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Chair

Mr. Bev Shipley

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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•(1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC)): Welcome, everyone.

I'd like to call the 35th meeting of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food to order, please.

We're dealing with the supply chain retail sector, particularly around food waste prevention.

With us today we have by video conference from Medicine Hat, Alberta, from Prairie Gleaners Society, Mr. James Smith.

Welcome, Mr. Smith.

Mr. James Smith (President, Prairie Gleaners Society): Good afternoon.

The Chair: It's great to hear you. Everything technology-wise seems to be working, so I'll turn it over to you for your presentation, please.

Mr. James Smith: Thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Chairman, and members of the standing committee.

I'm speaking to you on behalf of all the gleaners organizations across Canada. There are currently seven of us doing essentially the same work. There are three in British Columbia, one in Alberta, and three in Ontario, two of which have only begun production this year.

To the best of our knowledge this approach where we assist to help the world's food security while reducing food waste is quite unique to Canada. Interest in modelling what we do is expanding to other parts of Canada and into the U.S.

In partnership with growers and packers, we receive unmarketable vegetables which we in turn process. We all operate on a year-round basis, receiving different vegetables that become available at different times of the year. Using a small army of volunteers, we remove any blemishes, stems and cores from the vegetables. The vegetables are mechanically diced into small uniform pieces and then dried in commercial-size dehydrators. The dehydrated vegetables are stored in 45-gallon drums until it's time to package our finished product in the final step before distribution.

Some form of legume, such as split and broken beans, peas, or lentils, are also added as protein to make up our finished packages of dehydrated vegetable mix.

Generally we package once each year, having the full complement of all available produce to mix together in three-pound quantities, sealed in plastic bags.

In fruit-producing areas of Canada, apples and pears are dehydrated using the same method. The fruit is, of course, packaged separately. The bagged product is then given to Canadian charitable organizations that are in the business of providing food aid and disaster relief around the world, and to whatever extent, requested by food banks and soup kitchens here in Canada.

In 2013 the gleaners in Canada collectively received just over three million kilograms of fresh produce that was not going to make it to market. From that, we were able to produce and distribute approximately 32 million servings of nutritious dehydrated vegetables and fruit. We define a serving as one cup of soup if our cooking instructions are followed. In 2014 we are positioned to process about four million kilograms of fresh produce. This could potentially result in approximately 43 million servings.

Our product has gone to at least 55 different nations. All this is accomplished with volunteers. Together we can boast of having harnessed over 152,000 volunteer hours in 2013.

All food must either be consumed or processed in some manner to preserve it or it will perish as waste. The method of preservation we use is dehydration, which provides the benefits of a long shelf life with no refrigeration needed, significantly reduced volume and weight that reduces the transportation requirements, and essential nutrition for the vulnerable who may not have it available otherwise.

The organization Doctors Without Borders released a report in October 2011 stating that every year “the global food aid system largely continues to provide substandard foods to millions of malnourished children.”

The nutrients in dehydrated vegetables and fruit can significantly help meet the dietary requirements of the most vulnerable.

Our hope and desire is that with the support and collaboration of the right partners, we can help address the problem of food waste in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation, Mr. Smith.

As committee members have likely just heard, the bells will be going in 20 minutes, so I'm going to hold you pretty tight to your five minutes.

We'll start off with Mr. Payne.

•(1535)

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Jim, it's good to see you again. That's twice in one week.

You have a great organization. It's good to hear about what you're doing. I had the opportunity on Saturday to come down with the Telus folks and spend a little time helping to cut up some of those veggies. Thanks very much for the tour. It was a great tour to see exactly what the process is and how it's done.

On that note, there was an article in today's paper, I think in *Medicine Hat News*. I don't know if you've seen it or not, but you folks have sent an amazing amount of food and nutrition around the world. I think you said 55 different countries. Not all of that comes from Medicine Hat, does it?

Mr. James Smith: No, it doesn't.

I'm speaking on behalf of all the gleaners across Canada. We ourselves have sent to 26 different countries since we've been in operation.

Mr. LaVar Payne: That's outstanding.

Where do you get all your product? I know where some of it comes from.

