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Chair: Mr. Pat Finnigan



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• (1705)

[*Translation*]

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

It's a pleasure to participate in our first virtual meeting. I think the last time we met, we didn't expect to see each other this way. I'm glad to see you all, even if it's remotely.

[*English*]

I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number seven of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. Pursuant to the orders of reference of April 11 and April 29, 2020, the committee is meeting for the sole purpose of receiving evidence concerning matters related to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The order of reference of April 11 also stipulates that only motions requesting or scheduling specific witnesses can be considered by the committee and that such motions shall be decided by way of a recorded vote. As you know, today's meeting is taking place by video conference and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee. In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure an orderly meeting, I will outline a few rules to follow.

First, interpretation in this video will work very much as in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French. When you intervene, please make sure that your language channel is set to the language you intend to speak, not the floor. This ensures the best sound quality possible for our interpreters, which is very important.

Also, before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can either click on the microphone icon to activate your mike or you can hold down the space bar on your laptop or computer while you are speaking. When you release the bar, your mike will mute itself, just like a walkie-talkie, or for truckers, a CB radio.

[*Translation*]

I would also like to remind you that all members and witnesses should direct their comments to the chair. Members who need to ask for the floor when it's not their turn to ask questions should activate their microphones and declare a point of order. If a member wishes to speak in response to a point of order raised by another member, he or she must use the "raise your hand" function. By doing so, they will signal to the chair that they wish to speak. To do

so, please click on "participant" at the bottom of the screen. When the list appears, you will see next to your name that you can click on "raise your hand".

Speak slowly and clearly, and make sure your microphone is off when you are not speaking. As you know, we strongly encourage you to use a headset. If your headset has a microphone that hangs down, make sure it doesn't rub against your shirt during your speaking time.

In the event of technical difficulties, if you have difficulty hearing the interpretation or have been disconnected by accident, inform the chair or the clerk immediately and the technical team will try to resolve the problem. Please note that we may have to suspend work during that time to ensure that all members can participate fully.

Can all participants click on the top right side of their screen to ensure that they have an overview? This way you should be able to see all participants in a grid. This way, all participants will be able to see each other.

I don't know if everyone's had a chance to do it, but we should be able to see everyone. We should see one person in every little square. It should stay that way, so we know everyone is there.

[*English*]

Finally, just as we usually would in a regular meeting, we will suspend in between panels or sections of the agenda. There are a great deal of resources involved in the holding of virtual meetings so because of that the start and end times are currently set by the whip of all recognized parties, in consultation with the House of Commons administration. I will therefore ensure that the committee meets and finishes on time especially when there are other committee meetings following our own.

With that, we are ready to begin. I would like now to welcome our witnesses for this meeting.

For today's meeting we have from the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Mr. Chris Forbes, deputy minister. Welcome to our committee, Mr. Forbes.

Also from the Department of Agriculture we have Frédéric Sepey, assistant deputy minister, market and industry services branch. Welcome, Mr. Sepey.

From the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, we have Colleen Barnes, vice-president, policy and programs. Welcome, Ms. Barnes.

I would remind members that the complete sitting will be in public. There's no mechanism to sit in camera yet in virtual meetings. Even though we might cover some business at the end, everything will be in public.

Let's go to our witnesses. We'll start with Mr. Forbes for 10 minutes.

• (1710)

Mr. Chris Forbes (Deputy Minister, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I will probably start in French then switch to English, then return to French.

The Chair: Okay.

[Translation]

Mr. Chris Forbes: I'd like to thank you all for your invitation. It is a pleasure to join you virtually. I was also present, along with the minister, at the committee's last meeting on March 12.

We are here today to talk to you about the Government of Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has implications for our agri-food system, of course.

The pandemic has profoundly affected the sector and the entire food supply chain, from farm to grocery store. While our supply chain continues to function and adapt, the consequences are major.

Of course, there are positive aspects, such as the fact that the transport system works very well, which allows us to deliver our agricultural products on time, and the fact that the borders have remained open. This has helped us a lot in terms of exports and imports.

However, the almost complete closure of the hotel and restaurant sectors has had a considerable impact on the entire supply chain. Many farms now have a surplus of products that are not easy to get to consumers.

Moreover, COVID-19 is still causing labour shortages throughout the agri-food system, both on the producer and processor side and for organizations that provide food to the most vulnerable people.

Meat processing plants have been a prime example of this in recent weeks. Many have had to shut down temporarily or slow down their production.

[English]

Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.): Excuse me, Chair. My translation is mumbled together.

Ms. Lianne Rood (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'm only hearing the original and not the translation. It's mumbled together.

The translation volume needs to be higher than the original speaker.

The Chair: Mr. Forbes, whenever you speak French, you have to click on the French, and when you speak English, you have to click on the English.

[Translation]

Mr. Chris Forbes: These delays are severely impacting the cattle and hog sectors, increasing costs for producers as they need to keep their animals longer on farms, while prices are changing rapidly.

[English]

One important step we have taken so far was providing federal guidance to recognize the food supply chain as an essential service, to reinforce that vital work from production and processing through to distribution and sales of food must continue across the country.

We have also lifted travel restrictions on incoming temporary foreign workers and offered \$50 million in funding to help employers cover the costs of quarantine for those workers. Over 11,200 workers have arrived since the travel ban was lifted, compared to about 13,000 at this time last year.

At the same time, efforts are under way to reach out to all Canadians who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19, to consider the many opportunities to work in the agriculture and agri-food industry. My department has launched a jobs portal, we have a social media campaign urging Canadians to consider job opportunities in the food industry, and we are complementing the efforts by provincial governments to match unemployed residents with food sector jobs. To support our workers on the front lines, the government has also worked with the provinces and territories to offer a top-up to the wages of low-income essential workers.

On the side of financial tools and support to help farmers and food businesses navigate the stresses resulting from COVID-19, a range of financial measures have been put in place. Perhaps first and foremost was the \$5 billion in new lending capacity to Farm Credit Canada, FCC, to help farmers and businesses keep their businesses strong during the pandemic and to help with cash flow. To date, over \$3 billion worth of loans has been deferred with FCC.

The government also extended the payment deadline for the advance payments program for those who had a repayment deadline before the end of April. As well, we've extended the AgriStability program enrolment deadline to July 3 to encourage more farmers, producers and ranchers to manage the impact of current market disruptions, increased expenses and production challenges.

There are broader measures available to businesses, such as access to interest-free loans of up to \$40,000, with \$10,000 of that amount forgivable, and items such as deferral of income tax payments, as well as GST, HST and customs duties.

Specific to the agriculture and food sector, the government has also announced \$20 million to help the Canadian Food Inspection Agency hire, train and equip additional staff, which has meant more capacity to accommodate overtime and extra shifts. This funding is also supporting the sharing of inspection resources between provincially and federally inspected processing facilities, which is the case currently in Alberta.

Another area of significant activity has been in terms of food banks and community supports. Across the country, food banks and community food organizations have been forced to change the way they work. They've had to find new volunteers, certainly minimize interpersonal contact and offer more home deliveries, all this while serving a growing number of Canadians. As part of the response, the government has directed \$100 million to support food banks and other organizations on the front lines. The funds that have been distributed can be used to purchase, support and distribute food, hire temporary help to fill volunteer shortages and implement biosecurity measures, such as purchase of personal protective equipment.

As we've gone through this process, we have tried to keep in very close contact with industry representatives to make sure we understand developments as they happen. We've engaged with industry representatives through daily calls, five times a week, led by my colleague, Mr. Seppely, which have included about 500 participants, usually from the sector. This has allowed us to be aware of developments in real time, but also to communicate a range of government activities directly to the sector.

