



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri- Food

AGRI • NUMBER 112 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, October 23, 2018

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Chair

Mr. Pat Finnigan

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)): Welcome, everyone.

This morning, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying the mental health challenges that Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers face

With us this morning, by video conference, we have from the University of Regina, Dr. Nicholas Carleton, professor, department of psychology; and Dr. Amber Fletcher, associate professor, department of sociology. From the Canadian Farmers with Disabilities Registry, we have Bob Guest, chairman, and Jonas Johnson.

Thank you all for being here.

We'll start with an opening statement, up to seven minutes. We're kind of pressed for time, so I'll certainly let you know.

Mr. Guest.

Mr. Bob Guest (Chairman, Canadian Farmers with Disabilities Registry): Good morning.

Our goal is to help families and people return to the farm or ranch after suffering a disability through injury or illness. We provide support to the disabled person as well as the family. The mental health of the family is a big part of the challenge. That is why it is so important to deal with the entire family unit. The impacts on the family farm struggling with a disability are far-reaching. The mental health impact can go far beyond the family to the local community.

In one case, a farmer lost his arm. The farmer was doing quite well with the incident, but the son who had turned the auger on was greatly suffering with mental health issues. The entire family was torn apart by the incident, and the same burden is created when a farm disability or illness happens. The individual family or community are also impacted.

Without a disability, the daily challenges of the mental health burden of managing a farm can be great. Add a disability to the challenges, and it becomes a hundredfold more. The challenges can be so great that we recently felt the need to add a suicide hotline to our website.

We're the only national organization that works with farmers and ranchers with a disability. Our organization is made up of disabled volunteers committed to helping other disabled farmers. Our

volunteers experienced their own challenges, yet they take time to work tirelessly with others.

A family can be torn apart by the feelings of guilt and hopelessness. I cannot tell you how good it feels, and the changes that we can make with the family when we speak to them one-on-one to give them hope that they can carry on with their farm life.

For several years, the organization has not received any funding, and this has taken a great toll on our ability to help others. Many people in need do not receive the help, because we do not have the funding to reach everyone. We are now in the process of accessing new funding to help rebuild the organization and increase our reach, to help more people.

I feel it is a great loss to the agricultural community and productive families if our members are unable to do the work they love. Our goal is to help our members remain at work with the farm life that they love, and keep them productive in the agricultural community.

Basically, that's what we do. I won't take up any more of your seven minutes, and open it up to any questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Guest. There will be questions afterwards, so you can elaborate on some of those things.

Mr. Johnson.

• (0850)

Mr. Jonas Johnson (Canadian Farmers with Disabilities Registry): I won't speak at this time. I'm not doing a presentation.

The Chair: Dr. Carleton, you have up to six minutes.

Professor Nicholas Carleton (Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Regina): Good morning, honourable members. Thank you very much for your time today.

I'm a registered clinical psychologist in Saskatchewan, and a professor of psychology and a researcher at the University of Regina. I have experience in mental health, particularly acute and chronic stress including post-traumatic stress disorder, and I will be speaking to some of the published literature on farmer mental health this morning.

According to Statistics Canada, at any given time approximately 10% of the Canadian population meets criteria for one or more mental health disorders. In 2005, a peer-reviewed literature review article evidenced farmers as experiencing one of the highest industry rates of suicide, but also indicated that they may not have been experiencing higher rates of mental health illnesses.

More recently in 2018, a systematic literature review and meta-analysis by Klingelschmidt and colleagues was published in a peer-reviewed journal. The results indicated a pooled effect size of 1.48 times excess suicide risk among agricultural, forestry and fishery workers. Those results differ from a 1999 epidemiological study of Canadian farmers that indicated, after adjusting for age differences, that provincial suicide rates among farm operators were generally lower than or equivalent to those observed in the comparison populations of Canadian males.

Part of the difference may be due to climate change as indicated by a recent peer-reviewed article that evidenced that climate change and drought can negatively impact Canadian mental health, particularly for farmers impacted by drought. Over the last two decades, the climate changes, whether anthropogenic or not, as well as highly dynamic economic conditions and the progressive shifts towards mega-farms, have all produced substantial levels of uncertainty associated with critical components of farmer livelihood.

As indicated by two 2016 peer-reviewed review articles, higher levels of uncertainty are inherently perceived as threatening, particularly when associated with perceptions of realizable risk. Moreover, difficulties with uncertainty have been robustly associated with several mental health disorders.

There is also evidence from a 2013 peer-reviewed article that male farmers may be especially reluctant to access mental health care for a variety of reasons including stigma and limited accessibility of evidence-based care. Part of that stigma has been evidenced in a 2014 peer-reviewed article as being associated with potentially toxic notions of masculinity that may interact with perceptions that male farmers are primarily responsible for the success or failure of the farm despite having relatively limited agency over things like weather.

In addition, farmers are often relatively isolated, meaning that opportunities for social support may be limited, which can further increase mental health risks. The complements of challenges facing farmers including perceptions of masculinity, unstable work, uncertainty, diverse barriers to accessing care and limited social support networks are all likely to increase the probability for mental health disorders and death by suicide.

The perceived daily stressors also sometimes referred to as daily hassles, when coupled with a significant negative impact event like a flood or drought, may also exacerbate the potential mental health risks.

Accordingly, tailored mental health services and supports may be very beneficial for supporting farmer and farm family mental health.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Carleton.

Now, Ms. Fletcher, you can resume your time. Thank you.

Dr. Amber Fletcher (Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Regina): Good morning, honourable members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you on this very important topic.

I grew up on a Saskatchewan grain farm that my family still continues to operate. As a professor and researcher, I conduct intensive qualitative research with farmers and ranchers across the prairie region. My research focuses on social vulnerability to climate disasters like flooding and drought. Following supported methods of vulnerability assessment, my research employs an inductive approach that allows farmers to identify the issues most pertinent and top of mind for them. I would like to use my time today to share the key results of several major research projects I've completed over the past six years.

Uncertainty is, by far, the most commonly mentioned stressor for farmers. Unlike the relative stability of waged employment, farmers live and work with the constant threat of lost livelihood. Economic and environmental stressors are the most frequently mentioned causes of this uncertainty. Key economic stressors include the cost of inputs, high variability in commodity prices, and a general "get big or get out" environment in contemporary agriculture. Over the past few years, headlines have extolled an upward trend in farm income. However, my own analysis of census of agriculture data on net farm income from 1981 to 2017 shows that since 2006, farm incomes have demonstrated dramatic variability that is unprecedented in the same period. While overall trends may have crept upward slightly, variability, and the associated uncertainty, is at an all-time high.

Farmers speak overwhelmingly about the rising cost of inputs. Existing political-economic analysis, including my own research, has noted the growing profit imperative as large multinational corporations increase their presence across the food chain, from seed development to marketing and export. Both basic economic analysis and common sense suggest that a rising profit imperative for corporations leaves less room for farmers to profit.

In this context of economic uncertainty, farmers have adapted by seeking economies of scale. Although often heralded as a sign of farm success, Statistics Canada data from 2011 and 2017 show that the farm size explosion of the past two decades is actually premised on higher and higher levels of farm debt. My interview participants frequently discuss how farm debt increases their vulnerability, particularly when the year's crop is lost to a climate disaster.

Although new seed varieties promise resilience to climatic factors, these varieties are expensive. In the case of some disasters, a more expensive seed simply means a more expensive crop lost. In the context of future climate change, it would be a mistake to rely only on agricultural technology or insurance for climate adaptation. There is a pressing need for socio-economic interventions to enhance climate resilience.

Support for farmer-centred mental health initiatives is crucial. However, it is my opinion as a researcher that farmer mental health challenges can be best addressed at the root cause—by taking steps to increase market certainty, stabilize farm incomes and control input costs. Such steps are based on the understanding, which was quite common in past eras but is now seemingly forgotten, that farming is not an industry like any other. Market interventions are necessary for the continued success of the sector and for the well-being of the Canadians who carry out this very important work.

