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Chair: Mr. Kody Blois



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• (1145)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.)): Colleagues, we'll call this meeting to order, and we'll move as quickly as we can.

Welcome to meeting number 102 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Quickly, I'm not going to read through the entirety of the notes, because we already had a session on Tuesday in camera, but with regard to interpretation, please be mindful of earpieces and keep them at a distance from the microphone to avoid audio feedback, and try to be very respectful of our interpreters, who do very good work.

Through no fault of our own, there were a number of votes in the House, and we've been delayed. We have only so much time. Many of us have a hard stop at one o'clock. We're going to bring all the panels together, allow the individual organizations to give statements and then have an open panel to get as many questions in as we can.

This group works very well. If some of you want to stay beyond one o'clock, the resources exist. I'm just looking for a general agreement and unanimous consent that if you do choose to stay and engage on questions, which I think would be good, there will be no procedural elements. We'll be able to stay in that respect.

Go ahead, Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): We just have to make sure the witnesses can stay past one o'clock.

The Chair: This is for the witnesses who are able to stay past one o'clock. You've spent your time coming in. We want to be respectful of that.

There is now another vote coming. Let's seek unanimous consent to work through the bells, as we always do.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We have that. Let's get the statements going, and if we have to completely redo a panel because of this—we can't control what goes on in the House—we will do so accordingly.

Without further ado, I'm going to introduce our witnesses. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, November 2, 2023, the committee is resuming its study on issues related to the horticulture sector.

First of all, we have Marie-Ève Gaboury-Bonhomme, professor in the agri-food economics and consumer sciences department, Université Laval. Ms. Gaboury-Bonhomme is having trouble with her sound. She will give an opening statement. She will not be able to interact, but you can ask questions on the record, and she will provide written statements.

From the Canada Organic Trade Association, we have Tia Loftsgard, the executive director, who is joining us in person. Thank you for being here today, along with Gillian Flies by video conference.

From my home province of Nova Scotia we have, from the Wild Blueberry Producers Association of Nova Scotia, Peter Burgess, executive director. Thank you for joining us and congratulations on your world championships in curling. That's wonderful.

From British Columbia, we have Sukhpaul Bal, the president of the British Columbia Cherry Association. We had the opportunity to meet last week at CPMA, so it's great to have you on the panel.

From the Canadian Mushroom Growers' Association, we have Mike Medeiros and Ryan Koeslag.

From the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, we have Peggy Brekveld, who is no stranger to agriculture. Thank you for being here today.

We also have the president of the CFA, Mr. Keith Currie.

Thank you all for being here today.

We're going to get your statements on the record.

Colleagues, I'll walk you through the votes. We'll make sure we can utilize our time, and we'll do our best. That's all we can ever do.

I'm going to start with Ms. Gaboury-Bonhomme.

[Translation]

Ms. Gaboury-Bonhomme, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Marie-Ève Gaboury-Bonhomme (Professor, Agri-Food Economics and Consumer Sciences Department, Université Laval, As an Individual): Thank you.

Honourable members, thank you for inviting me to appear before you.

I am a researcher at Université Laval in Quebec. I specialize in analyzing agricultural policy. In 2021, some of my colleagues and I started doing research on risk management and crop insurance in all sectors of agricultural production, including horticulture. Using surveys and interviews, we questioned over 500 agricultural producers and 22 experts. We also looked into what was being done in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, member countries. I think some preliminary results may be useful in your deliberations. That is the backdrop against which I accepted your invitation to testify as a researcher. Our research reports will be published starting in the fall.

To begin with, we should remember that agricultural risks are uncontrollable events that are often difficult to predict and that can have a negative impact on income, margins or agricultural production. A risk can be assessed based on three factors: the probability that an event will occur, the frequency with which it may occur, and the impact and duration of the effects it might have.

The agricultural producers and experts questioned for our studies believe that the risks posed by climate change have major effects on agriculture and that the probability of those effects will rise in the medium and long term. In the past, agricultural policies were mainly geared to reducing risks associated with the market. Policies to deal to climate-related risks, such as crop insurance, were often regarded as secondary. Things change, and crop insurance is playing an increasingly important role all around the world. Its share in agricultural program spending in Canada has exploded since 2021. The United States is experiencing a similar situation.

Your committee is interested in the effectiveness of insurance programs and looking for potential solutions for developing greater climate resilience. I have a few suggestions for you.

First, agricultural risks are managed comprehensively at the farm level. To use a metaphor, agricultural producers use a toolbox filled with mutually complementary strategies.

Agricultural managers make decisions that can enhance their resilience by averting some risks or reducing their frequency or adverse effects. That can be done by adopting certain practices such as diversifying production, irrigation, crop rotation, cultivar selection, improvements to soil health, and so on.

Second, certain risks have to be transferred or shared, because the agricultural enterprise cannot deal with them by itself. That is in fact what government insurance programs are for.

The insurance programs do best if they are designed and implemented with a view to encouraging the resilience of the enterprises. In other words, these programs should encourage enterprises to diversify their risk management strategies, build up their toolkits, and ensure they have the proper support and advice so they are able to incorporate innovations into their practices.

In our studies, the support available to enterprises emerged as a factor with a very significant influence on farm risk management. That support appeared to us to be particularly important given that almost half of the producers who participated in our survey assessed their level of knowledge of climate risks to be average.

That being said, some practices, such as the use of synthetic pesticides, cannot be encouraged, even though some people regard them as useful in managing crop loss risks. Those practices have adverse effects on human health and the environment. Instead, insurance programs need to encourage other practices to manage pests. Rather than encouraging synthetic pesticides, we should be promoting integrated pest management, and, more generally, practices that are beneficial for water and air quality, ecosystems, biodiversity and greenhouse gas reduction.

Our studies also alerted me to the fact that production losses cause stress and worry, and even anxiety, in much of the agricultural population. It would be a good idea to expand the connections between mental health programs and insurance programs. This means that agricultural producers who have mental health problems will be able to get referrals to the services they need.

To summarize, there must be innovation and creativity so that insurance programs are designed in such a way as to provide enterprises with good protection against climate risks. As well, they need encouragement to be resilient by adopting practices that benefit the environment and health.

I will not be able to answer your questions orally because of the interpretation problem. However, I will be happy to do so in writing after the meeting.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaboury-Bonhomme.

We will now go to Ms. Loftsgard from the Canada Organic Trade Association.

Ms. Loftsgard, the floor is yours for five minutes.

[English]

Ms. Tia Loftsgard (Executive Director, Canada Organic Trade Association): Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. Thank you for inviting the Canada Organic Trade Association to present today.

The challenges faced by farmers are similar regardless of the method of production, yet we need to consider all possible approaches due to new climate realities. The whole-system approach of organic production means that sustainability is automatically built into this way of farming.

The international acclaim of organically produced goods, attributed to their sustainable cultivation methods, designates them as premium products. The organic fruit and vegetable category accounts for nearly 25% of all organic sales, holding a 6.6% market share. Production is highest in Ontario, followed by Quebec and then B.C. These numbers may seem small, but organic has been outpacing conventional growth. Two-thirds of Canadians purchase organic products weekly. The market is expected to triple in the next 10 years, according to recent SPINS data.

Despite being the fifth-largest organic-consuming nation globally, only 3% of Canadian farms hold organic certification, presenting a substantial opportunity for expansion. Canada's distinct lack of a policy framework for organic agriculture sets it apart as the sole agricultural nation without such a directive. In ongoing dialogues that we've been having, we've been actively engaging with members of Parliament and soliciting political support for the formulation of an organic action plan for Canada.

The regulated nature of the organic sector, coupled with trade agreements involving 35 countries, underscores its global presence. However, without explicit policy directives, support mechanisms, and an overarching framework for organic growth, Canada faces risks to its competitiveness. The U.S. and the European Union, with significant investments and growth plans in their policy directives, present a formidable challenge for Canada's standing in the absence of a comparable approach.

I'll now hand it over to my colleague Gillian Flies to speak to you about some initiatives that are helping to build more resilience and adaptation to climate change, many of which can be adopted by the broader horticultural sector.

• (1155)

The Chair: Please go ahead, Ms. Flies.

Ms. Gillian Flies (Owner-Operator, The New Farm, Canada Organic Trade Association): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for holding this hearing.

My name is Gillian Flies. Alongside my husband, we own and operate The New Farm, near Creemore, Ontario, where we produce certified regenerative organic vegetables, salad greens and livestock.

We are seeing the impacts of climate change first-hand on our farm. Last August alone, we had three rain events of more than two inches in under an hour, including one of three inches in under 30 minutes. It completely flooded our fields. However, thanks to our soil health and structure, the water soaked in within 30 minutes, allowing us to harvest our whole crop, while our neighbours' crops were severely damaged.

