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Chair

Mr. Pat Finnigan

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•(0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)): Welcome, everyone, to our Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Today we have with us the Advancing Women Conference for agriculture and Ms. Iris Meck. Also, with the National Farmers Union, we have Stewart Wells, past president. I will give them each a 10-minute opening statement.

I want to also welcome Matt DeCoursey. We'll make a farmer out of him yet. Also, we have Peter Fragiskatos. Welcome.

I think the rest of our committee is the same. *Bienvenue tout le monde.*

Ms. Meck, would you start with an up to 10-minute opening statement. Thank you.

Ms. Iris Meck (Advancing Women in Agriculture Conference): Thank you.

Thanks very much for the invitation. I'm Iris Meck and I'm the owner of Iris Meck Communications, and the host and creator of the Advancing Women in Agriculture Conference.

I was raised on a farm in Manitoba, went to the University of Manitoba, and with my agriculture degree and my management certificate, worked in the ag sector all of my career. I started Iris Meck Communications in 2000, specializing in agricultural conferences and marketing.

In 2013, a cohort of mine was asked the question, "Why are there no women in agriculture conferences at the podium?" I pondered on the question and thought back to my years of being the first woman hired into management at Cargill in 1978 from the University of Manitoba. I thought of the issues and challenges that I had during those time frames and realized that not very much has changed. Women still have a difficult time establishing themselves in positions in agriculture and are not being recognized to the extent that they should be for the contributions that they make.

In 2014, a group of women leaders were gathered from agriculture from across Canada and were brought together to discuss some of the opportunities and challenges that women face in the industry, and the skills and the tools needed to hone their leadership skills.

It became apparent to this group of women leaders that there would be a strong need for women in every sector of agriculture and food, and at every age and stage of their career, to hear and learn

from the experiences of successful women, to network with women who share the common passion of agriculture, to grow life and career skills, and to prepare them for the best possible future. It was an opportunity to find out how we can have women invest in themselves and benefit their families, their businesses, their communities, and the agricultural industry.

With this as our guiding principle I held the first conference in Calgary in April 2014. We attracted over 400 women from across Canada, from six provinces, five U.S. states, representing 130 organizations. It was a huge risk for me—very little profit but very rewarding.

The program emphasizes key leadership skills and development opportunities that include communication, mentorship, coaching, networking, financial management and financial independence, physical and mental health and balance-of-life strategies, career planning, and setting goals in all of these areas. Over the last year we have enhanced the program to include workshops on networking, succession planning, coaching, financial management and working with your banker, and risk management.

The audience is farmers, producers, ranchers, ag retailers and dealers, corporate agribusiness, entrepreneurs, small and medium-sized business owners, university students, 4-H members and volunteers, a few government attendees, and academia.

This initiative is clearly filling a need as is represented by the number of women who attend, but also, as important, is the support that we receive from private industry. Initially, I took this initiative to the government and industry. Sadly, the government response was disappointing with no interest at all. Private industry embraced the idea, however, and supported not only financially but in their attendance.

Sponsors range from farm organizations, financial institutions, agribusiness, and a wide range of private ag and food stakeholders from across Canada. We receive no government funding, with the exception of sponsorship from ALMA, which no longer exists.

Our main goal is to bring an exceptional speaker program to the audience. To date, we have been true to our commitment, and according to our audience we have exceeded expectations. At every conference we ask the delegates to complete and submit an evaluation form with their feedback. Often the scores for speaker topics, speaker selection, and speaker performance are so high that it goes beyond the defined range.

We have been very proud to have deputy ministers of agriculture—Bev Yee, Alanna Koch, Dori Gingera-Beauchemin, Deb Stark—all speak at the conference, and we have accepted the request for an invitation to speak by Premier Wynne and Jeff Leal.

Our second goal is to make this conference series affordable for all women in agriculture, and to help accomplish this, we're not only grateful to our private industry sponsors but also the Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan governments that have classified Advancing Women as a training program and allow reimbursement of registration fees and expenses incurred by the producer-farmer delegates through government programming. We have spoken to every other province in Canada and to date have no success in funding for the producers.

To assist in building a stronger ag community and industry for the future, we also sponsor young women and women studying agriculture in Canadian universities and colleges. We cover their registration and their hotel accommodations.

● (0850)

These young women have tremendous opportunity to see that agriculture is a positive career choice, and to build a network of industry leaders who will not only act as future contacts but also become their mentors and coaches. I, myself, and the industry stakeholders sponsor over 50 students at the conference.

Advancing Women is recognized in supporting, celebrating, and recognizing the contribution women make to the industry. Women leave the conference more confident, enthused, and motivated, and therefore, are more apt to be advocates for the industry and be involved in industry associations and boards.

This has also spurred regional and small local networks of women in agriculture in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Alberta. These networks each are of about 2,000 people.

Our overall goal is to have women involved in agriculture and food benefit from the Advancing Women's program not only through the speakers but from each other. Today we are considered to be the largest leadership conference for women in agriculture where women can join a community of their peers to listen, learn, network, and grow.

We have been asked on several occasions to connect women with certain needs due to their isolation in the rural areas, and from this have seen major networks develop. We have also been approached by two other industries—insurance and energy—to hold a similar conference, and have been invited to hold Advancing Women conferences in the United States and Africa.

To date, over the five conferences held over the last two and a half years, we have had over 2,500 women attend the conference. We

anticipate that in 2017 at the two conferences we will have over 1,000 women from agriculture, and we are planning one in 2018.

Our audience is 40% producers and operators, 40% agribusiness and entrepreneurs, and then associations and a few from government equalling 20%. Our age range is 17 to 65-plus.

I'll now describe our sponsorship. Since its start and launch, our major sponsors include Cargill, Dow AgroSciences, John Deere, and Royal Bank, to name a few.

Since 2014, we've had 2,500 followers, over 8,000 in our database of women in agriculture in Canada, and have LinkedIn and message directly to over 9,000 women in agriculture. Our YouTube station has been watched over the entirety of North America. We have garnished over \$200,000 in in-kind advertising from major agricultural publications across Canada to promote and to provide coverage on the conference.

I thank you very much for your interest in Advancing Women, and I hope the future government programming will recognize the Advancing Women in Agriculture Conference as a major training program and provide funding on a year-round basis for women in agriculture to attend.

Thank you very much.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Meck.

Now we go to Mr. Wells for up to 10 minutes.

Mr. Stewart Wells (Past President, National Farmers Union): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for the invitation to be here this morning. I'm appearing here today to relate the views of the National Farmers Union regarding one of the areas within the national policy framework that is under consideration, specifically the area of social licence or public trust.

A document called the Calgary statement, produced in July of this year, includes the following:

The NPF will continue to encourage and support collaborative sector efforts to enhance public trust by:

Examining how government programming can help reinforce confidence and public trust in the sector;...and

Sharing the story of the importance of the sector and the modern, responsible and sustainable practices it uses.

The NFU recommends that the Government of Canada be extremely cautious when interpreting these phrases, and even more cautious if considering spending taxpayers' dollars in such efforts. The NFU's position is that it is better to build confidence and public trust by requiring more independent and government testing of products in order to provide real transparency. Proper regulation is desirable and necessary.

We do not believe it would be in the best interest of the government, farmers, or Canadians if the government were to end up funding efforts that are simply trying to maintain the status quo via public relations campaigns, issuing misleading statements, or undermining other production methods.

The NFU believes that the government has a major role to play in promoting confidence in our food system by providing proper regulation, transparency, and testing. Given, however, the history of groups that have been advocating for their particular version of social licence and the continuous change in what society understands to be best practices, there is an extreme risk that the Calgary statement regarding public trust could lead to the government's funding messages that are not always true and frequently exaggerated. Worse yet, it could lead to the government itself issuing false claims.

First, let's look at the evolution of best practices.

Our farm in Saskatchewan has been operated by three generations of the same family since 1911. During that time, using what were the best practices of the day, our family has applied to the soil or to the crop many chemicals, including arsenic insecticide, mercury-based insecticide, dieldrin, and lindane, all of which have since been banned. A couple of weeks ago, Health Canada decided to ban one of the neonicotinoid insecticides.

I have included a photograph on page 3 of my submission of one of the best practices common during the 1960s and 1970s.

