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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.)): We'll get going.

Thank you, all, for being here this morning. Welcome.

Today, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, November 1, 2018, the committee commences its study of support of indigenous Canadians in the agriculture and agri-food industry.

This morning, from the Indian Agricultural Program of Ontario, we have Mr. Jamie Hall. Welcome to our committee, Mr. Hall.

Also, from the Okanagan Indian Band, we have Chief Byron Louis. Welcome to our committee, Chief Louis.

We will start with an opening statement of up to seven minutes.

Chief Louis, do you want to get us going?

Chief Byron Louis (Chief, Okanagan Indian Band): Thank you.

I can start, more or less, with what is looked upon as a historical perspective of agriculture in first nations. There are various studies around it, even in Canada, that show that agriculture in the western woodlands went back to about 900 AD. When you start looking at the contributions of first nations and indigenous people from the western hemisphere, today about 60% of all foods that are traded internationally originate in North America.

I often tell people to imagine Italian cuisine without tomatoes, or fish and chips without potatoes, or different varieties of corn or different other things. Those are foodstuffs that actually have their origins in the western hemisphere. Even today, 60% of all produce that's actually developed, grown and traded in the United States has its origins in the western hemisphere.

When we're looking at that from a historical perspective and how that actually fits in, one thing that is near and dear to us is the fact that, when you look at agriculture, agriculture is central to a lot of first nations cultures. One thing that's needed is looking at the definition of what agriculture actually is. If you look at it from a western perspective, it's basically opening the soil and opening the ground for produce and different other things. But in the western sense, agriculture takes various forms. What you see out in the east is what they call the planting of the "three sisters," which are corn, beans and squash. The uses of that were very well-thought-of in how

they have the corn and the beans, which are a nitrogen fixer, going up on the corn stalk, and then the squash, the pumpkins, that actually provide seeds so you use less water. If you look at that, from an innovation perspective, that's basically part of that.

If you look at the Haudenosaunee today, you see that they have over 29 different varieties of corn that are actually grown from prior to contact. This doesn't include such things as tobacco and other types of products.

Going out west, there's often the assumption that agriculture only went so far north, the southern end of North Dakota, but they're having studies in Winnipeg where pollen from corn is actually being dug up in some of the archeological finds outside of Winnipeg. If you go further west, what we used was predominantly fire for agricultural purposes and production. Even for some of the waterborne uses of such things as wapato, an aquatic plant that grows in rivers, along riverways, there are sites that were prepared that go back 5,000 years. We also look at such things as innovations in aquaculture, which we also feel is a form of agriculture that's actually used, and some of these areas were 5,000 years old, clam beds on the west coast.

Agriculture is something that's not foreign to us. In a more contemporary sense, I myself come from a family that has about four generations who were farmers and ranchers. A lot of ours was dryland farming. It's no different from the turn of the century, when a lot of our forefathers were buying threshing machines and our whole community once was, basically, into vegetables: tomatoes and different types of crops that were sent to canneries in Kelowna. One of the things that happened was that we were able to compete, but only to a certain point. Around the 1950s and 1960s, irrigation was put into pipes and infrastructure off reserve, which we were not able to obtain, and that was basically the downfall of that industry.

When we're looking at the future of agriculture for first nations, it's incredible what the growth is. A recent study that I sent out, "Success and Sustainability" from the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, shows that 50% of all agriculture produced by first nations in Canada goes for international trade.

•(0850)

The Blood reserve is trading no less than nine different kinds of agricultural produce to Japan for their Wagyu. Wagyu is beef that is grown in Japan. Osoyoos is the largest producer of grapes in all of Canada, and in fact the largest employer other than the south Okanagan. With their Nk'Mip winery, they produces wines that are actually having international recognition. It's the same thing on a private scale, where individuals are starting to move into that area. We have an individual who's an ex-chief out of Kelowna who is not only getting into wineries with Indigenous World Winery, but also going into distilleries and cider production.

These are all initiatives that are actually open. Out on Vancouver Island, chief Gordon Planes is using solar energy for greenhouse production. He's growing wasabi and also looking at shellfish production for international trade. Going east, in some of the areas in Ontario, you have wild rice, and others are using syrups and looking at different types of markets. That's considerable. If you go out towards the east, there was a certain purchase recently where the Annapolis Valley First Nation bought a farm. This farm is actually used for that type of initiative.

When we're looking at the future of agriculture, it's quite bright. As first nations, we look at the opportunity not in a domestic nature inside of Canada. We believe our future in agriculture exists in the international markets, which aren't subject to such things as quotas where we, as first nations, would have to buy into a quota and then look at the purchase of farms, at operations and maintenance, and compete with somebody who's already made those investments.