We're also working with the provinces and territories, obviously quite closely, meeting our colleagues there to make sure we're aligning programming and understanding their pressures. We've had specific working groups with the meat and poultry industries to understand and address some of their challenges.

I'll finish with some comments or a summary of today's announcements around the agriculture and food sector.

• (1715)

I think the chair and members are all aware the Prime Minister announced a number of measures this morning that totalled about \$250 million in financial support for producers and processors, first of all, most notably, some additional support for programs under the business risk management, BRM, suite and some for businesses as well.

On the programming side, the BRM side, the government has launched an initiative of up to \$125 million nationally under the AgriRecovery program, which is joint with the provinces, with the first steps being programs focused on cattle and pork producers to help them with costs such as feeding animals longer on site and in the case of hogs, if it comes to that, the unfortunate case of having to do humane depopulation.

In the AgriRecovery program we are committing to have the program cover 90% of eligible expenses, which is up from the normal 70%. It's normally a 60:40 cost share with the provinces. We will put up our 60%, and if the provinces have funds to add their 40% they can, but if not, we would still proceed.

We're also working with the provinces and territories to see if we can get the absence or the shortage of workers to become an eligible risk under the AgriInsurance program, which would be helpful for those worried about crops not being harvested in the fall due to a shortage of workers. These are on top of the existing risk management programs, obviously, which pay out about \$1.6 billion annually to producers.

Today there was an announcement around a program for our food processors, providing a total of \$77.5 million to help them adapt to new circumstances related to managing COVID-19, and also to ensure continued food production and potentially increase food production in Canada.

I have two final points related to surplus food, which I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks. There is a new program of \$50 million to help purchase some of the surplus food that exists in Canada to help direct that to those most vulnerable Canadians who need it. There is a proposal to work with Parliament to increase the borrowing limit of the Canadian Dairy Commission, which would allow it to better manage current milk supply imbalances by storing additional amounts of butter and cheese for dairy producers.

Mr. Chair, that's my summary of what has happened so far in the government response. Along with my colleagues, I am certainly happy to take any questions from the members.

Thank you.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Minister.

Now we'll turn to Ms. Colleen Barnes from CFIA.

Go ahead, Ms. Barnes, for up to 10 minutes if you can.

Ms. Colleen Barnes (Vice-President, Policy and Programs, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Thank you very much.

I'll start in English and finish in French.

Mr. Chair, thank you very much for this opportunity to participate in this virtual meeting of the standing committee. I appreciate the chance to share my perspectives as part of the committee's study of the government's response to COVID-19.

During this difficult time, CFIA is taking action to preserve the integrity of Canada's food safety system while safeguarding its animal and plant resource base. In doing so, CFIA is committed to protecting the health and safety of its employees, while maintaining these critical inspection services. Every day we work to understand the concerns of industry and consumers with respect to COVID-19 and the unprecedented impact around the globe on businesses, economies and people.

To address these extraordinary challenges that Canadian consumers and industry are facing, CFIA is prioritizing critically important activities and services during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic situation by introducing a temporary suspension of low-risk activities that do not immediately impact the safety of food or the protection of our agricultural resources. The agency will maintain appropriate oversight of domestic and imported food products to meet that objective while also supporting trade and the supply chain, including through the certification of exports.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, we are prioritizing the following activities: food safety investigations and recalls; animal disease investigations, if warranted; regulated inspection services, for example, what we do in meat slaughter establishments; export certification; import services; emergency management, if required, and laboratory diagnostics that support those activities.

CFIA will continue to examine its requirements to determine where further flexibility can be helpful. For example, the agency is temporarily suspending certain non-food safety labelling requirements for food service products so that they can be quickly repurposed for retail to consumers. This temporary measure will aim to ease potential food shortages in the Canadian retail sector, prevent food waste and support Canada's economy without compromising food safety. Also, in the event of meat shortages, we are working with the provinces and territories to enable the interprovincial trade of meat produced in provincially regulated establishments.

Notwithstanding this flexibility, industry remains responsible for the safety and the quality of the food that it produces, imports and exports. Despite the current pandemic situation, the CFIA will continue to exercise its enforcement discretion as appropriate.

This evolving situation highlights the importance of continued collaboration and communication between the CFIA, industry, and its other stakeholders and partners. To assist in these efforts, as Deputy Minister Forbes has mentioned, the CFIA was very pleased to hear the Government of Canada's announcement of \$20 million for the agency to help it to continue its important work.

With this additional funding, the CFIA will be reassigning staff to areas of high priority and providing them with necessary training and tools; increasing the number of inspectors by hiring new staff or temporarily bringing back those CFIA employees who have recently retired; hiring more veterinarians to provide inspection in industries like meat slaughter; funding more overtime hours to help support longer production hours of industry; equipping inspectors with digital tools and tablets and access to the CFIA's remote service delivery network; developing agreements, as Deputy Minister Forbes mentioned, with the provinces to train and equip some provincial inspectors so they can provide assistance to the CFIA on

a temporary basis as needed; and continuing work with international trading partners to support exports, Canada's jobs and economy.

These efforts will help uphold the Government of Canada's commitment to safe food for Canadians and support the sector at the same time.

• (1725)

[*Translation*]

We are working closely with the industry to keep establishments operating. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency, or CFIA, has developed guidance for establishments.

All facilities should follow appropriate public health protocols and seek guidance from local public health authorities.

The CFIA takes this evolving situation very seriously and has advised all employees that they have a duty to follow the guidance of health authorities to protect public health. We have also asked employees to follow the health and safety protocols put in place by the facilities in which they work.

CFIA is working closely with establishments to determine what capacity is required to ensure food safety and prevent pressures on the meat supply. To date, we continue to maintain the appropriate number of inspectors in meat processing establishments. We have a plan in place to address potential inspector absenteeism and an escalation process is in place with industry should issues arise.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate the important role that CFIA inspectors have in keeping Canada's food supply safe. We will continue to work diligently to ensure the safety of the food made available to Canadians.

Mr. Chair, I am happy to address any questions posed by members of the committee.

• (1730)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barnes, and with that we'll start our question round. I want to say hi to Mr. Barlow who has joined us. Hope you're doing well, Mr. Barlow. Good to see you.

[*Translation*]

The question period is going to be the same as when we meet in person. The first round of questions will last six minutes.

I'd like to ask you not to interrupt the person speaking, because that will cause the screen to jump from box to box. So, you have to wait. I would also ask the witnesses to limit the length of their response to the length of the question, so that there is a certain balance.

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

Mr. Richard Lehoux (Beauce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone.

It's good to see you all again via this video conference.

My first question is for Deputy Minister Forbes. Several plants have had to close their doors because of numerous cases of COVID-19. Some of them reopened a few days or weeks later. The Cargill plant in Alberta reopened yesterday, May 4, with a reduced workforce. So what is the federal government going to do about it?

You announced a cattle buyback program today, but this is a plant that processes more than 40% of Canada's cattle production and has reopened with half of its staff.

What steps will the department take to support producers who are having to keep their animals on the farm longer?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Today, we announced a program to address precisely this challenge. In English it is called a set-aside program. I'm sorry, I don't know the French term. We have set aside \$50 million to work with the provinces.

This amount will be used to cover the additional costs arising from the need for producers to keep their animals on the farm longer. That sounds like a demand from industry stakeholders for the type of programs that were in place 15 or 20 years ago.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Deputy Minister, in the same vein, there is a very important element in the program announced today to support processing plants.

Let's take the case of Olymel, in Quebec, which is a major pork processor. Indeed, there are elements of the program to support businesses. They had to take sanitary measures and acquire additional equipment—masks, visors, clothing and so on. But there are no concrete measures to reimburse processors, let alone producers, for these costs.