The reason for the evolution of the status of these chemicals from best practice to controversial to their subsequent banning has in every case been insufficient testing prior to their introduction. For instance, very little testing was done, and apparently done only by the corporate owner, on the recently banned neonicotinoid when it was introduced. With a spike in independent testing in the last couple of years, the insecticide's now documented negative impacts are sufficient for the product to be banned. In many cases, the notion of social licence or public trust is being promoted to blindly protect current practices instead of provide extra transparency and/or safety for the public and the environment.

Those misusing the concept of social licence or public trust make several common claims, such as, "I'm a farmer. I would never do anything that's going to hurt my land or the plants or animals on that land." Our family would have stood by that claim on every banned substance that was used on our farm over the past 105 years. We trusted the regulations and companies selling them at the time.

Another common claim is, "I need to feed a hungry world." That rationale has also been found wanting. Inadvertently destroying the natural world undermines our ability to produce in the long run. Currently we, meaning agriculture in general, are producing 3,200 calories per day per person—more than anyone can possibly eat—

but we have 1.2 billion people around the world who are food-insecure and 1.5 billion people who are overfed, and too much of our food is nutritionally disfigured.

The third claim I have listed here is, "The current technology—crops and chemicals—allows us to use less chemicals overall."

The September 29 issue of *The Western Producer* this year reported that:

A large American study has found genetically modified crops have dramatically increased the amount of herbicides applied to soybeans.

As well, data from Alberta suggest that GM crops have had an even greater impact in Western Canada, as the amount of herbicide sold in the province nearly doubled from 2003 to 2013.

• (0900)

As well, at least one group, commonly called SaskCanola, which is the Saskatchewan Canola Development Commission, has already used Growing Forward 2, which is taxpayer money, to produce a video that makes false claims, pits farmers against other farmers, and criticizes consumers, all in the name of "social licence". Continuing or increasing the amount of taxpayer money used to fund these activities will not end well.

The government's role in testing, regulating, and ensuring transparency will be undermined, if it adopts a conflicting dual mandate. This dual mandate would mean on the one hand protecting the status quo, which could be the interpretation of the quote from the national policy framework statement from Calgary, "Sharing the story of...modern, responsible and sustainable practices", while on the other hand trying to engage in meaningful testing and transparency.

I submit this respectfully, as past president of the National Farmers Union.

The picture that's on that last page says a lot, as pictures usually do. This is a common practice used in the 1960s and 1970s. You can see that the farmer is about to get drenched by whatever is coming out of that aircraft, and in the middle of that picture is a dog in the middle of that crop. I interpret that dog as the natural world. That dog doesn't know what's about to happen to him. The farmer does, and the farmer feels confident that everything is fine, but I look at that dog as being part of the natural world, and he's about to get drenched, too.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wells.

Now we'll start our question segment of the hour with six-minute rounds.

Mr. Shipley, you have the floor.

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

Ms. Meck, it's interesting that you've taken this initiative.

I just have a couple of things. I was interested when you were talking about your communication strategy. It looks like what you started with and what you developed, in encouraging young women to be involved in agriculture, has taken wings and has grown. I say congratulations to you for that.

The other night, I was at a reception put on by a great organization called CropLife, and I met a number of young people. There were five of them standing together, one young guy and four young women, and all of those five people were finishing their degrees in agriculture.

I had the opportunity to speak to them a bit about where they were heading. Not only were they finishing their degrees in financial management, political science, and agriculture in general with soil degrees, but they were all going to go back into agriculture. I had to question them, and I asked, "When you finish and when you're looking around, are there job opportunities?" Every one of them said, "Yes."

I talk to a number of students in high school, at times. I ask them what they want to do, and when they tell me, I always ask them at the end, "Are there jobs available?" because often they're going into maybe some course that is their choice, but it's not job opportunity driven.

I think the point you're bringing forward—and you're doing this as an entrepreneur, and congratulations—speaks clearly that this industry of agriculture we have is one of the strongest industries in Canada. It's one of the leading industries in Canada for the transparency of it and for the success of it over the last number of years.

It's really encouraging to see, when we read articles in our paper and our agriculture magazines, how so often we see a husband and wife, or just a woman, who have left a job to come into agriculture.

In your position, what do you hear from these young women, as they're coming forward and talking to you, about their future in agriculture?

• (0905)

Ms. Iris Meck: Most of the women who come to Advancing Women are very forthright, very aggressive and assertive, and already at that point. The young women who are coming out of university feel that there's a tremendous opportunity. Although they don't want to leave home and don't want to leave the university community and take on another four years of education, they feel very positive. The range of jobs is very wide and broad, anything from financial management to actual agronomy and from production through to law, environment, and forestry. It's so broadly encompassing that they can go across Canada and find a very broad area in which to work.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

Mr. Wells, when you were going through your presentation, I appreciated the commentary.

I'm from Ontario. One thing that has had a fair bit of discussion is the neonicotinoids and the pollinators. What we've also found is that over the past while there has been an increase in the bees and the beehive numbers and production. The interesting part is your

mentioning that over the last number of years things have changed in agriculture in terms of the products we use, the application, and even the crops we grow in different regions, and that we are saying that there is insufficient testing prior to their introduction.

When you go back, one of the things Canada is recognized for—in fact, one of the concerns we have in Canada—is that we get behind the eight ball in the approval of inputs for our Canadian farmers. We often get behind what Europe is doing, but particularly we get behind our American friends, whom we're in direct competition with.

I'll also go back a number of years in the auto industry or the farm equipment industry. As evolution has happened, as research and technology have increased, we now have made an auto industry, for example, that has done an extraordinary job in its advancement against pollution. We look at the farm equipment industry, those who produce the combines and the tractors, but also those who produce within our greenhouse environments and within the—

The Chair: Mr. Shipley, I'm sorry, but time is up.

Mr. Bev Shipley: All I'm saying is that a lot of improvements have happened over time.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

Just to explain, there is six minutes, and that belongs to the person who asks the question. It's up to them. It's not for me to control anything.

Mrs. Lockhart is next, for six minutes.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart (Fundy Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for being here.

Ms. Meck, I'm very interested in the work you're doing. We have been talking about different barriers for different folks and the tremendous potential there is in agriculture. What are you hearing from women? Where do they see the barriers, either to being more involved in agriculture or to advancing in agriculture? Are there hot spots right now that you're hearing about from women?

Ms. Iris Meck: I think it's both. Women who come to the conference talk about different areas of barriers. Women farmers find that it's different for them when they go to the bank without their husbands. I don't know what kind of barrier that is. It's the fact that they are not recognized for the contribution they make, as I said before, and therefore, there is automatically that obstacle in place. Men are used to dealing with men, on the business side, for farming.

Women in the rural areas find themselves very isolated, so it's difficult for them to say that they're going to join a board or become part of an association, because there's distance involved. There's the actual understanding of how they're going to work with that community.

Women in business find that they can get to a certain level, but of course, having their children between the ages of 22 and 35 takes them out of the workplace. Even for one month, one year, they find themselves losing step. They lose that ground.

The barriers, then, are there. We don't have the women leaders in place who will support and, as they call it, "sponsor" the women today who are coming up the ranks. We don't have women who feel confident enough to take on a position, and that could just be a role that women play without being in agriculture, in whatever industry you want to call it.

I think the barriers are there. Coming to a conference such as this provides the motivation and the aha moment of realizing that she made it to the podium, she made it to that place in her career, and there is an opportunity and a way for me to get there, too.

● (0910)

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: I think that's very interesting, especially that piece about women going to banks and that sort of thing. In my riding in New Brunswick, I know that women are an integral part of the business aspect of running farms. It's interesting that they're behind the scenes, but then when it comes to making the deals, you're saying they're not always at the table to make that final deal at the bank. I think that is a true barrier.

You mentioned peer-to-peer support. Can you think of a specific example of a success story that has come from that? You've been doing this for a few years. I'm really impressed with the number of women who have attended your conferences. Are there any success stories you can share with us?

Ms. Iris Meck: First is the development of all of the local, regional, little groups of women that have developed. In Alberta, just six months ago, a group of young women who attended Advancing Women went back to their locales, and they started gathering a group of women to be on social media, to be on Facebook, to use Twitter amongst each other, to meet at trade shows, and to hold special little events for each other just to talk about things like barriers, opportunities, and what's been happening. Today, six months later, there are over 2,000 young women between the ages of 21 and 35 who now belong to that network. It's the same in Saskatchewan and in Ontario. I think that the development of those types of networking groups at a local level has become very much spurred and motivated to discuss things like how to work better with our banks. How do we work better with farm implement groups and retailers? How do we deal better in our boards and associations?