That's seven minutes.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Chief Louis.

Mr. Hall, if you want to go, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Jamie Hall (General Manager, Indian Agricultural Program of Ontario): Thank you very much.

I'm the general manager of IAPO, the Indian Agricultural Program of Ontario. We were established in 1984 with federal support as an aboriginal capital corporation with a mandate to promote the economic development of first nations communities through the utilization of agricultural resources. IAPO operates as a not-for-profit social enterprise. Since its inception, we've advanced over \$80 million in loans for all types of farming operations.

While IAPO was formed to address the barriers faced by first nations farmers on reserve accessing credit, IAPO soon recognized that access to financing was not enough to ensure success, and, on an ad hoc basis, we provide agricultural extension and business advisory services, as funding and finances permit.

In recent decades, while the agricultural economy has expanded and prospered, first nations participation in this success has lagged substantially, due to legal policies and socio-economic factors. With appropriate strategies, abundant but underutilized assets and resources could be harnessed to provide meaningful economic opportunities for first nations communities, businesses and entrepreneurs across Canada.

Chief Louis talked briefly about some of the opportunities, and I'd like to elaborate on that further.

First, it cannot be ignored that there are vast tracts of land in first nations' control. In many cases, it is underutilized in terms of its economic potential, and there's a great opportunity to harness that.

Further, with land claims, land under reserve control continues to grow. Between 2006 and 2014, almost 3,500 square kilometres of land were added, and with 40% of Canada's landmass still under land claim, we expect that the vast quantities of land will continue to increase. We have a tremendous opportunity in terms of resources.

The other tremendous resource is the demographics. The first nations community is quite young and growing very fast. The median age is 32. We have a young population seeking meaningful economic opportunities, and agriculture can be part of that, whether farming or agri-food. If we look at the impact of that within the industry, it's important to consider the succession crisis that might be facing the Canadian farm industry. With the average age of producers being 55, and only 8% of them having succession plans, there's an opportunity to bring two worlds together. Similarly, regarding jobs in agriculture, according to the FCC, about 7% of agriculture jobs are unfilled, and by 2025 they estimate that 25% will be unfilled. Here we have a young, dynamic population seeking meaningful economic opportunities, and there's an opportunity to bring those two together.

Another area that can't be overlooked when we're discussing agriculture is food security. It's an omnipresent issue among communities. It's not an issue that relates solely to northern or remote communities. In southern Ontario, food deserts exist. Anything we do that supports the development of farms and agriculture within first nations communities can help address food security issues and help build local food economies.

Last, the big opportunity is within the context of reconciliation. As the National Aboriginal Economic Development Board outlined in its paper entitled "Reconciliation: Growing Canada's Economy by \$27.7 Billion", closing the gap in income between the indigenous and non-indigenous population in Canada would result in an estimated increase in GDP of \$27.7 billion. Agriculture can be a big part of closing that gap. We have a tremendous opportunity.

Now that we've talked about the opportunities, I think it's important to look at some of the potential constraints and the reasons for the state of affairs today. In addition to the typical challenges any farmer or agribusiness faces, including things like weather, markets and trade, first nations businesses and entrepreneurs face a unique set of challenges.

The first is limited access to credit. The Indian Act prevents individuals residing on reserve from pledging their assets as security, whether it be land, equipment or whatever else. That is an incredible roadblock to wealth creation and financing. The farm industry has expanded in Canada based on acceleration of land values and being able to borrow against that and leverage it for further growth. That opportunity does not exist among first nations in first nations communities.

• (0855)

The access to credit issue also affects organizations like IAPO. We provide developmental lending to first nations farmers in Ontario, but across Canada there are about 55 similar AFIs—aboriginal financial institutions—and they don't have secure access to funding for loan capital. In our history, as times have gone on, we've run into the position where we haven't had funding available to lend out to producers.

Some other unique socio-economic areas that are worth noting for how they impact participation in agriculture include, first of all, education attainment. Over 40% of farm operators in Canada have post-secondary education. Secondary and post-secondary education attainment among first nations members is far lower than that.

As well, if you think about informal training and skill development, in a robust farm economy in the countryside, either from father to son or from neighbour to neighbour, there's a vibrant agricultural economy where those who are interested can learn about farming, get experience and start to learn their trade. In many first nations communities—though not all—there is no ag economy. There is, again, a lack of opportunity for informal training or skill development.

Last, there's the technology gap. It's widely known that access to and utilization of technology by aboriginal businesses are lower. Four in 10 aboriginal businesses report that they have either no or unreliable Internet connection, whereas 81% of farm operators report using the Internet regularly for email, product information and research.

