me anecdotally how effective you think the prison farm program is in preparing people for release, in terms of recidivism and in terms of their employability relative to other programs?

Mr. Ron Amey: Like I said earlier, the biggest thing I see is that a lot of these guys are not used to working. They come from higher security, they've been sitting around, and it's pretty hard to get motivated.

Once they come here to our institution, they have to get up on time and get there on time. They need to get in the groove and to get that momentum going. They may not milk cows somewhere, but there's such a diversification here that when they get out.... They're going to have to start on the ground somewhere. Most of these fellows aren't bondable. They can't get jobs in a lot of areas because they get asked where they've been for five years.

At least if they can say that they've worked on a farm and have been there for six months or whatever, that carries some weight. I've heard that before. If you're in prison and you've come out of the farm, employers have a respect for that.

Mr. Mark Holland: Mr. Perry.

Mr. Dave Perry: A lot of these inmates learn to operate equipment while they're on the farms. They've never driven anything in their life. They can operate front-end loaders, tractors, and trucks at Frontenac Institution, heavy trucks. I know that several have gone out and got jobs on highway crews. There's a construction firm doing the 401 expansion and the guy has a farm in Renfrew that I know quite well. When he's interviewing a new applicant, his first question is, "Have you ever had farm experience?"

Many of these inmates are going to have jobs when they get out. The ones who aren't working on the farms, who are sitting in their cells, don't have the ambition to even look for a job. But these inmates are on a schedule, they're used to working, and they're going to go right out and continue to work when they hit the street.

● (1620)

Mr. Mark Holland: Thank you.

If I may, Mr. Edmunds—

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

Mr. Mark Holland: —you mentioned the issue of costs. Right now we're being told that no one is going to be laid off.

We have to source all of the eggs and all of the milk for Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes, so that could come from anywhere. It could come from Mexico or from the United States; we don't know because it's subject to NAFTA.

All of these facilities are going to be vacant buildings. As well, you'll have to replace all of these programs with new programs.

Can you see anywhere they could even conceivably save money by cancelling this program?

Mr. John Edmunds: No. As soon as you take away something you grow yourself, produce yourself, distribute yourself and then you have to go out to the fair market value to purchase, there is an additional cost.

In reviewing the tapes from last week, I noticed that the people from the Correctional Service talked about apprenticeships inside the institution; that's going to be the big replacement for the farm. I have a concern with that because of what's going on with the apprenticeships, in that employees of Correctional Service Canada can not sign off hours for inmates on an apprenticeship. There was a lawsuit a few years ago in Ontario. I'm from a plumbing background and I tried to sign up an offender that I had working for me at the Kingston Prison for Women. The government will have nothing to do with that.

So I'm a little concerned about, first, the costs that are going to be faced by your institutions, and then the lack of programming that is going to be in the institutions, because it's not there at this point in time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go over to the Bloc Québécois.

Monsieur Desnoyers, go ahead, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desnoyers (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to have you here and hear what you have to say, finally.

I have to say that this was something I was not familiar with, prison farms. When Sister Pauline Lally says they have a 150-year history, I think the reason the program has survived to today is that it must have positive effects in Canadian and Quebec society, given the number of people who must have gone through this kind of program.

We are told, with the statistics to show it, that over 4,668 inmates have gone through the prison farms. If we come back to the apprenticeship program Mr. Edmunds was just talking about, and I also noted what Mr. Leeman said, they talked about welding, mechanics, and in some documents, communications work, computer work, and of course agriculture, shipping and receiving, and heavy equipment repair. When I look at all that, having worked for over 30 years in labour relations, as the head of a union, I can say that these are trades that are in demand everywhere in society.

If people come out with apprenticeships in these areas, we will be building a much more just society for these inmates getting out of prison, who are often looking for jobs. It is not always easy, because not everyone is prepared to accept a former inmate. But when they come with such significant apprenticeships, I think that counts. I found it very striking to see the results described by nearly everyone around this table.

There is one question I would like to ask, and I don't know whom I should put it to. You have talked a lot about the economic benefits for the immediately surrounding communities. For the region immediately around Kingston, you talked about major economic benefits for farmers and for the communities in all their forms. Prisons buy a lot of things in the community, from what I understand. We haven't been able to get figures so we can see what impact the economic benefits might have in society in general.

I mention economic benefits because I have been told that it costs $4 million, when the result, when people get out, when they find themselves back in society and start to pay taxes immediately, is significant. It is profitable for society when they start paying taxes immediately. The little $4 million extra it may cost can sometimes bring in a lot more in terms of social benefits. If we take it away, if we put them in normal prisons, excuse the expression, and just let them stagnate there, it's counter-productive, particularly when they are getting close to leaving prison.

This question could be for Mr. Leeman. What effect did this kind of program have on you when you got out? How did you integrate into society?

On the question of economic benefits, maybe Mr. Edmunds could respond to that from the perspective of various communities.

And for a response from an academic, Mr. Flanagan could explain the pedagogical impact of this kind of training in prison.

So that makes three questions for three people.

● (1625)

[*English*]

Mr. John Leeman: In terms of the equipment you were just talking about and driving the heavy equipment, as the farmer was saying, when I got out, my first job was working for a local moving company. It was a coincidence, because when I walked onto the job, nobody was driving all the heavy trucks there. They were all five-ton trucks or tractor-trailers.

As we say, if you have enhanced clearance on property and they know you're not going to take off, there are trucks that you can drive. You learn in there. That experience is what I'm saying I utilize today as one of those examples. I went out to a local company and I've been driving a five-ton truck for the last five and a half years.

It was the work ethic on the farm and getting up in the morning.... We all know that moving companies start at about six o'clock in the morning so they can be at your house at seven, and that work ethic falls into the category of getting up and being punctual out in the community. Again, I took the tools out with me, and I utilize them out there on a daily basis. I hope that answers your question.

Mr. Bill Flanagan: I can speak to the question of the impact that it has on the law school.

As I mentioned, we have a correctional law program that we've had for well over 30 years. Every year 18 students are involved. They're working in the prisons advising inmates. In fact, today I was chatting with one of the people who came up from Kingston, Caroline Yull, a former student of mine, who participated in the correctional law program. She was telling me the story of many of the inmates she worked with who worked on the prison farms and telling me about the impact of that, the importance of it, and how much it was of assistance to the inmates in terms of their own rehabilitation.

You've heard this, of course, from the other witnesses. Frequently these inmates will have a history of violent crime. They may never have cared for a living thing before in their lives, and they're having an opportunity to work with animals in animal husbandry. It's well documented in all of the literature that this has a very positive rehabilitative effect on inmates. I think that our own students working in the correctional law project have seen this first-hand. They have seen the value of the prison farms in terms of the inmates they are advising on other legal matters. This has, I think, been a powerful experience for our students.