On the other hand, a year ago I was approached by a woman by phone, and she said, "I'm recently a widow. I have three small children. I run a huge farming operation, cattle and crop. Can you introduce me to another woman who is in the same situation as me?" I knew of someone, and unbeknownst to both of them, I introduced them at the conference and sat them beside each other. Those two women were connected at the hip for two full days, and it was so inspiring and heart-wrenching, really, to see them share their stories about how, having lost their husbands, they still wanted to make that succession plan so their children could take over the farm.

Today there are over 25 women, crossing the border from Canada to the U.S., who have formed a network of widows. We just don't know what to call them because men are assuming that they're for sale to be wives, so we're not sure how to promote that.

Those are two examples of peers working with peers.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: We don't have very much time, but you did touch on succession planning. Some things we've been talking

about are gaps in the workforce and succession planning. By bringing more women to the table in agriculture, I assume that's addressing some of those issues as well. Do you have any comment on that?

Ms. Iris Meck: Yes, it is. We find it's very important to talk about succession planning. That's why at every conference we have been talking about succession planning, not only on the farm but in agribusiness, people who are shareholders in retail outlets and people who run businesses in food. Also, in multinational corporations, succession planning is a major force, and we would like to see more women come up that stream.

● (0915)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Meck.

Thank you, Ms. Lockhart.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brosseau, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I would like to thank the witnesses for their presentations today.

Ms. Meck, I really want to thank you for the work that you're doing. I would love to attend one of your conferences. I think that what you're doing is really important. I was just wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on the importance of how you see the federal government investing in and supporting more women getting involved in agriculture.

I know you said the conferences you hold right now are privately funded. You said in your presentation that you had funding before from ALMA. What is that?

Ms. Iris Meck: It's the Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency, which is no longer in existence.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Okay.

Could you elaborate a little more on how you could maybe see, in this next policy framework, potential funding or some policies on how the federal government could really encourage women to get involved in politics? Oh, politics. Well, that's important, too, right? We're only 88 women in the House of Commons out of 338.

I imagine a lot more women are taking over farms and taking more leadership roles in farms. Maybe you could elaborate a little more on how the federal government could take a leadership role to encourage women to get involved in agriculture.

Ms. Iris Meck: Yes, thank you very much.

First off, I invite all the women and men to come to an Advancing Women conference. I think it's a really eye-opening experience. Perhaps if more government members, employees, and people who work in the government agencies attended a conference such as this, they would really get the true feeling of what the issues and opportunities are.

As for the funding opportunities, because I'm in the private sector, an entrepreneur, I am not eligible for government funding. However, I have appreciated the support that the government has provided to the farmers and producers who have attended the conference.

One thing I have heard, a critique, is that the farmers feel that it is very difficult to apply. There are a lot of criteria that you have to meet to make an application. The timing of an application is very difficult. Oftentimes, while our conferences are held in March, April, and October, potential applicants find that by the time they realize about the conference and want to apply to register for it, the funding date has closed. It seems odd to me that a date would close for people who want to continue their education and go to a conference such as Advancing Women.

That would be one suggestion.

I think it's important that the government does get involved in not only funding the women who attend this conference from the farmer and rancher perspective or group, but the government should also take the opportunity to fund speakers at a conference such as this. I don't see why that would make such a horrid circumstance if the government were to support an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs are doing a lot in this industry, and more as the years go on. I find it very frustrating being an entrepreneur when a government association can get funding to hold six meetings across the province to write a report, while I have 2,500 women coming to conferences, 500 at every conference, which is basically unheard of today, and I don't get one dollar.

Sponsor a speaker. Do something to show your involvement and support of the women who come to this conference.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Thank you very much.

Mr. Wells, I really appreciated the meeting we had earlier this week. It's always great talking with you and working with you.

I know we talked a bit about the agri-stability program. Over the last few years, we know that fewer and fewer farmers are using that program. In Growing Forward 2, there were a lot of cuts by the last government. Now I think we have a chance to do the study, meet with witnesses, take their expertise, and try to make sure that in the next framework we arm farmers with the tools necessary.

We talked a little about crops in Saskatchewan having some challenges this year. I wonder if you could explain to us the importance of programs such as agri-stability, getting them right and making sure that they fit the actual needs of farmers and the climate we're in presently.

● (0920)

Mr. Stewart Wells: Sure. Thanks very much for the question.

I think most people understand that this year in Saskatchewan there's a serious situation with a disease of not just wheat but grain, called fusarium, and a related disease that comes about because of fusarium. It may well be the first year, since serious damage was done to the agri-stability program by the previous government, that farmers are going to really need to rely on the agri-stability program.

It would take too long to try to explain the changes that were made by the previous government, but I would say that the changes that

were made, the detrimental changes to the program, were made without any consultation with the farmers, without any consultation with provincial agricultural ministers, and in fact, the agriculture minister from Saskatchewan was livid and actually went out in public railing against the federal government for making the change at the time. The net result has been to rip away support that should have been there in the safety net programs.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wells. That's all the time we have for that.

Mr. Longfield, you have six minutes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Thanks. I'd like to continue on that line.

Mr. Wells, you were in the middle of a sentence, and I think it's important to hear your comments. We have heard other testimony about the stability programs not working. You have some experience from when they were working, so please continue your train of thought for a minute or so.

Mr. Stewart Wells: There's been a steady evolution of these types of safety-net programs and income stabilization programs dating back to the seventies. The program that the previous Liberal government had was very helpful. There's no program that's going to keep a farmer in business forever if the farmer's doing a poor job or if the environment isn't co-operating. However, the previous program was pretty decent, and our farm participated in that program. If we had years of good crops and good sales, we could build up a reference margin. Then in the future, if our income dropped below a certain level, there would be a trigger, and there would be a payment. The program was large enough that it could keep a farmer who had 10 years of good crops in business for two or three years if things really went badly.

What happened with the previous government was that, for whatever reason, they decided to undermine that program. It resulted in thousands of farmers withdrawing completely from the program, because the triggers were changed so much, the reference margins were made redundant. There just wasn't the available assistance there that was required.

In our own case, our farm dropped out of the agri-stability program because my analysis and the analysis of Meyers Norris Penny, our accountant, said as long as your farm stays in the crop insurance program, you will never receive a payment from agri-stability. Therefore, there's no point in continuing to pay into that program.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Okay, thank you.

We're consulting here. We're also consulting across the country through the minister. Have you been part of any other external consultations on this?

Mr. Stewart Wells: Not me personally but the National Farmers Union is, and I believe the farmers union is going to present here again this morning on the topic.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Yes, they are. We have the New Brunswick folks coming in.

Great. I'm almost a New Brunswicker because I sit in the House with New Brunswick MPs. I have them on both sides of me right now, so I'm feeling the love. However, I am a U of M grad. I'm from Winnipeg originally, so here we go. We got back to the Prairies all of a sudden.

Ms. Meck, I'm very interested in what you're doing, and I'd like to share a little of my time Matt DeCoursey, my buddy, from Fredericton because he has a question around funding. I'm thinking of this. In the new policy framework, I would look at this as social innovation and as innovation on the farm through women and getting girls interested through 4-H. Sometimes when you're looking at funding, it's the words you use.

If you look at the innovation piece through your conferences—I've looked at some of your conferences online—do you have anything around innovation that might attract some attention or funding?

Ms. Iris Meck: Having women at a podium is innovation. I think that alone....

It's all innovation: to speak to the balance of life strategies, to find an innovative way to use your time, to learn from other women who have excelled in their career paths. There are ways to learn what's new, what they can do better, what they can change, and what difference they can make. Those are all innovative parts.

• (0925)

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you. It was innovative of the clerk to find you and get you here, so I appreciate your testimony.

I'm just going to split over to Matt DeCoursey, if I could.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you very much.

On that vein, as you were talking about funding, I was wondering if you have sought funding opportunities from any of the regional economic development agencies. In Atlantic Canada, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency delivers a lot of the innovative project funds, and I'm thinking maybe this is a way to seek opportunities for funding of a conference project that is helping build community capacity in an innovative way.