• (0900)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hall. Time is up, but you'll have a chance to elaborate further when we have questions.

[Translation]

We'll now begin the question and answer period.

Mr. Berthold, you have six minutes.

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

Chief Louis and Mr. Hall, thank you very much for being with us today.

Chief Louis, thank you for giving us a picture of the indigenous presence in agriculture. Honestly, there are not many indigenous people in the riding I represent. In southern Quebec, there is no community, frankly, and we don't have frequent ties to indigenous communities. So I found your presentation very interesting.

Is there an inventory of good agricultural practices or successes among indigenous people? If not, it seems to me that it would be

very interesting to highlight this very positive aspect of the relationship between indigenous people and agriculture.

[English]

Chief Byron Louis: There are organizations at the regional level, but there's nothing as yet for a national aboriginal lobby group that deals specifically with agriculture. Most of the initiatives to date have been provincially led, within specific regions. Their success is.... In British Columbia, we used to have a number of them, but now we're down to none.

It would be good to actually have something like that—a national organization looking at how we can share best practices in different areas. You know, the wine-growing industry in the Okanagan would be a very good fit with southern Ontario, in terms of grape production. Others are now.... Nova Scotia is actually producing some very good white wines. Other best practices would be in beef production. Out in British Columbia, our people have been dryland farmers raising cattle for the last four or five generations. It's considerable, and there are all types of opportunities when you look at what some of the bands are undertaking.

I gave the example of Chief Gordon Planes. Right now that's actually attracting international attention and possibilities for that type of development. I think that's something that would be good. That's one of the areas where we really need.... First nations are really dependent on venture capital, not only domestic, but foreign. This is one of the things I recently asked other government officials. When people are coming into Canada looking for investment, who's at the door to actually shake their hands and introduce themselves as potential recipients for this type of development?

I think in the future, part of what you just described would be a perfect vehicle to say that first nations are open for business.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you very much.

I'll give the rest of my time to Mr. Shipley, who also had some questions for you.

[English]

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

Thank you for coming out.

I heard you mention, Chief, that you recently bought a farm. How did that work in terms of the financing? I don't know where it was, but I'm just wondering how that worked.

Chief Byron Louis: The example I provided actually came from Nova Scotia, at the far end of the Annapolis Valley. It was with the Annapolis Valley First Nation, one of the Mi'kmaq communities.

Mr. Bev Shipley: How would you finance that? We just heard from Mr. Hall that access to financing.... We get that it's kind of general in the agriculture area, but there are some specific things. I'm just wondering how you would access the financing for it.

Chief Byron Louis: It all depends on the situation. We bought two ranches. One is Sun Valley Ranch, which we purchased with our own resources generated from economic ventures on reserve. Others will look at putting what's called a registered lease on a certain amount of land and use that for collateral. Other ones, like ourselves.... As I said, we actually bought two properties specifically for that purpose. Right now we can secure loans with a bank for up to \$10 million based upon some of our assets and monies held in trust.

Other communities aren't in that particular situation, so they look at different types of grants available and other things. I think it would take some time to actually research that one.

● (0905)

Mr. Bev Shipley: Up in my area, as was mentioned, there's a lot of unutilized land. I'm not sure what the percentage is. Is there a breakdown somewhere? I'm in southwestern Ontario. From southwestern Ontario up to the northern part of Canada and Ontario.... I suspect the land in our area can be utilized. The example I am using is one where they have 5,000 acres. Apparently they run 2,500 and then they rent out.

There is that utilization. In fact, they have it tiled. In a year like this, it's likely been a good investment.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley, sorry, the time is up. I'm going to have to move on.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I will come back.

The Chair: We have Mr. Longfield for six minutes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): I'm going to try to finish Mr. Shipley's question about the land opportunity because it was one I had on my mind. I would like to know whether we keep track in any way of how much land is being used for agricultural purposes by first nations.

Mr. Jamie Hall: I'm not aware of anyone tracking that.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Is that okay, Mr. Shipley?

Mr. Bev Shipley: That's good stuff. Thank you, Lloyd.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: You're welcome.

I was really interested in this topic. I put forward a motion to do this study. Some of my interest came from a comment that we had from Natan Obed in a Canada food policy study. He said that his communities need better access to country food. They don't need leafy vegetables and they don't need vertical farming. They want access to their own food.

Chief Louis, you mentioned the generations that have been farming on the west coast. We kind of have a mixture of country food and cultivated food within first nations themselves. Different nations will look at different opportunities. You went coast to coast, when you looked at the.... I guess it's coast to coast, because we have the northern food programs as well.