Mr. John Edmunds: Could I ask you to repeat your question?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desnoyers: I don't know who could answer that question. I thought you could do it. The prison farm has to buy a lot of materials. I imagine you buy a lot in the community surrounding the prison, be it fertilizer or mechanical parts to repair vehicles that break down. What would the economic impact be in the Kingston region if it were decided to close down the prison farm tomorrow? Would it have a major impact?

[*English*]

Mr. John Edmunds: In Kingston, there is an impact of approximately $900,000 per year to the city and to surrounding businesses. That doesn't include all the other institutions—Riverbend Institution in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, or Rockwood in Winnipeg, or down in Dorchester. They're all medium-sized communities that have a large base.

When you have a major purchaser such as the federal prison farms, it gives the farmers the ability, through the farms, to get seeds and parts at a discounted prices, because there's volume. There's stuff being used in the community. On that particular aspect, as I said, there has been some exploration in Kingston. It's a loss of approximately $900,000 to the City of Kingston.

● (1630)

The Chair: We'll have to move on now to the NDP.

Go ahead, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you.

In Vancouver there's a building near my riding that has a slogan painted on it. I'll paraphrase that slogan. It says that you should never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. I just want to say to all of you that this phrase has really been rendered real for me today.

I want to point out, as my colleague did, that when I look at the people speaking, I see community members, ex-inmates, law professors, nuns, prison guards, farmers, first nations, municipal officials, correctional officials—

A voice: And voters.

Mr. Don Davies: Yes, and voters.

I just think you couldn't get a more representative group of people. I commend all of you for being here.

The other thing I want to mention is that I had a town hall meeting in January in my riding and I invited people from my community to come and tell me what they thought. One of the things someone said to me was they wanted government to be more nimble and responsive. It was kind of vague to me. Again, that has been rendered very real for me here today, because I think this is a classic example.

I'm going to do something unusual in politics. I'm going to try to be kind and gentle to all of us. On the other side, representing the government, there are good people, people who care, and people who are intelligent, as we all are.

What I think is that in government sometimes we make a mistake. Sometimes we make a wrong policy move. I think the real test of a democratic responsive government, a test of its maturity, is to be able to say, "You know what? I think maybe we made a mistake here. We're taking the wrong direction."

I'm hoping that all of us as parliamentarians listen to the absolutely overwhelming voice of people here who are telling us that this decision to close the prison farms is simply wrong.

I also want to say that—I'll declare my bias right now—not only am I opposed to closing prison farms, but here's a news alert: I'm for opening more prison farms in this country. As for the reason for that, I can't say it any better than the people I've heard from today, you people who know so much about this.

I also want to point out that there's a philosophy underlying this. Often we have a vision of prison as a place of punishment and a place of vocational training. There's another philosophy that says it's a place of correction, a place of rehabilitation, and a place of healing. I think sometimes there is overlap there. But fundamentally I'm always reminded that we call this "Corrections Canada", not "Punishment Canada".

I think the main thing we can do as policy setters is to make sure, as one of you said, that when someone goes into prison, they come out a better person. If we can give them skills along the way, that's good. But that's not the primary purpose of prison. It's not a vocational training centre. It's a healing centre. Providing vocational skills is only part of it.

I'm struck by this thought: what could be healthier? What could be more rehabilitative? What could be more healing than to be working on a farm, connecting with the land, working outside, working with animals, and working with nature?

I want to focus a little bit on the work with animals. I was elected in October 2008, so I've been elected for 18 months. In that time, I have visited 14 prisons in Canada and three outside Canada, so that's 17 prisons in four countries. One thing that has struck me repeatedly—and it sounds trite to say it—is that any program that uses animals is, I think, critically and profoundly important. That's because I think a lot of people entering our prisons are people who, by definition, have been broken in some way. They have emotional difficulties attaching. So I think attaching through animals is a safe and rehabilitatively sound way to go.

I also want to point out that this is not just an issue of concern to Kingstonians, as important as you are. This is an issue that's important to Canadians across this country. This is what I think prison farms do. They provide local, self-sufficient, and sustainable food development. They provide self-sustaining food for prisons.

● (1635)

They are therapeutic. They are rehabilitative. They provide skills and training. They are liked by inmates and correctional staff alike. The program provides pride, honour, and spiritual development, and there's a community connection.

I know that I'm doing all the talking, and I'm not going to ask a question because I can't say it any better than all of you. I think what we need to do is listen to what you're saying.

It is that last component of community connection that I think is so critical; 96% of people who go to prisons come out, so we need our communities to go into prisons, and we need people to be coming out of prisons into the community. That's what strikes me as being so successful about the prison farm system: it is one of the few programs that involves the community.

We heard that this government is going to increase funding by 25% in operational funding, by 25% in staffing, and by 43% in capital expenditures, and this at a time when they have said departments are going to hold the line. These are the increases in corrections. I agree that finding $4 million a year—in fact, finding $8 million a year and doubling the prison farms—represents not only sound policy in our country but also something that politicians of every stripe from every party in every community should be pursuing, because it makes our communities safer and our inmate populations healthier.

I have a question. It's the one question I will ask.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Don Davies: The other side is going tell you one thing. I think the other side understands these arguments and I don't think they disagree with them, but there is one question they will ask you. They want to ask you about replacing this program with a targeted vocational training program, something that gives more direct training skills.

If any of you want to answer, I'd like to hear your response on that issue, because I think it's a fair question that my colleagues have asked.

The Chair: We have seven seconds left. Who wants to take it on?

Go ahead, Mr. Edmunds.

Mr. John Edmunds: We've done that in the past.

As I said, I am from the Correctional Service of Canada. I cut my teeth there, as a plumber at a prison for women in Kingston. There were vocational shops, and through the years, the government closed those down.

The biggest vocational shops we have left now are the farms. I'm saying there are still some vocational shops, but at this point in time, that's what's left. I can't see the reason for throwing out the baby with the bathwater, with the farm, when the farm gives you the vocational training as well as the produce to use inside our institutions.

There have been great debates in this forum, in this building, around Kyoto and going green and the 100 miles. This program gives the government the ability to lead and to show by example that it's trying to make government, at least in the form of the Correctional Service of Canada, self-sufficient. They can start to grow their own food and expand the program.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We shall now go over to the government side.

Go ahead, Mr. MacKenzie, please.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the panel for being here today.

