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• (1505)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome everyone to meeting number 28 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. We're meeting pursuant to the order of reference of May 26, 2020. The committee is resuming its briefing on the Canadian response to the outbreak of the coronavirus.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow. Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. You have a choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French. As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, you will need to also switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking. You may also want to allow for a short pause when switching languages.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, except during questioning when the questioner can direct questions to whomever he or she wants to question. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. I remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I would like to now welcome our first panel of witnesses.

From the Agriculture Union, we have Fabian Murphy, national president. From the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, we have Mary Robinson, president, and from the Canning Sauce Company, we have Kim Hatcher, farmer.

We will begin with the Agriculture Union. You have 10 minutes for an opening statement.

Mr. Murphy.

Mr. Fabian Murphy (National President, Agriculture Union): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee. It's my pleasure to be here today.

Approximately, 2,500 food inspectors, including 1,500 front-line meat inspectors, are among those who are members of the Agriculture Union. Their job is to make sure Canadians have safe food. This is a rain or shine kind of job. They are dedicated people who cannot do their jobs from home. They have to show up despite the risks, and they do every day. We call them invisible heroes, because

they are hidden from view most of the time yet the work they do is essential. We owe them a great deal.

Reports from inspectors in the field show a wide range of how CFIA handled the pandemic and protected its staff, region to region.

In Alberta, I have received reports that CFIA was late to protect inspectors. It is only in the last few weeks that inspectors in northern Alberta received one package of 50 disposable masks each, at best a three-week supply. Before CFIA supplied its staff in northern Alberta with face shields at the end of April, some inspectors on the morning and afternoon shifts had to share shields supplied by the establishment. At the beginning of the outbreak they went to work every day with just their normal gear: a smock, hard hat and hairnet. There were no gloves, face masks or shields. There are still no latex gloves and N95 masks.

In southern Alberta, CFIA's initial approach was to assure inspectors there were no risks associated with working at the Cargill plant, the site of the largest single outbreak in the country. The situation in Quebec seems to be the total opposite. CFIA has worked closely with us and public health officials to make sure inspectors and veterinarians are safe at work.

The point I want to make here is that there's no consistent national approach by CFIA to deal with outbreaks, and it shows in other ways that I will address momentarily.

Physical distancing in most of the meat production plants in Canada is, in many cases, impossible. I believe proper hazard assessments will determine that the protections provided leave employees vulnerable to this biological hazard, COVID-19, but these assessments have not been done. In fact, conditions in these plants are perfect environments for the virus to grow and persistently lurk. They are cool and humidity levels are high. On top of that, they are extremely noisy environments, so workers must get close to each other to be heard over the constant mechanical noise.

It is no wonder meat packing plants have produced among the highest concentrations of infection during the first wave of the pandemic, higher even than nursing homes in some provinces. As mentioned, the largest single outbreak took place at the Cargill meat packing plant in High River, Alberta. Half of the 2,000 employees working there were infected, including half of the inspectors assigned to that plant.

The health and safety provisions of the Canada Labour Code have not been followed in these plants. As a consequence, the CFIA continues to follow practices that could actually help spread the virus. For example, processed meat inspectors continue to be assigned to multiple facilities. Like long-term workers did when they worked at multiple facilities, inspectors going from plant to plant could actually become vectors for spreading the virus.

The Canada Labour Code requires employers to appoint a qualified person to conduct hazard analysis when there are new threats in the workplace, and to implement plans to mitigate hazards and protect the health and well-being of the workers.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which is responsible for regulating food-producing establishments that are federally licensed, has taken a hands-off approach to ensuring the safety of its employees. Despite being in the early stages of the outbreak, most inspectors had no access to any protective gear, and employees were actually forbidden to wear their own face coverings. Basic precautionary practices such as making alcohol-based hand sanitizers available to inspectors were not followed. CFIA deferred to the meat plants to provide protective equipment to CFIA staff. Inspectors working in plants where the company did not provide its own employees personal protective equipment went without.

When COVID-19 outbreaks occur, as they have on a routine basis in these facilities, there is no consistent approach to addressing the threat to public health and worker safety. CFIA left these decisions in the hands of the individual provincial public health agencies. For example, an outbreak at the Olymel pork production plant in the Montreal area was met with a two-week shutdown of the facility to allow deep cleaning and to allow workers the opportunity to isolate. Only those free of the virus were allowed to resume work when the plant reopened.

On the other hand, the giant XL beef plant in Brooks, Alberta, never shut down when an outbreak occurred, not even for a day. As a result, fully half of the residents of the town of Brooks became infected.

All Canadians, food production workers and inspectors should be protected by the best public health and workplace safety practices no matter where they live.

The federal government has announced a \$77-million fund to support worker safety improvements in meat-packing plants. No criteria for how this fund will be distributed have been announced, and it seems unlikely that any of this money will actually be available until the end of September. In our opinion, Canadians will get the biggest bang for their investment of this money if companies are eligible to receive support only if they collaborate with the unions representing workers at their plants. This condition will ensure that the money is wisely spent to achieve the safety objectives of the program.

Around the world we are seeing the second wave of the virus hit countries that have relaxed their COVID lockdowns. I sincerely hope Canada is spared such a fate, but hoping is not good enough. We need a plan for how to avoid a repeat of our food production facilities becoming virus hot spots.

We recommend the following: a national approach when outbreaks occur in food processing establishments; the implementation of parts X and XIX of the Canada occupational health and safety regulations in all facilities to mitigate these risks; the requirement that companies, as a condition of receiving any support from the emergency processing fund, work co-operatively with the unions representing workers; a reduction in production line speeds to lower than normal to permit physical distancing; the discontinuation of multi-plant assignments for inspectors; and making routine testing for the virus available to inspectors.

Last but not least, we must recognize the dedication and bravery of CFIA inspectors, who risk their health and well-being every day when they go to work, by ensuring that they have adequate personal protective equipment, including latex gloves, N95 masks, face shields and access to a steady supply of hand sanitizer.

Thank you very much for your attention.

• (1510)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Murphy.

We go now to the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and Ms. Robinson.

Please go ahead for 10 minutes.

Ms. Mary Robinson (President, Canadian Federation of Agriculture): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Mary Robinson. I'm part of the sixth generation of my family to farm in Prince Edward Island, and I'm also the president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. Our federation represents roughly 200,000 Canadian farm families and has been in existence since 1935.

To start, I want to say thanks and to acknowledge the work of Canadian governments at all levels. Public servants and elected officials have been working 24-7 to help Canadians and keep them safe during these difficult times.

These coming weeks and months are critical if we are to ensure Canada's domestic food supply is secure both now and into the future.

The federal government has designed and executed many programs for businesses and Canadian individuals. We are talking today about how we can bring this ingenuity and commitment to support our farmers and food businesses in their continued commitment to providing an adequate and affordable Canadian food supply. We believe the resilience, adequacy and affordability of Canada's food supply is a critical public health objective for all Canadians, second only to the direct health care response to COVID-19 itself.

The COVID-19 crisis continues to generate significant challenges and uncertainty throughout the agri-food sector, with potentially devastating impacts on farmers from coast to coast. As leaders, we have an obligation to plan for the worst and drive for the best.

To understand the impacts of COVID-19, the CFA, through a survey of members and other national commodity associations, identified \$2.6 billion in projected short-term financial losses across the Canadian agri-food sector nearly two months ago.

To date, the government has announced a number of initiatives for the sector, including a series of measures intending to increase credit availability for the sector, alongside the May 5 announcement of \$252 million in assistance, while committing to further funding announcements in support of the sector. While critically important to the sector, the funding relief to date falls well short of the sector's overall need, as there are a number of outstanding issues facing Canadian farmers.

Today, I will speak to these outstanding issues, shortfalls in programming and what's needed to ensure we don't see any unnecessary loss of food production during this crisis, which continues to place unprecedented stress on food supply chains around the world.

For the first time in generations, serious questions have been raised in Canada about food supply chains and our food security. Canadian farmers continue to make daily decisions with regard to their businesses and the production of Canadian agricultural products, while confronting both the immediate and the longer-term challenges COVID-19 has introduced to the sector.

These include the continued threat of processing disruptions, reducing supply chain capacity and increasing costs due to production backlogs; the temporary loss of the food service industry and its long road to recovery, which has seen a key market for many agricultural producers lost, in large part for the foreseeable future; unfilled job vacancies throughout the agri-food supply chain, further challenged by the possibility of COVID occurrences in the workforce; unprecedented market volatility; rising costs in both the farm and the food processing industries, as these essential businesses continue to put in place a number of COVID-related measures; and closure of sector-specific markets that can have devastating implications for subsectors of Canadian agriculture.

The CFA has proposed a number of specific policy measures to help address challenges faced by the sector during COVID-19. A brief will be submitted to the clerk shortly, with a detailed breakdown of these measures. Given the short time I have today, I would like to focus on three key areas.

The first is the need for enhanced business risk management coverage to ensure producers have support to overcome supply chain disruptions, address rising costs and, ultimately, manage pressures to scale back production. The CFA believes that changes to BRM programs are the most efficient, comprehensive and targeted means of assisting producers with both the immediate and the longer-term challenges posed by COVID-19, in addition to the range of broad-spectrum challenges already confronting the sector, such as closures of key international markets, increasing weather-related risks

due to climate change and an overall rise in the capital requirements and costs involved in agricultural production.

• (1515)

Had BRM programs been operating effectively, the CFA's view is that the program would have responded to up to 75% of the \$2.6 billion in projected short-term financial losses referenced earlier. However, in the absence of these improvements, we continue to see a lack of trust among producers as to the ability of these programs to respond to the challenges they're experiencing, resulting in low program enrolment and a myriad of requests for ad hoc support.

Through years of research, most of the solutions to fix the BRM suite are already known. Now it is a matter of the Government of Canada sitting down with its provincial counterparts and committing to a concrete timeline to fix these programs in concert with key stakeholders. In the absence of those timely reforms, Canadian farmers need urgent clarity on how government plans to respond to rising costs associated with producing food, uncertain access to labour and loss of critical markets for many agricultural products.

Second, in addition to the challenges directly confronting primary agriculture, there's a continued need to provide further support for food processors to mitigate the likelihood of COVID-related supply chain disruptions across the sector. While we were pleased to see the announcement of \$77 million for food processors, our supply chain partners have indicated that this is inadequate, with significant food and financial losses expected to follow any future disruption.

Industry assessments of the additional costs confronting food processors greatly exceed the funding made available to date, with businesses continuing to take on sizeable investments and changes to safeguard the health and safety of their workforce. Our concern is that the smaller regional processors, further processors and grower-packer operations that are so vital to so many supply chains may lose out if demand as currently expected greatly exceeds the existing funding support available. CFA is calling for urgent additional financial support to assist these businesses in retrofitting facilities to maintain capacity and support workplace safety.

Third, where disruptions either have or will take place, CFA is calling for the timely introduction of additional funding beyond the \$50-million food surplus program to ensure there is logistical support to address existing and anticipated surpluses. This support must be coupled with an immediate “buy Canadian” campaign to prevent farmers from further scaling back production due to loss of the food services industry, by highlighting the wealth and diversity of Canadian food products available through retail channels. Such a campaign would not only help respond to the loss of vital food service markets for many farmers and food businesses, but would play a vital role in educating Canadians about how food gets to their plates at a time when Canadians are already paying more attention to their food supply. This would also provide an important platform to support the promotion of greater food literacy at a time when Canadians are cooking more at home and the affordability of food is a growing concern.

We believe these measures, and those in our forthcoming brief, work hand in hand to help maintain capacity and ensure Canada's agri-food sector is doing everything it can to put food on the plates of Canadians and consumers around the world during these difficult times.

Canadian farmers take pride in the fact that every day we feed Canadians. Like most sectors of the Canadian economy, farmers have felt the tremendous pain brought about by the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. We will always work as partners with government to make nutritious and affordable food for all Canadians.

I thank you for your time.

• (1520)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Robinson.

We go now to the Canning Sauce Company.

Ms. Hatcher, please go ahead for 10 minutes.

Ms. Kim Hatcher (Farmer, Canning Sauce Company): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon. As the least-pedigreed witness on this panel, I thank you for the opportunity to address the committee.

My name is Kim Hatcher, and I live in Canning, Nova Scotia, which is located in the Annapolis Valley, the main agricultural sector of our province.