Would first nations embrace agriculture if they're not currently doing agriculture? Is it within the culture of first nations to take hold of this opportunity, or is this another case of non-first nations putting a solution on first nations?

Chief Byron Louis: I think a lot of it is that old saying, "location, location, location". That's very important when you're actually looking at an opportunity. For us in the central and southern interior of British Columbia, agriculture is a very realistic opportunity, especially when looking at how we can mix that with putting value onto a farm product, as I mentioned some people are actually doing. If we look at other areas of the country, we see that Saskatchewan, for example, has about two million acres. They're about to add an additional two million acres through treaty land entitlement. With regard to some of the negotiations that were mentioned earlier, in southern Ontario, most of these people who are having settlements are not going to be buying property in downtown Toronto. They're going to be buying something that's more viable, like acreage.

Agriculture has always been a part of our cultures, especially in the southern regions of Canada. It was for subsistence. Going back four generations, we were like everybody else; the supermarket was in the backyard. It was only recently that those practices actually stopped. So, agriculture is not foreign to us; it's more or less a movement. In our community, as I said, we had agriculture that was based upon ditches and flood irrigation. Then we went into dryland farming when that collapsed. We need to be able to take the next step.

This is one of the things I told the province. I said that it was a very myopic view not to support first nations in the 1940s and 1950s in putting in waterlines and such. If it had, every last acre on our band would have been under registered lease, which is also taxable. I said, "You've basically forgone hundreds of millions of dollars." It was a missed opportunity to have not only the benefit of another producer, but the tax generation that comes from that.

If you look at it from that perspective, some of our bands in the Okanagan Valley.... Westbank First Nation actually contributes close to \$80 million; \$50 million goes to the provincial government, and \$30 million to the feds. Osoyoos Indian Band is somewhere along the same line, and in between are other bands that are probably contributing close to \$100 million. Can you imagine adding agriculture to that mix?

● (0910)

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: The economic investment would be paying back to the government, hopefully.

Chief Byron Louis: Absolutely, it would be, yes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you.

Mr. Hall, I have two minutes left. The Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council had a report that said that aboriginal workers are a promising source of labour. You mentioned the access for young people, people who could be contributing. However, the report pointed out that only 10.6% of producers surveyed said that they would be willing to hire an aboriginal worker. They cited cultural differences and communication difficulties as reasons for a reluctance in hiring aboriginal people.

What solutions would we be looking at to try to overcome this and encourage producers to hire indigenous people?

The Chair: Give a very short answer, please.

Mr. Jamie Hall: Quite frankly, I haven't considered that side of the equation. Changing long-standing beliefs or misbeliefs could be very difficult. I will note that the agricultural industry in many parts of Canada has been built on foreign workers who have incredible language barriers and all those kinds of issues.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Yes. Very good, thank you.

The Chair: I'm going to have to cut you off.

Mr. MacGregor, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you, Chief Louis, for reminding this committee, and indeed everyone, that before the arrival of Europeans, there were some great flourishing agricultural civilizations in the western hemisphere. I think it's great to remind us that the tomato, the potato and corn all originated from here. Before the arrival of Columbus, Europeans had no idea that they existed.

In my part of the world, Vancouver Island is home to the Cowichan people. They have an amazing history, of course, that is based on the ocean. There's a popular saying among the Cowichan people that when the tide goes out, the table is set. There are very different experiences about traditional and culturally appropriate foods. The nations in my region are very much dependent on salmon. There is ample evidence of thousand-year-old clam beds and midden heaps. You can see old tools that were used, littering the beaches everywhere. It's amazing.

Going to your part of the world, the Okanagan is one of my favourite parts of British Columbia. If you look at the summertime in the Okanagan, because of how far north it is, you get more hours of sun in the summer than California does, which makes it such an amazing region for growing wine grapes and so on. I know a lot of people have had a lot of success growing ginseng as well.

On the Okanagan Indian Band website, I noticed there was a community agricultural meeting back in 2016, and you invited members to learn about some of the opportunities. I was just wondering if you could inform our committee about how some of those conversations have gone among your members. What has the pickup been, just from your own experience?

• (0915)

Chief Byron Louis: I would say it's mixed, because, after a hundred and something years, this is pretty hard to look at. From the perspective of a lot of our members, there was no support. Even with federal programs, we couldn't access those programs. Basically, all of our agriculturalists were self-sufficient and self-supporting. It didn't matter if you were a dryland farmer or if you were going back into vegetables or anything else. You were basically doing that yourself. After that 100 years, when people start looking at it.... You mention agriculture and they say, "My God, that's so tough. Let's make a modular home park. We can take advantage of that, because it has a proven track record."

However, I really have to say that in other parts they're are saying, "No, we still have an agricultural land base. We need to look at it. How do we expand on that to make a living?"

