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Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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• (1840)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.)): Colleagues, I call the meeting to order. We're going to get started now.

First of all, I apologize to Ms. Taylor Roy and to the other gentleman. Your name is kind of out of the screen, but I think it's Mr. Pernal. We are having technical issues with anyone who is outside of this committee room right now.

We're going to just hold and stand pat. I need to address my committee about how we want to proceed. We're pretty much batting 1,000% for anyone who is virtual. The sound is just not meeting the requisite requirements for our translation team here in the room.

Colleagues, with that said, I have Tom Rosser here from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Our folks from PMRA and CFIA are all participating virtually. At this stage of the game, it looks as though they will not be able to participate, based on what I'm being told by my clerk and the technical team.

We do have two witnesses who are here in person for the second panel, and they've travelled a great distance, from Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan. I think it would be absolutely imperative that they be on the record, given that they are here in person. We have to make sure that happens today.

My inclination would be that we try to proceed with those who are able to be on the record here.

We have Mr. Guzman, who was going to be participating virtually. Based on what I know right now, that's not going to happen tonight, for whatever reason.

I think we would be better off to go with a panel of about 90 minutes, if I call up the two witnesses who are already here for the second panel. We can move ahead with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and reinstate the witnesses who are unable to make it from the government agency.

Colleagues, that's the best we can do tonight. I think we'll do three rounds of questions. We have about 90 minutes. We'll leave ample time for opening statements from our folks, and that's how we'll proceed.

I will look for guidance from my committee members.

Go ahead, Mr. Barlow.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): I think that's probably the most prudent approach to take, unfortunately. I would hope we

would address whatever the problem is with this room for a future meeting, or whatever seems to be the issue.

I don't know whether we'll need the full 90 minutes, but I think that's the best path forward: deal with the ones in one panel who are here. Unfortunately, for those who are here on video, we'll have to reschedule.

The Chair: Okay, we're good.

Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Berg, I don't mean to put you on the spot, but we're going to expedite you by about an hour. If you wouldn't mind coming up to the front of the room, maybe we'll have the clerk address you.

Colleagues, we'll take a few more minutes and then we're going to proceed.

To our folks who are online, I know you have your technical headsets. Normally we don't have issues, but, for whatever reason, we do, and I have to take my direction from the folks in the translation booth about their health and safety. We will reschedule you and we will make sure that the room is better equipped, or we'll try to have you come in person and get this solved.

Madam Clerk, I'll ask you to reach out to Mr. Guzman and perhaps mention that we are having technical difficulties and will have to reschedule.

Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Berg, if you could kindly come up to the front of the room and join Mr. Rosser, we'll get started in just a few minutes.

Thanks, colleagues. We'll pause until that time.

• (1845)

Colleagues, now we are going to get started.

Welcome to meeting number 58 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

As I mentioned in my previous remarks, we're having technical difficulties for those witnesses seeking to participate virtually, so we're going to move forward with the hybrid panel and the folks in the room.

We have Tom Rosser, who serves with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Thank you, Tom, for being here today. You are no stranger to this committee.

We also have Jake Berg, who serves as the chair of the Canadian Honey Council. I believe he resides in Saskatchewan. Welcome to the committee, and thank you for making the trip in.

From Oxford Frozen Foods Ltd., we have John Hamilton, who serves in Nova Scotia. It's great to have a fellow Bluenoser before the committee. Thanks for making the trip to be here.

Folks, normally it would be about five minutes in terms of opening statements. I'd ask you to keep it around that, but we obviously have a little bit of flexibility, given what has transpired.

Let me just read out one more thing before I get in trouble.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by the committee on Wednesday, October 5, 2022, and Monday, April 17, 2023, the committee is resuming its study of the environmental contribution of agriculture, with this meeting being specific to the topic of bee mortality. I know we have great folks in front of us to talk about that very important subject.

Tom, I'm going to start with you, from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. You can lead off, and then we'll go down the line.

[Translation]

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

It's good to be back with you. Thanks for inviting me, in the context of your study on the environmental contribution of agriculture, to this discussion about pollinator mortality.

I thank the committee for dedicating time specifically to Canada's beekeeping sector.

Honeybee pollination is an important aspect of food security—from canola to berries to tree fruits, to vegetables.

The federal government, along with the provincial and territorial governments, continue to work closely together to help Canadian beekeepers meet contemporary challenges in order to contribute to maintaining a sustainable beekeeping population. As well, federal business risk management programs are there to help beekeepers facing financial losses. This includes including mortality coverage under AgriInsurance. Federal, provincial and territorial support for the sector will continue for the next five years under a new agreement, the sustainable Canadian agricultural partnership.

The department also supports leading-edge research in the bee sector, including our work at the Beaverlodge Research Farm in Alberta, on the detection and management of bee diseases and pests.

[English]

In fact, I had very much hoped today to be joined by a colleague, Dr. Stephen Pernal, who is from Beaverlodge, Alberta. Unfortunately, due to technical difficulties, he won't be able to participate here today, but I hope that at some point the committee will have an

opportunity to benefit from his expertise and hear from him directly.

Among the projects he's involved in, he's among the AAFC scientists partnering with several Canadian universities on genomics research to help increase detection of the effects of pesticides on honeybees so producers can take quick action to make any management changes they need.

From 2014 to 2017, we collaborated on a national surveillance project to establish a bee health database in Canada to help track pests, pathogens and chemical residues in Canadian honeybee colonies.

To help beekeepers build resilience and sustain and grow their hives, last year we launched a joint industry-government honeybee sustainability working group. This working group has been looking at short- and long-term solutions to respond to overwinter losses and other challenges to produce and maintain a high quality of honeybees and colonies.

The working group developed an action plan to improve the long-term sustainability of Canadian beekeeping, honey and pollination sectors. The plan, along with its recommendations, will be shared with federal, provincial and territorial ministers at their annual conference in a couple of months' time.

The working group covered topics such as federal-provincial technology transfer teams and programs, AI and other techniques in the pipeline, the development of varroa control products and methods, maintaining and increasing domestic bee supplies, and addressing import bee supplies.

This effort was a broad-based undertaking, involving FPT governments and provincial beekeeping associations as well as the Canadian Association of Professional Apiculturists and the Canadian Honey Council, from whom you'll be hearing very shortly.

Right across Canada, our beekeepers continue to work diligently to grow their operations. For our part, we will continue to consult with all, including the Canadian Honey Council, the Fruit and Vegetable Growers of Canada and other key provincial and industry stakeholders.

To conclude, the federal government remains fully engaged and focused in supporting this important driver of our sector, our food security and our economy.

Thank you again. I look forward to our discussion.

● (1850)

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

We'll now turn to Mr. Berg.

You have around five minutes, but we have some leniency this afternoon.

It's over to you.

Mr. Jake Berg (Chair, Canadian Honey Council): Thank you, Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to discuss honeybee mortality in Canada.

As an industry, the honeybee sector packs a punch far greater than people realize. The multi-billion-dollar canola industry relies on 60,000 to 80,000 colonies each year to pollinate seed canola in southern Alberta, and the industry is now expanding into Saskatchewan. Well over 100,000 colonies pollinate blueberries and cranberries in eastern Canada. About 30,000 pollinate highbush blueberries in B.C.

Even with that, we know we are short of colonies that are dedicated to pollination, and there's an ongoing discussion as to how short we really are. Nevertheless, these things, combined with honey production and pollination of various other fruits and vegetables, make our sector an integral component of the agricultural sector in general and an absolutely key contributor to agricultural sustainability in Canada.

As a commercial beekeeper, every spring I am unsure as to what my stock losses will be until I get the chance to open the lid of the hive and inspect the colony. Some years are better than others. In 2022 there was a historically bad loss across most of Canada, with 45% of the honey bee colonies dying. That stock loss had devastating impacts on many beekeepers. While they are not exactly comparable, it is hard to imagine any other managed stock operations losing even half of that number. That 45% loss was 10% higher than the next-highest recorded loss in 2008. It is still too early to tell this year, but many beekeepers are banking on having significantly better overwintering results.

The most frequently cited causes of colony losses are ineffective varroa control, poor queens and weak colonies in the fall.

To address bee mortality, in April of 2022 the federal government launched the industry-government honeybee sustainability working group, comprising federal and provincial representatives, industry partners, researchers and beekeeper representatives. A smaller subgroup worked on putting together a report that was finalized earlier this year. They prioritized recommendations that would go a long way in addressing honey bee mortality issues.

