



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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# Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 019**

**PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT**

Monday, December 8, 2025

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Chair: Michael Coteau





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Monday, December 8, 2025

• (1540)

[English]

**The Chair (Michael Coteau (Scarborough—Woburn, Lib.)):** I would like to call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 19 of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Before we continue, I'd like to ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters. You will also notice a QR code, which links to a short awareness video.

Please wait until I recognize your name before speaking or answering a question directed by a member. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute yourself when you're not speaking.

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use your earpiece and select the desired channel. All comments should be addressed through the chair.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. We appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, November 24, 2025, the committee is commencing its study of the supplementary estimates (B) 2025-26.

With us today is the Honourable Heath MacDonald, Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. He is joined by officials from the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Minister, I'd like to welcome you and your colleagues back to the committee. This is your second time. We appreciate your being here.

I'll open up the floor to you, Minister. You have five minutes for opening remarks.

**Hon. Heath MacDonald (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food):** Thank you, Chair. It's great to be here.

Hello, everyone.

It's been a busy few weeks since we last met. Just after our meeting, I had a great trip to British Columbia. I connected with farmers and food processors from a wide range of sectors, including fruit growers, greenhouse farmers and value-added food processors, as well as a vitamin maker who exports to 45 countries. I was also able to sit down with Minister Popham to look at B.C.'s priorities for the next policy framework, which begin in 2028.

At the end of October, I led a mission to China. As you know, China is our number two customer for agriculture, agri-food and seafood. We worked to strengthen our presence and partnership in China, and we continue to recalibrate the relationship.

I have to say that our Chinese hosts were very receptive, and we had some open and honest discussions. We were able to listen to our stakeholders and see the opportunities and challenges first-hand. It's so important to meet in person, put a face to a name and build those relationships.

In Beijing, I had the opportunity to officially open a Canadian meat advocacy office, which will give Canadian producers boots on the ground to connect directly with our customers and meet their needs. It was great to see first-hand how our Canadian brand for quality continues to grow in China.

We also met with senior Chinese officials, including the Chinese minister responsible for general administration of customs for China, which is their equivalent to the CFIA. I raised the serious market access issues that we still have with China, including the tariffs on our canola, seafood, pork and peas. One positive sign was their willingness to restart the work of the bilateral technical working groups, which is a critical step to being able to address regulatory barriers.

I was there just after the Prime Minister's successful meeting with President Xi and during Minister Anand's visit. Along with my cabinet colleagues, I'm also committed to keeping the conversation going while looking for ways to support our producers, processors and exporters.

At the same time, we continue to help all farmers cope with financial challenges due to market disruptions and increased costs as well as other challenges. Last week, I was honoured to speak at the 101st UPA congress in Quebec City. I was able to have a round table with producers, tour the Ideal Can facility and visit Université Laval to see the important work it's doing in science and research in the agriculture and agri-food space.

As outlined in these estimates, we are investing \$108 million to enhance the AgriStability program, increasing the compensation rate for farmers from 80% to 90% and raising the payment cap per farm from \$3 million to \$6 million. The AgriStability improvements are part of an envelope in budget 2025 totalling more than \$639 million over five years: \$75 million for the AgriMarketing program to enhance and diversify products and promote them to new markets; \$97.5 million to increase the advance payments program's interest-free limit to \$500,000 for canola advances for the 2025 and 2026 program years; and \$372 million to establish a bio-fuel production incentive to support the stability and resilience of domestic producers in biodiesel and renewable diesel.

In addition, Farm Credit Canada is launching a trade disruption customer support program to make available \$1 billion in new lending to help reduce financial barriers for the Canadian agriculture and food industry. We've also responded to the cattle sector by making pasture-related feed costs eligible under AgriStability and are seeking the required consensus from other jurisdictions.

To help producers meet their labour needs, budget 2025 proposes to provide \$307 million to the youth employment and skills strategy to provide employment, training and other support to about 20,000 young people a year, including in ag.

The industry was also very positive about other measures in budget 2025: the cancellation of the proposed increase in the capital gains inclusion rate so that family farms can continue their succession; a proposed investment of \$5 billion over seven years to create the trade diversification corridors fund to strengthen supply chains and unlock new export opportunities; \$76 million to help the CFIA support digital trade tools, replacing paperwork and cutting red tape for our agri-food exporters; \$32.8 million to help the CFIA secure, expand and restore market access for Canadian agriculture; a new strategic exports office; and nearly \$186 million for the new buy Canadian policy, which focuses on made-in-Canada products.

● (1545)

Our government has been putting Canadian farmers, processors and agribusinesses at the heart of nation-building efforts. Every time the government invests in agriculture, we'll do so in a way that strengthens our farm businesses, our jobs, our supply chains and our food security.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I look forward to our discussion.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll go to the Conservatives first.

For six minutes, we have Mr. Barlow.

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

Minister, the last time you were here, you gave us vocal support—I think it was the second time you'd said it publicly—that you would support the emergency-use application from Alberta and Saskatchewan on strychnine. It's now been more than two months since Alberta and Saskatchewan submitted their emergency-use application, yet they have not heard a response.

I'm hoping that today you can let us know on which date you will finalize the approval of those applications. We've certainly heard from ag retailers, municipalities and agriculture service boards that to source strychnine, they need an answer as quickly as possible.

