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Chair

Mr. Pat Finnigan

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● (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone, and welcome. This is our first meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying the support for indigenous Canadians in the agriculture and agri-food industry.

[*English*]

I want to welcome, from the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Mr. Tom Rosser, Assistant Deputy Minister for the Strategic Policy Branch. Thanks for being here again. We appreciate it.

I'd also like to welcome Jane Taylor, Assistant Deputy Minister for the Programs Branch; Brian T. Gray, Champion, Indigenous Network Circle, and Assistant Deputy Minister for the Science and Technology Branch; and Mervin Traverse, Department Elder.

We'll start with opening statements of up to seven minutes.

Mr. Rosser, I believe you will start.

Mr. Tom Rosser (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy Branch, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Yes.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Good morning. I'd like to thank the committee for offering the department the opportunity to discuss indigenous support in the Canadian agriculture and agri-food industry. I'd like to also acknowledge the timeliness of this study, as indigenous engagement in this sector is increasing in importance and frequency at the federal-provincial-territorial table.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada is committed to supporting the advancement of indigenous peoples in the agriculture and agri-food sector and the federal truth and reconciliation process. We've learned a lot from outreach sessions with our indigenous partners, and we've started to make some progress in the department. We understand that we have some catching up to do, including strengthening our partnerships and programs. We're hopeful that the work of this committee will enhance our understanding and enrich our ability to better support participation of indigenous peoples in the sector.

[*Translation*]

Agriculture and Agri-food Canada (AAFC) is firmly committed to creating meaningful dialogue and developing ongoing and sustained relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit in Canada. We recognize that this is a long-term commitment, one that will require intense effort and ongoing investment. We are committed to facilitating nation-to-nation dialogue and co-developed initiatives. Increased communication, accountability and support for greater indigenous representation in the department will be key.

There is an eagerness to move forward. However, we want to ensure that we get this right and are thoughtful in taking our next steps. As such, we are currently examining the ways in which AAFC can improve the way that it organizes itself to support this work and to ensure the department is appropriately resourced.

[*English*]

Our engagement efforts to date have included two outreach sessions, with approximately 85 first nations participants, in 2017, which provided perspectives that guided AAFC's approach to supporting indigenous issues. Food policy consultations with indigenous peoples, which took place also in 2017, were led by indigenous organizations, including the Assembly of First Nations, the Native Women's Association of Canada and the ITK.

As a department, we have established and supported programs to engage indigenous partners. Before explaining those, I'll note that my colleague Jane Taylor, the Assistant Deputy Minister of Programs, is here and can answer questions you may have on federal programs.

Under Growing Forward 2, indigenous-led initiatives were supported by AAFC. At the time, GF2 did not emphasize the development of policies targeting an increase in the participation of indigenous peoples in the sector, nor did the department measure indigenous participation well.

In developing the Canadian agricultural partnership, we tried to learn from GF2 and create policies and programs that strengthen the sector's inclusivity. We will also do a better job in measuring results and impacts of our programs.

From the beginning, under-represented groups, including indigenous peoples, were considered when FPT partners drafted the Canadian agricultural partnership's multilateral framework agreement with provinces and territories.

There are federal and cost-shared programs supporting indigenous participation through the Canadian agricultural partnership, many of which specifically target indigenous communities and provide tools to enable their participation in the sector. British Columbia, for instance, has an indigenous agriculture development program, supported by Canadian agricultural partnership funding. Provinces and territories also have programming outside the Canadian agricultural partnership, and we are working with provincial and territorial partners to get a better understanding of their programs and policies.

Under the CAP, we've developed AgriDiversity, a five-year, $5-million program that seeks to directly support the participation of under-represented groups, including indigenous peoples, in the sector. The program helps develop skills, leadership and entrepreneurial capacity. To date, two indigenous-led projects have been approved. The program is supporting activities led by the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers and the Northern Farm Training Institute in the Northwest Territories.

AAFC has begun to make a more conscious effort to measure progress in indigenous engagement throughout federal-only programs under CAP. Applications received to date range from providing business planning and financial management services that assist indigenous peoples in starting or expanding an agricultural operation, to piloting growing traditional foods in a greenhouse and community garden, and transferring knowledge to indigenous women and communities.

We've also developed the indigenous agriculture and food systems initiative. This five-year, $8.5-million initiative is designed to increase economic development opportunities for indigenous people by supporting their capacity to participate and succeed in the agricultural sector. This initiative is implemented with financial and logistical support from AAFC and the federal strategic partnerships initiative led by CIRNAC, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada.

Through our consultations we heard it can be difficult to navigate AAFC's programs. In response, we developed and launched an indigenous pathfinder service in 2018. It's effectively a concierge service that offers personalized one-on-one assistance to help indigenous individuals and organizations develop opportunities in the agriculture and agri-food sector.

In terms of upcoming initiatives, the department is working with Métis partners to develop a Métis outreach strategy. We will continue to work with the Assembly of First Nations and other national indigenous organizations to support their efforts to build a first nations agriculture strategy. We'll continue to examine ways to support food security initiatives in the north. We'll work with other government departments to better understand the federal programming landscape. We will maintain an FPT dialogue on indigenous policies and programs.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to discuss this with you today.

I will now turn the floor over to my colleague Brian Gray, who will speak about more internally focusing programs.

● (1105)

Dr. Brian Gray (Champion, Indigenous Network Circle and Assistant Deputy Minister, Science and Technology Branch, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you, Tom, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge Elder Mervin Traverse. He's a member of the Lake St. Martin Ojibway First Nation, and a traditional Saulteaux-language speaker. He is also Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's first departmental elder, and he is here today to answer questions that you might have pertaining to this role.

As Tom mentioned, our department has several branches working to support a diverse array of indigenous initiatives. Underlying this work is the need to increase our departmental capacity to work effectively with indigenous peoples, both externally with indigenous partners but also internally with our indigenous colleagues. In 2017, the indigenous support and awareness office was established to increase our capacity to carry out this work. It has has done so through a variety of methods, such as supporting indigenous recruitment and retention within our department, providing full-time elder services, developing a tailored indigenous awareness learning series for the department, and supporting research projects and partnerships with indigenous communities.

[*Translation*]

Supporting the recruitment and retention of indigenous employees requires consistent and long-term efforts. To that end, the indigenous student recruitment initiative was launched in February 2016, to offer indigenous students valuable experience and knowledge of the careers available within the public service, and to encourage the pursuit of an education and career, especially in the science and technology disciplines where indigenous peoples have historically been, and continue to be, underrepresented.

Since its launch, a total of 103 students have been hired through the initiative and many have stayed on part-time through the school year, as long as it does not interfere with their studies.

● (1110)

[*English*]

Our department conducts significant outreach to promote knowledge of our indigenous student recruitment initiative within indigenous communities, which is done through various means such as presentations at friendship centres, tabling at career fairs and community visits. Through these efforts, to date roughly 3,500 indigenous students have been consulted about our initiative.

Once hired, students are offered support for the many activities of the department's indigenous network circle, one of the department's five employee diversity networks. Each network has an assistant deputy minister champion, and I am the champion of the indigenous network circle.

The indigenous network circle is a networking and support service for indigenous employees and students that also serves as a platform for enhanced awareness and appreciation of indigenous people and cultures. The work of the indigenous network circle concentrates on three main areas: raising awareness of first nations, Métis and Inuit cultures; recruitment, retention and professional development of indigenous employees and students; and organizing cultural activities for all staff.

I would like to now discuss Elder Traverse's role within the department.

We are the first federal department to have a full-time elder on staff. Since Elder Traverse has joined us, other departments are looking at doing the same. Elder Traverse has roots in the public service, with over 28 years of service at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency prior to joining our department in September of 2016.

