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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I call to order this meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs Committee.

We always begin with the acknowledgement of the traditional territories. In Ottawa, that would be the unceded territory of the Algonquin people. Where I'm sitting, it would be Anishinabe, Haudenosaunee and Chonnonton, or neutral first nations.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and the motion adopted on October 27, 2020, the committee is continuing its study of food security in northern communities.

I would like to briefly mention the technical issues. You may speak and listen in the official language of your choice. At the bottom of the screen, using the little globe, select the language you wish to speak and listen to. That could be floor, English or French.

When speaking, ensure that your video is turned on. Please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. Once again, it's important that we conduct this carefully, because the meetings to be officially considered have to be properly translated in both official languages.

With us today, by video conference for one hour, are the following three witnesses: National Chief Elmer St. Pierre from the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples; Grand Chief Garrison Settee; and Lori Nikkel, the chief executive officer of Second Harvest.

Thank you all for taking the time to be with us. You have up to six minutes for your opening statement, and then we'll move to questions.

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre, please go ahead.

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples): Thank you for the invitation to speak, Bob and the members of the committee.

As you're well aware, my name is Elmer St. Pierre, and I'm the national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, CAP.

I'd like to acknowledge being on the traditional, unceded territory of the Mohawk people.

CAP has been a federal organization of the NIOs and represents off-reserve status and non-status Indians, Métis and southern Inuit. This year we celebrate our 50-year anniversary, and we're very proud that we were able to pass the 50 years the way the economy and everything has been going.

Food security was a top priority for CAP and the PTOs' COVID response. Problems with food security existed long before. Over the last year, CAP and the PTOs helped thousands of households across Canada to access food. We provided food hampers, transportation and access to traditional foods. We reached indigenous families in small towns and large cities, especially in the north.

We are thankful for the COVID response funding received, but COVID funding is temporary, and a gap will exist after it is gone. Even when food is available, families need incomes to buy it. One of our members is in Labrador, led by President Todd Russell. They face high food prices, a lack of jobs and a lack of incomes. They are denied the right to access food and resources on their own land—resources like fishing and hunting for food, forestry for heat and fuel. Food is the centre of cultural events and heritage. This is a matter of survival and culture. Only one of Labrador's communities, Black Tickle, is eligible for nutrition north. Many more need help but are denied.

The communities need basic amenities like water, heat, sewage systems and reliable roads. This is the kind of fight for basic equality and essential...that we have been dealing with for decades. CAP and our PTOs are not part of the talks around infrastructure and rights. Inclusion and rights can help build food security, jobs and economics.

The COVID funding example shows that we can offer solutions when we are included. Our communities need support for proper infrastructure. We need to consult with our communities, the same as you do with the AFN, MNC and ITK. Include us, and we can offer solutions. The Constitution does not specify organizations to consult, only that the government needs to consult Indians, Inuit and Métis. We can do that. The Daniels decision decided once and for all that our people are Indians under the Constitution. We are ready to solve these issues together.

At this time, I'd like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak to everybody. I'm looking forward to questions.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thanks very much, Elmer.

Next we have the chief executive officer of Second Harvest, Lori Nikkel.

Please go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Lori Nikkel (Chief Executive Officer, Second Harvest): Thank you to the esteemed members of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs for inviting Second Harvest Canada to provide some remarks.

Second Harvest is by no means an expert in the complex and multi-faceted challenges of northern and indigenous food security. What we can tell you is that food security or food insecurity is an outcome of poverty, and food security will only be possible when there are systems and supports in place for people to be able to access the food, housing and other essentials they need, when they need them, without the need for charitable organizations like mine. In the interim, it's imperative we get healthy food to communities at no cost to them.

For those of you unfamiliar with Second Harvest, we're the largest food rescue charity in the country. We're unique in that we redistribute primarily perishable food, and we work at the intersection of hunger relief and environmental protection.

We do this because in Canada 58% of all the food produced is lost or wasted, including 11.2 million metric tonnes of surplus food that could easily be rescued and redistributed. That's enough food to feed every Canadian for five months.

At Second Harvest we create systems to redirect that food to charities, non-profits and northern and indigenous communities. We do this with technology as well as trucks, trains, boats and planes to ensure that this surplus food stays out of landfill where it releases greenhouse gases, like methane, and directly contributes to the climate crisis.

In Canada, there are over 60,000 charities, non-profits and indigenous organizations that use food in their programs. As we are all aware, northern and indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by food insecurity and by climate change.