In Quebec at present, more than 100,000 hogs are being kept in facilities. What are the solutions? I don't think that the measure announced today will cover all these costs, on the contrary.

• (1735)

Mr. Chris Forbes: The purpose of the program is to help processors purchase new equipment to operate in this new COVID-19 pandemic world, to protect their employees and to continue their processing activities. I am talking about \$77 million or \$78 million.

There have been two announcements about the AgriRecovery program: one for cattle producers and one for hog producers. These announcements are intended to cover the extra costs they incur as a result of not being able to process their animals and being forced to keep them on the farm longer.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: I understand, Deputy Minister, but currently, on some farms, pigs are about to be euthanized because they

have gained a lot of weight in recent weeks. The program does not provide for any measures regarding the costs that producers will have to incur to euthanize these mature animals ready for slaughter. This will be a very significant cost.

Will these costs be reflected in today's announcement? There are few details on that.

Mr. Chris Forbes: I'm sorry, perhaps I expressed myself poorly.

The AgriRecovery program is designed to address extraordinary costs arising from these types of situations. We are working with the provinces to clearly define eligible costs. We need to take into account the additional costs of keeping animals longer or those related to euthanasia. I know that producers want to avoid euthanasia. These costs would also be eligible under this program.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forbes and Mr. Lehoux.

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

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

I'd like to greet all my colleagues who are here today.

I would also like to thank the representatives from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency for being with us today.

I have a few questions along the same lines as Mr. Lehoux's. He's asked some excellent questions.

Mr. Forbes, if I understood you correctly, you said you're negotiating with the provinces to establish the terms and conditions of the AgriRecovery program and the costs it will cover. Is that correct?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Yes, exactly, Mr. Drouin.

A province needs to start the process. We are going to work with the provinces to ensure that they have a program. Our goal is that there be a provincial program across the country. We are going to define the eligible costs with the provinces. As I said, a maximum of 90% of eligible costs will be reimbursed; 60% of that will come from the federal government and 40% from the provincial governments.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Cattle and hog producers could come forward and tell us that they have used the AgriRecovery program successfully in the past years, but it has not worked as well this time around. If I understand you correctly, the purpose of this program is to provide flexibility. So it may not work exactly as it has in past years. We recognize that this is an extraordinary situation that we have to deal with. But your comments suggest that there will be much more flexibility.

Mr. Chris Forbes: Normally, we have to work with the provinces to ensure that there is a crisis or an extraordinary event before we start the process. We have already done that work with the provinces with respect to the current situation created by COVID-19. We have already completed the initial stages of launching the program. We are often asked how long it will take. It is very bureaucratic, if I may say so, but we are trying to get this program up and running more quickly this time.

• (1740)

Mr. Francis Drouin: I'd like to talk about the processors. I've had several conversations with a local cheese factory, Fromagerie St.-Albert. I know it's the same story across Canada. This cheese plant has finally accepted a premium linked to COVID-19 and it has to modify its entire processing chain. One of the consequences of the physical distance is that production, instead of increasing every day, is decreasing. The cheese factory cannot produce as much as it used to.

I know you've had several conversations with processors across the country. Do you have a fairly representative picture of what is happening in Canada?

Are those who take these physical distancing measures, as in cases like Olymel and Cargill, seeing their output decrease from what it was before?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I think that is likely. Several companies tell us that this will pose challenges for them. They will have to figure out how to organize themselves to be as effective as possible in the new reality. The fact remains that distance is causing problems with their processes. Yes, it will be a challenge for many of them and that is why we announced this funding today.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I guess you'll have to work out the terms of the program.

When can the community expect to be able to apply?

Mr. Chris Forbes: As I said in my comments, thanks to my colleague Mr. Sepey, we talk to stakeholders almost every day. We're going to quickly discuss things with the processing sector representatives to make sure we understand their situation. I think we have a good idea of what their needs are, but we're going to make sure that we have a very concrete understanding of what they need to adapt. We're going to try to get the program up and running as soon as possible, because we understand this is an emergency for them.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Another announcement was made today. Within the Fromagerie St-Albert Co-op, there are members who are dairy producers. In fact, there is a large community of dairy farmers in my riding. As we have seen in the media, both in Canada and in the United States, it is not their fault if they have to throw away part of their production. You cannot stop a cow from producing milk, and unfortunately, you have to milk it every day. The role of the Canadian Dairy Commission includes buying butter and cheese. You mentioned that in your comments.

Why was a credit limit increase included in today's announcement?

Mr. Chris Forbes: The amount of credit provided to the Canadian Dairy Commission allows it to purchase more milk. The surplus milk production issue is solved by processing milk into butter and

cheese. The markets are not ready for these quantities. So the commission will be able to buy some of this butter and cheese from the processors and keep it for a given period of time. The increase in the commission's credit limit will help it to keep larger volumes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forbes and Mr. Drouin.

Welcome, Mr. Perron. You have the floor for six minutes to ask your questions.

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Hello everyone.

I, too, am very pleased to join my colleagues of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

My first question is for you, Mr. Forbes. It's a general question about the amounts announced today.

First of all, I was very happy to finally see announcements concerning agriculture. Parliament shut down on March 13. However, it is now May 5 and these are the first announcements of direct support. However, the amount is rather disappointing. We are talking about \$252 million in total. Compared to the United States, which offered \$17 billion in support, that is about 12 times less money, all things considered.

Do you think that will be enough?

Mr. Chris Forbes: The government tried to respond to urgent requests today. It is not for me to decide if it is enough, but we are trying to meet the needs of the beef and pork sectors and the needs relating to the surplus of certain products, such as potatoes. We are trying to meet those needs today.

I just want to add that risk management programs are already in place in the provinces for producers.

Mr. Yves Perron: Mr. Forbes, in the answers we get, there are a lot of references to programs that are already in place. We know that most of these programs do not work for many farmers. In the case of the AgriStability program, for example, only 31% of farmers participate. When an insurance program only pays out in the event of a major disaster, people stop contributing.

Before the crisis, discussions were underway to improve the AgriStability program, and I know you've been working on that since last summer. Are we going to get anywhere quickly? Isn't the COVID-19 pandemic crisis an opportunity to increase the insurability thresholds? It would be easy to raise the thresholds from 70% to 85%, as requested by farm organizations before the crisis. This could be a great help and give confidence to producers who are seeding their fields right now.

• (1745)

Mr. Chris Forbes: Provincial ministers and Minister Bibeau are discussing that. It continues to be a priority. I know that the industry and the ministers are looking at risk management programs to see how they can be improved. The ministers will decide on future improvements, and I can say that this is a matter of much discussion.

Mr. Yves Perron: I just want to point out that the need is here and now, quickly.

I want to address another topic, the ratification of CUSMA, which will come into force on July 1.

In other committee meetings, we met with dairy processors and farmers. They were very disappointed. They were told that this agreement wouldn't come into force before August 1. However, the promise wasn't kept. This isn't the first time. This also happened in recent international negotiations.

The representatives of the dairy processing sector spoke about the current issue of import quotas to comply with the percentages of goods that will enter the country as part of these announcements. They explained the importance of allocating most of the quotas to processors rather than to distributors.

Are you making any progress on this issue? Can you share any signs of progress? I know that this process will be established in the coming weeks, and I imagine that the department is working on it.

Mr. Chris Forbes: We're working closely with our colleagues at International Trade Canada. I can ask my colleague Mr. Seppey to comment on this.

Mr. Frédéric Seppey (Assistant Deputy Minister, Market and Industry Services Branch, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): The allocation of import tariff rate quotas plays a key role in the orderly management of market access commitments.

Over the course of the negotiations and since the signature of the agreement on November 1, 2018, we've worked closely with Global Affairs Canada and industry stakeholders, including dairy processors, to ensure that the quota allocation meets their needs. The allocation must comply with international trade rules. However, I can assure you that processors were consulted with regard to the terms of CUSMA.