My husband Steve and I own Canning Sauce Company, which produces hot sauces, barbecue sauces and pasta sauces. We grow the majority of the ingredients that we use, and those that we don't are sourced from other local farms as the sauces that we make use 100% local Nova Scotia-grown products.

We also have recently expanded and have obtained registered farm status, operating as Coywolf Farms, from which we grow and sell primarily greens and also a few select heirloom vegetables. Our farm expansion plans were already under way shortly before COVID-19 hit, and with a few alterations and a shuffling of priorities, we've been fortunate enough to be able to follow through with our desire to grow local food to provide to our surrounding communities.

How the virus will affect our ability to secure funding assistance to install greenhouses for year-round greens production still remains to be seen.

Overall, the impact that COVID-19 has had on our business and new farm has mostly been neutral or positive. Our sales have remained decent, with a few pantry items seeing a massive increase in popularity. We've also benefited greatly from the forethought of our local Wolfville Farmers' Market that's managed by Kelly Redcliffe, as this market has had online sales available since 2017. The online platform, WFM2Go, has a separate manager in Lindsay Clowes, and she reports that these sales have gone from 50 to 60 regular customers to well over 500 weekly orders since our pre-COVID days. This increase has required the addition of a second weekly delivery date, and those sales show no signs of slowing down.

People want to buy fresh local food. We, as a country, just need to stop making it so cheap and easy to choose not to.

While I feel like Nova Scotia, in general, has always put a fairly high value on local food and food products, the pandemic, I believe, has highlighted the problems in our food system throughout Canada. It's forced people to really consider where their food comes from, how it's grown and how it physically makes its way to them. Small and medium farms, regardless of the commodity produced, have largely struggled. This is, in part, from our products' being undervalued or prices' being undercut by megascale products that are cheaper but unsustainable in practice, quality and the stewardship of our agricultural lands.

I believe that this pandemic is providing us with a very unique opportunity to fix our broken food system and to capitalize on the momentum surrounding small and medium-sized locally based food producers. We have a chance to strengthen local food producers, which in turn strengthens the communities they're based in. It's a health and economic win-win scenario for communities all over Canada.

Creating programs that reward buying locally—like the ingredients found in the cafeteria of your local hospital, or locally sourced offerings from a school lunch program—will be instrumental. Jenny Osburn, locally, and a team of dedicated people have started such a lunch program. Pre-COVID, there were four Annapolis Valley schools on board, as well as one on the south shore. With a government subsidy to make school lunches affordable, and even with only 80% participation of the roughly 123,000 kids in the province at a buck a day, that's \$100,000 worth of local food purchased per day.

While I feel that more funding is necessary for small-scale and market-sized businesses, more importantly, I see this as a massive opportunity to re-evaluate the importance that farms, particularly those using sustainable farming practices, have in our society, and to create programs that will give real life incentives to farmers, enabling them to provide their products in a long-term and sustainable way.

Six minutes from my home is TapRoot Farms. It's a family-run, medium-sized, certified organic farm that has been running a CSA, community supported agriculture, program for more than a decade. Since March, it has seen a 30% increase in membership and online sales. Again, I believe that Canadians want to buy local food, particularly when we make it the better option and support its growth rather than the cheap and easy imported option that does nothing to serve our Canadian farming communities or our Canadian consumers. Unfortunately, TapRoot Farms, like many other farms in our area, is struggling. While we are grateful for the increase in sales and awareness, the loss of such a large portion of our province's foreign workforce makes it an uncertainty as to whether this COVID-inspired increase in demand can even be met.

The Canada emergency relief benefit that I was eligible for once recipients could still be earning some small portion of their previous income will, of course, end. My husband, besides working our farm, also works full time at another local farm, and it's one of the many that are sorely understaffed due to the cut in foreign workers. Based on our expansion plans, he will need to stop that outside work once we are in full greens production.

• (1525)

I have thus far been unable to find a current program to assist us in bridging the gap created by fewer of our expected venues selling our products, as we are too small, or too new, or are voluntarily leaving a position in order to allow us the labour time needed to grow and sell local food in a volume that's financially sustainable for us. This is a terrifying position to be in, but one that is necessary. I'm hopeful that more funding for market-size businesses will become available. While there may be very few positives that come out of a global pandemic, I hope that support for a local and sustainable food system will be one of them.

In closing, I'd like to state that given the enormity of the pandemic and the speed at which these programs and funding opportunities need to be released, I'm very pleased with our government's response. I also greatly appreciate the daily briefings that have been clear, calm and concise, relayed to the general public without unnecessary sensationalism or dramatics.

With that in mind, I would also like to note something that may become a missed opportunity but is a much-needed confirmation of our current political landscape. My local MP is Kody Blois, Kings—Hants, and he is part of the Liberal Party of Canada. I happen to be a supporter of that party. Therefore, I am in the very fortunate position of feeling like I have a voice in Parliament and my concerns are being appropriately represented. Many Canadians have an MP who does not belong to their party of choice, and therefore, do not feel like they have a voice in Parliament. Since April I haven't stopped imagining a PSA of all the political leaders, with Zoom clips of leaders talking to each other individually in a candid

and casual fashion, not pandering but complimentary: "I saw that tweet yesterday; that's great" or "I can't agree with that initiative as it is," with the response being, "Okay, let's work on it."

The political climate south of the border is divisive to the point of being malicious. That fear and uncertainty are making their way here. I think we would be missing an opportunity to show our country that we are a unified force against a global threat and to show the world that we are an example of how this can be done.

Thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hatcher.

We'll start our questioning now. We will do two rounds.

Dr. Kitchen, please go ahead. You have six minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, everybody, for being here. I'm sure you would all agree that once a farmer and/or rancher, always a farmer and/or rancher. It's part of your system. It's part of your life. We need more and more Canadians to take up that aspect of things.

I'm in Saskatchewan. Obviously, I have a lot of the agriculture aspect in my area. To help farmers deal with the effects of COVID-19, the industry requested that the Minister of Agriculture waive the carbon tax fee with respect to grain drying costs after what was dubbed the "harvest from hell" due to the poor weather and excess moisture out here. We learned last week that the minister will not allow any exemption. She also stated that, at most, farmers were paying \$819 per farm to dry their grain, even though APAS provided data that showed otherwise.

I personally know this to be untrue, as many of my constituents have come to me or written to me and shown me the exorbitant drying costs that some have been paying, some over \$10,000, just to have their produce ready for sale.

Ms. Robinson, have you or your organization heard from farmers regarding these types of costs, compounding the issues they're already facing with COVID-19?

• (1530)

Ms. Mary Robinson: We have certainly heard it. At CFA we support an exemption for agriculture. For some of these activities that are being subject to the carbon tax, the timing is quite unfortunate for sure, but even above and beyond that, these are not non-essential activities. Drying grain after harvest is just a necessary activity in order to make sure that the good of that grain gets to market.

Yes, we are aware of this and it is a concern.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Would you agree that a maximum expense of roughly \$820 per farm is realistic for our producers in Canada?

Ms. Mary Robinson: Personally, I can't speak to that. I have seen some of the information that APAS has done. They've done an evaluation of the producers in Saskatchewan. I think those numbers have been published. Generally, I think, the numbers are different from what the minister has suggested.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

Mr. Murphy, you talked a little about CFIA. A federal organization such as the CFIA relies on information provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada to make its decisions with respect to COVID-19 measures. We've heard from many witnesses at this committee that there are huge gaps and contradictions in the data obtained from the Public Health Agency. One example is that the chief public health officer, Dr. Tam, initially said that the wearing of masks would do nothing to stop the spread of COVID, yet she is now encouraging all Canadians to wear masks when out in public.

I'm wondering if you know of any producers, other than the ones you mentioned, who have experienced difficulty or confusion in determining what measures they need to take with their operations. You could also expand on the ones you talked about, such as Cargill, etc.

Mr. Fabian Murphy: Thank you.

Through you, Mr. Chair, to answer the question, I'm sure that the producers found this extremely frustrating and extremely confusing, as we did. As the union representing the food inspectors, we're extremely frustrated with this process.

I sit as co-chair of what's called the service-wide health and safety committee. That's a health and safety committee for all of government. I spoke there, and I also sat at the National Joint Council. The Public Health Agency presented to that council, and I asked questions on these measures with regard to the non-medical masks and why in the beginning the medical masks weren't available and weren't being recommended. Even after they were, it was clear that those medical masks were not considered personal protective equipment.

To answer your question, yes, I think there was a lot of confusion out there. Our main concern—from the beginning of this—is that the Public Health Agency is providing guidance for public health, not for an industrialized environment or a workplace where you have a hazard such as COVID-19, which is newly introduced. It's the employer's responsibility to conduct a hazard assessment based on the workplace and to implement measures that are going to protect the workers, as they cannot defer to an agency such as the Public Health Agency. I think this is where the government as a whole failed, and many departments failed to do that.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

I heard a couple of you talk about the lack of workers. The government has promised to create 700 agriculture jobs for students through YESP, through that program, but it appears that funding was not approved as part of the estimates released this month. Have you heard from any farmers as to whether or not they have been able to hire students through this program? Have they have been able to?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: I can't speak on behalf of the farmers, but I know that CFIA did hire some students. That would be under a different program, I think, the federal student workers program.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: That was more from the summer student program. Is that correct?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: Yes. That's correct.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Ms. Robinson, I'm really looking more just at the YESP.

• (1535)

Ms. Mary Robinson: I can't speak specifically to the YESP. I know that here in my province we have a great program that's been offered by our provincial government, which I think has been well accessed by primary producers.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Kitchen.

We go now to Mr. Blois.

Mr. Blois, please go ahead. You have six minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for their testimony. It was great to be able to have three different dimensions in terms of the inspection side generally, the farm advocacy group through Ms. Robinson and, of course, a local farmer.

The majority of my questions are going to be for Ms. Hatcher, who is from the Annapolis Valley.

Ms. Hatcher—Kim—you mentioned the fact that there's been a huge uptake in local food and that the farmers market in Wolfville is simply doing very well because there seem to be more people buying local. How important is it for the online component, in terms of being able to have consumers use the CSA and be able to go on...? Has that created efficiencies for you as a business as well?

Ms. Kim Hatcher: Thank you.

The online portion is critical at this juncture because, of course, for the physical markets thus far, with the exception of a few markets that are doing pickup with pre-ordering and drop-off only, the online avenue is the only way to go at this point. For vendors like me, for us to be able to do that individually, there is no other option to bring our products to the consumers in any sort of efficient or financially viable way.

The fact that we've had online sales since 2017 with the Wolfville Farmers' Market meant that we were already ahead of the game, in that the platform was already figured out. It was already running, and it has since exploded.

Mr. Kody Blois: Obviously, there's been a deindustrialization in the valley of some of the processing capability that we have locally. You talked passionately about the ability to try to bring back more local capacity, if I could use that word. I had this conversation with Earl Kidston today in Centreville.

How important would it be for government to work around greenhouse production, whether it's with smaller producers like you, up to larger producers, particularly in Nova Scotia, to try to extend our growing season even further and perhaps into the winter months?

Ms. Kim Hatcher: Yes, that's on our current farm plan as it is, with our farm expansion. It's a plan to have greenhouses in place to do greens production through the winter. Right now, our province is—

The Chair: Ms. Hatcher, could you hold the mike, please?

Ms. Kim Hatcher: Sorry.

Basically, our province currently has the option of the root vegetable selection all winter or imported goods that are out of season for us. I believe that our province wants to eat within season, but I really believe that, with greenhouse production, we could change what “in season” means to us and bring a substantially more varied and definitely healthful diet to the majority of our province.

Mr. Kody Blois: Our government introduced the first food policy in this country's history. This last week, Minister Bibeau announced the local food infrastructure fund. You mentioned Jenny Osburn in our community, who's been a passionate advocate. What does it mean to be able to have access through the federal government to support local food infrastructure, to support maybe some of the work that Jenny and others are doing to drive that local demand?

Ms. Kim Hatcher: I think, particularly when we're looking at what would be considered a massive customer base, i.e. the Nova Scotia school districts, those dollars would literally fund farms throughout their farming journey, whether they need to shut down over the winter or not. Having funding to support those programs, and those programs therefore being able to access locally grown products, would be instrumental in allowing our farming communities to stay vibrant, stay healthy and be able to bring our products to market in a long-term sustainable way.

Mr. Kody Blois: We have the Kentville research centre in Kentville in the Annapolis Valley. It has a long history of serving producers both small and large. Can you speak to how important regional research is going to be in the days ahead after COVID?

