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—
Chair

Mr. Pat Finnigan

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• (0845)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP)): We'll call the 115th meeting of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food to order.

I would like to welcome everyone to our continuing study on the mental health challenges that Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers face. Joining us today, we have Robert Johnston, who is a Clinical Psychologist and Manager of Addiction and Mental Health from Brooks, Alberta.

Robert Johnston, can you hear us?

Mr. Robert Johnston (Clinical Psychologist, Manager, Addiction and Mental Health, Alberta Health Services): Yes, I sure can. Can you hear me?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Yes, thank you very much.

We also have Chris van den Heuvel joining us today. He is the Director and Past President of the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture.

Welcome.

We also have Mr. Fred Phelps, the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Social Workers.

Welcome.

Witnesses, we're going to give you six minutes each for your opening statements.

Robert Johnston, we'll begin with you. Please begin when you're ready.

Mr. Robert Johnston: Good morning, everyone. Greetings from southeast Alberta. A big thank you for the invitation and opportunity to speak to you today about a very important topic that usually receives very limited attention.

Again, my name is Robert Johnston. I live in the southeast corner of Alberta in a rural area where, along with oil and gas activities, farming and ranching contribute significantly to our local and provincial economies. Similar to many areas across the country, many of these farms and ranches continue to operate intergenerationally and have been in the families for many generations.

On a personal level, I have enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in agricultural activities, from a family background as well as from growing crops and raising livestock on a small scale over the past 25 years. I mention this because partaking in this agricultural lifestyle and being embedded in a farming and ranching community has brought me a deep appreciation of the challenges facing agricultural producers. Although I am a farmer and rancher at heart, I am a clinical psychologist by trade, and I have been honoured to provide front-line and managerial mental health services to producers in our rural southeast Alberta area over the past 30 years.

In my current role as manager with our Alberta Health Services' provincial addiction and mental health community services portfolio, I've had a recent opportunity to develop and provide crisis support and follow-up services for ranchers facing the Jenner bovine TB situation. Individual, family and community supports were offered throughout this very difficult period.

In response to an invitation to present the producer mental health perspective on the TB event, I interviewed ranchers and farmers and presented the results of this qualitative study at a provincial veterinarian conference in 2017. The producers provided valuable and much-needed information about their experiences, as well as recommendations on how CFIA can build a people factor into future disease management processes. I'm currently having discussions with CFIA and Alberta Beef Producers regarding these recommendations, and there's optimism that policy changes may be made to consider the mental health aspect and supports required in situations that may include eradication of entire herds with multi-generational bloodlines.

In addition to crisis support services, our AHS community mental health mandate includes screening, assessment and treatment for children, youth and adults challenged with moderate to severe mental illness. This includes addictions counselling.

I'm not going to comment on the many challenges that our agricultural producers face that often result in significant stress and mental health concerns. I'm sure that you will hear from many about financial, social and weather issues, just to mention a few.

I would like to share a few brief observations as background to some recommendations for possible strategies toward improvements to agricultural mental health supports.

The stigma of seeking help for mental health concerns is well known and for many reasons that could be pondered and discussed at length, it is probably entrenched even deeper in the agricultural subculture. There are many valuable mental health supports available. However, like many groups, for example, seniors and immigrants, these services are not consistently accessed when referrals are made. I respectfully suggest consideration of the following recommendations to start to address mental health concerns:

The first is to rebrand through coordinated initiatives with agricultural producer groups the term “mental health services” as “agricultural wellness supports”. We are already doing this successfully through other initiatives in schools and within immigrant communities. An example would be to say, “You do a green-light maintenance inspection on your green farm equipment. As part of your personal business plan, please consider a green-light inspection on your farmer-rancher wellness.” My apologies to John Deere.

The second is to further develop the access door to available mental health services through ministry of agriculture funding, to be partnered, promoted and administered through producer associations at the provincial and national levels, for example, Alberta Beef Producers, Canadian Cattlemen's Association, or dairy as well as other sectors.

The third is to partner also with the ministries of health in the same way that the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children's Services have done to develop more accessible, pertinent and user-friendly access to mental health services. These initiatives should include prevention and promotion, and community presentations tailored to producers that are offered in their language. This would also provide an access point for referrals for more urgent mental health concerns. Basic information would be provided with regard to stress and coping, warning signs regarding more serious issues, for example, mental illness and suicidal risk, and, if required, where and how to access help on a crisis and long-term basis. Further development of producer-friendly online materials should also be made available.

● (0850)

Community assessment and treatment services should be made available on an outreach basis, with trained mobile practitioners being deployed as requested, at locations outside the usual in-town clinics and hospitals that are currently in use. Counselling services for non-clinical concerns, such as stress, coping and relational issues, should receive funding, since these are not typically funded through health. This support can often prevent the emergence of more serious longer-term clinical mental health concerns.

