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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Michael Coteau (Scarborough—Woburn, Lib.)): I'd like to call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 23 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Pursuant to the Standing Orders, some members are attending in person and others are online. Before I continue, I would ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the back of the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio feedback incidents and protect the health and safety of all participants, including our interpreters. You'll also notice a QR code on the table, which links to a short awareness video.

I have a couple of comments before we start.

Before speaking, please wait until I formally recognize you or you're asked to respond directly by a member.

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation.

Also, all comments should go 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.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, January 27, 2026, the committee is commencing its study on the subject matter of clause 223, division 8 of Bill C-15, budget 2025 implementation act, number 1.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses today.

Minister, thank you for joining us.

Deputy Minister, thank you for joining us twice this week. Thank you so much for being here. We appreciate it.

We'll start by providing you five minutes to speak, Minister, and then we'll go into questions.

Hon. Heath MacDonald (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you, Chair. The deputy was pretty excited to come back, I can tell you that.

First, for all of us, I think, this has been a tough week for the House and many of our colleagues. I'd like to give my condolences

for the victims in Tumbler Ridge and in the other places where horrible and senseless tragedies are happening.

Mr. Chair, amid all the change and disruption happening in the world, our government is working hard to tackle these challenges. Bill C-15 implements important elements of budget 2025 and is currently being studied at various committees, including this one.

I'm pleased to be here today to discuss specifically clause 223, in division 8, to amend the Farm Credit Canada Act. Farm Credit Canada is Canada's leading agricultural lender, with more than 100,000 customers across the country. For over 65 years, FCC has been there with an unwavering commitment to customers and the industry through good times and through challenges. FCC listens to its customers and continuously adapts its products and services to fit their unique needs.

Today, FCC plays a vital role in supporting farmers, food processors and the entire agri-value food chain, helping to drive growth, innovation and resilience in one of our country's largest economic sectors.

We're talking about an industry that drives more than \$100 billion of our exports, more than 7% of our GDP and one in nine jobs in this country. FCC is much more than a lender. It is invested in the future of our agriculture and food sector. Today, FCC continues to evolve and develop creative new tools to help the sector continue to invest, grow and meet the changing needs of its customers.

In fact, this week, we announced, alongside FCC, \$7 billion of new investment into Canadian agriculture and food by 2030. This will help grow ag-tech innovation in our agriculture food industry and sciences. FCC has also expanded its digital services, strengthened risk management and introduced new financing tools focused on sustainability.

As a government, we want to help make sure that FCC continues to have the tools and flexibility it needs to continue this great work.

Our discussion today comes at a moment when Canadian farmers and food processors are facing unprecedented change, uncertainty and instability from a perfect storm of pressures, including unjustified tariffs and other trade disruptions, extreme droughts and flooding, high input costs and animal and crop disease, as just a few.

We want to ensure that FCC can continue to meet the evolving needs of the sector, remain aligned with best practices and respond to future challenges and opportunities. That is why our government is moving forward with measures under the budget implementation act to enable regular legislative reviews of Farm Credit Canada aligning with existing requirements for Export Development Canada and the Business Development Bank of Canada.

The process will be inclusive to capture the different perspectives in this incredibly diverse sector. We will engage farmers, industry groups and all other stakeholders who have a passion to see the sector succeed. By committing to regular legislative reviews, we will ensure FCC's continued ability to support farmers and agribusiness for generations to come.

Lastly, I know there has been a lot of talk around science and research, and I'd like to share that yesterday I participated at the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, where we had a productive conversation and I was able to reiterate Agriculture Canada's commitment to science and research.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I look forward to the discussion and to this committee study before you.

• (1105)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll start with the Conservatives for six minutes.

John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

When the Liberals invoked the Emergencies Act, which was found to be unconstitutional by the courts, we were told initially that Farm Credit Canada did not share information on its clients and farmers who may or may not have participated in or provided financing for a peaceful protest.

With further research and ATIPs, we found out that FCC did indeed share a list of farmers and clients who may have participated in that peaceful process with the Liberal government. It is frustrating that we were told wrong information initially.

Is there anything in Bill C-15 that would ensure that FCC, as a Crown corporation, would not share private banking and account information with the government should they again be active in an unconstitutional crackdown on Canadians?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: As far as I know, I don't believe there's anything in the act in reference to that question.

It's a good point.