Ms. Iris Meck: We've approached every province on two bases. For us to try to get sponsorship or funding for things like speakers, sponsor a meal, or do anything like that, as soon as I say, "I'm a private entrepreneur", I get kicked out of the lineup because they say they don't fund private organizations.

When it comes specifically to the Maritimes, we have reached out to them because we've been asked to do a conference there. We were told that we would get no provincial funding on a regional basis because we're not from the Maritimes; we are from Alberta. That's another issue that we have. As soon as we hold a conference in another province, I'm not from that province. I'm not sure how else to approach it.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: Is there a way to partner with a regional entity to seek funding, again through the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, which delivers an innovative communities fund, an Atlantic innovation fund, and other such pockets of funding?

Ms. Iris Meck: I would love the list of what is available, because it's so hard to find that list. I have tried networking and connecting, and then joining forces with a group that is funded. Like the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, I said, "Let's join together. We're working on the same program. We have the same mandate. Let's join together and call it 'CAHRC hosts the Advancing Women Conference'". They were not interested.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Meck.

Thank you, Mr. DeCoursey.

[Translation]

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

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

I also wish to thank the two witnesses for being here with us today.

Ms. Meck, I am very impressed by the work that you do, especially the awareness-raising work you do with women to interest them in agriculture. Since agriculture has existed for 10,000 years, your work in trying to get women involved and become entrepreneurs seems extremely important and interesting to me.

Women have always played a vital role in this area, either in the kitchen, where agricultural products are transformed, or in the education of children from farm families. The promotion of the role of women in agriculture is a project I find really interesting. I would say that education is at the core of it.

Do you have any suggestions to make to the government as to how to interest young women in agriculture as quickly as possible?

[English]

Ms. Iris Meck: Thank you.

I think it's important that we start talking about women in agriculture in grade school, in high school. Grades 10, 11, and 12 are most important. I recently went to a conference down in the U.S. and I found it so interesting that in high school they have programs specifically for women in agriculture, talking about agriculture in grade school and the job possibilities in grade school. They don't wait until university, when you've made your decision on where to go. I think bringing that into play, and also talking about 4-H at a younger level and starting to talk about career planning at 4-H, are very important.

• (0930)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you. I think we are on the same wavelength on this issue.

It goes without saying that women are often the pillars when it comes to raising children and their education. But things are not easy for those who would like to devote more time to their work—agriculture, in this case—since day cares are not always easy to access.

Are you doing any awareness-raising on this issue with the various government authorities, as it can be problematic?

[English]

Ms. Iris Meck: I'm not sure. It spans across every industry, across every company, every program. I really don't know how to answer that question. I wouldn't know.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Fine. So basically your sector has the same problem.

Mr. Wells, the Calgary Declaration states that environmental sustainability and climate change are priority issues. Would your union have any recommendations to make to the government?

[English]

Mr. Stewart Wells: On the recommendations, I'm pleased that they are a priority in that Calgary statement. The only recommendation I have is to proceed on the basis of regulation, which follows from adequate and good testing.

The problem that Mr. Shipley alluded to before is that the natural world is so complicated that it's really hard to test for everything that needs to be tested for. As testing evolves and gets better, and as different parts of the system are tested, we learn new information each time.

My only recommendation is to prioritize the environment in a natural world, spend the money there properly, and not get dragged into defending some sort of chemical or business farming model that is better left up to others to promote and defend their own products. Do not to get dragged down to a place where government money is being used to defend something that later turns out to be a mistake.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gourde, you have the floor and you have six minutes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here with us this morning.

Before asking my first question, I'd like to remind the committee that I tabled a motion last December 6. It reads as follows:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food conduct a study on the government's transitional program for Canada's dairy farmers and the dairy industry in the context of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the European Union, and that the study take place at the beginning of 2017.

My question is for the two witnesses who are appearing before us this morning.

I am happy that the contribution of women to Canadian agriculture is being highlighted. I won't go back 10,000 years like Mr. Breton—my life experience has been shorter—but as far back as I can remember, in Quebec, women have always played a predominant role in agriculture, both through their work and through their role in decision-making and in farm management. Women really made a difference in the agricultural world as I knew it. I'm speaking about my grandmother as well as my mother and my wife. And in fact, there is a saying that behind every great man, there is a great woman. I would say that in Quebec, behind every beautiful farm, there has always been a woman's contribution.

In my province, farming women have gotten together. There are women farmers' unions and a federation. This has allowed them to develop and to gain a certain recognition from the various levels of government and the industry. These women have shaped agriculture in eastern Canada through their decisions and demands.

Mr. Wells said that agriculture has changed, but I think that in future, women are going to be increasingly present in that sector. Agriculture will be shaped by the various decisions women will have influenced.

In your part of the world, which is in the same country as mine, do you feel the influence of women on the decisions that are made?

• (0935)

[English]

Ms. Iris Meck: Yes, absolutely. I think there's a huge opportunity for women to be advocates for agriculture. Everybody is more concerned today about where their food comes from and whether their food is safe, and of course women are in that more nurturing area, so women make more advocate points with the public than perhaps the males would. They are just generally more believable and trustworthy when it comes to food—nourishing the family and food safety.

I think there's a huge opportunity for women to become better advocates. However, you can't just pronounce somebody an advocate. They should feel confident and very knowledgeable about what they do. Therefore, attending a conference like this raises that entire level.

I think there are huge opportunities for women to take more important positions and decision-making, even in agribusiness. A company that has an equal share or more of women in the organization will have better discussions around the table and will be more open to different areas and facets of agriculture than a group of men would. The decision-making is different in some way.

Mr. Stewart Wells: I agree completely.

I've been lucky enough to be part of the National Farmers Union since the mid-nineties. It wasn't actually me who joined. It was my partner after she had moved to the farm. She joined because Nettie Wiebe, a woman, was president of the National Farmers Union. She agreed with the positions and the public appearance of Nettie Wiebe.

Just two weeks ago, I was in a situation where I was attending two meetings at the same time. I was at the national convention of the National Farmers Union, and I also sit as a board member of the Western Grains Research Foundation. I was going back and forth.

The Western Grains Research Foundation is the largest producer-funding organization of varietal research and agronomic research in the country. At the western grains meeting, there were 18 aging white men sitting around the table, making the decisions, and having the meeting. Over at the National Farmers Union meeting, at least 50% of those participants must have been women. The National Farmers Union has been very deliberate in involving women, such as having a women's president and a women's youth president. The decisions made and the way of making the decisions is very different and much more lively, energetic, and vibrant, with new and creative ideas coming in when everybody is involved, rather than just one segment of agriculture.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: In the 45 seconds I have left, I would point out that regarding the future of Canadian agriculture, several witnesses have told us that very few people want to take up the torch. If 50% of those who do are women, we may see a certain level of success, given that the future of agriculture in Canada rests with the family farm. You can't have families without couples.

Let's hope that the new policy framework will take that duality into account and that this will be beneficial for the future.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gourde.

[English]

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Global food demand is going to rise 50% to 70% in the next 30 years. We'll have 2.4 billion people entering the middle class, which will present a huge opportunity, and 1.8 billion of these people are in Asia, China, and Indonesia. There's great excitement about precision agriculture and the advances being made there. All these things I just mentioned point to the fact that Canada can play a real role as, for lack of a better phrase, the world's breadbasket, or at least, an important breadbasket that can contribute tremendously to the creation of jobs and economic growth in this country.

At the same time, though, there will be a need for traditional help on the farm. The Conference Board of Canada is suggesting that by 2025 we're going to see a huge gap in demand and what's required in terms of support on the farm. By 2025, 114,000 unfilled jobs is the estimate by the Conference Board.

Mr. Wells, with regard to policy, what can be done to help deal with this problem? Are there tools in our immigration policy? We tend to focus our immigration policy on attracting so-called high-skilled workers, but we also have this huge gap. Is there something

to be said for making sure we are putting in place policies that will allow us to attract the labour needed by farmers across the country? That means perhaps looking at those who are so-called low-skilled and finding ways to privilege their applications.

● (0940)

Mr. Stewart Wells: Thanks for the question.