We have heard that in Fort Smith people have used boats to hunt moose along Slave River for generations, but wet weather and a short spring created so much water higher up in the woods that moose were not walking along the river this fall, which impacted the hunt and the food supply.

Food insecurity is only going to get worse as many communities depend on ice roads for transporting crucial supplies. With the increasing incidence of winter road closures, and reduced load weight limits, there are higher costs for delivering food.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Second Harvest created the Food Rescue Canadian Alliance. This was a national collaboration of industry, government, NGOs and indigenous communities. Our mandate was simply to identify where there would be high volumes

of surplus food across the supply chain, and to connect it with the communities that had an increased demand for food.

The indigenous working group came together in an effort to support non-indigenous food relief organizations like mine to distribute food and funds meaningfully to address the heightened food insecurity concerns of many, but especially indigenous, rural and remote communities.

Since then, Second Harvest has led several northern projects, including a grocery gift card program where we leverage funding from the Sprott Foundation to provide over \$4.5 million in grocery gift cards with grocers like the Northern Store. The Sprott Foundation has provided over \$21 million in COVID relief to food and housing causes.

We offer grants, up to \$20,000, through the federal government's emergency food security fund. We ensured our application process was flexible and accessible to northern and indigenous communities, which resulted in the disbursement of about \$2.7 million.

Additionally, through the federal government's surplus food rescue program, of which we are strong advocates, we were able to source, process and deliver about two million pounds of fresh, healthy, free food to communities that included fish, chicken, bison and frozen vegetables.

As the government subsidies conclude, we know how critical it is for us to continue to provide these services to communities. However, the logistical infrastructure necessary to get food to the many remote and isolated communities is prohibitively expensive, and a serious contributor to food insecurity.

In the Northwest Territories alone, we all know 33 communities cover one million square kilometres of land, which makes getting good healthy food at a decent price difficult to say the least.

For example, in Aklavik, we shipped a container of 20 skids of mostly meat to a community of about 590 people. The cost was over \$85,000 for one shipment. Transporting perishable healthy food is especially complex and expensive.

However, we are committed to ensuring this surplus food will reach the communities that want the food. This is achievable with government support and philanthropic gifts for transportation like the one we received through the Slight Family Foundation, in combination with amazing logistic partners, including Arctic Cooperatives Limited, Arctic Consultants and Uber Freight, along with essential collaboration with territorial and indigenous government representatives, communities and organizations.

● (1115)

Without a doubt, these challenges existed long before the pandemic, and although nutrition north has attempted to tackle rising food costs, statistics have continued to expose the food insecurity faced by communities, which is increasing in some communities by up to 80%.

We believe there is an opportunity for investment in an indigenous-led organization that can address and mobilize partners such as Second Harvest. There is also an opportunity to examine what strategies have worked, because as we all know, food insecurity is a serious public health issue, and one solution will not work in every community.

We also need audacious leadership and collaboration to support indigenous-led solutions to decrease and ultimately eradicate food insecurity and poverty in northern and indigenous communities.

I want to thank you for providing Second Harvest Canada an opportunity to speak. I would be happy to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation.

We are now joined by Grand Chief Garrison Settee.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee (Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc.): Good morning.

It is indeed my honour to be before the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. My name is Garrison Settee. I'm Grand Chief of the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak. It's an organization of northern Manitoba chiefs. I bring greetings on behalf of the 26 first nations that I represent. Our territory covers two-thirds of the province of Manitoba. It's a very large territory.

We have presented numerous times in front the House of Commons committees on various issues that affect our member first nations. Today, we appear before this committee to present on food security generally—not specific to the COVID global pandemic that we currently face. However, we are open to questions about the impacts of the pandemic upon our first nations.

In May of 2012, we made a submission to the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food. I now take this opportunity to provide the context on the food security issues that we face in our north, in MKO first nations. We assert that the MKO first nations express the right to food as food sovereignty, which the MKO first nations and the United Nations both recognize as a concept that is distinctly different from the concept of food security.

Food sovereignty speaks to the rights of the MKO first nations to sustainably meet our food needs in accordance with our customary food preferences and harvesting practices from our traditional territories.

I just wanted to add, before this committee, that I'm cognizant always of the fact that prior to colonization we never had to worry about food sovereignty or food security because our cultures maintained and sustained us since time immemorial. However, today, as we examine the status and state of our first nations when it comes to food security, when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to food, that is food security, but that is not the reality in which we live. It is not.

