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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.)): Good morning, colleagues. I call this meeting to order.

It is a great pleasure to see you, particularly the members who are taking part in the meeting in person. I hope you have all made good use of the break, which allowed you to spend a few weeks in your ridings.

Today's meeting deals with the supplementary estimates (C).

Welcome to the ninth meeting of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food.

Before starting the meeting, I would like to offer a few reminders.

The meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House Order of November 25, 2021.

The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee.

I would remind all participants that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted.

And the last point, I would remind the members taking part in person that they must keep in mind the Board of Internal Economy's guidelines for mask use and health protocols.

[*English*]

I have a few comments for our witnesses.

I recognize that we have the deputy minister and other folks here. I suspect this is not your first rodeo in front of a committee, but make sure you raise your hand and work through the chair in your interactions. Languages are available at the bottom of your screens.

It's our pleasure to have you today.

[*Translation*]

Good morning, Minister.

Welcome. It is a pleasure to have you here today.

[*English*]

Thank you for all your work.

You have five minutes for opening statements, and then we'll turn to questions. I pass the floor over to you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to note that the following people are taking part in the meeting virtually: Chris Forbes, Deputy Minister; Marie-Claude Guérard, Assistant Deputy Minister, Finance; and Sylvie Lapointe and Philippe Morel from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

I want to start by saying a few words about the situation in Ukraine. On March 11, I met with the G7 agriculture ministers at an extraordinary meeting attended by the Ukrainian Minister of Agriculture, Roman Leschenko.

I assured Mr. Leschenko that Canada was going to continue to support Ukraine in these difficult times. The G7 ministers also reiterated the importance of collaboration to ensure that the cross-border movement of goods is not interrupted.

We are already seeing very strong pressure on the global supply of foodstuffs and agricultural inputs, particularly fertilizer and fuel, with the resulting rapid rise in prices.

With an additional \$942,000, the supplementary estimates bring our total budget for fiscal 2021-2022 to over \$3.9 billion, making it the largest in history. The department has about 5,000 employees.

Our supplementary estimates, which come to a little over \$22 million, demonstrate the government's commitment to helping the sector meet the current challenges.

A little more than half of the supplementary estimates supports our \$28 million investment in helping Prince Edward Island potato producers manage the surpluses resulting from the closing of the border with the United States. I am resolved to restore the trade in fresh Prince Edward Island potatoes with the United States and to support our producers.

The estimates also include \$292.5 million for the Supply Management Processing Investment Fund, which I announced just under two weeks ago. This investment involves over \$3 billion in total compensation payments to support producers and processors of dairy, poultry and egg products.

Since our last meeting, we have continued to make new investments to help Canadian producers strengthen their resilience for dealing with climate change. If we consider the devastating effects of the recent floods in British Columbia and the historic drought that struck western Canada, there is no doubt that we have to redouble our efforts to enable our agri-food producers to continue to feed a growing global population.

We have worked with the provinces to provide over \$1 billion through the AgriRecovery program and the Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements to help western producers who have suffered from drought and flooding.

Our government has committed to paying more than a half billion dollars over the next decade in our new programs to help farmers adopt sustainable practices and clean technologies. That includes the Agricultural Clean Technology Program, which helps producers everywhere in Canada invest in technologies that reduce environmental impact, such as high-efficiency grain dryers, solar panels, or precision agriculture.

There is also the On-Farm Climate Action Fund, which is offering \$200 million to help farmers combat climate change and adopt beneficial practices, such as cover cropping, fertilizer management and rotational grazing practices.

[English]

Labour is another major challenge for this sector. I'm working with governments and industry to develop an agricultural labour strategy. I'm also working with Minister Fraser to expand pathways to permanent residence for agricultural temporary foreign workers. I will continue to dedicate myself to supporting the safe and timely arrival of temporary foreign workers this year. Last year, we welcomed a record 70,000 workers to farms across the country.

Significant challenges remain for Canada's agriculture sector. The current CP labour dispute will worsen existing pressures on our supply chain. This is a critical issue for all producers, including livestock producers. The work stoppage will have a significant impact on the importation of cattle feed from the United States, when availability is already limited following last summer's drought. There would also be a significant impact on the transport of fertilizers during the critical seed season, when world food security is destabilized by the war in Ukraine.

Both parties are still negotiating. We are urging them to work together to resolve their issues and reach a deal as quickly as possible, and we'll continue to do so. Canadians have worked together throughout the pandemic to find solutions to our collective challenges. They expect the same from such actors in our national economy. We continue to support the parties so they reach an agreement soon.

As well, CFIA continues to work with poultry producers to eliminate and prevent the spread of avian influenza in Atlantic Canada.

• (1110)

There are significant challenges, but I believe the long-term future is bright for our industry. FPT ministers and industry are working hard to develop the next policy framework of agriculture, to run from 2023 to 2028. Through this framework, our farmers and food

processors will be able to ensure that Canada remains a world leader in sustainable food production, and we will build on recent reforms of our business risk management programs to make them more timely and equitable.

Mr. Chair, I appreciate this opportunity and I'm happy to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

As you were speaking, I was talking to the clerk. I apologize. You had 10 minutes and I might have said five. I'm sorry if we rushed you. Are you good? Okay, excellent.

We'll turn it over to our question period. We're going to start with the Conservatives, with Mr. Barlow for six minutes.

It's over to you, Mr. Barlow.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the minister for being here. I appreciate that.

On February 1, AAFC announced \$28 million for the surplus potato management program in P.E.I., to divert some of those potatoes that weren't going to be exported. However, what we've seen in the supplementaries, which we're here for today, is that only \$12 million was allocated for that program.

Is the other \$16 million going to be rolled over into the next fiscal year? Where is that discrepancy? Why is that not the total that was promised?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: It was coming from an internal transfer. We already had a portion of the \$28 million available within the existing budget, and we needed additional funds to get to \$28 million.

Mr. John Barlow: We know we've lost last year's crop, and there's not much we can do about that. The P.E.I. Potato Board is asking for \$84 million in compensation for that lost crop. With the diversion program, you're paying about eight cents per pound, which is maybe a quarter of what they're worth. Are there discussions to provide compensation for the loss of last year's crop?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: As you know, the first safety net that we have available for our farmers is the business risk management programs. With the province, we have extended the application date for all farmers, so that they are still able to apply to AgriStability. We have also increased the interim payment to 75%, so they can get money quickly if they need to. AgriInvest is another one. These are the first steps, and then we are adding \$28 million, as you know, to divert—

Mr. John Barlow: I have only a certain amount of time. You're saying, basically, that they have to look at AgriStability and AgriInvest. There is not going to be additional money from the government for that compensation.

The crux of this issue, Minister... You also stated quite emphatically that on March 10 we would have some news on what is going to be happening with the trade to the United States. That date has long passed. As I said, we've lost last year's crop. Now the desperation of P.E.I. producers is about this crop coming up. What do they do? What do they plan? They have to make that decision within days.

On what date will you lift the suspension and the ministerial order on P.E.I. potato exports? On what date will that be lifted?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: I have to maybe reframe the statement, because the situation is this. When I went to Washington with Minister MacAulay in January, we had this discussion with Secretary Vilsack and we asked him... We put a lot of pressure, because first we had to make the decision on whether we had to destroy some potatoes during the very cold season, and then we knew other decisions would have to be made in the spring. We pushed them, and what they told us at the time was that it could take five to six weeks to proceed with the risk analysis for table-stock potatoes to the mainland. They said within two weeks for Puerto Rico, and they did that.

I can assure you that we are in constant discussions with them. I am in communication with Secretary Vilsack directly, and we see progress. We got it for Puerto Rico. I'm confident that we will reach the same for the mainland soon.

• (1115)

Mr. John Barlow: Assurances and hope aren't going to save the P.E.I. seed potato industry. Everything we're hearing from our American counterparts is that this is a decision and a Canadian-based problem that needs a Canadian-based solution.

Why will you not lift the suspension and the ministerial order, and see if the Americans will bring in a federal order, which you have said is your main concern? Will you go to CUSMA under the dispute resolution mechanisms that are there? At least P.E.I. potato farmers will have a path or a timeline to know when something is going to happen.