I want to add that Global Affairs Canada was conducting a major review of all tariff rate quotas in every international agreement. This review is on hold because of the current crisis, but it will start again. The interests of dairy processors were really taken into account in the establishment of this allocation.

Mr. Yves Perron: Mr. Seppey, decisions mustn't be made in two weeks when these analyses haven't been completed. It's important to take into consideration the requests of the industry, which has already suffered a great deal in recent years because of the significant losses resulting from various international treaties. I think that this is fundamental.

Lastly, I want to point out that the Canadian Dairy Commission is talking about increasing credit capacity. We're very pleased about this. The Bloc had suggested this increase. Do we know how much or to what extent the credit rating will be increased?

• (1750)

The Chair: Mr. Perron, your time is up, unfortunately. Mr. Seppey may respond to you when answering another question.

[English]

Mr. MacGregor, you have six minutes.

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

I'd also like to repeat the previous comments. I get to see everyone's face again.

Mr. Forbes, it's similar to what was asked about the amounts that were asked for. The \$252 million is just under 10% of what the Canadian Federation of Agriculture members thought it would need, and I understand it's not really up to you as to whether the amounts are sufficient. But perhaps you could inform the committee, how long you anticipate the \$252 million will last? What's the time frame that this amount of money will be adequate for?

Mr. Chris Forbes: If I were to break it up into the various programs, the purpose of the set-aside program for the cattle sector certainly has a duration of a number of months to help manage the feed costs, and this was linked to a request the cattlemen themselves made. Similarly, hopefully the pork producer amounts for the AgriRecovery program to help them with additional costs will cover those costs over the period of the coming months, and some of the ones that have already been taking place. With the processor fund, our goal is to spend all the money in the coming months as quickly as we can to make sure that money gets into the hands of processors.

We don't have a specific time limit for the \$50 million for surplus food but we'd like to get the money out the door at the earliest possible chance to get the food out of storage and out of processors' hands and out of farmers' hands and into the food banks or other places where vulnerable Canadians will have access to it.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

The minister gave me a call today before the announcement was made about the change that you're hoping to negotiate with the provinces over AgriInsurance, including the absence of temporary workers as a risk. As things stand now, and looking ahead to the projections for the next few months, is the department aware of how many workers we might be short, for the upcoming agricultural season?

Mr. Chris Forbes: The one item we have a really good handle on right now is the temporary foreign worker arrivals. To be quite honest with you, I feel we're doing reasonably well, given the circumstances. We have close to 12,000 workers thus far if we take into account arrivals so far this week, which is 85% or 90% of where we would have been last year at this time, which given all the challenges, is significant. That is not to downplay that obviously for farmers, the fact that two weeks of quarantine means certainly they are delayed in some of their planting. Overall, we're doing pretty well in the arrival of temporary foreign workers, which has taken a great deal of collaboration inside the federal government and with provincial colleagues and producer groups as well.

As for the rest of the agriculture workforce, that's a bit harder to tell right now. Obviously we still have a hiring season on and reports from provinces of their job-matching efforts are just starting to come in.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: In your opening statement, Ms. Barnes, you were talking about the CFIA and some of the changes going on. In today's news, the head of the agriculture union called for the closure of a third processing plant in Alberta. I understand the enormous pressure on our meat-processing plants, given the situation they're in, but there are some grave concerns over worker safety. While I appreciate that does come under provincial jurisdiction, the CFIA union has made those comments. They are concerned about the state in those meat-processing plants. Could you inform the committee, if the situation gets noticeably worse, what role CFIA is going to play in those plants in keeping worker safety in mind if you can see much more of an outbreak?

• (1755)

Ms. Colleen Barnes: We've been working really closely with the sector. It's a very local conversation that happens among the local public authority representatives, CFIA and the plant establishment. Sometimes the occupational health and safety people from the provinces are participating as well. As a team, they're looking at the risk assessment in the plant and they're working through mitigation scenarios to make sure the risks are appropriate. At the end of the day, for us it's following that local guidance and taking the steps that are recommended by the provincial authorities that will make sure we can continue the operation of the plants. While we've seen a few shut for a couple of weeks, we've been able to manage to get them reopened and to continue processing. We don't have any authority to shut a plant down for that reason. It's really a local decision, working with multiple public health—

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I have just a few seconds left.

Mr. Forbes, about the purchasing of surplus food and distributing it to food-insecure communities, can you add a little more to what you've already said, or the mechanics of how that's going to work?

Mr. Chris Forbes: To be honest with you, this is a bit of a new area for us. I think one of our first steps is to use existing relationships. We have developed pretty good relationships with a network of national food banks, which themselves have regional food bank networks. We're going to sit down with them in the coming days to discuss the nature of the program and how we might quickly get at some of the key surplus products that are out there and that people need.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forbes.

Now we'll start our second round.

Mr. Soroka.

Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC): Under AgriRecovery, from my understanding, there was always funding for \$125 million. Was there another \$125 million put into the fund, which was announced today, or was this just reallocating the same fund?

Mr. Chris Forbes: In any given year, we have the authority to spend up to \$125 million. This year we haven't really spent any of that thus far, so this is that \$125 million. We're announcing effectively that we'll make all of that available, if needed, starting with the beef and pork ranchers and farmers, and then, if needed, in other areas.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: True, but my point is it's not really new funding then. The money has always been there; it's just not been fully allocated.

Mr. Chris Forbes: It wasn't being spent. Whether it was—

Mr. Gerald Soroka: I'm just saying, you know how it looks. Wow, we just gave \$125 million that's always been available.

On my other point about the beef and the pork slaughter set-aside, that's great that they're actually keeping the money there because they're needing to buy more feed, but the problem is the price has dropped significantly. How is that still going to help the farmers with the costs of production when they're just helping with feed costs that they didn't need to have incurred in the first place because of a lack of slaughter kill?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I think there are two comments. One would be that by allowing the farmers more flexibility in terms of keeping animals longer, it certainly helps them avoid having to sell into a difficult price situation. It gives them flexibility as to when they sell. The second point would be that there are other programs out there to certainly help with revenue-side issues, most notably AgriStability being the biggest at the federal/provincial/territorial level.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: My other comment, then, is this. Because these are costs shared with the provinces, what happens if the provinces don't commit to their funding? Alberta is actually in some pretty financially difficult times. Will these programs still go through or not?

Mr. Chris Forbes: One of the things we confirmed today was that if a province does not have their 40% share, if they want to go ahead with it, which we'd like them to do, we would still want to go ahead with just the federal contribution. Previously, we would have to make sure the province was putting in their 40 cents to the dollar. What we're saying now is that if they are unavailable to do that, we will go ahead and put our amount in.

• (1800)

Mr. Gerald Soroka: On the \$77.5-million emergency processing fund, my understanding is that there has been work on this program since companies like Regency closed their doors. Has this been in the works for some time, and if so how long has this program been trying to get funding for emergency slaughter kill?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Are you asking how long it was in the decision-making process?

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Yes.

Mr. Chris Forbes: It came out today. We've been working on these kinds of programs. As I said before, as the crisis has developed, we have certainly looked at what we need to do to respond.

I would just say that we also have, under the agricultural partnership programming with the provinces, existing programs for food processing capacity, and they have certainly been available in certain cases for a range of things like investments in slaughterhouses.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: When it comes to the borrowing capacity, it seems to be the fallout for a lot of things insofar as it doesn't really give money to the producer; it just either defers their payments or gets them deeper in debt.