Our soil health is key to our climate resistance. Through our practices, we've increased our soil organic matter from 3% to about 5% to 6% across the whole farm. For every 1% increase in organic matter, soils can hold an extra 25,000 gallons of water per acre. Compared with a farm with about 3% organic matter or less, which is the average, we can absorb an extra 75,000 gallons per acre on our farm and survive these storms when they come.

We've achieved this through practices such as no-till and using tarps on our vegetables and salad greens. The untilled soil stays 6° to 9° cooler under the tarp than the tilled soil since it holds more moisture, allowing for better germination and less irrigation. We have successfully integrated livestock, including cattle, pigs and chickens, to rotationally graze our cover crops annually, further reducing our reliance on external inputs and input costs while naturally fertilizing our soils. Research shows that healthy soil also increases the nutrient density of our crops. For example, the Bionutrient Food Association found that regeneratively grown vegetables had 21% more nutrients than U.S. averages for eight crops.

A resilient domestic food supply is critical for food security. Canada imports three-quarters of our fruits and vegetables, including much from California. This leaves us vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and supply chain disruption. In 2018, when the drought in California and the simultaneous hurricane Michael in Florida brought shortages, our cooler soils allowed us to continue producing when others couldn't. We sold out so fast that we had to close our farm two weeks early that year. At the peak of the COVID pandemic, farmers' markets and small-scale producers, many organic, were able to continue supplying Canadians with fresh produce.

This underscores the need to increase not only domestic production but also on-farm resilience. To do this, we must be able to compete with cheap imports, including from the United States. Like many horticulture farms, we participate in the seasonal agricultural worker program, paying fair wages and complying with the higher standards of this program. The committee should consider solutions, such as wage subsidies, to address this imbalance.

We also need better support through the business risk management programs. As a small, diversified operation, these programs are not accessible to us. We need affordable emergency and whole-farm coverage. The BRM programs should also account for and encourage the risk mitigation impacts of soil health practices.

The new climate programs need to be adapted to support innovation on farms like ours. We have not been able to access programs like the on-farm climate action fund despite demonstrating practices that are adopted widely across the agricultural sector.

• (1200)

The Chair: Ms. Flies, unfortunately we're at time. I even gave you about 40 extra seconds. Please wrap up with a brief comment.

Ms. Gillian Flies: Okay.

What you can do is increase access to education, provide financial support, especially during the transition period, and build demand to ensure market access for our products. As we enter a period of global crisis, farming needs to be recognized and supported as an emergency service. The time to invest in the infrastructure to rebuild resilient farms and local food systems is now, while we still have time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now turn to Mr. Burgess from the Wild Blueberry Producers Association of Nova Scotia.

It's over to you.

Mr. Peter Burgess (Executive Director, Wild Blueberry Producers Association of Nova Scotia): Thanks for the opportunity to be here today.

I represent about 630 growers in Nova Scotia as the executive director of the growers association. First, I want to highlight a little about our industry before I talk about some of our challenges.

We are a unique industry. Throughout the world, wild blueberries are only grown commercially in the state of Maine and the provinces of Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. That's where our blueberries are grown. The bulk of our crop is cleaned and individually quick-frozen within 24 hours of harvest. This fruit is shipped around the world, mainly into the ingredient market—think yogourts, jams and so on. Nova Scotia, in particular, is around 15% of the total wild blueberry industry, but the largest processor, Oxford Frozen Foods, is based in Nova Scotia.

It's an extremely unique crop, as the fields are not planted. Rather, naturally occurring stands of plants have evolved in our climate, and these ecosystems are managed by our farmers. This means there is an abundance of plant biodiversity within every field. Farmers don't breed or select varieties. They manage the existing stands that have developed over hundreds or even thousands of years.

It's a long-term perennial crop. Some existing fields have currently been in production for over 70 years. It's managed as a two-year production cycle. Fields are mowed off to the ground in the fall after harvest. The next year, they grow vegetatively. The second year is when the fruit is produced.

Our industry has challenges similar to those of other horticultural crops: access to labour and increasing input costs. However, we have some unique challenges with subtle nuance in our industry.

We compete on the world market against the highbush blueberry—which is grown year-round in multiple countries around the world—and, of course, other fruit. Increases in highbush blueberry or European bilberry production can affect our market price here at home.

The nature of our crop doesn't allow for some common on-farm adjustments like crop rotation because we are a long-term perennial crop. As a matter of fact, we've run into climate change issues that are impacting us. Spring frost, exposed winters with low snow cov-

er, excessive summer rains and periodic droughts have all impacted production in the last 10 years. Support for climate change adaptation is a strong priority in our industry and something we greatly encourage.

Consistency of production has also slowed market development, partly due to climate change impacts. It is part of the reason for our variable on-farm returns. Funding for applied research is needed. Our crop is only grown in northeastern North America, so that work has to be done here.

Fluctuating returns for growers have slowed on-farm development and investment. Farm-gate prices have gone from \$1.12 a pound to 35¢ a pound in the last three years. Farm-gate pricing has always been very volatile. It highlights the importance of a robust business risk management program that needs to level out returns and allow for growth in our industry.

Pollination is a critical component of our industry. If we don't have access to reliable pollination services, our yields will fluctuate as well. A reliable supply of honeybees and complimentary pollinators such as bumblebees and leaf-cutter bees is very critical to our industry.

We have a lot of opportunities in our industry. All blueberries are extremely healthy when part of a regular diet. There's a significant amount of peer-reviewed data that shows this, much of which our industry has funded. Wild blueberries are smaller fruit and tend to have more concentrated anthocyanin, the beneficial compound. It's the one thing we like to leverage in our industry.

Wild blueberries are very sustainable and have a low carbon footprint compared with some other crops, because it's a long-term perennial crop with no soil tillage and it's only on a two-year production cycle. We also have a very good taste profile because of the amalgamation of a lot of different varieties within a crop.

Market differentiation is really critical in our industry for finding niche markets around the world where customers are going to be interested in buying our product. We highlight taste, health, environmental sustainability and the impact of our crops. Support for international market development is critical to the success of our industry.

• (1205)

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

We'll now turn to Ms. Brekveld for up to five minutes.

Ms. Peggy Brekveld (Chair, Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the invite. My name is Peggy Brekveld, and I am the chair of the board of CAHRC.

It may seem unusual for an organization that examines the workforce needs of Canadian agriculture to be speaking on the implications of climate change on the horticultural sector. However, the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council's work reflects on current and future challenges for the farming sector, and provides research and solutions to a \$38.8-billion GDP industry. This includes CAHRC's current partnership with the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and with Food and Beverage Canada on the national workforce strategic plan.

To set the stage, CAHRC's most recent labour market research, released in November, shows that in 2022, there was a critical sales decline of \$3.5 billion due to over 28,000 unfilled jobs. For horticulture specifically, lost sales due to labour shortages were estimated to be over \$260 million in 2022. Also, 45% of employers in the fruit and vegetable industry were unable to find all the workers they needed, and 60% lost sales as a result. Forty-three per cent of employers reported that they received no domestic applicants for their job postings. The peak labour demand is projected to increase by 11%, from 61,000 in 2023 to 68,000 in 2030, so labour shortages already exist and are predicted to become more dire.

Secure access to an affordable, safe and reliable food supply for Canadians and the world relies on a skilled and motivated workforce. The future success of the agricultural sector will depend on it as well. What does this look like in a world where there are already increasing challenges related to climate change? Growing fruits and vegetables depends on producers who are able to navigate the unpredictable cyclical highs and lows caused by nature and weather conditions.

Agricultural workplaces have very unique challenges that affect their success. One is the time-sensitive constraint of caring for biological organisms such as plants and livestock and harvesting crops. For example, some foods naturally have very narrow harvest windows of only several days or even a few hours, such as asparagus, strawberries and peaches. Climate change and the weather patterns associated with it further narrow these windows.

From a staffing perspective, this means that I may need more workers for a shorter period of time in an unpredictable time frame, and often at the same time as other growers. Unlike most other workplaces, the work that needs to be done in an agricultural workplace in any given week can typically fall outside of an employer's control. In other words, once a farm has planted a certain number of acres, the crops must be kept alive at nature's schedule, not at the farmer's schedule. For perennial crops like vineyards and orchards, which grow for decades, these limitations extend over multiple years. It leaves farm employers highly dependent on a reliable and predictable workforce.

Beyond harvest, the nature of plants and crops limits the ability of farms to postpone, reduce or otherwise adjust tasks. Crops need to go in on time or else they won't mature before harvest. The need for reliable and skilled labour on farms becomes more critical as climate change disrupts the best management practices that farmers

have used up until now. Failure to complete a task, such as harvesting or plant or animal care, within the window prescribed by nature can cause crop failure and can compromise the health of plants, potentially causing irreversible harm. It highlights the need for workers now and in the future.

