HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

AGRI • NUMBER 127 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, February 5, 2019

Chair

Mr. Pat Finnigan

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

Tuesday, February 5, 2019

● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)): Welcome, everyone, to our second meeting regarding support of indigenous Canadians in the agriculture and agri-food industry.

Today, we have Dr. Sheri Longboat, assistant professor at the school of environmental design and rural development at the University of Guelph. Welcome, Ms. Longboat. We also have Stephen Penner from the University of Guelph. I think both of you are going to do one presentation.

We also have, from the University of Guelph, Dr. Hannah Tait Neufeld, assistant professor, department of family relations and applied nutrition. She will have a separate presentation.

We will begin with Mr. Penner and Dr. Longboat, for seven minutes. I don't know how you want to share your time.

Ms. Sheri Longboat (Assistant Professor, School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, University of Guelph, As an Individual): Thank you, everyone, and good morning. We appreciate the opportunity to be here to contribute to this very important discussion on how to develop more inclusive agriculture and agri-food policies and programs.

As mentioned, I am a professor at the University of Guelph in rural planning and development, but I am also a Haudenosaunee Mohawk from Six Nations of the Grand River territory. My experience is about 20 years of working with first nations communities, both my own and others, at the grassroots level in education, training and land resource management. Stephen is working with me as a doctoral student. He has seven years of practical experience working collaboratively with indigenous communities on food-related economic and cultural development projects.

Today we're going to talk about agriculture and agri-food in the northern Ontario context, as well as the subarctic and arctic context regions, with an emphasis on community goals around food security and food sovereignty. Both spatially and temporally, this is a massive area, so we draw generalizations and present some commonalities.

However, it is important to recognize that there is great diversity among indigenous peoples across Canada, and their communities and nations, in terms of their relationships to territory and ancestral lands, as well as their food sources and food systems. It is from this context that we will first provide some background to frame the issue, after which we'll provide some recommendations.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stephen Penner: Good morning.

[*English*]

Kitchi meegwetch, Sheri.

Food sovereignty is an issue of colonial policies. Indigenous nations in Canada have, and continue to deal with, a colonial food system that leaves many of these nations located in what can best be described as a food wasteland, and at worst imposes a lifetime sentence to what has been called a food prison. The effects of food insecurity and the departure from traditional or country foods have tremendous implications on health and well-being.

Indigenous people lead the list of food-related diseases, such as diabetes, stroke, heart disease and kidney disease, due to decreased access to traditional or country foods, and from the imposition of a less-than-secure, less healthy and less sovereign food production and distribution system.

At the heart of the struggle for many indigenous communities is the continuation of anti-colonial struggles in even post-colonial contexts. Canadian government policies, including nutrition north, the food distribution system operated by the largest northern food retailer, the North West Company; the adverse multi-generational effects of residential schools, the Indian Act and the sixties scoop; and systematic and prevalent racism have eroded indigenous food sovereignty and indigenous faith in the established systems that were to secure a better food future.

Corporations that service communities remain profit-focused, and historically governments have generally used top-down policy agendas. These agendas result in adverse outcomes in indigenous communities. For example, up in northern Manitoba, food insecurity is at 60%, and in Inuit populations in Nunavut, it's at 70%.

Furthermore, communities such as Fort McPherson in the Yukon, Fort McKay in Alberta, Fox Lake in northern Manitoba, and the Eeyou Istchee are suffering from significant changes in the availability of food that has sustained them from time immemorial. These changes can be traced to climate change and resource extraction. What we really need to focus on, and what these communities are telling us, is that they draw their inspiration and support from going out on the land, fishing, hunting and gathering, and producing foods.

● (1105)

Ms. Sheri Longboat: It's important to know that indigenous communities are reframing their food system. Within communities, there are discussions happening and emerging around the creation of solutions, including the need to change local policies and practices.

Food sovereignty conversations are taking place from east to west, from the Mi'kmaq in the east to salmon production and salmon protection in the west, and north to south, as far as the Arctic and as far south as, for example, Six Nations, where local food movements are occurring, which Dr. Hannah Tait Neufeld will also speak of.

In these communities, we're seeing a revising of local practices to rewind some of the degradation that has occurred to traditional food sources. The success of these actions really calls for new collaborative approaches to the development of food and food-related policies that directly engage and consult with the indigenous peoples.

We also need to remember that prior to contact, or prior to colonization, indigenous peoples sustained their communities in North America and forged a healthy, prosperous life. Adapting their nations' knowledge allowed them to synchronize their socio-economic practices to the food sources available. This intimate knowledge remains in every first nation across Canada, and that knowledge transfer can contribute to this new dialogue on food production and distribution.

However, the current reality is that indigenous-produced foods account for a very small amount of the foods consumed. Only about 3% of the firms operating in the agricultural sector are aboriginal firms, despite the high number of aboriginal people living in areas largely associated with agriculture.

We do see a positive change. We do see that indigenous communities have, within the last decade, awoken some of the most innovative food sovereignty solutions. These include some of the activities that Stephen mentioned, which we've shared at the end of the brief. In terms of the Cree doing some activities in northern Manitoba, we have a food-from-the-land movement connecting people to the land by re-establishing sustainable healthy food systems. Also, in Nunavut now, the fridges sometimes contain up to 50% local country foods. We see these trends happening across the country.

Mr. Stephen Penner: What do we recommend? Policies and programs should stress the unique role that food plays in facilitating health for indigenous communities. Policies need to acknowledge the indigenous perspective and recognize the enshrinement of local food pathways, including a recognition of the supportive place of traditional food.

Specific recommendations are to engage with communities to define agriculture and agri-food needs and solutions locally; to respect, reinforce and protect the sacred relationship that indigenous food systems hold within indigenous communities; to promote local community eating guides; to create local and regional food distribution hubs; to address food-related deficits in the current food policy; to facilitate inter-agency co-operation among indigenous agriculture, agri-food production and indigenous services to build a supply chain to indigenous and non-indigenous markets; and, finally, to recognize and reinforce the ultimate goal of indigenous food sovereignty.

Ms. Sheri Longboat: In conclusion, I'd like to say that in both the academy and community practice, we see the incredible power of food as a decolonizing instrument, as a vehicle to health and a means to revitalize indigenous socio-economic systems. Indigenous agriculture is at the core of better food pathways towards indigenous food sovereignty. The Government of Canada has a wonderful opportunity to facilitate place-based solutions to support a resurgence of traditional foods and food systems. Collaboratively developed practices and policy tools can increase the participation of indigenous peoples in the growth of the agriculture and agri-food industry and have immense outcomes beyond those that were initially sought.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Longboat and Mr. Penner.

Now we'll go to Dr. Neufeld for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld (Assistant Professor, Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph, As an Individual): Good morning.

[*English*]

Merci and *meegwetch* for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food as you work towards strengthening support for indigenous peoples to become more involved in this sector.

My brief presentation today draws from my research program in the areas of indigenous health and nutrition and the ongoing community-based research I'm involved with alongside first nations and Métis communities and organizations.

I will begin with some background on the structural impacts, some of which Sheri and Stephen mentioned, that have altered food production capacity among southern indigenous communities, with a few case studies included from communities in southern Manitoba and southwestern Ontario to illustrate my points.

Although I consider myself of mixed ancestry, I did not grow up in an indigenous community or with my birth family. My first experience setting foot on reserve was in 1999, when I began my master's research working in the Interlake region of Manitoba. The focus of the study was to look at processes of dietary change during pregnancy by comparing the narratives of young mothers and of grandmothers in the community. I was interested in learning more about patterns of food acquisition, the use of locally harvested traditional foods, hunting and cultivation practices, along with circumstances of food insecurity. Much of what I came to learn was necessary to situate the historical context of the community and the land they continue to cultivate to this day.

Plant resources in Canada have historically played a less prominent role in overall sustenance than have wild meat and fish, in the diets of indigenous peoples. In many of the communities that have been studied to date, agricultural activities may have been directly tied to the operation of residential schools and/or church missions. The Manitoba community that I worked with, along with others in the same region, had a longer history of successful agricultural practices. It has been postulated that early ethnographies in this region were narrow in scope and did not provide sufficient historical analysis to recognize agricultural traditions first documented in the early 1800s, or knowledge passed down through oral tradition.

Prior to the introduction of federal policy in Canada that discouraged agriculture by increasing the difficulties of commercial sales, many communities had their own indigenous agricultural traditions and engaged successfully in subsistence farming. The policy changes in favour of the surrender of reserves located on prime agricultural land were also justified in part by the presumption of a perceived unwillingness of first nations to farm.