Thank you.

• (0855)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Fletcher.

Before we start with our round of questions, I want to welcome another in-house farmer, T.J. Harvey, who's a replacement today.

Mr. Dreeshen, you have six minutes.

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

The testimony this morning has been interesting.

First of all, I'll talk to Mr. Guest and Mr. Johnson.

I am a farmer, and many of my neighbours are farming in wheelchairs. I know that one of our neighbours had lost his hand in the Korean War. However, as my dad always used to say, he could do more with one hand than most men could do with two, because it had to do with determination and the things that are so important to people.

We listened to some of the experts, from the universities and so on, and there were a number of things mentioned that were negatives: the climate change, the shift towards mega-farms, the toxic notion of masculinity, and the large multinationals as being problems.

To those of us who farm, there is a certain amount of reality to the situations that occur, but what we've heard in testimony over the last few weeks is that the connotation that comes from the stressors that were just mentioned is as much of a problem to the farmers as anything else. When people are saying it's the big mega-farms that are causing the problems, or when they say it is the new technology that people have to deal with, these are certainly not factors on the farm. It might look that way from 10,000 feet, but the most

expensive seed is the first seed that is bought, because that is the one that is going to give you the most potential.

Those are things we've looked at, issues and concerns that many of us have. I just want to put that on the table because farmers get attacked in so many different ways. We've heard the social media attacks, the PETA groups, and we have the others who don't wish to have hormone injections into beef because they say it's going to be so disastrous, when there is more estrogen in the bun than there is in the meat. These are the kinds of things that farmers have to sort through, and they realize that there are issues.

As far as costs are concerned, when we speak about climate change, I have a chart as to how much it is going to cost the average farm just for the carbon tax alone. In Alberta, where we have a carbon tax, on my farm alone it's nearly \$20,000.

When we look at it from that 10,000 feet and say this would be a good idea and that would be a good idea, it doesn't hit the realities on the farm.

Mr. Guest, now that I've taken up half of my time, I'll ask, how is your organization trying to deal with both the mental and physical aspects of the disabilities?

• (0900)

Mr. Bob Guest: Our biggest issue is that when we hear about the accident, we try to bring in a matching family to help that person. We'll get a visitation into the hospital as quickly as we can with somebody with a similar disability so that they can see that life does go on after the accident. Then what we'll do is try to match his family with another family with a similar problem, so that they can go to the farm and help them with their farm issue.

We've found that one of the biggest mental problems a lot of times...and I'll use the example of the gentleman we talked about who had his arm in the auger. His son had actually turned the auger on. The father was doing extremely well. He just wanted to get back to work. He wanted to know when we could put a prosthesis on and he could get back to the farm. However, for the son and the mother, and the blame that was going through the family as to what they could have done and what they should have done, on the mental side of it, when they could go and talk to somebody who had been through it, it made a world of difference.

The family we sent in said there was no better feeling than seeing them get back and be a productive part of the farm, and be a unit again, where it wasn't getting torn apart.

That's basically where we go. There's nobody else who does that, because you, or whoever, can't go in with the same perspective as the family with the disability does, those who have lived through it. That's why it's so important that we don't lose our organization.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Also, one of the key issues is that, as farmers, we're not going to work; work is all around us. Every day you see what needs to be done. If it's a two-hour job and it's going to take you all day, it doesn't matter; you're going to take all day to get it done. That's the critical component that we all have to look at.

Mr. Chair, while I have time, I'd like to present a motion related to the study that we are dealing with. The motion says:

That, in relation to the current study on the mental health challenges that the Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers face, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food be invited to update the committee on actions taken by his cabinet.

That is the motion I would like to put on the floor at this point in time. Again, it is completely related to what we are dealing with, but we need to get some information on the action from the minister.

Thank you to our guests.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dreeshen.

To me, the scope of the study is about mental health. It's about everything, but really... We could make other motions to talk about the weather by itself. We could make a motion to talk about anything that happens on the farm, whether it's prices or anything. I think that the actions of the cabinet are very broad and very outside this study. I will not permit to have that motion made.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

[English]

The Chair: That's not debatable.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, we are not changing direction.

[English]

You gave me the floor, Mr. Chair.

A voice: A point of order...

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: I have already spoken, Mr. Chair. You gave me the floor.

The Chair: The motion cannot be part of a debate.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, I would like to appeal your decision. I am asking for a vote by a show of hands. In fact, I call for a recorded vote on your decision.

[English]

The Chair: There is an appeal on my decision, so we'll ask for a vote on whether people feel we should bring that motion into this study.

Can I have a vote on whether my decision is sustained or not? We'll have a recorded vote.

(Ruling of the chair sustained: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move on to our next question.

Mr. Harvey, you have for six minutes.

● (0905)

Mr. T.J. Harvey (Tobique—Mactaquac, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As somebody who doesn't normally sit on this committee, I thank you for the opportunity to be here. I'd like to thank all our guests, as well, for being here.

Before I start, I want to recognize Mr. Guest and the good work that they do. Thank you very much. I used to sit on CFA, and when I did, I was involved quite heavily with CASA, so I recognize the importance of that to the agricultural community.

I'd also like to touch quickly on what Mr. Dreeshen said, and I agree with what he was saying around the stressors of being an agricultural producer and not necessarily having the opportunity to feel as though the things that are the most important to you, your family and the people who work for you in your organization, are what's represented in the media. You feel as though you're somehow the villain in a plot as opposed to the good guy who's trying to do the right thing for Canadian families who don't necessarily recognize or appreciate the work that you do on their behalf.

I was an agricultural producer for most of my life. I grew up on a seed potato farm and later I farmed on a large scale in seed, table and processed potatoes as well as eggs. I sold out in 2011, and then I sold my egg farm in 2017.

I want to identify a few things before I go to questions. Hopefully I'll have time to go to questions. As a farmer who had farmed starting at a young age and raised a family on the farm and who has exited the farm, I would like to identify a few things that I feel.

The conditions I dealt with as a farmer before I exited agriculture were financial uncertainty, weather, market variability, and guilt about my work-life balance with my family and my children. The work-life balance piece was never brought up by my wife or my kids, but it was something that I always felt I was negligent in, but it was really beyond my control. It was beyond my ability to change that circumstance given the financial constraints of the operation that I was running and the demands that it put on my time and on the people who were helping me to run that operation.

When I decided to sell out in 2011, or the winter of 2010, it was because I had some health concerns. I can't take the dust anymore. I can't be around dust, so it was more of a forced exit than it was an exit that I had complete control over. I decided to sell out through a large auction company, which was an amazing experience. It was a good way to do it, and it was a way that left me a clean break to start over at the age of 29.

Post-exit, I had a lot of different feelings. You would think that you would feel as though you had exited the industry, that it was a new start and it was cut and dried and simple, but it's not. I was left feeling as though the rest of the world was passing me by and had moved on.

I remember the day after the auction, once all the equipment was gone, just standing there in the middle of the yard wondering if I had made the right decision, if it was the right decision for my family, if it was the right decision for me, and what I was going to do next. It led me to a period in my life that was very difficult, in which I struggled with severe depression, which put additional stresses on my marriage and on my relationships with my children, my family, and the people who had worked for me originally. It took me probably two years of hard work, counselling and working to try to overcome that circumstance, to get through it.

Even today, there are certain times of the year when I really struggle with whether or not I made the right decision, and it's been a substantial amount of time since that happened. I truly believe that I'll always feel that way. It was the career that I wanted for my entire life, so to have that taken away or to feel as though I needed to have that taken away.... Having had conversations with other farmers who were in similar situations or who had to exit for financial reasons or for health reasons related to stress, I think it's one of the biggest challenges that's going to plague the industry going forward.