Finally, no conversation on the future of farming, including on climate change and its effects, would be complete without addressing technology and innovation and their potential. With this in mind, CAHRC emphasizes the need for a vibrant and adequate agricultural workforce with future farming technology, training and practices in mind. It builds a case for additional researchers and innovators, which will help support future farming in Canada. The necessity to have a skilled, nimble and growing workforce to plant, tend to, harvest and even prepare food is even more evident as we look to climate change and the future of food. Without it, we will see direct impacts on the global food supply.

● (1210)

CAHRC research tools, resources and training support horticulture employers in their ability to plan human resource needs so they can ensure they have the workforce ready to go and bring food to your table.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Brekveld.

We'll move right to the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, with Mr. Currie and Mr. Bal.

Mr. Keith Currie (President, Canadian Federation of Agriculture): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee, for having us here today. We appreciate the time.

As most of you know, I'm Keith Currie, president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. I'll be sharing my time today, as you mentioned, with Sukhpaul Bal, who's a farmer in the Okanagan Valley.

The environment within which farmers operate, both figuratively and literally, has changed dramatically over the past several years. An increasing number of extreme weather events are having a direct impact on Canadian producers, and our risk management programs must adapt to this changing risk climate. For example, rather than focusing our disaster relief programming on helping producers recover from the extraordinary costs they must take on to recover from disasters, we should be looking to create risk management programs that are more focused on providing timely support and have a clear focus on mitigating future impacts. That is why, at a high level, the CFA has been advocating for an immediate review of Canada's agricultural disaster framework to ensure that farmers have the support needed to manage extreme weather volatility, while identifying immediate measures that can mitigate and prevent impacts from future such events.

Our horticulture sector carries unique risks and costs that are being further compounded by the impacts of climate change. For example, the current suite of BRM programs was not designed to support the diversity of crops grown in the horticulture sector—some 150 different crops—nor was it designed to compensate producers for the high input costs, the high perishability of many horticulture crops, and the production cycle, which can see multiple different crops grown in a single season.

The terms and conditions of Canada's current suite of risk management programs were negotiated as part of the sustainable Canadian agricultural partnership, which is a \$3.5-billion five-year FPT agreement that runs until March 2028. We can't wait another four years for the renewal of this partnership before addressing the gaps in Canada's risk management programs. We have to act now to fill the gap in our risk management framework.

That is why we are calling for a focused engagement with stakeholders and FPT governments to immediately establish a relief program to ensure that family farms receive the critical and timely support they need in times of crisis. If we want producers across Canada to become effective partners in the fight against climate change, we need to ensure that we have their backs when climate-related events destroy their harvest, crops and/or livelihoods.

Thanks for the time. I'll now turn it over to my colleague Sukhpaul.

Mr. Sukhpaul Bal (President, British Columbia Cherry Association, Canadian Federation of Agriculture): Thank you for the opportunity to present before the committee today.

My name is Sukhpaul Bal. I'm a fourth-generation farmer from Kelowna, B.C., and the president of the B.C. Cherry Association.

Farmers understand that risk is part of our business. However, what we've seen in B.C., and specifically in the Okanagan Valley, since 2020 is something different. In 2020, we experienced extensive damage from a polar vortex. In 2021, we were hit with a heat dome that raised temperatures up to 47°C. That same fall in the Fraser Valley, we witnessed the atmospheric river event that was widely displayed on the news across Canada. In 2022, there was a lasting effect from the heat dome of 2021. Buds that were developing on the trees were damaged by the intense heat from the year before. In 2023, a polar vortex greatly damaged the crops and even

killed trees. Now, in 2024, yet again, another polar vortex saw temperatures go from 5°C to -30°C in a matter of days.

On a personal note, our farm has lost its entire crop this year due to the freeze event. For those of you keeping count, yes, we are in our fifth consecutive year of dealing with extreme events.

Farmers participate in crop insurance programs, but when they're faced with multiple, consecutive extreme climate events, the current programs fail to meet the necessary levels of support. In light of my first-hand experience with these extreme weather events, I am confident in stating that we are missing a program within the BRM suite to adequately manage risk. We need to make sure that farms remain financially viable when they are faced with these extreme events. AgriRecovery is the current disaster program, but in its current design, it does not address the disaster we are facing.

I would also like to make the committee aware that I sit as a B.C. representative on the national program advisory committee, or NPAC, and I am concerned with the approach that the program branch is taking with climate. To explain it simply, the focus at that level is what farmers can do to improve the climate, as opposed to how we can protect farmers from what is happening in the environment.

Extreme climate is, without a doubt, the biggest threat to horticulture today. The rising costs of production and labour and depressed market prices are all major concerns. However, in my opinion, if we do not help farmers with this extreme climate crisis, farmers will not be around to have to deal with any of those other problems.

Thank you. I'll be happy to take questions, and I look forward to discussing some of the comments that I've made.

• (1215)

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

Colleagues, you can see the clock quickly coming down. I want to take the least amount of time possible. We are going to suspend, with your permission. I think we want to be respectful of our witnesses, so we don't need to suspend for 10 minutes, just until we're confident everyone has their vote in. If this committee is of the same view, I think that should have the most minimal impact possible.

Are we okay with that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, I'm not seeing any issue.

I'm going to suspend, witnesses, so we can vote. We'll be back with you shortly.

• (1215) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1220)

The Chair: Colleagues, we're back. Many of you have voted, so we're going to keep moving along.

Next up I have the Canadian Mushroom Growers' Association, with Mr. Medeiros and Mr. Koeslag.

You have up to five minutes for remarks. The floor is yours.

Mr. Ryan Koeslag (Executive Vice-President, Canadian Mushroom Growers' Association): Thank you very much for this opportunity to address the committee to talk about the amazing mushroom industry in Canada and our issues relating to the horticulture sector.

My name is Ryan Koeslag and I'm the executive vice-president of the Canadian Mushroom Growers' Association. I'll be sharing my time with our president Mike Medeiros, who is also a farmer.

We currently have a workforce of nearly 7,500 people, including farm owners, substrate makers and mushroom pickers. Those 7,500 people produce over 150,000 tonnes of mushrooms each year, year-round. Our growers supply nearly 100% of the fresh mushrooms in grocery stores across Canada.

Forty years ago, mushroom farmers grew one pound of mushrooms on one square foot of growing space. Now, in 2024, they grow nearly six pounds on that same space. That's a 500% increase. Canada exports approximately 40% of our production to the United States. Every day, our mushroom farmers are expected to compete with our neighbours to the south, who continually have fewer government cost pressures.

We're here today to talk about two bad policies imposed by our federal government: the carbon tax and the removal of the temporary foreign worker housing waiver.

Currently, Canadians comprise 70% of our workforce. For decades, our mushroom farms have advertised to and looked for Canadians to fill all our positions. They have conducted hundreds of labour market impact assessments, all showing the need for temporary foreign workers. I say the word "temporary" only because that's the name of the program. Many agriculture groups, including the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, indicate huge job vacancies in agriculture, signalling we will always require foreign workers, just like many other developed nations around the world.

For a long time now, when a worker requested moving out of farmer-provided housing while still under the temporary foreign worker program, Service Canada accepted a housing waiver, allowing workers to move in with family members, spouses, children or friends, or simply to have their own independence. Farms have allowed for contingencies for situations where workers may need to return to employer housing, identifying hotels, setting aside housing or making other arrangements. However, since Service Canada

has arbitrarily stopped accepting housing waivers when workers choose to live on their own, they punish farmers by demanding they keep empty housing for workers who have moved out. In some situations, workers moved out years ago, having made families of their own. Our farms are reporting that it's extremely rare to have workers request a return to employer housing.

The farmers' cost due to this policy change will be enormous. This impacts all year-round employers, such as for mushroom, pork, cattle, poultry, dairy and greenhouses, which use the temporary foreign worker agriculture stream. We're talking about hundreds of empty houses, hundreds of empty rooms and hundreds of empty beds for people who may never use them. We have an industry-wide survey out right now, with our preliminary data indicating the need for up to 1,000 empty houses.

Now I will pass it to our president Mike Medeiros to talk about the carbon tax.

Mr. Mike Medeiros (President and Mushroom Farmer, Canadian Mushroom Growers' Association): Thank you for the opportunity to talk here.

The carbon tax is yet another item that challenges the viability of mushroom farms, including mine. Mushrooms are already one of the most efficient water users. They have one of the lowest carbon footprints and grow on recycled agriculture material, and the carbon tax will cost mushroom farms an additional \$7.2 million this year alone.

On our farm, we are paying over \$16,000 per month in carbon tax. With the new 23% increase, that will go up to just under \$20,000 for the heating bill for our farm. My farm and other mushroom farms export about 40% of the mushrooms we grow to the U.S. This also makes it very difficult for us to compete on that level.