In the 1830s, the British Colonial Office put forward a policy of assimilation that encouraged indigenous groups to become settled in permanent villages and educated in the English language, Christianity and agricultural methods. The Anglican Church Missionary Society was very involved in Manitoba in this period and set up a number of agriculture and pastoral communities along the Red River north of Winnipeg. When Manitoba entered Confederation in 1870, the Canadian government began the conclusion of these land settlements and Treaty No. 1 was signed in 1871. It set aside this prime agricultural land for the Saulteaux community at that time, but in 1907 pressure from politicians and investors resulted in the illegal surrender of these lands to the Canadian government. In 1909, band members were moved to a more isolated and forested location, which has become one of the largest reserves in Manitoba.

Environmental dispossession refers to the processes that have reduced indigenous people's access to the land and resources of their traditional environments. It is a process that can affect health in direct and indirect ways. As I've highlighted, lost connections to physical environments and locally harvested and produced foods are examples of the direct effects of environmental dispossession. Even though the origins of these concerns may reflect global food trends, such as the overall environmental health of food systems, the mechanisms or determinants by which access to these foods has been reduced are different.

For example, the impacts of colonialism and forced assimilation that I first observed in Manitoba and directly associated with urbanization have eroded the relationships that have existed among indigenous people, within communities, families and local ecosystems. The health of communities has also been indirectly impacted through assimilative actions taken by governments to disconnect communities from their territories and knowledge systems through the residential school system, for example. The loss of languages, ties to elders, and teachings isolated children from their roots and disrupted the transmission of knowledge to subsequent generations. These influences have not only reduced physical access to food available in the physical environment, but they have also stressed relationships to maintain the crucial social structures for the maintenance of food systems.

● (1110)

Foods originate from the natural environment, from farming or wild harvesting or hunting. The harvesting and consumption of these locally produced foods also hold important significance for the preservation of indigenous knowledge, as they are housed within their own traditional food systems. A traditional food system refers to the socio-cultural meanings, patterns of acquisition, processing techniques, use, composition, health, and nutritional consequences for the indigenous people using these foods. The relationship indigenous people have with their unique food systems and local ecosystems encourages practices, values and traditions that perpetuate healthy communities.

Colonial policies, as I've mentioned, have disrupted, denied access to, and in many cases decimated traditional food sources and medicines. A lack of access to clean drinking water and adequate food remains a key health concern for many indigenous families and communities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission explicitly calls for actions that close these gaps in health equity, including food security. To restore sustainable relationships to the land, culture, and communities, restorations of these relationships and structures, including community roles and responsibilities to protect traditional lands and food systems, are necessary acts of resurgence and pathways toward reconciliation.

I can provide some cases and examples of community initiatives. In 2015, I witnessed a growing momentum in the community of Six Nations of the Grand River, where I work, with the start of the Healthy Roots initiative and returning to local food production and elimination of refined or processed foods from the diet. This movement has shifted toward the concept of food sovereignty, as Sheri and Stephen mentioned, which expands on the focus of food security from food cost, access and availability toward an understanding of the ways in which power relations and inequality undermine food production and distribution and consumption patterns.

In the indigenous context, a food sovereignty framework explicitly connects the health properties of food with the health of the environment and identifies a history of social injustice. It addresses aspirations for collective well-being, along with acknowledging land rights and cultural integrity. Indigenous food sovereignty also considers gender equity, adequate nutrition, addressing structural racism, and restructuring the socio-political process.

Emerging literature on the indigenous food movement also identifies community involvement, family-centred food education, and the re-establishment of relationships with the land as essential to restoring—

● (1115)

The Chair: I see that you have probably another page and a half, but we're past the time.

Is it the will of the committee to listen to the rest, or do you want to start the questioning? There is probably another two minutes left, at least.

You want to let her finish, okay.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: Sorry for being long-winded.

It's okay?

The Chair: Yes. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: Maybe I'll just continue on to the next section.

In connection with some of the work we're doing in collaboration with indigenous faculty, students and a growing urban network, food gardens are being expanded in the wider Grand River territory and at the University of Guelph, to strengthen land-based relationships and local food sovereignty. Using food as a starting point for action, I am leading a community-based research program addressing community needs previously identified here in southwestern Ontario. The ongoing research is designed to engage a diverse group of partners, collaborators and knowledge users.

Garden sites have been established with the assistance of local indigenous communities at the University of Guelph arboretum and at the organic farm on the University of Guelph campus. Our aim is to address food access and knowledge barriers to exploring innovative land-based education and practices. Since the spring of 2018, edible crops and medicinal plants have been planted and nurtured by a group of committed community members, faculty and students. The gardens are known collectively as *wisahkotewinowak*, which means “green shoots that grow after the fire”. The garden brings together indigenous community agencies such as the Grand River Métis Council, the White Owl Native Ancestry Association, the Global Youth Volunteer Network and the Aboriginal Resource Centre.

Given the momentum and interest I have observed at the community level in regions where I am involved in research and supporting community needs, I believe it is timely to provide longer-term funding and infrastructure to support indigenous food producers, both on and off reserve.

In the fall, I attended a conference on the topic of native nutrition in Minnesota and was amazed at the innovative community-based programming supporting local food production across the U.S. Many of the projects were supported at the federal level through Indian Health Service. Indigenous communities in the U.S., such as the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux community, have also provided a significant amount of funding to the organization called Seeds of Native Health. I have provided links as part of the reference list. The organization in turn allocates grants to support food research, education and access, and to build on localized efforts.

The mission of the indigenous food and agriculture initiative based at the University of Arkansas is to enhance health and wellness in tribal communities by advancing healthy food systems, diversified economic development and cultural food traditions. They work towards empowering tribal governments, farmers, ranchers and food businesses by providing planning and technical assistance, creating new academic and professional programs in food systems and agriculture, and increasing indigenous student enrolment in food- and agriculture-related disciplines.

In 2018, the U.S. Senate passed a new farm bill that included 63 tribal-specific provisions to make a historic investment in indigenous food and agricultural production, infrastructure and economic development. Some provisions of historic significance include creating a tribal advisory council to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, adding two tribal colleges that had previously been excluded, and creating parity for access to additional agriculture programs for indigenous students.

● (1120)

The Chair: Can you conclude, please? We have lots of questions.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: Yes. I will summarize. I'll just read the last two paragraphs, the concluding statements.

The Chair: You can submit it and we will translate it.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: Okay, that's fine. You'll have access to it.

The Chair: I think we can get back to you during the questions, and you can bring that if you don't mind.

We'll start with the questions. Mr. Dreeshen, you have six minutes.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer—Mountain View, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests this morning.

I am a farmer, and basically this study is trying to bring out the ways in which our aboriginal and indigenous communities can find their way into that particular industry. It is great to hear about their issues and concerns. I've spent a number of years with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, so I have heard about many of these things, including the nutrition north program and the concerns and issues that are there. One thing that I believe is important, as someone in the beef industry, is to recognize that there are some traditional kinds of industries out there. The same things that are associated with northerners for the types of food in their diets are significant for all. The only political pitch is Canada's food guide, which seems to be moving away from those things that traditionally are part of our diets.

Mr. Penner, you were speaking about how to get people into farming without that top-down pressure. As someone who grew up in it, and with my family's history of hundreds of years of farming, I'm curious about how you can create the things necessary to encourage the aboriginal community to get the engagement they require. We've heard of different ways. They can go to school, and maybe it would be a good idea to get 10% interested in farming, but you have to love it. You have to love that side of it as well.

Can you give me some ideas as to how that can be done from the ground up rather than from the government down?

Mr. Stephen Penner: Those ideas already exist in many communities.

We submitted a bunch of different examples, with links to those examples. We have to think about agriculture being different at large scale, medium scale and small scale. We have to think about it as the support of communities. Also, it's a way for communities to get a hold of their own financial futures.

These things exist. For example, in northern Quebec, in Eeyou Istchee, a person by the name of Irene Neeposh is starting a Labrador tea company. There is a tea company in existence that harvests up in Nunavik in northern Quebec and sends their stuff to southern Quebec. These are examples of agriculture, but they're not what we think of as typical agricultural activities. Then you look at the Quapaw Nation in Oklahoma, which operates a large-scale bison ranch as a vertically integrated operation.

We need to find a way to tell the stories in a broader range. We have to empower communities with a tool kit that they can go to and say, “This is the type of soil that I have; these are the types of resources that exist in nature.” It happens in Aroland in northern Ontario. These are things that happen on small and medium scale, but they need to be told in a very broad range and encapsulated in a tool kit. Communities don't rely on this in the south. They can rely on having a tool kit to work with, which gives them information that is meaningful to them.

They have to see themselves in agriculture. I say “they”, but we have to see ourselves in agriculture as well. That is the first step to forming indigenous food sovereignty. This is so critical, the agriculture and agri-food commission, with regard to establishing indigenous food sovereignty. Without indigenous agriculture, there will be no indigenous food sovereignty. We need to recognize it in a different way, taking our minds and putting them in a different way, and empowering those communities.

● (1125)

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Ms. Neufeld, in some of the discussions, you mentioned you were looking back at the historical context and looking at the maternal health requirements. Could you expand somewhat on that discussion?