Elder Traverse's role in our department has four broad responsibilities: first, to provide an indigenous perspective within the department; second, to serve as an indigenous liaison, whereby Elder Traverse helps to facilitate partnerships with indigenous communities and businesses; third, to provide cultural and emotional support to indigenous employees within the department; and, finally, to raise cultural awareness within the department through various cultural awareness sessions that are made available to all of our employees.

Elder Traverse's presence has been a significant contribution to the department's greater effort to reconcile with indigenous peoples and is a key reason why the department has been recognized by Mediacorp and The Globe and Mail as one of Canada's best diversity employers for the past two consecutive years.

[*Translation*]

The next topic that I would like to address is the development of a tailored indigenous awareness learning series for the department. The driver for this initiative is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's call to action number 57, which calls upon all Canadian governments to provide professional development and training for public servants on the histories and cultures of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

This series will include both formal and informal learning opportunities through workshops, courses, videos, books, a speaker series and cultural awareness information sessions. The speaker series and cultural awareness sessions are currently underway, while the others are being developed. The bulk of the learning activities will focus on agriculture and the needs identified within the department.

[*English*]

Finally, we support research projects and partnerships within indigenous communities. Our indigenous support and awareness office is working on developing learning materials for our scientists, who plan to collaborate with indigenous partners, and will be organizing a workshop this spring to begin that learning series.

One of our employees, Emily McAuley, a biologist and member of Lake Manitoba First Nation, has done an incredible job serving as Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's first indigenous liaison scientist. In this new role, she facilitates scientific collaborations with indigenous partners, our own in-house science and technology branch researchers, and external experts.

In 2018, our science and technology branch also added a new priority for an internal call for proposals that our scientists compete for. They were challenged to develop proposals regarding an area that we entitled, “understanding and supporting indigenous people's cultivated food systems.” Our branch also has several ongoing research projects involving indigenous collaborators, including our living laboratories initiative and other projects, such as the three sisters project, the lingonberries project and the Labrador tea project.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to our question round. I just want to welcome Mr. Lobb in replacement of Mr. Dreeshen.

The first question will go to Monsieur Berthold.

[*Translation*]

The floor is yours for six minutes.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to Ms. Taylor, Mr. Rosser, Mr. Gray and Mr. Traverse for joining us today.

I have read a lot of information since we decided to do this study on the indigenous presence in the Canadian agricultural sector.

Thanks to fine support from the committee's research analyst, we can see that indigenous people are less represented in the agricultural sector than in the general population. However, it seems that indigenous communities own a lot of land. Before we talk about the difficulties, have we established the development possibilities of those communities? How can those communities have better control over their territory? How can we help them to increase their presence in the Canadian agricultural sector?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank Mr. Berthold for his question.

Yes, it is quite correct that Canada's first nations currently own a lot of land. We are in the process of studying the data from the 2016 Census of Agriculture to get a better idea of everything indigenous groups have, because one of the strategies to address their underrepresentation in the agricultural industry is, of course, to work with the land they currently have.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I am well aware that the study has only just begun, but do we have any idea yet? Have you started? According to your first observations and your knowledge of agriculture, we can already see great potential there.

Mr. Tom Rosser: Yes, absolutely. We know there is potential. That is only one of the components we are going to focus on.

Across the country, I do not know whether we know the exact total area belonging to indigenous peoples, but we can follow up on that and provide you with the information we already have as we wait for more definitive figures.

Mr. Luc Berthold: It is an important study. In order to have a clear picture of the situation, it would be very helpful to have more precise information if we really want to increase the number and the presence of indigenous peoples in the agriculture and agri-food industry.

Mr. Traverse, my constituency has no indigenous communities. So I am not used to dealing with them. As an elder, what were your first impressions when you came to the department? Was the reception difficult? Did it go well? Given that your presence is a first in a department, it was be good to know what kind of welcome people gave you.

[*English*]

Mr. Mervin Traverse (Departmental Elder, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I did have a career in the federal government for the past 28 years. When I came to Agriculture Canada, I saw how huge the department was and the number of indigenous people who were in agriculture. The numbers were very low, but the progress from 2016 has been really incredible and the support we have and the work we've done is really incredible. We have a long way to continue learning and working with indigenous communities across the country.

It's been very rewarding for me as an elder to be able to work with my indigenous colleagues, especially the ones who have lost their culture, and for me to be able to guide them through the difficult times they're dealing with, coping with everything they have to deal with in the cultural aspect as an indigenous person.

● (1120)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: As for the public servants who are already comfortable with indigenous communities, Mr. Traverse has just explained that he has been able to reestablish contact with members of those communities. By hiring an elder, what was the department's objective vis-à-vis those people? We have talked a lot about recruitment, but what is the situation with those people and with the relationships with aboriginal communities that are already established?

[*English*]

Dr. Brian Gray: You mentioned the land capabilities and capacities. That's one thing. The other is the capacity within the communities for agriculture, so this is an area where we're trying to build bridges. Some communities are already excelling in agricultural production. Others have agricultural production, but it's generally through lease agreements so farmers or farming families are farming on that first nations land and those—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gray. I'm going to have to move to another questioner, and I'm sure you'll have a chance to refer to that conversation.

Mr. Longfield, you have six minutes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you.

Would you like to complete your answer? We do a lot of sharing in this committee, and I'm interested as well in Mr. Berthold's question on department policy.

Dr. Brian Gray: Continuing, there are communities that have agricultural lands being farmed, but not by the first nations. They have an interest, but they don't have the highly qualified professionals or access to capital.

Then there's a third category that are not practising agriculture, but they very well might have pre-colonial settlement. There are opportunities there for traditional agricultural practices, so those are areas that we're quite interested in, in the science and technology branch, to work with them on learning how to rejuvenate these traditional practices.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: We were studying Canada's food policy and preparing a report on that. During that study, I became aware of how little I knew about indigenous agriculture. It was an overlooked area in my studies.

I'm interested in the report that Mr. Rosser mentioned, the cultivated food systems report. We might get that to the clerk so the committee can get up to speed on that.

The University of Guelph graduates a lot of agriculture students. They've often said there are three or four jobs for every graduate going into agriculture. We know we have a shortage of skilled talent coming into agriculture. We also know that our only growing youth population in Canada comes from indigenous communities. We're trying to help, through immigration, to try to boost our young population. The opportunity for youth to fill some of these jobs seems to be an opportunity that's staring us in the face.

Maybe Elder Traverse or one of the others could comment on the economic opportunity for indigenous people looking at agriculture as a career pathway.

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mervin may well have a perspective on this, as he's probably closer in terms of on-campus recruitment than I am. However, I would say as a general comment that the government created the agri-food economic strategy table, which tabled a report last September. One of the key issues that we heard about there, and that we hear about regularly from the sector, is labour and skill shortages. The table put forth some recommendations for the long term in terms of trying to attract young people to careers in the sector, and with a particular focus on groups that are underrepresented within the workforce, which isn't limited to—but of course includes—indigenous people. We do maintain regular dialogue with deans of agriculture from post-secondary institutions across the country, and we have been talking about how we can work jointly to increase interest in careers in the sector.

I invite Brian or Mervin to add to that.

● (1125)

Dr. Brian Gray: I was the champion of our indigenous student recruitment program that started three years ago. I didn't know much, but what I did know was that the earth—mother earth—and water are sacred, and that's at the root of most first nations culture. Caring for the earth and having the earth provide was quite apparent to me. We pointed out that there are a lot of jobs out there, very well paid jobs in agriculture, whether they be in agronomy or agricultural science.

We saw an opportunity as we had first nations near several of our research stations in the west. We started the program because it seemed intuitive. We looked into the university system; there were students in the programs, so we were pulling indigenous students from those programs into our summer jobs and they got experience. They might have been in biological science, not thinking about agriculture, but it got them turned on to agriculture. I'm happy to say we have now bridged five of those students and they're employees in the department.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Elder Traverse, I'd like to hear your opinion on how it's going or what we could include in our report, if there are areas that we need to support better.