Answer yes or no: Will you lift those suspensions, will you go through CUSMA and the dispute resolution mechanisms, or will you go to the WTO to try to get this resolved?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: There are two things. First, the ministerial order limits the movement of seed potatoes out of the island. We have to do that to protect the other Canadian provinces as well. The ministerial order also says that table-stock and processing potatoes can move—and you can see them moving across Canada—following strict phytosanitary measures or compliance agreements. This is what we believe is the right thing to do. This is what we are explaining in different ways to the Americans. We hope they will agree with this conclusion. The Americans are undertaking their own risk analysis.

The ministerial order has nothing to do with the closure of the border. The closure of the border is there because the Americans want to proceed with further analysis.

Mr. John Barlow: It does have something to do with the Americans, because the Americans have told you to put in that ministerial order to not allow those seed potatoes to go across Canada. You have made these decisions based on a threat from the United States. You're letting the United States dictate our international trade, as well as our interprovincial trade. I see you're shaking your head, but these are decisions that you made and you implemented.

I have only a minute left.

If you're not going to go through CUSMA and you're not going to go through the WTO, would you look at reciprocal bans? The United States has at least a dozen states that have quarantinable pests in their potatoes that we are importing to Canada, while we, at the same time, are banning our own products from going to the United States.

Would you look at reciprocal bans on American products to retaliate against this decision?

The Chair: I'm sorry. We're at six minutes. I know the minister will have another opportunity to answer that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Turnbull, you now have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the minister for being here. It's great to see you. I haven't had a chance to see you since you did a really great food security round table in my riding. I wanted to thank you for that. My constituents and the organizations in my riding were very grateful for that opportunity to speak directly with you.

This relates to my first question, which is a concern in my riding of Whitby and across the Durham Region. During COVID-19, we've seen an increase in food insecurity in our communities. The use of food banks, food hampers, food pantries, etc., has increased. We've done many food drives in the community to increase access to non-perishable foods. Obviously, this is a result of the global pandemic. There have been job losses and income loss, and all of that relates to people's ability to access healthy, affordable food.

In regard to this, Minister, I wanted to ask you what measures have been taken to counter this increase in food insecurity during COVID-19.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: You're right. COVID-19 has been really hard on Canadians' wallets. Not long ago, through the food policy I am responsible for as Minister of Agriculture, we launched programs with food banks across Canada. We have chosen six main partners to provide money to food banks across the country in the best way possible. We went step by step to make sure it was done in the right way. We could see at every step that it was flowing the right way across the country. There was \$330 million directed to the food banks and \$50 million to buy surplus food from our producers and processors and to direct it to food banks again.

As you know, we have the school food program that Minister Gould and I are working on. I really look forward to continuing our work with these partners.

• (1120)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you very much, Minister. I know the support given out during the COVID-19 pandemic has been really helpful for food security organizations in my community, so thank you for that.

I notice you also mentioned the B.C. floods and the extreme weather in the prairies—the drought, etc. We know that these extreme weather events have been devastating for our farmers, especially for smaller operators. I think they are even more vulnerable to being able to absorb some of the shocks that these extreme weather events cause. We've also seen how many months of work and investments can be wiped out in a matter of minutes.

It has highlighted for me the importance of the support through the business risk management programs. Can you tell us about these programs and how they've helped farmers and producers during times of crisis? Given the pattern of weather that we're seeing due to climate change, which is obviously ever more concerning, how can we ensure that these programs are sustainable in the long run? Obviously, the demand for the programs will increase.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes. You're so right. We had to face the drought in the west and then the floods in B.C. Farmers are the first ones to be affected by these extreme weather events.

We have our business risk management in place, and we also have the disaster financing assistance program. For B.C. we were able provide, with the province, \$228 million. I understand the applications are already being made. Money is being sent to farmers. In the last year or so, we've improved the AgriStability program, which is the first safety net that farmers benefit from when they face a hard situation. We removed the reference margin limit, which put \$95 million more into this program. We still hope that the prairie provinces will join and we will be able to increase the compensation rate from 70% to 80%.

I can tell you that while we are discussing the next framework agreement for 2023 to 2028, business risk management is also being discussed.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that. That's great. I think in the next policy framework, there obviously will be questions and discussion on how those programs get reframed. Thank you for that response.

How much time do I have, Mr. Speaker...or Mr. Chair? I just promoted you to Speaker—unintentionally.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Congratulations.

To go back to Mr. Barlow's comments about CUSMA and the dispute resolution mechanism that's built in, is that a quick solution, in your view? My understanding is that it would be quite time-intensive and quite long. I'm not sure whether it would provide the kind of resolution in a timely fashion that we're probably looking for.

Would you agree with that, Minister?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes. This mechanism has been used by the U.S. concerning our TRQs for the dairy sector. We can see that the first response was obtained in eight months. That's considered to be quite fast, but it's not done yet. In terms of all the responses, it's not finished yet.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull, and thank you, Minister.

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

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you for being with us today, Minister. We greatly appreciate it.

In terms of the amounts announced, can we believe they will cover all of the compensation owed to producers under supply management in connection with CUSMA, the Canada—United States—Mexico Agreement?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Thank you for the question.

No. The amounts announced to date total \$3 billion, if I round the number off, and are divided as follows: \$2 billion for dairy producers, \$691 million for poultry producers, and \$292 million for processors. That covers all compensation payments in connection with the agreements with Europe and the Asia-Pacific zone.

Our commitment is still just as firm: to provide full and fair compensation to help the producers having to cope with the repercussions of CUSMA. We will be announcing the details over the first year of our term, between now and the fall.

• (1125)

Mr. Yves Perron: So there is nothing provided regarding CUSMA, if I understand correctly.

Obviously, I acknowledge the sincerity of your commitment, Ms. Bibeau. However, the producers are getting a bit impatient.

Can we expect that there will be details in the next budget?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: We are committed to providing the details during the first year. It might be when the budget is announced, or in the fall economic and fiscal update. That remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, I think producers and processors can rest assured. In the case of dairy producers, they received their third payment very recently, in January and February. They already know the amount of the fourth payment, and it is agreed that the compensation payments in connection with the Canada—United States—Mexico Agreement will follow. So that guarantees them predictability.

For poultry and egg producers and for processors, funds are already available for the first two agreements, under investment programs. So they can already count on predictability. As well, that gives us more time to hold discussions and clarify the terms relating to the compensation payments resulting from the Canada—United States—Mexico Agreement.

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you for the answer.

I am pleased to hear you talk about processors. Does that mean that they are included in this compensation process, even though they are not expressly mentioned?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes, absolutely.

All of the programs relating to the agreements signed with Europe and the Asia-Pacific zone cover producers and processors. The same will be true for compensation payments relating to CUSMA.

Mr. Yves Perron: So there are formal commitments. Thank you for that.

I would like to talk about the question of labour. In the budget, there is reference to the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy.

Have funds been planned for this? Have the steps been determined that are needed in order to quickly adopt emergency measures relating to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, measures that have been proposed by people in the food processing industry?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes, the question of labour is critical for the agricultural sector and for the food processing industry, clearly.

Proposals have been made, and I have had productive discussions with Ms. Qualtrough and Mr. Fraser.

I can assure you that there has been progress in this regard. I am persuaded that we will be improving our programs, both the programs for processors and that apply to processing plants and the ones for our agricultural producers.

In particular, I am thinking of a mechanism that would recognize trusted employers.

Mr. Yves Perron: Right.

You know we are very open to your proposals and we want things to move forward quickly. I don't need to tell you that.

I would now like to talk about the assistance measures you have announced concerning processors of supply-managed products.

Do those assistance measures apply to the research and development sector? Is the objective to fill the new gaps or limitations we have observed in CUSMA in particular?

Can you give me any information on that?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Those are actually investment programs. They are grants to help processors modernize their facilities or digitize them, for example. That will enable them to be more competitive in the circumstances. It is one way of providing a partial answer to the labour shortage.

So they are investment programs intended to improve their productivity.

Mr. Yves Perron: Might there be something similar in the food processing industry? In the course of our work, the committee has noticed significant under-investment in agri-food processing plants in Canada.

Can we hope that money will be provided to meet the needs in this area?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: First, what we were talking about just now really was about producers of supply-managed products. Second, when it comes to investment programs for processing more broadly, that would actually fall under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perron, and thank you, Minister.

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

[*English*]

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

Welcome back, Minister. I think the last time we had you before our committee was in June of last year, so it's good to have you here.

I wanted to follow up on the line of questioning from my colleague, Mr. Barlow, regarding P.E.I. potato farmers. I met with them earlier this month and, suffice it to say, they are quite unhappy with the current situation. I'm sure you very much understand that.