Crisis support services need to be readily accessible and responsive to the unique needs of specific sectors of the agriculture community. Many initiatives are in place in some areas, but there needs to be a more strategic coordinated effort to inform producers of this support and to promote access.

Throughout the ministry, initiatives and policies to recognize the need for producer support should be considered, as is currently happening with CFIA. Since the challenges and concerns of Canadian agricultural producers can be unique to specific sectors,

another study should be considered to better understand how supports can be developed to more effectively address a diverse array of issues and needs.

A final and very important consideration is to make sure to invite and involve producers to inform and participate in the development of any future mental health support initiatives. This could involve the Ministry of Agriculture sponsoring town hall meetings to receive feedback on how to move forward with new approaches to individuals and families very much in need of services.

My sincere thanks for the invitation to provide this information. Should you desire further clarification or discussion, I'm happy to provide that during the Q and A period.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Thank you very much for that, Mr. Johnston.

Mr. van den Heuvel, we'll continue with you for six minutes.

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel (Director and Past President, Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture): My name is Chris van den Heuvel. I'm a third-generation dairy farmer from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak before you here today. I appreciate the opportunity.

During my time in the industry, I've had the opportunity to sit on many different industry boards for farming organizations. I'm currently the president of our local federation of agriculture, director for the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture, and I also sit on the Canadian Federation of Agriculture executive board.

In these varied roles, I've experienced personally the impacts of mental health on our industry from different perspectives. From a national perspective, there's been research conducted and presentations made, which I'm sure you've heard about, on the mental health of our farmers across Canada. According to research done by Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton, we have a problem. This research from the University of Guelph indicates that many farmers are struggling in terms of mental health and are unable to access the resources needed for various reasons.

The numbers are truly of concern. The Guelph research says that 35% of farmers meet the clinical criteria for depression; 45% are classified as having high stress, and a staggering 58% of farmers suffer from high anxiety. These numbers are far, far higher than the general population, and there are many reasons for this.

We experience many of the same pressures faced by small and medium-sized businesses, such as price fluctuations for inputs, uncertain trade environments and competition with imported goods. Business owners have a lot to deal with. When there were proposed changes for taxing private corporations in 2017, we learned that many other small and medium-sized businesses face business succession challenges just as much as we do. Not knowing if you will be passing on your farm to the next generation after decades of hard work working the land is truly heartbreaking.

On top of the usual small and medium-sized business challenges, we as farmers face our own set of unique challenges in agriculture that are beyond our control. Extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, are on the rise and they put our crops at risk. In addition to that, pests and disease outbreaks can pose dire threats to the industry.

Farms are family businesses. We work where we live and we live where we work, which makes it hard to get away from our stresses. Lost in the mental health discussion a lot of times is the effects that mental health issues and stress have on the family, the spouses and children of farmers who literally live and breathe in the same environment where the stress can be so high.

While one of the benefits of farming is being able to work beside your family, we tend to miss a lot of family events because when the farm calls, we must answer. We subscribe literally to the saying that is thrown around so often: Make hay while the sun shines. Being forced to miss family events can have a detrimental effect on family relations and cause increased stress levels.

Provincially, we have faced some challenges over the past few years in Nova Scotia. Most recently, as I'm sure you've heard, we had a severe late frost this past June. This late frost has impacted many crops across Nova Scotia, with the most damage being done on wild blueberries, apples, Christmas trees and grapes. The financial loss associated with this frost is still incalculable in terms of dollars, but the stress that the loss because of frost put on our farmers is far more than the loss of sales.

We've heard from farmers who were concerned about losing their future market share. Others are concerned about damage done to future crops and extensive damage to plants, while other farmers are wondering how they're going to have cash flow to start next year's crop.

With all of these issues weighing on the minds of farmers after one event, it is no wonder that farmers' mental health is of concern, when you pile multiple events on top of one another.

In some cases, political shifts can cause unintended stress on farmers. Government programs are at risk of being changed when a government changes due to political differences. For example, many farmers rely on the seasonal agricultural worker program to help with cropping, and this program has recently been undergoing some administrative changes. This is challenging due to the inconsistency of the application process and requirements year over year and because farmers don't know who is going to harvest their crop in the event their application is further delayed.

In Nova Scotia, we're mindful of mental health concerns facing our industry, and we have taken a lead on addressing farmers' mental

health in our province. Farm Safety Nova Scotia coordinates key tools like the Farm Family Support Center, which is there for farmers to access in challenging times.

● (0855)

Farm Safety was also a co-host for an international farm safety conference that held a panel on mental health and a separate session on responding to farmers under stress, which opened as a post-conference event. To expand on that, the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture is partnering with Farm Safety Nova Scotia to bring Dr. Jones-Bitton to discuss mental health with our members at our upcoming annual general meeting.