Mr. Mervin Traverse: I know that, as Dr. Gray said, in the west we have a very huge population of indigenous people in cities. Their post-secondary numbers were alarmingly high in these urban settings, and we found that, for example, Regina had 1,700 post-secondary, Saskatoon had 2,200. We started tapping into those areas to try to figure out the line of entry for our young indigenous people who are trying to get back with the land. They want to work with their land, and the types of things they want to learn fall especially under food security. They're very interested, these young people, but that work needs to be done across Canada. We've hit all the universities and career fairs to try to attract them to the jobs, to guide them through those places.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: We're doing some, but we need to do more.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacGregor, you have six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all of you for appearing before our committee today.

Mr. Rosser, I'll start with you. When do you anticipate the national food policy for Canada will be ready?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I would anticipate that we will be in a position to announce a way forward on a food policy in the coming months.

As I noted in my opening remarks, we did engage with the national indigenous organizations in our consultative process. When one looks at the available data on food security, for example, one finds that levels of food insecurity are much more elevated among indigenous peoples, particularly those living in northern and remote communities. That was an area that was identified in our "What we heard report", which was released last fall. I expect that a food policy will look at ways to address that.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: The statistics are there for all to see. In a country as wealthy as Canada, the level of food insecurity among indigenous populations is quite shocking.

We've had one meeting on this subject so far. We had testimony from Mr. Jamie Hall from the Ontario Indian Agricultural Program. He said that domestically, both the federal and provincial governments do not really provide a lot of direct support for indigenous farmers in Canada.

I look at the development of the food policy. I can remember doing consultations in my own riding back in 2017—it's now 2019—and I realize it's going to be a very complex policy with such a diverse country and a lot of areas to address.

Specifically with reference to indigenous farming, the grave statistics that we currently have and the fact that we already have testimony saying there are not a lot of domestic supports, how do you anticipate that policy is going to inform the department going forward? How can we see the agricultural programs that you're responsible for respond to that in a timely way that addresses this problem with concrete steps?

● (1130)

Mr. Tom Rosser: Both through the food policy and through other changes to our existing programming, we hope to be able to better support indigenous agriculture in Canada.

Just in the past year or two, we have begun to set up programs targeted directly at indigenous participation in agriculture for the first time, and also at greater participation in agriculture and agri-food from other under-represented groups.

When one talks about the food policy and about food security issues, particularly in the context of northern and remote communities, one hears consistently a strong preference for greater food sovereignty and security in the community, as opposed to simply making food from outside the community, from the south, cheaper and more readily available.

Perhaps Brian can talk about this. I know we already have some partnerships with indigenous communities around vertical agriculture, community freezers and that type of thing. Certainly, again, in northern and remote communities, greater food sovereignty often means greater accessibility of country foods.

We are taking measures in this area already. I would anticipate that we will further them through the rollout of the food policy, but we also recognize that it's a journey and not a destination. While we feel good about some of the progress that's been made, we realize there's a long journey ahead.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Gray, or even Mr. Traverse, do you have anything to add on this subject?

Dr. Brian Gray: I mentioned in my opening remarks our call for proposals for working with indigenous communities. One of the calls was for sustainable northern agricultural production, going into communities and looking at where there were potentially traditional ways of producing local food. Also, this notion of contained agriculture—what we call northern greenhouses—is still an area of development. It's not an area that is widespread, so we're in the process of looking at it.

Our scientists have reached out and they have found some communities that are interested in co-developing this technology. We're in the letter of intent stage. We haven't awarded the projects yet, but we're looking at a couple of northern communities specifically to do this.

One technology is aiming to expand the growing season. You could think of varieties or techniques outside where you could expand the growing season for foods, for vegetables; and the other would be this notion of contained agriculture. It would be analogous to a greenhouse, but it wouldn't be a greenhouse. It would just be something totally contained.

One of the biggest challenges in a community that's off the electricity grid is finding clean, sustainable technologies to do that. The university systems are aware of this, and we're looking at partnerships with them as well.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I think I'm running out of time, but I appreciate that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Drouin, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I also want to thank the analysts who did a good job at providing us with a brief on the landscape of indigenous agriculture.

There is a tableau that I've seen—it didn't shock me, but I am interested in learning more. Maybe you don't have the answers, but I think it would be interesting for us to understand. It has to do with farm income from non-aboriginal communities, compared to farm income from aboriginal and Métis communities. I know that, for instance, non-aboriginal farmers will mostly focus on oilseeds and grain. First nations will mostly focus on other crops, maple sap and whatnot.

Do we know, based on those statistics, if the other crops are also export oriented?

● (1135)

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I'll look to my colleagues. I don't know that I am familiar with the statistics to which he refers. I would certainly be curious to see them.

What we do know about indigenous agriculture is that we're talking about a diversity of things. There are some very large, sophisticated indigenous-run agricultural operations in Canada that will be export oriented. However, in many cases, indigenous agriculture is much smaller scale in nature. We'll sometimes be directed towards increasing community level food security and food sovereignty.

We're talking about a range. There absolutely are indigenous agricultural operations that are very focused on the export sector, but many others are smaller scale, and targeted more at serving local demand.

I invite Jane, Brian or Mervin to add anything, if they wish.

Dr. Brian Gray: Again, there are a couple of areas on the research and development side.

One of the projects that's under way is the lingonberry project. The closest thing a lingonberry is related to is a cranberry, but they're in uplands. They're found throughout the northern boreal forest. For whatever reason, the ones in northern Manitoba seem to have the highest anti-oxidant qualities of any lingonberry.

We have a scientist working on this. Mervin has helped facilitate community involvement in northern Manitoba. The communities are collecting these lingonberries to find out which ones have the super high anti-oxidant behaviour and whether those can then be cultivated. If they can, then this is a great opportunity for some of these northern communities to create a product that I think would have great export value.

Scientists out of our centre at Saint-Hyacinthe were working with a first nations community and business in Quebec on a Labrador tea project. Again, that had health, medicinal values that they were working through, to determine level of certification. They've created a concentrated drink in collaboration with our scientists. Now they're looking at the final stages of getting that product on the market and they see an opportunity for export.

Those are more of the traditional sorts of crops that they're looking at.

Another one is more of a community-based thing that Tom talked about. They are creating pemmican, which is a traditional food. They are drying meat, grinding and mixing it with things to create the most healthy pemmican that you could possibly eat. If that happens, then maybe that's an export opportunity as well.

Mr. Francis Drouin: We know that one of the pillars that we had highlighted for agriculture was added value. Do we, from the research that's been done and from working with first nations communities, know that there is a lot of added value in their agriculture? I'm assuming there would be, if it's helping to feed their communities, if it's not export oriented.

Mr. Tom Rosser: When we talk about Canadian agriculture as a whole we have some very successful value-added operations. We see, in terms of growing our exports and the sector, that a big part of it isn't just additional commodity production, but rather adding value. That's true of Canadian agriculture and agri-food as a whole. I would say that it's true of indigenous agriculture, as well.

Again, there is a diversity. There's probably opportunity to grow the primary, commodity-oriented agriculture, but there are, for example, indigenous-owned wineries in British Columbia and elsewhere. Certainly indigenous peoples and businesses are involved in the value-added sector, and that too represents a growth opportunity, as it does for Canadian agriculture as a whole.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I want to ask another question before my time runs out.

When we did the study on food policy with northern communities, it became evident that it wasn't just about growing food in southern communities. It was also about making sure we continue to have access to the traditional foods that the people in these communities have been eating for many centuries.

Are we trying to work with those first nations communities to ensure that they still have access to those traditional foods?

● (1140)

The Chair: On that, Mr. Drouin, you might have to ask your colleague if he wants to share.

We'll go to Mr. Peschisolido for 10 minutes.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Mr. Chair, thank you and thank you to the witnesses.