I have some numbers. I don't know if anybody can confirm them, but if you can, or if you have a different number, please feel free to tell me. The farms are located at Westmorland Institution, with 50 inmates; at Pittsburgh Institution, with 29 inmates; at Frontenac Institution, with 41 inmates; at Rockwood Institution, with 26 inmates; at Riverbend Institution, with 44 inmates; and at Bowden in Alberta, with 30 inmates. That was as of February 1, 2010. Do those numbers sound correct?

Mr. John Edmunds: Are you asking for the population of the institutions, sir, or of those involved in the program?

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I'm asking how many inmates are working on the farm.

Mr. John Edmunds: Does either one of you have those numbers?

● (1640)

Mr. Dave Perry: Well, I'm at Pittsburgh currently, and I would say there are in excess of 40, but the program has already been scaled down. They did employ about 60 inmates there, but we're at 40 currently.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: You're at Pittsburgh. My understanding is that Pittsburgh will not close down, and that an independent operator is planning to take it over and employ inmates at the facility.

Mr. Dave Perry: That's for the abattoir only, and that contractor has been operating the abattoir there for 14 years now.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: He's going to continue on with the inmates?

Mr. Dave Perry: That's something we're not sure of. His contract expires in October.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I think you indicated there were jobs for those people. If that carries on, then that part of it is not adversely affected. Wouldn't that be a fair assessment?

Mr. Dave Perry: If it carries on.... That's the myth—

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Yes, okay, and I'm not asking you to suggest that it will or it won't; it's just that it is a fact.

Mr. Leeman, I'm impressed with your being here. I appreciate that you are here. I can understand that it is somewhat difficult.

Mr. John Leeman: It is.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: You deserve the committee's thanks for being here.

You indicated that you served...how long?

Mr. John Leeman: I served 10 years in the federal system on a life sentence. I've been on full parole now for 19 years.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: You served the full 10 years inside?

Mr. John Leeman: I served about seven and a half of it before I hit the minimum. That's what I was just trying to say, because when you're working in the higher security, the work hours are not there. Even though you're learning the trade, you're not able to demonstrate your ability on machinery. As I said, I was welding little pieces and I ended up getting my welding tickets, but I still had one of the farm staff teaching me some of the things about that not being the way you go around welding—it has be boxed and learned in other trades—so it's nice that I had the fundamentals, but I didn't actually get to demonstrate some of these work ethics until I got to the farm.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: You said you spent seven and a half years and then for the last two and a half years you were on the farm?

Mr. John Leeman: Yes, I was two years on the farm. I went into working on a committee to do other things because then I was moving towards my reintegration. I was ready. I completed the stuff that I needed on the farm. I had a good work ethic, and it led me into a work release that allowed me to go out and work. In those days you were allowed to go out for a certain amount of time to find your own job. I took those work ethics to a car lot. I found an auto wrecker and I started ripping cars apart. At least I started working, so....

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Did you find that employment as soon as you left or was it with the help of—

Mr. John Leeman: No, I actually had to get it extended. I remember that I couldn't find a job at the time, but the institution gave me extended time to find a job. I actually just went to the lowest-paid job. I took a minimum wage job, even though I went out with the credentials. I was qualified for higher pay, but I started at the bottom and worked my way up.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Is not a major part of why prisoners are rehabilitated so that they can find work when they leave—find housing and work and...?

Mr. John Leeman: What I'm trying to say about the farm is that it's about learning the life skills. There's a lot more than just working on the farm. We've seen guys who sat in behind the wall, rigid and not getting along, and we watched them cascade down to lower security.

I used a story in one of the talks I did about a guy who took a lot of pride in the job. The guy was attached to his job. He wasn't quite as efficient as the other guy and he thought he could go over and be the boss of this guy. One of the farm staff saw that and went over and said, “That's my job to do. I know when you do your job”. The guy didn't freak out; he actually turned around and said, “I learned a very valuable tool, because if I'd been on the workforce, I would have been fired”.

That's why some of these things are so important. There are so many related things other than just working on the farm. It's the life skills and the interaction with the people from the community, and it really is getting you more ready for the street. It makes you more alert about the statement that you used to live inside a corrections facility. You can forget very quickly what it's like out there. I think that's a very good process, and it's a positive reintegration.

What I'm here for is to say that when you have a positive reintegration in working with the community like that, for public safety it's definitely a better place for everybody.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: You said, and I've forgotten, how long ago it was that you got out and have been on the street.

● (1645)

Mr. John Leeman: I've been out 19 years now.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Okay. Have you had employment pretty well for that time?

Mr. John Leeman: I've had different jobs, yes. That's why you heard me say that when I see a farmer, I see a jack of all trades. I've done numerous jobs. I've been in welding shops where somebody had become ill, and I got called in and worked for three months while the guy was recuperating. Then I had to leave, and it was sad to leave.

Working on heavy equipment, again, gave me the confidence to sit in a five-ton truck. I started driving right off the hop and ended up staying there for five years, but without the experience being given, you can't drive this stuff. They encourage you to get your licence before you can even drive on the institutional property. They encourage you to move on and go out and get your licence. A lot of guys who were not working with the staff would sit back and be—

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: How did you get the licence to drive the five-ton truck?

Mr. John Leeman: To drive any vehicle on the property, you need to have your driver's licence, even if you're plowing the fields. It's part of the reintegration. It's a tool. It makes the guy feel.... I watched guys drive up and down those farm fields and look back and feel a day of accomplishment. The guy sees what he has done, and that's rewarding for somebody who has never worked in his life, and they learned it from the staff there—not only what to do, but how to communicate. That's one of the big things.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: And you found an employer who would employ you before you had the licence, is that what I heard you say?

Mr. John Leeman: No, I'm just saying that it wouldn't be wise to go right out to the street; you wouldn't have a job. What they've done is that if you want to drive a tractor on the farm, you have to get your driver's licence. Do you see what I'm saying? It's heavy equipment. These guys drive some pretty heavy equipment around there for snowplowing and working around the wall on the outside and keeping all the snow away so the farm trucks and everything else can move, so the staff can get into the institution.

So guys are learning trades, and believe me, a lot of guys would like to go out on a pass with the staff and say they'd like to get their licence, because they want to learn how to drive heavy equipment on the farm. That doesn't just take it to the farm; this guy can do some heavy equipment out in the community. There's a lot of stuff out there it could go to.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I have a brief question. I don't know who can answer this. About how many hours per day would be spent by an inmate working on the farms compared to the hours they would spend in other places like a workshop for welding or something like that. Does anybody know how intensive the farm program is compared to the other programs?

Mr. Dave Perry: In my particular shop, we have a punch clock, so the hours are definitely documented. They average seven and a half to eight hours a day. Two days a week they're allowed to work late because the staff work late. If they do stay after a certain hour, we notify security that we're keeping inmates late. It's only if they want to. We don't have any who refuse those extra hours.