We recognize the importance of having support and resources available and our recommendation on supporting farmers is twofold. The first is a national approach to developing a program, which is specific for farmers and industry stakeholders that is practical, useful and relatable. The second is provincial support networks. In Nova Scotia, it would be Farm Safety Nova Scotia. They are best able to deliver these nationally developed programs through their farming communities.

Going forward we need to lift the stigma around mental health and support our neighbours. While we can lump stresses into many categories, farmers face their individual challenges as well.

I'll put my notes aside and just talk about events that I've experienced personally.

I'll talk about one. My first cousin, Joe, grew up on the family farm. He raised hogs and grew hay. He had an off-farm job as a welder and was very well-respected in the community. We didn't know that he struggled with mental health issues. Two years ago, we buried him. My uncle found him on an abandoned road with a shotgun on the seat of the truck beside him. That was the last visual my uncle had of my cousin. We need help.

Thank you.

● (0900)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Thank you, Mr. van den Heuvel.

Mr. Phelps, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Fred Phelps (Executive Director, Canadian Association of Social Workers): Thank you very much.

We all know a Joe. I come from a family farm in northern Saskatchewan. My Uncle Joe did the same thing. Fortunately, he didn't die, but he lost half his face.

Long before I came to Ottawa to represent social workers, I grew up in rural Saskatchewan. Again, I have first-hand experience with this. I grew up with a long proud history of grain farmers, with my generation being the first who didn't carry it forward.

I took a less stressful route. I became a registered social worker, one of approximately 50,000 social workers in Canada, who can be found in hospitals, schools, community centres, correctional facilities, and many other places providing mental health services to Canadians.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this committee taking on this important issue and highlighting the fact that mental health and mental health supports in the agriculture community need to be addressed.

Having reviewed the list of other witnesses at this committee, I know you've heard statistics about farmers' mental health. You've heard about the results of the 2016 University of Guelph survey, which showed that nearly half of the producers experience high stress and emotional burnout and one-third experience anxiety. You've heard that this volatile occupation is a field predominantly dominated by men, and so gender is a factor.

We know that men die by suicide more often than women in Canada, and that men are more reluctant to seek help and services. This is where the important ongoing fight against stigma comes in, which we are proud to do, not only through our own association, but through our work with the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health.

Today I want to focus on one specific thing. From our perspective, access to services is one of the biggest problems facing the mental wellness of farmers and producers in Canada. I want to talk both about the levers available to the federal government, as well as how social workers can be part of the solution.

Right away, I want to acknowledge our support for the \$5 billion committed in budget 2017 for mental health in this country and, prior to that, the previous government's establishment of the Mental Health Commission of Canada. These were great steps forward, but we believe that sustained, predictable funding is required to ensure parity between physical and mental health in Canada.

Even now, Canada spends only about 7% of its health care budget on mental health, putting us way behind other countries such as the U.K., which spend an average of about 13% of their total health care budget on mental health. We can do better, and obviously we must do better.

I want to mention migrant workers. As it was before, every year, about 50,000 agri-food workers come to Canada, and they often live in poverty far away from their families. They experience myriad other stressors that can contribute to mental health concerns. On top of the challenges experienced by Canadian farmers and workers, these migrant workers are also impacted by their precarious status, experiencing social isolation, language barriers, limited access to care and services, and uncertain work conditions. More than anything, we want to ensure that the often overlooked population isn't invisible and that they're not excluded from this conversation.

Of course, next I have to address that most farmers and producers live in rural and remote areas. In 2012, a Canadian Institute for Health Information report on rural and remote Canada showed that of 11 countries, Canadians waited the longest for care. Since then, conditions have only deteriorated, with the Mental Health Commission of Canada identifying harms directly correlated to these waits.

With the acute mental health challenges that can be brought on by this volatile, massively debt-loaded and unpredictable thing we call farming, wait times can be all that more harmful.

Social workers are highly trained professionals who are capable of offering many of the same therapeutic services as other professionals, but at a significantly lower cost. In a small community that can only support one mental health practitioner, a social worker provides great value with broad skill sets, and they can provide various mental health interventions.

We also know that communities are ideally served by a practitioner from their community, as we heard earlier today, who understands the particular challenges of farming and ranching. However, with many young folks like me moving to urban settings for education and training, these communities have difficulty attracting mental health professionals to come back home.

To address this, we propose that eligibility for student loan forgiveness for social workers in rural and remote contexts would greatly support the recruitment of social workers to practice and stay in their home, and to return home to their farming and ranching communities.

In closing, I want to return to my most important point. Our broadest concern is that mental health services through social workers, psychologists and other regulated professionals are not part of the publicly funded system. Our simple message is that it is unacceptable that only those with the means to pay out of pocket and the ability to access private employment insurance plans are able to receive mental health services.