Food insecurity presents a particular serious and growing challenge in Canada's indigenous communities. There's a lot of evidence that food insecurity among northern first nations is a growing problem. It has always been a problem, but it's a growing problem that requires urgent attention to address and mitigate the serious impacts. The health and well-being of our people are in jeopardy. They're being threatened because of food insecurity. We assert that food security is encompassed within our assertion of food sovereignty.

Food insecurity is particularly concerning as it pertains to remote, isolated communities. We have 15 communities that require a winter ice road. That's how they get their food and their supplies. That door is only open three months out of the year. With climate change, that is now being threatened. The ability to access food is limited. They have a two-month opportunity, providing that the climate is cold that the roads can be used.

There are a lot of problems associated with food access with our fly-in, remote communities in our north. Limited selection of perishable foods, high food prices, escalating transportation costs, the uncertainty of travel on winter ice roads, high poverty rates and the declining use of our traditional foods have impacted food security.

We engage with other first nations to come up with plans on how we can address this. For example, community-based food action is one possible response to tackle food insecurity, alongside business activities, government programs and social policy. We have to get to the root problem of food insecurity in first nations in northern Manitoba. There must be consideration given to the empowerment and the resourcing of the first nations governments we have in our north.

● (1120)

The unilateral inclusion of Indians by the Crown in the first Constitution of Canada places them as wards of the state, and created a system of dependency, which should not exist. We should be emancipated and be a sovereign people able to determine our own destiny when it comes to food sovereignty. We should be able to move within our sphere to address our needs according to our understanding, because we know our territory.

I want to remind the standing committee that many times in my discussions with governments I said many decisions are made on our behalf without our inclusion, and sometimes those decisions are detrimental to the well-being of our indigenous first nations. So we need to continue to engage with you so that we can make decisions that will help our people instead of bringing harm to them.

The will and actions of Canada are required to make the rightful empowerment and resourcing of first nations a reality as it relates to food security. There is a treaty history amongst our nations, our people and the government. The upholding of these treaties will change the status quo. It will alter the status quo of indigenous people when these treaties are honoured.

We own up to our responsibilities to care for our earth, and our ancestors were assured food security in days that have gone by. Today we can continue to perpetuate the needs of life to our future generations. First nations and Canada need to uphold the true spirit and intent of the treaties and share the empowerment in resourcing of our ways of life, including food sovereignty.

We came here to present that there's a difference between food security and food sovereignty. We must—

• (1125)

The Chair: Chief, we're a bit over time. We need to move quickly toward a noon deadline.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: I'm basically done.

The Chair: That's good. I think we generally get the point, but more will come up in the rounds of questioning, which begins with six-minute question rounds.

Mr. Melillo, you're up for six minutes.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank all of our witnesses for joining us today.

I would like to start with Grand Chief Settee.

Grand Chief, I represent the riding of Kenora in northwestern Ontario so we're your neighbour to the east. The majority of the communities in my riding fall under Treaty 3 and Treaty 9 territory, but there's also a small sliver of Treaty 5 in my riding as well.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: Absolutely.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I think there are a lot of similarities as well between my riding and the regions you represent.

Just in talking about transportation and the infrastructure challenges, you mentioned winter roads. Those are, obviously, challenges we know very well in my region as well.

Can you expand a bit more on some of those transportation challenges and how the government can support that infrastructure?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: For housing, they need transportation. For the stocking of stores in first nations communities, they absolutely need those roads because the price of freight and cargo is astronomical. No individual alone will be able to afford to bring in food for themselves, so that's a factor and it has always been a factor.

Fifty fly-in remote communities in our first nations are suffering if they don't have those roads. Sometimes that road cannot be used because of warm weather so their opportunities are limited. Sometimes the stores struggle with supply and demand. It's a reality we live in every year. About two or three periods of the year our people are suffering with getting supplies.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Absolutely. I definitely appreciate those comments.

I think it goes into something I have been hearing a lot in my region about the need for more development, responsible development, in collaboration with northern communities and indigenous communities. I think you mentioned the empowerment aspect.

Would you agree that, in collaboration with indigenous communities and with the north, if the government were to support more economic development that would help to bridge the gap, because, obviously, there are a number of issues that contribute to the issue of food insecurity as well?

Would you agree that would help raise the standard of living as well?