Ms. Kim Hatcher: I think it's going to be pretty fundamental. I access several of the services at the Kentville research centre for our farm, including water testing. Because this is new for all of us, I think research is going to play a huge part in how we deal with this, what our future plans are and how our province is going to continue to deal with the after-effects and how to move forward during and after this pandemic.

• (1540)

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you very much.

Ms. Kim Hatcher: Thank you.

Mr. Kody Blois: I'll turn a few questions to Ms. Robinson.

Obviously, you mentioned business risk management, and that's something we've heard loud and clear on the agriculture committee from a variety of different commodity groups. You mentioned that, had there been a more robust package, which I assume is the 85% reference margin, which industry has been calling for, that essen-

tially 75% of that \$2.6 billion that CFA has referenced would be covered.

With the existing program with the 70% reference margin, do you have a certain percentage of what would be covered? I understand you mentioned we put in \$252 million in addition to the \$200 million for the Canadian Dairy Commission, but how much would be covered under BRM, what percentage? Do you have that number?

Ms. Mary Robinson: I do not have that number, but I will get it for you, Mr. Blois.

Mr. Kody Blois: As I understand it, maybe it would be 50% , 40% or 30% of that \$2.6 billion that would be covered. That's my understanding in terms of the numbers.

Ms. Mary Robinson: I don't know.

Mr. Kody Blois: Okay.

Ms. Mary Robinson: To speak to the larger issue of BRM, because it is broken in the view of most Canadian producers, the participation levels have certainly dropped off to a staggering level. Many people just don't have confidence that the program is going to fulfill their needs, so they just simply don't subscribe.

Mr. Kody Blois: We've heard that. I want to get to that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blois.

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you.

The Chair: I would also advise the witnesses that, if they have any additional information, such as Mr. Blois asked for or that you offered to Mr. Blois, send it to the committee through the clerk, and it will be translated and distributed in both official languages.

We go now to Mr. Thériault.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thériault, you may go ahead. You have six minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Chair, we came to an agreement with the clerk about my taking the first six minutes, if that's all right with you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members, good afternoon. I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here. It's always nice to hear from people with your expertise.

My first question is for Ms. Robinson.

Ms. Robinson, when you appeared before the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food on May 8, you said that many farm businesses were not eligible for financial assistance under the various programs in response to COVID-19.

What is your take on the situation today, five weeks later? Is the government doing a better job of meeting farmers' needs? Are the programs appropriate?

[English]

Ms. Mary Robinson: I don't believe there have been any changes to BRM in regard to the commodities that do not qualify for business risk management. Does that answer your question?

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I gather, then, that, over the past five weeks, neither the Canada emergency response benefit nor the other programs have been improved in a way that would help farmers.

[English]

Ms. Mary Robinson: Oh, the CERB, okay. I thought you were asking specifically about the business risk management programs.

We have seen allowances for the CEBA, the emergency business account, which means that several producers who did not qualify before now do qualify.

In regard to the wage subsidy—the \$2,000—we continue to run into that as competition as we try to convince people to work on farm. It seems that we can't entice them. Generally, it's a competition, and convincing people to come to work can be challenging.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

Ms. Robinson, you asked for \$2.6 billion in funding to help farmers. The federal government responded with approximately \$250 million and may have doled out a few morsels afterwards.

What exactly do you need? Do you still need to make up the difference between the \$2.6 billion and the \$500 million? Can you give us an estimate of what your financial needs are?

• (1545)

[English]

Ms. Mary Robinson: Exact financial figures will be difficult. The \$2.6 billion came to us by doing a cross-commodity scope. We surveyed all of our members, all commodities across the country, and two months ago the estimate of losses was \$2.6 billion.

In regard to the \$252 million and what's not covered between that and the \$2.6 billion, we know that we have escalating COVID-related costs, such as for PPE and modifications to make workplaces safe. We know that we have lost markets. We know that we've had food waste because we're trying to shift how food goes to market. Instead of its going to a food service customer, now it's going to a lot of retail customers, and that's been a difficult and costly shift to make.

Moving forward, our uncertain access to labour is one of the biggest concerns we have. COVID certainly highlights the importance of coming up with a labour strategy. We know that the work the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council has done has

highlighted that growing gap. We have so many unfilled jobs in agriculture, and what that costs not only farmers but the Canadian economy is extraordinary.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: From your answer, I gather that you're still waiting for the government to respond with substantial funding. We are talking about billions of dollars in financial support, after all.

Ms. Robinson, what food supply problems should we expect come the fall?

[English]

Ms. Mary Robinson: I'm sorry, the interpreter changed. I missed the question.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, did you stop the clock?

[English]

The Chair: Yes. Please go ahead. I'll make an allowance for the time.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: What should we expect in the fall as far as the food supply goes?

[English]

Ms. Mary Robinson: The fall is certainly a great unknown. The uncertainty of what's going to happen if we....

I'm hearing French.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, there's no French interpretation.

[English]

Mrs. Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale—Langley City, CPC): I'm also hearing French. I'm on the English channel and I'm hearing French.

The Chair: Ms. Robinson, are you on the English channel at the bottom of the screen?

Ms. Mary Robinson: Yes. I think Ms. Jansen is having the same experience as me. Every time I speak, I hear French.

The Chair: Okay.

Monsieur Desilets, are you on the French channel?

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, I'm on the French channel.

Would you like me to repeat the question? I'm not sure whether you heard it.

[English]

The Chair: Maybe I'll ask Madam Clerk to verify that interpretation is working correctly.

Ms. Mary Robinson: I have heard the question.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Mr. Chair, we should be—

The Chair: Madam Clerk, I think your bandwidth has kind of gone. I can't hear what you're saying.

Ms. Mary Robinson: The kids are playing the games.

The Clerk: We should be good to go, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Desilets, please go ahead with your question. We'll give it one more try.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Very well.

My question is for Ms. Robinson.

What should we expect this summer as far as the food supply is concerned?

• (1550)

[English]

Ms. Mary Robinson: I believe the channels are switched because I'm hearing only the French.

The Chair: I heard the French as well. It was a very good question, though.

Ms. Mary Robinson: Okay, the question is the same as it's been.

It's difficult to forecast what the food supply is going to look like in the summer and in the fall. A great deal of the uncertainty has to do with access to labour. There's also great uncertainty with regard to how COVID is going to impact food supply chains. If we see an interruption in processing, that will cause issues. Generally, we hope for the best and plan for the worst.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

We now move on to Mr. Davies.

Mr. Davies, you may go ahead. You have six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being with us.

Mr. Murphy, this is from a news release issued by the Agriculture Union, on May 11:

Under threat of discipline, CFIA instructed some of its non-meat inspection staff to train up as “instant” meat inspectors to be deployed to potentially COVID-19 infected meat slaughter plants, whether they want to work there or not.

Could you inform this committee how many non-meat inspection staff have been redeployed as “instant” meat inspectors?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: Through you, Mr. Chair, to date I'm not aware of any non-meat inspectors who have been deployed, but I know some have received training. In case there's a shortage of the current meat inspectors, they would have to rely on these non-meat inspectors who have been retrained.

Mr. Don Davies: Can you inform the committee of how many CFIA inspectors have tested positive for COVID-19 to date?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: To date, the number we have received is 40. That's a running total from the time this started.

Mr. Don Davies: Now, according to that same news release, “outreach to senior [federal] Ministers by the Agriculture Union has been all but ignored” to date. Has the federal government become any more responsive since that release was issued?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: After the release, I was contacted by somebody from the office of the Minister of Labour. We had a discussion, and I expressed my concerns with regard to what was happening and transpiring in those plants. After that I did actually get a phone call from the Minister of Health and had a discussion with the Minister of Health as well.

Mr. Don Davies: That's good to hear.

You described, in my view, a very disturbing state of affairs with the lateness and lack of a satisfactory response with regard to protecting the health inspectors. I'd like to get a current snapshot if I could. Is CFIA currently assigning inspectors to more than one facility?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: Yes. As of today, I checked. That's still happening. Some inspectors do what's called daily presence. They don't work for 8 or 10 hours in the plant. They go to various plants to check on a daily presence. They actually do go to different plants. They're continuing that practice.

Mr. Don Davies: Is CFIA currently ordering inspectors to work in unsafe facilities without the proper personal protective equipment?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: In my opinion, yes, because I don't think they have done a proper hazard assessment and determined what is the proper personal protective equipment to protect somebody from this biological hazard. Even the Public Health Agency and the provincial health agencies will agree that cloth face masks and non-surgical face masks do not protect the wearer from a biological hazard such as COVID-19.

They help reduce the spread, because the persons who are wearing them are less likely to spread the virus if they are carriers. When we're talking personal protective equipment, it's designed to protect you against the hazard. Anything but an N95 mask or greater will not protect you against a biological hazard such as COVID-19.

Mr. Don Davies: You outlined a plan that you think is necessary for us to put in place. I think there is a consensus that we will certainly be facing a second wave or outbreak. It strikes me that we should be creating a plan. Have you had any response from the federal government about your plan and the details you outlined that should be part of it?

• (1555)

Mr. Fabian Murphy: We haven't had a response on our plan, on our requests, and our suggestions. I know that the government and the agency are working very hard to procure more personal protective equipment—surgical face masks, N95s—and to put measures in place, but we haven't had a discussion with regard to implementing a solid plan in case we get the second wave.

Mr. Don Davies: You've indicated that you would like to see routine testing as part of that plan. Tell us about the state of testing of CFIA staff.

Mr. Fabian Murphy: That's up to the individual provincial public health authorities. They determine when testing is done. Different provinces deal with that in different ways. That is one of the asks from us, that there be a consistent national approach in dealing with COVID-19.

If somebody is actually symptomatic, then the provincial health authority, once it is made aware of that, will make the determination if the person must get tested and self-isolate. The agency is deferring to the provincial health authority for that reason.

Mr. Don Davies: Have you had any response to your request that line speeds be slowed down, so that we could have greater physical distancing?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: When the plants had the outbreak, and they were trying to get things under control, many plants did slow down their line speeds. Since then, line speeds in many plants are back to normal.

Mr. Don Davies: You've also indicated publicly that you would like the federal government to get off the sidelines in your view, and exercise its responsibility and authority over federally regulated food processors instead of deferring to the provinces. Is the federal government exercising its full authority over federally regulated food processors in a satisfactory manner?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: This, of course, is my opinion, but I don't think it is. It defers to the provincial health authorities to make a determination if these facilities are able to operate or not. However, CFIA is a federal agency and our members come under the Canada Labour Code, which is a federal law and federal regulation. It's the employer's responsibility, CFIA, to conduct its own hazard assessment and to make the determination of what is required to protect these food inspectors in these plants.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

We will now go to round two with Mr. Jeneroux, for five minutes.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux (Edmonton Riverbend, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

My first question goes to Ms. Robinson.

This week applications were made available for the government surplus food purchase program, but only a small amount of funding has been provided. We know that the amount of surplus food is much greater than its value.

How much funding would need to be allotted to purchase most of the surplus food supplies?

Ms. Mary Robinson: That's a great question. I don't know the total amount because we continue to see market volatility. As producers we're uncertain where we're going to be able to sell and where we're not.

Overall, we continue to put crops in the ground, raise animals, and hope we're going to be able to sell them. Until the animal or the produce goes to market and we get paid for it, we won't know the answer to that question, but it is certainly more than \$50 million.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: How many pounds of food do you anticipate will be wasted because of this? Do you have an estimate? Have there been any projections?

Ms. Mary Robinson: Again, there's a great deal of uncertainty as to what will make it to market. The surplus food purchase program is meant to divert a bunch of food from going to waste. We've seen several different components of the food supply chain trying to donate that food to make sure that it gets consumed and that we avoid waste, but the only way to answer your question will be with hindsight.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Right. Hopefully, it will not be a lot.

The government has promised to create 700 agricultural jobs for students through the YESS program, but it appears that funding was not approved as part of the estimates released this month. Have you heard from any farmers as to whether they've been able to hire students yet through this program?

• (1600)

Ms. Mary Robinson: I have not specifically heard of people hiring through this program. I have heard frustration and concern, in particular from smaller producers or newer entrants after announcements were made that they would be able to access the CEBA, and then there was quite a time lag between that and when the funds became available to apply for. There does seem to be a time lag. The announcements are made, and it's wonderful; the money becomes available, but it would be even more wonderful if those things happened in sync.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Yes, I certainly agree with you. I've heard that testimony over and over again. A lot of announcements are being made, yet the action hasn't necessarily taken place. I hear similar comments from farmers here in Alberta to what you've indicated throughout your presentation. I appreciate your coming to the health committee and doing that.