● (0905)

Knowing that the financial concerns created by the unpredictability of farming greatly contribute to this population's stress, we believe that a publicly funded mental health system would go a very long way towards alleviating this situation.

Thank you. I look forward to answering questions.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Thank you very much, Mr. Phelps.

Thank you, witnesses, for your opening statements.

We are now going to questions.

We will start with Mr. Dreeshen from the Conservative Party, for six minutes.

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

To all of our witnesses, thank you.

Mr. Johnston, I am from central Alberta. Certainly I am well aware of some of the concerns and issues having to do with bovine TB and before that, BSE. We had a situation where people's livelihoods were being affected and, as you mentioned, generational blood lines of cattle were being destroyed.

Could you talk about the relationship between the producers and the effects when all of these well-intentioned actions are taken by a government?

Mr. Robert Johnston: Yes, sure. The incubation that occurred out here was rather sudden, and in the interest of mental health, we were asked to come in and provide crisis support. I attended evening meetings and town hall meetings and offered individual support out there. The effect on the community and on individuals and families was just devastating. Their actual livelihood was threatened. A lot of the process of rolling this out was, I think, quite new to the CFIA with respect to the scope of it. It was commented that maybe they thought they were going out to Old MacDonald's Farm—400 acres and a few head—when it was really many thousands of acres and head that had to be contained. A lot of questions weren't answered readily, so there was a lot of significant stress. I can say there were individuals who were receiving services for the families, with the stress of that as well.

I would just end off by saying that I am optimistic, as I mentioned. There was a lot of discussion going on after I presented at the veterinarians conference, a lot of verbatim from the ranchers' mouths on what the experience was like for them. It's been further analyzed and there are some further themes to do with communication and competency and compassion as well as other things required to build a people factor into any future investigations that might have major impacts.

We're certainly working, from a health services perspective, to get in on supports earlier. I think this is an inter-ministerial type of thing that probably should be considered across the board when there are large-scale events happening where the supports are actually called in at the onset and are accessible immediately at the place where things are happening.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

Many farmers and groups of witnesses have mentioned the attacks that come about because of social media or just media in general. I think back to the BSE situation where all we ever saw on television was some Holstein from the U.K. that was flopping around. Every week, two or three times a day, that would be the issue Canadians had to be concerned about. Well, it wasn't the case. It wasn't the situation, yet we were being chastised by it. This was our own national media that were doing this, and they were doing it to our farmers.

This is another question. Other points have been brought up where we have these groups that will jump on anything that is anti-agriculture. This is part of the stress the farmers have.

Chris, could you comment on what you see when this negativity seems to be going against agriculture producers?

• (0910)

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: You hit it absolutely right on the head. We're being attacked from all sides.

I mentioned in my opening remarks that we're faced with a set of unique challenges such as droughts and pests that are out of our control. To a certain extent, though, we can do things about it. We can utilize new technologies like GMOs and responsible pesticide usage and stuff like that. As soon as we do that, though, we get constantly barraged with accusations that we're trying to poison people, trying to kill them. Well, no, we're not. We eat the same food we produce, and we stand fully behind it, and to be attacked like that

really hurts. It really does. It has a huge effect on how we go about our business. A lot of times we feel left out, unsupported by the media, by our politicians who bow to other countries when it comes to things like regulation of pesticides and the ability to move crops around and grow our food using a scientific method.

Yes, it really affects us to get attacked personally like that. It has a huge effect.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: The other point that I believe you mentioned, Chris, had to do with succession planning and the issues around a tax from CRA and changes.

I believe, Fred, that you had mentioned this as well. Where is this opportunity, like student loan help and so on?

When you take a look at that, farmers are asset rich but they are cash poor. Everybody talks about the rich farmer. Well, that's only if he's going to sell it to somebody else.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): You've reached six minutes.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: I appreciated that opportunity.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): We're now going over to the Liberals, with Mr. Peschisolido.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Mr. Chair, thank you and welcome, as our chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Thank you.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: I'd like to begin by speaking to Chris. You had mentioned earlier on that you had two stories. Thank you for sharing that very poignant and, I think, very illustrative event in your life. If you'd like, you can talk about your second story.

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: Thank you very much.

Although the first one was very personal as well, the second one involved me, involved my farm.

Five years ago we had a devastating barn fire. We lost 57 cows in that fire. That represented not just my family's lifetime but also my wife's. The farm is in my wife's family, the family farm. It represented the culmination of 50 years of work by her father and her mother on the farm, and that of her grandparents, who started the farm. When something like that happens, you have no idea the effect it has on you, on your family, your direct family, my son, my daughters, my wife.