Our membership, I think, is very progressive. In a community of 2,000, we produce two surgeons, two general practitioners, and we have other people in there. The very first person we educated in 1968 went on to become the first first nations MP, Len Marchand. We're very progressive in that regard, but we need to have people understand that agriculture is still viable. We need to convince those looking at the possibility of a modular home park, as opposed to looking at produce, that it can be value-added. It's still a viable alternative.

The better part of our people, about half the respondents, were very interested. The other part was the ones who didn't show up or the ones we have to convince.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Ultimately, this study is going to result in a report with some recommendations. We want to base that on the testimony we receive at this committee, so it's very important that we hear from witnesses like you.

When you look at the role of the federal and provincial governments, from your point of view, what kind of role do you think the federal government could play?

I think you've had some contact with the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, but what about the federal government specifically?

Chief Byron Louis: The federal government plays a very prominent role in first nations agriculture, when you look at it from local producers all the way up to international trade. We recently had a discussion with Minister Freeland on this whole issue.

As I mentioned when I made the opening statement, one of the things with first nations is that we believe our future isn't in the domestic market; it's in the international market, where we can look at certain niches that will be beneficial. We're not trying to corner the market anywhere, but if we could find a niche....

If you look at the example of India, they have 400 million people and they're middle class. Each year, consumption of imported alcohol or international beer grows at 25%. That's considerable. If we could just get a fraction of a fraction of a percent, we're talking about a considerable opportunity, and this is only one place. The federal government plays a very prominent role in this.

Mr. Jamie Hall: The federal government plays a role internationally, but domestically both the federal and provincial governments really do not provide a lot of direct support for indigenous farmers in Canada.

Speaking to an earlier question about how we can get BMPs out and get the word out to build awareness around agriculture, the Canadian agricultural economy and the economy as a whole were built on a robust agricultural extension service through the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s that provided capacity for development, not only at the farm level through farm extension representatives in every county, but for youth through 4-H and for women through the Women's Institute—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hall. Unfortunately—

Mr. Jamie Hall: That is gone today.

The Chair: I have to cut you off. Again, I'm sorry about that.

[Translation]

Mr. Breton, you have the floor.

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

Chief Louis and Mr. Hall, thank you for your testimony today. Like my colleague Mr. Berthold, my riding also has no indigenous communities and almost no members of your respective communities. However, I'm very interested in this topic and am learning a lot today. Thank you again for your testimony and for accepting our invitation.

As you said, about one-third of the members of indigenous communities are reported to be food insecure. From what I've read, the Government of Canada established the nutrition north Canada program a few years ago. I don't know if you're familiar with it, but I would suppose so. This program is supposed to reduce the cost of food for people living in remote communities.

Could you tell us if this program is working, if it's meeting the objectives of reducing food prices and if it is benefiting communities? And if some aspects of the program are working well or less well, what could the Government of Canada do in that regard?

You can answer in turn. Mr. Hall, do you want to start?

● (0920)

[English]

Mr. Jamie Hall: With regard to the nutrition north program, I don't have a lot of experience or expertise with it, and I've never evaluated whether the outcomes are working or what they are achieving. I'm more rooted in southern Ontario.

I would say anecdotally, though, from comments we hear from communities, that there are issues around the affordability and access to food, and they continue to look for means and methods of combining food production with traditional harvests to reduce that food insecurity.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: What do you think, Chief Louis?

[English]

Chief Byron Louis: Again, it's location, location, location. There is a certain band out in Manitoba that has actually looked at having a greenhouse for that specific reason. Now these greenhouses are very innovative. Some of them are actually stackable and you don't need a large footprint. They are growing a lot of their produce that otherwise would be shipped in by air or other means of transport, which really increases the cost.

I recently went up to Old Crow, the northernmost first nation community in Yukon. Up there, you're still looking at a bag of rice that's about this big and you're paying \$9 just for that bag. A small piece of fish, coho, is going for \$26, so you can imagine that's \$130 just to put protein on the plate for a family of five.

If you ask me what the success of that is, I think there needs to be more work put into that, because once these people have the diminishment of what's happening—especially in the northern communities, the Northwest Territories and in those Quebec regions—now they have to supplement the cariboo that they used to be able to put on their plates readily any time of the year. The cost

of supplementing that meat or that protein is astronomical, and one of the things that were guaranteed by Canada at its inception was that they would have continued and unbroken access to what you described as country foods. As you go farther north, dependence on those country foods is even greater.