John Barlow: Has FCC reached out to farmers whose names were on that list and told them their information was shared?

I would hope that there would be an apology or acknowledgement that it happened and that it will not happen again.

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I'm unaware, but that would be a good question for FCC.

John Barlow: Thank you, Minister.

You did raise the issue about research, and you have now announced you are closing about seven agricultural research centres in Canada.

Your deputy also said that you have increased the funding to the on-farm climate action fund by an additional \$300 million for \$700 million in total. The entire budget of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's research is \$300 million.

When the Auditor General audited the on-farm climate action fund, her comments were that there were no "measurable outcomes" or strategy to actually meet its expected contributions. There were poor results in management, "missing...performance targets for climate change mitigation" and no proof that any climate emissions or climate reductions actually happened.

Minister, would it not make more sense to use the limited resources that Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada has to provide those resources to actual research on the ground that shows measurable results, like minimal-till technology and new forage to reduce methane emissions in cattle? Would that not be a better use of your dollars, rather than throwing good money after bad to a program that clearly has no measurable results and does not work?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I think the national policy framework would be a great place to initiate that conversation. I believe that money was announced prior to all of this.

I hear from farmers that it works in some areas, and I hear from some that it doesn't. Maybe a better analytic on the outcomes going forward, as we move forward with some of the changes that we're making, would be appropriate.

I can certainly charge ahead in that regard to see if there's something we should or shouldn't be doing with OFCAF.

• (1110)

John Barlow: I'm going to pass the rest of my time off to my colleague, but lastly, I guess that would show the frustration.... You are making a significant cut to Canadian agricultural research, and it doesn't sound like you did your due diligence on where those dollars should be spent and where the best benefit is for the Canadian taxpayer.

Also, you've said to Canadian farmers, "We should have taken a look at this," but you should have done that before you announced these cuts to Canadian agricultural research.

I'll pass my time to Mr. Epp.

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

Minister, you referenced FCC's participation in the \$5-billion program. It was announced Tuesday, yet two of the panellists in the afternoon, in response to the question, "Is access to capital your number one problem?" specifically stated, "No, it's trade markets and regulatory reform."

Our committee just finished a report on regulatory reform where you stated, regarding the PMRA and the CFIA, that there needed to be an economic lens put to their decisions. Those two agencies pushed back and said that their mandate did not require change.

When the CFIA makes a decision to shut down destination inspection services, which have significant downstream impacts on trade, competitiveness and food prices, are they not expressing that an economic lens should not be applied?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: It's a good question.

I think everyone around this table senses my frustration, sometimes, with those entities.

I can tell you that we're doing further work on that issue alone, and we may have more information to come in the near future.

Dave Epp: Did your department do an economic impact analysis of exactly that decision, that cost benefit, including the projected increase in landed costs, dispute resolution delays, price markups by exporters and food waste and, if so, would you table it with this committee?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: No, my department didn't. That would be in the hands of the CFIA. I can tell you that we'll continue to work and push the envelope on the CFIA and the PMRA on issues that we feel have a major impact on farmers and ranchers in this country.

Dave Epp: Are you aware of the implications of shutting down this for the potential re-implementation of PACA provisions in this country? It basically removes that possibility. Is this one way the government is expressing its lack of support for reinstating PACA?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I don't think there's a lack of support from AAFC or anybody else in government. I think we certainly recognize the importance of this industry and all the sectors involved in it.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll go to MP Harrison for six minutes.

Emma Harrison (Peterborough, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here this morning.

The world is changing quickly and our government is responding. Could you speak to our government's most recent trip to China and what kind of access we've enabled for our producers?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: The result of the China trip came upon us relatively quickly. I think we were leaning on an open door and we had the opportunity, with the leadership of our Prime Minister, to move forward a little more rapidly than maybe even anybody expected, including ourselves. We were ready and our industries and sectors were ready.

I think what we've seen is certainly trade diversification, but re-entering that market was extremely important to many sectors, including canola, seafood, etc., and we have to continue to build on that relationship. It's a people-to-people relationship.

China's not the easiest in the world to deal with; we know that. It's a volatile market, but it's something that our industries and sectors are certainly supportive of and very grateful for the outcome to date.

Emma Harrison: Thank you.

You mentioned in your opening that there will be legislative reviews of FCC. How frequently will those be done, and is there yet a framework in how they'll be administered?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: That's something that I think is needed. Every Crown corporation out there should have these reviews and it should be legislated.