Then you compound that. Two years after that fire, while rebuilding the barn—we built it ourselves—I fell off the roof of the barn. I broke three vertebrae in my back and broke my pelvis in five places. I spent three months hospitalized with an external fixator, with rods drilled through me, not being able to work on the farm, not being able to get home and not being able to be there to support my family.

Farmers are constantly faced with these multiple events that. It's not just the one event. It's the multitude of events. It's year after year of constantly being barraged. One year it's a drought. The next year it's too wet. The year after that, pests come through. The year after that, it's a barn fire. The year after that, you fall off the roof.

This has a terrible effect, a very heavy effect on the mental health of our farmers. We're less than 2% of the population, and we have to feed the other 98%. We're constantly being told to suck it up.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: You had mentioned during your presentation that a lot of farmers are not able to access resources. Based on your personal experience, what systemic changes can be made that will be helpful so that you and other farmers can access those resources?

• (0915)

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: I think we all mentioned the need for a national strategy around mental health that's specific for farmers. Because we are faced with a set of unique circumstances, as Fred can well attest to, the average social worker is probably not in tune. While they are very well able to handle the mental aspects of it, being able to associate with and have a connection to the set of unique circumstances that farmers are faced with is truly of great help when it comes to accessing these resources.

That would be number one, a national strategy around mental health that's specific to farmers, and having them roll out to our provincial organizations. There are a few that do have them, but we need more. We need more help.

In our case, we have a provincial program. Unfortunately, due to funding, we're limited to three hours of help. When you're faced with these issues, three hours is not a lot of time.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Yes.

Fred, one issue that always pops up at every session we have is the social stigma in the farming community to these issues. Concretely, what can be done to help change that, so that farmers don't think—I was going to say, “particularly guys”, but rather, it's the whole farming community—that they have to suck it up, that it's okay to have issues and to ask for help?

Mr. Fred Phelps: It's a very good question. I would look at it in two ways.

First is the anti-stigma campaign. Federally and nationally there have been strong anti-stigma campaigns.

I would agree that to reach a farming community, that message is very different from the one for the general population. I would agree with Chris to look at a strategy that's ranch and farm specific and speaks to those individuals directly. They do face a unique set of challenges. Living in the city, if I didn't know the farmer or hadn't grown up on the farm and I didn't see the level of stress my dad, uncles and cousins carried every day while I was growing up, I wouldn't necessarily understand it. We need a strategy specific to that population, when it comes to stigma.

Second would be structural funding, the funding of mental health services. As Chris just said, three hours of support through a provincial program is not enough. Through their own accord as a small business, a farmer may have been able to access extended health care benefits and services. Those are very limited in their scope as well. So structurally, look at addressing that population directly and ensure the services are in place with a national strategy to do that.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Thank you very much, Mr. Phelps.

With the committee's indulgence, I'll take a couple of minutes for my regular turn.

Mr. van den Heuvel, you mentioned in your opening statement that you're a dairy farmer, a farm of several generations, I believe. As a farmer in our supply-managed sectors.... We heard a lot about the uncertainty that farmers face. You made specific mention of shifting government programs. You mentioned the temporary foreign worker program that farmers rely on. I think we've also heard from farmers about business risk management programs and so on.

I'm curious about the impact of recent trade negotiations from your perspective as a farmer in our supply-managed sector. I'm thinking specifically of CETA, the CPTPP and now the USMCA.

Do you have any comments about the impact of those trade deals on our supply-managed sectors, specifically with uncertainty and stress?

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: Yes, absolutely.

In a nutshell, it's going to have a huge effect. It's going to be hugely detrimental to our industry.

Our government of whatever political stripe that negotiates these trade deals has to stop using agriculture as a pawn when it comes to negotiating. When you look at every major trade deal that has happened, these three major trade deals, CETA, CPTPP, and the new NAFTA, USMCA, agriculture was always the last one to be resolved, specifically supply management. Why is that? They know these other countries want access to our market, so we're going to hold that off and we know we're going to give up 2% or 3%, or whatever.

Our own president of the Dairy Farmers of Nova Scotia used a good analogy, that supply management is like a tire. When it's fully inflated it works well. You can let a little air out of it and give up a little percentage here and there, and the tire still works, but not quite as efficiently. The next one comes along and a little more is let out, and we lose market share and dollars out of our pockets. We lose income. The tire still works, but eventually it gets to the point when you let enough air out, the whole thing blows up.

When we look at our governments and we see they're negotiating trade deals and using our industry, our sector particularly, as the last negotiating point, that doesn't leave us in a very good place. We brace ourselves. We go through these trade deals with uncertainty. They constantly tell us, yes, we're going to protect, we're going to support. In the end, they never do.