How can we develop a program instead of just getting them to borrow more money through farm credit?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I think one of the options that's part of the surplus food program was the idea of getting product that was otherwise not going to have a value or have a hard time returning a value to the farmer or the processor from where it was to where it will be used by those in need. That's hopefully bringing value.

I think working on food processing capacity is an important piece of ensuring value to primary agriculture in Canada. I think all these things together.... Certainly deferral of debt payments is helpful in the kind of financial times we're in now, but I would agree that our programs intend to support growth, and income is certainly a priority and remains a priority.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forbes.

Thank you, Mr. Soroka.

Now we go to Mr. Kody Blois for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased to be joining my colleagues from across the country this evening to discuss the concerns of Canada's agricultural sector and the opportunities available to the sector. Like the other members, I want to thank the House of Commons employees for their work on the virtual meeting of this committee.

[English]

I'm going to start by saying that in Kings—Hants we have the largest concentration of agricultural producers east of Montreal, including the most supply-managed farms. I'm very interested in today's announcement about the \$200 million to the Canadian Dairy Commission.

Perhaps, Mr. Forbes, you could quickly speak to what this program entails and what it means for the dairy industry and the legislative process.

Mr. Chris Forbes: I'll let Mr. Seppey provide a few more details about the program, as he is the expert in that area.

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Yes, thank you.

This increase of the limit of the ability to borrow from the Canadian Dairy Commission from \$300 million to \$500 million would allow it to implement programs that it has put in place and agreed to with the dairy marketing boards in the various provinces—so the producers—to use that money to purchase more cheese on a temporary basis. We have a surplus of milk. As Mr. Drouin said earlier, a cow produces more milk at this time of the year, more than usual. That capacity will allow the CDC to purchase cheese from the processors who will use the milk that is in surplus to produce this cheese. Then they can put it in storage so that it can be sold back to the processors when the market is able to absorb that additional amount of cheese.

It's a very useful mechanism policy that balances the supply and demand of the system. This is a stabilization mechanism that the dairy farmers and the dairy processors are really counting on in this difficult period.

• (1805)

Mr. Kody Blois: It's certainly great to hear.

This type of investment is historic. We're in unprecedented times, but I have to assume that, in the history of the Canadian Dairy Commission, we haven't seen this type of initiative, assuming we can get parliamentary approval.

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Yes, that's correct. The situation right now is exceptional. It's in very rare circumstances that dairy farmers would be forced to dump milk. They always want to find a home for their milk.

CDC's increased borrowing capacity will allow them to manage the system temporarily. It requires a legislative amendment, but the government has indicated that it would work closely with all parties to make sure that these changes can be implemented as quickly as possible.

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you very much.

I want to turn to labour because this has been a topic of interest in the Annapolis Valley in particular. We have a large horticultural industry. I've certainly been working closely with the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture, but perhaps, Mr. Forbes, you could speak to the effort that has gone into making sure that our agricultural producers have the labour that they need.

Perhaps you could do that in about 45 seconds.

Mr. Chris Forbes: Okay, I'll try to be quick.

For temporary foreign workers, as I mentioned, there has been a big effort to make sure they're brought in in a way that respects public health, treats their own personal health as paramount and also gets them to the farms where they can make a contribution.

We are working, as are the provinces, on a variety of job-matching sites to match unemployed Canadians with farm jobs. In Nova Scotia, I know this for sure, as the provincial minister is an advocate. The federal government is also working with provinces on an offer to top up wages for workers in essential services. It's not in my area of responsibility, but I understand that those discussions are ongoing.

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you so much.

I have one final point. I had a conversation with Michael McCain, president of Maple Leaf Foods, and he talked about supply chain issues.

Could you quickly address where we are with that and how today's announcement may have addressed some of those concerns?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I think the big issue comes in a couple of places, but it has been in the manufacturing or transformation side that we've obviously seen some challenges.

As one of the previous questions focused on, we may see a lot of manufacturers and food processors who need to take steps to adjust their processing systems to deal with a world where we're trying to mitigate COVID-19. I think the investments there will help them do that and will therefore help keep supply chains functioning and get food into the grocery stores.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forbes, and thank you, Mr. Blois.

Now it's over to Ms. Rood for five minutes.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Forbes.

I put myself in farmers' shoes today. I'm a farmer myself. I have been talking to many of my constituents, and the minister has been telling us that they're there for us, to hang tight and be patient, and that they're working with industry. We've been waiting for months and months only to find out that the funding that's available is not new funding. Some of my farmers are facing bankruptcy.

I just wanted to ask the question again about the \$125 million under AgriRecovery. Is it new money, yes or no?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I'm going to say yes, because it is money that was not going to be spent until that announcement was made today.

Ms. Lianne Rood: But every year there is money made available under AgriRecovery, so is this specifically new for COVID-19?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Last year, for example, we did not spend anywhere near \$100 million through AgriRecovery. These monies are new to deal with the specifics in the cattle and pork sectors right now, and as I said, it could be made available to further industries if needed.

Ms. Lianne Rood: The Parliamentary Budget Officer has said that there are \$126 billion, I believe, in new funds that have already been announced by the government, so if AgriRecovery isn't new

money, you can see how that kind of looks to industry and producers.

I'm going to go back to the \$77 million for the emergency processing fund. Can you confirm if this was in the works pre-COVID with industry? Were you in talks with industry pre-COVID-19, or is this new money? Again, yes or no, is this a new program?

• (1810)

Mr. Chris Forbes: This is a new program.

Ms. Lianne Rood: So it wasn't in the works prior to COVID?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Well, this program was not in the works prior to COVID. We have industry frequently making requests around new programming money, including the processing industry, but this program was not contemplated in its current form prior to COVID.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Okay. That's fair enough.

With regard to that \$77 million, here in Ontario we've had a backlog in cattle processing. A lot of ranchers and cattle farmers in my riding have had big difficulties getting their cattle processed because of the Ryding-Regency plant shutdown back in December, and I have been asking the minister for months if there was something available to help.

I'm just curious: Now that Ryding-Regency has new ownership, I believe, is there a potential for that new owner to access some of the \$77 million to retrofit in order to get them up and running again so that we can see increased capacity here for Ontario and eastern Canada?

Mr. Chris Forbes: My answer would be yes. It's obviously subject to the specifics they would be looking for. I'd just add, and sorry to be lengthy, that there are other Agriculture Canada or provincial programs that exist now that can support processing investment, too.

If that did proceed and the new owners, if that's the case, were to come forward and engage with us, we'd certainly be happy to look at what was available in the existing suite of programs, including the \$77 million.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Thank you.

I've been talking with some of my small farmers as well, who have fallen through the cracks a bit here. They're not qualifying for some of the money that's available to other businesses.

Is there anything in the works to help the smaller farmers who maybe can't qualify because they don't have a payroll that's worth \$20,000 or they are self-employed and they use their own children and their spouses to do the work on their farms? They also might have a retail store that they're not able to open right now. Is there anything available to them?

Mr. Chris Forbes: There is a range of programs available. In our engagement with the sector, whether it's individually or often through organizations, we try to look at what is available to start off with, whether it's through Farm Credit or other lenders, other programs—

Ms. Lianne Rood: With all due respect, farmers don't want to take on more debt. Will there be more help for them without having to take on more debt?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Sorry. Just to be clear, with Farm Credit, a big chunk of that is deferrals, so it's not actually adding debt but deferring payments.

However, I would certainly hear that point, that farmers are very clear about not wanting new debt. Certainly in our discussions, if we find out that programs are not working for farmers, if they're our programs, we can often do things about them, and if they're from other parts of the government, we work with our colleagues to look at whether there are solutions available to help make them better targeted for the farmers.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Right, but they still have to pay the interest, even if they defer, and that's only if they are existing customers of FCC.

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's all the time we have.