• (1130)

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: In northern Canada, in first nations, usually the rate of unemployment is 85%, if not more. Economic opportunities are the thing that will bring emancipation to our people from poverty, and education is our way out of poverty. I'm a former teacher, so I've been preaching this for 20 years, that education and economic development go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other.

If you zero in on economic opportunities to enable people to be employed, I think that's moving in the right direction.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you.

I'll just ask you one more question quickly and then hopefully have some time to get to a couple of the other witnesses as well. I'll let you pick up where you left off in your opening remarks. You were talking about food sovereignty and the need for a focus on cultural and traditional foods. Has the government done enough to support that, in your view? What could the government do better to help support that?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: The ability to access our traditional foods has been limited because of development relating to hydro projects and pipelines. Our food security has been altered by that. That does not mean we can continue to exercise our right to hunt, trap and fish. Those are the things. There's a big argument, and it's political, about natural resources transfer agreements that have really impacted our first nations.

Anyway, to make a long story short, the answer is no. Not enough has been done. There needs to be more resourcing for our first nations.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate that honesty and openness. That's very good for our committee to hear.

Thank you for those comments.

I will ask Ms. Nikkel next.

This is on the transportation side as well. I'm curious to get your thoughts. Your organization, as I understand it, operates across Canada, including in the territories. Have you found difficulty with the transportation challenges that we know exist across the north?

Ms. Lori Nikkel: We're lucky because we have great partners, but we clearly can't provide the amount of food that is needed. Transportation is incredibly expensive and it's almost prohibitive for us to get food into northern communities. Also, the reality is that the land mass is so huge. It's multiple trips, but you can do only one-and-done, so you have to bring up a whole lot to support one community and hope they can store the food.

The melting of the permafrost is not helping those ice roads at all. Everything's becoming far more expensive. Getting planes out.... Perishable food is also the challenge, because the way you manage perishable food is very different from shelf-stable food in cans.

All that is to say I don't think it's news to anybody, but transportation is a huge issue in getting food to those communities.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you.

Chair, I think I'm running low on time.

The Chair: You have just 10 seconds left.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I'll give that back to you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Ms. Zann, you have six minutes. Please, go ahead.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much to the witnesses. It's very compelling testimony, and of course this committee has been hearing from a lot of people right across the country about the challenges that are facing the north and indigenous communities in terms of food security, which is such an important part of people's life and health.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): I think she's frozen, Chair.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Bob, do you want me to jump in there and let her have my remaining time?

The Chair: Okay, go ahead.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: *Tansi*, Grand Chief Settee. I'm very interested in hearing more about the whole concept of food sovereignty and if there are any best practices you can share with this committee. We've heard much about some of the good things that are happening in terms of money being put into traditional hunting and fishing. We know food security is a growing problem because of not only climate change but also the conditions you talked about and systems of colonization.

As someone who is coming to you from the Eskasoni Mi'kmaq community, I'm wondering if you could share with the committee what some of the best practices are around food sovereignty.

• (1135)

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: At the beginning of COVID, because of the limited supply of products for first nations, the community of Lac Brochet started to have a community fridge where it stored fish and game, so that people could come and just access that in the community.

That was a good way to start, because traditionally, that is how things were done. When you killed a moose, it was not your moose, it was the community's moose. The community returned to that practice, and it helped sustain it throughout that rough part of not having the stores stocked.

That is a good way of dealing with that. If we can have that continue, perpetuate that in a healthy way, and have it monitored, I think that is a way to go.

It provides therapy for young people, because when they do these things, it brings healing and calmness to their spirits and minds. That's why we have such a high rate of suicide, because they don't have access to the land. The land heals when we are allowed to exercise our rights. We're going to have fewer mental and emotional problems with our first nations, in a nutshell.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I'm glad you brought up youth. I was on the Assembly of First Nations Youth Council many years ago. I've talked to people from northern Manitoba, and they have mentioned the lack of connection with the environment, and the mental health impact that is having.

Can you speak about the impact that is having on the mental health of youth, and whether you're getting a lot of outmigration, namely, youth leaving the communities?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: Yes, that is the challenge in first nations. When you have the reality of 85% unemployment, there is very little opportunity, and that escalates into a lot of things. They try to alleviate their pain, and they turn to drugs and alcohol. They leave the community. When they leave the community, it sets up a cycle of homelessness, and all kinds of challenges if they don't have the education to secure a job.