Mr. Murphy, you mentioned to my colleague Mr. Davies that 42 inspectors tested positive. Do you have their locations? Were they specific to one facility?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: They were not specific to one facility. There were positive tests in Quebec, Alberta and Ontario, but the majority of them were in Alberta: 18 inspectors in the Cargill plant tested positive.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Of the 40, 18 of those were from the Alberta Cargill plant?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: Yes.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: You also mentioned that CFIA was late to protect inspectors. Approximately, what were some of the dates associated with that? We had our first case of COVID-19 in Canada in January. When did we start hearing from CFIA of some of the protections being offered?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: To nail down a date would be difficult.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Approximately.

Mr. Fabian Murphy: It was over a month, a month and a half even, before the protections were put in place. I attribute some of that to confusion in the Public Health Agency, because at the beginning, our members were told they should not and could not wear face coverings, even though some of those inspectors wanted to supply their own.

Then later on it was decided that face coverings would be helpful if everyone wore them. That was confusing. The face coverings and face shields were not available. Some plants did manage to acquire both face coverings and face shields. In those cases, the CFIA told the plant that if they were going to provide their employees with protection, they had to provide CFIA inspectors with that protection.

However, in the plants that didn't provide those protections, the inspectors in those plants didn't get the protections. In my opinion, the pause button should have been pushed. An assessment should have been done and a determination made at that point of how they were going to protect everyone in those plants. Once that determination is made, then you move forward with your protections in place. It was piecemeal, by all interpretations, in my opinion.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Thank you, Mr. Murphy.

If you're able to provide us with any of those dates, it would certainly be appreciated going forward.

Mr. Fabian Murphy: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jeneroux.

We go now to Mr. Kelloway for five minutes.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and hello to my colleagues again.

I'd really like to thank the witnesses for their presentations today.

My questions are going to be directed to Ms. Hatcher. Before I get into my questions, Ms. Hatcher, you mentioned your pedigree. I think your pedigree is just fine. Thank you very much. We're glad to have you here.

I want to follow a similar line of questions to my colleague MP Blois. Here in Cape Breton, we have a local organization called the Pan Cape Breton Food Hub. The food hub supports local food producers and works to help families across the island ensure that they have food security through these extremely challenging times. They source their food entirely from local farmers and have garnered a lot of support from community members.

As challenging as the pandemic has been, do you think we'll start to see more support for local farmers and leadership from groups

like the Pan Cape Breton Food Hub to fight food insecurity across this country?

• (1605)

Ms. Kim Hatcher: Yes, definitely. I think that as we live through the results of this pandemic we're realizing how long our food chain is, and I think we're taking some really active steps to shorten it. I believe that support locally, whatever local means to you anywhere in Canada, will definitely increase with how we've seen how long our food chain actually is. I think the support is going to be overwhelming.

I don't know that it's going to.... If we can't get the food out of the fields or if we can't have an avenue to sell the food, some of the support, as wonderful as it is, is not necessarily going to be as beneficial as it could be.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: You talk about steps. I'm thinking, Ms. Hatcher, that if you had not the magic pen but the steps to put in place, where would you start?

Ms. Kim Hatcher: To put in place? Do you mean to bring our products to market?

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Yes. It's that, and I think also the bigger picture in terms of food security, but let's start there.

Ms. Kim Hatcher: Okay. To bring our products to market—I can only speak for my province of Nova Scotia—I think we're doing a good job. For the farmers markets in general, those that didn't already have an online platform set up switched to it very quickly, which was incredibly helpful for both the consumer and the producer.

As an overall picture of food security and the health of our citizens from a food perspective, the things that I would put in place would definitely be those I alluded to, like incentives for farmers. Incentives for corporations that choose to purchase locally would be a massive one. If our hospital systems were purchasing their food locally, that would be incredible revenue for whatever community they're based in.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Yes. Hospitals, restaurants and even universities that have—

Ms. Kim Hatcher: Absolutely.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: —a large contingent of students throughout the country and throughout the world.... I really appreciate that.

I want to stay with you. We know that there's a potential second wave in early September or at some time in the fall. I'm wondering if over the past few months you have adopted any new practices that will support your organization should we have a second wave. I think you alluded to some of this in your opening statement. You have a great platform. What advice would you give to other food-producing groups moving forward?

Ms. Kim Hatcher: I think a second wave is inevitable. That's a personal opinion. I think that bolstering the food producers within your community and ensuring that you're supporting them is really the only way that we can strengthen our food system, community by community. It doesn't necessarily start with the big boys or the medium farms or the large farms.

That's not to say that there is not an incredibly important place for them, but without our small producers and without community support for them, without municipal governments, provincial governments and federal governments, without those people standing behind them and supporting that movement and saying, yes, this is the preferred option, this is where you should be going, I don't think we really stand a chance. People are getting frightened and in many instances, when there are fear-based decisions, you're often going to go with the cheapest decision.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: I particularly liked your opening statement when you talked about this being an opportunity to reform, not just reform but to reframe, thinking and doing in the industry when it comes to local food security. You're absolutely right. I think that is one of the first places to go, the small farmers, but also connected to other industry partners and all levels of government, so I thank you for that.

The Chair: Mrs. Jansen, for five minutes.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I want to direct my questions to Mary Robinson. I am a retired farmer. I used to produce out of 28 greenhouse acres, both floral and vegetable. For many years, I was very concerned that all levels of government were basically attacking the farming sector, making it almost impossible for us to do our work. I kept saying that they've been coming after the resource sector and that we're next.

When I look at the way Minister Bibeau has been responding to the needs of farmers right now, the government is basically expecting to create food security on the backs of farmers. What are you thinking? Do you feel we have had a reasonable response to the needs that farmers are facing?

• (1610)

Ms. Mary Robinson: Mrs. Jansen, it's nice to know that you're a former farmer.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I'm also a Conservative, so I've been fighting for farmers.

Ms. Mary Robinson: No one in agriculture wants to appear ungrateful for the help that has been offered to agriculture to date. Help is help, and we will take what we can get, but we certainly would appreciate more.

With regard to how we feel, well, I guess it was a Conservative government that changed the BRM suite of programs, so I probably need to say that out loud, too.

In general, as I look at the people on my screen, I implore them to take into consideration the fact that the future of our country depends on the future of our family farms. Every member of Parliament needs to really understand that. They need to understand that primary producers are price-takers. They have no opportunity to pass on things like the carbon tax or additional costs from having to protect everyone from COVID on their farms, or the loss of mar-

kets. All of these costs that farmers bear just erode a very thin bottom line.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Absolutely. They have absolutely been pounding farmers with new regulations and taxes. I honestly feel terrible. My son took over the farm, and I sometimes think, wow, what did I put the poor guy into?

You know, the BRMs for instance, it's like they pat you on the head and say, "You know, there's money in the BRMs". Well, they're not working. They know they're not working, and then they tell us that's where the solution is.

I was talking to a friend who's in the chicken processing industry, and he was saying that their industry is down 7.5% across the country in what it is processing. The government is asking us to ensure that there's food security, but we're the ones who are taking on all the risks, all the costs.

How do you think we're going to encourage farmers to invest in their farms when we don't have any clarity from government where we're going. How can farmers be expected to ensure there's food when we don't have the right kind of support?

Ms. Mary Robinson: There's a wonderful opportunity right now for a very clear message from government to our spectacular agriculture sector. We're the envy of most of the world in regard to our natural resources, as well as our farming acumen. Now is an opportunity for government to send a message to the entire Canadian food chain that investing in Canadian food production and the food value chain is a wonderful place to invest.

We see businesses moving south of the border. They say it's too difficult to operate within Canada, so generally we need to address that side of things. We also need to have a very big look at our labour strategy. We need to get our labour issues sorted out.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I know you were mentioning the CERB and that it's a bit of a competition. Talking to another farmer friend, I was told that people can make more money staying at home than working. Conservatives have been asking, could we not find a better way to implement this so that we don't disincentivize people from coming back to the farm? Without people working on a farm, we can't produce food. Could you speak to that a little bit more as well?

Ms. Mary Robinson: Government is in the job of fixing these problems, not the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. I would instead defer to your expertise on that.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Thank you.

I think one thing that has really concerned me as well is the mental health of farmers. We have been waiting and waiting and told over and over again to go for the BRMs, that they are going to be our solution, when we all know they are not. You're told to keep on paying your carbon tax and that it's not that big of a deal. Farmers come to the end of their rope.

Are you hearing more about the challenges that farmers are facing in regard to mental health issues?

Ms. Mary Robinson: Absolutely. We see so much stress placed on farmers because, as you would understand, it's very complex. It's a highly emotional business to be in. I'm sixth generation, and my family's been here for two hundred years, so the generation that loses it is the one that really loses it. I think the stresses within agriculture right now are at an all time high, and it is devastating to see how that impacts so many families.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jansen.

We go now to Dr. Powlowski.

Go ahead; you have five minutes.

• (1615)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Well, Ms. Hatcher, I'm very happy to hear about your hot sauce.

I would point out, Mr. Fisher, Mr. Kelloway and Mr. Blois, that I see no excuse why you guys shouldn't be bringing some of us that hot sauce to Ottawa. I'm expecting it now.

I want to ask my first questions of Mr. Murphy. I assume that you're asking for the N95 masks because you feel that the meat packing plants are a high enough risk that you want to have the maximum protection. Am I right in that?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: Yes. In my opinion, when you do a hazard assessment, you determine how you're going to protect somebody from a hazard. If you can't eliminate the hazard or reduce it to the lowest possible level, you put in measures such as social distancing. When they don't work, you then have to implement personal protective equipment. The personal protective equipment has to address the hazard. Wearing a cloth mask to protect you against biological hazards such as COVID-19 just doesn't work, I'm sorry.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: You want the N95 masks and, as of yet, you don't have them. Am I right about that?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: Yes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: My next question is probably asking you a question with a different hat on, because I assume you're an inspector with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Something that's kind of occurred to me, and I haven't heard a response and maybe I just haven't Googled the question, is that when you have places like Cargill, where 50% of the workers get COVID-19, and then you also have temporary foreign workers working in farms where there are outbreaks of COVID-19, you deal with food-related health risks. That's your job.

What is the risk to the public when you have people on the assembly line with COVID-19? I know the virus can live a fairly lengthy period of time on other surfaces, so what, if any, do you think the risk is? I'm sure there's probably some risk, but is there a substantial risk to the public when you have people working on the lines who have infections when this food's coming out to us and we're buying it in the supermarket?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: I just want to qualify that I'm not an inspector. I came from the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, where I was a health and safety adviser. Many of my members of the Agriculture Union are inspectors. I talk to them every day and I visited these plants myself.

What we've been told by the Public Health Agency is that there is no hazard to the public when it comes to the food that's being produced in there. I think that's why we haven't seen outbreaks in the community from a food-borne illness. If it were listeria or E. coli, then, yes, absolutely, that would survive on the food and could be transmitted to the public. In the case of COVID-19, there's no evidence, to my knowledge, that it can be transmitted through the food chain.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: My next question is about local foods. I certainly love my local market. I'm waiting to get a shipment of meat from a local rancher, grass-fed beef. I think a lot of people prefer the quality of food when it's grown locally. Ms. Hatcher talked about heirloom vegetables. I think they taste better.

However, places like Walmart can sell food a lot more cheaply, and for a lot of people on limited incomes, that saving is really fundamental. What can agricultural producers do to make their food more affordable to people with limited income, not just people like me who have a better income?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: That's a very good question, and obviously when you mass-produce anything, the producers can usually lower their costs.

I agree with you 100% that sometimes the quality from the smaller producers is better. I think buying locally is very important, especially after COVID-19.

How we tackle bringing those prices down, or keeping those prices down, is a very good question.

When you look at industrializing food production, like what we have done in the meat production facilities here, then you introduce the other risks that go along with that. These facilities will have up to a 1,000 people working in one plant on a shift, and if something goes wrong, such as a virus that affects people, then it's going to spread pretty rapidly.

That's going to have a negative impact on the food production in our country. We've had situations previously with the Excel beef plant, where they had a large E. coli outbreak, and that plant shut down for months. That plant was then bought by somebody else because of that.

You have to weigh the balance, I think, when it comes to producing food really cheaply and producing food that has that quality you refer to.

• (1620)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Good.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Powlowski.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mr. Thériault.