That weighs heavily on us. We're losing millions of dollars. That has ramifications not just on our farms, but in our communities as well. Economic spinoff there is lost, at least three to one and as high as eight to one are the numbers I hear.

We lose 3% market share in this deal, compounded on the 3% on the last deal, compounded on.... They put out numbers of 10% lost market share...closer to 18%. Does anybody here want to take an 18% pay cut? I don't see too many hands going up.

That's what we're faced with, and we have no control over that. That hurts. We want and need the support.

● (0920)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Thank you for that.

We'll now move to the Liberals.

Mr. Drouin, go ahead for six minutes.

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

Thanks to the witnesses for being here.

Mr. van den Heuvel, you mentioned farm safety in Nova Scotia and access to tools. I'm wondering what the uptake is on the access to tools specifically for mental health. Do you have that number? Do we know if farmers are using those tools?

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: I don't have the actual number here in front of me, but I'll make sure that the office follows up and gets you those statistics. We do know that it is a well-run and well-utilized program. There has been lots of uptake and we've heard personal testimony from people who have used it and benefited from it. I'll make sure to follow up and get that to you.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Where I'm coming from is that I have chatted with doctors in psychology. They say that a helpline is helpful for maybe 10% of that particular population, and then there are those who will want to have social workers visit them and that will work for them. I think it's important for this committee to understand that we shouldn't make recommendations based on only one particular approach but should be open to those different approaches.

Speaking of social workers on farms and visiting them, we've heard, and I think I've heard you clearly say, that the buy-in for farmers is important. If that social worker was a farmer before, then they can really connect with that particular person. Is that something that's offered in Nova Scotia? Do you know if there are social workers who actually visit farmers proactively?

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: No, there are not to my knowledge.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I know that in Quebec they do that, and I think we've heard from many witnesses that that is something which would potentially be helpful.

On the national approach, we often talk about Growing Forward 1 and Growing Forward 2, the Canadian agricultural partnerships that were negotiated. We see five sectors that should be talked about, but mental health is never in there. As you know, mental health is a shared responsibility. Mostly the services are offered by provincial governments, but those are negotiated with provincial governments when we do that. Do you believe that this should be included in that?

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: Yes, absolutely. As Fred alluded to, our national spending on health care lags far behind that of other countries. We need access to the tools and the resources to be able to help our farmers.

As you have said, it is a shared responsibility. It's not only rural Nova Scotia or rural Saskatchewan, Alberta or whatever, or that rural Canada should pay for this because that's where we happen to live. We feed the rest of the population, so there is a shared responsibility, I believe, for everybody to be part of the solution.

● (0925)

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you.

Mr. Phelps, based on your experience, do you know what some of the provinces are doing to help farmer mental health? I mentioned the example in Quebec and we know about Nova Scotia, but what about other provinces?

Mr. Fred Phelps: Unfortunately, I will give a twofold answer again.

I think that mental health needs to be rolled into primary care. It's not rolled into primary care in the delivery of the provinces and territories. Each province and territory addresses mental health in its own way, but it's not integrated into primary care.

If we're looking for social workers to proactively be able to support farmers directly on their land and to come to their tractor when they're in crisis, that needs to be part of primary care delivery, and that isn't there.

If we're structurally looking to actually make mental health a priority, we'd advocate a mental health envelope of money, a mental health transfer over and above what is on the health transfer right now. We estimate that to keep the government at 25% of overall public health spending in the provinces and territories, that would mean an increase from 7% to 9%, so structurally about \$775 million per year to be able to bring that on par with physical health. That's what we advocate is a parity piece, so if the provinces and territories are working within their budgets, 50% to 55% of respective provincial budgets go to health care, but there's nothing specifically for mental health. We highly urge the federal government to look at a mental health envelope itself to transfer to the provinces and territories.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Johnston, you've mentioned the importance of rebranding mental health services as agricultural mental health awareness. I'm trying to understand why you believe that.

Mr. Robert Johnston: We've talked a lot about stigma. This is after a long time of.... There have been many really good campaigns to get information out. I think the next generation is that much more likely to access services. For this particular subculture, as I call it, they seem to be resistant to access anything on which you put the label "mental health", unless they're in an urgent crisis kind of situation. This is something we're doing in an initiative with immigrants, with seniors, putting it under the broader rubric of wellness. We're marketing this a little bit differently. We have a newcomer wellness health facilitator, for instance, in Brooks, because we have a high number of immigrants working at the meat-packing plant. It seems to be a bit more successful with respect to them feeling a little more at ease in coming in.

The other part of that rebranding is where the services are located

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): I'm sorry, Mr. Johnston, but I have to interrupt. The six minutes have expired.

Mr. Longfield, you have six minutes.

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

Please continue and finish your thought. We have time.

Mr. Robert Johnston: Okay. Thank you very much.