• (0910)

I don't think it's based on size. It's not based on size. I see farmers who have small, family-owned farms that milk 25 cows, who deal with the mental challenges around agriculture. I see large operators who farm 10,000 to 15,000 acres who suffer with the exact same challenges. I don't think it's something that's unique or relevant to the size and scope of an agricultural producer's operation. It's something that's related to the specific task that they're doing. I would say more than anything it's the desire on behalf of the farmer to feel like his contributions to society in this country are, one, acknowledged, and, two, found to be important and substantive to everyday Canadians.

I don't know very many farmers who wake up and say I don't really care whether Canadians think I'm a good person or not. Every farmer I know wants to do the right thing for the environment. They want to do the right thing for the people who they produce their food for, and then they're very proud of what they do. A lot of times—Mr. Dreeshen is right—it's a very closed-off group. Because you spend so much time working in your operation alone and not around other people, you really struggle to find those supports and controls, especially when you're in the situation at that time.

So quickly, if there's any time left at all, I would invite you—

The Chair: It's pretty much over on the time.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: I guess there's no time left.

I thank you for your patience through that. I thought it was important that I get it out there. I wish the committee the very best with the rest of their study if I don't get another opportunity to speak, and I thank you very much for everything that you do to both groups.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for your commitment as a farmer, and thanks for your input on this study.

Now, Mr. MacGregor, you have six minutes.

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

Mr. Guest and Mr. Johnson, I'd like to start with you. First of all, thank you for coming to the committee today.

Mr. Guest, in your opening statement, you had mentioned the funding that your registry had once received but you're not receiving right now. Can you just provide a few more details about where it's traditionally come from and why there's a bit of a gap right now?

Mr. Bob Guest: Yes. Basically, we used get funding through CASA. That was where all our funds came from, and they also did all of our administration. When the new farm programs came out, they said you had to have matching funding, and they also cut CASA's funding a great deal, pretty much in half. We were one of the casualties of their funding being cut in half. Of course, then we didn't have any administration either because we were just the farmers who were going and doing the work. We've never really had the ability to go out and campaign to get the companies to support us so that we can get the matching funds because we were never set up that way. We were set up to go and talk to the farmers and do the visitations and that type of thing, and CASA would basically make the contacts and that and then we'd get in touch with them and go that way.

Once the funding was lost, we struggled with what we had left over, but basically, we started to run out of funds because it became such a competitive area campaigning with all the different chemical companies and everything else, bigger groups that had more funds to do it with, so we were never able to really get any funding set up.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Okay.

You've identified funding as a key component here. That's good to get into the record.

One of our previous witnesses, actually a couple, came from an organization in Quebec and one of the things they did was that they had mental health workers who understood the nature of the farm, understood the culture of it. They would go to farms on unscheduled visits because we've heard about the culture of stoicism amongst the farming community. They're not often the ones who will go out and seek help for themselves.

They would pay unscheduled visits to farms, understanding the nature of the place, just to check in on a person. How do you feel about that kind of approach?

• (0915)

Mr. Bob Guest: It's similar to what we do. Where we were getting the physiotherapists and that, we were fairly well known to them, and they would get in contact with us and say that they would get permission for us to go and do a visitation. If, say, it was in Saskatchewan, my area, I would go in and do a visitation with the guy at the farm. We found that the sooner we got in there, the more likely it was that they were going back to the farm. Then we could find out a bit about their family and that, and then try to match them up with another family that had gone through a similar situation.

The mental health part of it is probably a hundred times more once you're trying to deal with a disability as well, because you have so much blame in terms of what you could have done or what you should have done or what you did wrong, that type of thing. We found that when they can talk to somebody who has been through it and has the same.... It's a lot different talking to somebody who has the same disability. It makes a lot of difference.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you for that.

Dr. Carleton and Dr. Fletcher, it was very interesting to hear about your research on climate change and its negative impacts on mental health. I think we all know that farmers over the ages have certainly had to deal with adverse weather events. That's just something they do. However, we're now seeing the evidence that these adverse weather events are being compounded. They're happening much more frequently, and if we believe the 6,000-plus scientists who have contributed to the recent IPCC report, we don't have very much time left.

It seems to me that it's very unfortunate that here in this place we're stuck over an argument about whether or not to apply a carbon tax. However, we're missing the big picture that climate change is happening and so far our response to it is completely ineffective. It's going to require some drastic change.

Acknowledging that these increases in adverse weather events are going to be the norm unless we drastically change our course of action, and knowing that this will negatively impact the mental health of farmers, has your research—or any of the research that you're familiar with—identified any possible mitigation strategies that we can employ? We're looking for recommendations, knowing that this may be the new norm in the future.

What strategies can we employ to help farmers deal with these increasing adverse weather effects and the effects that they are going to have on their farms?

Dr. Amber Fletcher: My own research focuses much more heavily on adaptation as opposed to mitigation. Although there is a

variety of options for climate mitigation, my own research has really focused much more on the effect of climate disasters on farm families.

One of the biggest recommendations I have is one that comes from my interviews with farmers, that there are important social and economic dimensions to adaptation. A lot of what we've seen has been an emphasis on technology. Certainly, technology is important. We've seen, for example, that the farmers in the areas where I do research are quite stressed about divestment from dam infrastructure. There is a lot of concern over, for example, programs that don't allow them to build if a bridge or some kind of infrastructure is damaged by a climate disaster. They often lack the funding to be able to build higher. They're often limited by what existed before. That doesn't consider the impact of future events. I think there should be a lot of emphasis on preparation and planning for disasters that far exceed anything even in intergenerational memory.

Technology is certainly a part of that. Dam infrastructure is important. At the same time, there are social and economic dimensions that we can be thinking about—

The Chair: Dr. Fletcher, I'm going to have to cut you off. I'm sorry, but we're out of time. I was sleeping on the switch here.

Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Breton, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I don't know whether it was Mr. Carleton or Ms. Fletcher who said that farming was a unique profession, as people were fairly isolated and there was little networking in the workplace. With social network being very limited, it may be more difficult to seek help. The time farmers have to seek that help or attend consultations is very limited. That clearly increases stress and all factors related to anxiety, for the many reasons you listed.

A few weeks ago, experts came before us to talk about proactivity and support workers. Those are social workers or psychologists who visit farms sporadically. Their organization is located in Quebec. I don't whether you have heard about this initiative or whether you have something similar at home, in Saskatchewan.

Could you tell me whether you think that initiative could spread throughout Canada? I would like to know what you think about it.

• (0920)

[English]

Prof. Nicholas Carleton: I haven't heard of that here in Saskatchewan. I think the unscheduled visits are welcomed by the farmers. If they have the capacity to escalate to higher levels of care where necessary, it could certainly be a good idea. I would suggest that a lot of the peer-to-peer support that we heard about this morning from Mr. Guest is also potentially a very good idea. I think there's a lot of room left for us to better understand how we can best support farmers as they endure these kinds of stresses and challenges across the farm industries.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: My next question is simple.

Every one of you has conducted considerable research.

Ms. Fletcher, what can the Government of Canada implement or do to further advance the mental health file involving our Canadian farmers?

[English]

Dr. Amber Fletcher: Thank you for the question.

One initiative that I think is particularly important is the funding to support farmer-led initiatives for mental health. For example, here in Saskatchewan, we have some groups of farmers who are actively pushing for farmer-to-farmer, peer-to-peer mental health supports.

One of the challenges we see is that often the people providing the support for farmer mental health are not actually farmers. Here in Saskatchewan, for example, the farm stress line is now operated by crisis intervention workers who are usually not farmers. I think it can be very daunting and very difficult for farmers to speak with folks who they see as having little connection or little understanding of agriculture.

In addition to that, as I've mentioned before in my statements, I do think it's very important to address the root causes of the mental health crises, that being, of course, the economic uncertainty, the financial uncertainty that farmers face.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Mr. Guest, if I understood your mission correctly, your organization and you are helping farmers get back to work as quickly as possible after an accident or an illness.

Between people suffering from anxiety- and stress-related illnesses and those who had an accident, can you tell us which group you help the most in your work, in terms of proportion? Are there more people suffering from anxiety or people who have had work related accidents?