You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Two and a half minutes isn't a long time.

Ms. Robinson, I'd like to talk about seasonal foreign workers.

Many farmers in my riding view the government's handling of the program this year as a fiasco.

On one hand, the government announced, in mid-March, that foreign workers were allowed to come to Canada, but on the other hand, it put the responsibility for their quarantine on farmers.

The government gave them \$1,500, but it's not a lump sum payment. Farmers with small and medium-sized operations had to modify their facilities and fill in paperwork when they should have been out in the fields. They had to fill in paperwork justifying their costs simply to get the \$1,500.

Earlier, my fellow member asked about what we should expect in the fall. Most farmers have sown half their fields. By the end of May, only half of the foreign workers had arrived.

Don't you think that's a fiasco? What should the government have done differently to prevent that from happening?

[English]

Ms. Mary Robinson: As I said earlier, COVID has certainly highlighted for us the importance of the need for more strategic discussions on how we can address the shortages in agricultural labour.

With our temporary foreign worker access, international workers have certainly been coming into this country for over half a century. We have multiple generations of workers that are incredibly important and vital to so many operations in every province across the country.

I think the producers have been given \$1,500 to offset some of the costs of isolation. There have been frustrations with the isolation, with the delay in bringing people in and with the breakdown in communications. Unfortunately, I think a good deal of this is just the reality of COVID and how it's impacted every government in every country and every citizen of the world.

I think it's unfortunate that farmers have to bear the brunt of this. I fear, as Ms. Hatcher said, what the implications will be when we have our second wave as we go to harvest.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thériault.

[English]

We go now to Mr. Davies.

Mr. Davies, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

Mr. Murphy, a little over a month ago the Agriculture Union said that CFIA is ordering its staff to work in facilities that are obviously not safe and without the proper personal protective gear. The agency seems to be unaware of the assurances that Deputy Prime Minister Freeland gave to the House of Commons just a few days ago.

Have CFIA inspectors faced any disciplinary measures for refusing to work in facilities they believe are unsafe due to COVID-19?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: Right now, no, there have been no disciplinary measures. We've only had two official cases of what's called the right to refuse under the Canada Labour Code, because our members fall under federal jurisdictions. Those right to refuse cases were resolved at the local level, and the workers went back to work.

To answer your question, as of today, there has been no discipline.

Mr. Don Davies: That's good to hear.

You said in your testimony that someone stated there were no safety issues at Cargill. Who stated that?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: That statement came from a supervisor who said, not that there were no issues, but that the plant had put in a process in order to protect workers at the Cargill plant to mitigate the hazards. They were going to implement social distancing, they were putting plexiglass barriers between the workstations and they were issuing face shields.

The statement came from a supervisor in the Alberta region to try to reassure our inspectors that it was safe to go back in and go to work.

• (1625)

Mr. Don Davies: Was that before or after you said that half of 2,000 workers and half of the inspectors at that Cargill plant became infected?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: I believe it was before that.

Mr. Don Davies: What's the situation now at the Cargill plant?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: The situation now is that Cargill is back to production. I believe they're back to full line speeds again. They're monitoring things very closely and we're not hearing that there's another outbreak, or there aren't a lot of new positive cases of COVID-19. That could be for a number of reasons. We're not seeing it across the country, so perhaps it's because of the time of year and things are settling down.

Mr. Don Davies: I want to ask you quickly about virtual inspections. I understand there might be a move by CFIA to not have in-person inspection, but virtual inspection.

What's your view on that?

Mr. Fabian Murphy: I have heard that's something that CFIA is looking into. To be quite honest, I'm skeptical, because our inspectors actually can stop the line when the carcass is going by. If they see an anomaly, they can manipulate the carcass to look closely.

It's going to be interesting to see how that would happen, but as far as I'm concerned, if I'm doing an inspection on something, I want to be there in person.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

The Chair: That brings round two to a close.

To our panel, thank you for sharing your time with us, and all your expertise and all your great answers to our questions.

We will now suspend the meeting as we bring in our second panel.

• (1625) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1650)

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone. We are resuming meeting 28 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. We are operating pursuant to the order of reference of May 26, 2020. The committee is resuming its briefing on the Canadian response to the outbreak of the coronavirus.

To our witnesses, before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, except during questioning, when the questioner will indicate to whom the question is addressed. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. All comments should be addressed through the chair.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much the way it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. As you are speaking, if you plan on alternating from one language to the other, you will need also to switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking. You may want to allow for a very short pause when switching languages. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I would like to welcome our second panel of witnesses. From the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, we have Ms. Colleen Barnes, vice-president of policy and programs, and Ms. Theresa Iuliano, vice-president of operations.

For the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, please go ahead. You have 10 minutes for a statement.

Ms. Theresa Iuliano (Vice-President, Operations, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Good afternoon. I'd like to thank the committee for the opportunity to talk about this important issue. More specifically, I appreciate being able to provide details on how the CFIA supports the Canadian response.

As you all know, the COVID-19 pandemic is a human crisis that requires governments and industry to work together and to be agile, caring and smart. In April 2020 the Government of Canada committed \$20 million to the CFIA to support critical food inspections that help ensure that Canadians will have continued access to safe, high-quality food to feed their families.

The CFIA is a science-based regulatory agency. In the face of COVID-19, the CFIA took immediate and decisive action to protect the integrity of the Canadian food supply and to protect our employees.

• (1655)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Iuliano, the sound is way weak. Could you speak louder?

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: I'll turn it over to Colleen Barnes, my colleague. I believe she has better sound quality.

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

Theresa was at the point of saying that CFIA is a science-based regulatory agency and that in the face of COVID, the agency took immediate and decisive action to protect the integrity of Canada's food supply and to protect our employees. These are the areas that we would like to address today in our remarks.

To support a stable food supply and the work of thousands of food businesses, CFIA has taken steps to maintain vital inspection services. The agency has hired 144 new inspectors and 44 veterinarians as of June 11. We've welcomed back some who recently retired, reassigned staff to priority areas and funded more overtime. This is being done to maintain capacity, and these measures enable us to continue fulfilling our mission without placing undue burden on our employees.

CFIA is also working with some provincial counterparts to train and equip provincial inspectors to provide CFIA with inspection support on a temporary, as-needed basis.

Mr. Chair, you can see how an effective response requires a collaborative approach. CFIA is monitoring and responding to the pandemic by consulting regularly with employees, unions, provincial and territorial partners, international trading partners and industry.

Whether it is on the front lines or in remote work, safeguarding the wellness of CFIA employees is a top priority. When COVID-19 outbreaks occurred in meat slaughterhouses, CFIA told these businesses they needed to put a response plan in place and provide a safe workplace for inspectors. When outbreaks occurred, we worked with local and provincial public health authorities, labour ministries, occupational health and safety experts, unions and staff to ensure that appropriate measures were in place before we resumed the inspection service.

To further protect staff, CFIA created a health self-assessment tool for inspectors, expanded leave options, and reduced face-to-face interactions between field staff and industry.

For situations in which inspectors are not able to physically distance, the agency has procured masks, face shields and other protective equipment for critical service employees.

All of this, together with risk mitigation measures put in place by industry, is producing positive results, with no new COVID cases reported among CFIA employees since early May.

Now we want to talk a little bit about our work with industry.

To ease the burden on industry and support the food supply for Canadians, CFIA has introduced temporary compliance flexibilities. The changes include suspending some CFIA compliance activities for non-food safety labelling requirements and delaying compliance activities for parts of the Safe Food for Canadians Regulations that come into force in July of this year.

Working with the provinces, we have implemented a protocol that can be used in the case of meat shortages, which would allow provincially regulated meat to cross into other provinces.

In addition, given the impacts on stakeholders that we are seeing, CFIA has delayed the timelines for all regulatory initiatives in our forward regulatory plan.

Further, CFIA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have agreed to provide a six-month extension for approved facilities to continue to export certain animal products and pet foods from one country to the other. This extension will help to maintain bilateral trade during the pandemic.

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

For me, this evolving situation highlights the importance of continued collaboration and communication between CFIA, industry partners and stakeholders.

• (1700)

[*Translation*]

There is more work to come in order to stay ahead of the pandemic, to be sure. Every day, the CFIA, our partners and the industries we regulate deal with unprecedented challenges from COVID-19. It demands the best of us.

For the CFIA, we will continue to monitor the pandemic closely, rethink procedures and innovate where possible as we work with our stakeholders towards a common goal—to carry on delivering the front-line services that support our way of life in Canada.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now hear from the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food. You have 10 minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Frédéric Sepey (Assistant Deputy Minister, Market and Industry Services Branch, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My colleagues and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the agriculture and agri-food sector and the Government of Canada's response to date.

The current situation is stressful for agri-food operators. Our food production system has nevertheless shown strong resilience since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the continued and reliable provision of food for Canadians.

The food sector experienced unanticipated declines in demand from some industries such as food services and spikes in demand from retailers. This created short-term challenges across the supply chain.

The government has been working with processors, producers and the provinces to rapidly assess shifting demands, share critical information and find solutions to address the impacts of COVID-19 on the agriculture and agri-food sector.

We witnessed significant stresses in the system earlier in the crisis. For example, some meat processing plants had to significantly reduce slaughter capacity or temporarily close owing to impacts of COVID-19. This presents challenges for livestock producers upstream, needing to feed animals for longer periods of time without a destination for processing.

The horticulture sector is another critical component of Canada's food system. Our food supply in fruits and vegetables is highly dependent on access to labour, trade and the timely transportation of goods. It is also vulnerable to weather, disease and insect pests, as well as access to crucial inputs such as bees for pollination.

[*English*]

On the health and safety side, workers in the food supply, from the field and the barn to the processing plant and beyond to retail stores, are playing an essential and critical role in securing our food supply every day.

To ensure their health and safety, food processors, among others, across the country have adopted new measures including investments in additional personal protective equipment, temperature testing of employees with scanners, and retrofitting facilities to include plexiglass shields on processing lines.

In addition, Agriculture Canada, with the help of the Public Health Agency of Canada, has developed an evergreen document bringing together existing and relevant federal public health guidance for the agriculture and agri-food sector to help the sector implement measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

The availability of a range of personal protective equipment for the food sector remains a challenge. For example, the use of masks is a common practice in meat-processing facilities to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. However, some food processors, particularly the smaller facilities, are facing challenges procuring stable supplies of PPE.

As the growing season is under way, farmers are also facing challenges accessing the PPE they need to use on a daily basis to protect themselves from hazards, such as inhaling spores when handling and caring for mushrooms, or when using crop protection products.

The Canadian and global supply of PPE is slowly growing. The government and provinces have been very active in working to increase the Canadian supply of PPE. They have developed a number of mechanisms to improve access through supply hubs and programs to support PPE purchases, which we hope will help to alleviate some of the pressures the sector is currently facing.

I would like to turn to Mr. Jurgutis to continue on our behalf.

Thank you.

• (1705)

Mr. Steven Jurgutis (Director General, Policy, Planning and Integration Directorate, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you, Frédéric.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for welcoming me back to this committee.

I'll start with temporary foreign workers, TFWs and labour. Labour challenges have been an ongoing issue for the sector. We are continuing to look at ways to address these challenges. Attracting Canadians to certain jobs in the sector has proven difficult. Despite efforts to increase wages, with provincial and territorial recruitment campaigns and job portals, the fact remains that we rely on TFWs to fill critical jobs in the sector.

Early on in the pandemic, the Government of Canada recognized the need to ensure that TFWs could continue to safely enter Canada, and worked quickly to put in place an exemption from travel restrictions. While ESDC and IRCC are responsible for administering the TFW program, AAFC is working closely with them, and has put in place a team to assist with logistical issues and to share information. We also work closely with our provincial and territorial counterparts and employers to help get TFWs into Canada.

As of mid-June, there are close to 32,000 TFWs in Canada, with more than 21,000 of those having arrived since the travel exemptions were granted. Despite this progress, there remains a gap in the total number of TFWs, when compared to 2019, and a risk that shortfalls in labour could negatively impact harvesting capacity.

At the same time, the sector has been impacted by a number of COVID-19 outbreaks. Most recently, there have been increased reports of outbreaks on farms in Ontario and other parts of the country. We were saddened to learn about the recent deaths of two workers from Mexico. We understand Mexico's recent decision to temporarily pause the arrival of some workers to certain farms in Canada while it examines information about the outbreaks and

measures being taken to protect all workers from further spread. We will work closely with the Mexican government, provincial authorities and the sector to ensure that workers can continue to arrive and stay safe while in Canada.