So if you ask me about how successful the program is, I'll say it needs more work. It needs to be looked at in terms of how you can actually better utilize what's there, because some of what you mentioned, greenhouses.... Inuit, from my experience, don't like vegetables. But there are possibilities when you're looking at other means—someone mentioned aquatic. Fish farms or possibly other types of ventures may be more successful than trying to introduce vegetables to people who never actually had them.

On the cost of food, a recent study out of Nunavut found that a lot of the produce went to the dump because people couldn't afford it. In a roundabout way, that's where they get it, though. Once it actually enters the dump, they go there to pick through it. That's a pretty sad state.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you for your answers.

There's another program called Indigenous Pathfinder. This program was put in place by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and appears to be in the form of one-on-one support. It doesn't necessarily seem to be for northerners, but more for indigenous people in general.

Are you familiar with this program, and how does it help you?

My question is for Mr. Hall or Chief Louis.

● (0925)

[English]

Mr. Jamie Hall: Are you referring to what they call the Pathfinder service?

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: What do you call the program?

[English]

Mr. Jamie Hall: It's the Pathfinder service.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Breton, your time is now up, but we will be able to come back to you later.

Mr. Peschisolido, you have six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Joe Peschisolido (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you.

I'd like to welcome Chief Louis and Mr. Hall to the committee.

Mr. Hall, I'll give you an opportunity to talk about two things. First, can you follow up on Monsieur Berthold's question? Second, I was intrigued by your comment that the federal government does not provide enough support. Can you follow up and elaborate on that, please?

Mr. Jamie Hall: With regard to the Pathfinder service, as I understand it, that service was created in the last year or so. IAPO as an organization has not utilized it, because we actually have very good relationships and contacts within Agriculture Canada. However, the approach looks very promising—reaching out to people seeking information and helping them navigate the myriad of programming. It looks very optimistic. That's the limit of my knowledge on it.

The second one was about my comment...?

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: It was about the federal government not providing enough local support. You outlined what was there in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and what is not, I'm assuming, there now.

Mr. Jamie Hall: Yes.

Today in Canada, agricultural extension really has been given to the provinces as a duty, a responsibility. Ag Canada obviously focuses on other areas of expertise. Within that context, if we go back to my story about the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, we had robust farm extension support everywhere. The industry developed. The needs of well-educated operators are very narrow compared with what they would have been in the 1960s. Extension services in some areas have disappeared completely.

If you're a young farmer in southwestern Ontario and you want to get information about beef cattle, you can't pick up the phone and call someone from a government ministry or somebody to come out and help you. You have to go on the Internet and find somebody like IAPO or someone in the industry to help you. That whole agricultural extension piece from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s was promoting agriculture and agricultural awareness. It helped introduce the notion of farming, farm businesses, and best management practices. It delivered all that. That's evaporating in many, many jurisdictions.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: So it isn't so much funding, then, as it is the apparatus that government puts there in support of it?

Mr. Jamie Hall: Well, you can't have an apparatus without funding.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: We spend billions of dollars on the framework agreement. The federal government provides 60% of the funding, and the provincial government 40%. The provinces operate that. How can we modify the framework?

Mr. Jamie Hall: Chief Louis and I went to Montreal recently to speak about past experiences with regard to Growing Forward, now CAP. A commitment to indigenous agriculture has to be part of that framework, and it's not. It's stated, but there's no explicit requirement from the feds to make the provinces deliver those funds in a way that will impact indigenous communities better.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Okay.

Chief Louis, you talked about a local food economy. Mr. MacGregor talked about Vancouver Island. You're out in the Okanagan. I'm on the south end of the Fraser, and we work quite closely with the Musqueam band. There's a lovely plot of land, 120 acres, called Garden City Lands, and the Musqueam.... The city is working with Kwantlen. They've allocated 30 acres to develop something called “place-based agriculture”. The whole concept is

that if you want to trade, all you need is a surplus. You also talked about a variety of types of agriculture.

Is the whole notion of place-based agriculture something that is applicable to you? Does it tie into what you are already doing?

● (0930)

Chief Byron Louis: Yes.

When you're looking at place-based agriculture.... I'll give you an example of Seabird Island, just north of your riding. I talked to the vice-president of Sto:lo Nation, Tyrone McNeil, who said that Seabird Island at one time was producing the highest quality of waxed beans and other ones, which were being sold to local markets. What happened then was a consolidation in the early 1970s or 1980s, when canneries and other things were bought up by the major supermarkets. After that, if you asked about wax beans, “aisle six” would be the response. There's no more buying local produce. That affected not only the other local farmers, but also first nations.

When we're looking at agriculture and the benefits there, I think it's important to look at place-based opportunities. It's very important that you look at first nations branding, the ability to brand a product that says it's produced by a first nation, specifically for the international market. If you're canning local produce and other things, those have a longer shelf life than fresh produce, and I think that needs to be looked at.