On the question that he was about to ask you regarding retaliation against the Americans, if you look at the state of Idaho in particular, they're having problems with nematodes. We asked this line of questioning of your government before, when it came to China's blocking imports of Canadian canola seed. There seems to be this aversion in your government to taking that next step, following through and letting our foreign competitors know that we mean business.

Have you ever entertained the thought of bringing sanctions against American agricultural imports, to let them know that this is a two-way street and that we need to have a relationship that's based on mutual respect?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Absolutely. I've been working on this file, as my whole team has, for months. We really care, and we're doing everything we can to reopen the border.

We have to live with potato wart on the island. I still believe that we have a very strong scientific case that what is in the Canadian ministerial order is the responsible thing to do, and the Americans should be reassured by these procedures.

I can see progress at the technical table. I have direct communication with Secretary Vilsack. Yes, all options could be on the table at a certain point.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: They could be, but are they? Have you ever considered following through? I'm talking about retaliatory measures against—

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes. We are looking at all options: retaliation, the WTO and CUSMA. We're looking at these options.

This is a timing issue right now; producers need to make decisions for this season.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes. They're going to be planting in May.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Exactly. I know that, but if we turn off the discussion at the technical table to enter into a trade challenge, we will have no hope for this season, because it will take longer.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: You might have representatives from the State of Idaho starting to voice concerns to the executive branch of the American government. That's what you might have happen.

The other thing I really want to know about is how we are going to learn lessons from this whole debacle. How are we going to ensure that when we have another outbreak, there are good measures in place to contain it? How do we ensure that the people in the places where seed potatoes are going understand that this is not a province-wide problem, that it's contained and that they should be assured of the containment? I don't want us in another couple of years to see an entire provincial industry affected because of a few test fields.

How are we learning lessons from this, Minister?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: We are proceeding with 35,000 soil analyses right now. We have to do a deeper analysis of the situation to be able to map in the right way where the disease is. Following this, we will know more, and we will probably have to strengthen the management side to avoid what you are describing right now.

If I may take two seconds to complete my previous response, we are looking at the situation with Idaho, and we are looking at the situation with the other Canadian provinces that supply potatoes. I can assure you that we are looking at the pros and cons of different options, including different trade challenges and retaliation measures. We're looking at it with Minister Ng, but I'm still confident that the technical table is the place to get a timely decision.

• (1135)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Those farmers are watching this live right now, I bet, and they need to have a strong signal about how we're going to resolve this pretty soon.

I want to change tack in my last minute and a half. In his mandate letter, the Prime Minister asked you to work with integrating climate risk management, which flows to our business risk management programs.

I know that in the next policy framework, this is going to be a key thing, but I want to know—because I've asked this question before—if your department has made any calculations as to what the future costs of climate disasters are going to be. You were in British Columbia recently, standing side by side with Minister Popham. That was a huge package, but how much more future tax revenue are we prepared to spend to help farmers out on this?

Is there some kind of cost accounting of the strain climate disasters are going to put on the business risk management programs in the next year, the year after that and the next decade?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes, we are working on this, particularly for B.C.

The Prime Minister has put in place a committee with a certain number of federal and provincial ministers working together. At this table, we are going into the details of investigating what the future could look like and what the impact could be. Meanwhile, I am having discussions with my provincial and territorial colleagues on how we can improve the business risk management to be in a better position to face the new types of risk associated with climate change, but also how we can maybe use it to incentivize producers to be more resilient.

We're trying to work on different fronts.

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you.

We'll move now to Mr. Epp for five minutes.

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's good to see you in person, Minister.

Do you believe that P.E.I. is infested with potato wart, and do you believe that growers will plant this spring?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes, I believe they will plant this year.

I don't expect the opening of the U.S. market for seed potato for this year. I think they all know that already. For table-stock potatoes, I am still confident that we will be able to find a path forward to send our safe, good table-stock potatoes to the U.S.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

On March 8, one of the largest retailers in Canada sent an email to one of the processors in my riding, saying that in the event a CP labour dispute causes service interruptions, it is their expectation that freight will continue to be delivered on time to service their stores and customers. They also said there would be no exemptions for fining due to late purchase orders as a result of any rail issues.

Well in advance of a potential lockout or strike, there were already threatening letters to our suppliers from our retailers, with no acknowledgement for additional costs.

Can you tell this group when you expect a grocery code of conduct to be in place?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: We will receive, by the end of the month, concrete recommendations from the committee. This is what we expect.

As you know, following the last FPT meeting, Minister Lamontagne and I are co-chairing the committee.... We provide administrative support to the industry to work together, and we expect them to come to a joint proposed voluntary code of conduct. We expect to have a concrete recommendation by the end of the month.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you. That was actually my second question.

You do not expect to implement or support a U.K. model, which has a regulatory framework. You are supporting a voluntary code, like Australia has, which doesn't seem to work.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Let's see what they come with. I think we still have space for them to come to us with a voluntary code of conduct. If we had to apply something else, it would fall under provincial jurisdiction, and that would be quite a challenge to the country.

Once again, all the options are on the table. They are working. We have seen progress. I look forward to seeing the concrete options they will put on the table by the end of the month.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you. I know the industry is looking for federal leadership so that our suppliers can seamlessly ship across the country.

With respect to the CP Rail strike, which is one of the factors that feed into the need for a code of conduct, what advice are you giving to the Minister of Transport right now? Are you suggesting binding arbitration, back-to-work legislation...? How will this be resolved now?

• (1140)

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: My colleague, Minister O'Regan, is in Calgary right now, following the situation. They are still negotiating in the presence of the federal mediators. I can assure you that I am sharing with Minister O'Regan the reality of the impact this labour dispute has on the ag sector. It is very significant, and it has added to all the pressure we already had on our food supply chain because of COVID. Now, with the invasion in Ukraine, it's also adding to our will to provide good Canadian food to countries that won't be able to be supplied by Ukraine.

Mr. Dave Epp: Your answer flows right into my next question. Thank you, Minister.

With the situation in Ukraine, with fertilizer being needed on our farms right now, what is your advice to the CRA regarding the 35% tariff on purchase orders that were put in place prior to March 2?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: It's the same as I keep saying with Minister Regan. We have this conversation with Minister Joly as well.

We want to be strongly supporting Ukraine, as you know, taking into consideration what we need and what Canada can do to feed the world.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

I have limited time, and I want to get one more question in.

With respect to labour, I want to pick up on the comment of my colleague, Yves Perron. In your opening comments, you addressed long-term labour strategies, but 11 groups wrote to you in the fall. They asked for something before January 31. They wrote again on February 23. Again, we're dealing with the CAP issue, which was part of the study we finished back in June.

When can we expect to see some action on the emergency program, which we desperately need?

The Chair: Mr. Epp, we're at time.

Minister, if you want to take a few seconds to answer, I can move on.

Over to you.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Minister Qualtrough is the lead on this. I know she's working hard. I don't have the date.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Epp.

Right now we have Ms. Taylor Roy, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your remarks and the time you are giving us today, Ms. Bibeau.

As we all know, the agricultural sector is very important to our economy and to Canadians' health. You therefore have a crucial role to play, Ms. Bibeau. You have numerous challenges to meet because of the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical problems, and, of course, the climate crisis.

[*English*]

My question is about the measures being taken to combat the climate crisis and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. I think Mr. MacGregor already referred to the costs of the risk management programs and these climate disasters we're seeing more frequently.

While I know you're busy dealing with a lot of the short-term crises that have to do with the situation in Prince Edward Island, which is very severe, as well as, obviously, in Ukraine, we still have that longer-term issue that we need to keep dealing with.

Could you talk a little about how the department is addressing your mandate to deal with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector to help us reach our goal by 2050?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: We are investing significantly. In the last year, we have committed more than half a billion dollars on environmental measures. For example, we are extending our living labs. We're really proud of how we are taking our scientists and having them work with farmers in the field. That is showing results, and it helps inform farmers as well. We have added \$165 million to this initiative.

We added \$200 million for direct incentives to farmers. Actually, a few weeks ago I announced who the project managers, as I call them, will be. We have 12 partners across the country who will be intermediaries with the farmers, and they will get financial incentives for cover cropping, rotational grazing and better management of the fertilizer.