Some other shops, such as janitorial work or cleaning jobs and kitchen jobs, probably have half that many hours. For some places they just touch the doorknob, show up, say they're present, and go back to their cell and read a book or sleep.

The Chair: So it would be a much more intensive work program.

Thank you very much.

We will now come back to the Liberal Party, with Mr. Easter, please. This is a five-minute round.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank everyone who is a witness, and those who are in the room as well, who have fought this fight for a considerable length of time, which shows a lot of community support.

I would submit to you, Mr. Chair, that if this committee can't look at this issue objectively and save either all or some of the farms, then I really seriously feel that what we've seen is an affront to democracy. I think this is the people speaking up with the evidence that the government should reconsider and change its decision.

My first question is to Ron and Dave. I want to congratulate you—I've been on your operations—on the job you've been able to do. Mr. MacKenzie, at the last meeting, in questioning the timing of this, said his understanding was that you're a year and a week and a half away from being closed.

Ron and Dave, I'm not criticizing him for making that statement. We're already seeing a phasing down, are we not? And if we hit June, these dairy herds are gone. Once gone, we cannot bring them back.

● (1650)

Mr. Dave Perry: At Pittsburgh, we have a feedlot sitting empty now. It will not be filled up. Greenhouses were cleaned out of poinsettias the day before Christmas; they have not been restocked.

The only part of the agribusiness that's currently operating is the abattoir at Pittsburgh Institution. I believe there are about 1,800 acres of property there. It'll probably be rented out to an area farmer, or some of it will sit vacant. I'm not sure.

Hon. Wayne Easter: So time is definitely of the essence.

I just want to lay some facts on the table, Mr. Chair. I was hopeful that with the new minister maybe there'd be a reconsideration. There obviously wasn't, because the same statement came out within very few days, before I think the minister even had a proper review of the files. Neither the previous minister nor the current minister has visited the farms. After questioning the head of CORCAN and senior officials the other day, I'm very doubtful if they've visited them or spent very much time there.

We're seeing questionable numbers in terms of the costs. As for the $4 million, to be quite honest, I don't believe it. The strategic study on which this decision was made is not available. We haven't seen it, you haven't seen it, and this committee does not have access to it. We don't even know if it looks at the whole system or just the economics in terms of the numbers without rehabilitation.

They admit that 14 people went to jobs, but they divide that into $4 million and say that it cost $285,000 for the creation of a job. So I would ask one of you to answer this: do others who come off the farm have jobs? Do they get jobs? The numbers from Shelly Glover the other day indicate a very expensive cost there, but I'm assuming that others got jobs. I'll come back to that in a minute.

The corrections officials quoted job numbers for other industries, but admitted under questioning that they never even talked to the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, which is about farm jobs. We were told by them that 39,000 farm workers will be needed in 2013 in seasonal positions. In fact, we're depending on foreign labourers in those areas now. They never even talked to that, which goes to show that they're using the numbers for their own purposes.

As well, the officials here the other day were not aware that in the United States.... I certainly don't favour their criminal justice system, but at least in the San Francisco area they are now turning to farming crops for rehabilitative reasons, and they admit that those numbers show recidivism is down.

Those are the facts.

So really, my question is in terms of the numbers that go through the farm system. Do they find jobs when they get out? Those jobs may not be in the farming industry, but do they find jobs when they get out?

Mr. Dave Perry: I can tell you that of at least three inmates I recently trained and released, one is currently delivering milk to stores and a local restaurant not too far from the prison. I see him there weekly. He's driving a truck; he's bringing milk to those businesses. He's reliable enough to do that. He doesn't have anybody with him watching him. Another is working in a chain store in Kingston. He was trained in meat cutting. He's working part-time in meat cutting and part-time in stocking shelves. Another is working at a local lumberyard, a RONA business. As I say, wherever I go in Ontario, in any city.... I just came back from London on the weekend. I saw one there. I trained him a couple of years ago.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I have one more question.

I think it's fair to say, David—

The Chair: Your time is up.

Hon. Wayne Easter: —that they are finding jobs in the system.

Mr. Chair, I think members of this committee have to challenge the government to do the right thing. Maybe we even need to look at the farms ourselves, because if you go there, I think you'll understand how important this program is.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McColeman, please.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I too want to underscore my thanks to the panel members for being here and presenting today.

My background is construction. That's where I made my living for most of my working life. I couldn't help but be struck by something that came up in our last group, and something that I did a little bit more research on.

You can look it up yourself; it's on the CBC website. It relates the story of a group of inmates in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, building a house for a family in need in the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. That's the beginning of the story.

This was a minimum security establishment. Earlier—I'll just allude to this for a moment—we had a member across the table somewhat minimize the building of a birdhouse. I think there should be no minimization of any skill set that comes across—

● (1655)

Mr. Mark Holland: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, in fairness, to be very clear, I stated that I do not minimize it at all. As for what I said, I asked why there was a different treatment of woodworking or building birdhouses relative to agriculture, where the question about how many people go from that to getting jobs isn't asked.

My question was about why there is a different treatment of different programs. I at no point... In fact, if you look at the record in the blues, I was very clear about the importance of those programs and others. My point was they don't need to be in exclusion of agriculture.

The Chair: You've made your point, Mr. Holland. Thank you.

Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Thank you for letting me continue, Mr. Chair.

So of the 19 people who were involved in the skills training in construction, 19 have already finished their sentences, all 19, and landed employment in the construction trades, according to the Correctional Service of Canada. Again, this is from the CBC website.

Among them was a fellow named Jessie Hoover, who said the most complicated project he had ever worked on prior to the house was a birdhouse. He's now an apprentice working in the community framing houses. He said:

> Some of the skills that I learned in this project would be, you know, good work ethic, coming to work on time, working hard when you're at work, plus the carpentry side of it, learning how to frame the house from the ground up.

I bring that point up because we also have a list of job placements of the 2,500 offenders who were mentioned earlier. The construction trades, by far and away, have the top ranking. Some of the others are: chefs; cooks; butchers; metal forming/shaping and erecting trades; welders and blacksmiths; automotive/autobody service technicians and mechanics; carpenters, cabinet-makers, and related retail and sales occupations; and professional occupations in social sciences, education, government, and retail. The list is longer.

One of the most rehabilitative, healing things we've witnessed in the prisons we've all attended is that having something meaningful to do gives you a sense of accomplishment, and nothing's better for that than having a job.

Thank you, Mr. Leeman, for being here and witnessing to us on that front. That takes great courage on your part.

Mr. John Leeman: Thank you.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I truly appreciate you sharing your story with us in more depth.