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: Sorry, do you mean on the findings from that research?

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Yes.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: This is research that took place in Manitoba over 15 years ago. I've been working in this area for over 20 years now. What I saw was circumstances of extreme food insecurity in those communities. I did food pricing. I did a pricing of a nutritious food basket at local community stores. There was a food store on reserve, which is only two hours north of Winnipeg, by the way. It's a fairly southern community. I've been taking the perspective of more southern communities, as opposed to the northern communities.

As well, there were disconnections between the generations. I interviewed two generations of women, grandmothers and mothers. A lot of the knowledge around agricultural practices, animal husbandry, and planting crops for the community itself and for the individual families.... Much of that information had been lost, and that was only between two generations.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: One of the issues as well.... We're speaking about the north—it's significant and we realize there are different concerns there—but again, I hear that your concentration is.... I'm trying to think back to my area, in central Alberta, where it's not necessarily the same type of farming that would be considered. Many aboriginals are actually doing that. They are part of the new traditional farming, which of course requires equipment. It requires a lot of technical knowledge, the things that all young people are getting when they go to universities, and now agricultural colleges, so they can understand the nuances associated with that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dreeshen. Unfortunately, we're out of time. Perhaps that can be answered at a later round.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Okay, sorry.

The Chair: Before I go on, I want to welcome Mr. Eyolfson and Mr. Yurdiga, in replacement, to our committee.

Mr. Longfield, you have six minutes.

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

Thanks to Guelph for being here.

Earl Dreeshen was leading down a path there, in terms of investment in indigenous farming, the equipment that's needed, and whether indigenous farmers have access to the same types of financial support. Is that where you were going with that question?

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Somewhat, yes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Maybe you could comment on that, because there are different types of agriculture.

Then I want to get to Manitoba after this.

Ms. Sheri Longboat: I can answer from some of the experiences I've had in working with communities in terms of forwarding some of their agendas on food sovereignty and security. I've been up in northern Ontario, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and territory, which represents about 45,000 people in 49 communities, northern and remote. In speaking with these communities and hearing their stories in terms of what they need to feel food-secure and then towards the path of sovereignty, for many of these communities it was just getting access to.... Some of the stories...for example, one elder said, “I just need some access to some soil to start some community gardens.”

We heard other stories from a gentleman who was diagnosed with severe diabetes. He began changing his food, how he ate. He began accessing local foods, traditional foods and, through that, even accessing the fish from his environment, which then brought up some issues for him such as the safety of the fish in terms of water quality. He began using that as a mechanism to bring some of the youth back out to the water and to the land, and he started to see these transformations happening in the community.

I use this as an illustration to say that, when we look at some of these solutions here, we'll be looking at multi-dimensional solutions and targeting different layers, and some of the layers are quite grassroots, some basic support. As Stephen said, there are many models across the country, and one of the recommendations we'd support is having an inventory saying what's happening out there, because a lot of communities are asking, “How do we re-engage? How do we do this? We heard neighbours down the road or up in the north are engaging in these ways”, and that was something they asked us to begin looking at as well. That would be one way.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you.

We didn't quite get to the investment piece, but maybe we can circle back to that.

I'm thinking of Manitoba—I'm originally from Winnipeg—and thinking of the different types of communities. The Métis nation used to have access to the bison and the herds were eliminated. Now bison is making somewhat of a return, and there are different types of practices around harvesting bison.

St. Laurent, up in the Interlake, has access to fish. We don't think of fish as agriculture because it's a different department in the federal government, so we get some cross-jurisdictional issues. I've been up at Fox Lake; I've been at the mine site, and there isn't a lot of farming up in Fox Lake. There isn't access to soil. Then in the Whiteshell, on the Manitoba-Ontario border, there's wild rice harvesting and wild rice processing.

The definition of agriculture in terms of first nations is as diverse as are the first nations and Métis. How do we deal with that as a federal government?

● (1130)

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: Maybe I'll let Stephen speak to this as well. I lived in Manitoba for nine years. Stephen currently lives there.

I totally agree, and I see the same circumstances from the work that I do in Ontario. I think there are different needs in southern Ontario, other than the ones you've described, which are very astute. One is the ability to access land. Even though there is plenty of arable land available, it's very expensive.

In and around the GTA and London areas, many of the communities I worked with, such as the Chippewas of the Thames and the Oneida First Nation, have very strong agricultural traditions but not a lot of access to land, so there's that piece.

I think there are two major pieces: access and knowledge.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Great.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: As Sheri was mentioning, there are some great things occurring, very diverse and innovative things, but there isn't really a way of connecting those pieces and allowing communities to learn from each other. I think that's a big piece, too. Ideally, at the federal level, that's something that could be assisted with.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: When we're working on reports, we're looking for that type of suggestion of what we could suggest back in connecting the best practices through first nations associations and university associations.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: I'll just say one thing, and I'll let Stephen respond. I think the communities are quite diverse as well.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Right.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: I tried to lead to this. This is a picture at the University of Guelph. This is our organic farm and some of the indigenous gardens that we had growing there this summer. I think the first nations themselves, on reserve, are one piece, but there is also a lot of migration to and from the communities and a lot of really interested individuals who are living off reserve, and the Métis nation as well.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I have less than a minute.

Mr. Stephen Penner: Very quickly, you asked how we can recognize different forms of indigenous agriculture. The Tsuut'ina Nation in Alberta recognizes it as honey. Up in Naujaat in northern Nunavut, they recognize it as caribou and char. We have to recognize it as a community. We think we have to recognize it as the community recognizes it, and then we can empower those communities to do the work that they see as necessary to establish both food sovereignty and an export market, but I think there are some things the Canadian government can do.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Food safety is a big piece of this. When you go north, there is mercury in the food. The food supply is tainted, so food safety has to be part of it.

Mr. Stephen Penner: Food safety is part of it. When we think about how our indigenous people have been here forever, they know what to eat and how to eat it, but they also know what's there in abundance, so they can develop an export market for it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Penner.

Thank you, Mr. Longfield.

Mr. MacGregor, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you very much to all three of you for appearing before the committee today. I hail from Vancouver Island, so within my riding we have the Cowichan, Malahat, Lyackson, Halalt, Ditidaht and Pacheedaht. There are many different nations and many different cultures even within that small space.

You're so right, that when you're talking about indigenous.... The word “agriculture” means so many different things. It's such a diverse group when we talk about first nations. I'm thinking of the Cowichan, in particular. There's evidence that they used to manage the Cowichan River by building weirs to manage the fish stock. Salmon is a central tenet of their culture and their food, whether it's the coho, the chum, or the chinook. There is also evidence of carefully managed clam beds as well. They have a saying, “When the tide goes out, the table is set.” This subject has the potential to veer into other departments, like the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, when we're talking about managing a food resource.

I really appreciate your comments on indigenous food sovereignty and some of the recommendations you have for the development of a food policy for Canada. As was already mentioned by some of my colleagues, we don't have to rely just on your testimony today. You're very welcome to submit a brief with further details that explain some of the things you'd like to see, and we'd welcome seeing that.

I do have to apologize, though, because I have limited opportunities to speak at this committee, being the sole New Democrat.

Mr. Chair, at this moment I want to use my time to move a motion.

Committee members will have received my notice of motion. It was given last year, and it specifically pertained to undertaking a study on the commercialization of unpasteurized milk in Canada. I wanted the study to include witnesses regarding the current consumption of the milk, how other jurisdictions regulate the sale, and that we report our findings back to the House of Commons.

I can make some opening comments once that's been passed around.

● (1135)

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Colleagues, I have four main points to make on this.

First of all, we all know from our local communities that the consumption of raw milk in Canada is probably one of the largest unregulated markets. We all know people who consume it, and yes, Health Canada has its position on it, but it's not preventing people from consuming it. I think this is a real area of opportunity that we have as a committee to study this issue, but more importantly, to look to other jurisdictions. In Canada, agriculture is a shared jurisdiction between the federal government and the provincial governments. We do use our criminal law power and our regulation over inter-provincial trade to regulate raw milk, but I think we can really benefit from looking at other jurisdictions.

If we look down to the United States, there are 37 states, comprising 76% of the population, that have legal off-farm sales, farm gate sales, or herd shares. Some of our largest trading partners in the European Union, including France, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Austria and the U.K., allow the sale of unpasteurized milk.

I know there are concerns out there about the health risks associated with it, but there is data from the United States showing that with the increased distribution there has actually been a decrease in the outbreaks. This is coming from the prevalence of on-farm food safety programs, which have had a significant role in decreasing the risk.

To summarize and to finish up, I believe that we, as a committee.... This being an agricultural product, and given the fact that our calendar in the weeks ahead has not been filled up by a study, I would like to move this motion that we start this study upon the conclusion of the current one.

I welcome committee members' comments on this.

With that, I move the motion, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

Are there any comments or discussions on the motion?