COVID has really shone the light on a lot of the deficiencies and inadequate programs that we have in first nations, because the youth are the largest demographic. They're the ones who suffer the most. In a first nations community where they're isolated, they are now in quarantine. It exacerbates the problems. As a result, there are many mental health issues.

Being out on the land, and having access to the land, is the way our people heal themselves. That's all connected with food security. It's all connected, and everything is interrelated in our culture.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I'm glad you talked about education as well, and one of the biggest pushes—as someone from the Mi'kmaq community—is returning to land-based education.

Could you speak to us about any promising practices, or what's going on in your communities and the MKO communities about restoring that land-based learning and the connection with the environment?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: Providing that the schools are adequately funded, you can have a very successful land-based program. The Misipawistik Cree Nation is where I come from. I am a former teacher. Our school had programs, land-based language and first nations studies. I was a teacher in first nations studies.

We had a land-based program, and I could see first-hand how that helped the self-esteem of the students, the pride they got when they were able to access fish for families and whatnot. It is something that has been attacked. Our culture has been attacked, but the only way we can recover is by having access to the land which will provide food security for us.

The Chair: We now go to Ms. Bérubé, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased that you are participating in this committee. I find it very important, given the crisis and insecurity we are experiencing, especially in terms of food.

I represent the constituency of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou in Northern Quebec. The communities I represent are Cree and Anishnaabe.

My question is for the three witnesses here today.

How do you describe the factors that contribute to food insecurity and its consequences in each of your regions?

• (1140)

[*English*]

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: What's happening in the north with CAP... We have what we call PTOs, which are members of CAP on our board of directors. We have three of them up in the northern area, and we try to reach out as much as we can.

A lot of it has to do with transportation. We try to get non-perishable goods because one of the big things in the northern area is your fruits and your vegetables.

As well, with regard to our grassroots people, we don't have the sources to be able hunt and fish and store away for the winter months because the federal government doesn't recognize us as people to be able to do that.

With the COVID-19 funding, we struggle, and we do our best. We have some great people who help. In areas that we can get to, we help out and make sure they get enough food that will last them for a month. Then if they need—well, I know they need—help later, we do it all over again.

Food security is a big problem, but there has to be a way of working it out. I've listened to Ms. Nikkel and the grand chief. It may be stretching it a little bit far, but maybe we should be looking at the army. They have helicopters. They have stuff sitting around not doing anything. Maybe we should look at, not employing them,

but giving them a routine what-do-you-call-it, where they go out and recruit and load the helicopters up with food for all the communities.

Yes, we have our boys and women overseas, but, you know, we still have people here. Let's use their helicopters. Let that be part of their contribution to this pandemic. Let each one of us, as organizations, put in some money. Let's say for CAP, for instance, with our PTOs in the northern area. Let's throw in a couple of hundred thousand dollars and the same with the grand chief and maybe with Ms. Nikkel as well—and not just them but MNC, the Assembly of First Nations, and ITK. If everybody throws a big pot of money in there and says, "Okay, we're going to deliver this, and it's going to be the army that does the delivery...."

Now for the infrastructure, we may have to have the government go in and build helicopter pads or clear out a spot where these big helicopters can land.

I've been thinking about this for awhile since the northern people are having so much trouble. You know, it's an idea.

As MPs, you could maybe take that up the ladder and say, "Listen. This is what we're hearing. You know, these helicopters, they can fly anywhere in just about any kind of weather. Let's put them to use."

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: I'm done now.

The Chair: Madame Bérubé.

Ms. Lori Nikkel: I'm sorry. Can you repeat the question?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Let me repeat my question.

What factors contribute to food insecurity and what consequences does it have in each of your regions?

[*English*]

Ms. Lori Nikkel: I'm just going to start by saying that I am, again, not an expert in this at all. We work with partners and just listen to what they need.

Second Harvest is just opt in. We have food. Whoever wants it can have it, and it's perishable.

The indigenous working group was led by Joseph LeBlanc and Elisa Levi, who have worked in food systems in indigenous communities for many years. What kept popping up was this lack of centralization. Where is this one place, this indigenous-led place, where we could say, “Okay, do you have it covered? Where are all the places we can send it?” I’m not even sure if that’s possible, but I know that that was a huge barrier in the beginning. We’ve created systems to ensure that we could get food places, but we’re doing the best we can without actually knowing this centralized place to help us get food.

As soon as you said to bring in the military, I thought, “That’s brilliant. Oh my gosh, of course,” because we have the food; it is really just the transportation and understanding where the needs are—and understanding also the complexity of the cold chain.