[English]

Mr. Bob Guest: I would say probably more after the accident. We're doing a very good job of talking about farm safety and accidents, but due to the nature of agriculture, there are still going to be accidents for some reason or other, and the anxiety seems to be more, to me, when an accident happens to a person. They deal with it fairly well in most cases.

In some cases they need a lot more help, but in a lot of cases the person the accident happened to deals with it. It's the family that really needs the help. They need to be able to talk to somebody who understands what's happened and why it's happened, and not to blame themselves but to get through it. Being able to talk to somebody who's been through it seems to make a world of difference to both sides. It's a real sense of achievement when you can help a family get back onto the farm and become a productive producer.

I think it's so important that we can reach the family after that situation. It's not necessarily an accident. It could be an illness that struck the family farm as well. It has to be dealt with as a family unit. I think that's an important side of it.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Guest.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Breton.

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you for your answers.

The Chair: Mr. Poissant, you have six minutes.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (La Prairie, Lib.): Thank you very much for your testimony.

I was a farmer for more than 40 years. My son took over the farm.

I also worked in the psychological distress field. I was the president of a community organization that came to testify here called Au coeur des familles agricoles. The role of support worker has been created, as well as a respite house for Quebec farmers.

The organization is still working on finding other solutions to help farmers, but I have never heard about your organization, Mr. Guest. I would like to know whether statistics are being kept on farm accidents in the country. Do you have statistics that show how many mutilations or other accidents occur on farms?

[English]

Mr. Bob Guest: I don't know.

Jonas, do you know whether there are statistics?

Mr. Jonas Johnson: I used to work with CASA, and the limits on the funding that was available restricted the research to fatalities. We don't have the resources available to get an understanding of exactly what the extent is of the injuries and also the illnesses that people would be suffering. That is something we hope to do with the organization moving forward as we rebuild to get a better understanding of the extent of the problem.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Okay.

My other question is for the researchers, Mr. Carleton and Ms. Fletcher.

Witnesses have told us that there was a lot of research and that action was now needed. Research has shown that real problems existed. But there are solutions. So we are now being asked to take action.

I wanted to hear your thoughts on that. Why keep doing research when the evidence is clear? What is your take on that?

[English]

Prof. Nicholas Carleton: I think there are enough data in the literature I was able to review to suggest that there is a significant and a substantial mental health challenge facing our farmers. I think how we would action the solutions to that challenge may warrant additional research. In the interim, however, we can explore opportunities to make sure that there are individual-level solutions—evidence-based care and peer-support care—available to our farmers.

I agree with Dr. Fletcher that another challenge is to provide a system-wide response to increase certainty where possible for farmers, because part of the root challenge they're facing is the level of uncertainty as we go forward.

Dr. Amber Fletcher: I would also add that in the interviews I do with farmers—and in contradiction to what was said by the first honourable member—this is not a view from 10,000 feet up. This is a view from my interviews, sitting down with hundreds of farmers across the Prairies. What I hear from them is that agriculture is constantly changing. There are constantly policy changes and environmental changes that are affecting the lives of farmers. For that reason, I think research remains important. We constantly have to keep on top of how new changes and new events are impacting farmers.

However, I think that as researchers we need to do a good job of being responsible in making sure our recommendations are reaching the ears of those they need to reach, and making sure that our recommendations are firmly grounded in the views of the farmers themselves, many of whom I have interviewed.

I would just like to point out that I think ongoing research is important in an ever-changing field like agriculture.

● (0930)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Okay.

A woman who came to testify told us that farmers often did business with professionals on the ground. Those may be bankers, agronomists or whatever. When those people issue recommendations, errors often arise that lead to farmers losing their business.

She suggested that an ombudsman be put in charge of those cases. When it comes to farmers, the lack of financial means sometimes prevents them from holding the people who made errors accountable.

What do you think about that?

[English]

Prof. Nicholas Carleton: I think an ombudsman would help to provide more certainty and more support for farmers. By way of that, I think it sounds like potentially a very good idea.

Dr. Amber Fletcher: I would agree. I think this is something that, provided it was made very accessible to farmers, would be an excellent way to give them recourse in dealing with some of the challenges they face.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Okay.

We also often hear about the distance that has developed over time between the rural community and the urban community. Some provinces have initiatives to reduce that distance.

I would like you to talk to us about initiatives the government could introduce.

[English]

Dr. Amber Fletcher: It's a very good question. I'm not sure I have a ready answer for it, but I would certainly concur that the farmers I interview often speak about feelings of being underappreciated—they feel there is a stigma associated with agriculture—so this is certainly contributory to the stress that they feel. Overwhelmingly, the stressors I hear pertain to uncertainty—financial and environmental uncertainty—but I agree that there is sometimes a stigma attached to farmers. Many farmers I talk to say that they're known as “dumb farmers”.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fletcher.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Mr. Shipley.

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

I appreciate the witnesses for coming.

Mr. Guest, thank you for being here and putting a real person and a face on this issue.

A number of years ago, two young students were working at a local business. They produced concrete form products. At the end of the day, one of them had to go in and clean out the turner. One of the safety switches malfunctioned. His best friend went by and touched a switch that should not have activated the drum, but it did. To your comments about the effects, that young person who accidentally touched the switch—which of course should not have activated the drum—suffered severe mental injuries even though he was not at fault.

That becomes part of what you're talking about. I think it was so important. These are mostly around family events, when there is an accident. I appreciate very much that you talked about walking alongside and giving people hope, because this is really what this is all about from my perspective. Thank you for that.

As my colleague has said, we need to look at how we can help those. These are on-the-ground organizations that will mean as much or more to that family than many of the higher integrated organizations might. It's like the person from Quebec, where they drop in. They're on the road. We'll be talking later about the mobile units from Saskatchewan.

Thank you. I really don't have a question, other than to say that.

T.J., thank you. For those of us who are in the business, to have one of my colleagues come forward....

We've been through it. I remember back to the 1980s. Dr. Fletcher, in some ways there hasn't been much change. There really hasn't. I go back to the 1980s. The change was 23% interest, not 4% or 6% interest, but the multiplier is still the same.

One of the issues in my area is that there's no recognition, other than often condemnation of what we do. This may be a bit like T.J. I'm sorry; I may not have a lot of questions, but maybe we can learn some things. We have one of the most advanced industries in this world, folks. When we get condemned by activists.... I have mink breeders. Their issue is not the market. Their issue is not the weather. Their issue is the people out on the road who are cutting the fence to get into their farms to let the animals loose, that they will die. The breeders' concern in that case is the security and safety of their family.

There is the issue around research. On the weekend I took a young intern to one of my farms that has beef and greenhouses. He's now taken that kernel of corn that used to grow and feed beef cattle to an ethanol plant. He takes the distillers back home to feed to his beef cattle. He's now taken the CO₂, which by the way is not a pollutant. It's a fertilizer. That narrative has now asserted a change in terms of climate change about pollutants instead of CO₂. He takes that heat and the CO₂, and is now growing tomatoes. That is the type of research.

The condemnation is of what we are doing. People say, "We don't like what you're doing to these animals. You're not transporting them properly." I meet with pork producers. When their trucks are on the road, they're being harassed by individuals at lights. Those are where the real stressors come from, not the everyday work.

I was in dairy. We have cash crop, and right now we're dealing with vomitoxin in corn. We're dealing with wet weather. Those are issues we can deal with, though. It's the external issues on top that discredit everything we're doing.

• (0935)

You know, in terms of the environment, the condemnation to us here is that we're not doing anything. The issue is that we're one of the best countries in the world. The agriculture industry is one of the best carbon sinks in the world. What we need to be focusing on is helping to train those other countries that are the major polluters, and quit condemning our manufacturers and our farmers for what they think we're not doing.

Ms. Fletcher, I would just ask you this. Would you agree that the technology and research and genetics that we now have continue to be of benefit to not only our industry but to the environment in which we live?