Testing and inspections are key elements to identify origins of outbreaks, protect workers and prevent future outbreaks. Provinces are taking action by engaging with provincial public health agencies and increasing the frequency of inspections. Ensuring the health and safety of all workers, whether they are domestic or foreign, is a top priority.

[*Translation*]

In response to the immense pressure being placed on Canadian agri-businesses and producers, the Government of Canada has created several initiatives to support the sector. For example, the Government of Canada announced a \$77.5-million emergency processing fund to help producers and processors.

Measures have been put in place to fund up to 700 new positions for youth in the agriculture industry through the youth employment and skills program. A total of \$50 million was allocated for the mandatory isolation support for temporary foreign workers program. An additional \$5 billion in lending capacity was made available through Farm Credit Canada. An investment of \$100 million was made to improve access to food for Canadians under the local food infrastructure fund. A total of \$50 million was also earmarked for the surplus food rescue program, and the list goes on.

The sector will continue to face challenges, which are expected to continue over the medium term. We have also seen farmers, processors and retailers adapt to help put new protocols in place, respect new rules and regulations, and find new ways to continue to ensure a supply of safe food for Canadians.

The health and safety of agriculture and agri-food producers, processors and manufacturers, as well as the safety of all Canadians, remains a priority as we continue to explore new ways to adapt.

Thank you.

• (1710)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you for your statements. We will now start our questioning.

We will do two rounds of questions. We will begin round one with Dr. Kitchen, for six minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, everybody, for being here today and for your presentations.

I'm going to start with the CFIA. I just have a couple of questions and clarifications. You talked about how the CFIA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture provided a six-month extension. When was that six-month extension going to expire?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: I don't have that exact date with me, but we can get it to the committee. I'll have to follow up.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: When was it established?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Again, I'll have to get back to you with the date.

What happens is that the U.S. comes up and audits our facilities from time to time. The extension was in a period when they wouldn't be coming, because no regulators are really travelling right now to do these kinds of audits. It was a grace period, if you will, when they wouldn't shut off trade but would allow that trade to continue.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: If it was done back in March, six months is almost up.

Anyway, I'll go on. You did bring in an issue. You went to companies, in particular Cargill, and said they had to have a response plan in place. Is that not CFIA's job, to make certain that a response plan was in place even before the COVID virus started?

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: We promoted guidance to industry very early in the pandemic indicating that they should have a response plan in place to respond to any outbreaks in their establishments, and that was in place very early on in the pandemic.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Part of PHAC's position is for it to have established protocols in place for hospitals, etc., as well as food agencies. I'm surprised that such a response plan would not be in place prior to COVID actually even coming into existence.

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Theresa, maybe I can take that one.

COVID-19 is not a food safety issue. The CFIA...that's the extent of our purview. What we did was make the plants have plans in place so that our employees were safe going in there, but we had no authority over the responses of the plants to COVID-19. That really went to local public health.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Okay, thank you. I appreciate that.

Since the onset of COVID-19, there have been major issues with the spread of the virus at meat-processing plants, as you've indicated. One concern was the inspectors could be vectors to the virus, transmitting it from plant to plant. There was also a problem with the shortage of PPE for workers, which contributed to one of the biggest outbreaks in the country at the Cargill plant. Can you tell us what the situation is with respect to access to PPE right now?

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: At the moment we have sufficient PPE for our meat inspectors. We are providing them with disposable masks. Certainly there are cloth or surgical masks—

The Chair: Pardon me, Ms. Iuliano. The interpreters just can't hear you.

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: We have a sufficient supply of masks and visors for meat inspection staff at the moment.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

We heard from previous witnesses in the previous hour that at Cargill the inspectors were coming in without their own equipment. That makes no sense to me when CFIA gets over \$749 million a year. Why wouldn't they be able to provide protective equipment to their employees?

• (1715)

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: We began providing equipment to meat inspection staff in meat-processing plants where social distancing could not be respected [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Mr. Chair, there's interruption with the French here.

The Chair: Yes, Dr. Kitchen. The translators can't hear Ms. Iuliano. They can't translate.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I understand that, but I'm hearing the French, as opposed to the English. I'm sure Ms. Iuliano's hearing that same thing, and that's interrupting her time. I'm assuming this is not cutting into my time for questions.

The Chair: I will make some allowances, absolutely.

Let's try again with your question for Ms. Iuliano.

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: Mr. Chair, as soon as the public health advice on the use of masks evolved, we immediately procured masks for our front-line staff. Those masks were deployed in late March and we began deploying face shields in mid- to late April.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: How often do you look at the expiry dates of these masks?

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: Our occupational health and safety experts would take that into consideration, absolutely.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Good. I just received these from the House of Commons, and they said they have a one-year expiry date. One would assume that's based on the date they were made, but you can't find that date on here. I'm just curious about this, to make certain that you're protecting your employees and that the date is being followed appropriately.

I'm sure—

Mr. Len Webber (Calgary Confederation, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman. Are we allowed to use props?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Robert Kitchen: My next question is for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

I'm sure they're aware of the minister's comment that due to the carbon tax, the approximate maximum cost per farm for grain drying is \$819, with some places being as low as \$210. She said that, because of this, farmers do not deserve a cost exemption in the midst of this global pandemic.

Todd Lewis, the chair of the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan, APAS, has stated, with respect to the minister's statement, that the numbers don't make sense to him, as some of his farmers are spending upwards of \$10,000 in carbon tax on grain drying. I can vouch for that, because many of my constituents have also shown me bills of that immense amount.

Department officials have stated that the numbers quoted by the minister "come from submissions from a number of groups", one of which was APAS.

Can you tell us why there's such a huge discrepancy between what the minister said and what our farmers are saying?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: I'll offer an answer, although it's not in my area of responsibility, so I wouldn't be able to get into specifics.

You're correct in saying that it is an amalgamation of different information and numbers that came to the department. I've been informed that additional information and numbers for additional clarification will be made public shortly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sidhu, please go ahead, for six minutes.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here with us.

My question is for CFIA. Either Ms. Iuliano or Ms. Barnes can answer.

I have a Maple Lodge Farms meat-processing plant in my riding. There was an outbreak, and I heard that you hired 144 inspectors. I want to know what you are doing to protect these workers to ensure that meat-processing plants like Maple Lodge Farms are able to operate safely during COVID-19.

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: We take a number of measures to ensure that our workers can operate in a safe environment. Obviously the health and safety of our staff is the number one priority. It starts with following the advice of public health authorities, and that includes everything from hand hygiene to social distancing to the use of masks and shields where these measures cannot be respected.

We have issued guidance to our inspectors on operating in this COVID environment. This guidance includes undertaking safety assessments before workers enter a plant and after each shift. We've also issued guidance to the industry on mitigation measures that they need to take.

• (1720)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: In April 2020, the federal government invested \$20 million in CFIA to ensure that our food supply was secure. Do you think this investment is achieving that goal?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Yes, we certainly do. It has permitted us to hire the extra surge capacity that we've needed. It has also allowed us to finance some overtime for our inspectors because of changes in shifts that the plants want. It has also helped us train new inspectors and give refresher training to our staff. It has allowed us to make investments in IM/IT tools for them to use as well.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

My next question is for the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Throughout COVID-19, we've heard of farmers having to dump their product as they have not been able to distribute it.

What impact will the surplus food rescue program have on addressing this issue to support vulnerable Canadians? Can you explore that?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: Go ahead, Frédéric.

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: We are constantly in discussions with producers to monitor the situation of the surplus. While we don't have precise quantities of what food is currently in surplus, we are confident that we will receive it, working with food banks, which are already discussing with producer groups to take advantage of the program and would be able to identify the food that is probably the closest to the end of its shelf life and be able to prioritize the support to those products that have a shorter shelf life.

Some of the surplus food is in storage in frozen form and can last several months. However, some types of food, such as potatoes, have a much shorter shelf life, so we'll try to prioritize these products that have a shorter life.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

In April, the government announced a \$100-million emergency fund to support national, regional and local organizations across Canada that would be able to reach people and communities experiencing food insecurity and who have been impacted by COVID-19.

Do you think this fund is helping this type of program? Are you collecting any data?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Steve, perhaps you would be better placed to answer that question.

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: We have received indication that it certainly has been helping. A large amount of the funds has been distributed out to major food bank organizations and has gotten out to smaller organizations across the country as well.

I don't currently have data in terms of to what degree all of the funds have been expended or what impact it has had, but we can certainly see what information we can provide back to the committee.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, do I have more time?

The Chair: You have one more minute.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Okay. I'll go back to CFIA.

What steps is CFIA taking to ensure our food supply remains strong if a possible second wave of COVID-19 happens in the fall?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Maybe I'll start and Theresa can add.

We're trying to learn lessons from the last couple of months about how we have to behave in food plants. We've also built some security measures through our compliance approaches on regulations so that we have procedures available now should there be shortages if there is an uptick in the number of cases in the fall.

We've really tried to learn the lessons from the last couple of months.

• (1725)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: I would add that we continue to refine our business continuity plan. We have defined what our critical services are and we are prepared to focus on delivering those critical services in the event of a resurgence of cases.

The Chair: Ms. Iuliano, do you speak French at all? If you do, can you respond in French as well? The translators can't hear you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: We have identified what the critical services are, and we are prepared to ensure the delivery of those services.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sidhu.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you may go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I just want to take a moment to commend the interpreters. We are well aware that their work is far from easy. Kudos.

My first question is for Mr. Seppey.

We have seen numerous outbreaks among temporary foreign workers in the agricultural sector. We hear about them daily in the news. Ontario has been hit especially hard.

Where would you say the deficiencies are?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Thank you for your question, Mr. Desilets. My colleague, Mr. Jurgutis, is actually a better person to answer that.

Mr. Luc Desilets: No problem, Mr. Seppey.

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: Thank you for your question, Mr. Desilets.

Certainly, it's a very complicated issue. Although the program doesn't really fall under the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, we are working closely with our counterparts in other departments, as well as our provincial and municipal partners, to find solutions.

One thing is for sure. The 14-day quarantine period is why the government announced \$50 million in funding to help farmers cover the exceptional costs they have to incur as a result.

Recently, certain farms in various regions have had a bit more trouble. As I was saying, though, we are working closely with other levels of government and our partners to find solutions.

Mr. Luc Desilets: In that case, can you tell me who is responsible?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: I would say the responsibility is shared among the different levels of government and farmers, depending on the issue in question. Health matters on regional farms fall, first and foremost, under the jurisdiction of regional and provincial health authorities, so it's important that the federal government work closely with those authorities to find solutions.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you for your answer. I have another question for you, Mr. Jurgutis.

It seems that Mexico asked Canada for assurances this week before it would provide us with seasonal workers. Can you tell us what its conditions are?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: Again, thank you for your question, Mr. Desilets.

We are currently in talks with the Mexicans to determine what we need to do to meet their conditions. We are also talking to other departments, since ours isn't the only one involved. There is no doubt that the Mexican government wants reassurance that we are able to protect Mexican workers. We are making progress, and the issue is a top priority for the government.

• (1730)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Are Mexican workers still arriving in Quebec and Canada, or has their coming here been put on hold?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: Off the top of my head, I don't have those specifics, but I do know that the Mexicans want, above all, to avoid farms where workers have tested positive for COVID-19. It's fair to say that the program is currently on hold, but the Mexican government's intentions are to continue allowing people to come to Canada to work on farms.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much, Mr. Jurgutis.

Ms. Barnes, where do you think food inventories will be in the fall? If there are shortages, which sectors will we see them in?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Mr. Chair, I think I can answer that.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Go ahead, Mr. Seppey.

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Thank you for your question, Mr. Desilets.

We have been working closely with farmers, especially vegetable growers, to monitor their seeding progress in recent weeks. What we've observed so far is that very specific areas of production in very specific regions haven't been able to seed as much as they would've liked. That is especially true for asparagus farmers in Quebec and Ontario. Not to mention, Ontario, mainly, has seen a significant decline in mushroom production.

Predicting where things will be in the fall is challenging. That's why we are keeping up our efforts to bring in as many foreign workers as possible, as Mr. Jurgutis mentioned. We are also maintaining hiring programs such as Canada summer jobs for young people, to make sure vegetable growers will have enough workers for the fall harvest.

Allow me to round out, if I may, what Mr. Jurgutis said regarding Mexico. It's important to keep in mind that, while the Mexican government does play a role in the application process, our embassy in Mexico City is still processing, as quickly as it can, the visa applications of temporary foreign workers looking to come to Canada.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Seppey.