The first priority was for support for provincial and regional tech transfer teams. Tech transfer teams help beekeepers identify bee health risk issues in their stock and do applied research. They are a key resource with respect to treatment options. Currently nearly every tech transfer team's future is in doubt, as funding is difficult to secure and the industry cannot handle the financial burden alone.

In support of this priority, the Canadian Honey Council has put together a proposal for the federal government to single-source fund each tech transfer team with \$150,000 per year to allow for the hiring of one person and to cover expenses to conduct projects that are national in scope on things such as using the same testing parameters to gauge the efficacy of Apivar across Canada, our main varroa control product.

This leads nicely into the second priority item, which is actions to accelerate the development of new varroa control products. Bee-

keepers know that it's only a matter of time before Apivar loses its efficacy, and currently there is no replacement available. We know that research is being conducted on some active ingredients that may prove effective and that new and innovative treatments are in the works, but the reality of the situation is that nothing is certain and the future is in doubt.

Supporting increased domestic stock production and addressing the challenges of importing stock round out the top four priorities. The COVID crisis highlighted the precariousness of the sector as it relates to both stock and labour, as flights were cancelled, impacting imported queens and packaged supplies and the manpower needed to efficiently handle apiary activities. While imported stock supplies remain a hot topic, the absolute need to increase domestic stock supplies should and does remain a key issue in maintaining a healthy supply of bees.

I look forward to questions and discussions concerning bee mortality.

• (1855)

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

Last but not least, we have Mr. Hamilton. It's over to you.

Mr. John C. Hamilton (Apiary Manager, Nova Scotia Apiaries Divisions, Oxford Frozen Foods Ltd.): Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank you very much for having me come here tonight.

First of all, I want to acknowledge today that I hail from the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia, located in the traditional land and the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people, who have stewarded this land for centuries.

I'm here to speak in favour of allowing packaged honeybees to be imported into Canada from northern California.

I am a generational beekeeper from Saskatchewan. I was born and raised there. My parents were life members of the Saskatchewan Beekeepers Association. My grandfather helped start the Saskatchewan Beekeepers Association. I was a director before I moved to Nova Scotia.

Prior to moving to Nova Scotia in 1992, I had my own commercial bee operation in Saskatchewan. When the provincial meetings were held to discuss the closing of the border, I voted back then, in 1986, to close the border to prevent the invasion of various foreign pests into our hives. I believe it is time to re-evaluate the risk assessment, since the results of the 2014 assessment on border closure are no longer accurate.

In the spring of 1992, we moved to Nova Scotia to work for the Bragg Food Group, which is the largest producer in the world of wild blueberries. The company has become one of the largest beekeepers in Canada, with commercial operations in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Ontario. All of this has been driven by the closure of the Canada-U.S. border and the lack of a reliable source of hives for pollination.

I was allowed to speak before the Senate on this very same topic back in 2015, I believe. While we were unsuccessful then, I believe that by my presence here today I am proof of our beliefs and our resolve.

We spoke to the Senate about the development of an additional 13,000 acres of wild blueberry land that our company had started to develop in northern New Brunswick and about the future needs of pollination of this land. The development is almost complete now, and the need for bees has increased. We expect to need four hives to the acre to pollinate that land. Where are all the honeybees going to come from?

During the past eight years, our company has been growing our hive numbers, along with investing in infrastructure. This year, our company has purchased 3,000 packages of honeybees from Australia to pollinate our wild blueberries and those of our customers. This is on top of our existing operations of close to 20,000 hives.

At this point, I would like to comment on the report by the industry-government honeybee sustainability working group. I believe it deserves to be mentioned that as the largest beekeeper/blueberry grower in Canada, and 100% Canadian-owned, we can't understand why we weren't invited to at least make a presentation to this group. There was no communication whatsoever.

Personally, I read the report and felt that they did not address the lack of pollinators for wild blueberry pollination or the high winter loss of hives.

I would also like to comment on the report by Dr. Albert Robertson, who has extensive experience working in northern California with honeybee queen producers. He feels that we now already have any issues that they have. I feel that the monsters of the past have been put to bed—

- (1900)

The Chair: Mr. Hamilton, I'm just going to stop you for a second. Your papers are rubbing up against the mike a bit.

I know that you're reading off your paper, but could you just make sure that it's not touching your microphone? We're getting just a bit of feedback, which isn't good for our interpretation team.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: That's fine.

I believe the monsters of the past have been put to bed and that we should move forward with science-based decisions and not more scare tactics.

There are people who believe that beekeepers should build a new industry to supply our own replacement stock. We've had over 30 years to accomplish this. The border closed in 1987, and that hasn't come about. I believe it is time to quit subsidizing this endeavour. This is a non-tariff trade barrier.

How is the commercial beekeeper suffering 80% winter loss ever going to rebuild? The financial costs are staggering. We have a contractor involved with us who this spring has lost 80% of his hives. He is buying 6,000 packages at about \$300 apiece. He had to sell property to be able to get the \$1.8 million to replace those hives. That's his equity. That's his retirement fund. He doesn't have a pension. He owns a bee business. Why is the growth of the wild blue-

berry industry in eastern Canada being held back by an unsustainable dream?

I formally request that this committee properly fund a science-based review of importing honeybee packages from northern California into Canada to fill the need for reasonably priced replacement colonies and to provide enough pollinator units to cover our growing pollination needs in eastern Canada.

Thank you very much. I am open for questions.

I apologize for the paper.

The Chair: It's all good. Thank you, Mr. Hamilton.

We'll do just that. We'll turn it over to questions. I'm going to start, I believe, with Mr. Barlow.

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

Thanks to our witnesses for being a little bit flexible with the timing. Certainly the technical issues are out of everyone's control, so it's great that you're able to do this.

Mr. Hamilton, I'll start with you. I had the pleasure of touring Oxford's head office in Nova Scotia last summer. It's a great operation. It's good to see the commitment of that business to the region.

You mentioned opening the border. We wrote a letter to the Minister of Agriculture, actually exactly a year ago today, asking for many of these things that you are requesting and to reassess the risks of importing hives from some of those regions in the United States. As a matter of fact, we've never had a response from the Minister of Agriculture to those requests to reopen the evaluation process. If the agriculture committee also doesn't get a response from the Minister of Agriculture on a request of that nature, I can understand how frustrated you must certainly be, given how important this is to your industry.

Just to continue on our letter and maybe some of the comments you made, what has changed between the time of that border closing, which you said you voted in favour of, in the late 1980s and now? Why do you feel a risk assessment is warranted now? Are the same concerns that were there when the border was closed no longer there? What has changed specifically that should no longer be a concern?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: We've had time. We've figured it out. In the United States, there are lots of commercial bee groups that post regularly. They had a fabulous, although wet, almond pollination this year. All the bees seem to be coming back in really good hive strengths. They have figured out pretty much all of the problems.

We actually exterminated hives that had tracheal mites. Then varroa came along, but we adapted. Now small hive beetles have come in. Hive beetles in southern Ontario are in our operation in Wellandport. Quite frankly, wax moth is a way worse pest than hive beetle is

These are all the monsters that have been brought out. Africanized honeybee is another monster that just keeps getting brought up, and it hasn't moved north. I was in Florida last winter talking to a beekeeper. They sell queens, and they were in a panic because they have to send their progeny away to have DNA testing to make sure they don't have Africanized bees in their stock. They aren't shipping to Canada. They're just shipping in Florida. That's what they're doing in Florida.

Right across the southern United States, they're figuring out how to deal with Africanized bees and how to deal with varroa. Back in 1986 and 1987, we didn't know how we were going to do it. There are new chemicals coming out. The whole idea, to my mind, was that we had time to defer things. Now it's time.

• (1905)

Mr. John Barlow: I guess it would be two things. You have very specific mitigation protocols to deal with those pest mites or Africanized bees. That would be one thing: There are some very specific mitigation strategies in place. It also sounds like the other thing is maybe addressing some of the misinformation that was out there about some of these “monsters”, as you called them. Both of those things have come into play over the last 30 years or 35 years to address that, so we should be reassessing our risk management around importing these bees from the United States.