Thank you, Ms. Rood.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Now we'll move to our next questioner.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Bessette, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Mrs. Lyne Bessette (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's nice to see everyone.

Thank you, Mr. Forbes and Ms. Barnes, for joining us and being there to answer our questions tonight.

These complex times call for greater solidarity. In my riding, La Coopérative le terroir solidaire is working closely with small farming companies in order to share best practices and mitigate impacts associated with COVID-19. We know that regional and provincial agricultural organizations are the eyes and ears of what is really happening out there in the field.

Can you inform this committee how you're keeping in touch with stakeholders during this time? What channel are you using to get this information out to them?

• (1815)

Mr. Chris Forbes: I might turn to my colleague, Mr. Seppey, to answer that question. He's the ADM who has been engaged most directly with stakeholders over this period.

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Thank you.

We have a number of mechanisms, some of which have been established for a long period of time with the industry.

As soon as we went into crisis mode, we organized daily calls with the industry. At times there are more than 500 representatives from all over the agriculture and agri-food sector, including food banks, small farmers, the National Farmers Union, etc. That's our primary vehicle. We also have regular emails and are proactively sending information to our distribution list of more than 1,500 participants.

In addition, as the deputy minister indicated previously, for certain big value chains that have specific issues—I am thinking of the meat sector—we have established working groups. They meet regularly to discuss in detail, with decision-makers in the government, such as public servants, the specific issues and look at how we can address specific bottlenecks. For example, my colleague Ms. Barnes, from CFIA, was active in these working groups when there were problems with the number of CFIA inspectors available to work at certain plants. These issues were escalated and quickly fixed in collaboration with the industry.

These are just a few examples.

Mrs. Lyne Bessette: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I'm concerned because, according to multiple reports, thousands of animals must be slaughtered on compassionate grounds. With slaughterhouses closed, the lack of capacity to provide feed for animals means that a number of farmers are facing difficult decisions. This is the case in my constituency, and it's also the case across the country.

I see that you have multiple connections. What does the department expect from the stakeholders in terms of compassionate slaughter?

Mr. Chris Forbes: If possible, stakeholders prefer to avoid this approach. As a result, we're trying to support stakeholders with additional funding to keep animals on the farm longer. This is the important part of the AgriRecovery initiatives that we announced today.

Mrs. Lyne Bessette: Okay, thank you.

On another note, regarding the market changes caused by COVID-19, the needs vary from farm to farm. Of course, it's important to show flexibility with regard to foreign workers.

Has anything been implemented to facilitate the transfer of foreign workers from one employer to another?

Mr. Chris Forbes: This matter doesn't fall under the department's jurisdiction. However, we're working closely with our colleagues at Employment and Social Development Canada and at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to ensure as much flexibility as possible for workers who are already in the country, for example.

We're also working with the workers to facilitate the approval process before they arrive, so that the process is quicker and more flexible for employers. Since producers are under tremendous pressure, our colleagues at the federal level are trying to make the process as quick as possible and to ensure flexibility.

Mrs. Lyne Bessette: Perfect. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

If our witness will allow another five minutes, I think we'll get through the round. We're a little bit behind.

Mr. Forbes, is it okay for you to hang with us for another five minutes?

• (1820)

Mr. Chris Forbes: It's a pleasure.

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Perron, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Yves Perron: I want to thank the witnesses for staying a little longer. This gives us the opportunity to have a second round.

I'll confess my disappointment. As result of the skilful questions asked by Mr. Soroka and Ms. Rood, I learned that new money wasn't put into the AgriRecovery program. In the details provided to Mr. Seppay regarding the Canadian Dairy Commission, I learned that the credit capacity may be increased to \$500 million, whereas the proposals were to increase the capacity to \$800 million. I don't know whether this will be different. You can tell me. It seems very difficult to put new money into agriculture and to support the agricultural sector, which is really the foundation of everything.

Here's my question. Is compensation for supply-managed sectors being considered? This doesn't involve new spending. This money was promised. The amounts are established. The dairy farmers could receive payments for 2020-21. It's easy. Cheques can simply be issued.

All the other supply-managed sectors have shared their requests and specific circumstances. They want investment programs, and so on. This seems to be a good time to invest new money in farms. As Ms. Rood said earlier, farmers need financial assistance, and not more debt, which is already huge.

I don't know who wants to respond. Mr. Seppay can talk about compensation for supply-managed sectors.

Mr. Chris Forbes: I'll try to respond.

Mr. Yves Perron: Go ahead, Mr. Forbes.

Mr. Chris Forbes: As the minister said last week, this issue is still one of her priorities. The government made a promise and she'll follow through on it, as she said. This week, she has been focusing on issues directly related to COVID-19. That's the priority.

I can briefly say that the Canadian Dairy Commission's credit limit has been increased to \$500 million. The sector made this request, and the government responded.

Mr. Yves Perron: I gather that we can expect an announcement in the coming weeks regarding compensation for supply-managed sectors. Is that correct?

Mr. Chris Forbes: No, that's not what I said. I said that this issue was a priority for the minister.

Mr. Yves Perron: Usually, when the issue is a priority, the implementation is quick.

Thank you.

I lost my audio.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry about that.

Mr. MacGregor, you have two and a half minutes.

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

I also have a number of small-scale farms in my riding. Many of them have developed a really neat business model over the years where they supply fresh local produce to a lot of the local restaurants in the area up and down Vancouver Island. Of course, because a lot of those restaurants are now closed, they've lost a huge share of their market.

I have two questions.

For the \$77.5 million that has been allocated in support of food processors for refitting, for buying new equipment and PPE, how do you ensure that small-scale processors are still going to get an adequate share of that money?

Has the department ever considered giving additional funding to programs like CanadaGAP? Then maybe small-scale fruit and vegetable growers could get the certification of safe handling of food they need to start selling to major grocery outlets in local communities to try to compensate for the loss in market share they've had from the closure of all the restaurants.

Mr. Chris Forbes: On the first part, I'd say, Mr. MacGregor, that when we develop a program, one of the things we certainly will look at is how we make sure that it's not all directed to large players and that certain groups are not excluded. We will do our best to make sure it has as broad an application as possible and works for the range of stakeholders in this sector. That comes from a mix of dialogue, as Frédéric was talking about, and our experience in delivering programs in terms of what works.

In terms of your second question, these are the kinds of suggestions that we can certainly always look at, whether it's with provincial programming or federal programming. Under the agricultural partnership, we have programs that can look at providing support to organizations to develop standards or to support companies looking to achieve standards. That's certainly the type of suggestion we can always look at with stakeholders, as I say, either provincially, because they have agricultural partnership funding, or federally.

• (1825)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

• (1830)

The Chair: Thank you, all.

This brings our question period to an end.

We shall break at this time for five minutes and will come back at 6:30 my time.

Alistair, is it 3:30 in your neck of the woods?

Anyway, at the half hour, we will all come back.

Thank you very much.

• (1825)

(Pause)

• (1825)

The Chair: I think we're all here.

I would remind people that we are in public. I'm not insinuating that you don't behave responsibly when we're not, but we are still in public because we cannot go in camera with this app.

We want to plan for the next couple of meetings. We tried to get a bunch of names of witnesses from organizations. I believe you all submitted them. If I can get clarification from the clerk, I think the whole list of witnesses that was submitted by every party was sent to all of you.

We need to decide a couple of things.

As for the panel itself, usually we have two full hours. Is it the wish of the committee to separate that into two different panels?

I think three maximum per panel would be as much as we could do with all the little breaks we get along the way for technical issues.

I'll finish by saying we have been told we can meet at least once a week. If we meet twice a week on Fridays and Tuesdays....