I'd really like to get away from the demarcation between low-skilled and high-skilled, because with the types of machinery out there now, which not everybody uses but most farmers do, people are working with global positioning systems, with electronics. In future, say, if you have a business plan and it doesn't involve a cellphone, throw away the business plan, because everything is moving that way. It's digital technology.

I'd like to get away from that notion, but you're absolutely right, there needs to be training and adequate training. Whether it's people coming from outside of Canada or from inside Canada, there needs to be skills and skills development.

One of the things that makes it difficult is the very nature of farming and the fact you are dealing with the environment and the climate, so one of the things I say is that I'm supposed to have 45 years in farming. I've been farming for 45 continuous years in the same operation. I should have 45 years of experience, but I don't. I have one year of experience 45 times. You can't possibly teach that type of understanding in a few classes or a four-year course, but it is essential that there be extension programming and educational and training programming.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, farmers, especially in western Canada, lost a whole generation of new farmers to other walks of life.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I hate to cut you off, but my time is limited. To be clear, I'm talking about the traditional kinds of farmhands that you would need where we have a situation.... So many Canadians, for a number of reasons, the low wage that tends to prevail in this sector when it comes to those traditional jobs, the long hours and the difficult work.... There is a labour shortage because of those reasons and a few others, but those are the two primary ones. We have the temporary foreign workers program that has helped to fill that gap, but it's not adequate. At least, that's what farmers are saying.

I wonder if you could speak to changes, perhaps, in our immigration policy that could rectify this gap. Have you any thoughts on that? By 2025, if it is the case that we have 114,000 unfilled positions in agriculture, it's going to be very difficult to meet that global demand, which is going to continue to rise, as we have an emerging middle class, particularly in Asia, which can really help grow Canada's economy if we fill that demand.

Mr. Stewart Wells: More people are going to be needed, but I would disabuse everyone from this notion of the stereotypical traditional farmhand, because as technology advances, technological skills are required for the workers on these farms. I wouldn't begin to categorize those people as low-skilled, or having low-paying jobs because they are low-skilled, because it is just not right. The machinery that is out there now is \$250,000 to \$500,000 to \$800,000 per piece. It's full of software and technology and you simply wouldn't take somebody, who I think would fit in your definition of a farmhand—

• (0945)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm talking about the person tilling the soil and picking the fruit, that kind of thing. You would say focus more on the innovation aspect of things and really encourage the growth of that in those kinds of skills.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos. We're done.

This is all the time we have. That's the first hour.

I want to thank both of you. They are very interesting topics and I thank you so much for appearing in front of the committee.

We shall break for a short period to change over to our next panel. Thank you.

• (0945)

(Pause)

• (0950)

The Chair: For the second hour of our meeting today on our APF study, we have with us from the National Farmers Union, New Brunswick chapter, Mr. Ted Wiggans, the president, and Amanda Wildeman, the executive director. Welcome, to both you. You are from my province of New Brunswick as are Matt and Alaina—and almost—Lloyd

With the Western Canadian Growers Association, we have Margaret Hansen, vice-president of Saskatchewan and also Mr. Stephen Vandervalk, vice-president of Alberta. Welcome to both of you.

We'll start with the opening statement from the National Farmers Union, Mr. Ted Wiggans, for up to 10 minutes.

Mr. Ted Wiggans (President, National Farmers Union - New Brunswick): Thank you.

Good morning. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

At the provincial level, the NFU-NB consulted with our minister of agriculture before the Calgary meeting in July. Federally, our national organization has provided input at various stages of this consultation process. Given that the Calgary statement is the most recent public document informing the next agricultural policy framework, our presentation today will be focused on a pillar that we believe is missing, new farmers, as well as concrete suggestions to improve the business risk management programs, and in particular, agri-stability.

Farmers are a keystone species in Canadian society. Take the farmer out of the ecosystem, and we would see a dramatic decline in our food security, our economy would shrink, and our rural

communities would dwindle. While farmers are a keystone species, they are becoming an extinct species. For hundreds of years, the renewal of the farmer population has been maintained through the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, assets, and land on the family farm.

The majority of new farmers grew up on the farm and learned, alongside their parents, to master the skills and knowledge of farming, but this system is broken. As the profitability of agriculture has steadily declined over the past several decades, farming is no longer accepted by society as a viable career option.

While low profitability may be the biggest barrier for entry of new farmers, when you dig below the surface, the challenges are cultural. Public institutions that once supported the next generation of farmers through extension services and education are now heavily influenced by corporations. Young people going to universities are more likely to become an agricultural professional rather than a farmer.

Even so, when these bright minds graduate from agricultural programs, farming is still not seen as a viable career option, yet never before have we relied on so few people to feed the Canadian population, 1.6%, and never before have we been in a situation where 75% of the farmers say they will sell their land and assets in the next 10 years.

As a society, we are setting ourselves up for failure. If nothing is to occur, this land will be bought up by larger farms pushing farm size ever higher and contributing to a cycle of fewer and fewer farm operators. Where will this lead? For decades the mantra has been get big or get out, but as large farms continue down the path of monoculture, commodity production margins continue to decline, and the cycle of dwindling profitability and increasing debt simply continues.

The amount of information available to today's new generation of farmers is limited, as information on aspiring farmers and those making less than \$10,000 a year is not captured in census of agriculture data. In response to a 2015 national questionnaire with over 1,500 respondents, 68% of new and aspiring farmers indicated they did not grow up on a farm. In addition, 73% of them responded that they are interested in farming ecologically. Nearly 80% of those with less than 10 years' experience in farming were into direct marketing.

Even without looking beyond these three simple numbers, we can see there may be policy implications, as a significant group of new and aspiring farmers for whom the traditional passing of farm skills, access to land, and business priorities are not available, and who are not well supported by the current policy framework.

We believe that supporting the next generation of farmers is the work of current farmers, NGOs, civil society, and governments. Our specific recommendations for government to better support new farmers under the new next agricultural policy framework include naming new farmers as one of the main pillars of the next policy framework. Under this pillar, we recommend the following priority areas: prioritize a just and sustainable agricultural and food system, move away from an export-dominated model toward a policy framework based on the principles of food sovereignty, and prioritize policies that incentivize farmers to adopt truly sustainable production.

The new policy framework must address the challenges associated with access to land, capital, and knowledge faced by new farmers by developing a national farmland succession strategy; limiting investment acquisitions, non-agricultural development, and non-occupancy ownership of farmland; providing fiscal and tax incentives for landowners to sell or rent land to new farmers who may or may not be family members; and exempting capital gains tax on farm property in transfers to new farmers, regardless of whether the buyer is the child of the landowner.

To ensure that new farmers can earn a livable income, we need to re-create direct, fair, and transparent distribution chains that support farmer renewal, promote direct marketing and re-evaluate regulatory regimes to reduce obstacles to direct marketing, and mandate supply-managed marketing boards to create systems of entry for new farmers with lower barriers to entry.

- (0955)

You can look at the last page of our submission, page 6, for more information on that.

Ms. Amanda Wildeman (Executive Director, National Farmers Union - New Brunswick): The next topic is business risk management, and in particular, the agri-stability program.

Canadian farmers are experiencing a prolonged income crisis. Federal agriculture policy has consistently promoted increasing agri-food exports, regardless of the impact on Canadian farm families, farms, and food supply.

Federal policy also adheres to market fundamentalism, the belief that markets will solve all problems without recognizing the vast differences in market power between a farm family and the global corporations that supply farm inputs and purchase farm products, and the impossibility of fairness under these conditions. Nor does the market recognize the non-financial values, such as culture, health, community, and ecological integrity, that are important to citizens.

The National Farmers Union advocates for a policy that would bring about food sovereignty, a profoundly different approach to agriculture and food policy that would support the livelihood of farmers, ensure adequate and wholesome food for consumers, work in co-operation with nature, and include citizens in meaningful decision-making regarding the food system.

In the absence of a food sovereignty based federal agri-food policy, we do need safety net programs to help family farms survive the ongoing crisis. The BRM suite needs to be designed in such a way that it actually protects small and medium-sized farms and co-operative farms, and allows them to maintain and build their farms as viable businesses that can be passed on to the next generation of farmers.

While we could make recommendations on many of the BRM programs, we will focus our time on agri-stability. Over the three policy frameworks, there have been substantial changes to the agri-stability program. In the first round, farmers found it relatively effective. Under Growing Forward, it appeared less farmer-friendly, only getting triggered with a drop in income of 15% or more. Under Growing Forward 2, it has become inaccessible.