Mr. Berg, you mentioned about how important the domestic supply would be to the future of this industry. What has been holding back the development of a domestic supply? Are there some things that need to happen to ensure that we can reverse that downward trend when it comes to replenishing our hives with a domestic supply?

Mr. Jake Berg: There isn't any one particular thing that has been holding the domestic supply back. It's the development of that supply system and getting some of the larger pollinators to accept the fact that there could be a domestic supply.

It's being done, particularly in the province of Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan is probably the province closest to self-sufficiency when it comes to a large number of colonies.

That being said, the domestic supply could be part of the answer. It will never be the whole answer, but it could be developed into a larger piece of the pie.

Mr. John Barlow: You both mentioned that a North American bee strategy of importing from the States and also having a domestic supply would maybe be helpful for all of these problems.

Is that something that's being worked on, and are we an active participant in that?

Mr. Jake Berg: I don't believe there is a North American strategy, mainly because the U.S.-Canada border has been closed since 1987. Going forward, that could be part of a new risk assessment and how that could possibly operate.

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Hamilton, do you have any comments?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: I believe that in the last year there has been quite an expanded interest by the Americans. Up until recently, they have just stayed out of the whole affair. However, I think it's economics. They see it as another income stream.

I'm not saying that the domestic bee supply thing is going to be done with if we start bringing them in. To be honest, in northern California, I don't think there are enough bees to fill the void. I think there's a lot, but not what we need in total.

I honestly think that once we get the Canadian border, then we're going to have some provinces saying that their borders are closed, but maybe the next one accepts them. It's not going to be a done deal to be able to buy packages into, say New Brunswick. It's going to have to be decided provincially first.

The Chair: We're going to leave it at that.

Thank you, Mr. Hamilton. Thank you, Mr. Barlow.

We will go to Ms. Valdez now, for up to six minutes.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses who have joined this committee.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I will direct my questions to Mr. Rosser first.

Can you provide an update on what the department is doing to help improve the health of honeybees in Canada, in addition to the working group that you mentioned in your opening remarks?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for the question.

As I alluded to in my opening remarks, we have an established research program whereby we collaborate with universities in the development of new control products and the like. Beekeepers, as do other agricultural producers, have access to our business risk management programs. Our AgriInsurance program, for example, has provided support to producers who have suffered significant, elevated levels of overwinter losses.

A number of the provincial initiatives that the other witnesses mentioned are oftentimes cost-shared. It's a provincial program, provincially administered, but many of those programs are cost-shared on a sixty-forty basis between the federal government and provincial governments.

As I believe I alluded to in my opening remarks, we hope shortly to present a series of recommendations to federal, provincial and territorial ministers on other additional measures that they might consider to help improve the sustainability of bee populations in Canada. I believe that this work is timely, in the sense that we're just a few weeks into the Canadian agricultural partnership. With many of the science and other programs that are funded through that framework, there is an opportunity, I think, to assess where this sector best fits within that suite.

• (1910)

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

Are you able to provide an update on our current diagnostic capacity for testing and measuring bee health?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I regret very much that some of my colleagues who have deeper technical expertise than I have weren't able to join, and who I'm sure could provide a more comprehensive answer than I'm able to, other than it is an area where I know that we are actively engaged in research.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Hopefully, we'll see if you can answer this one as well.

In 2016, the department initiated a project that would document the prevalence of newly introduced parasites. If you're aware of any of those, do you have any updates on that project?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I'm afraid, Mr. Chair, that I'm not able to speak to that, but I'm sure that if the committee is able to hear from some of my colleagues at a subsequent hearing, they could speak to it.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: No worries. I'll move on. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Berg, do you know which sectors within bees have the highest mortality rates? Is it honeybees, alfalfa leafcutting bees or bumblebees?

Mr. Jake Berg: Alfalfa leafcutter bees and bumblebees would be a different sector altogether. We're typically only dealing with honeybees in the honey production and also in this type of pollination.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

In your opening, you were saying that honey production has been depleted significantly. Can you give us any context in terms of how it's declined year over year?

Mr. Jake Berg: Honey production in the last couple of years has declined slightly, although it's not so much related to hive health as just hive numbers.

The bigger problem here is the actual hive loss that occurred in 2022. That loss was spread across all forms of honeybee occupations within that sector. Honey production and pollination both had very large losses, and I don't believe there was much differentiation between the bees that were used in honey production and the bees that were used in pollination.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

In your opening, you mentioned research. What recommendations to this committee can you make to help with the research and innovation you were speaking about?

Mr. Jake Berg: The one big thing this committee could recommend would be the increase in funding for the tech transfer teams and then also helping to expedite the development of new varroa control products. The varroa control products are really our Achilles heel in this situation.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

Are you familiar with the national bee farm-level biosecurity standard?

Mr. Jake Berg: I'm sorry. The national...?

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: It's the national bee farm-level biosecurity standard.

Mr. Jake Berg: I am not aware of that program.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: I was going to ask that.... I'm just trying to readjust my questions because the witnesses have changed, but no worries. I will move on.

My final question is for Mr. Hamilton.

We know that bee diseases and pests can spread between countries through the international trade in bees, especially packaged bees. In your opening, you were trying to support and encourage bringing them into Canada. Can you describe what opportunities you would see opening up for us here in Canada?

• (1915)

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Well, we'd be able to produce a lot more wild blueberries if we had packaged bees. A package of honeybees is basically as clean a product as you can bring. All you're bringing is bees. You're not bringing any of the comb or honey or any of the other products that can carry disease, so that actually limits it.

As I said in my presentation, we're already bringing in queens from northern California. I think Mr. Robertson figured that because of all the queens we brought in.... To date, we've brought in about 6,000 packages already, just in little crates, at three or four at a time. If we can get the queens from there, why can't we get packages from there?

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Valdez.

Thank you, Mr. Hamilton.

We're going to go to Monsieur Savard-Tremblay, but before we do, I want to recognize that we have some visiting members: Mr. Viersen and Mr. Shields on behalf of some Conservative members, and Monsieur Lauzon for Monsieur Drouin.

[Translation]

Welcome to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food.

Mr. Savard-Tremblay, you have the floor.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Hello.

I want to thank the committee again for having me. I'm starting to become a regular and a serial substitute. It's always a pleasure to join you.

I also want to thank all of the witnesses for their presentations and their testimony.

My question is for Mr. Berg.

Mr. Berg, one witness, Mr. Hamilton, told us about the losses in beehives. How do you explain such phenomenal and gigantic losses?

[English]

Mr. Jake Berg: The gigantic losses that have been occurring are typically being cited as lack of varroa control, poor queen quality and also small cluster size or small colony size in the fall prior, probably rated in that exact order, with varroa control being the number one issue here.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Exactly, a lot of beekeepers are telling us about varroa. It would seem that this problem is going to be increasingly common and severe. We really are talking about a parasite that literally feeds on pollinators.

First, can you confirm the link with climate change that many beekeepers seem to be saying exists?

[English]

Mr. Jake Berg: I don't know that I could confirm that there's a link between varroa and climate change. Varroa has been an ongoing issue in Canada since the early 1990s. It was an imported pest brought into Canada in packaged bees. That was before my time in beekeeping.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I understand that the problem started before the beginning and amplification of climate change. But is climate change going to contribute to exacerbating the problem?

[English]

Mr. Jake Berg: I don't know that we could make that particular link. The big link that needs to be made is that the beekeeping industry as a whole needs more varroa control product, and/or a new one.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: What measures do you think we can take, as parliamentarians? What can we do? How can we help out in the fight against the threat associated with parasites?

[English]

Mr. Jake Berg: An increase in funding in research in varroa mite control products would probably be the best solution in this case.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: So you are telling us that funding for research to develop new products to combat varroa needs to be increased.

Is that right?

[English]

Mr. Jake Berg: It's research of new control products.

• (1920)

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Very good.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have used half your speaking time. You have three minutes left.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: That's excellent.

Mr. Hamilton, would you like to add something, given that you have addressed the question? Do you see the link between climate change and exacerbation of the problem associated with parasites?

[English]

Mr. John C. Hamilton: I don't think I'm qualified to say whether it's related to climate change, but I would very strongly like to reinforce Jake's comments that we need new products. We're seeing the end of the Apivar strips, and there is an oxalic treatment that I can't use because I cannot.... I work for a limited company that is actually one of the top 50 companies in Canada, and I'm unable to use a product. It's glycerin with oxalic acid. It's under review, but I can't use it because it's not a legal treatment in Canada. I was in a bee yard with another beekeeper, and he said to me, "Jack, you're a fool for not doing it. It works really good," and I said, "I can't use it. It's illegal."