The Chair: You have five seconds to answer.

Dr. Amber Fletcher: I guess I would respond by asking in what way you are referring to genetics. Are you referring to animal genetics, crop genetics—

Mr. Bev Shipley: Absolutely: all of it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Longfield, you have five minutes, basically.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much for all your presentations this morning.

To the Canadian Farmers with Disabilities Registry, you mention on your website assistance on suicide prevention. I've been on your website and I've seen that you have connections to Farm Credit Canada. They were a previous witness on this study.

Mr. Guest, you mentioned that you used to have funding. It looks like that funding used to come through Growing Forward 2, possibly for project funding. On your website, at least, there was an indication of Growing Forward 2 funding. It seems as though funding is one of the big question marks. There is a safety association on Pembina Highway in Winnipeg—I know Winnipeg well, so I know where you're located—but it's not part of the government. You're relying on some funding from the government to keep it going.

Could one of you talk about the challenge of the organization in terms of funding?

• (0940)

Mr. Jonas Johnson: The Pembina organization that you're referring to is the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association. That organization is separate from the Canadian Farmers with Disabilities Registry. They have a contribution agreement with the federal government that provides them with funding, but at this time the Canadian Farmers with Disabilities Registry does not have an agreement in place for them to access funding.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: The two organizations are indeed separate, but the registry does some work with CASA?

Mr. Jonas Johnson: They have in the past. That was through prevention activities and safety awareness. However, now there isn't funding available to provide assistance for the peer-to-peer support, which is the primary role of the organization—to assist farmers.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Mental health should fall under safety in some way or another. Again, maybe that's just a statement. Funding is a question in terms of our study, and recommendations coming forward in terms of providing adequate funding from the federal government to help support the registry. I'm extending that into safety in general.

Mr. Jonas Johnson: Yes, and there is funding available for the safety side. Currently, there isn't funding available for the peer-to-peer support and the mental health side.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Okay. Thank you.

In terms of peer-to-peer support, CTV News Regina mentioned that the University of Regina has a free e-counselling service that they have been providing since 2010 across the province. Nearly half of the clients are coming from rural Saskatchewan, so there is some type of e-counselling service available through the university. I'm not sure whether that connects to your research or not.

My question is about that e-counselling. We had a previous study on broadband on the farm and on whether we have the right technology support to get to the farms in Saskatchewan or across the Prairies. Is this something the university does on an ongoing basis, and is that sustainable?

Prof. Nicholas Carleton: Dr. Heather Hadjistavropoulos is the PI who oversees the online therapy unit project. That's the Saskatchewan e-therapy opportunity that you're speaking about. I believe there was some renewed funding from the provincial government that came to support that. I don't know the size and scope of it, off the top of my head.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you.

Dr. Fletcher, something very interesting to me was the social intervention of climate change. We see the political argument that carbon taxes are bad. They're increasing the prices on the farm, but at the same time the problem of climate change is providing a stressor as well.

How do we look at those two stressors?

On one hand, we have to try to eliminate the effects of climate change, and we need to do that economically to get into the right effectiveness. On the other hand, the economics hurt the farmer. Could you make a comment on that, please, in the 20 seconds we have left?

Dr. Amber Fletcher: I'm not an expert in mitigation strategies, so I can't speak to carbon taxes.

However, one thing to keep in mind is the cause of the emissions. I think it's important to remember that individual farmers.... Even as a collective, the agriculture industry contributes only about 10% to 13% of emissions.

We need to look at the polluters.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Yes. Putting a price on pollution is where we're heading, as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Longfield.

This, unfortunately, is all the time we have.

I want to thank Dr. Carleton, Dr. Fletcher, and also Mr. Guest and Mr. Johnson.

As you saw, on this committee there are quite a few farmers. I'm a farmer myself, and there are other farmers here. We really understand, and it's also a chance for us to talk about our personal experience. I think it's great that we have such diversity.

I forgot to mention Mr. Baylis. You're so quiet. Welcome to our committee.

We're going to break and change the panel. We'll be back in two minutes.

Thank you.

● (0940)

_____ (Pause) _____

● (0950)

The Chair: We'll get going with our second hour on our study of mental health as it applies to farmers and ranchers.

With us today by video conference, we have, from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Dr. Katy Kamkar, clinical psychologist and director, Badge for Life Canada. From Mobile Crisis Services, we have John McFadyen, executive director.

Welcome. We'll start with a seven-minute opening statement.

Do you want to start, Mr. McFadyen?

Mr. John McFadyen (Executive Director, Mobile Crisis Services): Thank you.

In 1989, the Ministry of Agriculture recognized the range of issues faced by farmers and rural families and the potential benefits to farmers and rural families in Saskatchewan of having a specific phone line to assist. The farm stress line was initiated and funded, resourced, by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture and the agriculture knowledge centre in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Crisis counselling and referrals were provided.

In 2012, the farm stress line was contracted to Mobile Crisis Services and it provides a 1-800 number to farmers and rural families to access confidential telephone crisis counselling support, information and referral. This change provided 24-7 access along with proven expertise in crisis counselling services.

Crisis intervention is immediate and short-term psychological care aimed at assisting individuals in crisis situations and restoring equilibrium back to their lives. The farm stress line can address any self-identified crisis, whether it's a mental health issue, stress, depression, suicide ideation, family conflict, teen-parent conflicts, seniors' deteriorating health, abuse and neglect, relationships, parenting, addictions, gambling, alcohol, drugs and substance abuse, or even custody, child abuse, neglect and youth in crisis, whether it's bullying relationships with peers and parents or financial issues.

What can individuals expect when they call the farm stress line? The farm stress line can help the individual or those concerned about an individual. The hardest part is the decision to pick up the phone and make the call. Crisis workers will listen to what's worrying you, they will help you tell your story, they will help you prioritize the issues you have identified, and they will get you to provide information about your current situation, your past situations, your current and past supports and whether those are family, friends or professionals. They will assess what has worked well and what hasn't. They will help you determine what needs to be addressed and what can wait. They will help you to determine what you have control over and those issues you have no control over. They will help you problem-solve and identify alternatives.

Since June of 2017, mental health and farm stress have become a conversation that is more acceptable in the Saskatchewan farming community. Unfortunately, this was sparked by the suicide of a farmer in June of 2017. Conversations were initiated by Do More Agriculture Foundation, Bridges Health and the farm stress line. Organizers of agriculture forums in Regina, Saskatoon, Weyburn and Yorkton provide panels of experts to talk about mental health and farming. Organizations that worked with and for farmers, like Farm Credit Canada and APAS, also promoted this conversation.

At a Christmas gathering, my brother-in-law told me that he did not realize how much stress he had been under until he retired from farming.

We all have mental health, and our mental health is good when our thoughts are positive, our relationships are good and our emotions are stable. Our mental health is not good when our thoughts are negative, our emotions are unpredictable and our relationships are stressed. Stress impairs our ability to think and problem-solve and distracts us while we manage our day-to-day tasks. Stress can come from equipment breakdowns, weather, crop decisions, finances, physical health issues or issues with farm support workers.

• (0955)

Stress can also come from domestic issues with a spouse, children, extended family, illness in the family, accidents or a traumatic event like the death of a family member. When farmers are distracted and stress levels get too high, farmers are more likely to make poor farming decisions and be involved in farm accidents.

Over the past four years, since Mobile Crisis Services took over, there have been approximately 220 to 320 calls per year coming in on the farm stress line. Calls range from individuals calling in about issues that they're having with succession planning and the stress of making those decisions, and how that's impacting them with regard to sleeping patterns. A wife called in concerned about her husband who was unresponsive, worried about dementia. An unknown female called in stating that earlier she was not feeling safe and intended to take all her sleeping pills. She was currently under pressure due to decisions around the rental of a section of land, and relationship issues with a current and ex-partner. An unknown male called in who was struggling with anxiety and depression on an ongoing basis, which was made more difficult with the pressures around what to do with his will and succession planning. There was a grandmother who had her grandchildren visiting for the weekend, and a child was scared to return back home.