The third thing is \$185 million for the clean technology program. You may remember that in our platform we committed to tripling this amount of money. A portion of this is dedicated to research and innovation. We also want to incentivize the industry to develop faster and to commercialize and scale up these good technologies. A big part of that is really to provide farmers with incentives, actually subsidies, to buy technologies that will help them reduce their emissions, for example, grain dryers, poultry barn heating and equipment for precision agriculture. That type of equipment can be purchased with subsidies. I like to say it's fifty-fifty for most farmers—for the experienced farmers, let's say—but young farmers, women and under-represented groups can get a subsidy of up to 60% through this program.

• (1145)

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: That's great. Thank you very much for that.

Do you feel that with the money that's being spent now there's enough buy-in from the farming community? I know it's a very large community and we're talking about processors and farmers and, obviously, different types across the country. Do you feel that the will is there and that the associations have really bought into the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Well, farmers are taking care of the land forever—for generations—and this is what they have that's most precious. I think they get it. They are the first to be impacted by extreme weather events.

I can tell you that through the associations, they really get it. They are working hard, and I really feel that they want to be part of the solution. The challenge we have in the ag sector as compared with other sectors of the economy is that we have about 200,000 farming businesses, family farms, across the country. It is a challenge to reach out to all these farmers, to incentivize them, to get them to adopt these practices, and just to share the right information

and let them know what are the best practices and what are the results of our research and everything. It is a challenge, but I can feel that the associations want to be part of the solution.

Once again, their fields are the most precious things they have, and they want to take care of them.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Taylor Roy, and thank you, Minister.

Mr. Perron, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Bibeau, I am going to take the opportunity provided by the fact that you are talking about the environment to address the subject of funding relating to the organic standard. Producers in the organic sector have told us that funding for revising the standard had been cancelled.

Has that decision been reviewed? Is there a plan to do so over the next few weeks?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: I would not say that funding has been cancelled. In fact, it had been established for a certain period, at the end of which it was to be reviewed.

Certainly, the organic sector has a positive impact on the environment. There are a number of good practices that can be adopted, and they may go so far as total adherence to organic production. We are therefore trying to encourage agricultural producers to adopt best practices at all times.

It is still possible to discuss the support given to the organic sector, since that has not been cancelled.

Mr. Yves Perron: Your words give me some reassurance, because that means you are keeping an open mind. The least that could be done would be for the federal standard to be funded by the federal government. That standard is the basis on which products are marketed. Of course, we also agree about improving practices when it comes to agriculture in general.

You are talking about targeted grants. The committee will be pursuing its work on this subject in the next few weeks and we will be proposing very concrete measures. I hope you will be open to the idea of adopting them.

I am going to come back to the code of conduct. You said just now that you were waiting to see the proposals from the provinces. I think you have an exceptional opportunity at this moment, since all of the provinces have mobilized to have a mandatory code of conduct adopted.

Is that in fact the objective you are hoping to achieve?

• (1150)

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: The current objective is to adopt a code of conduct that would be followed voluntarily. The interested parties and industry representatives have sat around the same table to discuss it and there has been progress.

We have also offered them administrative support to facilitate the process. If it were to fail, it would be somewhat complicated to harmonize it all in order to respect provincial jurisdictions, but it wouldn't be impossible. We still have hope. My Quebec counterpart, Mr. Lamontagne, and I are eager to receive the next report, at the end of the month, which will include concrete recommendations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perron, and thank you, Minister.

Mr. MacGregor, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

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

Minister, over the years that I've been a member of this committee, it's often been said that we need to have better representation of various departmental staff at our embassies abroad. I notice that in these supplementary estimates, there is a transfer from Global Affairs Canada to AAFC, so that we can have departmental staff located at those missions abroad.

I would like to know how this fits in with our strategic diversification goals. What countries have you selected as a short list for where the departmental staff should be going? Do you have an idea of how many staff will be involved? Finally, has the war in Ukraine changed your calculus about which countries suddenly have more importance?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: This is something we are looking at, obviously, in partnership with Minister Joly and Minister Ng. The Asian zone and the countries that are part of the CPTPP are definitely the next zone we are looking at.

I cannot be very much more precise at this point yet, unless you want to turn to my deputy. He might have additional information. I would say that, for now, this is where we are looking.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: You know the region, but not specific countries yet, and not the numbers.

Do you have an idea, as a minister, of what you would like the departmental staff to focus on? What will be their main priority when they are staffed at those embassies abroad?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: I can tell you that I would appreciate more diversity—diversifying our markets—because we know that when we depend too much on one market, it could be at risk. Developing markets in trusted countries would definitely be helpful for that sector. We have so many opportunities.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: We'd be heading off any phytosanitary arguments that may come up before they become a major problem, I hope.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Of course.

Once again, different countries are working differently regarding this. I really believe that CFIA has a strong reputation international-

ly. We are delivering what we say we are delivering, and Canada can be looked at as a trusted partner. I would appreciate development in new markets and to be less dependent....

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

The next speakers will be Mr. Lehoux and Mr. Louis. They will have the floor for four minutes each.

Mr. Lehoux, you have the floor.

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

Good morning, Minister. Thank you for being with us this morning.

I am going to talk about labour, particularly in the pork production sector, which, as you know, is very important in Quebec and Ontario.

One employer in my riding employs 1,200 workers, but it is currently short 300 to meet the need. The labour shortage translates into overflowing piggeries, and the farmers are seriously starting to consider euthanasia.

The percentage of hirees who can be foreign workers has been raised from 10% to 20%. At the beginning of the year, you announced that the process for integrating these workers was going to be simplified and improved. But last year, the employer I just mentioned was short 200 employees, and it is now short 300. So the situation has not improved.

What is happening in the departments? Why can the foreign workers not be brought in as quickly as possible?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Thank you for the question.

In Quebec, yes, the percentage of hirees who can be foreign workers has risen from 10% to 20%. When workers initiate the process of applying for permanent residence, they are no longer considered to be part of that percentage. So that gives us some leeway.

The problem in connection with labour will not be solved just by bringing in foreign workers. However, we do need a large number of those workers.

We are also working on other fronts, and, in particular, we are trying to attract young people through the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy in the agricultural sector. We have also committed to improving tax incentives so that seniors can keep working longer, for example.

• (1155)

Mr. Richard Lehoux: In my riding, the unemployment rate is 2.6%. It is a good idea to try to attract young people, but there is a definite labour shortage. How can we improve our processing capacity?

As you know, Minister, we have tabled a report once again and I would hope that you have already seen it. Some things in it could be put in place quickly to enable small slaughterhouses to come back. Concentration in the slaughtering industry is taking us toward that kind of situation.

What is your position in that regard? Without lowering standards, we could cut the red tape to help these small slaughterhouses.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: In terms of foreign labour, Ms. Qualtrough is working to facilitate the process. You also know that for economic immigration, Quebec bears some of the responsibility. Canada and Quebec have to be more open.

On the question of small slaughterhouses, some fall under provincial jurisdiction and others under federal jurisdiction. At the federal level, Canada has to meet the international standards, because that is what enables Canadian producers to export their products. The federal government also regulates interprovincial exports. Under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, funds are transferred to the provinces. Certain programs are provided and administered by the Quebec government, but the funding comes in part from the federal government.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Minister, I would hope it will be possible to accelerate these processes. I have been a member of Parliament for two and a half years and I have been hearing about this for all that time. In concrete terms, little has been accomplished.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: The initiative has to come from the private sector.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Yes, and it wants to move in that direction. However, and you will agree with me, Minister, there is far too much red tape. We can meet the international standards without getting bogged down in them.

To conclude, I would like to talk to you about the restriction put in place during the pandemic that prevents foreign workers from moving from one company to another. This is a major problem at present.

Are there plans to cancel that restriction?

The Chair: Minister, can you answer the question briefly? I have to give the next speaker the floor.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: My answer will be brief.

I know that Ms. Qualtrough is working on a major reform of the Temporary Foreign Workers Program, and that this will be given consideration.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Louis, you now have the floor for four minutes.

[English]

Mr. Tim Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here. I very much appreciate it and all the witnesses who we're going to be talking to today.

I wanted to talk about food loss prevention. About a third of the food grown at present here is wasted. About \$49 billion a year is

Canada's portion. Much of the focus right now is on diverting food waste. Right now, programs are emphasizing organic waste management, so that organic waste does not end up in landfills, where it generates methane gas during decomposition.