There have been some issues raised by the opposition that I think could be challenged with these sectors during these legislative reviews. I think more communication and oversight is something I would be in favour of as a minister.

I'm not sure, Deputy, if it's one in five years.

• (1115)

Lawrence Hanson (Deputy Minister, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): The first such review will happen within five years of the act's coming into force, and then every 10 years thereafter.

Emma Harrison: Thank you.

I'm going to share my time with my colleague, Ms. Dandurand.

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

Thank you so much, Minister, for being here.

You know that there are a lot of questions currently about research in agriculture. You also know there's a research centre in my riding, and people are wondering what type of research we are aiming at in the future. Can you explain your vision of research in agriculture in the upcoming years?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I have two things.

One, the operational cost of these facilities is something that the opposition government of the past I think really let get out of hand. We have almost \$700 million in deferred maintenance sitting on the books, and now it's getting close to a billion dollars.

My vision is to make sure that we do as much research as we've done in the past. It's not going to be easy. I sympathize with those affected by these closures and the people who work there. We're trying as much as possible to mitigate and minimize the pain. I've spoken to two ministers recently, one within the last few hours and the other within the last 48 hours, in regard to this and how we can work together to move forward on this. I haven't spoken to the minister from Quebec, but I will.

It's my vision to ensure that we do as much research as we've been doing, but it's also important to note that we need to involve the stakeholders in what research they want done going forward.

We live in a rapidly changing world. Research is a major component of everything I do. With every trade deal, every time I sit down to do something relevant to another country, research is on the table. Therefore, we can't lose sight of that and I won't lose sight of it as a minister.

I'll challenge my department to ensure that we're doing as much research as we were. It may be more coordinated and collaborative. I have had the opportunity to meet with three universities so far to talk about their solutions and how we can incorporate some of what we've done and what we're doing into their facilities. It's going to take a little time to iron this out, but we do have what we think is a year, so we'll move forward.

Marianne Dandurand: Thank you very much.

Last week, we announced a series of measures for affordability, mostly at the grocery store, and there are many measures that are targeted for agriculture.

Can you explain a bit more what those investments are and how those investments are going to help our farmers and food supply chain?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I think everybody is concerned, obviously, with the way things are going with prices on some entities. You hear a lot about how it's not necessarily the farmers who are making the money. I want to be clear on that. In the House, we talk so much about the cost of living. Many people think that farmers are making all the money, and they're not. I want to be clear on that.

When we increase agrimarketing, for example, and we put in that we can now utilize small to medium-sized enterprises, those are the types of things that...

We also have the groceries and essentials benefit.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to the Bloc for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us today, Minister.

You've served on this committee. In particular, you took part in drafting the report in which you defended the importance of science and agriculture. Today, we feel that your department is going against that by making cuts to research.

As you know, under the Harper government, my area was affected by the closure of the Kapuskasing experimental farm in 2012.

Several memos from your department discuss the importance of agricultural research in the regions and of considering the diversity of each of Canada's regions.

This week, I asked Deputy Minister Hanson to tell me what research had been conducted in the Abitibi—Témiscamingue region over the past few years. I feel like asking you the same question, because history teaches us not to repeat the mistakes of the past. You can tell us that you'll do better than the Conservatives, but we're still very skeptical about the impact the cuts will have on various sectors.

How will you maintain local expertise in various regions despite cuts to science and research? Have any approaches involving universities been considered?

● (1120)

[*English*]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: Certainly, and I had the opportunity to visit Université Laval. Yesterday, I spoke briefly with the dean of agriculture. Those are important conversations, because it's important for me to hear from them first-hand on how we can work together.

The first part of your question was about what kind of research was being done. Much of it was in regard to soil health, but there are others, obviously. I've seen some things at Laval in the dairy field that are extremely important and kind of unique, so there are all kinds.

I feel that academia in this country can play a major role in moving forward with research and science in agriculture and agri-food that'll benefit everybody. I don't think we do enough. We do some collaboration, but I think we have the possibility of a really strong ecosystem to use academia to be more beneficial to farmers and ranchers.