Here are some challenges and recommendations. Some of the challenges are the lack of awareness of the services available, the stigma of asking for help, providing access to services for those in rural Saskatchewan—

The Chair: Mr. McFadyen, I'm sorry. We're out of time, but you'll have a chance to answer questions as we go.

Dr. Kamkar, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Katy Kamkar (Clinical Psychologist and Director, Badge of Life Canada, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health): Good morning.

Dear members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, I would like to thank you for the

opportunity to discuss mental health supports for our Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers.

I am Dr. Katy Kamkar. I'm a clinical psychologist at the work, stress and mental health program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, CAMH. I am an assistant professor within the department of psychiatry, University of Toronto, and director of Badge of Life Canada, which is a peer-led charitable organization for police and corrections first responders across Canada who are dealing with psychological injuries suffered in the line of duty.

I'm also a member of the Collaborative Centre for Justice and Safety advisory council, and I serve on the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment national policing research committee. I'm also part of the scientific advisory committee with Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia. I'm a founding and credentialed member of the Canadian Association of Cognitive and Behavioural Therapies, and I'm on the editorial board of the Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being.

I provide evidence-based psychological assessment and treatment for mood and anxiety disorders, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders, occupational stress injuries in first responders and psychological distress in the workplace.

Providing mental health support, resources and treatment to our Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers is of utmost importance. Building awareness to have a better understanding of the various stressors they experience can also help build further resources related to their needs.

Our Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers experience a range of stressors related to their occupations that in turn affect their personal lives. They often face situations or circumstances with heightened uncertainty and limited control, in turn leading them to feel helpless and powerless, increasing their feelings of anxiety. For example, poor weather conditions can significantly impact the quality of their work and the financial outcomes.

Other stressors over which they have limited control but that can significantly impact their mental health and their work include natural disasters, or any changes, for example, related to government policies or regulations. Public dissatisfaction or negative media coverage around their work can as well significantly increase stress levels and feelings of demoralization. High work demands, working long hours often around the clock, can lead to mental, emotional, psychological and physical exhaustion.

Most importantly, the hard work might lead to negative outcomes and limited financial gains given that many factors are not within their control, increasing the risk for psychological health concerns such as feeling demoralized, hopeless, helpless, stressed, anxious and depressed, along with other psychological symptoms such as sleep disturbance, changes in appetite or energy level, feelings of worthlessness, and reduced self-esteem and self-confidence.

Stresses and pressures related to finances and family are common as a result of the factors I just noted, in turn increasing the risk for psychological health problems such as depression and anxiety.

Their work also entails working in isolation, limited contact with people and limited social support. Over time this can translate into feeling lonely, suffering in isolation and feeling withdrawn, making it more difficult to ask for help if in need.

There is also a culture that embraces high stigma around mental illness, and there is a perception of weakness and dependence if someone suffers or talks about any mental health concerns. Concurrent physical and mental health issues are also likely given the pain and physical health concerns that could result from the physical demands of the occupation, thus further exacerbating any psychological concerns.

Support and interventions aimed towards building awareness of mental health issues facing Canadian farmers are needed. These include gaining access to mental health education, stigma reduction, mental health promotion and building resiliency skills.

•(1000)

Having access to resources, support and psychotherapy are necessary. Given long distances, difficulty gaining access to therapy in rural areas and difficulty leaving their work, therapy—either in person or through other formats such as phone or Internet-based therapy—would need to be considered. Group therapy and a community of support should also be considered. There is a need for further research to gain a better understanding of the unique stressors faced by farmers, and for developing more targeted interventions based on research.

Dear members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to discuss mental health supports for our Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers. Providing mental health support, resources and interventions to our Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers, again, are of utmost importance.

Thank you.

•(1005)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Kamkar.

Now we'll start our questioning round.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, you have six minutes.

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

I thank our two witnesses.

I also want to thank Mr. Harvey, Mr. Dresshen, and Mr. Shipley for their testimony during the first hour. It is good to have people

around this table who have been farmers themselves and can tell their stories. It was a really interesting hour.

Since the beginning of this study, much has been said about farmers in crisis, at the end of their rope. That is what we have talked about the most. However, not much has been said about prevention.

Ms. Kamkar, you work with different types of clients. Are all farmers likely to face mental health problems, or are only certain types of farmers at risk? That is something we have not really discussed so far.

Could you share your thoughts on that?

[*English*]

Ms. Katy Kamkar: Thank you very much for this important question.

Of course there are daily stressors that we need to expect. It becomes problematic when some stressors become chronic. We know that chronic stressors increase the risk for psychological and physical health concerns, so yes, there are certain chronic stressors specifically unique to our Canadian farmers—definitely, working in isolation. We know there is also this lack of control and tremendous uncertainty that they all go through. We know, as human beings dealing with uncertainty, we all have difficulties. We all know what that is, but the level of uncertainty that they have to deal with is almost chronic.

The limited control that they have over their occupation.... It could be working very hard. A lot of work demands working around the clock, as we know, but it's not knowing what's going to happen. I can put my hard work, my heart and soul into it but really not knowing what the outcome will be.... We know that if the outcome is not positive, it will lead to financial impact, therefore affecting family as well.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Ms. Kamkar, I would like to elaborate on my question.

All farmers and producers are facing those conditions. What is the trigger that leads to a producer experiencing distress at some point?

Why are some farmers able to do their job, endure all the stress their whole life without ever thinking about suicide or other ultimate solutions, while others end up in a funnel, a kind of a hole they keep sinking deeper into?

At what point can we identify that trigger, and how can we take action before it is set off?

[English]

Ms. Katy Kamkar: Yes. Definitely, as I mentioned, we need to further our research. We really need to build research to have a better understanding of the unique stressors and really at what point in time it would affect the individuals. It's very much individualized as well in terms of when a person might be more than someone else would be addressed. Certainly, I think here we need to appreciate that accumulation is very important. We know that accumulation of stressors.... Let's say that one person, chronically, one year after another, experienced weather problems, financial problems, difficulties doing the work on a daily basis. Then that person, maybe after a while, would have more difficulty and be more vulnerable to psychological problems than someone else.

•(1010)

Mr. Luc Berthold: Madam Kamkar, who will that person be?

How can we know before it happens? That's the problem. That's what I wanted to point out. How can we find out when farmers and producers will have to make a choice in their lives, when they cannot support it anymore?

Ms. Katy Kamkar: That's a good question.

I think the safest response is that we do not know. That's why this conversation becomes very important, because we simply do not know.

It also has to do with the heightened stigma about seeking help—keeping everything to oneself and this perception of being weak if we come forward. There are limited interventions, of course, with the isolation and everything going on, and the stigma and self-stigma make it even more difficult to come forward. It could be that by the time someone is reaching out for help they are at the burnout level.

If we encourage early intervention, awareness and prevention, it can very much further our understanding and provide some respectful response to that important question.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, I think that the opposition's intentions were somewhat misunderstood during the first hour. That is why I will propose a new motion, which is very simple and has the same objective—to hear from the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. I will move a new motion in a moment. I will give you a copy of it and let you to read it over. It is really very simple and reads as follows:

That the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food be added to the witness list of the study on the mental health challenges that Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers face.

It is a simple motion. Since the beginning, people have been saying that they think policies are problematic and talking about what we should do. So I think it would be important to hear from the minister. I will let you decide whether the motion is admissible before I talk about it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Berthold.

Regarding the last motion, my role as chair is to ensure that we show witnesses respect, but also that we focus on the study underway. If a motion I did not have an opportunity to read in advance is moved, I read it quickly. I felt that the other motion was

too broad. It talked about measures taken by the entire cabinet. My role is to make decisions while showing witnesses respect and taking time into account.

As I said, you certainly have every right to ask the minister to appear as a witness. So I will allow a debate on this motion.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That's very nice. So I will talk about the motion if that's okay with you. It won't take very long, since witnesses are in attendance and we have to hear from them. I think this is extremely important.