To make our recommendations more tangible we will share with you the experience that some of our members, who are wild blueberry producers in northeastern New Brunswick, had this year.

Wild blueberry prices have steadily declined in recent years. Some say it is cyclical, while others strongly believe that this current low price, and low price forecast for the upcoming two to three years, is due to an agreement our provincial government made to allow one mega-producer processor to set up in the Acadian peninsula, or northeastern New Brunswick.

This highly contested agreement gave loans and grants to open a processing facility, as well as 15,000 acres of prime crown land, much of which had been requested and denied to other producers in the previous 10 years. This deal will allow one company to essentially double the previous production in the region, creating a market monopoly.

Regardless of the reason, prices were about 30¢ per pound this year. Producers who have been registered in agri-stability for years, but who have not had to draw on it since the previous Growing Forward agreement before 2013, were blindsided as to what the new 30% loss trigger and new margin cap actually meant for their program eligibility. The worst crop price in history was seen in 2016 and it was still not low enough to trigger a payment.

Currently, agri-stability is only triggered with a drop of more than 30% to the producer's reference margin. The reference margin is the average margin over the past five years, leaving out the years with the highest and lowest income or expenses. On top of that, the reference margin is the lower of either the average gross farm income or total expenses. This margin cap means that most farmers will never be eligible for this program, even if they're in huge financial difficulty.

We believe the current example to be representative of the experiences in other sectors in different years. With that in mind, we provide the following recommendations. Agri-stability and all BRM programs must genuinely be made in the interest of family farmers, not in the interest of how much money can be saved for government. To reduce the total payouts by BRM programs, we recommend that the next policy framework include policies that protect farmers from the extreme price volatility of global markets, by focusing on developing our domestic food system rather than prioritizing exports.

We recommend that the government re-evaluate the effectiveness of agri-stability and all BRM programs. Recently, our provincial department of agriculture expressed surprise at how few NB producers were enrolled in the program. Comparing past and current participation rates and payouts may be a helpful indicator to show which versions of the programs were the most beneficial to farmers.

The way agri-stability and other BRM programs are calculated under Growing Forward 2, including the very high payout cap, which is up to \$3 million per farm under agri-stability, encourages monocropping and risky business models, and excludes farms that diversify on their own to mitigate risk through mixed farming. This has environmental concerns, and it can lead to increased debt load and inaccessibility of programs to new farmers.

• (1000)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wildeman.

Next is the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association. I'm not sure who wants to lead. You have up to 10 minutes.

Ms. Margaret Hansen (Vice-President, Saskatchewan, Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association): I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak today.

I am Margaret Hansen, and I grow grains and oilseeds on a family farm operation near Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.

I am also the Saskatchewan vice-president of the Western Canadian Wheat Growers. With me today is my colleague Stephen Vandervalk, who is a fourth-generation farmer who grows crops with his father and brother near Fort Macleod, Alberta. He is also the Alberta vice-president of the Western Canadian Wheat Growers.

The Western Canadian Wheat Growers is an organization founded in 1970. It's a voluntary, farmer-run advocacy organization representing millions of acres of crops in western Canada. We are dedicated to developing public policy solutions that strengthen the profitability and sustainability of farming and the agricultural industry as a whole.

As this committee studies Canada's APF going forward, while looking at programs and services to help farmers with issues around market volatility, it's important to review the good-news story of farming and innovation, and the reality of our businesses and essential export markets.

First, I would like to touch on risk management. We know that agri-stability enrolment numbers are plummeting, but we would like to encourage you, in making any changes to the risk management programs, to focus on agri-insurance, which we know is a predictable and bankable program that's working for our farmers.

In your deliberations on the APF priority of science, innovation, research, environmental sustainability, and climate change, I would like to share with you the good-news story.

As modern prairie growers of grains, oilseeds, and pulses, in the past 30 years we have significantly reduced carbon emissions, and we are reducing emissions further every year. Prairie innovation and technology have led this effort, and it has been exported around the world. Conservation and sustainability are essential to profitability, so we live it. Our homesteading grandparent farmers were the original environmentalists 100 years ago, and our grandchildren will farm the same land as environmentalists 100 years hence.

As we've recently stated, while we worry about climate change, we also can't pull an air seeder with a Prius.

The great news is that farmers are already achieving the desired policy outcome of much of the APF. We are reducing carbon emissions. We sequester carbon while producing food. However, we are concerned about what additional carbon taxes could mean for our farms as input costs spike.

Consider nitrogen fertilizer. Modern, sustainable agriculture depends on fertilizer, but it is energy-intensive to produce. Canadian fertilizer producers work hard to minimize emissions, but a carbon tax would force them to raise prices. That would force Canadian farmers to make a difficult decision: pay a higher price for Canadian fertilizer or buy it from other countries. How would it help the environment to put Canadian fertilizer plants out of business while plants in other countries expand?

Again, let's talk about the good news. We've seen considerable energy efficiency gains in tractors, trucks, and combines—many such innovations found by great agricultural equipment manufacturers here in Canada. I've spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on new combines and tractors. Modern farm equipment has highly efficient engines, with technology constantly monitoring and improving efficiency, and my neighbours have made similar investments.

We used to plow the soil, but with modern precision farming today, we now practice reduced or entirely no-till farming. Fuel use is cut, because we are not passing through the field to plow the soil or apply pesticides over and over again, as in the past. No-till has additional benefits in drier areas, where less irrigation is needed, further enhancing fuel savings and soil conservation. This is great news.

Agronomy has vastly improved. As growers, we now employ diverse cropping rotations and better fertilizer practice. Plant science innovations are remarkable. Productivity gains and yield advances with reduced inputs in wheat and canola, as just two examples, are impressive. This is happening because of advances in genetics and plant breeding, modern plant protection products, and improved soil health through agronomy. Again, much of this is driven by homegrown prairie crop science innovators.

New crop varieties developed through modern breeding techniques see further reduced tillage, with crops growing in drought conditions, meaning even greater sequestration and soil conservation.

• (1005)

A recent CropLife Canada study quantifies the significant contributions farmers have made in major environmental footprint reductions:

Since 1990, the reduction in tillage owing to use of plant science innovations have resulted in a 3.8 fold increase in carbon sequestration in cultivated land, reducing greenhouse gases by about 4 million tonnes per year. Decreases in summer fallow add another 5.2 million tonnes of greenhouse gas reductions through carbon sequestration.

As farmers, we're producing more food on less land, and we're continuing to reduce greenhouse gases further, including reductions of diesel fuel use approaching 200 million litres each and every year. Canada's greenhouse gases are steadily increasing, but in the agricultural sector they are clearly decreasing.

This leads us to the key point in your study on the priority of markets and trade for our products. Canadian farmers are concerned about competitiveness. As we potentially bring in more taxes, it impacts our competitors. France and Australia don't have those types of taxes, but the same world commodity prices prevail for all. The same crops will be grown and the same emissions will be emitted,

but carbon taxes will send a signal that farming in Canada is less profitable.

I'm a farmer speaking directly from that perspective. On markets and competitiveness, those key issues of climate change and carbon taxes can't be decoupled from the others.

With trade and markets, while there might be protectionist rhetoric coming from certain corners abroad, Canada should still move forward and lead on this critical issue. We have to maintain our markets, create new ones, and ensure when hauling future harvests that we're not at a competitive disadvantage to other countries. Whether in the trans-Pacific partnership or other bilateral deals, the benefits of trade are real, and every day that we don't have market access at competitive levels we're at a disadvantage. We need a level playing field. There's a reality in global supply chains, and we can't afford a missing link in the chain.

Our grain sector is designed to grow and to be a true modern global player. We produce food, which is something essential to everyone. We just want the freedom to grow, innovate, compete, and market it on a level playing field here, at home, and to families around the world. Combined with a strong agriculture insurance program, that will give us the tools we need to do that.

We thank you for your time here today. I look forward to your questions, and we look forward to working with all of you to enhance the profitability and sustainability of farmers in our agricultural sector.

Thank you.

• (1010)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Hansen.

We'll now start the question round with Mr. Anderson, for six minutes.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.