Without a doubt, there's a lot of silo research going on, whether it be forage, east and west and so on and so forth. It's important to note that we want to do more research. We don't want to do less. This is, without a doubt, a stumbling block to get through this process, but we're going to try to do the best with the ability that we have. We're also going to make sure that the input is there from academia, many of whom I met with yesterday, and stakeholders.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: The Canada Grocery Code has been in effect since January 1, 2026. Issues linked to new unfair practices are already being seen at Loblaws, such as a new way of calculating rejection costs or taking longer to pay invoices, which has consequences for farmers.

What are you going to do to support farmers in that context?

[*English*]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I think we have to recognize them and point them out to these retailers. When we hear of proposals coming to suppliers and farmers—an RFP and then an RFP being sent back the second and third time—that's a real issue. Those big distributors need to be called out in public.

If it takes the Minister of Agriculture or somebody beyond that doing that, we should be doing it. We need to ensure that we're doing everything we can to make it a fair process for our processors, farmers and ranchers, and to ensure they're getting a fair and equitable price.

We have a problem in this country with not enough competition. I would like to see more competition. I think that would be important for everyone.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: If you want to put words into action, we'll obviously be allies.

As for Bill C-15, I want to talk to you about the Alto project, which is a significant concern for farmers, particularly because the high-speed train project is very likely to go through agricultural land. How will you, as the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, protect the most fertile lands in Quebec and Canada as much as possible?

I'd also like to revisit a comment by Stéphane Alary, the president of the Outaouais-Laurentides section of the Union des producteurs agricoles. He had asked certain questions, particularly about how farmers will be able to harvest their hay if a high-speed train line runs through their farm, because they can't put up bridges. How will the integrity of agricultural land be protected?

[*English*]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: It was a good question. It was raised at the conference that I spoke at in Quebec. I've raised it several

times with the Minister of Transport. It's certainly on the radar, and I'll give you an example. In my home province we built a new highway, and it went right through P.E.I.'s mostly agricultural land. They built tunnels under the road so transportation like combines and larger tractors could get from one field to the other without crossing. There are ways to do it. I think they're acknowledging the issues, but I will say this: Pressure from all angles is good pressure. Martin Caron and I had conversations about this, so we'll keep the lines of communication open as this progresses.

• (1125)

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we have the Conservatives for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you, Minister, for being with us today.

We can't overlook the fact that, in Quebec, Université Laval has a research farm in Saint-Augustin-de-Desmaures, which specializes in the assessment of forage cultivars.

Hay is really very important in Quebec and Canada. The dairy and beef industries need these cultivars. Climate change often causes droughts, and cultivars need to evolve to be more drought-resistant. I think it's very important, and I'm not sure we're heading in the right direction.

Has your department conducted an assessment of the impact of the budget cuts on research centres? If so, can you provide it to the committee? If not, will you be conducting one?

Lawrence Hanson: We absolutely recognize the importance of forage research. What we're doing is really trying to just do consolidation. As the minister said, it's going to continue in places across the country, including Lethbridge, Beaverlodge, Swift Current, Kentville, Normandin, and Agassiz. Our internal assessment was based on looking to see where else we could conduct the research and where—

Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Mr. Hanson, but my question was for the minister. Has there been an impact assessment of the effects of the cuts on research centres, yes or no? It's simple. If so, can you submit the assessment to the committee? If not, will you be conducting one?

[English]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: We assessed impacts.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Will you be able to submit it to the committee, so we can look at it?

[English]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: Yes, I'm told we can table some of our analysis.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: We'll take whatever you have. Thank you very much.

Does the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food have anything to say about the mandate of Farm Credit Canada? Does that organization's mandate come from the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food or from the Governor in Council?

[English]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: It basically comes from the Farm Credit Canada Act.

I'm not sure that we do, do we?

Lawrence Hanson: No, its mandate and so forth are all spelled out in the Farm Credit Canada Act as opposed to any departmental acts.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: I'll come back to your trip to China, which my colleague mentioned.

This morning, we heard in the media that you were going on an economic mission to Mexico next week with Minister LeBlanc. Then, you'll likely tackle the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement or CUSMA.

How do you see the negotiations? By taking time to negotiate with all the other neighbours, I feel like you've kicked a hornet's nest. What strategy will you adopt to negotiate CUSMA after having talked to everyone?

[English]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I think we're doing the same thing that every other country is doing. We're trying to open up new markets and establish ourselves in many different parts of the world. ASEAN, as you mentioned, is in an area where we signed the first bilateral agreement the Canadian government ever signed.