So my view is not to diminish the value of farming, because I come from a riding where there's a lot of farming, and I meet with farmers on a regular basis. Certainly there are life skills that are gained on the farm. None of this is very black and white in my mind—that one doesn't do it and the other one does. That somehow creeps into these discussions. But as we go through and see inmates and where their lives are going and try to have rehabilitative programming that really works and makes them marketable when they come out, I really have questions about which is the best way to go.

I'll quickly relate to you one other story. One of the best carpenters I ever had on my crews was an aboriginal person who had spent time in a penitentiary. He came to work and gave me full value.

So I'll put this to you and anyone who'd like to respond, but I guess the person I'd really like to ask is Mr. McDermott, because he seems very experienced and learned in many areas, especially the areas of aboriginals and integration. We know there aren't these types of facilities—corrective farms—in Quebec or B.C. We know there are other jurisdictions, yet we have great stories about other areas. For the sake of discussion, what is your view on ramping it up to give them the real marketable trades I'm mentioning here today?

● (1700)

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Larry McDermott: Thank you for the question.

I think it's like you've said. By the way, I also made some of my income in the construction industry in the past. I think what you're saying about developing skills that will help you in finding employment afterwards is not a black and white situation. I agree with you 100%.

What I would say is that in terms of focusing on the farms themselves, and in terms of aboriginal culture relating to life, the cultural value of working with animals and plants is a special opportunity, not only to develop some of those marketable skills but also to practise your culture.

I grew up on a farm and I know that I learned a variety of skills. I learned block-laying and I learned plumbing. You had to. You had to know all of those things.

I was appointed by the Conservative government in Ontario to the Eastern Ontario Smart Growth Panel, and Mr. Holland's list intrigued me, because it was very similar to our list. Truck drivers were at the top, although actually the average block-layer or bricklayer in Ontario, at that time anyway, was approaching 60 years old. We have a vacuum when it comes to skilled trades. In fact, when we looked at it, we were appalled.

So for me, it's both; the farm produces a variety of skills.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. Bellavance, please.

[*Translation*]

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

In my riding, there is a municipality called Warwick, where there is an alternative school called Fermentière; it is a farm. There are no prison farms in Quebec. But I would say that the principles applied in those prisons are the same as at Fermentière. It is attended by young people who are 15 to 17 years old. They are not necessarily delinquents, they are young people having trouble learning, who have behavioural problems or lack motivation. This is the kind of young people who go to the farm.

The testimony I am hearing here about prison farms sounds a lot like what is done for those young people. Certainly they are going to learn punctuality, responsibility, autonomy and initiative. And of course they are going to take courses relating to farm work, but also courses in mechanics, cooking and carpentry, and regular courses—mathematics, French and English.

So they are able to come out with a diploma of vocational studies or a diploma of secondary studies, or go on to study at cégep. The school is rather phenomenally successful. The Commission scolaire des Bois-Francs, which operates the farm, is very pleased with the results. So I can make a comparison with the testimony I have heard here.

Mr. Perry, how many years have you been an instructor at a prison farm?

[*English*]

Mr. Dave Perry: I've been employed as a agribusiness instructor for 18 years.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Could we say that in 18 years you have seen hundreds if not thousands of prisoners come through?

[*English*]

Mr. Dave Perry: While I was employed at the dairy operation at Frontenac, we'd put well over 100 inmates through that program in a year, and in the abattoir, probably 40 or 45 per year.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: I understand that you couldn't give us a figure for the number of inmates who have been successful in life, or how many have been rehabilitated. But when we look at inmates when they arrive, I am sure there are some with whom it is more difficult. I am sure that some are more recalcitrant when it comes to getting them to do work or whatever.

Based on your 18 years of experience, can you say that when you take an inmate, in a large majority of cases, at the end of their apprenticeship, you are satisfied that you have made them, or helped to make them, a better person? Are you convinced that the person is fit to return to society? That they have become an asset to society, and not a cost?

● (1705)

[*English*]

Mr. Dave Perry: Yes, I'm definitely convinced. We're told that these inmates aren't tracked, but we see them in the communities, and they are successful. They do get jobs. I'd say a higher percentage of inmates who go through these farm programs stay out of trouble. I would say that's a given.

Mr. Ron Amey: I would like to make one comment. I've heard it said a couple of times that there were no prison farms in Quebec. Unfortunately, there were. I'm thinking of Mount St. Francis in the Laval area. It was a very good farm. It was disappointing when it was closed, which I think was in the 1970s. We ended up getting some of the equipment from them at that time. But again, it grew around.... There was no support. It was actually quite a shame.

Getting back to some of the questions about the inmates, as Dave said, we see this time and time again. A lot of guys will come up to you, shake your hand, and say, “Thank you very much”. The first time that ever happened, I thought it was kind of odd, because they're in prison, so why would they be thanking you? But a lot of guys have done that, time and time again.

The way we judge it is that we don't see them again. Nine times out of ten, if they do reoffend, they're sent back to where they left. So that's one indication we get: we don't see these fellows, so I think we've done a good job in that respect.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Leeman, my question is for you. You were at a prison farm. I don't want you to go into the details of your private life, but I think I can tell from your testimony that it was very beneficial for you. If you went back in time, Mr. Leeman, and you were told you were going to be in prison, that you would just stay there passively, do your time, do physical training, go for a walk in the yard from time to time, and that was about all you were offered, do you think you would be the same man today?

Earlier, you listed the jobs you have held. I'm not saying it would not have been possible to get them. When you got out of there you might have been able to rehabilitate yourself. All the same, do you think that without that experience, you would be the same man today?

[*English*]

The Chair: There's time for a brief response.

Go ahead, Mr. Leeman.

Mr. John Leeman: Well, I think I'd be the same guy today, but I don't know if I could have utilized the tools that I have. It's the respect that you're taught and the courtesy that you give to each other on the farm. Sometimes when you're not working in the barn, there's a spot you can go to and make a garden. When we do a garden, the guys who are working together ask what we can do with it. We donate it to Martha's Table or Salvation Army soup kitchens or Boys and Girls Clubs. I still see that happening today.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

Ms. Hoeppner, go ahead, please.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank the witnesses for being here. I think what we are all impressed with is that you're genuine. You really believe in what you're talking about. I appreciate that very much.

I normally don't sit on this committee, and I don't think my colleagues even know this, but about 25 years ago when I was a very young woman, my family and I volunteered for five years. Every month, we'd go to Stony Mountain penitentiary, where we volunteered in the chapel program. Who would ever have thought that a mom and dad would take in their young girls to volunteer? But I can tell you that it was a very positive experience.