We're really taking a look at outreach, at where the services are located. We have psychologists and social workers who work with us. As has been noted, few people in that profession do have a background in farming, so there certainly has to be a sensitivity in offering services that can reduce the stigma as well.

We're really starting to look at what we're calling our services. If you put a big sign out that says "mental health services" or "addictions services", a lot of people have some difficulty accessing it. There are other ways of going around that. I would suggest, as I mentioned previously, that the ministry of agriculture can play a role in having that be the door to services and rebranding what they actually call it. There might be a better name, but we've come up with more of a wellness approach that would offer the same types of preventive and follow-up clinical services for the agricultural sector.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Great. Thank you.

Mr. Phelps, the website for the Canadian Association of Social Workers talks about "prevention, treatment and rehabilitation". How are these services being balanced right now? I get the impression that we are fighting fires versus the prevention side. I mean, mental health is one of those things that really come and go. Sometimes you don't know whether the person is going to be better. How do you measure whether they're better? When you get past a cold, you can kind of tell you're past a cold, but mental health is not the same as physical health.

•(0930)

Mr. Fred Phelps: No, it's not the same as physical health, and it's not funded the same as physical health.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: No.

Mr. Fred Phelps: It's about looking at the prevention side of things, looking upstream, looking at how you can have services available to individuals before they have a shotgun in their truck. I think that really is what it comes down to. We haven't done a good job of prevention. We haven't done a good job of putting mental health on par with physical health in the way we deal with it.

Chris was saying how he fell off a roof and went in. There was no question about the services he was going to get, no question about the long-term services ensuring that he had follow-up visits for his physical health. We don't have the same thing when it comes to mental health.

The prevention side, yes, needs to be there. That can come through national campaigns, specifically hotlines or websites on how to deal with wellness, how to deal with day-to-day stresses, and how to prevent getting into a situation where you think the only out is a shotgun. That is a piece of it, but it has to be followed by treatment.

One thing we've noticed is that when you look at mental health now across Canada, it's out of the shadows in the sense that a heck of

a lot of people are able to talk about mental health now in a way they never did before. I imagine Chris 10 years ago wouldn't have shared that story about his cousin. We're coming out of the shadows now, and having those conversations, but you have to have the services. It's almost like gaslighting people when you tell them, okay, you can come out and talk about the issues—that you have this issue, that you're stressed, that you have to do something for you and your family—but then there are no services you can access. That's when we get into crisis.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Right. Thank you.

As I mentioned to both of you before our meeting, we are hearing these very raw stories that are making us think about how we as legislators put the right safety nets in place, working with the provinces.

Chris, you were talking about the trade deals and the impacts. We're very early in the game with the latest version of NAFTA. We're doing consultations with dairy farmers, with their national organizations. Are you plugged into that yet? Could you talk about how you connect with the national body when we're looking at mitigating the effects of trade deals on dairy farmers?

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: Yes, we're tapped into that, and actually I've been up in Ottawa for the past couple of days at a CFA board meeting. As I mentioned, I'm on the executive. They announced while we were in session that they were having these session groups relative to that.

Here's the kicker: Trump announced his tariffs and immediately announced a \$12-billion support package for farmers. No questions asked, here it is. What does our government do? It does the same thing in giving away the market access, but then it says, "Ah, we're going to study what the effects of that are and somewhere down the road we'll get to a point."

It's that uncertainty that makes us ask why we would go ahead and invest in growth mode in our farms, when we have no idea what support tools are going to be there for us in the future. We can't. It's that level of uncertainty that tells us to hold off, that there's no support here for us and we might as well hold off on investing in that new harvester, that new barn or those 10 new cows that we wanted to buy.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: From your supply-managed sector, the urgency is what we're hearing loud and clear.

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: It's paramount.

There is absolutely no excuse and no reason that level of stress should be put on farmers when you say you're going to study this further. If you know you're going to give away market access, then the next thing out of your mouth had better be, "Here's what we're going to do to compensate for that, like other countries do."

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: There is quite a delay in terms of phase-in. It's starting in three years and going over 15. We have to match the urgency to what we're working on.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): We're going to move to Mr. Shipley for the Conservatives, for six minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to all of the witnesses.

As my colleague Mr. Longfield said, we would not have heard about those true, real-life stories a few years ago. We would talk about them generally, but not the details. What we're actually wanting to do, even though I'm not sure we're going to make it.... In the 1980s it was a reactive response to a situation where we had some of those same sorts of issues. We were hoping as a committee now to be proactive on this, yet I think we're in the midst of it, quite honestly.

This is maybe more of a comment, but I know Mr. van den Heuvel, Mr. Phelps and Mr. Johnston said it, and I agree. In terms of social media, it's the add-on stuff. We have now, and you mentioned the CFIA, PMRA and the veterinary drugs directorate, everything that we, the 1.5% in this country, use to produce the food for the other 98.5%. Attacks are made against us for providing the safest food in the world. The frustrating part is that it's not just an attack on you, Chris. It's an attack on your family and it's an attack on our industry.