A few moments ago, I talked to Ms. Kamkar about prevention and about a specific moment when a crisis may arise. In fact, since the beginning of the study, we have mostly been talking about crises. We have had an opportunity to hear testimony from people with a great deal of experience in the farming sector. We have heard from Mr. Harvey, Mr. Shipley and Mr. Dreeshen. In addition, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food himself is a producer, a farmer. So he is also knowledgeable in that field. Since he is a minister, he has a unique role to play in defending producers and farmers.

Taking into account discussions that have taken place since the beginning of the study, it seems clear that we should prioritize farmers' and producers' mental health problems. I say that it seems clear because, when we asked officials what their mental health mandate was specifically, we saw that no such mandate existed. I don't know whether you remember, but that was at the very beginning of the meeting. If we recall the testimony, we know that there is no mental health mandate as such. That role does not exist. I remember very well that the deputy minister told us they were taking action because they wanted to help producers and farmers, but that was not written anywhere. It is not in the minister's mandate letter or in the department's letters of credence. The department has no actual obligation to consider farmers' mental health.

We just heard that there are many things we don't know about. I think that the role of the department of agriculture is to pursue this matter. In my opinion, no one is in a better position than the minister of agriculture to explain to us how he sees things, and especially what he thinks about this issue. Since I have been hearing testimony during this study, I have noticed that the situation is much more problematic than someone like me, a non-farmer, may have initially thought.

That is why, Mr. Chair, I will ask my colleagues for something very simple—to add the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food to the list of witnesses.

•(1015)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Shipley, go ahead.

[English]

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have an opportunity, colleagues. We've had some great testimony. We're actually coming to the end of the study, I think. I was just trying to find out the number of meetings. I think we're coming towards the end of it, unless we take an extension on it. Clearly there's been some movement of understanding of what we need to do on the peer-to-peer. How do we help those who are on the ground?

We've done a lot of research. There's an incredible amount of research. Back in the 1980s, some of us experienced that. The issues are the same. The one difference.... We haven't had a lot of discussion, but it will come up at another meeting. We did have some abuse of substance back in the 1980s, but not drugs—not out in the rural areas, anyway.

We have an opportunity with a minister who, I think all of us know very well, comes with that background. Not only as a leader around the cabinet table, but also as a leader in his community. Because he comes with that background, I think he could tell you that he also walked through, in the 1980s, changes in culture and life around the stresses that came at that time. I don't know where this will go in terms of the government, but for those of us, the farmers who we represent and the people in the agriculture industry.... It's much bigger than just the farmers. We have an opportunity to have him come before us and talk to us about the significance of this.

Where might he want to take us in terms of our understanding with this significant study? I have to be honest with you, at the start of it we knew that this was an issue. I don't think I had a grasp, quite honestly—even though I walked through some of this—that this was as big as it is across our country. It isn't just among the grain farmers. It's among all producers, whether you're in the supply-managed or not.

I would encourage the folks on the other side, with the government. This is about what can we find out and how we can best help those in our industry. It's also the ones who are selling us the inputs. It's also the ones who are selling to us and working for us. If we're in a situation where there are continual stresses, we need to get some peer-to-peer. Quite honestly, folks, my pressure is going to be, how do we get people in the industry who have actually walked it? How do we get those people to come alongside? We had that with Mr. Guest this morning. I think that was laid out strongly.

I won't take any more time. I know this study is coming to an end. I think if we don't have that opportunity to bring in a minister who is responsible for our industry and who lives it, has worked it, and who—I can almost be certain, although I have not talked to him about it so I don't want to be presumptuous—went through it in the 1980s.... I'll leave it at that, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Harvey.

• (1020)

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Mr. Chair, I move that we now adjourn debate.

The Chair: We'll have a recorded vote on the motion to adjourn debate.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: Debate is now adjourned. We will continue.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: As a quick point of order, Mr. Chair, on the subject we just voted on, I would like to say that, as somebody who is not a sitting member of this committee and as somebody who is a former agricultural producer and somebody who has been actively involved in advocating on behalf of agricultural producers across the country, although the debate was adjourned on this, it is an important issue and I would encourage the members of the committee—

Mr. Luc Berthold: That's debate.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: —to try to find an avenue to have the minister appear on the subject.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harvey.

Mr. Longfield, go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

It's just unfortunate that we keep getting these distractions from the other side, who are playing political games when we're trying to study mental health.

I do want to get back to the study with Ms. Kamkar.

Congratulations on all the work you are doing. I see that you're working with Badge of Life Canada, working with our police forces and our emergency services. There are different groups that really need the attention of CAMH and other mental health support services—

Mr. Bev Shipley: I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Mr. Longfield, I have a point of order.

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I'm sorry, but they're calling a point of order on us again.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm sorry. I know Mr. Longfield well and I have the greatest respect, but when we're trying to advance the number of individuals to come and be witnesses. It is not political games. This is actually likely one of the most serious issues that we have discussed, and I think having the full breadth of intervention is important.

When you say we're playing political games because we are trying to bring witnesses in to advance this, I actually take offence to that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go on, Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I'll go back to my question, through the distractions.

CAMH is working with different groups of people, including police services and veterans. Have you seen some differences with the farming community in terms of unique challenges they are facing, or is this really something we need to address on a broader scope through CAMH?

Ms. Katy Kamkar: We provide services to a variety of very specific populations, very much as you mentioned—first responders and police—but also to our youth and our elderly. We have a variety of programs dealing with trauma, mood and anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and as I mentioned, addictions, so there are a variety of services.

When it comes to our Canadian farmers, of course every population is very unique, and that's very important. It doesn't mean that different populations do not have similar stressors and concerns. They absolutely do, which is good because when we talk about assessment and treatment, we can use very similar skills and so on. Nevertheless, when we also provide assessment and intervention, we need to target it to the specific needs of the population. We need to be aware, as we just talked about, of the unique stressors that Canadian farmers go through.

One layer is very important. There has been some common conversation around the point at which there is a crisis so we can intervene. That's a very important question we need to find out about, which is also true for any population. Again, you mentioned police. We want to find out for our first responders and so on. Really also we want to make that shift right now for most populations and organizations. With mental health at work and everything, we're really working towards prevention more than on crisis management. It's really about mental health promotion and prevention, and early intervention.

If we target prevention rather than crisis intervention, not only for them but for our society, then as a nation as a whole, we would benefit most.

• (1025)

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you very much.

Mr. McFadyen, with regard to Mobile Crisis Services, it's very interesting to see how we're trying to get face to face with people who are facing challenges.

I see on your website that in 2015 there were 23,286 people who contacted your group for help. How have things gone since 2015? Do you have numbers from 2016 and 2017 or even anecdotally? Is it increasing? Is it around the same?

Mr. John McFadyen: The numbers on our website are in relation to the mobile crisis services we provide. That's our entire agency. We provide the 1-800 problem gambling helpline for the province, the farm stress line and also crisis intervention services for the city of Regina.

In this last fiscal year, 2017-18 we had just under 27,000 calls that came in to Mobile Crisis Services. In our last fiscal year, 320 calls came in to the farm stress line.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Was that 320?

Mr. John McFadyen: There were 320 calls that came into the farm stress line over the last fiscal year.

Part of the problem is awareness, getting the message out on the services that are available. It's being able to go out to the ag forums, to Agribition, to the different other ag expos, and also working with the Farm Credit corporation, with the publication that they're putting out in relationship to farm stress and mental health.

Hopefully, these types of things will help.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Right. I'm not sure how much time I have left after the intervention from the other side.

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: My time is almost up.

Do we have farmers working with psychologists, like farmer intervention people, people supporting the other farmers in providing services?

Mr. John McFadyen: That network is just starting to be developed with Bridges Health, trying to educate and provide mental health first aid so that they can recognize when there are mental health issues with the producers they're dealing with.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Great. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Longfield.