We met men, probably like you, Mr. Leeman, who had been in foster homes, and who had had no real mom or dad. I know that my dad became a father to many of them. Also, as a young woman, I was treated probably with the most respect in many of those prisons by some of those individuals. The work we did was primarily at Stony Mountain, but I remember hearing a lot about the farm, about Rockwood, because a lot of the guys were hoping that they'd have a chance to go to Rockwood and be a part of it. So hearing your testimony, hearing what you have to say, means a lot to me.

I do want to challenge you, Mr. Flanagan. I know your assertion is that our government is tough on crime, and you are right. We believe in that. Our approach to crime is markedly different from that of the previous government, but I would suggest that when you're pointing a finger, as far as political motivation goes, there may be a few fingers pointing back at you. I would suggest that we want to balance being tough on crime with compassion and with taxpayers' dollars, so there is a balancing act.

I have a couple of questions. As I said, I found many of the inmates wanted to go to the farm because it was a much better experience.

Mr. Leeman, I'll ask you this, and maybe I'll ask Mr. McDermott as well. Do you find that the farms are of greater benefit because they are a reward, a better place to be, the skills you learn are appreciated, and you are able to have more freedom? These are inmates who have earned their way there.

What would you say is the greater benefit? Those things or the actual skills you learned so that you could go out and get a job?

● (1710)

Mr. John Leeman: I would say there are a lot of skills going on at the farm to benefit the community, because a lot of guys come with a lot of baggage when they come to camp. Even though you're in a work-sharing program and you're not a threat to public safety anymore—or you wouldn't be in minimum—there is still baggage going on, where there's animosity. We've seen this in the job force, where the staff have sent them to the unit and they're rehired. They've learned that this will not be tolerated in the community, that a job is in jeopardy. Those are valuable tools to have.

It's not all about the correctional plan when looking at that last step of going into the community, where people have learned to be team players and have moved away from worrying about who this guy is and being a judge and jury about who a guy is. At least, that was the way most of the time when I went through there. I learned all of that.

We all know that certain sentences go through and people don't get along, but when you're in the camp, you learn not to be judgmental. You're to come and do your job. There are people in the community who don't get along in the job force.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: That's right.

Mr. John Leeman: So that's being taught. I think that's a very valuable tool and it is a good reintegration process.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: So it's more the interpersonal skills and the reintegration as opposed to, let's say.... It wasn't necessarily a trade you were learning, although you were learning skills such as getting up early, going to work, and those kinds of things.

Mr. John Leeman: Yes—life skills.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: Life skills—

Mr. John Leeman: Yes.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: —as opposed to a trade or getting your licence or something to that effect.

Mr. John Leeman: I ended up getting all my trades in the other institutions but I never had a chance to demonstrate them. When I wanted to finish off in the related trades that I needed to continue, they all disappeared, and I was wondering what was going to happen before we got through our sentences. When I went to Frontenac, it was such a wake-up call, as I've said, because these tools are not taught to you where there is punishment, and trying to get you into the programs and give you some education, that final part is done in minimum.

You think you have it when you're in medium or maximum, but you don't have it until you demonstrate it, so I believe that....

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: That's right.

Do I have a little bit of time?

The Chair: Yes, you have.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: Mr. McDermott, if you have something to say on that, that would be great, but could you also speak a little more about aboriginal women? You were saying that aboriginal women make up the fastest growing population in our prisons. Is that correct?

Mr. Larry McDermott: Yes. It's hugely disproportionate. It's nearly 30% of the population of Canada, whereas aboriginal people represent 4% of the population of Canada. The ratio is way out of whack.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: What kinds of skills do they need? Are the farms helping them? Are any farms serving aboriginal women's prisons?

Mr. Larry McDermott: Locally, the gentlemen around me probably can answer that question more accurately, but my understanding is no, they are not.

What I'm hearing from those who work with aboriginal women and from aboriginal women themselves—and this also is addressing the question you asked previously—they definitely cultivate an emotional relationship with animals. In that emotional relationship of caring, being responsible, and nurturing are skills that, when blended with vocational training, make one a more employable person and make one successful in their community.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: That's right. They are those kinds of intangible, personal skills we talked about.

Mr. Larry McDermott: Absolutely.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Kania, please.

Mr. Andrew Kania (Brampton West, Lib.): I'm going to start by discussing my notice of motion from last time. A motion is pending. I am going to ask that it be heard at the next meeting, on April 1.

Part A of the motion reads: “That the committee calls upon the Minister of Public Safety to table forthwith the Strategic Review document referred to by CSC officials on March 25, 2010, during their testimony before the committee”.

I would ask that part B be heard on Thursday, April 1, at our next meeting. It reads as follows. We ask: “That the Minister of Public Safety refrain from taking any steps to sell, dismantle, or reduce operations at any of Canada's prison farms in any way until independent experts have had an opportunity to fully review the value of the farm program and duly report in writing to both the Minister of Public Safety and the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security”.

I am moving that the motion be debated and dealt with at the next meeting.

● (1715)

The Chair: You're giving notice, in other words.

Mr. Andrew Kania: That's correct.

[*Applause*]

Mr. Andrew Kania: Dean Flanagan, as a fellow lawyer and a former secretary of the Ontario Bar Association, I understand you're here in an independent capacity, to be objective. I regret that your independence was challenged by my friend, Ms. Hoeppner. She did so without giving you an opportunity to defend yourself. I'm giving you that opportunity now.

Mr. Bill Flanagan: Thank you. I'd like that chance to comment.

I agree that our criminal justice system is about balance. This is something that we spend a lot of time thinking about in law schools. Law professors think about it a great deal. You have to balance appropriate punishment for people who have offended and you also have to think about fair treatment of accused and our inmates.

As a society, I think it is extremely important that we maintain this balance. As I said in my earlier comments, we have, for many years, seen a decline in crime rates in Canada, yet at the same time, we're seeing an increase in our prison population, an increase that is projected to be as much as 10% over the next few years. The government has also increased the budget for the Correctional Service of Canada by 27% over the next two years. In all of this, we also see a government that is determined to close these prison farms, notwithstanding all of the evidence we've heard today that demonstrates how effective these farms can be.

So I would only suggest that somewhere along the line we may have lost that balance. I think we ought to restore it.

Thank you.

Mr. Andrew Kania: I'm going to read a quote for you and ask you to listen to this and respond:

> ...virtually none of the inmates who work on the prison farms end up with employable job skills and makes them more likely to reoffend when they re-enter the community. That is bad for our communities.

Does anybody agree with that quote? No?

Have the panellists disagreed with that quote? Raise your hands. Yes? That would be all of you.

That is a quote from the Honourable Peter Van Loan in the House of Commons on April 28, 2009.