Ms. Hansen, you talked quite a bit about innovation and being innovators. As we're having this discussion, we're trying to set some future direction for agriculture in Canada. I'm just wondering if you can talk about where you see the future of farming headed over the next 10 years. What would you see as the focus of innovation? Where is it going to be taking place? We've seen such huge changes in the last 10 years. Where do you think that's going? As we're trying to set a direction for APF, what should we be focused on when we're looking at innovation?

I'll probably ask the same question about research a bit later.

Ms. Margaret Hansen: We would see it largely with better tools being needed to meet the challenges of the future. Any kind of environment that will encourage investment in that type of area is where we would be seeing things.

Mr. David Anderson: Where should the research money be focused? We've heard a lot, as we've had these hearings, about the importance of research in the future, the science clusters, and those kinds of things, but where would you like to see.... Mr. Wells was here earlier, and we talked about the Western Grains Research Foundation. We have other funds in some of the organizations. Where should that research funding be focused do you think?

Mr. Stephen Vandervalk (Vice-President, Alberta, Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association): The grain companies now and some of the crop researchers, the Syngentas of the world, are doing a lot of research. We do have the fund, which I think is upwards of \$60 million, in the Western Grains Research Foundation, and they are doing some research as well.

It's a very tough thing, because every part of the Prairies needs different research. Some areas are droughted out, and other areas are being completely flooded out. I think the key thing to focus on is having that level playing field, making sure that some of our agri-insurance is in place. If we're able to invest in what we put into the ground especially, that's what it comes down to. If we can profitable, we know we can put more into the crop. By putting more into the crop, that decreases the risk of using these insurance programs because usually we're able to grow the yields.

I think we just need to make sure that those programs are definitely bankable from the beginning so that we know what we're going to have and that we're able to have trust in putting the investment into the crop. From there, we can push forward. Then we can use some of these new technologies as far as drought-tolerant seeds are concerned.

A good example is seed treatments. One of the problems we have in western Canada is the wireworm. It's a little worm that's in the ground. You can't do anything about it because it's under the ground and it eats your seed. You have a crop, and then three weeks later you have nothing. Without seed treatments, which are the only way to protect against that, you might as well pack up and go home, because there's no other answer. Without those types of products and research, we would be in very deep trouble.

Mr. David Anderson: There are lots of things I'd like to ask today.

Mr. Wiggins, or maybe it was Ms. Wildeman, mentioned the business risk management. You have a chart in your presentation

here. I think it argues against the claim in your presentation that there has been a prolonged income crisis in Canadian agriculture. It shows net income increasing in the last 10 years, from \$2 billion to \$8 billion; net farm exports are up about 40%; and imports are up as well.

I wonder how you can reconcile the chart with the statement that you made. My experience, on the Prairies anyway, is that net farm incomes have been improving and increasing for people.

• (1015)

Mr. Ted Wiggins: It all depends upon the commodity group we're talking about. Even if you look at the total net farm income on that chart versus the exports, there has been a tremendous increase in both imports and exports, and net farm income has increased slightly, not nearly as much.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Vandervalk, would you have any comment on that? Larger farms were partially blamed by the NFU for entering into a cycle of declining margins, declining profitability. Is that what you're finding with the farmers in your area?

Mr. Stephen Vandervalk: No. I would agree that it depends on regions. In western Canada, there is no doubt that farm income, in the last seven to eight years especially, has increased significantly. It has to do with a few things. World prices have increased. In the last 10 to 15 years, with a lot of the technology we use, which we've talked about, our costs have gone up, but our revenue has actually gone up a bit further. That said, with our costs going up, we do have more increased risk because we have those extra inputs, but definitely the net margins have increased. Again, going back to agri-insurance, with our increase in revenue, our averages should be going up; therefore, we should have more bankable, higher base-level coverage.

Yes, we've definitely seen an increase in profitability, but also with that comes an increase in risk.

Mr. David Anderson: You mentioned three times about agri-insurance being a far more predictable and useful program than agri-stability. We've heard at this committee that less than 30% of farmers are now enrolled in agri-stability. That basically means we don't have a business risk management tool that works across the board.

You folks like agri-insurance. What other aspects of the APF do you like that have worked for your members?

Mr. Stephen Vandervalk: There are a few things. Agri-invest has been something that's also bankable. Agri-insurance, as far as a grain and oilseeds farmer is concerned, is the be-all and end-all for the business risk management suite. We get coverage, we know what we're going to have, and we're able to plan our farms accordingly.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vandervalk. I'm going to have to cut you off here.

We'll move on to Mr. Breton.

[Translation]

You have six minutes.

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you Mr. Chair.

Ladies, gentlemen, thank you for being here with us today. Your testimony is extremely important in the context of our study on the next agricultural policy framework.

My first question is addressed to Mr. Wiggins and Ms. Wildeman.

According to some sources, there has been a serious labour shortage in the agricultural sector over the past 10 years, and this shortage is not going to improve in the coming years. It is even expected to double in the next eight or nine years. This is a very problematic situation, all the more so since the demand for foodstuffs of all kinds is going to continue to increase, given that the population is also increasing both in Canada and elsewhere in the world.

What are two or three solutions the sector might suggest to alleviate this problem?

What can the government do about this issue, which is in my opinion one of the most serious challenges the sector is facing?

Ms. Amanda Wildeman: Mr. Wiggins basically stressed the fact that a new generation of farmers is needed, and that in our opinion this issue is first and foremost a cultural one. As Mr. Wells was saying earlier, we lost a whole generation which for various reasons decided they would not work on the farm. Some parents told their children it was preferable to go to university and choose another line of work. That is why the majority of those who want to get into agriculture now are not from farming families.

Consequently these people have not acquired experience from a young age. So it's a cultural issue. To begin to deal with this, we have to start in the schools and broaden the debate and involve all of the population, and promote the valuable work farmers do everywhere in Canada.

Mr. Wiggins mentioned several solutions. It is really very costly to start farming. All of those who spoke to us spoke of the cost of the machinery needed to get going. A person who is just starting out can't afford a million dollars' worth of machinery. And banks are not willing to lend such large sums. It's too risky to lend such amounts to people who are new to the sector. We submitted practically a full page of recommendations on how this process can be approached. I don't, however, want to talk about this at length and use up too much time to set it all out.

• (1020)

Mr. Pierre Breton: That's fine. That's very good and it's quite clear.

If I understand correctly, you are emphasizing the need for education first, and, given the extremely high cost for new farmers, you are also suggesting ways to facilitate access to land.

Your testimony included the following recommendation: Name new farmers as one of the main pillars of the next policy framework.

I think that is very clear. However, you also want us to move away from an export-dominated model. I'd like you to provide more detail on that aspect, in light of the fact that the vast majority of farmers who testified here over the past weeks and months have said that they wanted tools that would allow them to export more, and increase their income as well as their operations.

Ms. Amanda Wildeman: Could you answer that question, Mr. Wiggins?

[English]

Mr. Ted Wiggins: I don't think we're advocating that we get rid of the export model. The export model is very important. In New Brunswick, potatoes are a huge industry. Blueberries are an export product. But, especially for new farmers to get into farming, there is a huge amount of smaller production in terms of certain types of livestock, vegetables, fruits, and so on that we import right now. We import as much as we export, probably. There is a lot of this that can be replaced and give us greater food security and give young people an opportunity to get their foot in the door.

The export market is still important, but we can't sacrifice local protection for local consumption to the export market as well. I don't know if I'm making it clear, but we value export still.

If you look at a commodity like milk, for example, some people are going to say it's a commodity board that's protected, but it is one of the more prosperous parts of the Canadian agriculture industry. It brings stability. It brings a tremendous number of jobs, especially in rural Canada. A lot of, we'll say, part-time farmers or smaller farmers end up buying equipment from the larger milk producers and so on. It's the whole basis of rural Canada, really.

There's a place for a local market, I guess.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Would you like to add something to that, Ms. Wildeman?

Ms. Amanda Wildeman: I was just thinking about a CBC report that aired this week. They mentioned that the family grocery basket was going to increase by \$420 this year. If you consider food sovereignty, you have to look at the entire system. If the consumer can't afford to feed himself, then the circle is broken. This is due to the fact, for instance, that we export potatoes, and also import some from the United States.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wildeman.

Ms. Brosseau, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for their presentations today on the next agricultural framework.

