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Chair: Mr. Pat Finnigan



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• (1705)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)): I will call this meeting to order.

I apologize. Everybody's sound is great and I forgot to bring my headset with me today. If you can't hear the translation, please let me know. I'll try to speak right into the laptop, loud and slow.

Welcome to meeting number 22 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House of Commons on Tuesday, May 26, the committee is meeting to consider a request received by the clerk and submitted by four members of the committee. This request was made to discuss support measures for Canadian poultry and egg farmers.

I have just a few notes here. When you intervene, please make sure that your language channel is set to the language that you intend to speak, not the floor. This is very important. It will reduce the number of times we need to stop because the interpretation is inaudible for our participants, and it will maximize the time we spend exchanging with each other.

Also, before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike.

[Translation]

Make sure that your microphone is off when you are not talking.

We are now ready to begin.

[English]

Members have all received the letter and had a chance to look at the meeting request. Perhaps at this stage I will open the floor.

I don't know, Mr. Barlow, if you want to talk about the motion or actually move the motion so that we can discuss it. I'll let you explain your request.

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

It's good to have everybody here, virtually at least, in the middle of summer, and I appreciate everyone taking the time. I know everyone is busy in their constituencies as well.

You all have a copy of the motion that the Conservative members of the committee submitted. I will move the motion. I will just read

it into the record, and then, Mr. Chair, we can discuss it afterwards, if that works for you.

The Chair: That works fine. Go ahead, Mr. Barlow.

Mr. John Barlow: Okay. I'll just read the motion.

That the committee invite the Minister of Agriculture, department officials and poultry and egg stakeholders to provide an urgent update to the committee on the lack of action on promised programs from the government to support Canada's poultry and egg farmers as a result of losses resulting from recent trade agreements.

Mr. Chair, the reason we bring this up to the committee at this time is that it has been more than a year now since the minister made some commitments to the industry to offer some compensation as a result of the CETA and the CPTPP. The federal budget also promised \$3.9 billion in funding for dairy, poultry and egg farmers to deal with the impacts of those trade agreements. The commitment has already been made of \$1.75 billion over eight years to Canada's dairy farmers to compensate for the CETA and CPTPP agreements. However, similar commitments have not been made to the poultry and egg producers across this country.

Now that we're in the midst of a global pandemic, which is not something any of us would have anticipated, it is having an impact on Canadian agriculture throughout the industry and across the country. Canada's poultry and egg producers are also feeling the impact of that, and that has been exacerbated by the lack of compensation and the inaction from the current government on a commitment that was made in the budget in 2019, and again reinforced by the minister in her comments after the meetings held last June and July. We're now more than a year past when those commitments were to be made, with no follow-up.

Our concern on this, as Conservatives, is this continuing narrative that Canadian agriculture is being neglected in various different ways, not only during COVID but certainly around compensation for these trade agreements that were signed by the current government. Our feeling in bringing this motion forward is to hear from the stakeholders on the impact that the trade agreements have had on their industry. We want to know what the impact has been, with not having the compensation that was promised to them by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture. Certainly, I think it's important for us at this committee to be their voice and to listen to their concerns and the impacts this is having on their industry, and also the impacts it's having on our supply chain.

I'm not the only one, I'm sure, who's had numerous calls, not only from producers but also from processors, who have been impacted by this as well. If they do not have the producers, who have spent years on genetics and investments, millions of dollars in investments in their operations, they are also going to be impacted.

That is the reason we have submitted this motion. I look forward to the support of my colleagues on this committee to discuss this and pass this, and have two or three meetings on this so that stakeholders can have their voices heard.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

• (1710)

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

We'll open the floor.

I just want to remind members that if they wish to speak, they can use the "raise hand" function at the bottom right-hand side so it is easier to keep track.

I see Mr. Hoback has his hand raised. Would you like to speak to this, Mr. Hoback?

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Yes. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, members of the agriculture committee.