On what date will your support for this application be official?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Mr. Barlow, I think I stated clearly that I would support the application and support it through Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. The final decision doesn't lie with me. I said bluntly and I said publicly many times that I would support the initiative.

All I can do at this point in time is reinforce my commitment to ensuring that the Department of Health, which is fully responsible in this regard, continues to look at this in an expeditious way. I fully understand—

**John Barlow:** Okay. Thanks, Minister.

You're going to be just like every other Liberal agriculture minister. You're going to do what you're told rather than advocating for farmers and making sure they have a voice at the cabinet table. It's very frustrating. I think all of us were hoping for something new.

When you were with us before, you also talked about the Prime Minister saying that he wants an “economic lens” put on everything. We also had CFIA and PMRA officials here. We asked them if they were going to listen to the government's mandate—that you also supported in the election platform, as Conservatives did—that there needs to be an economic lens and an idea of food security when it comes to the decisions of CFIA and PMRA. The CFIA and PMRA officials said there was no need for them to change their mandate. They think it's already happening, but I think we heard from every single stakeholder during our red tape reduction study that this is certainly not the case.

Are you going to make sure that PMRA and CFIA have an economic lens and a food security lens on every decision they make?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** I think it's extremely important. I would make reference to the USDA. I think they do that as well.

First and foremost, we need to reassure, because as I travel around the world and talk about exports, food safety is number one with all the countries we're dealing with and all our trading partners. I will endorse the economic lens without a doubt. I have been talking about it and I will continue to talk about it. I will continue to push CFIA and PMRA. It has to happen in the decisions they're making.

**John Barlow:** Thank you.

Your department gave \$8.5 million to the failed cricket farm that declared bankruptcy, but it was recently sold. How much of the \$8.5 million did your department recoup from the sale of that operation?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** I'm not as familiar with that file as I maybe should be. The cricket farm situation was before my time. I'll certainly look into it and get back to you on it.

**John Barlow:** Farm Credit Canada gave them \$40 million. I'd like to know how much Farm Credit Canada recouped of that \$40 million from this failed project.

Speaking of Farm Credit Canada, we recently saw in the media that the CEO of Farm Credit Canada has billed taxpayers almost \$315,000 in travel expenses. Just to put that into perspective, that's three times the amount the agriculture minister has charged taxpayers for travel expenses.

Do you support the immense travel expenses that the CEO of Farm Credit Canada is charging to the taxpayer?

• (1550)

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Well, I saw the story. I think the frame around the story is not likely something I would have used, but I will say this. I've travelled to many provinces, including Alberta, where about \$8 billion from Farm Credit Canada is invested. I was in Quebec last week, where it's about \$6.1 billion. I think it's extremely important to remind people of how important Farm Credit Canada is to ranchers and producers across this country. I hear it all the time.

I will continue to work on this and see what the relevance is of the story that came out. I will have an opinion at that time, but I can tell you that FCC is really important.

**John Barlow:** Thanks, Minister. I'd appreciate you getting back to us on that.

We've been getting a number of emails and calls from FCC employees who are very frustrated with the leadership of the current CEO. This is just one aspect of it. We have transcripts, which are now also in the media, that in a recent discussion with staff, she was asked which politician or which leader she admired the most. She said it was Fidel Castro, for his courage and his commitment to his values.

Do you believe that is a value Farm Credit Canada should be sharing with farmers and agriculture stakeholders across Canada? This is a person who represents us not only nationally but also internationally. Do you think that coincides with the values of Agriculture Canada?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** No, and I think, certainly—

**John Barlow:** Will there be repercussions for the CEO of FCC?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Again, I think the full story has to come to fruition. To make a statement on it without knowing all the details would be unfair to the general public, the farmers who are involved in FCC and the administration.

I will say that FCC plays a vital role in the success of farmers across the country. I want to ensure that in everything we do, we're doing the right thing, with the farmers and producers first. We'll certainly look into the administration accusations.

**John Barlow:** Thank you, Minister.

**The Chair:** We're going to the Liberals for six minutes.

Go ahead, MP Dandurand.

[*Translation*]

**Marianne Dandurand (Compton—Stanstead, Lib.):** Thank you very much.

Minister, thank you for being with us today to answer our questions.

[*English*]

I'm going to ask my first question in English, because I really need this answer from you for my constituents.

Supply management is vital in my riding. It helps support our local ecosystems in every region. Can you confirm that the government intends to continue to protect it in the face of external pressures, particularly from the U.S.?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Right from the get-go, our Prime Minister has been very clear that supply management is not on the table. I spoke to 500 delegates in Quebec last week. I was asked a question from the floor, and I gave the same answer. It's non-negotiable, and we're going to fight tooth and nail for supply management.

I come from a province of 175,000 people, and we have about 140 dairy farms, so it's extremely important to my province as well. It's something we continue to deal with.

[Translation]

**Marianne Dandurand:** Thank you very much.

In my region, the pork industry is very strong. However, it is also affected by external threats.

Can you tell us what the government is doing to support the pork industry?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** We continue to work on the diversification of our exports, and the pork industry leads the way. It's likely in every country I've visited now. It's established in that country...and is looking for access for more market share. We'll work alongside the pork industry.

I believe the pork industry is a very solid sector in reference to being in other countries and knowing exactly the capacity it has to be in those countries. In every trade mission I've been on so far, the pork guys have been standing shoulder to shoulder with me—the representatives from Quebec as well.