Actually, I will follow up on Mr. Drouin's question. Like Mr. Longfield, I was surprised at the extent of my lack of knowledge of indigenous farming. I was moved by a couple of witnesses who spoke about the situation of indigenous communities with respect to food supply in the north.

Would someone like to take this question? I think it's a very important one. As Mr. Drouin asked, how can we improve the situation in the north? What are some concrete steps that we have been taking to deal with what I think is quite a grave situation?

Dr. Brian Gray: I can start.

I think the way we approach it is important. I mentioned at the outset the importance of working with the community. This means going to a community, finding one that's interested in this sort of thing, sitting down with members at the drawing board and finding out what exactly they're looking for. Is it self-sufficiency in feeding their community or is it that plus exporting to the south or internationally? Most of these communities don't have an active program so this means working with them and working with our research and development folks to see if these things are possible, whether it's growing something inside or outside.

That's where our calls for proposals are. They're different in the sense that our scientists are saying we found a community that's interested in working with us. We want to go to that community and start the discussions about what they're interested in working on.

In general, I think our approach to the north, whether it's in the treeline or with the Inuit, is to go to the community and find out what they want and what they need. Not all of them are ready or interested in agriculture, but by finding the ones that are, we learn by doing and then hopefully that will spread.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: It's my understanding now, as Mr. Drouin mentioned, that our policy for food for indigenous communities, other than working with them, is to simply supply them with food from somewhere else.

In British Columbia, where I'm from, there's a movement for place-based agriculture. Mervin, do you think that is an approach that we can use?

Mr. Mervin Traverse: I want to reiterate the question about indigenous communities and the type of agriculture. There's also the organic part of our traditional foods, such as the bison. We are working with our communities in the west that are very interested in those areas. They always refer to traditional foods. We work with the British Columbia communities. We're very tuned in, even in the Okanagan, to the plantations and the wineries there. They are a pilot project and indigenous people across the country are looking at how the Okanagan first nations have progressed in the export fields. They happen to have the nicest weather and the agricultural land. They're land-based and they've been able to increase economic development in British Columbia. We look at that.

Unfortunately, some of our northern communities—as Brian mentioned, where the treelines are—are always looking for ways to lower the cost of the food. Greenhouses are not always the best option. Global warming might be a major effect that might help the indigenous people in the future. Where there was no agricultural land before, there might be availability in the future.

● (1145)

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: I can't recall if it was Tom or Brian who talked about the indigenous programs found in B.C. Can you elaborate on them?

Mr. Tom Rosser: The program that was referenced in my opening remarks is an example. It's cost-shared programming under the partnership, so it's delivered by the province but is funded on a 60:40 basis in terms of the federal-provincial cost split. It was just an example of a program. Many other provinces, through the CAP, have programming directed at indigenous peoples and at indigenous participation in agriculture. We also have federal-only programs in that space, which Jane is responsible for delivering.

Do you have anything to add, Jane?

Ms. Jane Taylor (Assistant Deputy Minister, Programs Branch, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): I think I'll just make a quick comment—Tom alluded to this in his comments—about the pathfinder service that we've launched. One of our responsibilities is to demystify and help solve this web of federal, provincial and territorial programs that are available, along with other resources.

Yes, Agriculture Canada has launched some specific programs for indigenous people, obviously recognizing that all of our programs are open.

This concierge service has had a really good response. When a call or an email comes in, we work with that person or organization to help match and find. It could be a program in our department or a program in another federal department, but we'll also look in the province or territory where they're located. I think that's extremely helpful.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Shipley for six minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you very much.

Since I usually run out of time, I'll get right to it.

First, for Mr. Rosser or Mr. Gray, how many new civil servants do you believe you need to fill the need in your department?

Dr. Brian Gray: Well, our general goal is that we'd like our population of employees to represent the Canadian population from a diversity lens, a cultural lens. We don't want to draw hard targets just for the sake of hard targets, but if the general population is 4% or 4.5% of Canadians who are...that seems like a reasonable place to start. We're not there. We might have 2%—half—but I think it's helpful.

Again, it doesn't matter which group you're talking about. If you have fair representation, it brings a richness of ideas and a richness of being able to problem-solve. The more representative you are, the sooner you can start breaking down these biases or the ignorance of culture, so that—

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm just trying to get a handle also on the percentage. You talked about the north. You must have an idea of the percentage of indigenous who live in what we would call traditional agriculture areas in Canada. What percentage would that be? Do you know?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, just to clarify that I correctly understand the question—

Mr. Bev Shipley: Of the total percentage of the indigenous population that you're talking about, how much of that is in agricultural areas that we recognize in Canada as the major agricultural areas? In my area, I have five first nations in an agricultural area. You have the same in every province.

Mr. Tom Rosser: I guess I'd just say as a general comment that in terms of the way the government measures the representativeness of its workforce, it does take into account the demographic composition of the community.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Okay.

Mr. Tom Rosser: In a community that has a higher proportion of indigenous people, for example, we would take that into account in terms of figuring out whether or not they were under-represented in our workforce.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I've been involved, not only municipally, but here for 13 years. Municipally, there has been an issue of first nations in agriculture. The ability to have our young indigenous people continue with their education has always been an issue.

Could you tell me how many are going to agriculture colleges or universities? I'm going to be honest with you, today I've not heard of any. I've heard mainly about building a government structure. To me that's quite concerning. What are the local councils, the local elders and band members, doing to encourage and to show the need to get an education? We don't just need people at the top telling them what to do. We need these young people coming from the bottom so they know what to do.

Can you tell me how that's working in agriculture? Because in this day and age—and it doesn't matter what sector we're in—the significance of innovation, technology and business management is going to be key to their success. I think this is going to be a key component.

● (1150)

Dr. Brian Gray: I can't speak to the broad national numbers but I can give you a couple of examples locally.

We have a large research and development centre in Lethbridge, Alberta. Adjacent to that is the Blood Tribe First Nation. Part of our student recruitment initiative was looking where we have research centres adjacent to first nations. The children from the first nations can commute, and it's a short distance to our centre.

In Summerland, B.C. close to Penticton, our centre is literally surrounded by Penticton Indian Band. In Agassiz, our neighbour on two sides of our research farm is Seabird Island First Nation, and then I get back to the Blood Tribe. When we started this program, they had agricultural activities in all three of those first nations. We didn't have any students and very few staff from those first nations. We talked to the chiefs and council and they were interested. We included students in our recruitment program, but your point about education is very important.

By getting students already in the university system, we've already picked the low-hanging fruit. We need to know how we get the kids in the community interested in agriculture, or any science or technology from my bias, and that is through our students who are a part of our program—we call them ambassadors. They go back into the community and talk to their peers. We're not as young as them so they're more likely to listen to somebody who's closer to a peer. They go into the community and say here's this wonderful educational program. These are jobs.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gray. I have to move on.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Poissant, you have six minutes.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (La Prairie, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to the witnesses. Their comments are very interesting.

In general, the big problem for farms is succession. I am wondering whether indigenous communities are experiencing the same problem? The average age of farmers is 57 or 58, but what is it for indigenous farmers?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Thank you for your question, Mr. Poissant. Unfortunately, I have no specific answer.

As Mr. Longfield noted. Canada's indigenous population is younger on average than the rest, and it is growing. That is one of the reasons why we believe that indigenous peoples could participate more in the agriculture and agri-food industry. It could be a solution to the labour shortage in the area.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Is there enough of a next generation on the existing farms? It must be somewhat similar to us, where farms are passed from father to son.

● (1155)

Mr. Tom Rosser: You are right to say that succession is a major challenge in agriculture. I can do some research to see whether there are any data comparing indigenous and non-indigenous farms. I do not have an exact answer at the moment, but we can check whether there are data on the matter and follow up with the clerk of the committee.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Okay.

Mr. Traverse, what are the most popular agricultural outputs? Is it livestock or crops? If agriculture were to be more diversified, what could the government do about it?