I'm the critic for the trade committee. This issue has been coming up from a variety of groups that are concerned about the credibility of the government as it negotiates trade deals, works with all the different interests and groups here in Canada, and makes settlements with them as it proceeds on with the trade deals. For example, in the TPP, in order to get their buy-in on supply management, the government actually agreed to a compensation package beforehand, before we signed on to it. That hasn't been forthcoming.

We did try to do things the appropriate way. We did send a letter to the minister three weeks ago, asking for her response, to pay attention to this, to focus on it—not even a reply. That's very unfortunate. I'm sorry, but that's not an excuse.

Now I have a scenario in the wine sector where we have wine growers who are really nervous right now because of trade action that's happened because of an escalator on the excise tax. They have an agreement in place that gives them two years, but they're seeing what's going on in the supply management sector and others, the groups outside of dairy, and they're saying, "Well, can we trust them? If they don't keep their word with what was created in TPP with the supply management sector, how can we trust them to keep

their word over the next few years in the wine sector?" There's some credibility at stake here, and some nervousness on top of COVID and everything else that's going on.

The trade committee, it's tough for us to meet. We don't have the ability to do Zoom meetings. We actually have to go, in person, to Ottawa to do these meetings. I'm glad John and you guys in the ag committee are considering this. It's very important that we deal with this. There are lots of farms here that could really use that support and that knowledge and the comfort in knowing that when they do agree to something, the government will actually follow through.

I'm looking at the motion—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): I am sorry to interrupt, Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Chair, the interpreter is unable to interpret Mr. Hoback's comments because of the sound. Perhaps Mr. Hoback should slow down or speak closer to the microphone.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Randy Hoback: I do talk fast. I apologize.

Just to wrap up, I think it's important that you talk to the producers impacted by this and we get a path forward to get this resolved. I think this committee is a great way to do it.

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

Next is Mr. Drouin.

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

To my colleagues, namely Mr. Barlow, I'm just wondering if the plan is to invite before us some groups that were not included, obviously, in the dairy announcement—the Egg Farmers of Canada, the chicken farmers, the turkey farmers and the hatching groups.

I'm also seeking to know whether or not they want to invite the minister and the department to provide an update. If that's the case, then we... I will say for the record that I don't necessarily support all the language in the motion, but I don't feel like arguing for hours about words and commas. That's not my style. But in terms of timing, should we just give the option to the clerk to decide on when those meetings will happen?

It's our understanding as well that the minister does not... I think we can find some time in the not-too-distant future. We can give the liberty to the clerk to decide on dates that work for all of us and then move on, just in terms of practicality.

Mr. John Barlow: Thanks, Mr. Drouin. I can answer the first question really quickly. Yes, it would be our intention to invite the stakeholder groups from the feather sector and the egg producers, as well as a couple of processors, just to give their perspective on the impact, and the minister and officials.

I agree with you 100% on the scheduling. We understand that right now it will be extremely tricky. From our discussions—unless there's an intervention from someone else—I think we are fine with leaving the scheduling up to the chair and the clerk to manage, as well as the minister in terms of her ability to appear. With the technology that's involved in this and the number of other committee meetings that are going on, we know that this will not be easy. We will just leave that to the chair and the clerk to schedule.

My feeling is that three meetings would be more than enough to do this, but I'm open to other suggestions. I don't think this is something we need to prolong. I think our stakeholders are looking for an update on what the situation is with this compensation. As Mr. Hoback said, the frustration for us is that we did send a letter to the minister asking for an update and we did not have a response. The next step for us was to have these meetings.

That would be our template, to Mr. Drouin's question.

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barlow.

Again, we can look at that. Another thing we could do, if the committee wanted, would be to have a long meeting of four hours, or maybe two three-hour meetings. There are different ways we can do this to maybe save one meeting. I'm just throwing that out there.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

Mr. Yves Perron: I will be very brief. I simply want to say that I totally agree with the motion. I support it very strongly. These meetings are necessary and we could have them as soon as possible.

As was mentioned before, we could hold three or four meetings. If we need more, we will do more, but maybe we should start with that and choose the dates with the clerk.