[Translation]

**Marianne Dandurand:** Thank you.

Since we're talking about missions abroad, can you give us an update on Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy and the evolution of Canada's Indo-Pacific Agriculture and Agri-Food Office in Manila?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** The agri-food office in Manila has been very strategic. When I was there, the connections it has, the opportunities it's raising and the awareness of Canadian products for market share are exponential in many aspects. It's certainly put a lens on the opportunities for Canada to be in that area.

The bilateral agreement is the first one an ASEAN country has signed with Canada. We're excited about it, and I think there is potential for more growth in that area, with a middle class that's growing with more disposable income. There's value added on the pork side too, especially on the protein side. It's something we look forward to.

• (1555)

[Translation]

**Marianne Dandurand:** Thank you.

Budget 2025 talks at length about the resilience of supply chains, which are critically important for the agricultural sector. Are there any specific investments planned for agricultural infrastructure and regional processing?

In addition, how can we support SMEs that are not necessarily SME exporters?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** When you talk about the infrastructure side of things, if you take the port of Montreal with Contrecoeur, there's a trickle-down effect for all suppliers and all farmers at every level. To get goods to market, we need to be more adaptable and quicker, obviously.

Every time we invest in a port, whether it's the port of Churchill or port of Vancouver, or the rails, it's extremely important for agriculture. It's been a long time coming, as far as I'm concerned, from what we're reading and what we understand about it. Anything we can do to make exporting easier is something we'll continue to do. I look forward to some of these nation-building projects.

[Translation]

**Marianne Dandurand:** Thank you.

This week, you met with farmers from the Union des producteurs agricoles du Québec, the UPA. Can you tell us a bit about the details of the conversations you had with them?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Trade was something that came up several times in the Q and A I had with them. Input costs were certainly something...and climate change. Farmers are out in front of climate change. That was front and centre, as well as support and communication to deliver the message of how important farming is to the economics of this country.

I think sometimes farming gets pushed to the side of the desk, and I don't think it should be when it's 7% of our GDP and one in nine jobs. It's something we as a government, and as I told them as well, we as an association... Farmers are humble, and they're resilient, but sometimes humble doesn't get you that far. They also need to shout it from the rooftops as much as they can to ensure the public understands how tough it is to be a farmer.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll move to the Bloc Québécois for six minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Lemire.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ):** Thank you Mr. Chair. Thank you for welcoming me.

Minister, I want to talk to you about the advance payments program.

Last Thursday, my colleague Yves Perron attended the UPA convention, and he heard your remarks and the question period that followed. Grain farmers approached the microphone to ask you when the government would permanently increase the maximum amount of the advance payments program to \$350,000. Your answer pertained only to this year's temporary increase to \$500,000 for canola and to \$250,000 for other crops.

Will there come a time when our farmers won't have to approach a microphone at their national convention to ask you the same question every year? When will it be permanent?

This question is also very important back home in Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** There's an opportunity just around the corner in the new policy framework. I think I addressed that in my response to that question. It was relevant. Now is the time, if we're going to make changes. We're starting in January, I think it is, Deputy.

**A voice:** Yes.

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Yes. We're trying to expedite the new policy framework.

I think having those voices at the table, like UPA and Martin Caron.... We talked about this and about ensuring they have a voice and that they come with their ideas to see what we can do to satisfy them. It's not regional, of course. It's Canada-wide. We have to ensure that everybody has their input and that it's consistent and everybody can agree to it.

• (1600)

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you for your answer. That gives us a glimmer of hope. I hope that farmers will have the same reaction.

Last week, in discussions with the Canada Organic Trade Association and with Canadian Organic Growers, my colleague Yves Perron heard that the government is contemplating abolishing the Canadian General Standards Board in order to achieve some innovative savings. We know that the organic standard is one of the standards, among others, that the board administers.

Can you clarify your intention and your government's intention in this regard?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** I'm not sure I clearly understood the question, Sébastien. Can you repeat it?

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** In your view, is the future of the Canadian General Standards Board, which administers the organic standard, secure?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Yes, certainly we had a good exchange on the organics.

We fund that every five years. I think it's \$500,000, if I remember correctly. They've asked us to make it permanent. That is an opportunity for us to show some support for the organics. I think there's a real opportunity for that market to expand and grow. That's something that we would consider, definitely.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** We know that the government has let the industry self-regulate for a long time when it comes to the registry of gene-edited varieties. The government made up for this by again funding the organic standard. If the administration of this standard becomes privatized, we know what could happen: a loss of neutrality; a standard that could be influenced by the interests of large corporations; increased costs for accessing the standards, obtaining certification or participating in five-year reviews; a weakening of the participation of small and medium-sized farms; reduced credibility of the "Canada Organic" logo in the eyes of consumers; and so on.

What support would you provide to the organic sector, whose international trade relations are already being affected by the non-labelling of cloned meat and gene-edited products? Will you support this sector, if you were to abandon it and stop funding certification?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Obviously, certification is important, and I think we have to take into consideration what certification means to our trading partners as well.