We see beef going into 30 or 40 Costco stores in Mexico. We hope to have more on the fruit and vegetable side on this trip. Pet food is another example.

Part of this trip will be to further align ourselves on the regulatory side so that when we are doing shipments with any commodity, there is a clear digitized process that we're going to be utilizing. It's an opportunity for us to continue those conversations, and I think that the Mexican government is open to having those discussions.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Our country remains a leader in genetic exports. Will Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada continue to support genetic producers?

[English]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: Yes, most definitely.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: We will go to the Liberals for five minutes, with MP Paul Connors.

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): Good day, Mr. Minister. I thank you for coming out to meet with the committee again today.

I have a question that just came to me as we were talking about science and research. Can you tell me where agriculture ranks when it comes to science and research conducted within the government overall?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: There are lots of science departments, but the research we do is more than 50% of our budget, so even with the changes we're making, we'll still be the largest science centre, per se, in the country. We'll continue to build on that.

I think there will be a lot of changes over the course of the next few years in agriculture, even after what we do here today. There are going to be changes, because the world is changing. AI is going to play a significant part in agriculture research, and it's something we need to adopt and adapt to quickly for the farmers' sake.

Paul Connors: This is a comment on a comment you made. You said previously it is not the farmers who are making the excessive profits. I think that's very important for people to hear, because people do think farmers are making excessive profits, especially the farmers in Newfoundland and Labrador, for whom I worked for so many years. The profits are probably not made at the farm gate. They're made throughout the line, and I think it's important for people to hear that.

If you have any further comments on that, I'd like to hear them, but you don't have to comment.

Hon. Heath MacDonald: The costs to farms have risen. Land is more expensive. Input costs are more expensive. When you look at farm gate yields, they're not necessarily translating into what it's costing farmers to farm today.

You talked a bit about retail. It can be frustrating for anybody who pays attention to the cost at the retail shelf and what the farmer is getting at the farm gate.

Paul Connors: Thank you very much for that comment.

There's an article that was put out titled "U.S. agriculture groups launch campaign backing trade deal with Canada, Mexico". It goes on to say, "Coalition touts benefits of CUSMA to rural America, key voting block for Trump" and the party down there.

Do you have any comments on that? What have you heard from farmers in the U.S.?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: Our industries are integrated. In any conversation I had with Secretary Rollins, that was acknowledged.

I know the official opposition asked about going to Mexico and whether there are any impediments there relevant to the CUSMA trade talks. On my way home from Mexico, I'll be stopping in Washington with a negotiating team to meet with Secretary Rollins, so we'll be having those conversations.

I think person-to-person dialogue is extremely important. I think the U.S., as you're aware, in that article.... There have been other letters written to Washington about how important it is that these two countries live side by side—our neighbours do a tremendous amount of business—and how negative a disruption in CUSMA could be to both economies. I think they're starting to realize it, and they're starting to speak up. It's something that we look forward to.

Certainly, if there are any farmers out there listening, they should reach out to farmers in the U.S. and have those conversations with the people they know. We do a lot of business. There are a lot of friends. There are even relatives in the U.S., and we need to be talking to them on a daily basis.

• (1135)

Paul Connors: I'll just finish off with a comment.

This week, I met with some peat moss farmers. One from Newfoundland is expanding his business in Grand Falls, moving to Gander and hiring new people. I think he told us that, of peat moss producers across the country, 80% of their market goes into the United States.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to the Bloc Québécois with Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In 2023, Abitibi-Ouest experienced a drought mixed with winter frost and wildfires. In that context, it was very difficult to access insurance programs, which forced several farms to sell animals or go into debt to buy hay.

Can we expect more changes in agricultural programs to ensure that the mechanisms are more suitable and that the funds reach farmers?

[*English*]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: That's certainly not the first time I've heard about this type of issue. I think the national policy framework is a place where BRM is likely going to be the top line item discussed in every conversation. I think part of what you're saying or asking is basically going to be a large part of the overall discussion in every province in this country. We get a look at ways to expedite

getting those funds into the farmers' hands a lot quicker. That's something that's certainly on our radar.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: The enhancement of the AgriMarketing program seems to focus on exports.

I wonder when we'll focus more on making our agricultural products available to people here. Our food standards are among the best in the world, and our environmental laws are among the most stringent. We import products from elsewhere and, in my opinion, we don't eat enough local products.