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: We understand what you are saying about products very well.

But even though you say you are not qualified to comment on the question of climate change, you do confirm that reproduction of the larva is facilitated by heat.

Is that correct?

[English]

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes, it would be, but if you get the treatments at the proper times, it defeats the climate change advantage for the mite.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Thank you, Mr. Hamilton.

Mr. Berg, since you work at the Canadian Honey Council, I would like to tell you about what has been said by some beekeepers: that new beekeepers don't have enough training to do their work properly.

Do you know whether a standard curriculum is offered in educational institutions in Quebec and in the Canadian provinces?

[English]

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds, Mr. Berg.

Mr. Jake Berg: There are a couple of different institutions that do offer beekeeping training, although there is no national-based beekeeping course that could be offered. That could also be part of the solution, but the bigger thing here would be more access. As my colleague Mr. Hamilton was referring to, there are some treatments that we know work, but they haven't been approved yet.

The Chair: Thank you to you both.

We'll now go to Mr. MacGregor for up to six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Rosser, we limit packaged bees coming in to Canada from Australia, Chile and New Zealand. Those three countries share a characteristic in that they are separated from other countries. Australia and New Zealand are naturally islands, and Chile has the Andes mountains.

I'm trying to understand the discrepancy as to why we restrict packaged bees to those countries, and probably I've outlined the answer. Why then do we also allow queens to come in from California and Hawaii? What is the main difference there?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I thank the hon. member for the question.

I will answer it, although I should preface it. If my CFIA colleagues were able to join, the regulator could give a more authoritative answer.

My understanding is that for any potential foreign source of bees, the CFIA will undertake a risk assessment of that country.

The member is quite right that a large number of the packaged bees come from the southern hemisphere, in part reflecting the work done by the working group. Some other geographic priorities have recently been identified as potential sources. My understanding is that the CFIA has now authorized the importing of packaged bees from Italy. I know we're in active discussions with Ukraine. I believe Ukraine has also been approved as a source of bees. It's based on a risk assessment of the relative risks of bringing in bees from that country.

In terms of packaged bees versus queens, my layperson's understanding is that with a larger number of animals, it's harder to screen them visually or otherwise. That's why they are perceived to be a higher risk than the importation of queens.

● (1925)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Hamilton, if we were to change the rules on packaged bees, I guess the immediate beneficial impact would be that you would have more availability to choose from. Is it costs that you assume would go down because of the distance in transport, or does northern California have a larger stock and is able to sell at a better price than what's available from Chile, New Zealand and Australia?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: The bees coming from New Zealand and Australia are going into winter. The bees coming out of California are spring bees. Almond pollination starts on Valentine's Day. A month later it's finished, and there isn't really anything from then until June. There are minor pollination crops throughout the United States, but the big honey crops come from alfalfa and clover later in the year. There's an ample surplus of bees at that time of year, because they're big, strong colonies and you can shake them. It's really quite effective. They are spring bees. They are not bees that are going into fall or winter in Australia and New Zealand. They are local bees.

I keep wanting to go back to.... There are not enough that we're going to deplete the business for people in different provinces who are operating a local industry, because I'm sure the Americans are.... Right now, a package of bees in California is worth \$120 U.S. We're paying \$285 to deliver it to the Halifax airport, so—

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I just want to get to some other questions.

Varroa have been a big subject today. I guess it's my understanding that with the packages of bees we import, there's been no immunity developed naturally or through breeding techniques abroad to make any kind of resistance to varroa possible. Is that right? You're basically importing them to replace ones that have been lost to the mite, right? You're just trying to replenish populations. We haven't figured that piece of the puzzle out yet.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: They have bees that are naturally hygienic, but it's a recessive trait. Anybody who has bees they don't treat will see them die.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I have someone from Vancouver Island who is involved in a non-profit called Ensure Hive Future. He is working, really, on trying to develop, through breeding, a honeybee that fits with Vancouver Island's characteristics. Varroa are a big issue, and he is really trying to develop traits that would make bees resistant to varroa.

I know, Mr. Rosser, that you don't have the expertise, but can you tell us, from a 30,000-foot level, whether there is research going on in this area? Has there been any promise in the breeding programs, or are we just, for the foreseeable future, going to have to rely on chemical and synthetic methods to take care of this pest?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Again, Mr. Chair, I regret that my colleague couldn't join us. Dr. Pernal was telling me today about collaborative research he's doing with somebody at Simon Fraser University on new varroa control projects, so I guess the short answer is yes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Then—

The Chair: Mr. MacGregor, I apologize. We're at time, but you're going to—

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I'm only at five minutes and eighteen seconds.

The Chair: I have you at six minutes.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Oh, okay. Sorry. I may have started the clock a little bit late.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I'll leave it there, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm pretty fair to you. I would have given you a few seconds, but you were just winding up, and then that would have been another minute and a half. You'll get another crack at it.

I'm going to go to Mr. Viersen for five minutes. Then we're going to go to the Liberals. We'll do two and a half and two and a half minutes, and then we'll do a third round.

Certainly, Alistair, if you have any further questions, we won't be too strict here tonight.

Mr. Viersen, you have five minutes.

• (1930)

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Mr. Hamilton, can you just restate your opening request about opening the border?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: My initial request was that I am here to speak in favour of allowing packages of honeybees to be imported into Canada from northern California.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You would recommend that.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: I would recommend that, but I understand that we have to have the risk assessment.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I'm from northern Alberta. Falher, Alberta, the honey capital of Canada, is in my riding. I think we need to make it clear for this committee that honeybees wouldn't exist in northern Alberta if people didn't bring them there. Is that a correct statement?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: That's very correct.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Everybody I talk to about all the honeybees dying and things like that... Really, these bees wouldn't exist if we didn't bring them here. Then we lock them up in a little box, wrap it in a sleeping bag for the whole winter and then open it up in the spring and hope that some have survived in there. Is that a correct statement?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: In my case, it is indoors, but it's still putting them in a dark room for five months.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Out our way, they wrap them in what looks like a black sleeping bag and hope for the best.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: What's interesting about Australia, New Zealand and Chile is that they don't have minus 40°. California doesn't have minus 40°. Trying to make these honeybees survive minus 40° is what the game is all about, is it not?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Would you say that DNA testing has gotten dramatically better since 1987?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: I would say so, yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Therefore we can test quickly for Africanized bees. It's a lot cheaper now than it was in 1987.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes, I think so. It's a lot quicker, too. They're doing a lot of it. As I said, when I talked to the Florida breeder, I was really quite surprised that they could not sell queens until they had a lab result.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay, so that works out well.

You talked about the seasonal changes. Is it just the fall bees that we're getting from the southern hemisphere?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It's a generational change to get them to be spring bees. Is that correct?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes, but the first—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Could you explain that?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Well, the trick when we have a package is to get the first eggs to hatch. You have an insect, so it's egg, larva, pupa and adult.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: It's about, I think, 21 days for an adult worker bee. What you want to do is try to get your package to sustain itself until you get some young bees. Then the difference is just almost surprising, because you can see these little young bees running around the hive. We see it in our wintered hives as well when we pull them out of the buildings and set them down. When you get that first hatch, it's quite impressive. It's "Oh, we have young bees."

Mr. Arnold Viersen: In that next generation, is that a spring bee, then?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: That's right, yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

How long is the average life of a bee?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: In the summer, it's six to eight weeks. In the winter, it's probably five months.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Then being able to import bees from the United States would allow you to fill those hives up quickly with current bees that know what they're doing already. You don't have to wait.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes, and at a reasonable price.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: We also don't have to wait a generation for them to get to work.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: That's right, yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Can you talk a little bit about the difference between the value of pollination and the value of honey? There's the wax, as well.

Lots of people think of bees and think honey, but there's a huge value to.... I know we're the honey capital of Canada because of canola, and there's a 1% to 2% production increase to have honeybees. Just explain to people that honey is not the only thing that these bees are all about.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Actually, Jake asked me earlier today. We don't produce....