The policy framework is another place. I don't want to keep using that as an excuse, but I think it's important that these topics get into that discussion so that everybody has a say. Not only that, but it allows me to see across the board. We have organic farmers in every province in this country, and certification is certainly important. Labelling is as well. It would be good to hear from producers, the general public, obviously, and others in regard to those facts. It would be something the policy framework could do.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** An organic farmer in my riding, Daniel Coutu, told me about a major problem with the organic standard. Some shipments arrive here that are certified organic but they don't meet the organic standards of our other partners. Since the organic standard of the exporting country is not the same, even if Canada grants its organic certification to the products, they don't pass the customs examination of other countries. As a result, Canada is not abiding by its own reciprocal agreement, leading to a major loss of trust in Canada on the world stage.

What inspections are being done and will be done at entry for certified organic grains?

[English]

**The Chair:** Give a short answer.

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Sébastien, we're willing to look at everything in that regard. We had some good meetings there and some round tables. This discussion came up as well. It's something that I can follow up with you on afterwards, if you wish.

[*Translation*]

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** We'll go to the Conservatives for five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Gourde.

[*Translation*]

**Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC):** Thank you Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here, Minister.

You had a noteworthy visit to Quebec last Thursday at the convention of the Union des producteurs agricoles, or UPA. The question period is always interesting.

Marcel Pépin, president of the UPA federation of Lanaudière, asked an excellent question. He raised some serious concerns about the route of the high-speed rail project. He recalled the tragic case of Mirabel, where 40,000 hectares of land were expropriated and, in the end, not much was accomplished.

We're currently studying Bill C-15, the budget implementation bill and, unfortunately, the Liberal government and the Liberal Prime Minister want to move too quickly. There are provisions that will likely lead to the expropriation of other lands.

Can you assure me that you will be an advocate for agriculture and, since you're in the cabinet, that you will stand up for farmers, land ownership and a healthy negotiation? In Quebec, we will not accept another expropriation of lands.

• (1605)

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

Look, it was a good question from the floor. I've never heard it before, and no one has ever approached me on it. When we left the building, I said to my staff that we needed to dig into it and see.

I fully understand land use and the complications around losing land, especially farmland. We're going to pursue this. I haven't had the opportunity, as I just got back on Friday night, to sit down with the transportation minister, but I can assure you that I'm going to sit down with him and have a discussion relevant to this to see if there are any best practices around the world where this happens and see if there's something we can follow up on that could be relevant. We need to make sure farmers are looked after. We did have some farmers say, "I don't mind it, because I'll be able to rent my land", and things like that.

There's been a bit of back-and-forth, but it was never brought up to me until the question on the floor, which was good.

[*Translation*]

**Jacques Gourde:** Thank you, Minister. You can rest assured that we will be following up on this file closely with you.

There is another issue I'm greatly concerned about as a passionate advocate for the next generation of farmers. A study by Farm Credit Canada, using Statistics Canada data, shows that more than 50% of farmers in Canada are over the age of 60 and, unfortunately, fewer than 32,000 farmers are under the age of 40. Over the next 10 years, it is projected that more than \$50 billion in farm assets will be transferred. If the trend continues, there will be fewer and fewer young farmers and more and more older farmers, like me—I'm 62. This is a serious problem.

Has your department started to tackle this issue head-on and, at the very least, looked for a way to encourage the next generation of farmers? There is a shortage in the next generation for all of Canada's agricultural heritage that needs to be transferred. I'm not talking just about the next 10 years. We also have to think about the 10 years after that.

[*English*]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** It's right across the country. This is an issue that governments at all levels—provincial, federal and municipal—have to consider.

Before I left for Quebec, I met last week with the Prime Minister's Youth Council. The chair of the youth council is actually from Quebec, from a dairy farm family. I was intrigued by some of the education these kids have, and they want to be in the agriculture field.

There are opportunities in agriculture now. I think we have to do a better job of telling the story about innovation, technology, plant science and genomics and to talk in the same breath about agriculture and farming. I don't think that happens enough. There was a young guy there who grew up in downtown Toronto and wants to work in agriculture.

I know that in budget 2025, we put in \$307 million for the youth employment and skills strategy. I know we changed some tax regimes in regard to transfers.

[*Translation*]

**Jacques Gourde:** I have two brief questions.

The advance payments program—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You'll have to be really quick, like 15 to 20 seconds.

[*Translation*]

**Jacques Gourde:** The committee is willing to help you with the advance payments program, or APP. If you want us to do a small study, we would be very happy to do so, because we know there are a lot of issues. We are quite familiar with these issues, since we've been working on this file for a long time. Regrettably, this program is not universal. We're ready to help you if you want to go ahead with that.

[English]

**The Chair:** I'm going next to MP Connors for five minutes.

• (1610)

**Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.):** Thank you.

Welcome, Minister and other representatives of the department. It's great to see you here.

I want to start by noting the mention of your commitment to supply management, because in my province of Newfoundland and Labrador, supply management is a huge part of our agricultural industry.

As part of that, there are a lot of small farms, family-run farms. As a province, we've been working on food sustainability and working really hard on the importance of agriculture as an economic generator, as well as from a food perspective.

From a small farm and rural perspective, what programs and funding will continue to support small farms such as the ones in Newfoundland and Labrador?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Thank you, Mr. Connors.

I come from rural P.E.I. In fact, most programs consider Prince Edward Island as a whole rural province, so I fully understand how important it is to the small communities. They drive the communities, really.

