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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, April 11, 2019**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Pat Finnigan**



## Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

Thursday, April 11, 2019

• (1205)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)):** I want to welcome from Calgary, Alberta, Kim McConnell, from the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. Mr. McConnell is a member of the Order of Canada and chair of the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity, public trust steering committee. We also have Mr. Ron Bonnett, Co-Chair of the Public Trust Steering Committee at the CFA.

We also welcome Ms. Susie Miller, Executive Director, Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Crops, and Robert Saik, Chief Executive Officer, Know Ideas Media, by video conference.

We have a very short time. There's a vote coming, so we'll have an opening statement.

Do you want to start, Ms. Miller, for up to six minutes?

**Ms. Susie Miller (Executive Director, Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Crops):** Great. Thank you. I will abbreviate my remarks.

Thank you for focusing on public trust. In a recent analysis that was undertaken, public trust was top of mind for producers. In fact, in terms of risk to the overall food system, it was rated number one. In terms of risk to a particular sector, it was rated number two, just behind policy and regulations, which of course can be impacted by a lack of public trust.

In terms of the grains industry, there are many activities being undertaken by individual companies and associations, but in order to ensure that the actions are coordinated, leveraged and effective, a strategic plan was developed in March 2019. The top public trust issues in the grains industry are concerns about plant breeding technology, such as GMOs; pesticide use; water quality impacts of fertilizer and manure use; and corporate farming and corporate involvement in farming.

In terms of the strategic plan, activities will include enhanced communications to and dialogue with Canadians in a way that resonates with their values. It's not our preaching to them; it's about listening and about understanding what the concerns are and their roots. The focus is also on the development of a code of practice for grain, oilseeds and special crop production. Canadian producers follow sound practices that address those public trust issues that I identified, but we don't have a national, articulated code that defines what those practices are. With the development of a code of practice,

Canadian farmers, exporters and processors will have a concrete tool to show the beneficial management practices to preserve land, air and water. It will also function as a tool to communicate back to producers.

How will this be developed? Obviously and absolutely, farmers have to be at the table, but if the code is going to build the trust of Canadians who are interested in how their food is produced, farmers can't be alone when that code is developed. It must include scientific expertise, non-governmental organizations with an interest in sustainability, customers and processors. It has to be open to public review and publicly available when completed.

I'll skip right to what government can do to help us get to where we want to go. Number one is to communicate the regulatory system and the findings to Canadians. Canada has very strong regulations for food and environmental safety. I'm sure you've heard this. Regulators are focused on communicating with the regulated parties, as they must, to make sure that they understand the requirements placed on them, but they're not as successful at communicating those regulations and their impacts to Canadians. If Canadians don't understand the regulatory system, then it can serve no purpose to contribute to the public trust that our food is produced safely and sustainably.

Number two is access to data. Canadians trust Statistics Canada—they love Statistics Canada—which collects a significant amount of relevant data from Canadian farmers. For example, Statistics Canada undertakes, with the support of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, periodic surveys on environmental farm practices, the last of which was produced in 2018. Not only will these results establish our environmental performance and compliance with the parts of the code of practice that we are developing; it will also help identify weaknesses for us so that we know where to focus corrective action. As these surveys are periodic, they will help show continuous improvement, which Canadians and international markets are interested in. Statistics Canada and Agriculture Canada are only resourced to publish a limited amount of that data, so our ability to use it is heavily compromised. We need a cost-effective and timely mechanism to have those results for reporting back to Canadians.

Number three is research results. Government researchers are trusted researchers. You could have the same research undertaken by industry, but it doesn't mean the same for being able to develop public trust. A significant contribution to our reporting of our environmental performance is Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's agri-environmental indicators. The latest indicators available are from 2011, and an update isn't planned until 2021.

•(1210)

I know they're doing their best, but we require that priority be placed on those data series as soon as possible for credibility, and also to take into consideration improvements that have been made in the last 10 years. Research from Environment and Climate Change Canada on greenhouse gas and water quality is also critical to us.

Last but not least is program support. We'd like to take this opportunity to emphasize how critical Government of Canada programming is in helping us to maintain that public trust. The continued availability of contribution funding from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada for things like the code of practice leverages industry contributions to produce credible, science-based results that can go a long way to enhancing Canadians' understanding that we are doing the right thing.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Miller.