[*English*]

Mr. Mervin Traverse: It varies across the country. In the prairies they have a lot of cow-calf operations. In some of the communities, it's bison. They're still trying methods to be able to use them as an economic development opportunity, but there are barriers. There are no avenues for them to export, because they just don't have the knowledge for that capacity. In the east, there are communities that are trying blueberry operations, trying to meet the local markets, such as weekend farmers' markets. There are communities in Canada that have community gardens. They're trying to utilize those community gardens to be able to create revenue for their little operations and put back into their communities. These are very small farm ideas that they're trying.

As for husbandry, there are no huge operations in western Canada that I'm aware of. For the northern people, there are no facilities available for caribou in terms of the federal standards required for export purposes. These are some of the things that I'm aware of. There may be other ones that I'm just not aware of.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: If a packing plant were established for processing, would that be useful?

[*English*]

Mr. Mervin Traverse: Ideal would be indigenous plants—wild rice, for instance, or things that are natural to our lakes and that exist in the west and in regions like Ontario. Wild rice has been a very big factor, but there has never been a production plant. There were some in the prairies in the past, but they're no longer in operation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Ms. Taylor, we are talking about federal programs. Do most provinces offer indigenous programs?

Ms. Jane Taylor: In the Canadian agricultural partnership, there are federal programs, but there are also provincial and territorial programs. Most or perhaps all provinces and territories have indigenous programs. As we told the committee, this is the first time this year that, across programs, there are federal programs specifically for indigenous people.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: That concludes this round of questions, but before I continue, I will ask a few questions, if I may.

[*English*]

We've now identified that quite a bit of land exists in the territories of the first nations. I'm curious; have we asked them what kind of agriculture they want there? Do they want the commercial type of agriculture that we have now, cereal and ranching and so on?

As well, we're talking about education. Have we made any attempts to capture the traditional knowledge and the traditional ways of growing and collecting food? We're talking about bison. We're talking about caribou. We're talking about plants like Labrador tea. Are we going in that direction? I think that's very important as well.

● (1200)

Dr. Brian Gray: I can address the second part of your question. Through our indigenous science liaison officer, we are working with communities that are interested in traditional agriculture, but as I said, for many of these there's the traditional knowledge but the practice might not be in place, or there could be communities that have traditional practice in place, but it's small.

We're working with them to find out what they are interested in. Do they want to grow? Do they want to build? Again, what we're doing is not a program, so it wouldn't be something in the programs branch, but it's something we're doing—kind of research and development—and if it works, then down the road it could lead to something that could be programmatic.

Mr. Tom Rosser: With respect to the first part of your question, Mr. Chair, I just want to note that we talked earlier about the pathfinder service we have, which is a type of concierge service to try to help indigenous people in communities navigate through not just our departmental programming but other programs and services available from other departments and other levels of government.

I think we noted as well in the discussion this morning that, of course, access to capital is a key barrier to participation. Part of the agriculture portfolio is Farm Credit Canada. I know they, at a community level, are working with indigenous communities, particularly those that have agricultural land in their possession, and are working with other indigenous financial institutions, the First Nations Bank and others, to try to find solutions to that problem.

The starting point for that dialogue is understanding what the communities' views, preferences and visions are for realizing the potential of agriculture in the community.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you so much, Elder Traverse, Mr. Gray, Mr. Rosser and Ms. Taylor, for being here with us today. It will certainly help us in our report.

We shall break. Let us be back in our seats in two minutes, for the second part.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1205)

The Chair: Welcome back.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

During the second hour of our meeting, we welcome Vincent Lévesque, the founder of the Agricultural Society for Indigenous Food Products, and Michel Gros Louis, its director.

[*English*]

Also, from Northern Farm Training Institute, we have Ms. Jackie Milne, President, by video conference.

We will start with a seven-minute opening statement.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gros Louis, you have the floor.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis (Director, Agricultural Society for Indigenous Food Products): *Kwe*. My name is Michel Gros Louis and I am a Huron-Wendat from Wendake.

Let me introduce you to the Agricultural Society for Indigenous Food Products (ASIFP), which is based in Quebec and was founded in 2014. However, first of all, I would like to briefly go over my professional background. I worked for 30 years in agri-food, science and technology at the Research and Development Centre in Saint-Hyacinthe. I retired in 2016. In 2018, I was appointed executive director. Over the past few years, I have worked as a facilitator in indigenous agri-food in Quebec. A report was published in 2013 on indigenous agriculture and agri-food production in Quebec. That document, which has been distributed, described the situation in Quebec. I cannot speak for the other provinces.

That was after indigenous agriculture was introduced during those years. I was wondering why Quebec was not part of that program. There was one project in British Columbia, one in Ontario and one in Saskatchewan. I was called upon to help. I was asked to paint a portrait of indigenous agriculture in Quebec, if there was such a thing. In 1910 in Kahnawake there were 1000 farmers, but 100 years later, in 2010, there were only five or six. This means that the situation has deteriorated in Quebec. There have been many problems, but absolutely no support.

The purpose of ASIFP is to promote local products. There are many products. In terms of supporting scientific research and innovation in indigenous local products, we encouraged a project with the Mohawks on hominy and corn soup. There is also the Labrador tea, of course, which has been the subject of a research and innovation project at the Research and Development Centre. Vincent Lévesque will talk about this at greater length. I am very interested in birch water, which has enormous potential. There are also berries, cloudberries. There are many products.

There was also the “Three Sisters” project, which took place between 2015 and 2018 and which was sponsored by ASIFP with Agriculture Canada's Science and Technology Branch. A report published in the spring of 2018 is entitled “Three Sisters value-chain: characterization of attributes and functionalities of aboriginal corn, squash and bean varieties, preservation of genetic material and prefeasibility of new culture models”. I have also been hired in recent years to inventory the collection of traditional seeds from the Iroquois who cultivated the last species. The purpose of the Agriculture Canada project was to protect World Heritage seeds under the Paris Agreement.

I will now discuss assistance to indigenous farmers and agri-food in collaboration with the government to create programs. The situation for programs is very difficult in Quebec. There is virtually no support. An indigenous farmer lost his 2,000 apple trees. He was 35 years and two months old and the age limit to be eligible for this program was 35. Many of the problems we face are raised in the report. There are many problems. We receive no help, regardless of the area. This is also the case for farmers. There have been a lot of losses.

Charly Jacob, from Kahnawake, is a founding member. Three nations keep the traditional seeds. They have a project that deals with traditional corn for soup. Julie Landry, who is Abenaki, wants to establish a school farm to help indigenous youth by raising traditional crops. Of course, there is Vincent Lévesque and the Terre de l'aigle products, medicinal plants, essential oils, Labrador tea, and so on.

Mr. Vincent Lévesque (Founder, Agricultural Society for Indigenous Food Products): *Kwe*. I will continue along the same lines as Mr. Gros Louis.

My name is Vincent Lévesque, and I am a member of the Huron-Wendat Nation. Basically, I am a communications man with a background in political science from Université Laval. I now work in agri-food, which proves that you never know where studies in political science will take you.

I know the economic development sector, and I believe in the potential of the First Nations. Because I believe in a vision of economic development and work, and to inspire pride in First Nations, I spent over 20 years creating networks and a business directory of indigenous communities in Quebec, the Prairies and Canada, a network I sold in 2008.

At the same time, I set up a company called Les produits autochtones Terre de l'aigle, which develops traditional incense and collaborates with traditional medicine men. We have developed expertise in the production of essential oils and plant maceration and have created medicinal synergies. I also work in partnership with a 74-year-old Innu medicine man, a third-generation healer, who teaches me a lot. In my company Terre de l'aigle, I have merged the modern with tradition, with a laboratory down below and a medicine man up top, who prescribes different plants.