● (1145)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, please go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, everybody. I really appreciate your testimony today.

If I could start with you, Ms. Nikkel, one of the things we’ve already heard in this study is about food being transported to very remote northern places. There are so many challenges in terms of maintaining the food viability due to a lack of food storage infrastructure. I’m just wondering if you see this—I would assume that you do—and if you could tell us what gaps are most problematic.

Ms. Lori Nikkel: It’s the cold chain. It’s always the cold chain that’s the biggest gap. At the end of the day, we have food safety compliance rules that you must adhere to, and that’s the reality. I think we’re doing all the right things, but the infrastructure is just not there. But we’re still dropping off food that I know we would not probably do in any kind of urban centre just because the infrastructure is not there.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: So that’s a big gap.

It seems to me you also talked about the expertise you’ve gathered in terms of finding creative ways to transport food. Again, we heard about bringing in the military—and I’m coming to you next, Elmer—but I’m just wondering what, in your experience, is the biggest gap. You did talk about the coordinated approach, and part of that being a challenge, as there’s not that one person to contact and say who needs what, and where.

Ms. Lori Nikkel: Again, it’s a coordinated, centralized approach. I would say that’s our biggest challenge.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay. Thank you so much.

I will come to you, National Chief St. Pierre. Thank you so much for being here today. You talked about a lot of different things in your presentation, but one of things you talked about is a sense of not being included. I was not clear on what that meant for you in terms of being included in the conversation. Perhaps you could just expand, from CAP’s experience, on what “not being included” looks like.

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: The whole thing is we’re called in at the last minute of any consultation talks and we’re not at the lead with the other NIOs. To say that we are one of the

NIOs...they call us on at the last minute, and all of a sudden everything that’s being talked about is going to hit the floor by the end of the evening, and we have a two-to-three-minute talk on anything and everything.

I’m glad that Bob included us in this, and I think there was one other under COVID that Bob invited us to and we were able to talk. With some of the big things that we were invited to it went like this: “Your mike shut off.” “Your video shut off.” “Sit in the corner and be quiet. You can all listen, and that’s it.”

But things are slowly picking up, and, like I said, we have champions like Bob and Cathy McLeod, and yourself, Rachel, making sure that CAP has a voice. We can help out. A prime example is when Ms. Nikkel said, who would have thought of the army? Let’s put them on a training base and ship food all over northern Ontario. Wherever we can’t get by vehicle, and even with the ice roads, as bad as they are getting to be, the helicopters can fly. We have enough helicopters probably right across Canada so that they wouldn’t have to fly.... I imagine in Manitoba, as a prime example—up in northern Ontario, the same thing—there must be helicopters close by. We just have to work together with Ms. Nikkel to be able to pick up the food—and the army can do that, too, because they have trucks—bring it to the helicopters, and say, “Okay, guys, you’re heading up, you know, this way, and you’re going up into northern Quebec, northern Manitoba.” They’re there. We have army guys. I’m not saying they’re sitting around doing nothing, but let’s get them out there and train them.

● (1150)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: National Chief, you also talked about the fact that food security problems were in place already prior to COVID starting. Could you just tell us a little bit about the food security issues before COVID compared to the COVID times?

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: Just like my other colleagues here and the ones before...it’s unforeseen weather. Maybe the airplanes are heading up to northern Manitoba and all of a sudden there’s a big rainstorm or whatever coming in and they can’t get there. That’s a problem. Those people in northern Manitoba may have to wait for a week before the weather clears up so these airplanes can fly again. If there was a way for them to go by boat...but with a lot of the rivers up through there, you’re looking at canoes, so you can’t put very much food in there.

It’s always been an issue for the northern people, because most of the time they can’t get the proper fruits and vegetables that the young kids and adults need. Then with the restrictions of COVID-19—well, COVID-19 now, but prior to that....

Most of our families cannot hunt or fish. Back in the day when I was a kid, my dad and my uncles all went out and hunted and fished. I'm not going to say they didn't do it the right way, but that's how we survived in the winter time.

The Chair: Elmer, we'll leave it at that.

I'm sorry, Ms. Blaney, we're over time.

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: That's okay, Bob.

The Chair: Maybe hovercraft....

We'll move on for a shortened round because we have a noon deadline.

Mr. Viersen, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our guests for joining us today. Normally we get to fly you all into Ottawa and see you in person. I apologize for that not being the case today. Nonetheless, here we are.