When you're talking about local opportunities in agriculture, absolutely you need to look at what's in your backyard and the opportunity that exists to either grow it or add value to it.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Thank you.

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

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

I'm going to start my clock, as Chief Louis did, so I can finish on the six-minute mark.

I've had the opportunity to be a member of the indigenous and northern affairs committee and spend some time going to various first nations all around Canada. You find some of the greatest people who could be CEOs to manage companies. When we look at the things that have happened in your part of B.C., Chief Louis, it is certainly amazing.

One of the things you mentioned was venture capital. If you have a good idea and the right people doing it, then money is available. I know we talked about whether they can borrow against the land they have if it isn't in that particular format, but that isn't what's happening in communities where they have great ideas.

I know that many years ago a bunch of elderly, retired farmers, rather than selling all that land, pooled it together so that young people could have an opportunity to work via that, to get engaged in it. I'm curious whether any of that is taking place in first nations, where they say, "We've built up a decent nest egg here. We don't necessarily need to keep it entirely for ourselves. We could perhaps funnel a little funding into other areas where we feel there are some problems, or we could help them attract venture capital from around the world so they could have projects there."

I wonder if you could comment on that, please.

Chief Byron Louis: Yes, a very good example is happening right now. This was being discussed by the FSIN vice-chief in Saskatchewan, Edward Lerat. One of the things they were talking about was looking at that two million-plus acre potential for the additions to treaty lands, and having that banked to have a system almost like banking that says this is what it's available for. In the southern end it could be wheat, further north barley, and all these other products in there, and looking at international investment. There was, and still is, a very great interest in foreign investment to do such ventures.

We all know about Sprott, a large-scale...26 sections in southern Saskatchewan. That's an example that should be looked at for best practices and what went wrong. But there is a huge opportunity to do that. Our community has about 200,000 acres in the Okanagan Valley that would be perfect for that. With Sto:lo it's the same thing. When you go out on the Prairies especially, you're talking about some very large acreages. Each one of them could be a very good recipient of international investment.

Why isn't there a first nations winery in southern Ontario, Nova Scotia or parts of Quebec?

• (0935)

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Again, I know first nations that have really put their heart and soul into these things. They create jobs for young people in their communities, and they create a talent pool that is able to go elsewhere.

Yet, on the other side, we have government programs saying, "Well, these guys are okay, so we won't worry about them. We're simply going to put our efforts in other areas where it's more difficult."

What I'm asking is whether there's a way for the more successful first nations, which have already gone through the growing pains and so on, to find ways of maybe pushing the government out of the way, so that there is a way to be successful by using the skills that are obviously available from your people.

Chief Byron Louis: You bring up a very important point.

I think the best venue for success is to help those who want to help themselves. That's probably one of the best ways you can succeed in something, especially when you're looking at opportunity. I do agree. There was the earlier mention about programs, but there's a very small uptake of these programs.

One of the things I handed out to your group was "Success and Sustainability", from the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. With regard to the recommendations in there, the first one is

"Centralize government loan and grant applications for Aboriginal businesses in agriculture on a platform. This could be organized by level of government (municipal, provincial, federal, or by region)." The second one is "Simplify the process of applying for government grants."

You're talking about people in agriculture, and they're easily frustrated and will walk away.

The third one is "Support the identification, certification, and branding of [first nations] businesses in the agriculture sector and promote these businesses within government and corporate supply chains."

I would even say to go more so to the international community.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you.

I believe I'm pretty to close the end.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Chief Byron Louis: I hope that I answered your questions.

[Translation]

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

[English]

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

I want to thank Chief Louis and Mr. Hall for being here.

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Hall. Chief Louis, feel free to jump in if there are comments you think would be beneficial to this committee.

Mr. Hall, your organization is based out of Ontario, and I'm wondering if you're also working with some of the northern communities in Ontario. I would assume that the needs of the northern communities differ from those of the southern communities. Access to transportation, for example, would be an issue for those who choose to grow their own foods. We know that new varieties of corn can be grown in northern Ontario, or so I've heard for a while now.

I'm wondering if you've had some experience dealing with the first nations communities up north.

Mr. Jamie Hall: Not a lot. Our organization is driven by agricultural lending, and a lot of the opportunities in food production that are emerging in the north are not at the commercial stage, or borrowing stage, if you will.

We certainly get inquiries about production on a project-by-project basis, but it's not a huge volume of inquiries.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Going back to the first nations communities you are working with, what innovation are you seeing coming down the pipe that they're working on in terms of first nations agriculture?