Let me give you an example of medicinal synergy. I drink Labrador tea, something we have had much success with. It has about 70 uses and is world-renowned for treating hepatitis and cancer, as well as stimulating the immune system. I created a liquid concentrate that is even more powerful, and we made a powder version from it with the help of the Saint-Hyacinthe Research and Development Centre. Our company is apparently the first to use the Research Centre's pilot plants. I have been working on this project with the centre for the past seven years, and I would like to thank Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada very much for their help.

Mr. Gros Louis put me in touch with the necessary people because it is quite complicated for a small indigenous entrepreneur to advance projects within a large structure. I got help, and my project was approved. We have had great success in the laboratory. At the same time, my goal was to create a network of indigenous Labrador tea pickers across Canada, if necessary. We wanted to start with Quebec to make this plant better known. So I met with representatives of companies like Oasis to set targets for my liquid concentrate, which they liked. However, they asked me how much 8,000 litres of this concentrate would cost, and I couldn't answer them because I wasn't yet able to produce that much. I then began working with the pilot plant at the Saint-Hyacinthe Research and Development Centre, something I have been doing for the past seven years.

In addition, we founded the Agricultural Society for Indigenous Food Products, ASIFP, to establish a long-term vision for our future network and to include all the necessary people. It is a little complex in Quebec because of language issues and the fact that the communities are located more on forest land. They therefore do not practice the same type of agriculture as the Mohawks, who have more land to grow corn.

● (1215)

The Chair: Mr. Lévesque, I have to stop you there, but you will have an opportunity to provide more explanations later.

Mr. Vincent Lévesque: Okay. I will conclude by saying that we are building our own plant to develop the concentrate. In fact, we are having some problems with the Research and Development Centre: the process is a little lengthy, the centre has been under renovation for four years, and I have access to it only twice a year. So we are trying to manage on our own, like ASIFP. Furthermore, we don't have a bank account, and we are doing all the work ourselves.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lévesque.

[*English*]

Now we have Ms. Jackoline Milne, for up to seven minutes.

Ms. Jackoline Milne (President, Northern Farm Training Institute): I want to thank you for inviting me here. I'm talking to you from Hay River, Northwest Territories. I'm the founder of the Northern Farm Training Institute. I'm a Métis person. I'm married with three children. I've seen that we need to build and contribute to the solutions to address northern food insecurity.

The deficit that is aggravating this is that we don't have domestic skills in domestic food production, which we need to complement the wild harvest systems for our indigenous and isolated communities. Right now, we have a functioning 260-acre farm campus in Hay River, which is the largest land-based farm in the Northwest Territories. We have successfully trained 250 first nations people and other people from 33 different communities.

Our students have already gone on to build gardens in their communities, build small farms and teach other people to produce domestic food.

Our program has been successful because of its unique structure and our genuine experience in teaching and producing food in an isolated place. We know how to produce sustainable, domestic vegetables that are appropriate in the northern setting and domestic meats in the north and we understand how to empower northern people, indigenous people. It helps build confidence. Hands-on experiential education is what we're doing. People need to learn the entire spectrum for growing food and how to build a business, how to access appropriate funds.

Our campus is scaled and has systems in place to feed 200 people in a northern, remote community setting. It's a full-spectrum operation. What does that look like?

We do have a deficit of skilled food producers and teachers in our isolated communities, but there's a fast way to turn this situation around. We need to empower local people to restore their food systems according to what they want, through direct capacity building, and have local indigenous people running newly created training and support centres that are around the theme of food. It can be domestic food and wild food. We need these two systems to complement each other.

In Canada we have over 600 indigenous-type communities that are often managed by bands. Our focus has been on the most vulnerable, most isolated extremities, but we do have a national vision. We believe there's a system that we can deliver.

We figured that we could build 50 training centres that would also be food-producing centres, and we would call them “from the land” learning hubs. Each centre would need to have a core of four to six people to run the centre, teach and produce the food. These small centres could service 10 to 15 regional communities around them.

From our experience, because of the isolation, with low-mechanized systems on bio-intensive garden farms one person can feed 10 people. We've already worked this out. In Canada, with a population of 1.6 million indigenous people, if our goal is to reach 10% of the population and strengthen their food skills—wild food skills and domestic food skills—we need to focus on this. In five years, we could empower 30,000 people throughout the most vulnerable communities.

The program is not like a traditional academic one. We could do it faster because the programs can be shorter, and run on weekends. We can have young, old, men, families, women, and an array of topics: gardening, animal husbandry, fishing, wild harvest skills. Once established, these training centres can even contribute to their own financial stability because they will be able to produce products to sell. There are a lot of options here.

● (1220)

We've calculated the financial scenarios that would be needed to implement this. We have some suggestions for even accessing nutrition north funding to invest in the critical infrastructure that needs to be built for domestic food systems. We know we have a serious crisis in Canada. I'm calling you from the north. I travel to remote communities. This is a serious problem. We need to address it immediately. We need to have federal funding directly supporting the solutions here.

Sadly, there's a dilution and an inefficiency that has been happening for decades because of the way administration goes through regional government. I'm sure we can correct this problem.

We have a 10-year plan for restoring food stability and independence in indigenous communities across Canada. We know we can do this, but we just need your help. We're already doing it. We're confident we can build whole food systems that will have lasting and profound impacts on indigenous wellness, health and economy. We need to foster independently managed food systems at the local level. It's already working. I'm here to tell you. I'm here because it's working.

Thank you.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Milne. Thank you for your passion. I think that's really good.

We're going to go to our question round.

[*Translation*]

We'll start with Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Berthold, you have six minutes.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Indeed, the passion among our witnesses today is quite obvious. I'd like to thank them for being here and testifying before us. I have so many questions to ask that I will certainly not have enough time.

This document is outstanding, Mr. Gros Louis.

In the report, will it be possible to take into account what's in the document? I've been told yes.

It addresses a very large number of issues. I'll try to ask you my questions quickly and will ask that you give me short answers.

Mr. Gros Louis, where do we stand following the tabling of this report?

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: The report wasn't considered. It contains recommendations, but they have never been implemented.

Mr. Luc Berthold: So it's still valid?

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: The report cost our department $150,000, but it was not acted on for several years. Every time I have the opportunity to put it on the table, I do.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I personally like this report. We'll be able to take it into account in our study, and I am convinced that we will be able to draw many lessons from it. I only flipped through it a bit, but I could see that it answered many of the questions I had.

Would you tell me if the legal status of land, particularly in Quebec, is still a major problem?

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: In Quebec, the situation is really special. First, we don't have treaties like those in the west that include some form of agricultural assistance. There is the James Bay Agreement with the Crees, but the other nations don't have treaties. We are therefore working with the Quebec Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, whose conditions aren't flexible and are very difficult for First Nations to meet.

As for land, there are certainly a lot of claims, and there is a lot of land. As I said earlier, there were 1,000 farmers in Kahnawake. Today, there are five or six. There is no help, either federal or provincial, and the criteria are inaccessible.

For us, in Quebec, we are talking about start-up and not succession. Some people have small community gardens. Surprising traditional cultures, including very old varieties, are still being discovered. Yet people live in pain and misery. No program really helps us. At least ASIFP is keeping us alive and helping these people.

I would say that Quebec is the poor relation when it comes to indigenous agriculture in Canada.

Mr. Luc Berthold: You are raising another issue we will probably have to consider in the study. Indeed, this involves federal, provincial, and municipal jurisdictions.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: It's very complex.

Mr. Luc Berthold: It's a real brain-teaser.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: In my opinion, Quebec should create an association or an organization to manage its agriculture with federal funds, because at the provincial level, indigenous agriculture and agri-food participation is not taken into account at all.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you, Mr. Gros Louis.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: I could give you an example, briefly. Quebec adopted a special law to allow game to be served in restaurants, such as moose meat. There were 13. This involved hunters, but in the course of the process, indigenous hunters were not considered. The program was cancelled because there were hygiene issues and facilities needed to be put in place.