I drive an electric vehicle, so I do believe in climate change issues. Back in 2018, we invested \$1.8 million into a pipeline to bring natural gas to our farm, which is a cleaner fuel source. It cut down our propane usage by roughly 700,000 litres per year. A year later, the carbon tax was implemented. Any savings I was hoping for to help pay for my pipeline were gobbled up by my carbon tax. Also, I'm building a compost facility nearby in the Prescott area, which will have the lowest carbon footprint in the world of those making mushroom compost, yet my taxes continue to increase.

At the end of the day, the data is showing that the carbon tax will not reduce emissions for mushrooms, as they already have the most advanced technology, and there are no alternative options at the moment. We are trying to work with the Canada Revenue Agency to be included in the greenhouse rebate program, because mushrooms were left out. Despite mushrooms being under the same export pressure and having the same growing conditions, we are not able to apply for that rebate.

We are also supportive of the unamended Bill C-234, and are looking for ways for this committee to help our farmers remain viable.

Thank you very much.

• (1225)

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

Colleagues, I'm going to try to do two panels. We have options to extend. I know that some of you have to leave at one o'clock. We need at least four people to stick around if we want to still hold court, ask questions and get evidence. Otherwise, if you want to move a UC motion, we could keep whoever wants to stay, and basically supersede the standing order, if you so choose.

Let's start with the two panels and see where we go. If you want, four of us can stick around and continue to ask questions a bit beyond one o'clock for those who can't stay.

It's over to you, Ms. Rood, for six minutes.

Ms. Lianne Rood (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being with us today.

We've heard some very interesting testimony today that's actually alarming. Something I've been asking a lot of witnesses about is the P2 plastics ban that the NDP-Liberal government has tried to implement. I heard from the organics folks that you grow 25% of your organics—I believe that was the figure you gave today—in fruits and vegetables. Also, the mushroom growers are exporting 40% of the mushrooms grown in Canada.

Perhaps I'll start with the mushroom growers. How will the P2 plastics ban affect mushroom growers? We know that mushrooms come in plastic packaging right now, and you're exporting to other countries. Could you give us an idea of how that might affect you?

Mr. Mike Medeiros: Well, we are using recycled PET already, which was allowed after that ban. We're also looking at cardboard as a substitute. We are doing trials right now to utilize cardboard for our tills. Years ago, actually, all our packaging was cardboard. When consumers asked for smaller packaging, that's when we transitioned to the recyclable PET.

As I said, we are looking at trying to implement cardboard. We are doing tests for that, but right now, with margins the way they are, being sort of non-existent in our industry at the moment, it's really tough to implement these extra costs on cardboard. The retailers do not want to pay more for mushrooms, and neither do the consumers. The price of mushrooms in the stores is all that consumers want to pay.

At the moment, we've noticed consumption going down about 10% to 15%. We don't want prices to increase. We're absorbing the food inflation at the moment, but we are working on changing to cardboard.

Ms. Lianne Rood: You mentioned that consumption is already down. We've heard from a Deloitte report that banning plastics right now could increase health care costs by over a billion dollars per year because of lower fresh produce consumption.

I'm wondering if the organic association has any comment on that and what you're doing already to mitigate it. Is there an impact on you with this ban right now? Were you consulted?

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: It hasn't been a major point of discussion within the organic sector so far, but the Sustainable Food Trade Association formed to find packaging solutions before the ban ever existed, because it is of interest that we ensure sustainability throughout all organic products.

Gillian, did you want to speak to the plastic ban as well?

• (1230)

Ms. Gillian Flies: I can only speak from the point of view of our farm. We use reusable returnable packaging on our farm, and we also use recyclable plastic bags when we need them for salad, out of Quebec. We have tried to work with retailers as well on salad. It's really hard to get anything but a clear plastic clamshell on the shelf for salad. We use EcoStar 100% recycled packaging made with coke bottles, and we're doing our best.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Mr. Currie, this week, we heard a scathing report from the Auditor General saying that the government did not consult with stakeholders prior to establishing the fertilizer emissions reduction target. I'm just curious. Was your organization consulted prior to the government establishing the P2 plastics ban on fresh produce? Did the CFA have any input into what was published in the planning notice, or were you only afforded the 30-day window for consultation after the fact?

Mr. Keith Currie: We didn't get a lot of heads-up on that announcement. Certainly, we've been working very closely with the CPMA on this issue. We're trying to figure out the problem we're trying to solve here, because the amount of plastic we're talking about is so small, yet the impact is so huge. That means there's going to be a lot of waste product. Potentially, there aren't going to be a lot of imports coming in, because the importers won't adhere to the plastic regulation.

Really, all we ask for in any issue is to have a conversation to see what the impact on the ground is going to be so we can go forward collectively and make the right decision.

Ms. Lianne Rood: To the mushroom growers, you mentioned that you paid \$16,000 per month in carbon tax and that the mushroom farming industry pays \$7.2 million. We've heard the NDP-Liberal government claim that you get more back in rebates than you spend. I'm just wondering if that's your experience. Have you heard from anyone who's gotten more back, or do you believe they're spreading a false narrative by making this claim?

Mr. Mike Medeiros: I know from my farm and other farms I've talked to that we don't get any carbon tax back whatsoever. We basically keep paying it and don't see anything for it. We're not getting any credit for the work we're already doing in carbon sequestration, so it's a little frustrating on that point.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Mr. Currie, have you heard of anybody getting more money back than what they're paying for carbon tax?

Mr. Keith Currie: No, not at this point. We have to understand that agriculture producers are large users of all products, all inputs, including energy. Especially when we live in a northern climate where we require a lot of heat, large volumes of propane and natural gas in particular are used. I don't think the government has any intention of rebating the amount of carbon tax that we're paying, much as what Mr. Medeiros just alluded to.

The Chair: We're going to leave it at that. Thank you so much.

Mr. Louis, you have up to six minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses here in person and online. We have a bunch of experts here, and I really appreciate your time.

I would like to focus on Ms. Loftsgard from the Canada Organic Trade Association.

In my riding of Kitchener—Conestoga, I have 49 organic farms and businesses, and I'm aware of the impact on our community of promoting soil health and biodiversity, helping with risks for water pollution and minimizing chemical runoff. The benefits are there. At the same time, we're hearing from all of our witnesses about floods, droughts, extreme weather, the climate crisis and terms that we didn't hear years ago: the heat dome, polar vortex and atmospheric rivers.

All these losses are due to climate change, and I believe you or someone else mentioned that it's a big source of concern and stress for farmers. Because profit margins are so slim, farmers are feeling pressure to use every inch of land that they can grow on. I've heard about farmers ripping up fencerows and drying out wetlands to use for planting or moving bushlots, but as you know, those are measures that can actually help with sustainability and resilience against severe weather.

What incentives would you like to see to help reward farmers in preserving those beneficial lands for fencerows, wetlands and bushlots?

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: It is time, I think, to invest in things proactively and make sure we are not working on remediation but rather mitigation. This is the time for investment.

We saw the U.S. government invest over \$300 million. I've had many discussions with the USDA's national organic program. I asked, "Why are you doing that?" They said it was because it costs them less than paying out to deal with emergencies, floods and insurance programs.

What the organic actors are showcasing is that there is a solution out there that allows us to start working towards better soil health and more of the activities that provide benefits to the climate. Real-

ly, I think it's an investment time, and a time to look at a long-term solution.

• (1235)

Mr. Tim Louis: I'd like to think we can do both at the same time.

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: Absolutely.

Mr. Tim Louis: We can work on resilience and sustainability.

Is there a way of quantifying the cost of climate inaction? How can we quantify that? You're saying there's a cost to not doing anything. What could that cost our farmers when we're hearing about these disasters?

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: What we need to do is look at the payouts that have happened in BRM programs in the last couple of years. We need to look at agriculture with a true-cost accounting lens to really understand that small investments can have a good return on investment. We can start looking at and tracking what's happening in regard to the constant payouts going to farmers for them to mitigate the effects of climate change. Also, many farmers are changing over to organic right now anyhow because of the high cost of inputs and to make sure it's profitable for them to continue farming.

Mr. Tim Louis: That's encouraging to hear for a number of reasons that I mentioned off the top.

Are the people switching to organic now getting the same level of support? Can they get the same level of support as people who have already been doing organic practices for years? I've heard some organic farmers say they're not getting supports. There are new programs they don't qualify for because they've already been doing this. How can we recommend steps to reward people for beneficial practices they've already been doing?

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: I'll let Gillian respond to this one, but I will say that we are one of the administrators of the on-farm climate action fund. That is one of the programs that are discriminatory against organic farmers.

I'll let Gillian speak to it.