My time is up, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

We now move on to Mr. Davies.

Mr. Davies, you have six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Ms. Barnes.

Ms. Barnes, I don't know if you had the opportunity to listen to the testimony of Fabian Murphy, the national president of the Agriculture Union, who just testified at the committee. He represents all of the food inspectors and employees of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and the picture he painted of the CFIA's response to protecting its workers was rather startling.

To summarize his evidence, he thought that the CFIA was late to protect its workers. In fact, there's personal protective equipment that just arrived in Alberta last week. He spoke of employees having to share face shields. There has been a shortage of latex gloves, N95 masks and shields. There is no consistent national approach across the country. There is the spectre of inspectors having to be assigned to multiple facilities, potentially being vectors of transmission of COVID-19, and in fact, being banned by the CFIA from using their own cloth masks, at least at the beginning. What's your response to that testimony?

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: I'll start by saying that the health and safety of our staff is a top priority for us at the CFIA. All of the actions that we have taken to mitigate risks have been done in consultation with our occupational health and safety experts, our unions, local public health authorities, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Health Canada, etc.

We acted immediately to provide protective measures for our staff. As I mentioned in my earlier remarks, we began procuring masks and face shields for employees in establishments where physical distancing could not be respected as soon as the public health advice in this matter evolved. We were providing masks to our staff in late March, and we began procuring and distributing shields in mid-April.

• (1735)

Mr. Don Davies: Okay.

The Chair: Just one moment, Mr. Davies.

I'm sorry, but the translation didn't happen. Is that an answer that you'd be able to give in French as well?

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: Yes, I can.

The Chair: I will make adjustments to your time, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: The health and safety of staff is a priority for the CFIA.

[*English*]

Do you want me to continue, or should I turn it over...?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Mr. Chair, this is Frédéric Seppey. I am pleased to translate what Theresa just said, if you'll allow me.

The Chair: Yes, please. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: All right.

As Ms. Iuliano said, the health and safety of CFIA employees is a priority. We took steps as soon as possible, in consultation with the occupational health and safety committee and union representatives.

We acted immediately in response to the advice of local public health authorities. For instance, we began providing staff with protective equipment, when there were separators, beginning in late March and, in other cases, in mid-April.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll resume your time, Mr. Davies. You have two and a half minutes left.

Mr. Don Davies: Two and half minutes? Mr. Chair, that can't be the case. That's two-thirds of my time.

Mr. Chair, I directed my question to Ms. Barnes for a reason, and that's because I wanted to avoid the translation problems. Perhaps you could direct the witness that I'm asking to answer the question. It completely unsettles the line of questioning when I have to listen to the same answer repeated twice.

Ms. Barnes, how many food processing facilities across Canada have experienced outbreaks of COVID-19 to date?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: We'll have to get back to you with that specific number. I know, anecdotally, that there have been a few, but the exact number I don't know.

Mr. Don Davies: My next question is for the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food.

I understand that the Government of Mexico has put a moratorium on all workers coming to Canada. Can you provide the committee with a clear explanation of why those two Mexican migrant workers died of COVID-19?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: Thank you for the question.

Unfortunately, I'm not in a position to be able to provide details as to those specific cases as they don't fall under the purview of our department.

Mr. Don Davies: Fair enough.

Do you know how many temporary foreign workers in Canada have contracted COVID-19 to date?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: I don't have those numbers either. We have been having conversations, particularly with the provinces, to try to gather that information, but even at the provincial level there has been some difficulty to pull the information together because it comes from the local health units as well, so it hasn't been as precise.

I do think that type of question would need to be directed more precisely to PHAC or Health Canada.

Mr. Don Davies: Could I ask you to undertake to provide the committee with those numbers?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: We could look to get that information to the committee. Again, I would just say with a caveat that it will depend on the kind of information that we can get from the municipal to the provincial level. We've started those conversations already to try to get a handle on those numbers, so we—

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you for that.

Could you tell us how many farm operations have been impacted by COVID-19 across Canada to date?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: I don't have that information, but that is something we can look to get back to you on as well. It would be related to the same type of information gathering.

Mr. Don Davies: On your web page under compliance inspections, it says, "All Service Canada employer inspections during the COVID-19 pandemic will be conducted virtually/remotely." Given that the Migrant Workers' Alliance has documented over 1,000 complaints of abuse for migrant workers, do you believe that virtual inspections are sufficient at this time?

• (1740)

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: Thank you for the question.

Again, it's not under the purview of our department, but I do know this is one of the areas that is currently being looked at as the situation is unfolding.

As well, from what I understand in terms of the virtual inspections, they are by video, in which inspectors are asking the employers to go to various areas of the farm to provide that documented evidence. In terms of the specifics of that, again, it would be outside of our purview.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

I'll go back to CFIA.

Would you be prepared to work with the union on their national plan? They outlined the five points that they would like to see, moving forward, particularly if there's an outbreak of COVID-19 in the fall. It includes a national approach, slowing down line speeds, routine testing, inspectors at one facility, and appropriate and sufficient PPE.

Is that a plan that you would commit to work with the national Agriculture Union on?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Our work has been ongoing with the union, and so obviously we would continue those conversations. Some of what is in the plan is not within our purview. It's more for industry to take up.

In terms of our commitment to our employees to make sure they have PPE, we are making efforts to try to minimize the extent to which inspectors have to go from one establishment to the other. We've committed to that. Certainly, we are working on elements of that plan today with the union.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies. You were correct, by the way, in pointing out my error in saying you had two and a half minutes left. You actually had three and a half minutes left. I did make allowances for the translation issues, and we will continue to do that as best we can as we go forward.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We're starting our second round with Mr. Webber.

You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Len Webber: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions, through you, of course, will be directed to the CFIA.

In the testimony you shared with the committee today, you mentioned you had hired new inspectors, 144, in fact, and 44 veterinarians. You've welcomed back some recently retired individuals, re-assigned staff and also funded more overtime. I assume that you probably do not have a concern with a lack of inspectors.

However, have there been challenges in meeting minimum staffing levels? Have there been absenteeism problems with food inspectors? Should we be concerned that a lack of inspectors could further disrupt the meat supply chain?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

I'll start, and perhaps Theresa will want to jump in.

Really, with the investment that we received, we've been able to service all of the shifts that the sector has asked for by virtue of that investment. Our employees have been incredibly dedicated. Former meat inspectors who are now working in another area of the agency are now putting up their hands to say they'll come back to help out.

With the dedication of our staff, we have not had issues yet to keep the plants running and we anticipate that will continue. With the investment, we have that extra surge capacity to make sure we can continue to be there when we need to be.

Mr. Len Webber: Great. That's good news.

You also mentioned that you're working with some provincial counterparts to train and equip provincial inspectors to provide the CFIA with inspection support on a temporary basis, as needed. What type of training is unique to the federal inspectors? What specifically do you have to give them, the provincial counterparts, additional training on?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: One example is the law. It would be different. It's the actual provisions that would be applied if a non-compliance were observed. The inspector would have to be able to move between their former regime and the current one.

Mr. Len Webber: All right, thank you.

In your testimony you said that to ease the burden on industry and to support the food supply for Canadians, CFIA has introduced temporary compliance flexibilities. The changes include suspending some CFIA compliance activities and delaying compliance activities.

Can you elaborate more on this and give us some areas with suspensions and delays of compliance?

• (1745)

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Early on in the pandemic the agency moved to its business continuity plan. We determined where we absolutely had to be to provide critical service to keep the supply chain running.

Luckily we live in Canada where we have an incredible level of food safety and high levels of compliance in just about the entire food system. We were able to dial back or postpone some of our oversight in areas of the grocery store where risks are really pretty low, such as, for example, with cookies or manufactured foods of that sort.

While COVID was running, we delayed inspections that we would have done. Now that we're starting to normalize, we're going to start those inspections back up.

Mr. Len Webber: Being from Alberta, I have some questions for the CFIA with respect to the fishing season that has come upon us.

What plans does the CFIA have for ensuring that we have proper food inspections in place there? I understand that physical distancing and sanitation on board boats is a unique challenge. How is the CFIA going to deal with that?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: We'll approach it the same way we've approached the issues in facilities producing meat. To the extent possible, inspectors will keep that two-metre distance. You're right that in some cases that's not possible, so Theresa's group will be making sure they have the adequate personal protective equipment that is going to be needed.

We'll also be looking at whether there are other ways to do the inspections, like maybe looking at records or trying to be innovative in how we do the inspections. Again, we'll be making sure the food supply continues to operate.

Mr. Len Webber: Great.

Recently, there have been some media reports out there saying that the most recent COVID outbreak in Beijing may be related to

fish preparation boards. Do you have any information on this? Have you heard anything about this issue? If so, could you share that? Should Canadians be concerned about the transmission of a virus through any part of the food supply and preparation process?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: This is something we are aware of. It came up yesterday evening, I think. We have been officially notified by China, and they've asked us to make sure there's no chance of COVID-19 coming to them in products they import from Canada.

The evidence is very clear on this globally. There have been no cases of transmission of COVID-19 linked to the food supply or even to the packaging of food. Globally, regulators are very clear that this is not a pathway for the transmission of the disease. We are communicating with China, as are all regulators, because this wasn't just a Canadian issue, and we stand behind the strength of our food supply.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Webber.

Mr. Len Webber: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now go to Mr. Van Bynen for five minutes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of the witnesses, who have taken the time to be here to provide us with their information.

Overall there have been 13 disease clusters and approximately 3,000 cases associated with meat and poultry plants alone. Agriculture is an area of shared jurisdiction between the federal government and the provinces and territories.

What factors have contributed to the outbreak of COVID-19 in food production facilities in Canada? What impact have these outbreaks had on the security of the food supply in Canada?

I'll direct those questions to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Mr. Chair, I can start and perhaps Mr. Jurgutis would like to add to it.

You're absolutely right that early in the COVID-19 pandemic there were a number of highly visible cases. We have in mind the case in Quebec of Olymel, which had a major impact on the production and slaughter of hogs. Now there are very few.

In the meat sector, there are still a number of small-scale operations in certain parts of the country that have cases and are not functioning at their full capacity. However, in terms of hogs and beef, the slaughter process now is almost at full capacity. Of course, since certain operations were closed, there has been a backlog of animals in the supply, but there has been a catching up. Thanks to companies doing overtime, with additional shifts, they're able to catch up on that backlog, but it will take several months before we can catch up.

At no point did we find the situation was such that it would create a food security issue. It was more a question of maintaining the pipeline operation ongoing.

• (1750)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: What are the roles and responsibilities of the federal, provincial and municipal governments in responding to the COVID-19 outbreaks in the food production facilities?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Again, perhaps I can start and colleagues can add to it.

When there's an outbreak, the first responders, as my colleagues from CFIA indicated, would be the local health authorities. It varies from one jurisdiction to another as to how decentralized it is.

For example, if I were to refer to the case of Olymel in Yamachiche, with an outbreak that happened in late March, it was the *santé publique*, the health authority at the provincial level, that intervened very quickly. Very quickly, CFIA and AAFC, as well as the health authorities in Quebec, the company, and the agriculture department in Quebec sat down together to look at all the dimensions of the issue and at how to remedy the situation, but it was a company decision to close. It reopened after two weeks, after taking all the measures to the satisfaction of the provincial health authority that it was safe to reopen.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: What steps has Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada taken to collaborate with different levels of government and industry stakeholders to respond to outbreaks at these facilities? Are there any specific steps that have been taken as a result of this pandemic?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Yes, there were a number of steps. While the jurisdiction is shared, as you pointed out, we are a convener. We are the main interlocutor to the industry or the point of initial contact when it comes to issues of preoccupation for the industry.

One example is that we've worked with the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety to compile all the guidance on public health that exists at the federal level, so that in one document, while it was not the legal authority, it was at least providing operators with a greater sense of what are the guidelines they should refer to in addressing their issues. Several provincial governments are doing the same thing, and we are coordinating our efforts through our mechanisms at Agriculture of federal-provincial collaboration.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Of the data you've received so far, what was the most significant lesson learned from the response? What would you do differently going forward?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: I think that communication early on and being as transparent as we can be among partners are among the

lessons. There are a number of lessons that were learned from Olymel, for example. I'm using that case because it was quite symbolic at the beginning of the pandemic. I think the way that this company operated with regulatory authorities and was transparent and collaborative is a case study for what should be done. In fact, since that initial outbreak, there have been no outbreaks in the hog processing plant of Olymel in Quebec.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You're done. Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

The Chair: We go now to Ms. Jansen for five minutes.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Thank you.