We wintered 12,000 hives this year. We hope to send 10,000 to pollination. We did that last year, and that's what we hope we can do again this year. We produce enough honey to give us our yard rent, but it's not really our focus. Our focus is on making more wild blueberries.

• (1935)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: If you don't harvest the honey, what happens to it?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: It stays in the hive for feed.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: The bees eat it again.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes. In our growth program, we're feeding a lot of sugar anyway, because we're constantly growing our hives. We're always trying to grow more hives. With all three bee operations, other than sending strong bees to pollination, the second thing they want us to do is to grow our numbers.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I have a minute left. Can you just reinforce the idea that if we didn't bring them here, then bees wouldn't be here?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: They're not native to North America. Back in the day, the natives called them the white man's flies. They brought them over with the early settlements because they couldn't figure out why their fruit trees and whatnot weren't getting pollinated.

The Chair: Gentlemen, we'll have to leave it at that.

Mr. Viersen, we were at time, but I wanted to make sure that was on the record.

Thank you, Mr. Hamilton.

We'll go to Mr. Turnbull for five minutes now.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Chair.

Thanks to our witnesses for being here today.

I'm not an expert on this topic, so bear with me. I have a few questions.

From our briefing package, I see that the honeybee colonies have actually risen. The number of beekeepers has risen over time.

I think the issue is the mortality rate. Would you say that's true? Is that the big issue that we're discussing, that the mortality rate is climbing quite high? In the graphs that we can see, it was up towards 46% in 2021. That's obviously a problem.

There are numerous factors identified in our briefing package. I just wonder how you diagnose it. When there are many different factors potentially involved in a complex environment that the bees are in, how do we diagnose what is causing them to die? Is it just one thing? We've heard about only a couple of the factors. In our briefing package, there are some others that are also included, like pesticide use and the changes to weather patterns. Are those also factors here?

Mr. Rosser, maybe I'll start with you.

Mr. Tom Rosser: In my understanding, there's no question that 2022—and I think Mr. Berg spoke to this in his opening testimony—was an exceptional year. As far back as we have data, there was never a year like it in terms of overwinter mortality, and it wasn't regionally focused. It was national.

I think there were probably multiple factors at play in different regions that account for 2022 being an exceptionally poor year.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Mr. Berg, I know you are specifically focused on honeybees. I read recently about the fact that monocropping—the killing of native plants and weed control—can have an impact on the nutrition of honeybees because there's less for them to forage on.

Can you speak to that a little bit? Is that a factor that you're concerned about as well?

Mr. Jake Berg: Yes, monoculture is a factor that we're concerned about, although in my operation we thrive on the monoculture that happens in the Prairies with the canola crop. That's what I make my living on. I make honey from canola. Ninety-five per cent of my honey crop is from canola.

However, we also need other types of flowers—wildflowers in the ditches and in other types of wild land—to help grow and sustain those bees for the other 11 months of the year. Canola crops are great, but they only flower for a month. From the first of July to the end of July, there's a huge sea of yellow flowers across the Prairies, but we need those other wild areas and wildflowers, starting in early April and right through until the canola crop comes on. We also need those flowers after the canola crop is done to sustain those bees and keep them growing.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay. Thank you. I really appreciate that.

Neonicotinoid pesticides have come up a lot, at least in the briefing package that I've read through. I've talked to the National Farmers Union and several other farm organizations that are concerned about not having pollinators and about the widespread use of those pesticides.

Mr. Hamilton, what's your view on what we should be doing about that? Is the government doing enough on that front?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: I keep bees on potato land and I kept bees on P.E.I. for a few years through the summer. I'm hesitant to comment. I don't see a... I think it... I don't want to comment.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: It's a sensitive subject, I think.

Mr. Rosser, what's your perspective on this? I know that the government has done work through the Pest Management Regulatory Agency. Are we doing enough to limit the widespread use of neonicotinoid pesticides?

• (1940)

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, again, I regret that my PMRA colleagues weren't able to join in. I know that they were ready to speak to that issue. I don't feel that I can do justice in trying to address it.

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull, you have about 45 seconds.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay.

I guess the last question is really about climate change. I know this issue comes up a lot. One of the factors that have been identified, at least in our briefing packages, is the longer winters and the changes to the seasons.

Is this having an impact on the bees and the mortality rate of bees? Can you clarify if you've seen any changes to the weather patterns and whether there are best practices that can help prevent colony losses?

Mr. Berg, I'll start with you.

Mr. Jake Berg: It is a tough subject to really put a gauge on, because the weather patterns do change over time and there's an ebb and flow there.

Part of what we're doing with bees in keeping them alive in Canada is that we're pushing them to the absolute limit in trying to keep them alive over the winter. If the weather patterns change just a little bit, it makes it harder. We have to make sure that all the boxes have been checked off—that the varroa mite count is low, that the other bee diseases are under control and that the bees are healthy going into winter.

If any of those boxes haven't been checked off, along with an extra couple of days of cold, a little bit of extreme cold, or longer winters or longer springs than normal, that hive doesn't make it. That's part of the problem. We need to make sure the bees are extremely healthy going into winter.

The Chair: We're going to keep it at that, gentlemen. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Savard-Tremblay, the floor is now yours for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rosser, can you confirm the information that numerous beekeepers have given us, that queen bees in Quebec and Canada are imported? Can you confirm or refute that information?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I confirm that we import queens.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Why not raise our own queens here?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I think Mr. Berg talked about the queens being imported. However, there is another option to improve the health of our industry, and that is to increase production in Canada.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: In terms of importation, is there a challenge associated with genetics? Can the fact that the imported bees may not be adapted to our climate harm the genetics of the bees here?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I will reiterate that it is unfortunate that my colleagues from the Canada Food Inspection Agency could not participate in the meeting today.

Before permitting imports, each country does an assessment of the risks associated with importing bees.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: What are the challenges involved in raising bees in Canada?

What do you think Canada could be doing better?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I think Mr. Berg and Mr. Hamilton are in a better position to answer that question than I am.

However, I can say that the provinces and the industry have recommendations to make to the committee. Mr. Berg mentioned several ideas, including the possibility of doing more research and of emphasizing technology transfer. The federal ministers and the provincial and territorial governments will in fact be discussing these solutions in July.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Gentlemen, do you want to add something about domestic production?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

[*English*]

Do you have anything to add, gentlemen, on domestic production?

Mr. Jake Berg: Yes.

There is domestic production of queen bees in Canada, but there are also a large number of imported queen bees as well. One of the big problems in domestic production of queen bees is timing. Most beekeepers want queen bees earlier than we can produce them in the same year. Some more research into overwintering queens in queen banks or other innovative ways of overwintering queens that can be produced the summer prior is needed.

● (1945)

The Chair: We'll leave it at that.

Mr. MacGregor, you have two and a half minutes, and then I plan to go to the Conservatives, to the Liberals and then to any final burning questions. I might have a few as the chair, given that this has been a very interesting topic.

Go ahead, Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you, Chair. I started my clock this time, so we're good.

Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Berg, I'm going to ask two questions for both of you to take turns answering.

First of all, you both come from very different regions of Canada: Nova Scotia and the Prairies. How often do you observe the health of wild pollinators? Do you ever take lessons from how they're doing and take any lessons on how that may affect your domestic production? Have you noticed any jumping of varroa mites to wild populations? Do any of them show they are resistant to it?

Second, when it comes to increasing the amount of wild forage that is available, aside from the domestic crops that you are primarily responsible for, what methods work well? What kinds of partnerships have you established to try to increase that?

Mr. Hamilton, do you want to start?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: To start with, right off the top of my head, we're planting a mustard crop. It's in a rotation. We have a large carrot farm in the Annapolis Valley, and we plant mustard because, first of all, it's a great nectar source for our bees, and the roots are actually good at suppressing the nematodes that are in the soil. Then, finally, it's mowed down as a mulch after it has bloomed. We are very progressive in that.

Now, that's not during pollination; that's in the summertime when we're growing our hives. We're doing that within our own company and being very successful and very happy with it, actually.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I just want to give Mr. Berg a chance to answer as well.

Mr. Jake Berg: Typically, out in the Prairies, we haven't been seeding other crops to offset the flowering season. However, rather than having government agencies spraying the roadside ditches, we would like to encourage them to use a seed mix that has some type of flowering plants in it rather than just grass.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Great. I'll just leave it there.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Shields. Then we're going back to Mr. Lewis or Mr. Drouin, and then we'll go from there.