Mr. Settee and Mr. St. Pierre, you mentioned a bunch of the things that are perhaps going in the wrong direction when it comes to food security.

We heard that there are more cattle in the Yukon than ever before. They're starting to grow their own grain and cereal crops there, as well. I understand that the Yukon's mountainous valleys grow things quite well compared to the Canadian Shield, so I don't expect to be grain farming in northern Manitoba anytime soon. Nonetheless, livestock and animals, the harvest of caribou and things like that, do happen in your community.

One thing that hasn't been mentioned is population growth. I've been to Iqaluit and visited with Inuit people. They tell me that population is another major food problem. Not only is food tough to get, but their population has gone, over the last 50 years, from about 14,000 Inuit to about 140,000 Inuit.

I'm wondering whether that is a similar scenario where you're from.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: Absolutely.

Population explosion has altered the ability for first nations and their families to sustain themselves. The inflation of food continues to rise as the population explodes. That's the dilemma we're in.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Could you give us, in number terms, what the population has done over, say, your lifetime?

• (1155)

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: For myself—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Your own community, for example.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: There were 4,000 people in my community when I was a teenager, and now we have 8,000.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It's basically doubled.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: It's doubled, yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. St. Pierre, is it a similar story where you're from?

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: Actually, I live in the urban area of Kingston.

The numbers have grown. If you go with Stats Canada, I think there's something like 30,000 or 40,000 aboriginal people who don't belong to an organized nation, but it's part of our mandate to make sure they are looked after.

Every city is the same way. I'm not quite sure about the northern country, to be honest about it. I know that all of the urban areas are growing year after year.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Settee, one of the things I've noticed is that animal harvest is a big part of all of these northern communities. When I was up in northern Quebec, they were using the kitchen from the large performing arts centre to clean the animals. That was the largest commercial kitchen in the entire community. They were hauling the moose into the back of the performing arts centre. It seemed like an odd thing to me. They said that this was the best place they had.

Are there butcher facilities in your communities?

I know in rural Alberta many of us have participated in chicken slaughter co-ops and things like that. Is there stuff like that happening in your neck of the woods?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: As Ms. Nikkel mentioned, neither the infrastructure nor the facilities are there. We have a fish plant where our fish get treated, but as far as facilities and spaces, we only utilize the fish plant and also behind the building where they are able to look after the game. That's basically it.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

Is there any interest?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: The interest is there. If infrastructure was there, they would have people lining up to volunteer and do this for their community.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay. Interesting.

Mr. St. Pierre, I guess it's quite a different story where you're from and the people that you represent.

The Chair: You only have 10 seconds.

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: When we do hunt, by that time, all our people pretty well know how to harvest and to do their own cutting up and everything. If not, there are local butcher shops in the countryside where a lot of our hunters take their deer or moose—whatever the case may be—to get cut up and wrapped.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Zann, please go ahead for five minutes.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

Hopefully I won't get interrupted again. Sorry about that folks. My Internet became unplugged.

Ms. Nikkel, first of all I just want to say thank you so much for all the work you're doing for Second Harvest. It's an amazing organization. You've definitely helped so many people across the country including in my riding of Cumberland—Colchester here in Nova Scotia. I was very glad to receive communications from you saying that you provided 2,789 kilograms of food, a donation value of \$17,453 and \$65,800 in federal funding to support the emergency food access needs for seven different non-profit and charitable organizations in my riding. I'm really grateful.

Also, I know that you are concerned about the surplus food rescue program, which has done so much good work. You would like to see the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada continue to invest in this program.

Do you want to elaborate on that a little bit for us, please?

Ms. Lori Nikkel: Sure.

The federal government—Agriculture and Agri-Food—has food security funding. They allocated about \$250 million. We were grateful that we were one of the organizations selected. We've allocated grants. There is a surplus food rescue program, which I think is critical because not only does it actually help get food to people, it ensures that the producers can be paid for the food. We can process it properly. Then we can distribute it to northern communities and it's all paid for. It also it doesn't go into landfills creating greenhouse gases. There's this win-win-win.

I am a strong proponent of not only keeping this during COVID; there's a definite legacy program here. We have to address this enormous amount of food we have in Canada that is just going into landfill.

Thank you for giving me that opportunity. I would appreciate it if everybody could support and advocate for the continuation of the surplus food rescue program.

• (1200)

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

Yes, I think it's so important.