The best way to reduce the numbers is to keep the food in the food chain in the first place, by focusing on food loss prevention rather than these more efficient ways of destroying or modifying food waste. We know that prevention creates the greatest economic social and environmental benefits. Once you reduce food loss at any point in the chain, you're automatically saving it all the way back up the chain. If we're wasting a third of the food we grow, we're automatically wasting a third of the fertilizer, a third of the fuel and a third of the land that it took to grow it.

Minister, can you share with us some of the programs and the solutions that we have and would like to implement to combat food waste?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: I'm sure you know about the food waste challenges that are already ongoing. We have passed the first wave, let's say. We have selected, across the four different challenges, about 44 semifinalists, if I remember, who are moving forward with the development of either their business model or a technology. I think we will have from this challenge very good ideas that we will want to scale up and apply in different regions across the country.

You might have seen also in my mandate letter that we have a plan for a fund that will be dedicated to reducing food waste across the food supply chain. As you said, this will have impacts on climate change, actually, because this generates a lot of emissions. It will be good for farmers. It will be good, because when you integrate the literacy part, it can also help in terms of food security to better manage the food we already have.

We are looking at different options and are investing in research and innovation as well.

• (1200)

Mr. Tim Louis: That's fantastic. Yes, the sustainability of the program itself would be most helpful, because we want to keep this moving forward.

You touched on the scalability of it. In my riding of Kitchener—Conestoga, we have a company called Enviro-Stewards. They're an environmental engineering business. They go to the food manufacturers and help them reduce food loss and prevent water waste. On average, they work with 50 plants and save about \$250,000 per plant. That gives higher margins and a smaller carbon footprint.

I wanted to ask you how we can help with the scalability of this. Will we be able to support smaller producers as well as larger companies? How can we work with all sizes of company?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: I think we will keep working together while we are developing this new fund. I was wondering if we could also, in some cases, use the clean tech program, but anyway, we will be consulting you while we develop the new fund.

Mr. Tim Louis: That's perfect. Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Chair. I believe that's my time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lewis, and thank you, Minister.

That concludes our one-hour panel with you today. On behalf of all the committee members, I would like to thank you for your time and for your leadership. As you mentioned in your remarks, there are challenges globally, particularly with what's happening in Ukraine and elsewhere, but there are also opportunities, and we know you'll rise to the occasion. We look forward, as a committee, to continuing to support your work and helping to provide recommendations to the government.

All the best. We'll excuse you at this point. You can go enjoy your lunch.

Colleagues, we're going to break for three or four minutes. Speaking of food waste and not letting it go to waste, the clerk wanted me to remind you that we have lunch at the back. She orders this faithfully so we can have a quick bite, so please enjoy the lunch.

We'll be back in three or four minutes. Thank you.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1205)

The Chair: Colleagues, we're going to get back at it. As was mentioned by the minister, we have a number of her colleagues here, including the deputy minister, Mr. Forbes.

Order, folks. I know we're all enjoying a bit of lunch, but I have to be able to hear myself speak.

Mr. Forbes, I see your hand. I'll try to quieten down my colleagues here. We're going to go over to you.

Mr. Chris Forbes (Deputy Minister, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I'm having a computer problem, and I'm worried my battery is going to die. My computer seems to be crashing. I will stay with you as long as it lasts, but I'm having screen and other failures.

The Chair: Let's get right at it, then.

Mr. Chris Forbes: My colleague, Madam Guérard, is there if there are questions.

The Chair: I'm sure some of the colleagues will want to get right to you, so stay with us as long as you can, please and thanks.

A few folks are saying that it's convenient, but we know that's unfortunate.

We're going to start with Mr. Falk. I believe he's on the screen.

Folks, we're getting right to questions. The officials are here to follow up on what we spoke about with the minister.

Mr. Falk, you have six minutes. We'll go over to you.

• (1210)

Mr. Ted Falk (Provencher, CPC): Very good.

Officials, thank you very much for joining us this morning. I am looking forward to the answers you're going to be providing for us.

This committee, some time ago, asked for numbers on the Agri-Invest program, with a breakdown by provinces, sectors and also with account balances of less than \$10,000. Is that information that's going to be coming fairly shortly?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I'm not sure we can provide all of that, but we should be able to provide some of that. In fact, I apologize if it's been requested and we have not provided it, because our goal is always to follow up promptly to committee requests.

Mr. Ted Falk: Thank you.

An issue that's front of mind for a lot of producers right now is that of the CP Rail strike. I'm also wondering, with the potential vaccine mandate that the trucking industry is facing interprovincially, is this something that Agriculture is anticipating? If so, what response can we expect?

Mr. Chris Forbes: On the rail situation, as the minister mentioned, we are quite engaged—as she is with her counterparts, and we are, of course, at the officials level—in working with the sector to make sure that all of the challenges arising from a strike or stoppage in work are well understood by everyone involved and that we do what we can to mitigate.

I would say more broadly, whether it's on trucker availability or other supply chain-related issues, that we're very alive to concerns in the agriculture and food sector about the stresses the supply chains are under, and that goes for trucker availability, the costs of inputs, ports, rail, everything. These are issues that are front and centre for us in the work we're doing.

Mr. Ted Falk: As far as the mandates north-south go, many of the producers in my riding—some of the large hog producers and the feed mills—have reached out to me and indicated that trucking is a problem in terms of getting product from the southern states. Because of the particularly dry summer we had last year, the crop yields weren't what they were expected to be, and the mandates that were implemented some time ago regarding vaccination status to cross the border certainly haven't helped that situation. Those seem to have aggravated the supply. In addition to that, as you indicated, the prices have reflected those mandates as well.

Is the department taking any proactive measures on that?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Well, in terms of movement of goods, we work with our colleagues in Transport and other departments to do what we can to facilitate that. I think colleagues at CFIA have also been involved, for instance, when we have had issues like highway closures in B.C. with the floods.

In terms of costs, we provide financial support through programs like the advance payments program, which is available to producers to deal with some of the upfront costs of planting and other spring activities before the revenues start to flow. We have a range of tools like that available.

Mr. Ted Falk: We're also hearing from a lot of industry-related folks about the labour shortage. That is an issue that has seized this committee in the past.

Recently, the Canada summer jobs program was released. Has your department been recommending to the government that agriculture be made a priority for the Canada summer jobs program?

Mr. Chris Forbes: We certainly advocate with colleagues across ministries to make them aware of the labour shortage in the agriculture and food industry, as was discussed in the previous session, so whether it's Canada summer jobs, the youth employment strategy or other programming, for the regulatory aspects we are certainly advocating for awareness around the critical labour shortages the sector faces, yes.

• (1215)

Mr. Ted Falk: There have been some cost increases with the AgriStability program. Do you expect further increases this coming year?

Mr. Chris Forbes: You mean the costs of AgriStability? No, the fees would not change this year.

Mr. Ted Falk: Insofar as CFIA goes, I don't know, Mr. Forbes, if you are going to answer that question or if you want to refer that to your colleagues in CFIA. According to the little feedback I have received over the years that I have been a member of Parliament, CFIA isn't always seen as coming alongside and partnering with industry, but rather as fulfilling only the regulatory function of that.

Does CFIA see that as something in its mandate that could possibly be improved, such that it could have a role that would be more complementary to that of the industry? How does it see that role evolving?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I will defer to colleagues from the agency on that.

Ms. Sylvie Lapointe (Vice-President, Policy and Programs Branch, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): We have been very focused on a collaborative relationship with industry. As the regulator, we work very closely with industry members, and in some instances actually co-develop regulatory approaches with them to make sure we are facilitating innovation and flexibility and meeting the needs of industry as well as the needs of the regulator. We very much work with them to avoid unintended consequences.

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

I have just a couple of points.

Mr. Forbes, it was suggested in the room that if you are comfortable and you think it saves battery, you can shut your camera off.

We're willing to make that happen. We know who you are and we trust your voice, so I will leave that to your discretion.

Mr. Falk, you had some questions on Canada summer jobs. I know MPs have the ability to help categorize priorities. In Kings—Hants I have put agriculture, and probably other colleagues have as well. That's just for your benefit.

Mr. Forbes, I see your hand. Go ahead, quickly.

Mr. Chris Forbes: I'm sorry to be so difficult, Mr. Chair. I will try calling back in on my phone, because my computer is really about to crash and I don't seem to be able to save it. If it's okay with you, I will try that.