We also wanted a deadline for submitting new witnesses. That deadline would be May 7, which is Thursday, at 10:30 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time. Having said that, we may need to get a new round of witnesses. We don't know how long this study will last. If you could submit all the witnesses before Thursday, that would be great. It would help the analysts prepare the list.

If it's okay, we'll use the same formula as we did in our first study where we go with the percentage of the House: 50% Liberal Party, 30% Conservative Party, 10% Bloc and 10% NDP, give or take a few. That gives an idea for the clerk to prepare the lists of witnesses.

That's about all I have to say. I can take some comments, suggestions or questions from the floor.

Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Chair, are the analysts going to send us a list of the proposed witnesses and potentially a schedule we can all look at and comment on if we need to?

The Chair: I understand everybody received a list of witnesses proposed by each party. Am I right? As soon as the analysts have determined the people who will appear....

Everybody was asked to indicate their priority preferences. Your first witness would be your number one choice. With that, the analysts can start scheduling the upcoming meetings.

• (1835)

Mr. Francis Drouin: Okay.

Mr. Chair, obviously we know some other stakeholders were given the opportunity to appear before other committees. I would hope this committee would choose and prioritize those who haven't yet had the opportunity to appear before any committee.

I would suggest the analysts look at what other committees certain witnesses have appeared. It's not to say we don't want to have other witnesses appear at this committee, but I think we should give a voice to those who haven't yet been able to express their concerns or thoughts with the agriculture committee.

The Chair: Thank you for your comments.

Are there any other comments on that?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron: I have a comment.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Perron.

Mr. Barlow, you'll have the floor next.

Mr. Yves Perron: I have something to say about Mr. Drouin's comment.

When you asked us to submit a list, it was clear that we would prepare that list based on the order of priority. The members who prepared a list of witnesses know whether the witnesses appeared elsewhere. If the members believe that these people will provide significant information, the fact that they appeared elsewhere shouldn't necessarily be taken into account. Instead, we should refer to the lists prepared by members of Parliament.

The Chair: Mr. Perron, the parties are responsible for suggesting witnesses and the order of priority. I think that Mr. Drouin said this. You can choose to suggest the witnesses you want.

[*English*]

Go ahead, John.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm kind of echoing what Monsieur Perron said. We've already submitted our witness list, so it's tough to prioritize ones who have been....

To Francis' comment, I think it's pretty tough for us not to have CFA, horticulture, the cattlemen, the pork council or the meat council at the agriculture committee, as they may be bringing up issues that are more focused on agriculture programs or issues, where, if they were at the finance or industry committees, they may have taken a different approach. Many of us on the ag committee were not on those committees, and we have not had the opportunity to ask questions that we may feel are more ag specific or in more of an ag direction.

I agree to a little point. There may be some who don't have a specific ag focus who we don't have to prioritize, but I think our main stakeholder groups would be.... It would be incorrect for us not to have them as big priorities as part of this committee.

My second point, Mr. Chair, is that I'm wondering if there's any will among our members to put some sort of timeline on this. The only reason I say this is that, unlike a lot of other industries, time is of the essence when it comes to agriculture as we're going through the spring seeding right now, and producers are trying to get yearlings into the auction marts. The set-aside does not work for the hog industry, as was raised today, as Mr. Forbes said. We want the set-aside for the pork industry, but it doesn't work for pork.

I think there are some time issues that we need to be focused on, so it's not clear to me, Mr. Chair, and maybe you can clarify how this is going to work. Are we meeting indefinitely and just talking about COVID issues in agriculture, which obviously is what we're here for, or are we saying that, maybe in two or three weeks, we develop some sort of list of recommendations that we would pass on to the minister?

I do think time is working against the agriculture industry right now in terms of some of the things they are facing.

Maybe, Mr. Chair, you could provide some direction on the timelines here or what's really expected of us. Would that be okay?

• (1840)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barlow.

To your first point, again, it is up to the party to present whoever they want to see as witnesses.

On your second point, from my understanding, we are here at the will of the House—the whips of each party agreed—and right now we don't have a mandate to, say, do six meetings. It can be done if we can all go back to our whips and agree as parties that we want you guys to come up with a report after six meetings or whatever it is. That's how I understand it. I can certainly double-check it, but that's how I understand it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Girard, is that about right?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Marc-Olivier Girard): Yes, Mr. Chair, you're right.

The committee received an order of reference from the House of Commons to sit for the sole purpose of hearing evidence regarding the current pandemic at this time. This won't prevent the committee from potentially collecting all this evidence. When the House and its committees start meeting again in a more traditional manner, I don't believe that anything will prevent the committee from taking into account the evidence collected virtually during this time of crisis in order to make recommendations to the government and to the House.

Mr. Yves Perron: Mr. Chair—

[*English*]

The Chair: Just to pursue that, again, we have been mandated by the House to do this study. Right now we don't have the mandate. We can't vote on anything else because of the structure, the mechanism, that we have now.

Again, unless we get different directions from the House, right now we'll just keep doing our study, and we can decide within that framework how it's going to go. We could very well say we're going to do it by theme or we're going to do meats or grains. That could be another option, to look at all sectors. Basically, that's the direction we've been given. I can double-check it, but that's how I understand it.

I think, Mr. Blois, that you had your hand raised.

Mr. Kody Blois: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I certainly appreciate it.

I have just a couple of housekeeping notes, more than anything.

First, as far as timing is concerned, you mentioned Tuesdays and Fridays. I think the schedule is being determined by the whip's office, but do you know when we would regularly meet per week?

Second, around themes, I think you're spot on. We need to have some direction if we want to analyze the measures we've announced as a government today and take a look at their benefits and what it means to the industry.

To the point on the other different committees, I listened in on INDU last night and it sounded a lot like what I would assume this committee would sound like. It was very agriculturally focused. If it's the will of this committee to continue to bring those same witnesses, so be it, but to Mr. Drouin's point, I do think there's an opportunity to hear from some different folks who perhaps all parties have not had the chance to bring forward through this committee.

There's a lot of duplication going on right now. We have to ask ourselves as a committee what our role is, especially recognizing that I believe it's only until May 25 that we're scheduled or permitted to meet at this point.

My concern is times and themes. Can we confirm that we only really have a mandate until May 25?

The Chair: Mr. Blois, I do believe that's the date right now. I don't have that in front of me.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Girard, can you check whether May 25 is the set date?

The Clerk: Good question. I believe that May 25 is the applicable date. While you're continuing your discussion, I can check this date on my end and then get back to you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

We'll go to Mr. MacGregor, but did anybody else have their hand up that I didn't spot?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Perron, would you like to speak?

[*English*]

Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Chair, I know that the Minister of Agriculture has appeared before other committees. However, with today's announcement, we have significant new material to discuss. Mr. Forbes did a good job answering questions, but he can't really go beyond the technical nature of the announcement. He's tasked with carrying it out.

Has an invitation been sent to the minister? Do we have any indication as to when she might be available to appear before our committee?

• (1845)

The Chair: I'm quite sure she has been invited. As to when she will come in, I'm not sure. I didn't see the list of five witnesses that everybody provided and whether she was on that list or not. Anyway, I'm sure she has been asked already and we'll make sure to have time for her if it's the will of the committee.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Perron.

Mr. Yves Perron: I want to address the issue that Mr. Barlow raised earlier. He agreed with me on the first part and I agree with him on the second part. Even though this isn't clearly set out in our mandate, I gather—and I must remind you at this point that I'm a new parliamentarian—that the committee operates and makes decisions in a fairly sovereign manner. We could easily decide to make recommendations and send them out. I'm even prepared to make a proposal that will be put to a vote, if that's possible.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I'll raise a point of order right now regarding this matter.