Mr. Vandervalk and Madam Hansen, you were talking about the importance of trade agreements. Canada exports a lot. Recently we had the Minister of Agriculture before the committee, and we were all tasked to study the supplementary estimates. I'm sure you're well aware that we have the market access secretariat, and that does an extraordinary job of coordination. It works with CFIA and Global Affairs. Their priorities are to reopen, maintain, and expand international markets, use the Canadian brand to market food products, fill market intelligence needs, and leverage the agriculture and agri-food trade commissioner service. The secretariat does a really important job, but we found out that the government is cutting money to the market access secretariat by \$22.9 million in the next year.

Could you talk to us about the importance of the work that is done by the federal government internationally, and the importance of revisiting funding to make sure they're getting the funds necessary to do the job, to support Canadian agriculture?

• (1025)

Mr. Stephen Vandervalk: Yes, definitely. In western Canada, numbers change, but probably 80% to 85% of our product is exported. It's all-important. When it comes down to what you were talking about, the work the federal government does through CIGI, who do trade missions around the world, and some of the commissions that are farmer-run.... We were all down in South America a couple of weeks ago, and some throughout Asia. They usually try to bring a farmer along to explain the story.

We're trying to sell our brand, sell our product. We have the highest quality food in the world and produce the most environmentally sustainable product as any place in the world. That's how we need to brand it. We definitely need to make sure those markets stay open, because without exports.... We have some of the biggest land bases in the world, and the population isn't there, so we need to export. We need to keep those markets open through trade deals and through organic growth, increasing demand in these countries.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Also making sure we have a transportation system that works.

Can I get some brief comments on transportation because I know it's very important. Bev and I were on the committee when we had the transportation crisis. We dealt with Bill C-30. The new government prolonged some of the provisions in Bill C-30, which we're happy about. There's the importance of transportation in Canada, and then I'm going to ask a quick question of the NFU.

Mr. Stephen Vandervalk: Sure, that's every bit as important. Sometimes I'm on trade missions, and I always bug my farmer colleagues who I go along with. I ask what they are doing going on a trade mission when we can't even get this product to port. There's no doubt that is a huge bottleneck.

A new terminal is being built, G3, that's all-important. There are very many bottlenecks in the system, from the tunnel going into Vancouver to having roundabout tracks in Vancouver so they can unload faster. If we could just fix about six things, we could easily increase the hopper car fleet; we could increase exports or enhance export transportation to the coast by as much as 30% or 40%. It's definitely going to be needed because these crops are just getting

bigger. We've seen record crops in two of the last three years, and that's going to keep going and going, so the problem will get worse.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: It doesn't matter how many trade deals we have if we don't have a transportation system to get our product out or across the country.

A private member's bill is currently before the House of Commons. My colleague Guy Caron has presented it. It's a bill to change unfair tax practices. Right now it is more advantageous to sell your farm to somebody else instead of selling it to a member of your family. I was just wondering if I can get some comments on the importance of changing this unfair tax practice right now. I don't have this bill before me, but maybe you've heard of it before, and I could give you more information on it.

Talk about the importance of making sure that the government has tax rules in place to encourage transfers of farms between parents and children. We have an aging population. It's important that we look at ways to help support farmers, young farmers, and encourage the transfer of family farms but also fishing businesses, businesses in general, among family members.

Ms. Amanda Wildeman: I attended a presentation when Guy came to Fredericton to share about his private member's bill. One of the things that goes along with everything we're saying is that our lack of knowledge of new farmers is our current.... For example, the regulatory framework we have around farm taxation policy is not reflective of today's world. If someone has a family farm and it's not incorporated, there are different tax laws.

Guy's legislation is focusing on farms that are incorporated because they have a different set-up. If the farm is not incorporated and it's just Amanda's farm and it's my personal business, historically, I have always had a different tax relationship if I want to pass it on to my children. If I incorporate, which is more of the business climate now, and more and more farms are choosing that, that's where we need legislation that is updated to today's farm reality.

• (1030)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wildeman.

Now we'll move on to Mrs. Lockhart, for six minutes.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have had an opportunity to collaborate with my colleague, Mr. DeCoursey, and I'd like him to ask a question, please.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: Thank you very much and thank you to all our presenters for your presentations this morning.

I'll focus on an area important to our region of the country and the idea of new farmers, which is well articulated in your presentation, Amanda. I want to ask you what interface you may be having with government agencies, community groups, and organizations around helping newcomers enter the agricultural field.

In Atlantic Canada, we have fewer young people, but we've seen an influx of newcomers, whether they're refugees eager to get to work.... You have a government initiative to help bring upwards of 2,000 skilled immigrants, newcomers and their families, to the region over the next number of years, and local pilot projects seeking to connect newcomers with business opportunities. The local Fredericton Chamber of Commerce has such a pilot project on the go right now.

I wonder if you have any interface with any of those initiatives, ongoing trends, and if so, what that might look like.

Mr. Ted Wiggins: I'll make one comment to start with. The provincial government has individuals who have been tasked with liaison with new farmers, immigrant farmers, or whatever from Europe or other parts of Canada, partly because we have such low cost land in the Maritimes. They've also put together fairly comprehensive literature to help new farmers, especially people from other countries who may have farming experience but are not be familiar with the rules and regulations and the programs, etc., that exist in, say, the province of New Brunswick. There is some work being done in that area.

Ms. Amanda Wildeman: That's a great question. We, again, at the provincial level—and this is something that can be replicated elsewhere—like Ted said, our provincial government recently targeted new farmers as an economic growth opportunity for the province. We still are waiting to see what exactly that means, so we're collaborating on that.

There was also the recent announcement of bringing over more immigrants and a trade mission to attract more immigrant farmers to New Brunswick, which are both needed. It's definitely going to be a multipronged approach to attracting and rebuilding our farmer base. Once people are in Canada and in New Brunswick, the programs that are available to them are a lot less than for people who are coming in.

There's more support for someone who's coming in from a different province or a different country to establish in New Brunswick than there is for me or any of you. If you want to leave politics to start a farm, it's easier if you are coming from another country. They're going to be more interested in drawing you in, at the provincial level at least. There's a big space for a renewed immigration policy and programs for helping Canadians who are interested in farming get into farming, rather than always seeking elsewhere for people to come in and save New Brunswick in particular.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: My understanding is that, at least with this pilot initiative in our community, there is a survey being done of people who are in the region, in the area, and have been around for some time.

Are you involved in that conversation at all with those leading this succession connect program? Are there lessons to learn from that that we can apply to other people in the region who have been here their whole lives, for generations—

Ms. Amanda Wildeman: About the succession connect program that the chamber of commerce is leading, I haven't spoken to them directly about it, but in the Campbellton area they were doing a similar program a few years ago that was mostly for grocery stores, corner stores, etc., connecting people, future entrepreneurs, with business owners who were looking at retiring. I spoke to them at length about how we might be able to adapt a similar model to agriculture, where farm businesses would be included. At least in that conversation, they weren't even going there, but there is definitely a lot of opportunity. I haven't gone to the Fredericton Chamber of Commerce yet to explore that, no.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: One last thing, what sort of conversation is ongoing with your organization or your member groups with post-secondary institutions and the way that they might, through the myriad of programs that young people are taking at universities, help or better advise people as to opportunities in the industry?

•(1035)

Mr. Ted Wiggins: One of the issues that arose last year is that for people under a certain income, their tuition was free. That applies to all kinds of programs in the province, but if you want to get an education in agriculture, you have to leave the province. We've raised this with the provincial government because right now there's no consideration for people going out of the province to get their education, especially when there's no education in agriculture available in the province.

Ms. Amanda Wildeman: I found interesting a comment from the previous presentation. One of the questions was about agriculture grads, how excited they are to be working, and whether there were jobs in their field. One of the positions that was listed off by the witness was law, and none of them were actually farming. They were all support positions for the agriculture industry, which is important, but like we said in our presentation, we should go with the model that Quebec has taken where, if you have an undergraduate degree or college diploma, you get a significant financial grant to start up in agriculture. It's a lot more tempting, if you're paying off student loans, to take a professional career in agriculture and start selling inputs.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wildeman.

That is all the time we have. We need to go in camera to deal with the business part of our mandate, so I thank you.

We will take two minutes to go in camera. Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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