The Chair: Yes. We will work with our technical team and our wonderful clerk.

Right now, though, I'm going to move to Ms. Valdez for six minutes.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Good afternoon, colleagues and Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses who are providing input into this discussion.

Many groups are under-represented in Canadian agriculture, whether they are youth, women, indigenous people or persons with disabilities.

Can the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food share what initiatives are in place to help address the key issues and barriers they often face to thriving in the sector?

I know Mr. Forbes had to step out, so this is for Madame Guérard.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Claude Guérard (Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Management Branch, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Good afternoon.

I don't have the details relating to this question at the moment, Ms. Valdez, so I will answer it later.

[English]

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: No problem.

I have two kids, so I'm really mindful about youth and the future of our youth. In the supplementary estimates, I saw that there was a \$4-million transfer from Employment and Social Development Canada to the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada youth employment and skills strategy.

I really wanted to know, because this is a very positive strategy, if there's anything you can provide as far as insight goes on how those funds will be spent. Or will we have to defer to Mr. Forbes?

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Claude Guérard: I can answer part of the question.

Actually, following the biannual reallocations under the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy, Employment and Social Development Canada transferred \$4 million to Agriculture and Agri-food Canada. The total amount for the department is \$24.6 million for the current year.

[English]

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Would you happen to know if any other government departments will be engaged to plan out this strategy?

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Claude Guérard: It is actually a horizontal initiative, but I don't have the names of the other departments. I will be able to answer that question later.

[English]

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: No worries.

In terms of upscaling, would you happen to know how this program will be deployed? Are there any comments you have on the program overall?

• (1220)

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Claude Guérard: I don't have the details for that question at hand.

[English]

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Go ahead, Mr. Forbes.

Mr. Chris Forbes: I missed the beginning of the question, but I have rebooted.

Can you tell me which program you were talking about?

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Sure. No problem. Welcome back, Mr. Forbes.

Essentially, I was just explaining how I noticed in the estimates that \$4 million was transferred from Employment and Social Development Canada to the Agriculture and Agri-Food program with youth. If there is anything you can comment on as to how the funds will be spent, or if you have any comments on the program overall, it would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Chris Forbes: This is part of our youth and employment skills. The funding has gone to fill, I think, a few thousand positions—I'd have to check my numbers—over the course of the last year, and these jobs would be ones in the agriculture and food sector. There are 2,400 jobs in total. This is just part of the funding. This would be for a range of agriculture and food sector jobs that would provide young Canadians with meaningful work experience in the sector over a period of months.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: That's fantastic.

Would you know if this is limited to just youth farmers? Or would that include employment for, say, youth who wanted to participate in organizations that support agriculture as a whole?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I think the answer to that question would be yes. I think it's broader than just farms. It could be in agriculture

organizations or in groups related to food, but we could certainly find for you the precise eligibility. I don't have that in front of me.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

I'm going to loop back real quickly to close a question I asked earlier. I think you were off-line. It's really around under-representation in Canadian agriculture.

We talked about youth, but for women, indigenous people and persons with disabilities, can you share what initiatives are in place to help these groups address these key issues and the barriers?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Yes. There are a couple of points. We have programming under our agriculture partnership, including the AgriDiversity program, which is there to expand and provide opportunities for more diverse groups to participate. We have at the program level.... The minister referred to how sometimes, when we design programs—I can't remember which program she was referring to—we'll have an elevated cost-share for younger farmers, as an example, on some of our programs, as a way to give them access to funding that might be more challenging if it was a traditional cost-share.

A lot of work has gone on in the department in terms of working with indigenous partners to expand not just eligibility but also access to the programs, through things like our pathfinder service, which will help them navigate some of our programming, particularly as first-time applicants. That can sometimes be challenging, so we have made some effort there to help indigenous partners as they apply.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forbes. Thank you, Ms. Valdez.

[Translation]

Mr. Perron, you now have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank Mr. Forbes, Ms. Lapointe, Ms. Guérard, and all the witnesses for being with us today.

Mr. Forbes, I asked the minister a question just now about funding relating to the organic standard. I mentioned that the funding had been cancelled, but instead she talked about the non-renewal of an amount that had been established before for a particular period.

Are you considering funding the review of this organic standard again in the near future?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Thank you for the question, Mr. Perron.

I think the funding came from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. I would like to turn the floor over to Ms. Lapointe or Mr. Morel on that subject.

Mr. Yves Perron: Right.

Ms. Lapointe, can you answer the question?

Ms. Sylvie Lapointe: Thank you for the question.

I will have to provide you with the details later.

Mr. Yves Perron: I see that no one can give me details on this subject.

This point is important, because the fact that the standard is funded by the federal government is a way of guaranteeing our producers' credibility abroad. These are not huge amounts of money. We are starting to invest a bit all over to preserve the environment, but it seems to me there is something incongruous when it comes to the organic standard.

We spoke just now with the minister about the point when we would be able to restore trade and about the sanctions provided.

Mr. Forbes, the Prince Edward Island producers are being compensated at present. We have seen \$12 million provided for that purpose.

Will that be enough? If it is found not to be enough, are you considering providing additional funds?

• (1225)

Mr. Chris Forbes: The government has announced \$28 million in funding, as was said during the first meeting. The province has also added funds in the amount of \$12 or \$13 million. In total, that makes \$41 million to help producers find other markets, to diversify their activities in terms of processing, of using potatoes, and, unfortunately, of destroying them.

I don't know whether other funds could be added. We will have to take various factors into account, such as access to other markets and the reopening of the United States market. For the moment, I can only talk about the program offered at present.

Mr. Yves Perron: Right.

If other regions encounter problems, will you be open to the idea of providing help for them too? In particular, I am thinking of the producers in the Saint-Amable region, who have been having trouble for several years, although that case is unique.

Mr. Chris Forbes: Are you talking about help for other producers?

Mr. Yves Perron: Yes, the producers in the Saint-Amable region in Quebec. It's not the same situation, but I know that a disease has devastated potato production, and is preventing them from producing potatoes. I am raising the issue, but we could talk about it again later.

I would like to come back to the labour shortage in processing plants, the subject raised by Mr. Lehoux earlier. The minister told us that Ms. Qualtrough was working on that, but could you give us any details about the implementation of the improvements promised several weeks ago now, if not several months, that we are not seeing on the ground?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Thank you for the question.

I can only repeat what the minister said. We are aware of the urgency associated with the labour shortage. Steps were taken, but they have been suspended.

We know it is urgent for our stakeholders, and we are trying to make sure that it progresses quickly.

Mr. Yves Perron: Mr. Forbes, we have seen that funds have been provided for producers under supply management to help them become more competitive, among other things. The subject was raised earlier of compensation granted to producers and processors.

Can we hope this will be mentioned in the budget? Are you in a position to answer this question?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Thank you for the question.

I am going to repeat the answer that the minister gave you. The government has promised to make an announcement during the first year of the minister's term, and it could be done this spring or in the fall.

At present, this year, we are paying compensation to producers and processors to help them deal with the repercussions of the agreements signed with Europe and the Asia-Pacific zone.

Mr. Yves Perron: Mr. Forbes, I would like to ask you one last question.

Earlier, we addressed the subject of the code of conduct and the negotiations. From what we know, everything seems to be working well.

Are you planning for funds to be available for the rapid provision of technical support for the organizations?

Mr. Chris Forbes: We are waiting for the outcome of the discussions between retailers and processors. We will then see what is expected of the government in terms of support. That is going to depend on where the funds are coming from and whether the government is being asked for something.

• (1230)

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

Mr. MacGregor, you have the floor.

[*English*]

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

Mr. Forbes, in these supplementary estimates, there's a \$4-million transfer for the youth employment and skills strategy.

Can I get a little more detail as to how this fits in with the overall strategy to address the labour shortage? What kinds of outcomes is the department hoping for with this \$4 million?

Can you provide more detail with regard to those questions, please?

Mr. Chris Forbes: This money was from when there was unused money from other departments over the course of the year. We had excess demand for the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada part of the program, so we were able to step in and use that money.

There are different target groups.

I'd have to get you more detail on the specifics of how the money was broken out, but we have targets that go—per one of the previous questions—to some disadvantaged groups.