I understand what Mr. Perron means, but this isn't possible. We're at the mercy of the House and we can't do anything about it. We've dealt with this situation in every other committee sitting at this time. Remember that the House isn't sitting officially and this status is currently a special status. If Mr. Perron wants to look at the motion carried by the House on April 11 and the amendment made a few days ago for the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, I invite him to do so. However, we can't move a motion simply because we want to. The committee isn't sovereign and we're really at the mercy of the House in this case.

The Chair: I also understood this, Mr. Drouin. We can check this. However, according to the motion, we must follow the guidelines. The situation is a little different from when we meet in a non-virtual setting.

Mr. Yves Perron: That's why I specified that I was a new parliamentarian.

The Chair: This is a new experience for everyone today.

I want to specify one thing.

[*English*]

If we want the minister to come in, we would have to send an invitation to the minister to officially bring her in.

Is it the will of the committee to send an invitation to the minister to appear?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We're all good on that. We will send an invitation to the minister, and as soon as we know when, we'll certainly circulate it to all the members.

Just to be clear, we wanted to have a list for the clerk to invite people. That's why we said to send us your top five right now, and then for Thursday we want everyone to dig deeper and send another list. You can send as many as you want, but we'd like to have another more comprehensive list for Thursday just to make sure that everybody's got that.

Are there any other questions or comments?

Mr. Barlow, go ahead.

Mr. John Barlow: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: I can't hear you very well, Mr. Barlow.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Mr. Chair, I had my hand up and I think Mr. Lehoux has his hand raised, too.

The Chair: Okay. I never saw it.

Who wants to go first? Go ahead, Lianne, and then we'll get John and Mr. Lehoux.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to say, to Mr. Blois' point, I did sit on the industry committee last night for the meeting with our stakeholders. I think it's important that we see them in the agriculture committee, especially in the context of just having heard this announcement of new money and funding for the agriculture industry. I think it's important that we hear from the stakeholders now on how this is going to help them or not. It's important that we see them at this committee to study that in particular.

That's all I'd like to say. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay, thank you. It is certainly the option of every party to submit its choice of witnesses.

Let's go to Mr. Barlow.

• (1850)

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, I just noticed that Lianne and Richard had their hands raised, so I was just bringing your attention to that.

The Chair: Oh, okay.

[*Translation*]

Do you have a question, Mr. Lehoux?

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Yes. Ms. Rood put it nicely. We must be able to hear from some of the witnesses again. I'm also a new parliamentarian. We must have the opportunity to make recommendations, rather than merely listening to people just for the sake of listening to them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lehoux.

You certainly have the option of inviting the witnesses you want. Regarding the recommendations, as we've said, that matter is beyond our control. Perhaps this will change, but right now, this is the extent of our mandate.

[*English*]

Are there other questions?

Go ahead, Mr. Blois.

Mr. Kody Blois: Mr. Chair, I believe we have the ability to strike a subcommittee of one representative from each of the parties along with, I believe, you and perhaps the clerk of the committee. In relation to themes and some of the witnesses and other ancillary issues that have been raised, I would recommend that this be handled offline, outside of this forum, to help expedite our process.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron: Mr. Chair, I don't know whether I'm the only one, but I don't have any audio.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: We can't hear anything, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: The chair and the clerk are conferring.

The Chair: Sorry, that's what was going on.

No, we're not allowed to move any motions. We didn't have a subcommittee structured from the start, so we're not allowed to have any motions or anything else, but right now the only thing we have to deal with is witness scheduling. That's all we have.

That's not to say that... You can call me and I can call you and we can all talk about things, but we cannot adopt or do anything as a subcommittee officially. Again, my line is open if you want to talk about different things. We're very tightly limited as to what we're allowed to do, and that's basically to talk about COVID-19 issues dealing with agriculture, and that's pretty much it.

Monsieur Perron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron: At that point, perhaps we could take the same approach as in the House. We could try to resolve the issue and reach an agreement before we come to the committee. This would save us from wasting time in negotiations—I was about to say “dilly-dallying”—and allow more time for witnesses. We could then make things official.

Are we allowed to do this, Mr. Chair? You said that we could call you to come to an agreement.

The Chair: We could certainly speak to each other, but the witnesses—

Mr. Yves Perron: Mr. Drouin says that he agrees. So this should be fine.

The Chair: To make things official, everything must be sent to the clerk so that the clerk can prepare the list of witnesses, the groups of witnesses, and the schedule of their appearances. These are the only things that we can control.

However, I don't have any issue with us speaking to each other. You can simply call me or email me to discuss any other matter. I'm always available.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Chair, I want to say that we don't have any issue with meeting informally outside the two hours of the committee meeting to discuss the choice of witnesses. May 25 will come quickly. We agree to not discuss these choices in the committee, but instead to discuss them informally with all committee members. If the other parties agree with this proposal, we can then give the necessary instructions to our committee clerk and to the analysts.

• (1855)

The Chair: Everyone will receive the list of suggested witnesses. You'll see that the witnesses suggested by the Conservatives could be the same as our witnesses, or vice versa. Personally, I don't have any issue with discussing the order of appearance of witnesses in conference calls, Zoom video conferences or chats, if you want. I think that we're allowed to do so.

Mr. Yves Perron: If our discussion is informal, will we still have the right to interpretation?

The Chair: Mr. Girard, will that be possible?

The Clerk: I think that it would be possible. However, the interpretation won't be simultaneous, but consecutive. In other words, it won't take place while you're speaking, but after you've finished speaking.

The Chair: Before the end of the week, we could hold a conference call and invite interpreters. We could then discuss a variety of topics without taking up committee meeting time. I could ask my assistant to organize this, if you'd like.

[*English*]

Mr. MacGregor, would you be available?

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes, I'm fine.

The Chair: Okay, I can try to set it up.

What's the best time? Is it morning, afternoon or evening?

Mr. MacGregor, of course, you represent your party, and Monsieur Perron as well.

I don't know who would be the Conservative lead. Does anybody want to volunteer to represent the Conservative Party?

Mr. John Barlow: Yes, I will, Mr. Chair. I don't know that days of the week matter anymore, or the time of day, so we'll make whatever it is work.

The Chair: We'll try not to wake you up too early in the morning, John and Alistair.

Okay, so we have all four parties. I'll try to set it up before our next meeting. Again, we have to submit our final list on Thursday at 10:30 a.m. I'll try to do it beforehand and we can negotiate some witnesses.

Does that work?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Are there any other hands?

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: Can I say something, Mr. Chair?

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

The Clerk: I want to tell the committee quickly that I confirmed that May 25 is the date, unless the whips of all the recognized parties agree on a later date.

It would also be very helpful if the committee could clarify which people it would like to meet with on Friday. Do you want to

meet with the minister, or do you already want to identify some organizations that we would invite on your behalf?

The Chair: I suggest that the clerk send an invitation to the minister. Otherwise, we'll proceed according to the order of priorities submitted by each party for two groups of three witnesses, if that's fine with everyone.

We must give people notice if we want them to appear. If everyone agrees, we'll stick to the order of priorities that you put on your lists.

Let's invite the minister first. Let's ask her whether she can come. If she can't come, she'll tell us when she would be available and we'll send her an invitation.

Let's invite the minister first. Let's ask her whether she can come. If she can't come, she'll tell us when she would be available and we'll send her an invitation.

The Clerk: Fine. If everyone agrees, that's how we'll proceed.

Thank you.

The Chair: Does everyone agree?

I see that this is the case.

Is there anything else?

[*English*]

Okay, that is all. That will conclude our first virtual meeting. I think it went relatively well.

I'm really happy to see everyone, and I'm looking forward to the next meeting.

Thank you so much. Take care, everyone. Take care of yourselves and your family. That's the important thing.

● (1900)

[*Translation*]

Have a good evening, everyone.

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