I think a lot of it comes back to the SCAP program. Whether it be AgriMarketing, AgriStability or AgriInnovate, I think these are some of the things that smaller farmers can take advantage of—obviously on a smaller scale—and also some of the science that's being done. For example, I was at Université Laval last week, and they have a \$10-million budget for science and are doing plant-based science, genomic science and bioscience. These are the types of things that are available to small-town farmers, to rural Canada, and they can take full advantage of them.

In working with the provinces, like the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, and in developing these relationships from province to province, whether in Saskatchewan or Newfoundland, I think the federal government's part is to listen. If there are policies that need to be changed to ensure that smaller provinces like yours and mine can benefit from them, then certainly that's what we have to do.

**Paul Connors:** Thank you for that response.

The research and everything that goes on is certainly helping Newfoundland and Labrador, because it's helping us to introduce new products to be grown there.

You mentioned climate change, and I want to ask a question about Newfoundland and a lot of the parts of Atlantic Canada that were hit this year by drought. There was drought in probably most of Canada. Can you tell us a bit more about the AgriRecovery programs or the programs supporting Canadian farmers through droughts and other climate impacts?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Our business risk management programs have come up several times in my travels, and they are something that will be front and centre. They came up at our na-

tional ministers meeting in Winnipeg in the summer, and they are something that I think government has to take a look at. If changes need to be made, obviously you need the partnership of all the provinces.

This morning I had an opportunity to sit down with Robert Irving, and we were talking a lot about drought and irrigation and how the federal government can help, so there's lots to do.

In terms of AgriStability in Newfoundland, I know they have droughts. There's a discussion going on now, with the newly elected government going back and forth with some of my officials, I believe. The deputy may be able to tell you more on that if you need more, but discussions are certainly going back and forth to see where they're going to land on the AgriStability file for farmers who are hurting because of the drought.

**Paul Connors:** I think I'm running out of time.

I was going to give you the opportunity to talk about anything you wanted to talk about that was important for you.

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Oh, thanks.

**John Barlow:** That's a hard-hitting question.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** It's Christmas.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** You have about 15 seconds.

**Paul Connors:** I never have enough time.

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** I must admit that I think I've been to every province in this country except Newfoundland and Labrador, Mr. Connors. You and I know a little spot called the Trip Inn that we have to visit when I'm there. I certainly look forward to visiting some of your producers and farmers in Newfoundland.

• (1615)

**Paul Connors:** I look forward to it as well.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Next we'll go to Mr. Lemire with the Bloc Québécois.

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

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Ianiro.

We've all read the response you sent us regarding the importation of poultry fraudulently declared as spent fowl coming from the United States. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the CFIA, tells us that there are no problems with the traceability or food safety of this meat, even though the declaration that allows it to enter the market is itself fraudulent. You're also telling us that, for those reasons, it is not possible to issue a recall to pull it from the shelves when it is necessary to do so.

Why does the CFIA prefer a cure rather than prevention in terms of subjecting this meat to DNA testing at Trent University? What makes this approach so complicated?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** I had some good meetings early last week with the Chicken Farmers of Canada, and we had a good discussion. CFIA is sitting right here to my right, so maybe I'll get them to follow up on that.

I will say that after the meeting on the first of last week, CFIA went to Trent University to seek out the DNA test to ensure that it's still appropriate and reserved to the pathogens they look for.

I think it's very serious, and we need to find a solution that's compatible but that will also ensure that everybody is on the same page on this. At this point in time, I can tell you from the discussions I had with different organizations that we're not all on the same page.

It's something that maybe you can follow up on, Mr. Ianiro.

**Robert Ianiro (Vice-President, Policy and Programs, Canadian Food Inspection Agency):** Thank you.

I think the minister covered everything.

We did meet with Trent University as recently as last week to discuss their views on this, and we're open to continuing discussions with industry and all those within the supply chain as it relates to this.

I would like to underscore that this is not a food safety issue. This is really a misdeclaration and tariff issue.

One key thing we are doing is working with our colleagues at CBSA. They have undertaken a significant number of investigations over the last few years and have imposed over \$370 million in fines.

There should be no concern as it relates to traceability, as we have the appropriate certification from a health and safety perspective. Again, this is not a food safety issue; this is a tariff and misdeclaration issue. We're open to continue working with Trent and the industry to make sure we do all we can.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'll next go to Mr. Epp for five minutes.

**Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Minister and officials, for being here today.

In your last appearance, Minister, you were unable to commit to the continuation of the seasonal agricultural worker program. Your deputy committed to getting back to us, but we have not yet heard about the status of that program.

Are you prepared to commit to the continuation of the SAW program today?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Well, since the deputy committed to that, I'm going to let him answer your question.

**Lawrence Hanson (Deputy Minister, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food):** Obviously, this is not a program on which we lead. The program itself is led through ESDC. As you know, they are continuing to look at a specific stream for agriculture and fish processing workers, but I cannot commit to specific timelines or decisions from ESDC.

**Dave Epp:** Are you prepared to support the program?

**Lawrence Hanson:** I think we continue to be absolutely clear that temporary foreign workers are crucial for the operation of the agriculture sector. We've never wavered on that.

**Dave Epp:** Thank you. We'll still wait for your answer on the seasonal program itself.

Going on to farm income now, there's a 26% drop in farm income—\$3.3 billion in realized net farm income in 2024. Minister, that was before you were minister, so feel free to comment quite openly and specifically as to which policies contributed to that.