Mr. James Smith: In our area, there's a large greenhouse growing industry: tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers. A lot of culls come from that industry. There's a huge acreage of potatoes, a sweet corn industry from the Taber area, and large acreages of onions and many other field crops. We have one of the largest vegetable producers right next door to us in Redcliff that contributes to vegetable distribution on the Prairies.

We're well situated in a rich vegetable growing area. It's not just all wheat and cattle out here.

Mr. LaVar Payne: All that is given gratis to your organization?

Mr. James Smith: It is.

Mr. LaVar Payne: That's outstanding, to make sure the food is not wasted and goes to organizations. I know you delivered—what was it—22 tonnes to the Philippines for typhoon relief.

Mr. James Smith: That's correct. I've received numerous photos of locations where it's been distributed. It's always gratifying to our volunteers. That's really the only reward they ask for, to see where it goes.

Mr. LaVar Payne: How many volunteers do you have?

Mr. James Smith: We average 20 a day. Over the course of a year, well over a 1,000 individuals come out, many of them on a regular basis and some only once.

Mr. LaVar Payne: That's outstanding.

What does it cost you to run your facility?

Mr. James Smith: If I narrow it down to a serving, it's between three and a half to five cents, depending on the price of natural gas. Natural gas and electricity are our biggest operating costs, so it depends on the fluctuation of those rates.

Mr. LaVar Payne: You ship around the world, so tell me about how you arrange for the shipping and who pays for it.

Mr. James Smith: Charitable organizations that are in the business of providing food aid in other countries, particularly after some major disaster, receive it right from our door. From our door they're responsible for the shipping costs to wherever it goes in the

world. We do not charge them for the food, so they just incur the transportation costs.

Mr. LaVar Payne: I know that some food has also gone to Haiti. I believe Bob Davidson's organization has been part of that process.

Mr. James Smith: That's right. That was our first major shipment once we were operational five years ago.

Mr. LaVar Payne: I'm delighted we can support you in any way. Certainly the food is fit. You said you store it and you package it once a year.

Can you tell the committee how that is done?

The Chair: Make it very short, please.

Mr. James Smith: We want to ensure that we have the widest variety of vegetables. As you know, everything comes in at different times of the year. Root crops come out of storage throughout the winter months and the fall crops come out of the fields. The greenhouse industry supplies us pretty much year round with those crops. By taking all the different vegetables that are available to us, we can glean the greatest variety and mixture that provides the maximum amount of nutrition.

• (1540)

Mr. LaVar Payne: I had some of that great soup.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Payne.

I do apologize to Madam Brosseau, but now is your turn, for five minutes please.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, James Smith, for all the work you do. It's obviously life-saving in certain countries the difference that you do make.

I found it really impressive that you get and process three million kilograms of food which translates into 32 million servings. In this year, 2014, you have a projection of four million kilograms which will translate into 43 million servings. How much of that goes to other countries, and how much of it stays in Canada?

Mr. James Smith: The bulk of it actually goes for foreign relief and aid. We make it available to soup kitchens and food banks here in Canada, but the simple answer is that it's not well received. It's very basic food, whereas most food banks in Canada have food that our citizens are more accustomed to cooking with. You can think of canned goods and packaged goods. We're finding that given the choice, this has not been well received by patrons of the food banks. They simply don't know what to do with it or don't want it. It's not very pretty looking once the vegetables are dehydrated.

Mr. LaVar Payne: It tastes good.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: LaVar said it tastes good. I think we need some samples.

Mr. James Smith: Once it's cooked up.... It's probably more common to go to soup kitchens whereby it is made into a soup and the cooks there probably have the skills to know what to do with it, whereas maybe some of the patrons of food banks are not as familiar with cooking dehydrated vegetables.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Maybe there's some work that could be done with education around this food. It's still good and it's still healthy.

Mr. James Smith: We would be happy to partner with anyone, home economists or dietitians who would be willing to educate people on that.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: This is really a non-profit group. You don't get any kind of aid from the government. You just work with your volunteers and fundraise and you get donations. Is that correct?

Mr. James Smith: What you just described is exactly it.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Also I think you said there are five gleaners altogether: three in B.C., one in Alberta and one in Ontario?