Ms. Gillian Flies: Yes, I'd like to speak about the OFCAF in particular.

The issue there is that, if you have already been implementing the practice—which you would be, as an organic farmer—you can't get paid to implement the practice. I think that's what you're talking about. We've been cover cropping for years at our own cost, but neighbours down the way, who are competitors, are getting those costs covered, which seems unfair.

What we're asking for is support for farmers around education, using farmers who are already doing this and supporting them to educate with on-farm education events and those types of things. However, on the grander scale, we need more organic farmers, so let's cover transition support for organic-curious farmers as they come across, because for a period of about three years it is very tough for them when they make the transition.

Mr. Tim Louis: I don't think one should be at the expense of the other. I think if someone is willing to transition to organic farming, we need to support them. At the same time, what you're saying is that there are those who have already been doing that, and it would be encouraging to support them as well for taking those steps.

Maybe I can continue with you, Ms. Flies, with the minute I have left.

You mentioned that only about 3% of farms have organic certification. I believe you also said that the market is growing as far as consumers go. Is there room for selling more organic food to Canadians? Right now, where are people getting that from, and how can we address it?

Ms. Gillian Flies: Yes, there's—

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: Sure—

Ms. Gillian Flies: Oh, go ahead, Tia. I'm sorry.

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: Go ahead, Gillian.

Mr. Tim Louis: It's a Canadian standoff.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: Okay, I'll go first.

I would say there is a major opportunity. We import carrots and potatoes. We can be growing these things on our own. There's such an opportunity. We need to look at the areas where we're bringing in non-climate-friendly foods, because an organic demand is there. We should be looking at the products we can produce on our own and putting the supports in place so there's a financial return not only for the farmers but also for soil and soil health.

The Chair: That's perfect. We're going to leave it at Sukhpaul Bal (President, British Columbiathat.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Perron, the floor is yours.

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Thanks to the witnesses for being with us, both those taking part online and those taking part in person.

I am going to ask a series of questions and I invite all of the witnesses who may want to answer my questions but who may not have time to speak during my turn to send us their answers in writing.

First, Ms. Gaboury-Bonhomme, I see that you have done a lot of study and you are still studying the issue of enterprise risk management. Like Mr. Currie, some witnesses have told us about the importance of reviewing the Sustainable Canadian Agriculture Partnership before 2028. They believe it makes no sense to wait that long. Climate change is happening now and our producers need help.

Other witnesses have proposed a sort of "agri-disaster" emergency program that would be temporary, in order to sit down with the people who work in agriculture and do a speedy review of all of the programs. I would like to know what you think of that.

With respect to environmental practices, several of the witnesses, again today, are telling us that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and soil resilience has to be increased. I quite liked what Ms. Flies had to say on that aspect.

For our part, we advocate decentralized funding that would encourage good agricultural practices and make funds available to producers in a sort of "agri-investment" program. These producers are entrepreneurs and they should not have to wait for a big Canadian policy to be adopted. We recognize the importance of environmental innovation, and this money would be paid beyond the control of the government. These people could use the money to undertake innovations, whether in two years or five years. These innovations could also be recognized and rewarded. I would like to hear your opinion on that.

I would also like to talk about funding relating to the organic standard. Every time the standard has to be revised, we have to fight and argue with the federal government for it to fund that exercise, even though it is a government standard. That makes no sense. People have to pay to practise organic farming, when we should be encouraging them to do it, paying them to do it. I would like to hear your opinion on that as well.

I am also thinking about access to the various programs. Ms. Loftsgard, or Ms. Flies, said good practices on the farm need to be encouraged. Organic producers, however, do not have access to certain programs because they are already practising organic farming. That makes no sense. We also have to recognize what these people are already doing. Earlier, I suggested decentralizing the funds, and I would add to that the need to recognize people who have already been doing organic farming for many years. Some have been doing it for 20 or 25 years.

There is also the problem relating to reciprocity in the standards, not just environmental standards, but also labour standards. How can we improve our system to make it fair and equitable for our local producers?

Another problem arises from the standards: product certification. When a manufacturer changes the recipe for a pesticide or any other product, that presents a major problem. The timelines for obtaining certification in Canada are very long. Can we consider a sort of certification principle that could eventually be harmonized with the one in the United States and in Europe?

Obviously, we also have to address the workforce problems and the sustainability of the system we are currently using for relying on temporary foreign workers. What are your thoughts on that?

I know these are a lot of questions, but it is important that we talk about them. Earlier, I mentioned an "agri-disaster" program. Obviously, it would have to be much more flexible and much faster than the current AgriRecovery initiative. The Government of Quebec has been calling for this since November 2023, I would remind everyone. Today is May 2, 2024, and the federal government has still not provided an answer. Producers are waiting to know what is going on in order to respond. This makes no sense.

I cannot speak to each of you, and you cannot answer all my questions. As I said, I invite all of the witnesses to submit their comments in writing, if they wish.

Hello, Mr. Currie. I am glad to see you.

I would like to hear your comments on what I have been saying.

• (1240)

[English]

Mr. Keith Currie: I'll start off with a shameless plug. There's a certain bill known as Bill C-359 that, if it went through the House, would certainly expedite access to a lot of inputs and tools. The government can take a holistic view of that and how we expedite access to the tools we need going forward to get them into the farmers' hands more quickly.

Certainly, one of the biggest things we're dealing with is the lack of flexibility within our BRM programming. The way it's set up now is more about broad acre cropping and more predictable climate cropping. Realistically, can we give our provinces, for example, more say in how those programs look on a more regional basis? If you're dealing with different aspects of climate, soils and weather right across the country, then a one-size-fits-all program just can't work. How do we improve the programs so that more people can get access? Certainly, more people can get access, including in the horticulture sector, which really has been left out of the whole BRM discussion, more or less, as far as accessibility goes.

There's another aspect to a lot of this that a few people have touched on. I live very close to where Ms. Flies lives and her farming operation. They're doing a wonderful job in their operation. Really, what we need to do is start with the soil. Everything that we do starts with the soil and how we make sure the soil is as good as it can possibly be.

As farmers, we grow plants. That's what we do. It doesn't matter whether you're a livestock farmer, a crop farmer or a horticulture producer; you grow plants. We need the proper, correct, right soil all of the time. What tools can we make going forward? It can be a sustainable agricultural strategy, with the tools within that potential option, or the government can come up with ways to award early adopters. You just heard people talking about not being awarded for being early adopters. Let's continue to award people who switch to a better practice or a different practice. I don't want to make the assumption that people aren't farming smartly.

As for my operation at home, part of it is certified organic and part of it is not. That doesn't mean that I don't farm sustainably in both pieces of my operation. It's just different. I think we need to make sure that we recognize that. We can then put tools in the

farmers' hands going forward and make sure that everyone has access to those tools, especially in the business risk management aspect of it.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Currie.

Thank you, Mr. Perron.

Colleagues, I have a couple of things. First of all, you noticed Mr. Perron asking questions of Ms. Gaboury-Bonhomme. I just need majority agreement that her written answers, when she provides them, can be appended to today's written evidence. I know that's not going to be an issue for you folks.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: You will also notice that we're going to go a bit past one o'clock. Some of you have to go, and I know you worry about procedural elements, so I'm asking for your permission that we continue with whomever can stay beyond one o'clock. As your chair, I'll make sure that nothing goes out of sorts. To those who can stay beyond one, that's great. Those who have to go will go. I'm happy to continue.

I have a few questions. Maybe I would like to, as the chair, ask some questions too.

Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Just to make sure, if all members agree and are bowing their heads saying there's not going to be funny business when we're gone, then....

The Chair: It's impossible, anyway, if we don't have quorum. Basically, it's a minimum of four members, but I'm asking for consent. Then, even if we have only two or three here, we'll still be allowed to ask questions so that our witnesses can have the best utilization of their time.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I'm seeing no issue with that. I'll make sure that I handle it accordingly.

Go ahead, Mr. MacGregor. You're up for six minutes.

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

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses for being here today.

Ms. Loftsgard, I'd like to start with you. I've worked with your organization on a motion, and you have a petition for the Government of Canada. You've recognized all of the beneficial practices that organic farmers practice.

I'm just wondering if you could expand on that a bit, if you want. Two of the calls in the petition are for "bold policies and programs" and to "recognize and incentivize sustainable resilient food systems". Is there anything else that you want to add to those two calls to action?

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: What I want to point out is that organic lives nowhere. There's no policy. There is no directive for organic. We are in part 13 of the safe food for Canadians regulations, whereas the U.S., the EU, Mexico, Taiwan, Korea and all of our trading partners have a specific act for organic. That is what provides the policy directive.