[Translation]

Mr. Lehoux, you have the floor.

Mr. Richard Lehoux (Beauce, CPC): Mr. Chair, will I have a bit of time at the end of the meeting to make my motion?

[English]

The Chair: Yes, you will.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Mr. Chair, I would also like to have some time. I don't want to interrupt the question period, but I would like to ask for an extension so we could hear testimony from witnesses who were not able to testify today. It would be good to add a meeting.

[English]

The Chair: I don't even think you need to move that. I think the expectation is that we'll have those witnesses back. We'll have to talk about a committee when we'll schedule them. I absolutely want to hear from PMRA and CFIA, and it was disappointing that the technology didn't allow for it.

You're not going to have any issue with that committee. Mr. Lehoux, if you want to raise something once we're done, we'll have a bit of time to address that.

Mr. Shields, you have five minutes.

Mr. Martin Shields (Bow River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the witnesses today.

Just so we're clear, all bees in North America were imported. That is clear. They're all imported and not native. That is great. Other pollinators are out there.

I'm from an area that has 70% of Canada's irrigation in my riding. We have 4% of the arable land producing 30% of Alberta's agricultural GDP. Pollinators are critical. Bees are critical. Honey is a side business, as you've said, with the other. Pollination is critical.

I want to go to something else. It's the digital log in the trucking industry, and it has come into effect. The reason I mention it is that it's different from the U.S. one. The U.S. has about a three-hour window before their clock starts.

If you're moving bees and hives and you're somewhere in B.C. or in southern Ontario and you hit that 12-hour mark, what would happen to a load of bees sitting on a truck at, say, 30 degrees centigrade? What's going to happen?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: It's not going to be good.

Mr. Jake Berg: It really wouldn't be good. It would be a disaster. Those bees would suffer.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: The load would perish. The whole load of hives—400, 432, 530, or whatever's on the load—would cook, because they're netted in, right? The whole load would be netted.

Mr. Martin Shields: The Americans have figured out a three-hour window before the clock starts ticking. The 15 hours versus the 12 hours basically gives them the movement.

I think, in a country that's spread out the way ours is, that really puts our bees at risk when they're being moved. When you hit that 12-hour clock, you turn the motor off, right? You don't have a half-hour extension to get somewhere else. You don't have the option to unload. This is really a tough one.

The exemption for agriculture is something we're looking for. The U.S. has that exemption for agriculture. Is that something you would recommend?

• (1950)

Mr. John C. Hamilton: It is, very much so.

Mr. Jake Berg: It is, very much so, yes.

Mr. Martin Shields: Mr. Rosser, is this a topic you're familiar with at all?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I'd just say that in the working group process we've discussed here today, this was not a major topic of discussion. It was not a subject on which that group made recommendations.

Mr. Martin Shields: I'm going to go one step further, past the bees.

In the production of blueberries and other products that are time-sensitive in terms of being moved, does this also have an effect on the product coming out of the Annapolis Valley, for example?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes. During blueberry harvest, they're moving berries. Sometimes they're passing each other. They're moving berries in every direction.

Mr. Martin Shields: An agriculture exemption would be helpful broadly in the agricultural industry.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I will salute the sense of creativity of my friend Mr. Shields in bringing up this issue, but as he knows, there are no Transport Canada officials in front of us. I understand where Mr. Shields is going, but perhaps you would be better to ask those questions to Transport Canada officials. That's all.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you, Mr. Drouin. I've never gone off topic before.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Martin Shields: In the sense of what has been mentioned when we talk about separate bees, the leafcutter bee specifically is one of the most critical ones out there. Are you familiar with it, Jake? Mr. Berg, are you familiar with the leafcutter bees?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: I am familiar with the leafcutter bees, yes.

Mr. Jake Berg: I'm familiar with them, but they're not part of our sector.

Mr. Martin Shields: Mr. Hamilton, are you familiar with them?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: North of where I grew up, towards Carrot River, Saskatchewan, there are big leafcutter areas. They pollinate alfalfa tremendously and there have been numerous attempts to use them to pollinate wild blueberries. It doesn't work.

They are very easily affected by wind. If you have a nest, they will fly within 500 feet of that nest. On the east coast, we get some very strong winds. I thought we got strong winds in western Canada, but no; we get them in Atlantic Canada, and they'll just blow the insects off to the edge of the field.

Mr. Martin Shields: The leafcutter bees in a sense are very specific and critical to the alfalfa seed. The alfalfa crops go two or three times a year. They're not specific, as canola is. They can pollinate up to three times, meaning three crops, in a year. The leafcutter bee is a critical piece of the agricultural industry and the alfalfa industry.

Mr. Jake Berg: Again, we're dealing only with honeybees in this case. I'm not very familiar with leafcutter bees.

Mr. Martin Shields: It's critical. It's a little piece. We export alfalfa seed into the U.S. market as well as growing it in our area. It's a very critical piece in this conversation when we're talking about bees.

The Chair: We'll leave it at that, Mr. Shields.

It's certainly on the record that the leafcutter bees are important too.

I'm going to go back to my Liberal colleagues.

Mr. Louis, if you want to share with Mr. Drouin, that's up to you. You have five minutes.

Mr. Tim Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all of the witnesses for being here, especially in a lot of these different circumstances when we have had two different panels. We learned right away how important the sector is to driving our agriculture sector. I really appreciate your being here.

Maybe I'll start with Mr. Rosser.

We've talked about some of the main causes of colony collapse. We've talked about illnesses and pesticides. We've mentioned monocultures and changes in weather patterns. A lot of these are interconnected, and monocultures seem to be at the centre of a lot of it. Monocultures create the need for increased use of pesticides, which are detrimental to bee health. They provide bees with one nutrient source, which, we learned, has a place at certain times of the year.

How can we increase crop diversity in order to decrease bee colony deaths? Are there best practices out there that farmers are using to increase diversity?

● (1955)

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I'd only say that if the intention of the committee is to call the witnesses who were unable to participate, my colleague Dr. Pernal is an expert in the field and probably much better able to respond to that question in depth than I possibly could.

Mr. Tim Louis: It's not a problem unless, like you said, we were trying....

Maybe I will ask Mr. Berg. Do you know of farmers using best practices? At the end of the day, farmers are looking to make money. If they can plant those extra rows, they're going to do that. However, is there a way to incentivize? Is there a way to help farmers plant that biodiversity?

Mr. Jake Berg: Yes, there probably are ways to do that, although I'm unaware of any government incentives that are available at this time that would cause that to happen.

Mr. Tim Louis: We also mentioned some changes in weather patterns and got some mixed answers. Maybe Mr. Hamilton will be the perfect person to ask.

What would droughts and flooding do to the crops, and what does that do to the pollinators?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Droughts reduce the swelling of the berries, so a drought would make it a smaller blueberry crop. When you're in a drought, there's no nectar for your bees, so it would mean that we would have to feed them more. However, we are proactive with our bees and with our growth in trying to push them and expand them. So far, we've been reasonably successful.

Mr. Tim Louis: The flip side of that would be flooding and excess....

Mr. John C. Hamilton: I've had hives go down the creek.

Mr. Tim Louis: We talked about pesticides briefly. Mr. Rosser, I know that the honeybee sustainability group hasn't released its report, but its going to be producing an action plan for the long term and for the short term. Do you know if it's talking about the effects of pesticides?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I don't recall. There was certainly talk about varroa control products, but I assume no. I do not think the working group made specific recommendations on the usage of pesticides beyond those used to control varroa.

Mr. Tim Louis: Lastly, we just kind of touched on illness. You say that research is being done on varroa mites. Is it through the private sector, through universities or through partnerships? How is that working?

Mr. Tom Rosser: My understanding is that there is public financing available through the agricultural partnership, among other funding sources. My understanding of the research is that it is quite collaborative. Oftentimes, industry will also participate in funding.

We have, within the department, researchers who are experts in this field, and they will typically work in collaboration with university-based researchers and others.

Mr. Tim Louis: In my last minute....

We talked about up to 45% losses in 2022. What unfortunate lessons can we learn from that year? That was just a perfect storm of problems.

I leave that open to anyone.