Monsieur Poissant.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (La Prairie, Lib.): I'm not sure that would be a good idea. There have been cases of bovine tuberculosis detected in British Columbia, and milk may be contaminated. I'm not sure I want us to do a study on this to allow people to have access to raw milk. Public health has to be our top priority in any study.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

Mrs. Eva Nassif (Vimy, Lib.): I agree.

[*English*]

The Chair: Are there other comments on the motion on the table?

If not, we shall proceed.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: If there are no other comments.... My interest in this is the fact that there are so many Canadians consuming it, and it's growing. Trust me, it is growing. Is it in our interest to simply ignore the problem and say that we're just going to keep it illegal and you can take your chances, or is it in the interest of the government, from a public health perspective, to actually look at how other jurisdictions regulate this and attempt to keep it safe?

I think that's what the role of our committee is. It's not to come to a conclusion one way or the other, but to study the fact that this happens in Canada. It's an unregulated market. Other jurisdictions have regulated it. Are we just going to ignore it and let people kind of take their own lives in their hands? There are varying degrees of safety standards. That's my interest here from a public health and safety perspective. The government can play a real role in establishing standards for something that does exist. It's not going to help us if we just turn a blind eye to it.

That's how I respond.

● (1140)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Poissant, you have the floor.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: There were cases in the past. Raw milk was used to make cheese that wound up on shelves, and it caused serious problems. Some producers also drink their milk raw, directly. They are unwittingly exposing themselves to this sort of problem, but the government is not responsible for their actions.

More thought has to be put into protecting citizens' health.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I move to adjourn the debate.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Yes, instead of taking a decision....

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: We have committee business coming. We have witnesses.

The Chair: There is a motion on the floor to adjourn debate.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We shall adjourn debate, and we shall now....

Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: With respect to Mr. Longfield, we're not allowed to talk about committee business to the public.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): I have a point of order. The debate on this issue has been adjourned.

The Chair: You have two minutes and 40 seconds. Say whatever you want.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I'm just making that comment. We're not allowed to speak about in camera meetings. This is an opportunity for us to actually deliberate in public, but point taken.

I'm sorry for that interjection. If you want, you can speak a little bit in the two minutes that you have remaining, and I also invite you to submit greater details as a brief. You've touched on indigenous food sovereignty. What are some of the key points you would like to see included in the development of a national food policy for Canada? I held consultations on this with my community back in August 2017. Here we are in 2019, and we're still waiting for it. What are some of the key points you would like to see really highlighted with respect to indigenous food sovereignty?

Ms. Sheri Longboat: I have a few, and then my colleagues may want to add some as well.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: Sure.

Ms. Sheri Longboat: One thing that's emerging from the communities is that those policies be place-based policies that reflect local dynamics and also local social, cultural, political and economic realities within those regions, because of great diversity. That would be the number one element. We need to ensure that they are engaged and that they are reflective of those communities.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Penner.

Mr. Stephen Penner: It is a very large job to take on, to see that we develop regional and local food sovereignty realities that are already there. The knowledge is there. It's all there, but we don't recognize it. People feel like they're failing when they're not keeping to the Canada food guides. They eat too much caribou; they're not supposed to eat too much protein. I think it's really important to give the power back to communities, in a good way, from a government's perspective—to make the government more consultative and collaborative.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Okay.

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: I'll just add a final point. I think it's also important to consult directly with communities and get perspectives from the ones who are really hungry to initiate change in their communities and from some of the ones who have been very successful. I think it's really important to listen to that grassroots voice, because it's going to involve incorporating a number of different sectors, providing funding, and also providing support for education in this area, to get young farmers more interested in this field.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Drouin, you have six minutes.

[*English*]

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

Thank you for being here on this important study.

Mr. Penner, I'll start with you. I am interested in northern agriculture, and some of the trends that are happening. I'd be curious to find out about the impacts of climate change. With my brief experience—not having worked on agriculture with first nations communities, but on energy—I know that winter roads would impact access to energy, in having them move from diesel power to solar power.

I know we have a program for food, nutrition north, but do some first nations access foods through winter roads?

● (1145)

Mr. Stephen Penner: That's very common. I used to work for the North West Company, in a former life. They were primarily involved with the feedback on nutrition north. Nutrition north does not serve the communities well. As far as winter roads are concerned, they last for shorter and shorter periods, which means the communities rely upon those services more and more in their food source. They don't travel south as much, because there are no winter roads. Thus, they are relying upon imported foods, foods that don't make them healthy. It correlates directly back to that.

That's one aspect of climate change, but when we look at the Fort McPherson first nation in the Yukon, they don't have the caribou running anymore in that community. They rely upon another Gwich'in community up in Old Crow to support them by sending caribou down to them. There is no longer that migration pattern where they hunt caribou. That's a definite huge impact of climate change on resources that they can't manage to climb over without the co-operation that happens naturally among the Gwich'in, the Cree and any community. They form those inter-tribal relationships, and they have been there forever.

We need to have some support systems for that, and recognize it. It's quite difficult, but climate change affects seals and all sorts of different marine animals. With the salmon runs from the Yukon, sometimes they have lots of salmon, and sometimes the salmon don't come up to the Yukon because they stop in Alaska.

These are things that have been studied, but they aren't actually integrated into the formalized agricultural systems of Canada. If we can tease out that information through studies and base it on empirical facts.... We always talk about what matters. It is through having that information and doing the studies that give us the information that we can form good policies.

Mr. Francis Drouin: About extending the growing season and working with genetics—and feel free to jump in, because I know Guelph is a big partner in that—how are you guys working with first nation communities to extend the growing season? Are you finding it hard to introduce those new breeds to some first nation communities, because of traditional foods, etc.?

Ms. Sheri Longboat: I can share a little bit. It's not an area of research that we work in, in terms of socially, community-based research. It's working with the community to reinvigorate what we might call indigenous law, or traditional systems. It is the reinvigoration of food sources that were once relied upon, and that were intimately connected with the social, economic and often political systems of how communities managed their relationship with one another, their trade, their inter-tribal or international relations with other first nations, as well as within their communities. It was very much food-driven.

What we're finding is that more communities, rather than bringing in some of the solutions that we talk about for the south.... I will say that it varies with each community. We do have communities in the north that are saying, "We want greenhouses. We do want that." There is that willingness, and that sense that the communities want to employ what we call southern foods. However, most are leaning towards country foods, if you speak to those who are trying to reinvigorate those values and those knowledge systems.

I can say from the Haudenosaunee that we're trying to bring back heirloom seeds that have been saved through the generations between our seedkeepers. We're going to move that. If we want health, we need to go back to those seeds that have been collected and gathered through those ceremonies, and bestowed within the communities with specific responsibilities to protect them.

It's less about bringing in.... It's trying to get back to the other ways, but doing that in a contemporary context. That becomes the real challenge, when we have students and youth disengaged from those practices.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Going back to your previous comments about some of these first nations that have lost that knowledge of farming, that agricultural knowledge, are you having to teach some of this knowledge again to first nation communities up north, when you're bringing back traditional foods?

Ms. Hannah Tait Neufeld: I would say, definitely, in the context of my work in the south and working with communities to bring elders.... The project I'm involved with is that I bring elders from the community of Six Nations into urban settings to teach them about planting practices, harvesting practices, food preservation practices and things like that, definitely working with a collection of heirloom seeds, heritage seeds. They know the land they've come from. We do a lot of work in that area.

However, getting back to your point on climate change, we do see some of that changing. I know, from circumstances shifting in the north, that there are some food preservation and food preparation practices that are negatively impacted by processes of climate change and are a food safety issue as well.

● (1150)

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Penner, did you want to jump in and add anything?

The Chair: Very quickly....

Mr. Stephen Penner: I'm okay.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

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

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

With your permission, I'll be sharing my speaking time with my colleague Mr. Eyolfson.

Witnesses have come to meet with us and have made suggestions. There were discussions with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada representatives over the past months. We were told that first nations people had more trouble than others acquiring land, for financial reasons, among others, whether they lived on reserve or off reserve.

Are you aware of this? Can you tell us the reasons why these people have more trouble obtaining financing? It's quite important in terms of food self-sufficiency; it's one of the primary aspects.

Since I want to leave some time for Mr. Eyolfson, I'm going to ask you right now what the Government of Canada can do to remedy the situation.

Mr. Stephen Penner: Thank you very much. My comments will be very brief.

There are several systems designed to grant funds, but none of them allow you to reach the people you need to reach. No one works with the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, the Cando organization, or community economic development officers to let them know that funds are available. The system is fragmented. There are funds available, but no one knows how to get them to the communities.

A link has to be established with the communities through the economic development officers. When the work is done with the Cree Nation government, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business—with whom you already work—or the Cando organization, officers work with the communities. You always try to announce that you are doing the right thing by making these funds available, but the communities never have access to them. There is no portal that allows the communities to access the funds.

Mr. Pierre Breton: Do you have any other comments?