But the fact remains that we were not involved. And that is what happens in general, across the board. The Iroquoians, Mohawk and Huron were agricultural peoples and grew many varieties of corn, squash and other produce. Unfortunately, that has almost disappeared today.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I would also have liked to talk about your efforts to preserve traditional seeds, but I don't have enough time left. I'll come back to it later, Mr. Gros Louis.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: In the context of the Paris Agreement, Canada and all the countries of the world put together a program to preserve the world heritage of seeds, including all the varieties of beans in Canada. It is a very good program, which I took part in, with scientists. I've also taken part in harvests with seed keepers, the Iroquoians, who grow crops from these seeds and are trying to keep them alive. It's truly extraordinary.

At the research centre, in the Three Sisters project, we studied bean crops. Among the traditional varieties we found one whose nutritional value is a hundred times superior to the variety being sold on the market currently. However, the issue is how to grow and market that traditional variety.

There is a problem with the Canadian Agricultural Partnership. I exerted pressure to have an indigenous branch in it, but this was refused. If we grow organic produce, the crop insurance included in the partnership does not cover it, and that is a problem for us.

● (1230)

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you.

Ms. Milne, it would be good if you could send the committee your plan, or an assessment of your project, so that we may be made aware of its scope. You are passionate about this project and I think it would be worthwhile for the members of the committee to take an interest in it. Thank you very much.

In conclusion, Mr. Lévesque, I want to congratulate you. I see that you have a very keen entrepreneurial sense. If you are setting up any projects, it would be good for you to tell us about any obstacles you encounter, so that we may deal with them appropriately.

Mr. Vincent Lévesque: I can tell you about the obstacles I've encountered, very briefly.

I went from laboratory research at the research centre to an application at the plant level, and I never had access to the atomizer. It's been four years and I never had access to a device to create a powder concentrate, where water is extracted by spray drying or a freeze-drying process. I still don't have access to these devices. There is an accessibility issue.

There is also a labour shortage, because employees have taken sick leave. The plant is being renovated and it will take a year. I am stuck. I am unable to develop my product in the plant. So I organize things alone, with what little means I have, as usual. I will develop my product one way or another, and I will provide work for indigenous people.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lévesque.

Mr. Luc Berthold: You are always the one who gets interrupted.

Mr. Vincent Lévesque: And I'm trying to be brief, too.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Longfield, for six minutes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you.

I was going to finish with Mr. Lévesque, but now I'm going to start with you to make sure we have time. The last time you were cut off you mentioned access to funds, getting banking attention. First of all, congratulations on your product. People know there are traditional healing methods that we should have more access to but we don't. You have a product there that could tap into the alternative medicine network in Canada.

You mentioned access to funding. Could you expand on that? You made a comment about not being able to get into the banks, and then you got cut off. Was there something there that we need to put out?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Vincent Lévesque: Regarding funding for indigenous projects, I am setting up a plant and purchasing equipment, but there are issues. Since the assets of indigenous people living on reserve cannot be seized, they cannot obtain loans. When we want to obtain funding, we are often told to buy what we need and that we will be reimbursed later. That is often how programs work. We have to ask for loans, but since our assets can't be seized, putting up collateral for the loan is an issue. People want us to incorporate, but then we would lose all of our rights. There are several problems in this regard.

There might be other ways of doing things. We could, for instance, make direct payments to the suppliers as a guarantee. This would keep us from having to ask for bridge financing, which also costs money and is complicated, as it involves three levels of government: the provincial level, the federal one, and the band council.

There's no end to it. By the time we obtain authorizations from all of those levels of government, the government will have changed in the meantime, the funding will have run out, and everything will have to be done all over again. It's complicated and it's very slow, if you are trying to run a business. It's been seven years. I am patient, but I can't wait any longer. I'm going to die waiting.

[*English*]

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Maybe this could be an offline conversation and not one for the committee, but I would be interested in testing that www.innovation.ca website. It's pretty new. If you put in your postal code, it will tell you all the government programs, provincially or federally. Is it working? Does it reach you where you need it in your business? Maybe we could follow up. I would be interested in having that conversation.

I have to go to the Northwest Territories. I was on the other side of your lake. I was in Yellowknife this summer. I was heading up to Eureka, on Ellesmere Island. I got a little bit of a flavour of the land up there. Until you see it, it's hard to appreciate.

● (1235)

Congratulations on your project, Ms. Milne. I'm very interested in the social innovation piece. We don't think about agriculture and social innovation, but you're talking about transforming small communities. As Mr. Berthold said, your report would be very interesting for us to see. It may not be strictly in agriculture, but could you comment on the social benefit you're trying to provide?

Ms. Jackoline Milne: Yes. What's happened is there's a criss-crossing between community sustainability and self-sufficiency, and commerce. What happens is that sometimes we're trying to advance the commerce of agriculture, but in the small, isolated communities that don't have access to markets, we need to focus more on resilience and sustainability. They could eventually move to producing a niche product that maybe could be exported, but right now the communities are in a dire situation. Let's help stabilize those food systems that are appropriate for the area, appropriate for the land and appropriate to the skills of the people. That's what we're doing.

It's going to look different. For the more remote and small, there's going to be a different system. If you're closer to a larger centre, then there could be more focus on the commerce. A little bit like a tailor-made suit is what we need to do.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Have you done enough work to get samplings of the barriers that the different types of communities might be facing, something we could include in our study?

Ms. Jackoline Milne: Absolutely. The barriers are, first of all, that we assume people in the communities have access to the same things we have. Most of the houses don't even have a tap on the outside of the house to support irrigating a garden. They do not have hardware stores. They do not have access to the most fundamental tools that we take for granted.

Another one that the other gentleman mentioned is that lots of the programs are structured so that you apply, you get approved, you must pay for it and then be refunded. If you are living at the poverty line, you do not have $3,000 or $4,000 to pay up front, to purchase the equipment and then be refunded. That's one of the things our project bridged.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Seed funding, a few thousand dollars, would make a big difference. It's not hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Ms. Jackoline Milne: Right. Exactly. How our organization was created is that we become the recipient. We purchase everything to give them.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Right, the micro financing.

I don't know whether your Internet picture is better than ours, but you need more broadband up there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Mr. MacGregor, for six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you very much, Chair.

Monsieur Gros Louis, I want to continue on the same topic you were talking about with Mr. Berthold. You were talking about some of the heritage varieties that exist in the traditional corns, beans and squashes.

When you go into today's supermarket, all we have is the yellow corn and the orange pumpkin. In domesticating many of these products for agricultural use, we have narrowed down the options that are available to many Canadians. You have talked about the role that first nations have traditionally played in trying to preserve these individual varieties.

I'm curious. Can you expand a little bit more on that subject, the important role that first nations play in making sure those heritage varieties still exist? Do you see some opportunities for trying to get some of these beautiful corns—I have a picture from your website of all of the different colours you have here—into more of the mainstream market? I think we're missing out so much when all we see in the major supermarkets is that yellow corn, but you have almost every single colour of the rainbow here. You have talked about the high nutritional value of some of those heritage varieties.

Can you expand a bit more on that, please?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: It's a question that requires a long answer. To try to keep it short, however, there are seed keepers among the Iroquoian peoples in Ontario and Quebec who are secretly keeping their seeds alive. They have to grow crops. There is a huge number of varieties. In North America alone, it is said that there are 3,500 bean varieties, and less than half of them have been inventoried. That was my first example.

The Agriculture and Agri-food Canada project consisted in visiting the communities, studying the DNA of the varieties, listing their characteristics and protecting them. It's an agreement that was made in the wake of the Paris Agreement on climate change, which rallied all of the countries of the world. The Iroquoians still grow and eat these local varieties. Many indigenous farmers would like to grow these products, but as I mentioned earlier, there are problems. If they invest everything in a crop and it is destroyed by a summer drought, they can lose everything if crop insurance does not cover organic products. That problem may be solved by the new Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

I can't speak for the rest of Canada, but there are a lot of problems regarding indigenous agriculture in Quebec, notably with respect to funding. As I said earlier, let's take the example of a Kanesatake farmer who is 35 years and 2 months old and has five sons. He obtains 2,000 apple trees in a land claim and asks the Quebec Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for a subsidy. He is told that he is 2 months too old. He gets discouraged, decides to try his luck with the federal government, but receives a very similar reply.