As I was starting to ask before my Internet got interrupted, you had said it cost \$85,000 to transport one lot of food up to the north. Do you have any ability to have greenhouses in, for instance mobile units to be able to help communities?

Do you have any kind of access to that sort of support?

Ms. Lori Nikkel: No, and to be fair, that's not what we do. We just rescue food and get it there. All the other stuff is for other people.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Right. So the \$85,000 is just in transportation costs.

Ms. Lori Nikkel: That's it. Yes.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Yes. That seems like an awful lot, but if we can support you in any way, shape or form here, financially, I certainly think that the program you're doing is worthwhile and needs to be continued. Again, I want to thank you so much.

I want to ask the other witnesses something. If you have a brief request of this committee, what would be your number one priority that you would like to get to government for us to support?

Mr. St. Pierre, would you like to go first?

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: I think the main thing would be to get the food to our northern outreach communities, which are hard to reach, to start out with. As I said, maybe your committee could go to the government and say, “listen, here's a great idea”—well, I think it's a great idea—“let's use the army.” Give them some basic training so if something ever happened in the world we would have an army that would go out and do their thing.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Go ahead, Mr. Settee.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: I think that food sovereignty is something that we need to examine, and we are able and ready to engage with the government. If you want to move forward on any issue to bring food, we are here. We're all standing by to facilitate the process and we can.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

The Chair: I was intending to complete each party. I have Madam Bérubé and Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes each, so, I think we should allow them to ask their questions.

Madam Bérubé, please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What recommendations would you like to see in the final report of our study on food security?

[English]

The Chair: Does Elmer or anybody else want to answer?

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: I will still emphasize that we have to get the food up into the northern communities. It's as simple as that. If it means that we need to use the army—

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: A point of order, Mr. Chair. We have no interpretation.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, do we have an issue with translation?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Naaman Sugrue): No, I don't think so. I hear it now, so we'll attempt to continue.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

National Chief Elmer St. Pierre: As I was saying, I still emphasize that I'd like to see in your report that using the army to transport food into the northern communities was mentioned. Whether it's in the summertime or wintertime, either way, we have to get the food up into the northern communities. It's as simple as that. If not, we're going to have people starving or they are just going to be sick. We have to make sure that our brothers and sisters in the north are properly looked after.

So if you put in a report that one of the witnesses said something about the army, I'd be willing to talk to the transportation, anybody, about it.

• (1205)

The Chair: Mr. Settee, do you have a response for Madam Bérubé?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: I think that the need is critical. We're in dire straits. We need to have a process that we can all work with. I think developing a process that works would be the answer to addressing the food insecurity.

The Chair: Ms. Nikkel.

Ms. Lori Nikkel: I would go back to the centralization of an indigenous-led process group that can get the food up there and the surplus rescue food program.

The Chair: That's about time right there, so, we'll move quickly now to Ms. Blaney to conclude.

Please go ahead, Rachel.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for those recommendations. I really appreciate them.

Grand Chief Settee, one of the things you talked about in your introduction to us was how decisions are made by government that are not good for the nation, and how that impacts food sovereignty.

I'm just wondering if you could talk about or maybe give an example of how decisions are made without the nation and what challenges face you directly around food sovereignty.

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: I have a whole speech on this, but I will condense it into one statement.

We need our first nations to have the ability to make those decisions for themselves, because they know their people, they know their culture and they know their lifestyle. If you have people making decisions on their behalf, they're going to make all kinds of errors. Diabetes is killing us, and we're going to receive products high in sugar and sodium. That's killing us. Think of alternatives.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: The other thing you talked about was education, and the supports that are required for youth and mental health. I imagine that food sovereignty has a huge impact on the mental health of young people. Are you getting the appropriate supports, and how is food sovereignty specifically impacting the mental health of young people?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: Our education funding is low. It's not meeting the requirement. We can't have programs, such as land-based training and education with a land-based approach. It's not there, so we're robbing Peter to pay Paul many times to get a program going.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Is the mental health issue really impacted by on the land education?

Grand Chief Garrison Settee: Absolutely. It brings healing, when there is an opportunity to go out on the land. The mind and emotions are settled. Self-esteem is critical.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. Those are all the questions I have.

The Chair: Thanks very much. Thank you to all of our witnesses today. I'm sorry we have to move on to other business, so I will say thanks very much for your testimony. If there's anything further that you felt we needed to hear, you can submit written testimony, and we'll be happy to receive it.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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