Mr. MacGregor, you have six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you, Chair.

Dr. Kamkar, I think I'll start with you, being that you belong to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

Given the statistics that your organization is familiar with on people turning to substances to help them cope, namely alcohol, illicit drugs and so on, do you have any research regarding the use and abuse of substances within the farming community? Do you know how prevalent it is that people use these to help cope with their issues?

Ms. Katy Kamkar: No, I do not have the answer to this. I'm not even sure we actually have that data available. That's again because of a lack of understanding and lack of research in regard to that. Certainly it would be very important.

We know that whatever data we also have in other populations, it's always good to keep in mind that these are only estimates. We have a lot of people who suffer in silence, who do not come forward and so on. That, of course, is one of the significant barriers we have right now with our Canadian farmers as well.

However, certainly we need to conduct that research, and hopefully with stigma reduction, we can have clear data and further understanding of their needs.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Stigma reduction is a very interesting term.

I know within the farming community—we've had lots of testimony to support this—that there is a stigma about coming out to talk about mental health issues.

We have had success in other professions, notably the Canadian Armed Forces, and among veterans groups, first responders. However, there's also a stigma surrounding the use of illicit substances—the stigma of their ongoing criminality.

I know that the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health has talked about the subject of decriminalization. Do you think, in trying to encourage people to come forward to seek help with substance abuse, particularly with illicit substances, that this is maybe a conversation we should start having?

•(1030)

Ms. Katy Kamkar: Generally speaking, I think that any conversations around any health issue can start such a great path. However, it goes with the ups and downs. We're talking about human need, so absolutely it's very important.

I like the fact that you mentioned that with first responders, and police and veterans and the armed forces, we are noticing a stigma reduction. It took so much work. We have noticed that difference in the past five years, and more so in the past two to five years. There's still prominent stigma, absolutely, but we have worked so hard around changing the culture, which is very much needed right now.

We're for our Canadian farmers, and that's why what you're starting right now... We're all sending our heart and gratitude to what you're doing right now, because it's very much that conversation, the dialogue, that is needed. Hopefully, they're also hearing us. When we are able to change their mindset and that culture, we're also able to reduce the stigma.

It's interesting, because if we also look at similarities across populations. I don't see much of a difference. The adage is very much the same there. It's the perception that if I talk, then it means I'm weak, that I'm dependent. It's not the case. It's very much learning that you can do the wonderful work that you're doing—we're so appreciative of that work—and you are also strong and powerful. At the same time, you can ask for help; you can be in need.

Those two issues are not mutually exclusive, and they're part of being a human being. That's the very concept that, hopefully, with a lot of ongoing conversation, as we're doing right now—discussions and dialogue and education—we can help to change the culture.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

Mr. McFadyen, for the last couple of minutes I have, I'll turn to you.

You sit at a nexus, particularly with the information you have at your fingertips from the experiences of your organization about what works and what doesn't. You have a lot of those lived experiences. I think this is a very general question. Ultimately, we as a committee want to make recommendations, and we have fantastic analysts who are taking care and looking at all of the testimony. I want to give you the opportunity, in the minute and a half I have left.

From your point of view, with all the expertise you have, what do you think the strengths of the federal government are in tackling this issue, and what do you think we as a committee should be recommending that the federal government do more of?

Mr. John McFadyen: I think research is certainly important, because that helps give us direction and a path to go on to provide services. I think certainly the government could fund a campaign in relationship to reducing the stigma of mental health, so that people feel more comfortable—individuals or farm families—in coming

and seeking help. Also there's the issue of the isolation and how to address that.

It would be a communication strategy and then some strategy to develop addressing the isolation and the access to services, whether that's something that's Internet-based or video conferencing or through telephone. The need is to look at providing those services without the time-consuming aspect, taking away from the farming with the travelling time, etc. I think some farmers just don't seek help because of that.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Harvey, you have six minutes.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both witnesses for being here. We really appreciate the time and effort you took to be here with us today, as well as your work.

I'll start with Mr. McFadyen.

Certainly as an agricultural producer and somebody who's been actively engaged in agriculture my entire life and seen not only my own struggles but the struggles of other members of my family who are also producers, it's something that's close to my heart.

I want to start by asking you how you feel the federal government could do a better job, or what measures could be put in place to help support farmers around mental illness and mental health care over a long-term strategy. What do you feel would be the best way forward or would have the most measurable impact in a positive manner for the agriculture community? How could the federal government help most quickly and with the most impact in supporting your work?

•(1035)

Mr. John McFadyen: The access to services, I think, is the key piece. They kind of work together, reducing the stigma and also educating—the communications strategy in relation to letting people know of the services available.

When we triage people from crisis intervention, we need that next piece in relation to providing them with some ongoing services and for that to be done in a timely fashion. I think that portion of it is not available now. There are waiting lists for family counselling and mental health services.

I know that personally. My son experienced a mental health issue, and there was no predictability around that. He was in Toronto at the time and got services from CAMH, which was very responsive and made a significant difference in his life. He's found stability as a result. When you look at the rural population and you're talking about how to predict who's going to have a mental health crisis and who's not, we could have never predicted that with our son.

When you look at the people who access crisis services, you're looking at maybe 10% of the overall population who don't have those same social networks where they can get support. They don't have professional support. Sometimes it's a matter of not feeling comfortable about coming out and talking about the issues they're having.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Both to you and Ms. Kamkar, how do you feel we can address the stigma around mental health in agriculture because as somebody who's grown up in agriculture, I still have a lot of friends who farm. We touched on it a little in the first hour but as somebody who's still very engaged in the agricultural community, when we talk about stress and anxiety and depression and those mental health issues and different variations of them from within the agricultural community, we're talking about the majority of agricultural producers who suffer from some level of one of those ailments.

How do we lessen that stigma?

Ms. Katy Kamkar: You're right about that. If we're talking about the majority, speaking of Canada overall, one in five individuals suffer from mental health problems, which is not surprising. It's the same for physical health problems. To find better ways to reach the population and also so they believe us, they trust us, comes over time. We need to be persistent, consistent and creative. Obviously, when we adopt an activity, there could always be trial and error.

For example, I would go specifically to all those places with anything that could be on television, any ads, anything within workplaces, anything that could be within their neighbourhood, the grocery store and so on, and put ads here or there.

As was mentioned, access to services is extremely important but also before access to services, there is the pain and the suffering in silence. Any of those conversations or anything in pamphlets that they would see, for us to reframe the culture and say they're struggling, at the same time is all within one package. That's very normal. Making that consistent so they see it and they also start talking about it is how we can see the changes. This is also what we have noted in the other populations.

The other aspect we see is how it works in other populations, When we have people within a population, it could be a president, a chair, a leader, whoever, talking about their own struggles, their own issues and normalizing them, then it makes others coming forward more comfortable.

• (1040)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Kamkar.

Unfortunately we are out of time.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We have about two minutes left. Mr. Breton, you may ask a question.

Mr. Pierre Breton: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for their expertise and their interest in this issue.

Mr. McFadyen, you talked earlier about better access to services for farmers. Don't you sometimes feel that those services already exist to various degrees? Farmers are proud people. They are their own boss and their family's primary wage earner. A farmer knows very well that, if they consult a medical professional, there is a good chance they will be removed from their workplace so they can rest.

Do entrepreneurs have that fear? I called them "farmers", but they also entrepreneurs. They are among the main employees of the business and probably the most important ones.

[*English*]

Mr. John McFadyen: Certainly I think that's part of reducing the stigma about accessing services. Farmers are proud. When they're having issues, they tend to keep it inside. They don't seek help. They're resilient, but some people just don't have that ability.

With mental health, things can turn chronic if they're not addressed in certain situations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McFadyen.

We're out of time, unfortunately.

I want to thank both you and Dr. Kamkar for taking the time today to address this committee. It will certainly help us in our study, and hopefully help the farmers in the long term.

This is all for today. I think we have a vote forthcoming.

The meeting is adjourned.

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