I'd like to direct my questions to Ms. Barnes, especially because of her ability to speak with a proper microphone.

I just want to say that it has been my unlucky pleasure to have to deal with the CFIA back in the day when I was farming, so it's interesting to have this opportunity to ask some questions.

It was mentioned in the presentation that you "took immediate and decisive action to protect the integrity of Canada's food supply". I wonder if you can tell me why I'm hearing very different stories from poultry processors here in B.C.

When a few of our processors had to shut down due to COVID-19 outbreaks, the other processing plant stepped in to fill the gaps by doing a lot of overtime, but their CFIA inspectors were unwilling to help out. They were demanding two weeks' notice for overtime work, which of course is not feasible in a pandemic. Why were they refusing to do overtime in the beginning?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: In the beginning, we were all learning what the new environment was like. Very quickly we put in place an escalation protocol, so that if plants had an issue, they worked it up through the chain of command. If there was an extra shift that they wanted to put on, there was a protocol on how to let us know so we could arrange for our staff to provide that oversight.

We also worked with the associations. Working at that level too, at the most senior level at the agency, we worked through these issues together.

After we set up these protocols, there were no shifts that we weren't able to cover.

• (1755)

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I don't know if you heard, but plants were basically telling their inspectors that in order to deal with the enormity of the situation, they had to proceed with humane killing with or without inspectors on site.

When did CFIA finally encourage overtime for inspectors? When did that happen?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: I'm not sure I know that exactly. As soon as those protocols were in place, we were doing extra shifts I think.

Theresa.

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: We provide overtime services on a daily basis for industry, overtime in terms of daily shifts and overtime on weekends. So that—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Unfortunately under the pandemic, it seems that some of our meat processors were not getting that kind of service because the inspectors were unwilling...without two weeks' notice.

You mentioned that you have hired 144 new inspectors and 44 veterinarians. As Canadian poultry processing is now down by an average of 7.5%—and I understand it goes across the sector due to the drop in food demand by restaurants and tourism—why do you need more inspectors now compared to when Canada was in full swing?

You mentioned it yourself that there are many inspections that aren't happening. Why are there the extra inspectors all of a sudden?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Agriculture may want to comment on this as well, Mr. Chair.

I think what we saw, and what we're seeing now, is that plants that had challenges have sorted out their new way of operating, given equipment to their employees and they are now ramping up. We are seeing a quick return to former levels of capacity and output in plants. We are investing to make sure that if there is an uptick in cases in the future....

As Agriculture mentioned, there is a bit of backlog in terms of some animals that have to be cleared. We're going to need that extra capacity to help the industry do it.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I have a quick question, then.

On April 15 or 14 or 11, CFIA got \$20 million so they could ramp up and get prepared for this pandemic with enough...I guess inspectors and so on. It took until June 15 for \$50 million to be put out by the government for a food surplus program.

When you think about the food surplus program, at \$50 million—just in extra pounds of potatoes alone, it's 450 million pounds—why did CFIA get \$20 million right away in the beginning and now we only see a measly \$50 million for food surplus? Who got the priority here? What does it look like? Does it look like CFIA or farmers?

Perhaps Ms. Barnes can answer, or Ag Canada. It's fine with me.

Ms. Colleen Barnes: I think it's Agriculture.

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: Thank you for the question.

I'll attempt an answer and then see if my colleague Mr. Seppey wants to add anything.

I don't think I'd be in a position to make a comparison between the two different streams of funding for different types of initiatives or programs and how the government may have decided which has a higher or more important—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Priority, right.

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: —priority. What I can say is that they are to serve different outcomes and objectives.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Exactly. My point today is that farmers have not been getting the priority.

The Chair: Ms. Jansen, your time is up. Thank you.

We go now to Dr. Jaczek for five minutes.

Ms. Helena Jaczek (Markham—Stouffville, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

My first question will be for Ms. Barnes of the CFIA.

You're aware that the Agriculture Union appeared earlier during this committee meeting. Mr. Murphy made a clear request for some national standards.

You have also alluded to the fact that in terms of your employees and issues like personal protective equipment and so on, you were very reliant on individual public health units. I suppose this explains some of the lack of consistency in terms of some of the advice that was being given within each of...well, we'll say the meat packing plants or the processing plants.

Would you not find it preferable to have clearer national standards in terms of public health practice?

Just so you know, during this committee over the last many months, there has been a call for clearer national public health standards.

Could you speak to that a little bit? Certainly from the union perspective, this lack of consistency resulted in different outcomes in the plants themselves.

I'm sure, given your concern for your employees, that you would also be somewhat in favour of something clearer across the country.

• (1800)

Ms. Colleen Barnes: We have heard those calls for a national approach. As we have worked through these issues over the past three months, what we've learned is that the approach can't be national. The reason is that in each community, those plants were either a hot spot within a broader community that was a hot spot or they were very localized.

The response that happened in each plant really depended on the extent of the health care resources that were available in each community. Sometimes there didn't have to be as stringent a response if there was greater capacity to deal with the issue. For us, it really became working with the local public health authorities in each instance to make sure we were responding and making sure our own employees were protected in that environment.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: What sort of infection control procedures do you have as a minimum in all of the establishments that CFIA inspects? Obviously there's a risk to employees, your inspectors, in terms of those infections such as *E. coli*, where there is a risk to the individuals handling the meat. What is your normal practice in terms of infection control on behalf of your employees?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: As you've mentioned, there are hazards in a meat plant, so we would generally have proper hygiene that our inspectors would respect, generally speaking. With COVID, we've added that they do a check before they go into the plant and that they then check to make sure they're feeling well after a shift. They inform their manager how they're feeling. Those are added steps we've taken. Then there's the addition of PPE. Where we have had these issues of not being able to keep the two-metre distance, as Theresa mentioned, we've provided our staff with masks and face shields.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Well, I was getting to the normal practice, not that in the COVID-19 situation. What sort of personal protective equipment do you provide to your inspectors on a regular basis?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: I don't know if Theresa can respond to that or if we can get back to the committee if the translation issue is a problem.

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: Mr. Chair, the type of equipment that we provide staff is very much tied to the requirements of the job. In a meat processing plant, they are provided with appropriate equipment such as coats, boots and hard hats where they're required.

A hazard assessment would be done in other situations that might be more dangerous, like working in a barn, where there is an animal disease situation. If risks were identified, the appropriate equipment would be provided to staff.

The Chair: Ms. Iuliano, is it possible for you to try that in French as well?

I will pause Dr. Jaczek's time.

[Translation]

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: Under normal circumstances, we provide inspectors with equipment.

[English]

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: On a point of order, is it possible for Ms. Iuliano to go onto the French when she speaks French so that we don't get the English-French, and she doesn't either? If she toggles to the [Technical difficulty—Editor]

The Chair: Yes.

Please try that, Ms. Iuliano. It might help.

• (1805)

[Translation]

Ms. Theresa Iuliano: The necessary equipment is provided to staff. We also conduct hazard assessments.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Jaczek, you may carry on. You have 15 seconds.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: I'm wondering if CFIA has ever been involved in any sort of pandemic planning, given that obviously so many people are working in very close proximity to each other. Prior to COVID-19, had there ever been any exercise related to the possibility of a pandemic?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Mr. Chair, we can get back with specifics that I'm sure we have, because we are responsible for the animal health area as well, so we've definitely exercised around major animal health diseases, and I do believe that in some of the human health pandemics we have been involved, but we'll have to get back to the committee with specifics.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Jaczek.

[Translation]

We now move on to Mr. Thériault.

Mr. Thériault, you may go ahead. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Temporary foreign workers are essential to our farmers. Mr. Seppey, you mentioned areas of production that have faced serious challenges, namely, asparagus and mushroom production.

In addition to being on thin ice because of this unprecedented pandemic, like everyone else, farmers in my riding weren't given timely information that would have informed their decision-making around production capacity.

My fellow member Mr. Powlowski wants to close the farm to fork gap, but doing that means people have to want to produce something.

Mistakes were made, and we are here to find solutions. Would you now agree that the \$1,500 should have been a lump sum, because it didn't incentivize people to engage in food processing?

Some of the witnesses we heard from said the government should have been responsible for the quarantining of workers. I imagine you agree with that. What else needs to happen to ensure that farmers, be it before, during or after a second wave, receive timely information and can actually get down to the business of farming, so we don't have a food supply problem?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: Mr. Thériault raised a number of points, so I'll start and my colleague Mr. Jurgutis may have additional comments.

You're right, vegetable growers, in particular, needed decisions to be made quickly. We were in contact with them throughout the crisis. Bringing as many temporary foreign workers to Canada as possible, as quickly as possible, was crucial, and significant efforts were deployed to that end.

As far as the quarantine program is concerned, whether the responsibility falls on businesses or the government is a matter of policy. As public servants, we can't offer an opinion on that, but I can assure you—

Mr. Luc Thériault: You can make recommendations, though. What would you recommend to reassure farmers? Is it appropriate to create programs that don't cause them to lose money if they seed more than half their fields, for example?

Mr. Frédéric Seppey: The need to reassure farmers was part of the discussion. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, it is up to each farmer to decide what they are going to plant and how much.

As for the quarantine support program, which, of course, stems from a public health decision, the amount is basically a lump sum. The \$1,500 remains available until the \$50 million in program funding is depleted. In implementing the program, we tried to streamline the process as much as possible, precisely so that farmers could be confident they would receive the support they were entitled to. Clearly, supporting documentation is still required.

• (1810)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thériault.

[*English*]

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

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for the Department of Agriculture.

We know that in April the federal government announced the \$50-million program to help farmers and fish processors who were bringing in temporary foreign workers during the COVID-19 crisis. We know that at the end of that program employers are eligible for up to \$1,500 per foreign worker to help cover the costs of complying with the mandatory two-week quarantine upon their arrival in Canada. We know that employers must provide accommodation for those employees during that self-isolation period and pay those workers during the 14-day period.

According to a spokesperson from the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, if an employer is found not to be compliant with those requirements under the Quarantine Act with the TFW program, they would no longer be eligible for the \$1,500.

Could you inform the committee of how many inspections have been conducted to ensure employers are compliant with the requirements under the Quarantine Act with the TFW program to date?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: I wouldn't have specific information in terms of how many have been done. Part of the processes do involve, as I mentioned earlier, some of the other jurisdictions from local health units as well as other requirements that are in place. That type of information isn't something that I readily have at hand.

Mr. Don Davies: How will you enforce the federal requirements if you're not taking responsibility as a federal government for enforcing the very criteria that the government has implemented? Surely, it's not the provincial government's responsibility to double-check your requirements, is it?

Mr. Steven Jurgutis: No. Correct. Sorry if I misled.

What I'm trying to indicate is that it's part of a process that we're working on, primarily led by PHAC. It has been doing a number of inspections. The indications we have so far, in terms of what has been done, is that fairly minor difficulties have been corrected. To my understanding, as it stands right now, in terms of the level of inspections that are done, they are in compliance as they pertain to the 14-day quarantine period.

I'll have to get more specific information and get back to the committee as that unfolds.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you. I would appreciate that.

To CFIA, according to a June 12 article in *Food in Canada*, CFIA has announced that it is now in a position to gradually resume some inspection services that were temporarily suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Could you tell the committee specifically what inspection services were temporarily suspended? In your view, what impact did the suspension of those inspections have on food safety in Canada, if any?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: As we mentioned earlier in our remarks, when COVID hit, we went to our business continuity plan. We prioritized food safety investigations, and focused on export and import investigations, all the lab work that would have supported that, and any animal health issues that needed to be prioritized. That allowed us that bandwidth to ensure the food supply system kept moving.

Where compliance has traditionally been very high, we knew we could delay some inspections for a month or so. It wasn't going to compromise food safety for Canadians. Those are the kinds of things that—

Mr. Don Davies: The question was regarding what services were you not doing. I understand what you were doing. My question was, which inspection services did you suspend?

Ms. Colleen Barnes: Inspections in the manufacturing of cookies, cereals, or something like that. They would have been delayed, but we are now restarting.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

That brings our round two to a close. That also takes us to the end of our meeting.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for sharing with us their time and expertise, and for putting up with our technical issues. I would like to thank the interpreters for their trials and tribulations regarding our technical issues. I would also like to thank the members, of course, for once again having a great meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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