Mr. Jake Berg: Yes, it probably was a perfect storm of problems. We are starting to see the end of Apivar as a useful product. In 2021, there was an early spring and a late fall, which gave a couple of extra growth cycles for the varroa mites to grow in.

Possibly Mr. Hamilton might have some other thoughts.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: We had our own correction a few years back, and you just can't let your guard down. You have to make sure that you have your mite treatments and that the mite treatments are working. You have to have the feed in the hives early. You have to be prepared for a wet fall, when they don't want to take the feed. It's 100% on. You would say that last year was a benchmark year. As I said, there's a grower in Niagara-on-the-Lake who's buying 6,000 packages right now.

The Chair: We're going to have to leave it at that, Mr. Louis.

• (2000)

Mr. Tim Louis: Thank you for your time and your perseverance.

The Chair: To my Bloc and NDP colleagues, I said I would give you one. I know, Alistair, that you want a short one, and I have a

few questions, unfortunately, that I'm going to have to indulge, because it's an interesting conversation.

Monsieur Savard-Tremblay, do you have questions? No? You're good?

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I have no other questions, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Keep it tight, please, Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Hamilton, I'll direct one question to you because you are primarily using bees for fruit production and for berries.

I understand that honeybees are imported, but how often do producers like you pay attention to the wild and native pollinators? Are there any consistent efforts to look at how they are doing?

I know they help pollinate some of your bushes, but are there ever any serious interactions with the wild population to see how they're doing?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: To be honest, we're all about anything that wants to pollinate wild blueberries. I was in a blueberry field with the tech team from Nova Scotia, and it was a rainy day. It was pouring rain. I had them there and I wanted to show them what strong hives look like during pollination, but it was a terrible day.

As it was, there were bumblebees flying around. The problem with bumblebees.... Kenna MacKenzie was a researcher at the station in Kemptonville. She said that yes, bumblebees are good, but one nest has only 30 or 40 adults. They're a far better pollinator than honeybees, but there are only 30 adults. She said my hive there had 20,000, 30,000 or 35,000 bees in it.

It's the sheer numbers, and remembering that we only have a short bloom period. It's just like that, and then it's gone.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

The Chair: I'll ask a couple of questions.

One of the things I heard during the conversation was, "What is actually causing the mortality?" This question has become part of the consciousness a lot more parliamentarians and the public as well, because of the mortality we're seeing.

Am I correct in saying that we've been seeing higher mortality numbers over the last couple of years in particular? Briefly, is it as a result of the varroa mite, or do we really not know, because we have to do more research to try to figure out what the root cause of some of this mortality is?

Mr. Rosser, do you have anything on that? I'll then go quickly to Mr. Berg or Mr. Hamilton.

Mr. Tom Rosser: I'm not sure I have a lot to add to what's been said, other than I think, as it has been described in the conversation today, they're sensitive creatures. It stands to reason that it doesn't take a big change in environmental conditions to have a significant impact on populations. Some years are better than others.

I think there are many factors at play, but clearly, as the environment moves to more extremes, it won't be good for bee health.

The Chair: To Mr. Berg and Mr. Hamilton on that—and you can address the first question about the cause of the mortality—what I'm hearing from both of you is that now is a pretty important time to make sure that something is being done to restore bee health and numbers across the country.

Is that fair, and is there any quick element on mortality?

Mr. Jake Berg: Yes, we need to restore the numbers across the country for various reasons. Pollination of fruit crops across the country is a huge issue.

Without being a researcher, I believe part of what's happening right now is probably varroa control. Again, I'm not a researcher and I don't want to really comment on that.

The Chair: Is there anything further on this, Mr. Hamilton?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: As far as trying to get more bees to blueberries is concerned, I'd love to be able to truck 50 semi-trailer loads of bees from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba to Nova Scotia, and then get them back in time for honey crop season, but we'd have to figure that out.

The Chair: I want to take you back to 1987. Mr. Barlow was leading you on this line of questioning.

Part of the impetus—I wasn't around then—around this decision was that the varroa mite was not widespread in Canada, but it might have been in the United States. That was part of the protection in terms of trying to make sure that the diseases or different elements that existed outside the boundaries didn't find their way in.

Am I correct in saying that, Mr. Hamilton?

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Yes, it was to slow the spread. Surprisingly, in Nova Scotia, it was never actually determined, but it was believed that a hobbyist brought two hives into the metro area. They got them from New Brunswick, brought them in and plunked them down, and the first positive varroa mites were found in metro Halifax. They spread from there.

The Chair: I want to go to you and Mr. Berg on this.

What is the profile on Canadian bees in relation to varroa mites? Is it vastly different than what the rates of infection would be in the United States right now, or is there a lot of similarity between the two bee populations as they relate to either varroa mites or some of

the other elements that we are trying to avoid, as you guys mentioned earlier?

This is for Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Berg.

• (2005)

Mr. John C. Hamilton: As far as I'm concerned, no. We're very similar.

Mr. Jake Berg: I think the levels of the infestations are very similar. I think one of the concerns that was stated in the 2014 risk assessment was on the Apivar-resistant forms of varroa that were in the U.S. but were not in Canada at that time, so I think Mr. Hamilton is right: It is probably time for a new risk assessment.

The Chair: Mr. Berg, I've heard you loud and clear on the importance of domestic production. Frankly, Mr. Hamilton, you said that it could be both at the same time.

Is the Canadian Honey Council position, Mr. Berg, that obviously we have to focus on domestic production and the building up of the bee capacity, but that importation, as long as there's a reasonable protocol in place, could be allowed at the same time?

I haven't heard what the position is of your council. I know that domestic production is important. Can both be achieved at the same time?

Mr. Jake Berg: Yes, absolutely, both are needed. Domestic production should be ramped up, and it has its place. Although in years like 2022, when there were widespread bee losses across the country, in most years or more commonly we'll have one area of the country that has a higher loss than normal. In those years, possibly domestic production could be more of a filler to fill that gap. If the west has a good winter but the east doesn't, we then could provide some bees to the east.

The Chair: Queen bees are allowed in, but it's just the regular packaged bees that we're talking about in terms of the importation from the United States. We mentioned Chile, New Zealand and Australia. Mr. Rosser, I think you mentioned Italy.

What is the profile of disease in those countries? I don't know. I ask this question honestly: Are there varroa mites in these countries of importation? Is it at a lower rate? Is that what has allowed for the acceptable risk?

That's for you, Mr. Rosser, if you know it, or for our industry folks. I would welcome hearing about that.

Mr. Tom Rosser: I'd just very quickly say that I think the risk profile will look at a variety of different diseases. In the case of the U.S. profile that was just referenced, I think there were four individual diseases identified in that risk assessment, but that would certainly grow, and other risks would be considered in due course before imported bees were allowed from a new destination.

The Chair: Mr. Hamilton, is there anything you want to add, or Mr. Berg?

I'm probably testing the limits of my good colleagues here.

We'll go to you, Mr. Hamilton.

Mr. John C. Hamilton: Am I wrong in stating that we're accepting packages from Ukraine?

Mr. Jake Berg: We are acknowledging accepting packages from Ukraine.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, colleagues. That helps to satisfy some of the concerns I had.

Mr. Lehoux, I know that you want to move some committee business. Let me first thank our witnesses.

Thank you, Mr. Rosser, for coming in and fielding and being very generous with your time.

Mr. Berg, thank you for making the trip all the way in from Saskatchewan and for your work on the Honey Bee Council.

Mr. Hamilton, it's great to see a fellow Nova Scotian. Certainly, Oxford Frozen Foods is something we're proud of back home. On behalf of my colleagues, thank you for being here and sharing some of your insights

Mr. Lehoux, you wanted to move something. You've given notice. Why don't we move that motion and deal with it now?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know it's Monday night and everyone is anxious for the meeting to end.

I had moved a motion, and I imagine everyone has received it. Madam Clerk sent it to all my colleagues. If you don't have any objection, I won't read the whole thing. However, if you want, I will read it.

I would like us to very rapidly take a position on the closing of the Olymel plant in my riding, in Vallée-Jonction, Quebec, which has also had a very major impact on pork producers in Ontario.

The motion I made is for a two-hour study. The first hour would be reserved for some of the witnesses I have suggested, and the other hour, which would also be very important, would be reserved for Quebec and Ontario pork producers and the Canadian Pork Council.