[*English*]

Ms. Sheri Longboat: I might be able to speak a little bit about the access to land. I can speak for the reserve communities in northern Ontario that are the small federal parcels of land. Often, the quality of arable land, on those lands, is very difficult and it poses significant challenges for communities to engage in mainstream or traditional farming practices, if we want to call them that. As well, having limited access to traditional territories outside of the reserves is very difficult. Then we have challenges with respect to capital and having access to equity, to be able to generate equity from that. Just to step back, some of the communities in the north were saying that some of the things they're looking for are just equipment.

It's such a complex issue, but your question is tremendously important.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you very much.

I will now yield the floor to Mr. Eyolfson.

[*English*]

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you very much.

I'm new to this committee. One of the things that were pointed out.... Actually, Mr. Longfield made reference to it in his question. I'm also from Manitoba—I guess prairie boys think alike. The stats here on the types of indigenous farmers show that the most common farm type for Métis is beef cattle. Again, coming from Manitoba, we know the bison was very important to the history of the Prairies, to the ecosystem of the Prairies. Again, I'm a physician, not a farmer—that sounds like a *Star Trek* line—but from what I understand, bison are uniquely suited to being farmed on the prairie, in that they'll just eat what's there, as opposed to needing feed.

It sounds to me like, just because of the nature of these animals and how they grow, that would be a very good opportunity for indigenous farmers to branch into. Has there been any effort to promote this as a suitable and potentially very profitable market for indigenous farmers to get into?

● (1155)

Mr. Stephen Penner: I'm not aware of it in Canada. There are some examples of it in the U.S. The Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma has a huge feedlot with bison, and they operate it as vertically integrated. They use it in order to grow vegetables, and they view it as a holistic system. But you're right. You can't do anything with the buffalo or bison. You can't lasso them; you're not going to contain them, except when you go to slaughter them. It's extraordinarily healthy meat that's very low in fat and totally delicious.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I order it whenever I see it on the menu.

Mr. Stephen Penner: Most people recognize it as a good food source. We don't know whether we're getting it from Alberta, Manitoba or the U.S. It's just like wild rice. We think about wild rice, but we also have to think about wild rice being a valued commodity like Parmesan cheese or champagne, because it does belong to indigenous communities and it is a huge export with a restorative component to it.

Did I answer your question? I don't know if I'm going on. We have to contextualize most of what we're doing and make it specific to the regions, whether it's bison on the plains or wild rice in Ontario or Manitoba.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Penner and Mr. Eyolfson.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, I think you have about three minutes left.

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

I want to thank the witnesses very much for being here today.

Your answers were very instructive and will help us to make good decisions in our recommendations to the government.

Mr. Chair, like my colleague Mr. MacGregor, I am going to present a motion that is not directly related to our current study, but which is very relevant to the report we will be tabling soon on the mental health challenges farmers face. Last October, I already attempted to convince the committee to adopt a motion in the context of its study on mental health. This is today's motion:

> That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food conduct a study on the consequences of the draft USMCA on Canadian farmers, particularly as related to:
>
> 1) producers under supply management,
>
> 2) any limitations placed on Canadian exports
>
> 3) any limitations placed on Canada's ability to make independent regulatory decisions within the agricultural sector
>
> that this study be comprised of no less than four meetings to be held at the committee's earliest convenience; that the minister and departmental officials be in attendance for at least one meeting; that the government produce all studies, evaluations, analysis and reports that touch on the matters of this study.

Mr. Chair, I am proposing this motion now because I know that we are working on the report on mental health the committee is going to table. I believe my motion is relevant because one of the recommendations of this report will be about the consequences of the government's decisions on the mental health and daily life of agricultural producers.

I think that the changes resulting from the USMCA require that we take a closer look at their consequences on farmers. These producers followed the public negotiations that led to this agreement through the media, and saw their markets erode to the benefit of the Americans.

My objective here is not that we discuss this motion for hours. However, I would like the committee to make a prompt decision, while there is still time, on the merits of including such recommendations in the report on mental health it will be tabling very soon. This presents a unique opportunity to discuss government decisions that have real consequences on farmers and milk, egg and poultry producers. I think we would be remiss as a committee if we did not devote a few minutes, if not a few meetings, to studying the effects of this agreement on agricultural producers.

The Chair: First we have to suspend the appearance of the witnesses who are here. Then we can get back to your motion.

[*English*]

Unfortunately, this concludes the time we have for this panel.

I wish to thank Mr. Penner, Dr. Longboat and Dr. Neufeld for being here. We could have had more time, for sure. Again, if you have anything you want to submit, any recommendations, please do so. We will distribute it and make sure that it's part of our study.

[*Translation*]

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes before we resume our work.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1205)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC)): We will resume our discussions.

I am going to ask the witnesses who are taking part in the meeting by videoconference to wait for us for a few minutes because we are debating a motion that was presented a few minutes ago. Then we will resume the meeting immediately after, and I will make the official introductions at that time.

Thank you for your patience. This should not take very long, unless the members decide to speak longer than usual, which is always possible given the long tradition among parliamentarians here in Ottawa.

Mr. Dreeshen, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you. I'll try to be brief.

When this was first discussed back in December, it was very important that we actually study the USMCA and the effects on producers—

Mr. Francis Drouin: I have a point of order.

[*Translation*]

If I understand correctly, once a member begins chairing the meeting, we cannot discuss his motion. Isn't Mr. Berthold the motion's sponsor?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): The clerk explained to me that under the Standing Orders, I cannot table a motion as chair, but nothing prevents the other members of the committee from discussing it. The debate had already begun when I assumed the chair and it must continue. However, I will not be able to vote. I lost my right to vote by assuming the chair, but I am sure that you will vote in the right way so that my vote will not be lost.

Mr. Dreeshen, you may continue.

[*English*]

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

As I mentioned, we know there are going to be some consequences for agriculture, so it is important for us to be able to discuss this. Our last study, which dealt with mental health issues and concerns, was truly eye-opening, with people recognizing the concerns and issues there.

It's not just supply management; it's also other limitations placed on Canadian exports and the concerns and issues we have there. It's the major frustrations and concerns we have for the independent regulatory decisions that are being made. It's important for all sectors that we get a handle on what is happening, and the sooner, the better; that way we can deal with it. We'll be able to include those types of decisions in our upcoming reports to get a feel for those things that are so important for the study.

I'll leave it at that.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you, Mr. Dreeshen.

Mr. Eyolfson, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I move that the debate be now adjourned.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): What a surprise!

The vote is on Mr. Eyolfson's motion to adjourn the debate.

(Motion agreed to)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): The debate on the motion is postponed to another meeting.

I thank our videoconference witnesses very much for waiting for us so patiently. We have been good parliamentarians and we managed to stick to the essentials in our debate of the motion.

It is our pleasure to welcome the representatives of 4-H Ontario, Ms. Debra Brown, executive director, and Ms. Meaghan Moniz, coordinator, volunteer support, first nations engagement. They are both with us via videoconference from Guelph, Ontario.

Good afternoon. Thank you very much for your participation.

Also by videoconference, from Washington, we are pleased to welcome Mr. Jean Poirier, the owner of Northern Lights Foods. Thank you very much for taking part in our meeting today in the context of this very important study.

We will begin with the two 4-H Ontario representatives for a period of seven minutes.

You have the floor.

● (1210)

[*English*]

Ms. Debra Brown (Executive Director, 4-H Ontario): Thank you very much.

My name is Debra Brown. I am the executive director with 4-H Ontario. I have gathered some information from my colleagues across Canada to make this presentation to you today.

4-H is a positive youth-development organization with a focus on agriculture education. We've been operating in Canada for over 100 years, mostly in the rural areas. There are over 25,000 youth enrolled in 4-H across Canada at this time. In Ontario, 92% of youth in our program live in rural areas.

4-H Ontario has been working with indigenous communities for about two decades. Today I'm pleased to present you with a few ideas that we've gathered from those communities we've been working with, and I hope to provide some insight into how we may better encourage the participation of indigenous young people in the agriculture and agri-food industry.

First, I'd like to talk a little bit about youth needs. The rural Canada report told us that we need more capacity-building for rural individuals. This includes indigenous peoples. The indigenous population is the only youth population that is growing in Canada, and it's growing more than four times faster than Canada's non-indigenous youth population.

In terms of the needs of indigenous youth, some are shared by non-indigenous youth, and some are more unique or focused with this population. There are challenges to mental health and well-being, sometimes leading to higher instances of suicide, compared to non-indigenous populations. There is a sense of isolation that goes with that.

There is also a unique factor there in that indigenous youth sometimes—depending on where they're located—have to break community to go to high school. You can imagine being 13 years old and having to move out of your parents' home so that you can attend high school. There is also a rural factor in attending schools. Transportation home after your school day sometimes prevents you from getting involved in extracurricular activities, which contributes to a sense of isolation.