We do need to shed some light on this situation because, in terms of the amount of this compensation, negotiations with the various groups were already completed in August last year. It has now been a year.

It is quite well worded. It has my full support.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perron.

[*English*]

Could I ask everybody to make sure they're on mute when they're not speaking? We're hearing some background noise.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lehoux, you have the floor.

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

I would just like to add a few words. There is a great deal of pressure on the ground from farmers. As my colleague Mr. Barlow mentioned, farmers in the four production sectors concerned have not always received a response to their requests. The negotiations have been going on for quite a while, however. Calling the minister to appear is important so she can answer those questions and give us very specific timelines as well.

Our producers and processors have been patiently waiting and very tolerant of the delay. I understand we are still in a COVID-19 period, but it is all the more important that producers be heard and that, at the end of the day, both producers and processors get answers to their requests.

The minister previously said that she understood it was a matter of time and that an announcement would be coming. We need the minister to respond quickly.

As a first step, it would be a good idea to meet with witnesses and hear from the associations of producers whose products are currently in demand. They could bring us up to speed on the issues they are facing. Then we could meet with the minister so that she could give us specific dates very quickly.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lehoux.

[*English*]

Mr. Barlow, you have the floor.

Mr. John Barlow: I didn't see any other hands raised, Mr. Chair, so I was just going to call for the motion to be voted upon.

Our producers are trying to set budgets for the upcoming year, and when they aren't sure what their compensation is going to be, it's very difficult to do so. We have certainly heard, all of us on this committee, the anxiety and the frustration coming from our agriculture sector. It started with the harvest from hell last year, then the illegal blockades, then the increase in the carbon tax and now COVID. It's been a very difficult year, and for our producers to be able to set their budgets, they need to know the situation when it comes to this particular issue on this compensation package.

I would ask for the motion to be brought to a vote, and then I would ask the chair and the clerk to do their best to schedule the meetings as quickly as possible. I would suggest a maximum of three meetings. I am fine if you have to be a little bit creative, Mr. Chair, on how you do that, whether it's one four-hour meeting or two three-hour meetings. We understand that the current situation is a bit tricky, so I'm fine with however you feel fit to try to schedule that.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barlow.

Yes, I can certainly work with the clerk on that. Everybody would have to send their lists of witnesses. It's not going to be a very long list, but we need some witnesses for the clerk to work with. I imagine we could set a date as a deadline to have that list submitted. Today is Wednesday. What about tomorrow or Friday? Do you think we could get that list before the end of the day tomorrow or Friday?

Mr. John Barlow: I think, Mr. Chair, all of us know who the stakeholders are going to be that we're going to be asking. I don't think there will be any curve balls, certainly not on our end. Is there anything planned in that respect?

I think it would be more than doable to have that list of stakeholders and witnesses to you tomorrow.

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Perron, had you—

[*English*]

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Mr. Chair, I had my hand up.

The Chair: I didn't see your hand. I'm sorry about that. I saw Mr. Perron.

Go ahead, Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Just very quickly, I'm very supportive of the motion and, like John said, I don't think we're under any illusions as to who our main witnesses are going to be. In fact, I think I spoke to all of them this morning in advance of this meeting and what I got was a sense of frustration. They really do want to work with the government, but I think their patience has very much run out, given the length of time.

If we could have a committee meeting that runs four hours, I would be in favour of that—if we could have the stakeholders on one panel and the minister on the other. Next week is a scheduled sitting of the House. I don't know if that makes it easier, given that we all have plans to attend that either virtually or in person, but I don't think we're under any illusions as to whom we need to hear from.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacGregor.

As I said, I think everybody knows who they want to see as witnesses at this meeting, so maybe we should just make sure that we have that list right now. As you say, definitely there was the minister, and I think Mr. Drouin suggested the four organizations.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Yes, I suggested the Chicken Farmers of Canada, the Egg Farmers of Canada, the Turkey Farmers of Canada and then the hatching group. I forget their official name, but it's the hatchers. Those are the four that have not yet been covered.

The Chair: Okay.