Mr. Longfield.

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

I'd like to quickly read into the record a motion that the committee invite the Minister of Agriculture—

**Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC):** I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** Mr. Berthold.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** We were at the testimony. I didn't hear a point of order. I just heard Mr. Longfield, and he cannot move a motion on a point of order.

**A voice:** How did he get the floor?

**The Chair:** He asked for the floor.

Mr. Longfield.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** I'd like to move:

That the committee invite the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food to appear on Thursday, May 2, 2019, as the new Minister and to discuss department plans for the upcoming year.

I'm just giving notice of motion.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Bonnett, go ahead.

**Mr. Ron Bonnett (Former President, Co-Chair of the Public Trust Steering Committee, Canadian Federation of Agriculture):** Thank you.

I'm going to have some abbreviated comments as well. I'm here in a bit of a different role than usual. I co-chair the national steering committee for public trust. I think it's interesting that my co-chair is from McDonald's foods. It's an indicator that the issue of public trust

is a lot broader than just primary production. There's a lot of work being done in the different sectors—Susie has been working on the grain sector—looking at how they actually do the right thing, prove what they're doing and communicate it.

This issue has been building steam over the last few years. I think the ability of social media to put out misinformation about farming practices, how we care for our animals, how we grow our crops and the types of products that we're using has presented a challenge.

The public trust steering committee basically was just an offshoot of a meeting that was held in P.E.I. with all of the agriculture ministers and the federal minister. Governments and industry realized that we needed to start getting in front of some of the misinformation that was out there in order to ensure that we maintain the confidence of consumers.

We've worked through a process. CFA was actually granted some funds last year, and Susie has been working on the project to take a look at the tools that are required and the information we need to collect and look at putting together an overview of where we should be going from here.

I think one thing that became clear is that it is a lot broader than just one commodity. Everyone is involved and there was a need for co-ordination. I think there's a responsibility of individual commodities to deal with the public trust issues that they have. Over that, there's a need to coordinate some of the responses and take a look at best practices and things like that when you're addressing the public trust issue.

You have written comments that we presented. I won't go through them, but I did want to touch on the fact that, coming out of this discussion, we're looking at finding a home for some group to take leadership in running this file and playing the coordinating role. Kim is speaking next and the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity has been identified as one of the groups that could take on that role.

We need, though, to build a governance system underneath that, so that all of the different commodities and all of the different players—processors, retailers and the general public—are connected into this discussion as well.

I think there's an opportunity for us to share information back and forth between commodity groups, to take a look at the best practices and take a coordinated approach, so that we're providing good information to the public about what we're doing rather than trying to put out fires every time there's some type of complaint or something comes forward. That is the goal.

As I said, I'm keeping my comments abbreviated, but you do have the written comments. I look forward to questions if we have time.

•(1215)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bonnett.

Now we have Mr. Saik.

**Mr. Robert Saik (Chief Executive Officer, Know Ideas Media, Saik Management Group Inc.):** Good morning.

My name is Robert Saik. I presented you a written submission of the top 20 GMO FAQs written by me and Robert Wager. I represent a science-based initiative called Know Ideas Media. We draw up a new science video pertaining to agriculture every Friday on YouTube and Facebook. I'd like to tell you a story about apples and grapefruit—not quite apples and oranges.

When I was growing up our grapefruit were always white-fleshed, but today if you eat grapefruit it is red-fleshed. The grapefruit became red-fleshed because science and plant breeders exposed grapefruit to nuclear radiation, specifically gamma radiation that scrambled the chromosomal complex of the grapefruit, turning it from white-fleshed to red-fleshed. That's why you have red-fleshed grapefruit today. This is called mutagenesis. It's a scrambling of chromosomal complex. It's a breeding process.

Now let's go to the apple. In the Okanagan, scientists have figured out how to flick off three to four enzymes inside an apple to prevent the apple from growing brown. You have three to four enzymes flicked off in an apple and you have a chromosomal complex scrambled with nuclear radiation.