The last point about youth needs I'd like to touch on is just about rural and aboriginal youth having lower high school graduation rates than their urban counterparts. This is ironic because these are also the youth who are often located in the rural areas where agricultural production takes place. The challenge is really to create that intentional link between a growing population and a growing need for employees in the agriculture and agri-food sector.

Our learning over the last few years primarily has been about the power of language. 4-H Ontario has over 100 topics that youth can learn about in their 4-H club. A 4-H club is made up of two volunteer leaders and youth aged nine to 21. They learn about a topic from those mentors. Each topic has a handbook for volunteers to use to teach about the topic. As well, there is a handbook for youth in which they can record their own learning. Over the past few years, 4-H Ontario and 4-H British Columbia have collaborated with indigenous communities to indigenize or decolonize, as we say, some of these handbooks. Incorporating indigenous knowledge and perspectives into 4-H resource manuals is an important piece of engaging in any indigenous community. The concept of decolonizing and indigenizing the curriculum has also been taken up by several ministries of education across Canada.

Let's turn to the agri-food industry's needs. I'm sure that in your course of investigation on this topic you have heard many things about the labour gap in the agriculture and agri-food industry. I won't go into that, but I do see that there is a need for 4-H and a place where we can play a strong role. We are uniquely positioned to spark an interest in agriculture in the minds of young people at a very early age. 4-H leaders are often business leaders in the agriculture industry. Indeed, you will find that many past ministers of agriculture, CEOs and chairs of commodity boards are 4-H alumni.

4-H leaders have the ability to open up a new world to youth in which they can experience agriculture in a hands-on way. This can lead them to pursue a career in the industry. Often, it may lead to their first job in agriculture, working for their 4-H leader or a guest speaker at their club.

● (1215)

The program is a strong network across rural Canada that builds skills and provides places for youth to practice those skills. 4-H has the strength and network to introduce youth to agriculture and to the many jobs that are vacant in this number-one thriving industry in Canada.

What are the challenges of enticing indigenous youth to pursue careers in agriculture? Well, there is the common proliferation of the stereotype—we regularly hear this in our programming with youth—that if you want to pursue a career in agriculture, that means you're physically going to be in the field planting and harvesting, because that's all that farming is. That stereotype is alive and well, especially with youth. In 4-H, we talk about the bigger picture of agriculture—truly from field to fork—by engaging volunteers as those adult mentors. They work across various facets of the ag industry: from the farm to the processors, the retailers and the consumers.

There's also the perception that agriculture is old and traditional. The reality is very far from that. Agriculture has leveraged technology to increase production all over Canada. It's seen great gains by looking at what technology can do, from genetics to equipment.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Madam Brown, I just want to let you know that you have 30 seconds to conclude. I just want to advise you.

Ms. Debra Brown: Okay. Thank you. I'll skip to the end.

There are some recommendations made in workforce 2025 that 4-H is responding to. The essence of that would be that we have a practical knowledge of agriculture that is beyond the classroom or the textbook. We introduce young people to agricultural producers and thereby open the door for networking, jobs and scholarships for indigenous youth to pursue school or employment in agriculture.

Please accept my sincere thanks for your invitation to attend today. I wish you all the best in your search for knowledge on this important topic.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much, Ms. Brown.

[*English*]

Thank you for your testimony.

Now we'll go to Mr. Jean Poirier.

[*Translation*]

He will be testifying by videoconference from Washington.

You have seven minutes, Mr. Poirier.

[*English*]

Mr. Jean Poirier (Owner, Northern Lights Foods): Good morning.

My name is Jean Poirier. I was born in Alma, Quebec. In 1965, life events got me to accept employment in northern Saskatchewan. My young years with the Aluminum Company of Canada prepared me for a more diversified life than I would have ever expected. At the time, La Ronge, Saskatchewan, was a community of 250 white residents surrounded by 2,500 indigenous people. It was quite a friendly family; we had no problems. Everyone wanted a job or they were happy trappers in winter, guides in summer, living on secluded lakes in cabins they called home. And, yes, for them it was a home to be proud of. I witnessed this many times, as I owned eight different fishing or hunting camps at different locations.

During our first year, we opened a small coffee shop. Our summer employees were young native girls from the boarding school. In winter we were very slow. We handled the coffee shop by ourselves and even took catering contracts for work on the reserve. All our construction projects were handled by me, with the help of aboriginal friends. The coffee shop grew to be one of the best steakhouses in the province and was a good training ground for our native youth.

In 1967, I started to work on a tourist resort development that included a golf course. Not everyone was in favour of an individual becoming the sole owner of this development, and finally after a few changes in the provincial government, I had no choice but to let the interested individual take over. In 1989 they had failed and I took over and constructed what is today Eagle Point Resort. The project was used as a training program for heavy equipment operators. The golf course was built and maintained by aboriginals who never golfed or had seen a golf course before. The restaurant was sold, but the money was reinvested in construction companies, including heavy equipment, concrete ready mix. With these companies, our main workforce was native people from the Cree and Dene nations. Naturally, a part of the mix included Métis, so all the time the evolution of the native was right under our eyes. When I say “evolution”, I also mean changes.

Our two main employers in the north are uranium companies. Both companies show me confidence and I work at all their projects, with up to 128 people, again of Cree or Dene ancestry. To be a contractor at the mine, you have to employ 70% northerners. I employed over 80% at all times, and again trained young people to become carpenters, electricians, mechanics, welders, pipefitters, millwrights, basically all the trades for such a project. At one of the mines, I had continuous work for over 17 years.

In 2012, I was asked by a wild rice harvester to take over the sale of wild rice internationally. The band gave them notice of discontinuance as they would be losing their main buyer. Wild rice harvesting in northern Saskatchewan employs up to 500 people of aboriginal ancestry. For many of them this is their only revenue for the year.

This is my short presentation to tell you who I am and how much I know about native people. It has always been a very close connection.

Thank you.

● (1220)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much, Mr. Poirier.

We will now begin our question and comments period.

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

[*English*]

Mr. David Yurdiga (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for joining us here today.

I come from a farming background. I grew up on a mixed farm. Often when we're talking about supporting indigenous people in agriculture, we're talking about the big farms, farms that require a lot of money to get into. I'd like to talk about the micro farms. My children were in 4-H and they learned a lot. Thank you so much to all the 4-H people out there. It's a marvellous organization. With these micro farms, you can teach the kids to grow their own food, whether it's in their house or in a garden.

Ms. Brown, from your experience, do you think we should have more 4-H or have more education in our school system to address the issue of people growing their own food?

Ms. Debra Brown: Yes, absolutely. I think there has been something lost in cooking skills for youth, and there's a huge gap between what comes to the dinner table and where it comes from. People don't understand where their food comes from anymore. Most urbanites think their food just comes from the grocery store and that's it.

I think there is a tremendous opportunity as we teach young people about gardening, and that can be done in the schools. It is certainly done very much in 4-H. We're looking at gardening in urban areas as well, because access to land is an issue. There's rooftop gardening, and lots of people are interested now in gardening in their own backyards.

So, 4-H can be a source of information to teach young people and adults alike how to grow their own food, for sustainability and for good health.

● (1225)

Mr. David Yurdiga: My next question is for Mr. Poirier.

When I was growing up in a northern community, we had a lot of shallow ponds. We called them muskeg lakes. They averaged two to three feet in depth, so we grew wild rice. We seeded in the fall and we harvested it the next year.

When we're talking about northern communities in particular, they have access to a lot of shallow lakes that potentially can be an ideal business or even be used for providing for their own families.

The markets are growing. With your experience, do you feel this is a great way for northerners to gain income? I know the demand is great and the supply is low. Can you give me your experience on this?

Mr. Jean Poirier: My experience is that we have lots of areas, as you said, muskeg lakes, that are very shallow. We have lots of areas that have been seeded but never harvested.

One of the qualities of wild rice is that it will reproduce itself; it will regrow over a period of about 10 years. Basically, we cannot do anything to produce more by using any artificial means. The Government of Saskatchewan said we cannot use fertilizers or anything else. So, basically it is a natural, organic food that we grow.

We have lots of possibility to grow more, but like any other farming industry, it requires a certain investment. Since 1995, these investments have run out. The price of the rice has been set so low for the native people, the aboriginal people who harvest, that basically we ended up with very low production, even though northern Saskatchewan is still the biggest producer of wild rice in Canada.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Mr. Poirier, do you believe the government should invest more money in northern communities so they can actually grow wild rice? I see less and less in my community as time goes on. Everyone was doing it when I was younger, but it seems there's a trend for the next generation to do other things, other than actually grow their own food.

From your perspective, do we have to have a more education-based approach to this, starting from the youth, or the next generation, to encourage them to grow their own food?

Mr. Jean Poirier: Yes, I would agree with that, for sure.

One of the unbelievable situations is that, even though I am buying rice, let's say, from 100 different people, probably 60% to 70% of those people have never tasted wild rice. They have no idea what it tastes like. So, basically, education is badly needed.