I'm even going to help you with that. Would the industrial carbon tax not be one of the major contributors to the increasing cost at the farm level?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Look, you heard me get up in the House and talk about this a bit. I'm not a scientist, nor am I an economist. Basically, you take your lead from the professionals in this field.

If you look at the Canadian Climate Institute, they say that, one, up until 2030, 0.08% is the relevant cost and effect it could have on food on the table. Two, on the farmer, it could be 0.12%. Putting that into context and doing the math, obviously there's a very negligible increase in reference to the family farm.

If you take the OBPS—

• (1620)

**Dave Epp:** Minister, I take it that you're supporting the increase in the rising cost of the industrial carbon tax.

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** I'm not supporting.... You asked me a question; I'm trying to explain. My reference is from the Canadian Climate Institute. It's the way they explain it, and I can get it to you.

**Dave Epp:** Thank you. If you could table that explanation, that would be great.

During the campaign, the Prime Minister was elbows up on carbon border adjustments. Post-campaign, now it's elbows down. Do you support carbon border adjustment mechanisms?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Look, we're in a geopolitical war. At the beginning of it, the European Union said they were going to do carbon border adjustments. That never transpired.

With carbon border adjustments, you have to be very careful when we're dealing with a triangulation of China, the U.S. and the EU on top of that. It's extremely important, but I don't think I would say that it was elbows down. I think it was very strategic.

**Dave Epp:** The Prime Minister actually substituted a rising industrial carbon tax as justification for putting his elbows down. Do you agree?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** No.

**Dave Epp:** Would you agree that food systems infrastructure is just as important to Canadians as electricity, water, roads, etc.?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Without a doubt.

**Dave Epp:** May I ask, then, why budget 2025 invests \$280 billion in infrastructure for roads, bridges, hospitals and broadband, yet zero is targeted for food infrastructure?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** You live in the hub of an area that produces lots of fruits and vegetables, Mr. Epp. To get those fruits and vegetables to market, we need infrastructure. If we don't put infrastructure in place.... It's deteriorating rapidly. As farmers across this country tell me day after day, if you're going to do anything, invest in infrastructure. It's going to take time to build it, but if we can't get our products to market, then there's not much use in expanding our markets.

**Dave Epp:** If ag is not directly named, can ag access the CIB for funding and value adding?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Yes.

**Dave Epp:** That's an excellent point. What's the record of the CIB?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** We've opened a new office for the CIB, and it's changed quite a bit. You're going to see lots of changes relevant to the CIB, and that was a discussion I had this morning, actually, with Mr. Irving.

**Dave Epp:** The food report documents that the rate of inflation of food dropped with the temporary GST holiday. If you remove taxes, food prices go down. Do you agree with that assessment?

**The Chair:** Give a short answer.

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Of course.

**Dave Epp:** Thank you.

Can we remove further food taxes and have the same effect for Canadians?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** What food taxes are you referring to?

**Dave Epp:** It's the industrial carbon tax, Mr. Minister.

**The Chair:** Okay, I'm going to stop you guys there. You're 15 seconds over.

We'll have MP Harrison for five minutes.

**Emma Harrison (Peterborough, Lib.):** Thank you very much for joining us today, Minister.

The recent budget was encouraging. I don't think you'll be surprised by this: Any time I see Canada's agricultural role in driving economic growth, I'm pleased. With investments in infrastructure to support agriculture exports, as well as the increase in the AgriStability's compensation rate from 80% to 90%, these measures are important steps forward.

In Ontario, our agricultural sector is incredibly diverse, not only in the size and scale of operations but also in the types of crops, livestock and innovative practices. This diversity is also reflected in my riding of Peterborough, which is filled with many generational family farms. This diversity is a strength, but it also means policies must be flexible and responsive to regional realities.

I was reminded of this diversity during a recent drive to the Bay of Quinte. Along country roads, you'll find communities built around small family farms, niche producers and businesses deeply tied to local economies and food systems. Supporting them is critical, not just for food security but for sustaining rural communities and ensuring that agriculture remains a viable career for future generations.

Minister, could you share with us what the government is doing to support small producers specifically? How do you see some of the budget measures impacting smaller farms compared to larger operations? Could you also share any initiatives or priorities that will help small producers adapt to challenges that impact the stability of their operations, such as climate change and passing farms down to younger generations?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** In your question, you answered some of what the government is trying to do. Yes, there's a difference between small and large farmers and producers, but really, a farmer is a farmer is a farmer. They want to be prosperous, sustainable and, most likely, generational.

I think some of the programs we introduced in the budget and the increase to some of the programs, at this point in time, for what we're going through... It may be different in a year's time or two years' time, but from what I've heard, whether it be from small producers or larger producers, we need trade diversification and infrastructure, and we need to continue with our science programs, ensure we streamline them, not duplicate them, and bring more people together regarding what's expected of the federal government, academia, GenCanada, Seeds Canada and GATE in Winnipeg. I think it's extremely important that we get everybody on the same page, because agriculture could be a lot stronger than it is. It's extremely important to the economics of small towns, but also to Canada as a whole.

On the transportation side, we're investing \$5 billion over seven years for Transport Canada to create trade diversification corridors. When you talk about small farmers, that's exactly what they need as well. A strategic exports office is going to affect them—there's a trickle-down effect—as will AgriMarketing. I think there are all kinds of programs and goodies in there.