We had a barn fire in our region where they lost the barn and all the pigs, and there were people out on the road waving signs calling them murderers. You know, it wasn't just about the fire. They'd lost everything they'd put their investment in. Now it's a personal attack against us, and there are no consequences for those folks. We have our hogs in Ontario going to packing plants, and there are people on the road stopping them and giving them water, and we don't know what they're giving them. They could be handing them water with poison in it, but once that happens, that whole truck of hogs is lost.

We've covered a lot of talks. We're trying to get a discussion at our committee where we would bring in the minister and those people to talk about the trade agreements and the impacts on agriculture, because some of it isn't impacted, but some of it is more so. We need to have that discussion. I'm not sure that actually—maybe my colleagues across the way can talk about it—we even got the Canadian tax yet, because everything we're running off up until now has been just using the U.S. tax.

If we're going to help as the federal government.... Mr. Phelps, you talked about 7% of the health care budget going to mental health. One of the last things all of us here want to see is a bureaucracy-loaded system...recognizing the responsibility of the federal and provincial governments and then some of the associations. You may not have the answer now, but you could help us by giving us some recommendations, through your associations, on what we could do to best provide that service. How do we effectively provide it and make it so that you folks on the ground, those of us who are in the industry...?We've been told by people that they hope they are actually people who understand agriculture and have lived a little bit with it. Mr. Poissant and I have talked a bit about the significance of that, and so has your chair, Ron Bonnett.

Could you help us with that? I don't know if you have any comments on that right now.

I see you were nodding, Mr. van den Heuvel.

● (0935)

Mr. Chris van den Heuvel: Yes, thank you very much.

Obviously our ask is for more funding going directly to mental health.

On the preventive side, it's having a well-rounded and well-regulated—and by well-regulated, I don't mean over-regulated; I mean efficiently regulated—suite of programs that farmers can access. For example, the business risk management tools allow us, in the face of disasters, drought, floods, pests or whatever, to take advantage of compensation, if you will, in the face of those things and the uncertainty around them.

The unfortunate reality is, in the last three federal funding programs, our agriculture budget has not increased. We've had the same amount of dollars in Growing Forward 1 and Growing Forward 2 and now in this new CAP funding program, yet we're challenged by Dominic Barton in the Barton report, and more recently an even larger increase by Murad Al-Katib in the agri-food strategy round table to increase exports by \$30 billion in seven years.

Who is going to take on the risk of planting those crops and growing those animals and processing that food? They're telling us to. They're going to give us the same amount of money to do it, but we have to increase our output by 30%. It's that suck-it-up attitude again, and we have to prevent that.

On the preventive side, having a well-rounded and a well-funded suite of programs would go a long way.

● (0940)

Mr. Bev Shipley: I think the chair is nodding that I am done.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

Ms. Nassif, we have two minutes for you.

[Translation]

Mrs. Eva Nassif (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Johnston.

As a psychologist, could you talk to us about the most urgent priorities in mental health and the tools likely to prevent crises, like those Mr. van den Heuvel described to us, which can sometimes lead to suicide?

[English]

Mr. Robert Johnston: Sure, and I think there are two aspects to that. One is to have timely access to crisis support services right in the community that would be mobile, to hook up the individuals with the type of services they need. If it's suicide risk, there is hospitalization sometimes. The other, with the prevention piece, I think it is to have some of these community psycho-educational type of presentations that talk about wellness, available mental health services, warning signs and so on, similar to what's been discussed here.

I certainly concur that there needs to be more of a national strategy. I think there need to be provincial stamps on how that gets rolled out through the sectors in different areas.

Through these workshops and presentations right in communities there is a building of trust in the relationship that people would be able to access in a time of crisis. Also at those presentations—and I've done many of them myself—people will hang around after and start talking to you about their concerns. That's a very good access point to get people into services as well.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Is there anything that could be suggested to young farmers lacking experience? Could training and education help young farmers who are thinking of getting into agriculture?

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Johnston: Yes, I think definitely there are a lot of very good programs in these farming communities and a lot of funding going into the education system in schools. That needs to be made applicable to them personally if they're moving into farming. In addition, for instance, we offer agricultural programs in Olds, Alberta, and I'm sure that's the same across the country.

There needs to be a wellness component that includes mental health within some of the training so they are able to look after themselves and be informed about mental health concerns and how to get help as soon as possible.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alistair MacGregor): Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Phelps, Mr. van den Heuvel and Mr. Johnston, thank you for appearing and giving your testimony today.

The committee is going to suspend for a couple of minutes to go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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