Another serious problem that we have with wild rice is that it's very difficult to sell in Canada. It's very difficult to sell in the States, for the simple reason of transportation costs, not necessarily the cost of the rice. The cost of the rice, in most situations, is probably less than half of the cost of the rice at the grocery store, not including the grocer's profit. But the cost of land transportation is very expensive.

Yes, there is a point where we can do more education, but the wild rice itself.... The leases on the lakes, things like that, are mostly owned now by older people. The Government of Saskatchewan is reviewing that, and they are coming out with new conditions, new rules, so we should be able to provide education on how to harvest it. Because in principle, as I heard from 4-H—

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Mr. Poirier, I must interrupt you. Your speaking time has elapsed. You will probably have an opportunity to come back to that.

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

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Poirier, in the spirit of co-operation, I will let you finish your comment.

Mr. Jean Poirier: Very well. I will continue but I won't be very long.

[*English*]

Simply, there is lots of room for improvement.

Where should the money be? If you give the money to the band, the money will go in different directions. If you give the money to help somebody who is already there, you will find that it will probably have better results, a better result for education for the young people and also a better result with whoever has wild rice at heart.

That's it.

● (1230)

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you.

I have a question for Ms. Brown and Ms. Moniz.

We've heard from previous witnesses that sometimes farming skills are lost after simply just two generations within a first nations community. I don't know if you have had time to expand on your youth development programs with first nations, but I'd like you to explain to us what you do with first nations communities.

Ms. Debra Brown: We've had the focus on decolonization of our curriculum, but we've learned over the last few years that we're really looking for partnerships. As 4-H is a grassroots community development organization, we've worked with probably a dozen different communities over the last few years, and they've all been very different. Some of them have been very much focused on healthy food and not having access to it. Some of them have been focused on wanting their youth to just finish high school, and whether we can provide social support for that. It's really a wide variety of things.

Our approach has been to get to know the leaders in the community. In Six Nations, that was the community centre itself. In other communities, it's been the health centre, or in some communities it's been the band itself. So really, 4-H can offer so many tools to provide learning about agriculture and food that we have really taken a tailored approach to try to partner with those communities based on what their needs are.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I heard you mention some of the stereotypes that are out there: that it's old, that it's traditional, that when you're farming you're out in the field. Do you find that's consistent across the board? I guess you can speak for Ontario only, but having chatted with your other colleagues, do you find that's consistent across the board?

Ms. Debra Brown: I would say that's consistent with youth, for sure. Regardless of whether they're indigenous or otherwise, they see that in farming.

If they're involved in 4-H, they have an opportunity to do that. Just as an example, 4-H Ontario was just reclassified, from our health benefits, that we're now in a tech group. Agriculture is now tech, so there's that kind of thing. If you go to a farm show, you see that you can control your tractor from your house. This is incredible technology.

That's why, in 4-H, we do a lot of ag career education. In most provinces, they do some kind of programming around that. We call it career education, but it's really a lot about agriculture because that's where our contacts are. That really opens up the youth's horizons to talk about all the different facets, and it connects them with mentors in their local community.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I know you're developing skills with your volunteer coordinators for mental health, and we actually had 4-H Canada here last week talking about that initiative, which is great.

Ms. Debra Brown: Yes.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Just going back to the first nation engagement, if we were to make a recommendation from this committee to perhaps help you or some other organization connect with first nation youth, what would it be?

Ms. Debra Brown: In my opinion, the investment needs to be at a younger age, because sparking that interest in agriculture has to come before high school, when you see high school graduation rates that low. We have to connect youth with that sense of hope and that plan of where they want to take their life, and the social support and scholarships and mentors to help drive them there.

Our approach would be to help that happen in indigenous communities themselves, and not to transplant those youth elsewhere and take them away from their social support.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Yes.

● (1235)

Ms. Debra Brown: We think that comes in a variety of forms. On the programming.... I think that the indigenous communities and 4-H communities are all grassroots. We do have some very strong shared values. We both value that experiential learning model. In there, we found some commonalities, which we built on to be able to have mutually beneficial relationships with indigenous communities.

Mr. Francis Drouin: That's great.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Brown.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Mr. MacGregor, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

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

Ms. Brown, I'll continue with you. 4-H is a big part of my community. I come all the way from the west coast, from Vancouver Island. We do have a pretty amazing climate there for growing things. On my own property, we already have our garlic appearing out of the ground.

The first part of my riding's name is “Cowichan”. It's the Cowichan people, and they are the largest band in British Columbia, just by the number of members. Their traditional territory expands over a considerable part of Vancouver Island and includes the Lower Mainland. Their traditional foods usually include salmon and clams, but I've talked to some members and they have also looked at the tracts of arable land they have on their reserve. There has been some expression of interest there with regard to getting into agriculture, moving on into something they may not have practised in the past and claiming food sovereignty.

You talked a lot about 4-H's engagement efforts. I know you're speaking for 4-H Ontario, but when you talk about the issue of youth engagement, specifically among first nations, Métis, and even Inuit communities, is it right across the board? Is this a big thing that's happening at the 4-H national level, with all of its member provinces as well?

Ms. Debra Brown: I would say that, mostly in the western provinces, there is more of a focus on indigenous youth. In B.C., 4-H has a three-year program to foster that connection in various communities across B.C. They have started by looking at the curriculum they use and moving from there. In Saskatchewan, 4-H is also looking at community gardening with indigenous communities. I was just in Saskatoon last week and heard from a presenter. There's a garden right in Saskatoon for which all of the signage is in Cree. There are lots of opportunities.

Indigenous communities aren't just rural, either. We want to keep that in mind, too. It's really about what the needs of the community are and, for us, whether 4-H could offer something to help fill those needs.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Further to what Mr. Drouin was talking about, we've just concluded a mental health study. We know that 4-H was the recipient of some money from the federal government to help deliver some programs.

Mental health is a big issue, particularly among indigenous youth. The suicide statistics we have are a source of national shame. It's such a young population. When I look at the demographics of the Cowichan tribes in my riding, there are so many youth. They really are ready to try to make a name for themselves. They're the first generation born after the residential schools. There's a lot of pressure on them to carry the torch forward.

In terms of the recommendations we as a committee can make, you've talked about how agriculture is increasingly a technical experience now; it's not just someone out there with a hoe and horses. You really have to know the intricacies of how your equipment works. Do you think, going forward, particularly for indigenous youth, given how important education is now...? I'm just thinking about roles that the federal government can play, maybe in scholarships and stuff like that. Is there anything you want to expand on, on that front?

Ms. Debra Brown: Yes, I think there's definitely a role for the government to play in terms of encouraging youth to pursue higher education. I did have the pleasure of sitting on an Ontario advisory committee on that for under-serviced communities. Rural, of course, was in there as well.

I think it echoes back to what your previous witness said about knowing how to access that. It's wonderful to have scholarships, but if the teachers, students and guidance counsellors don't know how to get at those scholarships for indigenous youth, it will be for naught. I really think there needs to be a hand-in-hand education program on how to access things when you launch something new.

There can be some language barriers to that as well. In Ontario, also, we're still experiencing rural broadband challenges.

● (1240)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes.

Ms. Debra Brown: We have a technology piece, too, and I think the technology in agriculture and the amazing grasp of technology that youth have are where those things coincide.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: To summarize, you also commented on decolonizing our approach. In all these engagements, it's very important that the community be driving this, and that we speak not only to chiefs and councils, but also to the elders and to the students themselves, to make sure it's not a top-down approach and it's actually their community that's leading the efforts and trying to facilitate their needs and wants in this enterprise.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): That would be a good conclusion, Mr. MacGregor.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

Ms. Nassif, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank the witnesses.

My question is for Ms. Brown. You represent the 4-H Ontario organization, and in that capacity you try to develop interest in farming among young people. Could you give us some statistics on the participation of young indigenous people as compared to that of non-indigenous young people?

Is the participation of young people higher or lower in indigenous communities?

[*English*]

Ms. Debra Brown: I would say that, across Canada, the percentage of non-indigenous youth would be greater than the percentage of indigenous youth in our programming. I think that's because there are different needs in those communities than there are in most rural areas across Canada, so it does make it more challenging to engage based on what the need is in the community.

Our 4-H program is set up to offer tools for education to any volunteers across Canada who would like to deliver that education to young people in their neighbourhood or community, but there are other factors at play in indigenous communities. Some of them already have their own educational tools and don't want an outside service provider doing that. Some of them would have a language barrier in order for the adults to be able to deliver that, or they would prefer not to deliver it in English, and right now our resources are mostly in English.

The community is really responsible for what they would like to deliver and how.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Do elders from indigenous communities come and talk about their culture to encourage young people to come back to it or develop a greater appreciation of it?