In saying that, I'll note the last time a budget was done, I think agriculture was mentioned three times, and this time it's mentioned over 30. I'm not taking anything away from anybody, but I think people are starting to realize how important agriculture is to the economics of this country. This gives us an opportunity to talk about it, to put it on a pedestal and to make the changes we need.

• (1625)

**Emma Harrison:** Thank you.

You already touched on visiting Trent last week to talk about the DNA test, but I'd like to talk a little more about that because there's some really important research coming out of Trent University. I had an opportunity to visit the ENIGMA lab a few weeks ago, and what they're doing will be crucial for helping innovation in the agriculture industry. I also had a meeting with the University of Guelph a few weeks ago. You already spoke to this a bit, but they have students getting job offers 18 months before graduation. I think you explained clearly that we need to do a better job of advertising these jobs and the diversity that comes in the agricultural sector.

Could you tell us more about the role you see innovation and technology playing for producers in the future?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** I've said many times that you could put farming up against any other manufacturing or processing entity in this country, and farming technology and innovation will rise above most of them. It's about telling that story and ensuring those.... There's the youth council, for example. I talked about the young guy who grew up in downtown Toronto. Who would have ever dreamed he wanted to be a part of agriculture?

The other thing is that piloting new strategies is important for showing examples of how people can be successful in agriculture. Now that we have AI—kids are certainly very interested in AI—

that's something we need to exploit to introduce them to the agriculture field.

**The Chair:** We're running past the five minutes.

We're going to do another 10 minutes, if you have time, Minister. We started 10 minutes late. Are you guys okay to stay 10 more minutes for one more round?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Sure.

**The Chair:** Okay.

We'll go to the Conservatives for five minutes.

**Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. It's always good to welcome a fellow Maritimer to committee.

Minister, I just want to ask you this really quickly. Are you aware of the current value of Canada's agricultural trade with the U.S.? What is that in dollar figures?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** I know the total amount. Is it over \$100 billion in exports?

**Richard Bragdon:** That's very—

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** It's 1.1....

**Richard Bragdon:** Wow. When you combine the imports and the exports, the amount of trade that's happening is significant.

Have you had a chance to speak with your counterpart in the United States, considering, obviously, the climate in which we're in and the concerns among many of our farmers and producers regarding tariffs, CUSMA negotiations and where the state of all that is? Have you had conversation with Secretary Rollins?

• (1630)

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Yes, I have.

I can tell you, Mr. Bragdon, that my staff are in constant contact. My chief of staff is in constant contact with her chief of staff as well. The last conversation I had was a very good, almost personal conversation relating to agriculture in both countries and how we're intertwined. We got to the point of talking about her farm and also 4-H in both countries.

We're seeing a change now in the attitudes of some of the associations with the letter-writing campaign they've done regarding the White House. I think we're starting to see some integrity being formed within some of those groups and them pushing back hard.

**Richard Bragdon:** Thank you, Minister. It's important what you're talking about, but I have a few questions in a short period of time.

Given the importance of the U.S. market to Canadian producers and farmers, there are competitive challenges posed by CFIA and PMRA delays. Can you commit to personally meeting with our U.S. counterparts in the future to address these issues and to make sure we are putting ourselves in a better position competitively so that our producers have a level playing field and continued open access to that market?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Look, we fought hard, and I think everybody knows my feelings sometimes about CFIA, no offence. They received another \$70 million, for example, for the digitization of phytosanitary certificates. That is one impediment that I constantly hear about. That is something we need to move forward on.

On regulatory burdens, I totally agree that we need to be on a level playing field at every stand. This is something that, as we move forward, we'll challenge.

**Richard Bragdon:** That's what has been made very clear.

I'm going to turn to my colleague in just a moment. I have one final question.

How involved are you in the current renegotiation process with CUSMA? We know that under a previous prime minister, Harper, the then minister of agriculture, Mr. Ritz, was very intricately involved along with the stakeholders and the farmers. Can we have surety from you that you will be at that negotiating table along with the producers?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Well, no. Do you know what? This is going to be very strategic, and we're living in different times with different presidents of the United States. I think we have to take that into consideration. Our voice is heard. We're briefed constantly on those exchanges.

**Richard Bragdon:** Thank you, Minister.

I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Bonk.

You have a minute and a half.

**Steven Bonk (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC):** Thank you, Minister, for coming today. We really do appreciate it.

You mentioned earlier that with strychnine, you were supporting the application for an exemption. I want to let you know that the clock is ticking on this. The producers will need the product very early in the spring.

I want to know if you will commit to being an advocate for this at the cabinet table to make sure we have timely access to strychnine.

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** My most recent conversation was last week with the Minister of Health. It was the week before, sorry. Last week, we pushed up another one, because when I was in Saskatchewan, I think it was the Saskatchewan Cattle Association that said they would even implement an applicator. In other words, they would hire an applicator to put down strychnine.

I made sure that I wrote a letter. It went to the Minister of Health to ensure...that's a process. I will continue to advocate at every opportunity.

**Steven Bonk:** I have one more question, really quick, and it's about canola tariffs. This is a huge industry. It's bigger than the steel, aluminum and auto sectors combined in Canada.

We've had absolutely no action on this front when it comes to the removal of tariffs. With whom have you met? When did you meet with them, and what can we expect?