My question to you is which one is GMO? The apple is GMO. This, paradoxically, could be labelled organic, non-GMO even though the chromosomal complex was scrambled with nuclear radiation.

The public does not understand that GMO is a poor monitor for modern breeding processes. It's not an ingredient. In Canada we have all kinds of examples of people benefiting from GMO technology. If you know of anybody who is being kept alive through insulin injections, they are using GMO medicines. Hemophiliacs are being kept alive through GMO medicines, and most of the hard cheese that we eat in North America is GMO because the coagulant is a GMO or genetically engineered coagulant called chymosin. In Canada we register our products based on novel traits. I would encourage the standing committee to fight for that and to retain that in Canada, because it's a level-headed approach to how we look at and study the breeding processes and the crops and livestock that are being brought forward.

However, activists are pushing fear, uncertainty and doubt onto the consumers. It's estimated that between \$2.5 billion and \$3 billion is circulated annually through activist organizations bent on spinning fear, uncertainty and doubt. They do this because they have an agenda, and part of that agenda is to drive up food costs based on labels. What kind of labels? When you go to the grocery store you will see a non-GMO butterfly sticker, and that sticker appears on things like non-GMO maple syrup. There aren't any genetically engineered maple trees. Non-GMO Catelli pasta; there isn't any genetically engineered durum wheat. Non-GMO Hunt's tomato sauce; there isn't any genetically engineered tomato sauce. Non-GMO Himalayan rock salt, non-GMO tea, non-GMO seaweed extract, non-GMO coconuts, non-GMO spinach, non-GMO lettuce, non-GMO bacon.

I'm calling for four things.

First, help the public to understand that GMO genetic engineering is not an ingredient. It's a very poor monitor for a description of modern breeding processes.

Two, uphold the institutions that we have. Health Canada's recent ruling on glyphosate would be an example that also recognizes that the novel trait registration system we have in this country is a strong one.

Three, recognize that activists are pushing forward with a fear-based agenda to underpin or to create uncertainty in the marketplace.

Lastly, I am calling on the committee to call on CFIA to act to remove from the grocery store shelves false and misleading labels that are creating fear, uncertainty and doubt among consumers.

Thank you for your time today.

• (1220)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. McConnell, do you have a few things to add to Mr. Bonnett's presentation?

**Mr. Kim McConnell (Member of the Order of Canada, Chair of the Centre for Food Integrity, Public Trust Steering Committee, Canadian Federation of Agriculture):** Yes, I do.

**The Chair:** You have a couple of minutes at the most.

**Mr. Kim McConnell:** As Ron just said, I'm the Chairman of the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity. I'm also an adviser to and supporter of many of the initiatives who have submitted or presented to you.

The centre has a mandate to be a service provider to Canada's food system and to help our food system earn public trust. We provide research studies on what the consumer is feeling or doing, or on what is happening. We provide dialogue experiences so that we can share with various industry players. We provide training and support. From farm groups to processors to companies to food retailers to food service to governments, that is the audience we are involved with.

We're only three years old but we've been involved in building public trust since 2006. Over the years we've learned a number of things about how to build public trust, but I'm not going to get into that today. Instead, I'm going to focus on two different areas. First off, what's making the Canadian system different and gaining traction, not only across Canada but across the world in a lot of ways? The second thing is the role that we believe the government must play and can play as our industry partner.

First, I'll go back to the Canadian approach. As the African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far"—

**The Chair:** Mr. McConnell, we're going to have to cut it very short. If there is one last line you want to give us, please do. We're going to have to run to vote.

**Mr. Kim McConnell:** Okay.

We need you as our partner to support us. We need you to encourage government regulations that will allow regulatory bodies to speak up and to be able to do what they're doing. We need you to help us be a partner in working together. That's what is needed.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. McConnell.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Mr. Chair, I'd like to give notice of the following motion:

That, during the meeting of Thursday, May 2, 2019, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food appear for two hours to answer questions on international trade, including relations with China, during the second hour of her testimony.

**The Chair:** Very good. Thank you.

[*English*]

Thank you all, Ms. Miller, Mr. Bonnett, Mr. McConnell and Mr. Saik.

The meeting is adjourned.

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