This is where we're really speaking to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and our supportive MPs. Canada needs to get to the place where we have our own act so that we remove the barriers that currently exist. We are consistently running up to roadblocks when we're asking for a move in this or a move in that. There are too many legal barriers because organic doesn't have a carve-out policy directive.

It needs to live in Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Because enforcement is done by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, we used to have an organic office there, but we no longer have an organic office specifically within the CFIA, and there's no organic office anywhere within the Government of Canada.

That is really our ask: to get us acknowledging that we're losing ground. We are the fifth-largest organic nation right now. Combined with the United States, we're 50% of market demand, but we need to get the policy directive in place for us to continue to be a leader.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you for that.

Mr. Currie, welcome back to the committee.

There's been a lot of talk today about BRMs and the current SCAP going to 2028. I've been very curious about some of the programs, and AgriInsurance in particular. I think that insurance program is going to be drawn on quite heavily in the coming decades.

I'm just wondering if you want to add anything further to this discussion on BRM programs, and AgriInsurance in particular. How does a program like that need to be tailored? I think it's going to be drawn on a lot. As with other insurance policies, will we have to require farmers to have certain practices in place before they're eligible? Do you have thoughts on how that program is going to evolve with the challenges we already see coming our way?

• (1250)

Mr. Keith Currie: I believe the government needs to take a much more holistic look at how we react to the need for business risk management programs. We were happy to see the increase in funding last year in the SCAP program, but it's a decimal point on a rounding error. To actually have an effect, really what we need is a different program, a stand-alone program.

A prime example of that was in 2021. With the drought in the Prairies in western Canada, the CFA initiated the hay west program. We sourced hay to get to our livestock producers in western Canada to help them through the troubled times. When we sourced hay, we could not find any in western Canada at all. Yes, the production was down, but any extra production there had already been gobbled up by U.S. farmers.

Why? The USDA has a program on the shelf, and whenever there is an issue, they pull it off the shelf, insert money and get it out to the producers quickly. It's timely. It's effective. I can't put a

number on what the dollar value would be, but it's certainly not the dollar value within the SCAP program now, which wouldn't suffice long term. Part of those dollars, as we've talked about around the table today, are about putting preventative measures in place to offset the tremendous cost that happens when an event occurs. If we can mitigate those costs, then the cleanup is a lot less.

There has to be a long-term vision to how we do this. It can't just be a one-off program or a short-term program. There have to be conversations with the people on the ground—the farmers, the farm community and the governments across the country—about how we get that done.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

Ms. Brekveld, I really appreciate how you wove in labour, sustainability and horticulture. There are definitely some important links.

I've had conversations with organizations like the UFCW and the Deans Council, which is trying to churn out graduates with technical skills and innovation. Is there anything you want to expand on from your talks with those groups? What I'm trying to look for is how we can encourage more homegrown talent in Canada and make agriculture a more enticing career to someone who's just coming out of high school.

The Chair: Answer in about 45 seconds.

It's over to you.

Ms. Peggy Brekveld: The national workforce strategic plan looks at the perceptions and awareness of agriculture and the jobs that are available through it. Part of this is about supporting that work through the strategic plan. Beyond that is work that the CAHRC and its partners could do for you. We know there are four jobs for every graduate from a degree or program, so let's continue to build the knowledge of where jobs are available.

Also, the stopgap measure with temporary foreign workers, which will help fill the gap and continue to bring food to the table, is so important now and will be until you have that gap lessened. Maybe that will be in a long time, but we need those workers to continue to help fill the space. Otherwise, food sits on the ground or on the trees and fails to get to your plate.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will go to Mr. Barlow, but just before that, Mr. Carr asked for 45 seconds to a minute.

I'm going to you quickly, Mr. Carr.

Mr. Ben Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. That's quite courteous of you.

Thank you to my colleagues across the way for agreeing.

Colleagues, I simply want to share something. I know it's unconventional at this stage of the process, but this will be my last meeting as a permanent member on the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Thank you, John, for the applause. I'm sure that was about my participation, not my departure.

I will be moving on to the committee on procedure and House affairs.

I have genuinely enjoyed a deep degree of collaboration. Seeing as I was elected relatively recently, it was a very nice opportunity to sit on this committee with all of you and work in such a collegial and collaborative manner, so truly, on a personal level, I am appreciative of the relationships that have been built on the goodwill that I hope will carry forward to PROC—or perhaps not.

Nonetheless, thank you, Mr. Chair, for your service here and for your time.

I look forward, of course, to crossing paths with everybody in the chamber and beyond, but I wanted to take the opportunity, while we are here, to express my gratitude on the record.

Thank you.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

• (1255)

The Chair: Bravo. Good luck.

Thank you, Mr. Carr. Best of luck in your future parliamentary journeys on other committees.

Mr. Barlow, we'll go over to you for up to five minutes.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I just want to clarify something, Ms. Loftsgard. You mentioned that more farmers are going to organic, but in the document you presented to this committee some time ago, which asked for support and had recommendations you wanted of the government, the Organic Trade Association said that organic operators fell for the first time, in 2022, by 3.8%.

Which number is right? Is the number of operators going down, or, to your earlier comment today, is the number of operators actually going up?

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: In 2022, they were going down by 3.8%. We're just tallying the numbers for 2023 right now. It looks like it's going in that direction; it's going up again. However, the thing is, when prices fluctuate, people come and go sometimes from organic, and it's difficult—

Mr. John Barlow: That's fine. I just wanted to clarify that. It may have more to do with the prices than maybe what the Organic Trade Association is trying to say on opportunities there, which would be like many other commodities.

I want to go to Ms. Brekveld.

You were talking about labour. Minister Boissonnault hinted earlier this week that the temporary foreign worker cap may go down to 10%. They are saying that primary agriculture may not be in-

cluded in that drop to 10%, but that agriculture processing and manufacturing and food production would go down to that 10%.

Can you comment on what the impact would be to the supply chain for produce growers if they did not have access to plants that were operating? Can you maybe comment on what impact that 10% cap would have on your industry?

Ms. Peggy Brekveld: Certainly, and we actually saw this when a peach canner—I believe it was Del Monte—in the Niagara area closed. When it was gone, most of the peach trees stopped being peach trees. A few went into fresh pick, but most of them were gone. That is the consequence of less processing in this country.

The importance of workers not just in planting, tending and harvesting, but in processing, who make it so that food is ready and available on your plate, is also critical. Any ability for the placements that currently go to processing to continue will be appreciated.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you, Ms. Brekveld.

I'd like to pass the rest of my time to Mr. Lehoux.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Currie, several times today and at several previous meetings we have talked about problems involving our enterprise risk management programs.

You said at the outset that you are always consulted on this, but sometimes that happens at the end of the process. You also offered some recommendations concerning the changes that might be made to the risk management programs.

Could you and your colleague from British Columbia provide the committee, orally, but most importantly in writing, with the proposals made by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture?

We can discuss them now, but it would be worthwhile to get the proposals in writing so they can be incorporated into our recommendations.

Are you comfortable with doing things that way?

[*English*]

Mr. Keith Currie: Yes, and thank you for offering up an opportunity to speak to that.

We absolutely would be happy to submit to the committee some recommendations and comments on it. Also, as you heard earlier, Sukhpaul is part of NPAC as well, and he's very engaged with the British Columbia Agriculture Council and is a member of that organization.

We will make sure that all of our members across the country get comments to the committee. They can take a look at this and make recommendations going forward. Thank you for that.

• (1300)

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you.

In the same vein, you brought up the idea of renewing the Sustainable Canadian Agriculture Partnership before 2028, because that is much too far off. We all agree about that. In any event, I agree.

Can you also tell us about some aspects of the partnership you would like to see changed quickly?

[English]

Mr. Keith Currie: Certainly the partnership is not an easy one to come up with, because you're dealing with provincial and federal ministers of agriculture in different regions. Coming to a consensus on that at times can be difficult, but I think if the provinces are allowed to have a little more flexibility—they have some now, but more flexibility—on how they implement risk management programs within their jurisdictions, that would make them much more effective regionally. These programs could start to include different sectors of the industry that aren't already included in some of the programming.

I think that's a first step. We also have to talk about, as I mentioned earlier, programs that are outside of SCAP, stand-alone programs for severe climate issues that happen so that we can respond to them quickly, and separate packages that lead to mitigation of those impacts going forward. I think that's a different conversation from what's within the SCAP program.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Currie.

Thank you, Mr. Lehoux.

Ms. Taylor Roy, the floor is yours for five minutes.

[English]

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today. I'm sorry that our committee time was shortened. There are so many good questions to ask of all the witnesses here.

I would like to address my initial questions to Ms. Loftsgard and Ms. Flies regarding organic farming.