The goal is always to increase employment in the sector for youth. It's a very one-to-one relationship, right? We try to make sure there are some regional and sectoral varieties, so that it's not all concentrated in one subsector or part of the country. It's application based, so where there's demand, we will try to fill in with as much as we can provide.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

In his mandate letter, the Prime Minister directed the minister to explore the next steps to modernize the Canada Grain Act to ensure it meets the needs of the sector now and in the future. I know the department has been engaged in extensive consultations, especially over 2021.

What do those next steps entail? What is the department now doing with that feedback? Are we in the process of seeing some legislation eventually coming our way? Can you give us a summary of what you believe people in the grain sector need or want from those consultations?

Mr. Chris Forbes: We are in the process of reviewing what we heard from stakeholders. There are a range of views and interests. Obviously there are some significant views placed around outward inspection fees in general, with some feeling that this is an extra burden and some stressing the importance of it.

We've had a few other issues come up over the course of the consultation. The normal process would be that we would work through a set of options, approaches—which is what we're doing—to move forward, to see if there are ways we can respond to stakeholder feedback to modernize the act in a way that we feel will be helpful for the sector moving forward.

It's a bit early to say exactly when and how next steps will come out, but it is something, as you said, that was in the minister's mandate letter, so it will be something that we continue to work on.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Another part of the minister's mandate letter was to ban the live export of horses for slaughter.

I've received a lot of correspondence on this issue over the years. It's not only in my riding, but across the country. Many Canadians are concerned with this practice.

The mandate letter is starting to show a bit of age, now that we're in March 2022. Can you provide our committee with an update on how the department is moving ahead with that particular directive?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I will turn it over to colleagues at the CFIA. However, Mr. MacGregor, I think with the mandate letter as a whole, we will certainly look to implement as much as we can as quickly as we can.

Obviously with an entire mandate letter, it can take months, if not years, to get through all of the items, so that's certainly on the list of items we are discussing.

Sylvie Lapointe may wish to elaborate a bit on that specific commitment.

• (1235)

Ms. Sylvie Lapointe: As you indicated, Mr. MacGregor, this is a very polarized issue across Canada, and certainly one we've been well aware of for a long time.

From a CFIA perspective, the federal perspective, we have measures in place currently to make sure all animal health and welfare standards are met in terms of the transportation of these animals outside of Canada. We are actively working on how we are going to implement the mandate in the minister's letter.

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

I'll generously cede the rest of my time to the committee.

The Chair: We can always add 20 seconds on at a future time. I'll keep that in mention.

We're going to now turn to Mr. Barlow.

Colleagues, obviously we want to pass the estimates, or certainly call it to a vote, so we are going to go for five minutes, five minutes, two and a half minutes and two and a half minutes. That will get us to 12:50. I'm going to reserve one question for myself—I rarely do it, but I want to—and then we'll get to the voting procedures.

Mr. Barlow, you have five minutes.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to focus my questions on CFIA, Ms. Lapointe and Mr. Morel.

Ms. Lapointe, I understand that an 80-page draft report was recently sent from CFIA to USDA regarding the P.E.I. potato issue. It was a draft; it was never vetted by the minister or by the industry. Parts of that, including the fact that the P.E.I. Potato Board supports increased labelling on potatoes, are completely false.

Why was this draft report shared with the USDA before being vetted?

Ms. Sylvie Lapointe: As you noted, we shared a draft document at the technical level—a scientific document, a pathway analysis—with our colleagues in the U.S. This is something that is normally done. It is normal practice among technical experts between countries who share information back and forth—

Mr. John Barlow: Ms. Lapointe, I'm sorry, but I have limited time.

It's normal practice for CFIA to share documents with other countries, including USDA, with incorrect information in them.

Ms. Sylvie Lapointe: The incorrect information that you mentioned was corrected. We noticed that error and it was fixed immediately. As I indicated, colleagues in the U.S. know that this is a draft document that could change over time, and it builds on information we have already shared with the U.S. There is nothing new in that document with respect to the fact that our table-stock potatoes are perfectly safe to ship to the U.S.

Mr. John Barlow: Can you table that draft with the committee, and can CFIA also table all of the correspondence, emails, phone calls, texts, between CFIA and the USDA that were made before the ministerial order and suspension were put in place? That would be very helpful. Thank you.

With regard to my next question, P.E.I. has had a successful potato wart monitoring program for 20 years. The potato wart was detected in fields that were monitored.

What is the reasoning for CFIA recommending shutting down the entire province for two detections, and describing the province of P.E.I. as completely infested with potato wart when that is not the case?

Ms. Sylvie Lapointe: I would note that there were two detections, but the implications of those two detections on two fields actually then entail a very lengthy investigation that right now involves up to 300 fields.

That is why, from a science perspective, and further to our domestic and international obligations, it was felt that a ministerial order was required to limit the spread of potato wart in the province but also outside of the province to other parts of Canada.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you.

What's the point of having a monitoring program to detect pests and then throwing out 20 years of data and making such an overreach, I would suggest, with the decision that was made by CFIA?

For our own government to put in a ministerial order when the United States is exporting to Mexico potatoes that are Sprout Nipped and washed.... It seems odd that the Americans are exporting the potatoes that you say are perfectly fine for the Americans when, in contrast, not only is Canada blocking those same potatoes from P.E.I., but the United States has quarantinable pests in many states, including Idaho, yet we are still importing those potatoes into Canada.

Why is there a double standard from CFIA? We are punishing perfectly safe Canadian potatoes while still importing American potatoes that have quarantinable pests.

● (1240)

Ms. Sylvie Lapointe: We are not blocking the movement of table-stock potatoes from P.E.I. The ministerial order is not a document that bans anything. It's actually an enabling document that allows products and commodities from the potato industry to move, under certain conditions, across Canada. That is completely separate from the decision the United States took, which was to not allow or to suspend the import of potatoes from P.E.I.

Mr. John Barlow: I'm sorry, Ms. Lapointe. Can I—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Barlow. We're going to have to leave it there.

Mr. John Barlow: Well—

The Chair: Look, Mr. Barlow, we're at time. Everyone is allotted their time.

Thank you, Ms. Lapointe.

We're going to go to Ms. Taylor Roy for five minutes now.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Thank you very much.

I had some questions about the youth employment program and how that's working. I was wondering if you could go into a little more detail. I know we've had a couple of questions about the \$4 million that's been transferred over, but it seems that in the agriculture sector there have been a lot of applications and a lot of demand for that program. I'm curious to know where those are coming from and whether even more funding in this area could help with some of the labour shortages we've been hearing about.

Mr. Chris Forbes: On the program itself, we were basically supporting youth employment in the agriculture and food industry by covering about 50% of wages and benefits, up to about \$14,000, with additional incentives for youth who have specific employment barriers, like those from under-represented groups, or for an employee with a disability, for example. If you need to buy specialized equipment, there would be additional support.

Regarding the applications, I'd have to check. I don't have the data in front of me, but they come from across the country and from a range of subsectors. We find that it's a popular program. Would continued funding be helpful for the sector going forward? I would say yes. Ongoing funding under this program will support youth hiring and of course, as you point out, given the shortage of labour and the rising costs of labour, particularly at some of those salary levels, I think it would be helpful for the sector.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Given the need for more youth employment and to attract young people to this sector, which we obviously depend on greatly for our future, this seems to be a win-win situation right now. I don't know. I know the labour shortage is quite severe. Mr. Lehoux mentioned a shortfall of 300 employees in one area. I'm just wondering if more money is going to be allocated for this or has been requested in the budget to help address the strains that are being felt by this sector right now, not only in terms of labour but in terms of costs. Obviously, it's providing subsidies and there are so many stresses right now, from supply chain issues to fertilizer issues and with what's happening in Ukraine. I'm just thinking that if it was oversubscribed in agriculture, perhaps there's a way to get more funding into this and to try to address some of the labour shortages and cost pressures through a program like this. I just encourage the department to look at the possibility of doing more in this area.

I asked the minister about incentives for the agricultural sector to engage in the reduction of greenhouse gases. In the meetings we've had with different associations, they've been very eager and very willing to be involved and to try to help move forward on this important issue.

Once again, I know there are a number of different challenges the sector is facing right now. I know for some of the groups that have been here and for individual farmers, there are just so many other things to have to worry about right now and it's very difficult. I am wondering if you think the programs we have in place currently are sufficient in terms of incentives to help our young farmers or farmers who are really interested in trying to deploy new methods to reduce greenhouse gases? Do we have enough programs in place or do you see the possibility for other programs that could provide further support?