[*English*]

Ms. Debra Brown: We would have 4-H volunteers. Some of them may be seen as elders in their indigenous community. The volunteers I know personally were involved in 4-H when they were children. As leaders in their community, they wish the youth they see now to have that experience. In 4-H, in the non-indigenous world, we would say that they are community leaders. Maybe we use a different term, but both would mean that sense of respect in terms of someone who does the right thing in their community, someone who is well known in their community and probably holds a position of power and influence to make change.

● (1245)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: I would now like to put a question to Ms. Moniz.

You are a young woman and you coordinate volunteer support. Could you tell us about the participation of women in both indigenous and non-indigenous communities? What is the percentage of that participation and what are the challenges these women face when they want to volunteer?

[*English*]

Ms. Meaghan Moniz (Coordinator, Volunteer Support, First Nations Engagement, 4-H Ontario): I'm actually [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Ms. Debra Brown: I can speak to that. We have a pretty even split, actually, between boys and girls involved in the program. If you look at volunteers, we would have more women than men.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Is it even between indigenous and non-indigenous, or is there a difference? I'm talking about women.

Ms. Meaghan Moniz: When it comes to our volunteers, it's mostly non-indigenous volunteers. We do have a large number of indigenous members. However, we're still trying to figure out exactly where they're placed, because they're in the regular 4-H programming rather than in specific indigenous clubs, which there is a big need for.

For example, when we go into communities and we're speaking to people, there's a huge interest to have indigenous-only clubs run by elders that can deliver that programming based on indigenous cultural values. However, at the time, it's been challenging to get those volunteer leaders to take part. The interest from parents and communities to have the clubs and have that for youth is very strong.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: I have a 2016 table here that shows that the number of female farmers is highest in Canada. I see that 36.8% of farmers in first nations communities are women.

I don't know if it's the same for young people. You said that the participation rate for men and women was comparable. So there is no difference and it is not higher for indigenous women than for young people. We always talk about young people since you work with young women. So the percentage of young indigenous women is no higher than the percentage of young non-indigenous women.

[*English*]

Ms. Meaghan Moniz: Is the question about aboriginal women participating in agriculture in Canada, in general? My understanding is that the participation of indigenous women in agriculture is much lower. I don't have the number, but I was looking at this a couple of days ago.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you, Ms. Moniz.

I now yield the floor to Mr. Poissant for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses.

My first question is for you, Mr. Poirier. I see that you are speaking to us from Washington, in the American state of Utah. To your knowledge, in the United States, are there any specific programs for indigenous agricultural producers, or do they benefit from the same programs as other producers?

Mr. Jean Poirier: I have no idea.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Okay.

I'll go back to you, Ms. Brown. You said at the outset that there were more indigenous young people in the new generation than non-indigenous young people. How do you explain that difference?

[*English*]

Ms. Debra Brown: My comment was on population growth in general. As a rural youth-serving organization, we look at what the rural population is doing. We know that in Ontario, it is getting older. The youth population is not growing in rural Canada. The only youth population in Canada that is growing is the indigenous population. When you separate that out, it's interesting to see the vast difference.

● (1250)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Ms. Brown, do you know if anyone has ever tried to set up partnerships between indigenous and non-indigenous farmers?

[*English*]

Ms. Debra Brown: Definitely. We see that in our clubs. There may be a 4-H club offered and it's off reserve, but there is a significant number of 4-H youth members who actually live on the reserve. They come to their 4-H club and learn from leaders in a community that's very close to their reserve, but it is not the reserve. That club is a mix of indigenous and non-indigenous youth and leaders.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: I am asking that question because I am the member for La Prairie. In my riding, a lot of croplands were given to the Kahnawake community, but they have not been farmed since. I was wondering if the knowledge of non-indigenous farmers could not be put to good use by twinning them with indigenous farmers to get these lands cultivated again. Perhaps this could also be done in the rest of the country.

Do you think that is possible?

[*English*]

Ms. Debra Brown: I think there's a fine line there, when it comes to agriculture education by non-indigenous individuals for indigenous individuals. I wouldn't say it can't be done, but I would just say that it would have to be developed through a trusting relationship over time, with a mutual exploration around best practices to be shared.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: A witness told us earlier that there was a lack of support on the ground. In what way could the government offer agricultural support to young indigenous people?

[*English*]

Ms. Debra Brown: I think that the new announcement on mental health is huge. As was previously stated, it's at a crisis level. It is a shame. I think that supports around that are really critical. If you don't have your mental health, you can't even think about what career you want to pursue or hold down a job.

For youth, we really need to help them develop those coping skills for their own resiliency, so that they can go on to pursue careers, have families and become the community leaders that all communities desperately need, which will influence the next generation of youth and make positive change.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: In closing, Jimmy Hall, the executive director of the Indian Agriculture Program of Ontario, said in his testimony that the Canadian Agricultural Partnership did not have a component specifically for indigenous communities. Do you think that omission should be rectified?

[*English*]

Ms. Debra Brown: I would support that notion.

For 4-H, when we have sought out funding before, we have found that the majority of funding available for 4-H Ontario to apply for, to work with indigenous communities, can only be held by an indigenous community. That is a barrier for us because we can work only with communities that can apply for a grant, manage the grant, etc. We can't actually partner with communities that don't have the capacity to hold those grants and steward those funds. That's limiting for us, that we can't do that.

In the past two years, all the funding has been through partnerships. It has gone directly to those indigenous partners. I think that is missing a significant part of the population that just can't access those funds and is not able to participate in development in that way.

● (1255)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you, Ms. Brown and Mr. Poissant.

Mr. Dreeshen, you have about four or five minutes to conclude.

[*English*]

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

It's certainly great to hear the testimony that we're hearing this afternoon.

I am involved, and have been involved, in 4-H for a long time. It was mentioned how, when you want to get people engaged, it usually comes from a grandparent, then a parent and then the child. Everybody knows how important that is, and how critical it is to a community.

Some of it is also about farming. I know that agriculture is a high-tech organization and that you have to be engaged in that. The broadband issue was another concern, whether it's on the education side or in the management of farming operations.

I was a high school math and physics teacher, but I was also responsible for work experience programs, whether it be a work experience green certificate program, as we have in Alberta, or a registered apprenticeship program. Those are the kinds of things that allow students to learn about agriculture and to be engaged in it. I also developed an agriculture course. It was designed in such a way as to deal with linear systems of equations and so on that you wouldn't typically have for a grade 10 student, but if you were talking about feed rations and those types of things, it was something that they were engaged with. That is the potential that you have; you can show young people just where these things can be used. I think the education side, the curriculum development, is part of it.

We know there is an emphasis to make sure that we're also reaching out to indigenous communities so that they have an opportunity to be part of that. That's a critical component that we have as well. Included in that is the discussion we're having at this particular point in time, which is that if we just go back to traditional foods and that approach, that is something that will satisfy young people in indigenous communities. I have the feeling that you need to have both, because they're going to want to look at what kind of return on investment they can actually have. Even in a general farming operation, if you're getting 1% or 2% return on investment, in a lot of ways you're pretty happy with that. Nobody else would be, but you would be.

I wonder if you could speak to the concept of curriculum development and how we can perhaps bring that in from the standard education system that we have in all provinces and tie in our indigenous communities as well.

Ms. Debra Brown: I do hear from my colleagues, both in the Ministry of Education and 4-H, that the indigenization and decolonization of the curriculum are of vital importance for there to be acceptance of that teaching.

There are four or five other provinces where you can actually earn a high school credit by participating in 4-H. There is a valuing of experiential learning outside the classroom that I've seen develop over the last five years, from P.E.I. all the way to B.C. There is that opportunity. It does spark more of a.... You can see yourself doing it. As you know, in 4-H, our motto is “Learn To Do By Doing”. The way we engage young people is through the experiential learning model that many ministries of education have implemented as well.

In Ontario, we're very focused on the specialist high skills majors program, which does allow for elective credits to be earned by doing 4-H activities. Those can be applied to a specialist high skills major in agriculture. We've been working with the Ontario ministry on that for a little while now.

We see the value of the 4-H club experience around meeting management, networking and connecting youth with leaders, entrepreneurs and farmers in their community. It's also in the classroom, but there's something special that happens in a 4-H club when you have those mentors with you to encourage you, to push you outside your comfort zone, to recognize your gifts and tell you to use them. Those are all great mentorship things that happen in 4-H and in the education system. You have those teachers who encourage students to use their skills in different ways.

I do think there's a big role to play with that youth-adult partnership that happens in a club or in a classroom. However, there is also a lot to be said for what is in the handbook or in the curriculum. Is it going to be accepted by students, and is it going to be accepted by their parents?

● (1300)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Our meeting will conclude on this excellent presentation by 4-H.

[*English*]

Am I too old to join a 4-H club now?

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Yes.

Voices: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much for your testimony, Ms. Brown, Ms. Moniz and Mr. Poirier.

The meeting is adjourned. This study will continue next Thursday.

Thank you.