From what you've been describing and talking about, it seems the organic sector has a lot of potential. It's addressing a number of the issues we're facing in local sustainable food and perhaps even the workforce, and in diverse crops and soil health, which are also very positive. I'm wondering if you can comment on the profitability of organic farms or the stability of organic farms versus others. To my understanding, you use far fewer inputs that you have to purchase on the open market—for example, when fertilizer prices went up so high.

I'm wondering if you could comment on that, Ms. Loftsgard.

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: I'll start, and then I'll pass it over to Gillian.

I'll quote the census statistics. Some 63% of organic farmers are earning over \$100,000 versus 44% of non-organic farmers. We've seen through the agricultural census that there are more farmers earning higher incomes.

I'd like to pass the floor over to Gillian in regard to the profitability.

Ms. Gillian Flies: On our farm, for example, we are able to garner \$50,000 an acre in vegetables, because we're able to plant through multiple times. Our biggest cost is labour, but we really work hard on limiting imports. We buy seeds, which we need annually, but we do not have to buy any inputs—fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, any of those things—the costs of which have become prohibitive.

I like to quote Gabe Brown's saying: I prefer to sign the back of the cheque instead of the front. I think this focus on yield only is a problem. You need to look at the bottom line as well.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: When it comes to finding the labour force you need, do you find that young people are more interested and more willing to work on organic farms, or do you feel it's the same across the entire farming infrastructure?

Ms. Gillian Flies: I'm also on the board of Canadian Organic Growers, and we find that a significant percentage of new farmers, young farmers, who are interested in regenerative and organic are coming into the field. We're actually setting up a demonstration farm. We're transitioning to a demonstration farm for regenerative agriculture on our farm in Creemore. We have lots of young people applying to be involved in that movement and to work on that program. To find Canadian workers who will hand cut salad for 10 hours a day just seasonally is really challenging.

• (1305)

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: In my riding of Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, we have a number of different alliances. The York Region Environmental Alliance is promoting small agricultural and local sustainable farms in our area. However, one of the issues we're facing is available farmland. I'm wondering if you could comment on what the situation is like for new farmers looking to start farms and acquire land.

Ms. Gillian Flies: Is that for me as well?

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: That's for anyone.

Ms. Gillian Flies: I'll start by saying it's a huge issue. Up in our area especially, up near Creemore, a lot of people come to ski. We could sell our farm tomorrow and make almost as much money as we are farming.

It's really challenging, but I know there are some unique models, like people setting up agricultural condos where they are able to put multiple farmers with shared infrastructure on 100-acre farms. That's happening in Owen Sound. I can follow up with you. There's a woman who's doing that. She bought a 400-acre farm and has eight farmers who are now tenanting it.

There is room for that, but it is really prohibitive for people entering.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: I know we have a motion to look at preserving farmland across the country because of food sustainability and food security, which are obviously of national interest. My grandfather's farm was in Owen Sound. You mentioned that. I have fond memories of going up there, so I think that's a great idea.

I know my time is almost up.

The last thing I want to ask, Ms. Loftsgard, is whether you could submit to the committee your thoughts on what the policy directive might be or what you're looking for specifically in terms of our government setting up a separate directive for the organic sector. I think with all of the benefits of soil health, the environment, sustainability and attracting more people to farming, it would be an interesting initiative.

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: We have been working for the last two years as an alliance among the three national associations, consulting with all the provinces and stakeholders to create the foundation of an organic action plan. In there, there are four pillars, but the big focus is on production supports because without producers, we have no market. Without a market, we have no producers. Those are the two areas we're really highlighting.

We'll be putting forth a budget submission for this year's federal budget and hope to have support. We will continue to work with our policy-makers and Agriculture Canada to make sure we find the right solutions. There's only so much industry can do without having a policy framework. We've run into barriers. Now we're at a place where we need to ask for actual regulatory changes or a full-on act.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Thank you very much.

I think my time is up.

The Chair: Yes, it is.

We have until 1:30. If the witnesses absolutely have to leave, they can, but we want to utilize their time while they're here.

I'm going to Mr. Perron. I'm going to give him five minutes. I'm then going to take some time. If any of our colleagues want time—I know some of you will have to leave—we'll then open the floor to an open format, basically.

[Translation]

Mr. Perron, the floor is yours.

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Given the exceptional nature of today's meeting, I would reiterate what I said earlier: that the witnesses can always submit comments in writing to the committee afterward. They should not hesi-

tate to do so, given that speaking time during meetings is very limited.

Ms. Brekveld, I would like to talk to you about the workforce issue, which is your specialization. We often hear about problems relating to temporary foreign workers, one such problem being bureaucracy. I am sure you are going to tell us, again, that we need to cut the red tape, facilitate access, and so on, but have you also given some thought to how sustainable the system is? Can we still operate this way?

Can you offer the committee any solutions, either now or afterward, in more detail and in writing?

[English]

Ms. Peggy Brekveld: In general terms, farmers are very adaptable. When dealing with weather, climate change, etc., we're constantly trying to adjust.

The importance of this question is about the future of the temporary foreign worker program and other such programs. The most important thing you could do for farmers is give them stability in programs in a world where often we don't have stability because of things like climate change. As farmers, if we understand the rules on what we need to do to bring people in and help them have a very good life here in Canada, you will make it easier. Constant change to the rules is extremely difficult for farmers to adjust to. We saw this with COVID. Farmers struggled and constantly flexed to ensure the safety of their people. We did it. We worked hard to ensure their safety, but we also saw that it was extremely stressful for the employers.

The second thing I'll say is that, long term, through the national workforce strategic plan, we are looking at different pillars and ways to ensure there is a workforce forever for farmers going forward. That possibly includes foreign workers. It includes improving Canadians' knowledge and awareness of farm jobs and domestic labour. It includes technology and innovation as well.

• (1310)

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Perron: I'm sorry to interrupt you. Please don't hesitate to send us those recommendations in writing so we can try to address them in our report on this subject. Thank you very much.

Time is running short and I would like to speak with Ms. Loftsgard and Ms. Flies.

Ladies, your testimony was really very useful. You have probably heard the questions I asked Ms. Gaboury-Bonhomme earlier.

I would like to hear your comments on that subject.

[English]

Ms. Tia Loftsgard: I want to highlight that the organic standards funding is a constant pain for us. Every five years, for our trade agreements with those 35 other nations, it's mandatory to have it renewed. If we do not have the funding, the agreements do not get renewed and trade halts for international exports as well as imports.

We can't highlight enough how important it is for us to get full, permanent funding. There have been two recommendations from the Standing Committee on Agriculture over the years. We still do not have permanent funding. We still have to fundraise a portion of that funding. We do appreciate that the Canadian General Standards Board's costs have been covered, but there's another \$200,000 at least that need to be covered by industry. We have to fundraise that by 2025.

I love that you brought up the idea of a fair work environment as part of the standards process that we're in right now. I'm leading a working group on fairness. It ties in to the concept of labour and making sure that we have a workforce for the future. It really is part of the organic principles.

We have four organic principles: health, care, ecology and fairness. When we became regulated in 2009 by the federal government, we dropped all the discussion about fairness. It's time to bring that back because we need to motivate the workforce to continue to farm organically.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Perron: That's perfect.

Please don't hesitate to send us any specific recommendations you have. We will send you the list of questions I asked earlier, to refresh your memory.

[English]

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

I'm going to take the podium, so to speak, for a few minutes.

Mr. Burgess, unfortunately, with the double panel, you haven't had a whole lot of opportunity to build upon your initial statements. As a proud Nova Scotian wearing a Nova Scotia tartan tie, I know that wild blueberries matter not only in our province, but also, as you mentioned, in eastern Canada. The export value is significant. I know you export around the world.

You talked about a number of things, but if this committee had to subscribe to one or two key recommendations, what are the one or two things that we need to get into this report that matter to the Wild Blueberry Producers Association of Nova Scotia to make sure that you can continue to find success?

Mr. Peter Burgess: Thanks for the opportunity.

Building resilience in our fields is important. Several other panellists here have mentioned that. That helps with drought situations, excessive rain and so on. Growers see the benefit of that, but when margins are tight, it's hard for them to invest in it. I think incentives to help build things like hedgerows and pollinator habitat around our fields would really help stabilize the consistency of production.

To that end, those adjustments won't affect what we've seen from extreme weather. In 2018, we had -7°C weather for 12 hours in the middle of bloom. That kills your bloom immediately. For things like that, our adaptations aren't going to have an impact. Having opportunities for timely help with disaster relief would be very critical.

• (1315)

The Chair: Talk to me about the pest management centre. You and I have had conversations off-line before on that. Public research on minor-use pesticides and alternative types of pesticides takes place. I know they had a recent conference. I think you were part of it.

How important is that programming to the Wild Blueberry Producers Association, not just in Nova Scotia, but in Canada?