Mr. Jamie Hall: I really—

Mr. Francis Drouin: We've often talked about wineries and whatnot. Is there a reason why they're not getting...?

Mr. Jamie Hall: Well, the most recent surge in interest and expansion is within the maple syrup sector, as Chief Louis mentioned. I'm not familiar with anyone who is engaged in wine production at this point in time.

Our role is really... We're working more with individual first nations members at the entrepreneur level, in terms of start-ups and business expansions. That's where we spend most of our time.

• (0940)

Mr. Francis Drouin: You also mentioned in your comments that one of the barriers was access to lending.

Are you mostly working with first nations members who are on reserve or off reserve?

Mr. Jamie Hall: It's predominantly on reserve.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Okay.

Mr. Jamie Hall: We have filled that gap where the big five banks won't go.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Okay. The other part of your comment was on the access to technology. You mentioned that four in 10 have no access to the Internet. Obviously, you see this as a barrier.

Mr. Jamie Hall: Oh, absolutely.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Are the first nation members you're working with adopting new technologies, knowing the fact that there are some issues with the Internet?

Mr. Jamie Hall: Yes, absolutely. On an individual farm basis, we have operators who are at the highest level of technology. It's quite a spectrum of first nations farmers that we deal with. Large cash crop farmers don't take a back seat to any other farmer in terms of technology adoption, but in general there are lower levels of innovation in terms of technology. It's partly because of economics, the lack of affordability, if you will.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Whatever Canada produces, we export 50% of it. Are you seeing that with the first nation members? Is the produce or whatever crop they're producing destined for export markets, or is it to feed certain populations?

Mr. Jamie Hall: We haven't really looked at that analysis. In Ontario, we have a large group of cash crop farmers who are into wheat, soybean and corn production, and certainly a lot of soybeans get exported. We have some pork producers involved in pork production. That's typically an export business, but we haven't tracked that through our client base or our member base.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Chief Louis, in terms of the first nations that you're working with or represent and the type of agriculture they're producing, is that mostly destined for export markets, or is it to provide food security?

Chief Byron Louis: It's a mix. I mentioned the Blood reserve, which markets no less than nine products to the international market. Within the Okanagan, there are two varieties that are basically destined for domestic markets that should be actually pushed for the international market. In terms of Chief Planes, out in Vancouver Island where they're producing wasabi, that again should be looking at the international market.

I think there needs to be more support, especially in terms of accessing international markets, but also, as I mentioned, foreign

investment. They need to be able to market what they have, and sometimes that means they have to create an inventory of their reserve lands, especially soil types and different other.... There's a need for support not only from the federal government but also from the provincial governments. Provinces use all of us in a head count and that gets money from federal transfers that go into agricultural programs, but that support does not necessarily come back into a first nations community.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Louis.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

[*English*]

We're almost out of time, and I know that Mr. Shipley was itching for a question.

If you have a very short question, Mr. Shipley.... I don't know if you wanted one or not.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm not so sure it will be that short.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I thought about that.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I don't want to go over the time, but I thank you for the opportunity.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. Maybe I'll ask a short one.

I know you were talking about how assets cannot be used for capital investment, but there are precedents. Chief Louis, you said that you were in New Brunswick. I think that in Edmundston they have developed a major gas bar and shopping centre, where they have been able to use reserve assets as collateral. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

I know it's an issue. If the bank were to take it over, it would be a big issue to have foreign people who would actually own property within the first nation. I don't know if you want to briefly comment on that.

Chief Byron Louis: I think what you're referring to is the process of establishing head lease over a given part of property on the reserve. It's a long and cumbersome process, especially in terms of agriculture. It's a little different from what you mentioned, because people can actually see the returns on some of the other ventures. You have Membertou over in that area, which has done that type of initiative, but that's a much easier sell.

For agriculture, yes, you can put aside a head lease, but then you have to convince your membership that the agricultural venture is viable. I think that's where, more or less, what's in the package is most important. In our region, if I went into our community and said that we have.... Well, what we do have is an area of a thousand acres that's able to actually have grape production with all the right attributes. Our membership, with their knowledge of what goes on in the Okanagan, would have a look at that and consider it.

It has to be something that's actually sellable. For whatever reason, the Annapolis Valley First Nation had agreed to buy the neighbouring farm, which is a commercial farm.

•(0945)

The Chair: Thank you very much. It was a very good segue to our study, and we were really able to get good information here today.

I want to thank Chief Byron Louis and Mr. Jamie Hall for being with us today. Our first discussion is certainly leading us to a very interesting continuation. This meeting will be the last one until the

new year, but we're looking forward to completing that study and the results that will come out of it.

Thank you, everyone. We'll take a break and come back for our business portion.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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