Voices: Shame.

Mr. Andrew Kania: I want to ask Mr. Perry about the scaling down. What I note from the statistics is that since 2007-08 there has been a scaling down at most of the institutions, such that between 2007-08 to the present there are roughly 250 people left who work on the farms.

First of all, assuming you agree with that, would you not also agree that any statistics the government might be seeking to rely upon to shut down the farms are skewed and not reliable because they don't show the true capacity of the system?

Mr. Dave Perry: I would answer that as president of the Frontenac Cattlemen and I would say yes.

Mr. Andrew Kania: Now, in terms of the rationale for shutting down the prison farms, have any of you been made aware of any independent information or evidence to suggest that the shutting down of these prison farms is logical?

Mr. John Edmunds: No, I have not been made aware of anything, and as it stands right now, anything that I ask the government around the farms, around their operation, is flat out refused. We're not allowed to see it now because it could affect the upcoming auction of the materials from the farms. Everything right now is off limits.

The Chair: Do you have a comment, Ms. Dowling?

Ms. Dianne Dowling: I do. My understanding is that before the decision was announced they didn't ask for feedback on this decision from CSC staff. They didn't ask the citizens' advisory committees; at least, the one in Ontario was not asked about it. CORCAN has an advisory board of tradespeople and business people, and that board was not asked for its opinion on this decision either.

● (1720)

The Chair: Thank you. Unfortunately, we're out of time.

Mr. Goldring, please.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I certainly do want to thank the presenters here today. You certainly are demonstrating a compassion for the issue. I want to thank you very much for your words.

I grew up on a farm here in Ontario, just outside the Cobourg area, so I'm familiar with a little bit of what farming is and the benefits there can be. Some of your comments are very true and very realistic in regard to the benefits of being on a farm.

But I was also executor for my brother-in-law's farm, a 10,000-unit chicken farm, when he passed away. He was divorced, and there was one person working on that farm, who was virtually working on that farm alone and at barely above minimum wage.

So my concern is that the farming experience can be very good and very satisfying, and maybe therapeutic as well, but at the end of the day, when somebody leaves a prison, they may have a family to sustain, and they have to look for things. In looking at the skills of some of these other things....

For example, I was in New York City visiting some of the homeless shelters. They had a work program to reintroduce people to life skills, to the street. All of that is very important to do, but also, in going through these CORCAN farms—maybe somebody could help me with this—I'm seeing a lot of other skills here that are being developed. For example, in Alberta, there are welders. As has been mentioned before, there is manufacturing, and there are other areas. I know full well that in Alberta a welder up in Fort McMurray can make $100 an hour.

So it becomes a bit problematic when, as has been mentioned across this, right now we import farm workers, but those farm workers who are imported are minimum-wage workers. I wonder how many people can be satisfied in the long term while working at a minimum wage when they have families and responsibilities that they want to take on in the future. And how many more would like to have....

I can appreciate, Mr. Leeman, that the tickets are problematic in regard to going through and obtaining them and going through the levels of them. But perhaps that's something that could be focused on more to allow people to access the ticket levels and the additional training that's needed, so that they can move up through the ranks of journeymen, up through the ranks in the trades, and share in some of that rewarding experience financially as well, which many tradesmen in the construction industry here in Ontario—and certainly in Alberta—take part in on a regular basis.

My concern is along that line. I think we have to be aware that when people leave the prison system, part of leaving, staying out, and going into the greater community, is the rewarding as they move up through life skills and up through the wage levels and the increasing of wages. Maybe someone would care to comment.

In regard to my own background, I had a manufacturing company for some 30 years. I didn't need the welding tickets, the hard tickets, but I did need people who had some reasonable amount of skills to begin with. I could carry that through and train them more as time went on. As a matter of fact, one fellow, an aboriginal, a very best friend of mine, was able to take over a portion of the company eventually, even though he came in at minimum wage, with a very low skill level, but something that I could work with.

At one point, I'm very pleased to say, it was politely pointed out to me by the aboriginals that they outnumbered all the rest of us in my company. Many of them went on to become very successful or moderately successful, but all of them were able to go into that family-sustaining wage level that I don't think is that common coming out of a farming circumstance, unless you're able to move into farm ownership or into some other very serious end of farming.

Mr. McDermott, maybe you could comment on that for me.

Mr. Larry McDermott: I think it's important to realize that the skills learned on a farm are transferable. I tried to express that in my previous answer.

In other words, when I think of the list that we looked at on the smart growth panel, I know that I was exposed to many of those skills—yes, at the entry level—in my farming background. I think it's applicable in this circumstance.

● (1725)

Mr. Peter Goldring: But then most of these here would be more applicable; for my company, it'd be difficult for me to interview people who had just come from a farming scenario versus those coming in with some manufacturing or some assembly background experience. Those types of skills would be what my company would be looking for and I would be able to build on those skills.

Mr. Larry McDermott: Well, I think that's true. I would suggest that you're talking more about an urban circumstance. Yes, 60% of the aboriginal people live in aboriginal circumstances, but there is 40% still looking for employment. They want to go back to their families. They're located in rural areas and on reserves in Canada.

The Chair: Okay. We'll have to wrap it up there, unfortunately.

Last of all, Mr. Holland, please.

Mr. Mark Holland: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank Mr. McColeman, because I think there was a sincere misunderstanding, that he raised, which I think is at the crux of part of the problem here. Maybe I can bring this misunderstanding to the witnesses.

Unlike any other program, the prison farm program is asked to compete not against an existing or specific program, but against an ideal. As an example, we don't take the birdhouse program, where people build birdhouses, and compare it to the program where people sew patches onto military backpacks, as an example. Now, I support both of these, though it's a little hard to show explicitly how these lead to a job, as it is with most programs, but we don't ask to have a battle of the programs to say who will become the winner, which I find confounding.

The second part of the problem is that there seems to be a thought that we only have so much room for programs. I think we need to challenge that, because, in my experience, it's the opposite, and I'm wondering if the experiences of the witnesses have been the same. I would argue that many of our inmates are not in fact being challenged with programs. I would argue that they have the types of programs Mr. Perry mentioned, where they just go in, touch a doorknob, say they were there, and then come back.

How many programs do we have that are as substantive as this one? Why can't we continue to have this good programs like this? Why is this program being pitted against other programs?

Maybe we can start with Mr. Edmunds and then hear from Ms. Doherty and Mr. Perry.

Mr. John Edmunds: I think the most important thing we have to remember is that one of the documents that Rob Sampson was involved with, the road map to corrections—I probably misquoted the name—talks about expanding programs. It talks about expanding the prisoner's workday and giving the prisoners more opportunities.