Mr. James Smith: There are three in Ontario. Two just started up this year.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: This is very interesting. I would like to see if it is possible to bring something like this in my province, because we do have food waste, and I think this is a very important question that we're studying here in committee.

Also, you touched on the education aspect. In the United States they adopted a law in 1996, the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act. With the exception of negligence or wilful misconduct, the law protects all donors in good faith from criminal liability if food causes harm to the recipients. Other countries such as Australia and Italy have adopted similar things. Do you think this is something the government should look at, perhaps adopt something along those lines to help facilitate the better and more sustainable distribution of food?

Mr. James Smith: My understanding is that a number of provinces have similar legislation. Alberta certainly does, and to the best of my knowledge B.C. and Ontario have something similar. I may not be correct on that one, but I do know that Alberta has similar legislation for that very reason.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Do you have any suggestions on how we could, as a government, help reduce food waste, or better facilitate the distribution of food? You've done some great work. Is there something we should be looking at in committee?

• (1545)

Mr. James Smith: If you could promote dialogue with packers and producers, and in some way encourage them, make them aware of what we can do, this would help immensely. There is still some reluctance on the parts of major producers and packers to donate to us. We know we can process a lot more of what's available out there.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: I know.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Brosseau.

We'll now go to Mr. Eyking, for five minutes.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr. Smith, for coming today.

As a vegetable farmer, I realize the waste we have in the fields, especially now with the chain stores. Most of them just want number ones. When you run off the field, there are always 10% to 15%

number twos, and many times there's no home for them. It's great that you guys are doing this work.

I'm from Atlantic Canada, but I don't think we have anything like your operation in Atlantic Canada. Is there a push to have nationwide gleaners across the country?

Mr. James Smith: We haven't been pushing for it, but there is growing interest and we are getting requests. Actually, there's a group in P.E.I. that has approached us asking if we can assist them. There's another one, I believe, in Nova Scotia. I mentioned that there are a number that have shown interest, even in the States. We're finding that this is growing, and we will do everything we can to help and assist and encourage this, because we know there's room for expansion.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Can you explain a little bit about the products you have? You talked about some of the crops. Did you say it's frozen or dried?

Mr. James Smith: We have received frozen produce in the past. For example, not too far from us in the city of Lethbridge there are packing plants that take sweet corn for the frozen corn market. We've received that from them in the past, and frozen green peas.

Most of what we receive is fresh, though: damaged, bruised crops that have had some hail damage to them, potatoes that get broken and bruised in the harvest. It just goes on and on when you think about it.

Hon. Mark Eyking: It's a dried product, right? Would it be in five-pound bags, or five-kilo bags? What does your product look like?

Mr. James Smith: The standard we've adopted is it's in a bag with a three-pound quantity. The bag would be thirteen inches high by six inches wide.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Okay. You were mentioning you have a lot of volunteers, and of course, the food you're getting is at hardly any cost, but still there's a considerable amount of cost for electricity, gas, or whatever, to produce this product and the packaging. Where do you get your revenues from if the people buying your product are just FOB your plant? How do you pay for your costs?

Mr. James Smith: It's strictly through donations. Not only do our volunteers give of their time, but they open up their wallets as well. We are a charitable organization, and of course through this work, we can issue tax receipts for any donations we receive.

Hon. Mark Eyking: The Horn of Africa, for instance, is often plagued with problems with drought. Is it feasible if they needed the food? Say they needed a couple of containers of food, would the governments pay for the transportation? You mentioned the Philippines.

Can you give us an example of how that works on the international scene? Who pays before it leaves your door? Somebody has to pay a shipper of some sort. How does that work in getting it distributed in these areas? Can you give kind of a snapshot of the situation?

• (1550)

Mr. James Smith: Yes. Think of organizations like the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, the Mennonite Central Committee, World Vision; those are some of the bigger ones. We operate with smaller ones as well. They're on the ground in those countries throughout the world helping with relief and aid. They pay for the transportation of this product to get over there. We have used a number of different means.

In 2010 there was a major flood in Pakistan. I made arrangements with Air Canada and Pakistan International Airlines to fly our product over there in very short order at no cost. Whatever means it takes we'll do what we can. We find there are many different ways that come together at times, people responding in times of need.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Eyking.