As for the others, the growers or processors, you can forward them to me by tomorrow, if you wish.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Perron, did you raise your hand?

Mr. Yves Perron: Yes, I raised my hand. May I speak?

The Chair: Yes, go ahead, please.

Mr. Yves Perron: I have a question about the motion before we pass it. I might have a minor amendment to suggest, and I would like my colleagues' opinion on it.

Dairy farmers have received a first payment, but they are expecting the second one. Does the wording of the motion permit us to ask the minister about that payment date or do we need to change something?

I would like to hear what my colleagues have to say about it. Perhaps Mr. Barlow would like to comment.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Barlow, do you want to comment on that?

Mr. John Barlow: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I just didn't hear the translator very well.

Mr. Perron, do you mind repeating it again? I apologize.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I heard it.

Mr. John Barlow: Go ahead, Alistair.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I think, Monsieur Perron, if you have your six minutes with the minister, it's up to you as to what you want to ask her. You'd be free to do so.

• (1725)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron: In terms of the compensation involving payments in the second year, it must be said that there has been some inaction and that some commitments have not been met.

It's fine. I am okay with that.

The Chair: Mr. Perron, when the minister is here, you will be free to ask your question on any subject you choose. Does that work for you?

Mr. Yves Perron: Yes. If the committee members agree, we could also invite the dairy farmers. That will give us one more group of witnesses.

The Chair: You can submit the list of those you wish to invite, by tomorrow evening.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Chair, I just want to ensure that we stay on topic. I have many dairy farmers where I live, but it is important that we focus our attention on the groups that have not had an announcement yet. At the meeting, it will be important to give our full attention to them and them alone. The letter was sent by Mr. Barlow. If we cast the net too wide, we will no longer be talking about anything specifically.

I would like us to focus precisely on the four groups affected by supply management who are still expecting an announcement from our government. We owe it to them to stick to that.

Of course, if Mr. Perron wants to ask the minister a question when she is here, he can do so. However, if he wants to have another meeting with the dairy farmers only to discuss other things, that is altogether a separate matter.

I find we are not doing a service to the community we are trying to serve right now, that is, the four supply-managed farming groups other than the dairy farmers, who have already had an announcement. Mr. Perron can put the question to the minister, if he wants, but we must stay on topic, the poultry sector.

[*English*]

The Chair: We do have a motion. It would need an amendment if we wanted to go there.

Right now, as the motion stands, it's for Canada's poultry, egg farmers and—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron: It is not an amendment, Mr. Chair. That was absolutely not the intent of my question or my comment. That is why I formulated it, not as an amendment, but as a question to my colleagues.

Let's keep it in mind, however. I have no problem with the rest. As for Mr. Drouin's comment, I totally understand that they are the people who need our attention.

Let's take it one step at a time.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

Are there any other comments on the motion? I don't see any hands raised.

I'll read the motion again:

That the committee invite the Minister of Agriculture, department officials and poultry and egg stakeholders to provide an urgent update to the committee on the lack of action on promised programs from the government to support Canada's poultry and egg farmers as a result of losses resulting from recent trade agreements.

That is the motion as presented by Mr. Barlow.

Are we all in favour of the motion?

Or perhaps I can ask this: Is anyone against the motion?

I don't see any hands raised or any signals against the motion. I will take that as consensus for the motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Barlow.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you, everybody. I appreciate the support.

The Chair: Okay.

Just to help with our list of witnesses, we're looking at three meetings. That would be six hours. If we do two hours, one with the minister and one with the officials, that leaves us four hours for other witnesses. At three per panel and three per hour, that would be 12 witnesses.

Since we're here, is everybody ready to provide their list right now? We're really looking for about 12 besides the officials and the minister, if I have this right.

Hang on: Let's just follow the first plan and have you send your list of witnesses by tomorrow. We'll go by the same ranking we had with previous studies. If you can send in your list by tomorrow evening, we'll go with that.

Are there any other comments or questions?

If not, thank you, all. We shall certainly see you soon. Thank you for joining the meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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