These programs lack flexibility. And yet the watchword is that there should be flexibility in the application of programs for first nations. We have extended families. If one of us works the land, his aunt, brothers and cousins will all benefit. We all work together. And yet we are considered non-indigenous farmers and private enterprises, despite being family or community businesses. Those factors should be taken into account. Often, it's the start-up that's the issue.

There are extraordinary products that could be sold in Amerindian, Canadian and international markets, but indigenous people have to be given an opportunity to grow them. However, current conditions are unfavourable for these crops. I don't know what the situation is in Ontario, but I'm talking about Quebec, as well as the Maritimes, which I am also familiar with. If I were to begin to list all of the issues, the list would be endless.

The programs, whether provincial or not...

● (1240)

[*English*]

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I'm sorry to interrupt, but my time is running out. I just want to get a quick question to Ms. Jackie Milne.

I really loved your enthusiasm. You can tell that this is not just a job for you, this is a way of life, and I really appreciate that. I just want to let you know that sometimes this question-and-answer format is not enough to get very substantive answers. You are always welcome to submit a brief to the clerk of the committee to lay your positions and solutions down in more detail. We can try to include those in our report.

You were talking about some of the skills gaps that exist. I imagine that in the north you have those short, intense summers, but also during the long winters the ability to preserve your food and maybe add value to it is also another skill set that we need to look at as well.

Ms. Jackoline Milne: That's what we do. We focus on the appropriate crops for their sparse season, maximizing growth. We focus on various methods of food preservation, which we teach: food drying, dehydrating, fresh storage, all of it to carry us though. What does it actually look like? Now what's exciting is we've worked it out. It can be done. We have animals: cows, sheep, goats, poultry, pigs. We have greenhouses, very simple low input, low tech. These systems have to be manageable. We don't have access to repairs for complicated things, but once these systems are built they're permanent. They will produce food for generations with the skills—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Milne; unfortunately I have to cut you off.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Breton, you may go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Pierre Breton (Shefford, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today. I have a lot to learn about indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, there are no indigenous communities in my riding or my region.

I find all of these issues very compelling, so I thank you for giving us so much to think about today.

There's a basic thing I don't understand. I had a look at the latest figures on farmers' incomes. According to the statistics, a non-indigenous farmer earns, on average, a gross income of $70,000 annually, as compared with $20,000 to $26,000 for an indigenous farmer, be they a member of the Métis or first nations community. That's a huge gap—a non-indigenous farmer makes triple.

I'd like to hear from each of you. Please tell us the reasons and factors behind the difference, if you would. What more could the Government of Canada do to work with you on closing, or at least narrowing, this wide gap?

Let's start with you, Mr. Gros Louis.

● (1245)

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: I've never taken an in-depth look at family or farm income. If I understood you correctly, non-indigenous farmers earn higher incomes than indigenous farmers.

When it comes to indigenous farmers, I think part of the answer lies in the absence of large-scale intensive farming operations. What we often see in Quebec is multinational companies working together. A person will buy their neighbour's farm and eventually the operation grows. An indigenous person, however, will never have the funding to take that same step or even access to those funding mechanisms. Quebec farmers have the support of quite a powerful organization with the capacity to help them. It's a matter of logistics. An indigenous person, though, could never undertake such a large-scale endeavour.

Coming back to Mr. Lévesque's situation, I would say he will likely get his larger production given what a resourceful person he is.

Mr. Pierre Breton: Sorry to cut you off, but I gather that you aren't able to join unions like the UPA? Is that correct?

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: That's a good question. I've never thought about it. I think, though, you first have to be a farmer. In Quebec, we are still in the start-up phase, but in order to apply for funding or join a union, you have to be a farmer already. It's a bit like the chicken and the egg scenario. It's a challenge.

Mr. Pierre Breton: Mr. Lévesque, would you care to comment?

Mr. Vincent Lévesque: I would add that first nations farmers are usually located in remote areas. They have a smaller market and can't afford to promote themselves or grow their business. That may be one of the reasons why they have smaller incomes. One of the things I'd like the Agricultural Society for Indigenous Food Products to do is promote who does what, establish a network to help those with a product to sell make that product, build relationships with big companies to land major orders and thus help farmers earn better incomes.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: May I say something?

Mr. Pierre Breton: Go ahead.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: In Quebec, obtaining grants and financial assistance, in general, is a problem, and that applies to the agricultural sector as well. In many cases, in order to obtain funding from the Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones, you need a letter of support from the band council. Take, for example, the case involving the band council and Maria's Mi'kmaw community farm in Gaspésie, which had employees and summer students. Today, despite the funding she received, nothing is working anymore. The tractors sit abandoned in the fields. The same goes for the rice. In Quebec, if individuals want to receive funding, they have to deal with the issue of getting the band council's support, and the band council is a political body. I could give you other examples. People who don't have a letter from the band council can run into problems. The whole thing is quite the challenge.

Mr. Pierre Breton: It's yet another factor that has to be taken into account.

Ms. Milne, is there anything you'd like to add?

[*English*]

Ms. Jackoline Milne: Yes. It's kind of contentious, but there's a split system. The more isolated and remote the community, the more socialist the system is. More and more, the different funders are forcing the people to be administered through the band.

For example, in the community I live in, if I wanted to apply to a fund, I would apply directly. I would never go to my town council and ask them to apply on my behalf because then the town council would receive the funds and choose the recipient. This is the model that is in many indigenous.... There's this disproportionate problem where the individual is not being recognized. The capacity for food must be owned at the individual level. I could tell you a lot about that. We do need to address it.

There are different systems. In the north, food is very expensive, so it's actually more profitable. We can make an income from small pieces of land, especially if we live anywhere near a larger community because the food can be 50% more expensive here, so we can create business.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Milne. Unfortunately, I have to cut you off again.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Breton.

Mr. Poissant, you have just a few minutes, because we need five minutes for committee business.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Kahnawake is in my riding, La Prairie. How did we go from a thousand indigenous farmers to just five or six?

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: That, too, is a good question.

There is no doubt that the appetite was there. It was a matter of assistance. Indigenous farming suffered the effects of residential schools, acculturation and oppression. We didn't have anyone advocating for us to seek out assistance or government programs. It's an issue that would certainly make for a good study.

The fact remains: in 1910, there were more than a thousand indigenous farmers, and today, there are just five or six. It's not due to a lack of interest, on the contrary. Recently, some traditional lands have been reclaimed. Young families are extremely keen to be farmers, even squatting on land to do so, without an agreement with the band council. It's on a small scale, but they are trying to make it.

Figuring out whether it involves Indian or non-Indian governance is problematic, not to mention what people think. There's a huge appetite, but it's really tough to answer such a complex question in two minutes.

Nevertheless, the facts are the facts. It doesn't make sense that the Odanak Abenakis had more than 2,000 cattle at the beginning of the last century, but have none today. The reason isn't that they don't want to farm. The story is more or less the same in Kanesatake and all over the place.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: I have one last question.

The UPA came up earlier. I was a member for 20 years.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: I see.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: I know that, when organizations or producers approach the UPA, they are often allowed to join. I don't know whether your organization has enough indigenous producers. Show the UPA your product.

The Chair: Mr. Poissant, we're out of time.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: I just want to tell you that those at the UPA are open to hearing what people have to say.

Mr. Michel Gros Louis: Thank you.

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's all the time we have.

Thank you all for your passion and your vision of agriculture.

We will take a one-minute break and resume in camera to discuss committee business.

I would now ask the witnesses to take their leave as quickly as possible.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]