We'll now go to Mr. Lemieux, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Could you remind me what your source of supply is for these foods? You mentioned packers. Where do you get most of the food you're processing and sending overseas?

Mr. James Smith: Packers are where the vegetables are packaged for market distribution. Large farms, and not just large farms, even small farms; we'll take whatever they have. Perhaps there's some hail damage to a crop. A farmer recently dropped off about 100 bushels of peas he had left over. He had finished seeding and rather than put them back in his bin—it was only 100 bushels—he brought them to us to add to our.... It means like that, wherever it's grown, wherever people are aware of us, and whatever they have that they can contribute, we'll receive, small and large amounts.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: When you pick a particular country and you're making a shipment to that country, how do you determine in that country who the recipients of this food will be, and how do you transport it to them?

Mr. James Smith: We don't provide the transportation ourselves. The aid organization, such as World Vision or Canadian Foodgrains Bank, will be responsible for the transportation and the distribution in the overseas country.

I'm sorry, what was the first part of your question?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: It was how you determine who the recipients are, but I guess you're probably determining the recipients through these other organizations.

Mr. James Smith: That's correct. They put the request in to us, and it's usually wherever there's a major natural disaster in the world. That's not always the case, but usually that's where the bulk of our product has gone.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Right.

Perhaps you would remind me how many people are involved in this effort. Are they considered to be employees, or are they all volunteers? How big an organization is this?

Mr. James Smith: Each of our gleaner facilities would have one employee. You need somebody to be there and be responsible. Other than that, it's all volunteer.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you very much.

Mr. James Smith: The backbone is our volunteer.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: That's very good. That's an excellent effort. I think we all greatly appreciate the input of volunteers to making worthwhile causes such as this actually come to life and be sustainable.

Thank you for your presentation today.

The Chair: Are you done?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Yes.

The Chair: I'm going to turn to Madam Raynault. If you want to take up the minute or two that are left, please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Raynault (Joliette, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Smith, thank you for joining us this afternoon.

According to our documents, food waste amounts to billions of dollars. Although not everyone benefits from your efforts and those of your volunteers, I still want to congratulate you on the work you are doing to avoid all this food ending up in the garbage bin without anyone being able to use it.

For competitive reasons, traditional grocery chains have come together to save money. Does all that waste have a positive or a negative effect on agricultural producers, processors and consumers in terms of food quality? Consumers are not the only ones responsible for that waste. Producers and food chains also play their part. What should be done to avoid all the waste?

Of course, food is distributed to people in need, but do you really think something else could be done to avoid wasting all this food? Any food that ends up in the garbage bin represents money wasted by consumers, processors and grocery stores.

• (1555)

[*English*]

Mr. James Smith: You're absolutely right.

There's a huge cost not only to the resources of all that goes into the farming, packaging, and transportation. I think the committee is well aware of all those problems and will certainly find out through other presenters.

I'm not sure I have the answer as to how to prevent damage to vegetables, or as to why consumers.... You go into a grocery store and you watch us as consumers and we'll pick up a tomato and look at it, and if there's a blemish, or an imperfection on it, we'll set it aside and take the one that's perfect and nice looking. Grocery stores know that and we have that choice in this country.

I know that growers and packers struggle to find ways to bring value to what isn't acceptable to us standard-wise, value-added product, such as sauces or juices, and these sorts of things.

The message I hear from the ones that we partner with is the market is saturated and there doesn't seem to be room, and we can only consume so much in this country. It's nice that we have such an abundance. The unfortunate thing is there's such an inequity in the world. There's a distribution problem if you like, where we have so much and other places have so little.

I don't know quite how to fix that one other than we'll do our best, and hopefully, there are other methods and strategies that can be put into play.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Smith.

Our time has run out as the bells are ringing and we will be having votes. To committee members, thank you very much.

Mr. Smith, it's an intriguing and very interesting project and program that you have. It really goes to show the effects that we could have from the things which the majority of us will set aside because of their imperfections, and yet, will meet an incredible need and demand out there, whether it's domestic or foreign aid.

With that, we thank you very much for what you do and for the leadership that you're showing out in Medicine Hat.

The meeting is adjourned.

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