• (1245)

Mr. Chris Forbes: We launched the agricultural clean technology program about a year ago, and we have the agricultural climate solutions now up and running, as the minister mentioned, with a number of partners across the country looking at how to support the implementation of best practices. We also have funding with the provinces for programming they deliver under the agricultural partnership, which we hope to continue and potentially will see expanding in the next agricultural partnership. I think probably more is going to be needed to help the sector adopt practices that—

The Chair: Mr. Forbes, we're going to have to leave it there with perhaps the need for more programs. Thank you, Ms. Taylor Roy.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Perron, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Forbes, I am going to give you a chance to finish your answer. You were saying that this could be an opportunity to do more. I would like to know what you were going to say, because that interests me.

Mr. Chris Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Perron.

I simply wanted to say that we have to do more to help our producers adopt the practices that are necessary to achieve our objectives of reducing greenhouse gases. We could offer training programs on the ground, for example.

Mr. Yves Perron: So I conclude that if the committee made specific recommendations to provide financial compensation for actions taken on the ground, you would be open to that. That is quite positive; thank you very much.

Earlier, you addressed the subject of inspection costs in slaughterhouses under federal jurisdiction, which are seen as a hindrance. I am referring to the questions that Mr. Lehoux asked earlier about the difficulties that slaughterhouses have to deal with, about the glaring labour shortage, and about operating costs, since everything is interrelated.

I understand that the department might be open to the idea of alleviating the financial problems caused by these inspections.

Is that accurate?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Thank you for your question.

I was talking about inspections for grains that are exported. On the subject of costs for slaughterhouses, there are certainly federal programs to support their investments in automating facilities and other efforts to reduce labour costs.

In addition, transfers to the provinces are possible in the Department of Employment and Social Development to help our provincial colleagues offer training, for example. There is also the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, which provides funds to the provinces to help them.

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

Mr. MacGregor, you have the floor.

[*English*]

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

Mr. Forbes, I'm going to continue with my examination of the minister's mandate letter.

There is a mandate here to support food producers who choose alternative pest management approaches. I am going to assume that those are approaches that do not need pest management regulatory agency approval, because we have heard from a lot of producers who are concerned with the backlog at PMRA.

I'm just wondering if you can provide our committee with a bit more information on what those alternative pest management approaches are. What does this support look like? Does this support include some of the fantastic research that's going on in Canada, in places like the University of British Columbia's experimental farm? Please give us any information you can on that particular mandate.

• (1250)

Mr. Chris Forbes: There will be a mix of priorities as to where our research goes. It could be into non-synthetic pest management tools, organic pest management tools. It could be, in some cases, in agronomic practices, but there is also an aspect of making sure that the regulatory work necessary, whether that's through our pest management centre, which deals with minor-use pesticides or through the PMRA.... More likely it will be through our pest management centre. It has the prioritization and its list of activities includes looking at some of these non-synthetic pesticides to make sure they can get approval for use.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: To clarify, Mr. Forbes, where it says, "support food producers who choose alternatives," to your mind, does that support mean better funding for research and development, so that they have more options to choose from?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Yes, I would say that is like making sure there are more products available, either through research or by making sure that the regulatory approvals are in place.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Okay. Thank you for that clarification.

I believe that's it, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds, but now I have you up to 40 that at some point I will give back to you.

At the behest of some of my colleagues who have asked to get on the record for just one quick question, I'm going to offer about 90 seconds each to the Conservatives and the Liberals, just for any parting thoughts on the third round, and then I'm going to quickly exercise a little discretion, and then we'll go to the supplementary estimates.

Mr. Barlow, you have 90 seconds.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have two quick questions I will try to get in.

Ms. Lapointe, I just want to clarify your last statement. You said that the suspension for fresh potatoes into the United States was implemented by the Americans. Everything we have been told was that it was implemented or put in by the Canadians. Can you clarify that? Was the suspension done by the U.S. or Canada?

Ms. Sylvie Lapointe: We were informed by U.S. officials that they would not be accepting imports of potatoes from P.E.I., and our regulations don't allow us to issue export certificates if we don't meet the country's importing requirements.

Mr. John Barlow: Can you also table that correspondence with the committee?

I have a really quick question for Mr. Forbes. The minister stated that the ministerial order is the responsible thing to do and that they don't want to go toward dispute mechanisms with the United States. I believe we can walk and chew gum at the same time. Can we not initiate that dispute mechanism under CUSMA while at the same time still having those technical discussions with our partners in the United States?

Mr. Chris Forbes: I think the minister was saying we have all options on the table, certainly, and she stated quite clearly that technical discussions—

Mr. John Barlow: Can we do both at the same time?

Mr. Chris Forbes: It becomes more difficult to have technical discussions with a country when you are challenging them in a dispute panel, because the outcome—

Mr. John Barlow: Difficult doesn't have to mean “no”.

The Chair: We're going to have to leave it there, Mr. Barlow.

Thank you, Mr. Forbes.

Mr. Turnbull, you have 90 seconds.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Forbes, I was very happy to see in Minister Bibeau's and Minister Gould's mandate letters a reference to a national school food program, something for which I've advocated for many years. I know that means building out a cost-shared program with the federal government investment.

Could you briefly sketch out just how that work will roll out over the next year or the coming years?

Mr. Chris Forbes: The simple answer would be that, as the mandate letter lays out, we will have to work with the provinces and engage with them and also with stakeholders—those groups that are out there supporting food security across the country, with whom we have partnered over the course of the pandemic—to determine the kinds of options we have for delivery, who might be the best delivery agents, and what the model would be. We have a lot of expertise out there, and we want to make sure we develop something that is successful and sustainable.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

Colleagues, I'm just going to exercise my discretion because I have a quick question for Mr. Forbes.

Mr. Forbes, the minister, in her remarks, talked about the targeting of Ukrainian agriculture infrastructure in the war that's happening right now. We know that Russia and Ukraine together represent about 26% of the global wheat market. There's going to be fallout on potash and other critical supplies that are important to the agriculture industry.

Notwithstanding some of the challenges the Canadian industry has faced over the last year—we've talked about that vis-à-vis COVID and otherwise—is the department looking at different ways the government can work with industry to strengthen Canadian agriculture? Can it perhaps respond in a global way and be there as an important backstop, given everything that's happening in the world right now?

• (1255)

Mr. Chris Forbes: Yes, I would say definitely that we're thinking about this and—if I could broaden it beyond just my agriculture hat—doing so also with my colleagues who work on the development side, through organizations like the World Food Programme. There are both, with Canada supplying from an agriculture standpoint by making sure we have a successful year ahead of us in terms of food production. We've also talked a lot about supply chains.

We're thinking a lot about all of those issues. At the same time, I think our colleagues on the development and aid side will be thinking, “Are there other programs that can help in Ukraine and in other countries that are affected?” As we've seen, there has been a significant run-up in prices, and obviously the costs of food for many people around the world are going to be a significant challenge in the coming year.

The Chair: Just as a quick follow-up, is there any engagement right now in the department with stakeholders about ways in which the government can work to address and perhaps bolster the existing production in the country to support in that fashion? Are those conversations taking place or being planned, or is it perhaps a bit premature at this point?

Mr. Chris Forbes: Yes, we're talking to the sector about a range of issues. Again, I would focus a lot on supply chains, because that's in some ways the biggest concern our producers face. The market signals will be there, for sure, given where prices are. We're talking to the sector. There's no formal process right now, if that's what you're asking.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, colleagues, for indulging me in a couple of quick questions.

On behalf of the committee, to all of our witnesses and to all those who are working with CFIA and with the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, we thank you for your work, and we thank you for your time here today. We permit you to leave the virtual room.

Colleagues, we're going to continue, because we have to move forward with the supplementary estimates.

Unless anyone objects, I will seek the unanimous consent of the committee to group the three different votes together under the sup-

plementary estimates, so that we can deal with them all at one time. Can I have unanimous consent to move forward in that fashion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Do we need a recorded vote or can we perhaps say "on division"?

Some hon. members: On division.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Vote 1c—Operating expenditures.....\$5,669,154

Vote 5c—Capital expenditures.....\$1,042,945

Vote 10c—Grants and contributions.....\$12,000,000

(Votes 1c, 5c and 10c agreed to on division)

The Chair: You've made my job easy. Thanks so much. Have a great day. Take care.

The meeting is adjourned.

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