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** We formed a working group with canola producers and farmers. We met last week. We're meeting at a committee that was formed out of the Prime Minister's Office. To ensure that they're up to date on everything we're doing, we're meeting one more time prior to Christmas. If that's what you're referencing, that's who we're dealing with.

**The Chair:** Mr. Connors, you have five minutes.

**Paul Connors:** Thank you.

Recently, I had the opportunity to tour the Country Ribbon chicken processing facility in Newfoundland and Labrador. They have introduced some new equipment—chillers and the like—and they've had the opportunity to expand their market. They're processing a lot of the chicken now that's produced in Newfoundland and Labrador, and there are other possibilities for them.

Can you tell us how your department is supporting farmers to expand their markets?

● (1635)

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Mr. Connors, I've been here for seven months, and diversifying our market is extremely important. In the same breath, we want to maintain the markets we presently have.

The China and canola issue is something we'll continue to fight for. The U.S. is likely our most valuable trading partner, and we're going through the CUSMA review. It has to be very strategic, and it has to stay on public airwaves because we see what happens when it doesn't. It's something we'll continue to pursue.

The money we're putting into trade diversification, with a new exports office, an export strategy and more money for Global Affairs, which is relevant to that, I think says pretty much... With where we are right now at this time in history, it's certainly important for us to pursue that. As I said, next year, it may be something different, but right now, it's extremely important that we continue to invest while ensuring, in parallel, that technology and innovation are at the forefront of our industries and sectors.

**Paul Connors:** Thank you.

I'm going to share my time with MP Dandurand.

[Translation]

**Marianne Dandurand:** Thank you very much.

I'm going to ask you another question in French, Minister.

There is a serious shortage of labour in the regions. This is particularly challenging in the agriculture sector.

Can you tell us what's happening with the temporary foreign worker program in the agriculture sector? Are we continuing to support these workers and make them available to the agriculture sector?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** We can't do what we want to do in farming without the support of temporary foreign workers. Temporary foreign workers play a significant role in all farms and in processing seafood. It doesn't matter where you come from. I believe Quebec—and don't quote me on these numbers—takes about a third of the temporary foreign workers. There are about 77,000 in this country, and I think 25,000 or 26,000 are in Quebec. It shows how important they are there. If we're going to get our product either off the processing line or out of the field, we need temporary foreign workers.

Sometimes we hear questions in Parliament, and people stand up and respond to them, but every time we talk negatively about temporary foreign workers in one aspect or another, I get farmers saying to me, "Why don't you guys stop talking about temporary foreign workers?" That's how important they are to them. They don't want to jeopardize a program that's been around for 50-some years in many sectors, and a lot of them are under my portfolio. It's extremely important, and sometimes we as politicians don't do that justice.

Should there be changes? That's up to somebody else, but I can tell you that they're extremely important in this country. I want to add that sometimes we forget that we're trying to get our products into Mexico, for example. Temporary foreign workers coming to Canada are very important to Mexico as well. We have to remind ourselves every once in a while that it's not just our country benefiting from this; it's also our trading partners that are benefiting from it. If we're negotiating, we don't want to say that we don't want their workers anymore.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'm going to Mr. Lemire.

You have two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you Mr. Chair.

Minister, as you know, in parliamentary committees, such as this one, the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, people are listening to us. I was told that your answer to my question about fraudulent poultry imports and DNA testing at Trent University was not entirely accurate.

I'm told that the meeting didn't go well and that the relationship of trust was especially undermined when the CFIA vice-president suggested quite clearly that no testing would be done and that poultry that is fraudulently declared as spent fowl, particularly coming from the United States, would be allowed to enter the market without being checked.

Is that the department's official position? Are you going to completely let people down on this issue?

• (1640)

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** To be quite honest, I was in la belle province until the weekend. I haven't been briefed on that, but that's certainly, I hope, not the end result of that meeting.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** I'm glad to hear that.

On another matter, I requested a meeting with you several months ago, shortly after your appointment, and I want to reiterate the importance of this meeting for me and my region. This concerns the agri-food research and development unit in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, the URDAAT, at the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue, or UQAT.

In Canada, farming is also carried out in northern areas and in clay plains. For many years, a research team in Kapuskasing received funding. However, over the past 15 years or so, that funding has fallen to zero. Fortunately, URDAAT has taken over. One wonders why Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada won't implement a pilot project with UQAT to advance research on agriculture in northern environments. The amount allocated to this experimental farm in Kapuskasing could be used to develop agriculture in Quebec's breadbasket, which includes Abitibi-Témiscamingue. I would like to send you the documents again and request a meeting with you.

Would you be willing to meet with me or with URDAAT representatives in the next few weeks, since the holidays are approaching? Would this be a good time to meet with them?

[English]

**Hon. Heath MacDonald:** Yes, certainly.

As I said earlier, I was at Université Laval last week. They get \$10 million or \$11 million for research in science and on many different issues, but a lot of it is plant-based. We partner right alongside them.

I would be more than welcome to sit down.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you so much for being here.

Minister, we appreciate your time, and thank you for extending your time a bit. I know you were here pretty much on time and ready to answer questions, so thank you for the extra 10 or 15 minutes.

We will now suspend for about five or 10 minutes to go from public to in camera for the next part of our meeting. I don't think anyone online is part of the committee, so we'll suspend.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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