It would be useful for us to decide on this motion as rapidly as possible in order to hear these people and ultimately make recommendations and submit a report, which could be very brief. I think it is essential that we make a decision this evening on doing this study. This is quite an important subject.

My colleagues may have questions about this.

● (2010)

[*English*]

The Chair: I will turn it over to Mr. Drouin.

I recognize that it's an important subject. I know that we have determined a committee schedule, but of course I'm always in the hands of the majority and the will of the committee. We can devi-

ate, but I do want to recognize that we have some work ahead of us in the days ahead.

Mr. Drouin, you wanted to speak to this motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to salute my colleague, Mr. Lehoux. I know it is not easy to lose industry players in his community. I just wanted to point out that the members of the subcommittee have already met and Mr. Turnbull has decided on a schedule. I think it would be very difficult to make recommendations in one two-hour meeting. The company is definitely going to close its doors in December and that decision is a major blow to the community. I am going to let Mr. Lehoux make a choice as far as the meeting goes.

We could meet as quickly as possible, but we can't do a report to the House, because it is impossible to decide all the important points in a single meeting. If it comes down to holding more meetings, I would like to point out that we have a schedule to follow and that if the motion is adopted, it will have to be incorporated into the schedule, given that we had already determined what was to be done.

I would like to mention that the plant isn't closing its doors tomorrow morning; it will be in December, and it has been announced publicly. The Quebec government is already included in the process. From what I know, Olymel has not made any official request for the federal government to get involved, in any way.

I know my colleague Mr. Lehoux wants to speak.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm going to Mr. MacGregor; I see his hand up. Then I'll go to Mr. Barlow and back to Mr. Lehoux, if necessary.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: I understand how important this is to the local community.

I don't know if we can issue a report, but I'm just wondering if Mr. Lehoux will maybe consider that this committee authorize the chair to write a letter to the minister based on what we've heard and express our concern.

If we're going to do a report and, I assume, include recommendations, we may need to expand it, and as Mr. Lehoux knows, our calendar is pretty full these days.

That's just one suggestion for consideration.

The Chair: Let's go to Mr. Barlow.

Mr. John Barlow: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the committee's taking the time to discuss this for Mr. Lehoux, as I'm sure I would be in a similar position if Cargill decided to close the meat processing plant in High River. It would be pretty devastating not only to my constituency but also, obviously, to the industry.

I feel this is important, as is how we decide to work this into our calendar. I certainly understand that the committee has important issues to discuss, but I think we also have to be nimble when issues arise that are unexpected, and this is certainly unexpected.

I know it sounds like the facility is not going to close until the fall or winter; however, we had the Ontario Pork Producers in my office today, as a matter of fact, and they're very concerned now with the lack of processing capacity and how they're going to resolve this situation. I know it doesn't close until the fall, but that only gives them a few months to try to find different locations or different processors for tens of thousands of animals, and that is a problem.

Right now they're going to be trying to get into Iowa and Idaho, but if something were to happen at the border or if production in the United States goes up, they lose that capacity to move south of the border and they have to go somewhere else. They're also worried, with the new electronic logs, about how far they can truck the hogs, because they do not want to deal with unloading and loading.

Again, I know it sounds like it's a long way off, but there are some big issues that need to be addressed. I understand Mr. Drouin's point that this is a private company, but I believe it is our job as this committee to hear our stakeholders' fears and concerns and some of the issues that they are facing. If Mr. MacGregor has a good suggestion as well, if Mr. Lehoux is willing to do that, it might make us a little bit more time-sensitive.

I guess we have an option here to do one day. I think we can fit that into our schedule and address what I think is an important issue for the people whom we are here to represent, our agriculture and agri-food stakeholders. It could be a very significant issue that has ripple effects across Quebec and Ontario and perhaps into Manitoba if processing capacity becomes more of an issue.

• (2015)

The Chair: I'm going to go to Mr. Drouin, and then afterwards I'm going to go to Mr. Savard-Tremblay.

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Oh, okay. I'm sorry.

Go ahead, Monsieur Savard-Tremblay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: It is a bit difficult for me to get involved in scheduling issues for a committee I am not a permanent member of. However, I agree with Mr. Lehoux's proposal and I appreciate his wanting to discuss this here. I would be the first to do it, since there are a lot of plants of this type in my riding, including an Olymel plant, so I approve the motion.

I also agree with what Mr. MacGregor is proposing in terms of an amendment. I think it would be a good compromise. It also

seems to me that holding another meeting would not radically upset the schedule.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin: The only comment I'll make on processing capacity is that I'll remind this committee....

We're not against the motion. We'll support it if we write a letter.

I salute what Mr. MacGregor is saying. However, we're already done a study on processing capacity in Canada, so we may come up with the same recommendations at some point.

As a holistic view of the processing capacity in Canada, it's very concentrated, and this committee has heard witnesses time after time over the past few years and in the studies we did prior to the last election. For those of you who were on the committee.... There was Mr. MacGregor, and I think, Mr. Barlow, that you were there. Sometimes you were there and sometimes not, but you're a recurring member.

If we write a letter after this, and to get it as soon as possible,

[*Translation*]

I will be pleased to support Mr. Lehoux's motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Colleagues, I see Mr. MacGregor and I know we want to come back to Mr. Lehoux.

I'm going to go to Mr. MacGregor.

You will have the final thoughts, and then, as your chair, I'm going to tell us—hopefully with your blessing—where we're going.

It's over to you, Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: That was going to be my point—that the letter can include and reinforce the findings of our earlier report on processing capacity.

The Chair: Mr. Lehoux, I will turn it over to you.

It looks as though you've got approval for your motion to move forward. I would request that you keep it as is and trust the chair, in his discretion, to try to move this as quickly as possible, given our previous meetings.

I will turn it back to you to see whether you want to thank your colleagues for moving this forward. It's an important subject.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I very willingly support the proposed amendment, that is, that we write a letter. To add to what my colleague Mr. Drouin said just now, we did in fact already do a study on this subject in the past. I think the situation has changed quite rapidly, though. As well, markets have been closed at the international level. Ultimately, as my colleague Mr. Barlow said, that means a reduction in the number of animals slaughtered, by one million in Quebec and 700,000 to 800,000 a year in Ontario. These are fairly substantial numbers, and it is important that we be able to bring it up again if there are new developments.

I think the witnesses we have identified will be able to provide us with the necessary information before we write our letter to the minister. I am only suggesting it, because I forgot to mention it the other day. Ultimately, the question of animal health is important in all this. As you said, Mr. Drouin, the closing is scheduled for December. People are already starting to panic. The plant employs 1,000 people divided over two shifts. Some of them may decide to leave before the closing, and that would also certainly significantly affect the slaughter capacity, within a relatively short time. It is therefore essential that we be able to look into this. The witnesses named in the motion could help us find solutions. They could at least make suggestions for us.

If the motion is adopted, I will certainly place my trust in you to write the letter and deliver it to the minister by hand, Mr. Chair. I am pleased that I will be contributing to the efforts to enable us to reach a conclusion. I am very open to the idea of collaborating with you, Mr. Chair.

● (2020)

[*English*]

The Chair: Don't worry; as the chair, I'll make sure that letter gets to the minister.

I think we can all agree that the issue is serious and important and has wide-ranging impacts in many regions, and certainly, as you mentioned, in Ontario and Quebec.

Here's what we're going to do. We don't need to have a vote. This has been passed. I will use my discretion to work with the clerk within a reasonable timeline to get this in. I know there's a sense of urgency. We'll invite the folks you've listed. Assuming that they all come, that should fill the panels. If we need additional help, we'll turn it over to the parties and ask for additional help.

We'll try to set aside maybe 10 or 15 minutes.... We'll shoot for a meeting of two hours and 15 minutes, so that once we are done we can go in camera and provide some feedback. This will not be a formal report, but there will perhaps be some element of a discussion on which we might want to inform the analyst to then write the letter. We'll try to make that a reality.

Colleagues, what I thought was going to be a short night was only nine minutes short. We had great testimony on the bee. It was a very interesting topic tonight.

I'm sorry for the technical issues, but our translators have to come first. We'll try to get that resolved. I assume that we want to get CFIA and PMRA back. You can leave that with me and our capable clerk and analyst, and we'll make sure that happens in the days ahead.

We will see you all on Wednesday for a continuation of bee mortality, and we'll go from there.

The meeting is adjourned.

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