There's nothing saying that we can't build the houses and do even more, but what we're doing right now is that we're looking at taking away something that adds value to a person's life, to their workday, and gives them a sense of purpose and more hours of work than they'd have inside a normal institution.

Yes, the comment was made that they could come out at minimum wage. I think a lot of the people who come out of the Correctional Service of Canada will come out at minimum wage, because they've just paid a price to society. I actually also grew up on a farm and went from that to being a tradesperson to the president of a union. I guess what I'm saying is that at least the farm is giving them a direct start in life; it's something hands-on, something tangible, and it's a program that can work. But I also agree that the government should support the rest of the documentation, take it farther, and create more programs.

Mr. Mark Holland: I'm being told by the chair that I don't have very much time. Let me just ask one more question.

I apologize to the other witnesses.

Is there anybody who would disagree with the following statement, yes or no? Given the fact that there's no evidence whatsoever put forward by departmental officials showing that this program is anything but effective, cost efficient, and highly effective at rehabilitation, would you agree that at the very least, the very minimum, the government should hold off on its decision until an independent third party is able to assess the veracity and effectiveness of this program?

Voices: Yes.

A voice: Agreed.

Mr. Mark Holland: I'm seeing a consensus on that point. I'll leave it at that, Mr. Chair. They did say yes, on the record.

The Chair: Okay.

I have to deal with just one issue. We had a motion raised here today. I have to get the consensus of the committee on it.

On Thursday, we already have a very full agenda. You've received your notices on that. When on Thursday should we deal with this motion? Do you want to put it on at the very end of the meeting or...?

Mr. MacKenzie, you have a suggestion?

● (1730)

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: No, absolutely not, Chair. The other side filled up the agenda.

We wanted Bill C-391 to go ahead sooner rather than later. They filled the agenda and now, all of a sudden, they want to move people around. We have witnesses scheduled. It's an important issue and something that we've been working on. If they hadn't been so adamant about filling up the committee's schedule, we would have been dealing with some of these issues sooner. As I say, we wished to have Bill C-391 sooner, but they wouldn't listen to that.

The Chair: Mr. Holland.

Mr. Mark Holland: Mr. Chair, it is common practice for this committee to deal with motions at the end; there's no reason why we can't finish our work with the witnesses earlier to deal with the motion. I can't imagine that we're not ever again going to leave any time for motions. That would be a rather horrible precedent. Given the fact there probably isn't going to be a consensus, probably the best way to deal with it is to bring the matter to a vote.

The Chair: Well, we need a proposal.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: It was their motion. These are their witnesses. If we were going to cut it off, we should have cut it off today. These are witnesses who we've asked to come forward on a study that we've been doing for months and months—

Mr. Mark Holland: If we're willing to go directly to the question, we can move the matter right now. I'd be happy to do that as long as we're willing to suspend debate, just move the motion, and have the vote.

The Chair: I need to know clearly what the motion would be. Are we going to cancel these witnesses, then? What are we going to do with the motion? Are we going to do the motion at the end of the meeting or...? I need some direction on this.

Mr. Mark Holland: Chair, the normal practice of the committee when a motion has been raised is to finish 15 minutes early and allow the opportunity to deal with the motion. That has been the normal practice of this committee in the past. I'm not sure why this normal practice is causing such angst—

The Chair: Because that would mean that we'd have to cancel witnesses. You've received the notice already. In the notice, we have three witnesses for the first hour, then we have another witness for the next half hour, and then finally a witness for the last half hour. So if we're going to do that, then we're going to have to start cancelling witnesses.

Mr. Mark Holland: No, Chair. The simple solution is to have them on the hour and to finish 15 minutes early. We have never, ever had a problem with this in the past.

There's a very simple solution. You have one group of witnesses at the first hour and one group of witnesses at second hour and you finish 15 minutes early. I'm sure the witnesses will understand. These are the last of, I believe, nine hearings that we've had on the issue of corrections. I think of the nine meetings we've had, with some 18 hours, we can afford 15 minutes.

The Chair: Well, they're your witnesses.

Mr. Kania.

Mr. Andrew Kania: I actually would like to raise a point of order, please, briefly. this is the second meeting in a row where the Conservatives have mentioned the rationale behind the setting of the committee's agenda. Those are all in camera discussions. It should not be mentioned ever.

I would also indicate that I disagree with the characterization. No request was made for Bill C-391 to be done earlier. In fact, there was no legislation on the agenda when we were discussing it, because it was all killed through prorogation. So I would ask that these be held back and these rationales not be raised before committee unless it's in camera, based on these in camera discussions.

The Chair: Private members' business is not killed at prorogation.

Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: I want to say that I think if we're rational about this, the eminently sensible thing is to leave 15 minutes at the end. I would point out that on Thursday we're finishing up the last witnesses for the mental health and addictions study, and I believe they're the Conservatives' witnesses that day—

The Chair: No. They're...[*Inaudible—Editor*].

Mr. Don Davies: Or they're the Liberals' witnesses.

I want to point out that when my witnesses were brought in last week, we had to suspend the meeting 15 minutes early because there were votes held. I don't remember anybody else complaining about it on that day when my own witnesses were cut short.

So what we know is that sometimes there are legislative issues that come up. As we all know, this is nothing unusual. I think it's eminently sensible to simply stop 15 minutes earlier than normal to deal with this matter. That's customary.

The Chair: Mr. Desnoyers, do you have a brief comment?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desnoyers: I agree with my colleagues. At the next meeting, in the last 15 minutes, we'll deal with the motion and the amendment. I think the motion is important to the people who are here. So we will have to deal with it at the next meeting.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. MacKenzie, you had a brief comment.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Chair, first off, the time is up. The witnesses are still sitting here at the table. I think it's—

● (1735)

The Chair: I know. I didn't expect this to happen.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I think we should adjourn this meeting, because I think what's happening here is just inappropriate .

The Chair: I was just going to have a consensus here. Is there consensus that we spend the last 15 minutes on this?

Some hon. members: Yes.

Some hon. members: No.

Mr. Mark Holland: Mr. Chair, I'll move a motion that we spend the last 15 minutes of the next meeting to deal with the motion presented by Mr. Kania.

The Chair: Are we just going to cut back all the rest of the witnesses, then?

Mr. Mark Holland: Well, we have an hour and 45 minutes. It's the 18th hour of studying this issue. I think we can afford 15 minutes.

The Chair: I'll try to get the schedule amended.

Mr. Don Davies: I'll call the question on that, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. The question has been called. All those in favour?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you to all the witnesses. I'm sorry that you had to endure some of the inside battles here at the committee, but I thank you all very much.

This meeting stands adjourned.

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