Mr. Peter Burgess: It's critical. It's important to have that tool, realizing that our markets around the world are looking for softer pest management tools. Having resources there to register new products that are effective and safe is critical to making sure we're on an even playing field and to making sure we have effective products that will control the pests that occur.

The Chair: This is the last thing I want to ask you, but I have a couple of other questions for other witnesses.

On research, you mentioned the unique nature of how regionalized the industry and the climate are in eastern Canada. Are any federal research dollars going towards the industry at this point? I know that many groups will talk about some of the challenges of raising industry funding, but are there any federal resources? Where are the provinces on this? Is this something they're willing to partner on as well?

Mr. Peter Burgess: We invest a lot of money in our own applied research. It can be challenging to access federal dollars to work on a regional basis. There are examples, certainly, through Mitacs, NSERC and so on, where research is happening through provincial researchers and universities in our region, and it is important. If the research doesn't happen in our region, it doesn't happen, because this is where the crop grows. Having that regional focus of federal dollars would be very helpful. There is some happening, but as I said, we need to have the work done here.

The Chair: Last, you mentioned pollinators and their importance. We did study them, and some of the recommendations from this committee were to have CFIA re-examine its policy, particularly the cross-border policy, on queen bees from California and other areas in the United States.

Is there anything in particular on pollinators that you want to highlight for a recommendation? Can you highlight the importance of their necessity in your industry?

Mr. Peter Burgess: They are critical for our industry. I think any decision obviously needs to be in consultation with the beekeepers across Canada. I think it needs to be science-based and needs to clearly allow beekeeping pollinator businesses to thrive. Honeybees are the base industry for pollination for us, and having a consistent supply of honeybees is critical for our success.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to turn to the CFA, but particularly to the B.C. Cherry Association.

Mr. Bal, you and I spoke in Vancouver. You talked about some of the devastation from the extreme weather in the interior of British Columbia, and you mentioned AgriRecovery and changing the framework. Of course, that's a program where provincial and federal authorities do the initial assessment and then create programs above and beyond what is existing in the BRM.

What do you envision when you talk about a program that's different from AgriRecovery? Can you give us any parameters there that this committee could take away for recommendations to the government?

Mr. Sukhpaul Bal: Sure. What we've witnessed with how AgriRecovery is set up is that it compensates for additional costs due to a disaster—for example, if a flood occurs. The atmospheric river in the Fraser Valley had a tremendous amount of water and flooding, and barns were destroyed or heavily damaged. There were additional costs for farmers to get out of that disaster.

In our situation with the extreme cold and the extreme heat, I'm calling it the “silent disaster”. Let's use the extreme cold event. Our trees looked exactly the same a week after the event as they did a week before the event. Where the disaster lies is in extreme crop loss, which, in the current framework, directs us to go to AgriInsurance for our losses. We have been doing that, but what the cherry industry example highlights is that this is not a program to go back to year after year, because you can cover only 80% of your crop. You have a 20% deductible. In a one-off scenario, yes, a farmer can absorb that 20% and understands that they got their insurance and that next year they're looking for a better year, an average year or maybe a record year. However, this five years in a row that we're now in highlights that this is not the correct program.

I'm talking about a program that lies somewhere between AgriInsurance, AgriStability and, on the far end, AgriRecovery. If I had to give it a name, I would call it “AgriResiliency”. Within that, we'd have monetary compensation for extreme losses so farmers remain viable, and at the same time, we'd assess what caused that loss and provide funds for BMPs. If it's extreme heat, shade covers could potentially mitigate that in the future and open it up for farmers to invest in, because as mentioned by one of the panellists, farmers are very adaptive.

The Cherry Association is already looking for options, but we can't do this alone. It needs to be supported with some government intervention to help us.

• (1320)

The Chair: I'm going to the mushroom folks.

You mentioned housing and a bit of an alignment. I didn't catch all of that. Can you repeat some of the concerns on the mushroom side in relation to that? I think what I'm hearing is an underutilization of housing in relation to the temporary foreign worker program.

Mr. Ryan Koeslag: I'll point out that the mushroom industry is all organic. We're either organic or certified organic. We're an industry that has always had organic beliefs, and certainly we feel as though we're an industry that could use more support.

We've had recommendations on the temporary foreign worker program. Our issue right now is essentially that there has been a fundamental change in the program. As you know, there has always been a housing waiver allowance for individuals who wanted to go out and find their own housing, live with their spouse or live with their family members. There's been a fundamental shift and change in policy, arbitrarily, and now, even if a worker chooses to live on their own, farmers must provide an empty space at all times. That means we need to find empty beds, empty houses and empty apartments just so we can continue to be approved under the temporary foreign worker program.

We mentioned needing to provide more stability. That is a huge instability for our labour issues in trying to harvest organic mushrooms.

The Chair: Okay. I understand. Notwithstanding the existing policy, whereby farm workers can have a waiver and say, “I'm going to live in a different situation, but thank you for the opportunity if I need it,” now there always has to be an open unit. I can appreciate the concern there.

This last question goes to Ms. Brekveld. It's about the agricultural labour strategy, which is something the government has talked about. I know that ESDC is considering right now the number of foreign worker programs we have and trying to find ways to consolidate them.

I take note that the government has introduced the recognized employer pilot. If we can make sure that end-users are utilizing that program, I think it can be a way to reduce the administrative burden.

How are those conversations going? What can you share on the record here about that work and how we need to further advance it?

Ms. Peggy Brekveld: I think the most critical thing to remember is that the gap between the number of workers we need and the number of workers we have is still widening, so the program in the agriculture sector is necessary and critical. Even with the temporary foreign workers coming in and filling some of the unfilled jobs, we still see a gap of 28,000. There are too many jobs open. With that comes a loss of income.

The biggest stressor, I would say, whether for planting, tending, harvesting or processing food, is that those workers coming from other places are so critical. Outside of that, this conversation about building up our domestic workforce is important, but it's going to take a very long time. In the meantime, Canada has this ability to produce more food than it needs. It's one of seven places in the world that can do that. Why wouldn't we use that resource, that industry and that asset in this country to build a better Canada and feed the world?

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Currie. I don't have any questions for you, but thank you for your leadership within the sector.

Thank you to the Canada Organic Trade Association. I don't have any questions for you.

We have about three or four minutes, Ms. Rood. If you would like to put any final thoughts on the record or ask any questions, I'll turn it over to you. I'll gently tell you when we're at time, and we'll turn on our way.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Thank you.

Mr. Koeslag, you were talking about the empty house policy. We know the government's new empty house policy will require farmers to keep, and in some cases even buy, vacant homes, even if employees choose to live on their own. Has there been an analysis of how many empty houses farmers will be forced to keep or buy across Canada?

Mr. Ryan Koeslag: Yes. We're doing our own survey. As of right now, we're into the thousands. Certainly, as I mentioned, this applies to mushrooms, dairy and pork. Anybody who is keeping temporary foreign workers year-round under the agriculture stream will be impacted by this.

It's a huge issue. We're going to have vacant houses and vacant spaces during a housing crisis across this country and in the rural communities in which these farms operate.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Do you think this policy could actually lead to a decrease in workers on farms?

Mr. Ryan Koeslag: I guess it could in the sense that it could increase costs for the farms. Certainly, there is going to be an impact when it comes to the entire viability of these operations, which is what we were trying to stress. Every time there's a new regulation

or a new policy from government, it really has our farms contemplating their viability and how they're going to continue. This is just one of those major changes that's going to have a huge impact.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Thank you very much.

Mr. Currie, I've been hearing a massive amount of outrage from farmers in recent weeks, not just in Ontario and my own riding of Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, but across the country, about the government's announced changes to the capital gains tax. Has your association assessed the impact that such an increase will have on the viability of farm transfers? What have you been hearing from those you represent?

Mr. Keith Currie: Like you, we're hearing a lot of questions and we are looking into it right now. We haven't done a full assessment of what the total impact will be, but what does it mean for transition and succession planning? That's the biggest concern we're hearing about with this announcement. Is it going to affect that succession planning aspect going forward? That's really what we're concerned about.

I will end by saying something that was triggered when MP Taylor Roy was speaking about the preservation of farmland. Whether tax credits or other policies are made, if you can't save the farmer, what are you saving the farmland for? That's something this committee needs to think about as it makes recommendations going forward. You can do all you want to save the farmland, but if you can't save the farmer, what's the purpose? Making sure that our tax system is where it needs to be and making sure that our environmental policies are strong and where they need to be are what we need to keep in mind.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, on behalf of Ms. Rood and I, who are the remaining committee members in what has been a bit of an unusual sitting. I think we made it work. We were able to make sure your time was recognized and that you contributed.

To all the witnesses, for your testimony and for your work in agriculture, I want to say thank you very much. Thank you for your contribution to our study.

• (1330)

The meeting is adjourned.

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