Instead of investing in international marketing, can we focus on short supply chains, processing, local slaughtering and reducing transportation costs to ensure that local products are more available on shelves here?

[*English*]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: Certainly, a lot of the stuff that we import are the fruits and vegetables that we don't grow. People use lettuce all the time.... When we talk about the cost, if it's coming from California and there's a drought in California....

It's kind of like our chicken farms in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The same thing happened. The price of chicken went up and came back down. That plays an integral role in that...but you're certainly right. I think the more we do here at home and become domesticated, the better off we're going to be.

That's certainly a goal of ours. You talked about agrimarketing. There is an enticement on the agrimarketing file. We include small to medium-sized enterprises in that file now. They can see the benefit of not only exporting but ramping up their domestic product as well, so it may give them even more of an incentive. It certainly is something that we're well aware of, and we need to do a better job of creating more...at home.

The Chair: Conservatives, please go ahead for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. Like I said before, it's always good to have a fellow Maritimer in the room.

Minister, you're well aware and you confirmed here at committee in October that P.E.I. is not infested with potato wart, yet the ministerial order remains in place and P.E.I.'s seed potato growers still cannot access key U.S. domestic markets. You also stated that \$50 million had been provided to the seed growers, but the P.E.I. Potato Board wrote you a letter on December 18, 2025, and still has not received a response. In fact, they haven't received any compensation. CFIA has confirmed that it does not have the authority to pay for these losses.

When will the P.E.I. seed producers receive the compensation that was promised to them? What is your plan to restore their full market access?

These are your farmers, Minister. They are gravely concerned.

Hon. Heath MacDonald: It's extremely important; it's our biggest crop on Prince Edward Island. The per se promises were made back three ministers ago. Since 2022, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has disbursed over \$18.3 million in compensation, including \$9.7 million specifically allocated to seed potato growers.

• (1140)

Richard Bragdon: Minister, I only have a short time.

They were promised \$50 million. It's been over 60 days since they wrote you a letter. They haven't received a response.

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I'm trying to tell you what the amount of money is. If I said \$50 million, I want to add it up so I can show you there's \$50 million.

There's \$19.2 million in potato stabilization. There's \$21.9 million through CASPP-100 to support the P.E.I. Potato Board in efforts to divert. I will say this: It's on my radar and always will be because I live in it every day. Family, friends and relatives are potato farmers.

However, we are in a trade war with likely our biggest customer. I've been told several times by processors that are doing table stock and what have you, not to raise the red flag too high until we get through this trade war. I don't want to jeopardize McCain's or Cavendish Farms on any other market that's going into the U.S. right now. I think we have to be very thoughtful in everything that we do and say.

Richard Bragdon: We absolutely have to be very thoughtful.

Has this been communicated to the producers in Prince Edward Island?

I know throughout Atlantic Canada there are huge concerns about our region as it relates to agriculture being overlooked, sometimes passed by, and their concerns being neglected. One of the most recent indicators of that is the closing of the Nappan research facility for agriculture, which definitely has an impact on our beef producers, forage growers and producers in the Maritimes. This has been raised as a huge concern. We know that research is a major and meaningful component of agriculture. We have studies produced and provided by the Canadian Cattle Association that say for every \$1 that is spent on research, there's a \$63 return. That's an amazing return on investment for research as it relates to science and agriculture.

Yet, the Department of Agriculture seemed to find priority to fund things like gender-just rice in Vietnam, which I don't think Canadian producers and those in New Brunswick or P.E.I. are identifying as a major priority for where taxpayer dollars should be spent. Research facilities for the future of food security in Canada is a priority.

Hon. Heath MacDonald: The program you're talking about is not an ag program.

I will say this, beef production activities will be consolidated and continue in Swift Current and Lethbridge coming out of Nappan. Forage production management and breeding activities will continue at Truro. Key science positions will be retained at Truro.

I want to go back to the operational side of this. This might be an unfair statement but I'm going to say it anyway because I think it's important.

I mentioned we have \$700 million in deferred maintenance. We have some properties—and I won't mention which ones—but we're up to near 45% of their budgets going into maintenance. All you people sitting around this table, some of you have businesses, some of you have farms, know you can't succeed with that. We have to make changes.

The Chair: You only have 10 seconds.

Richard Bragdon: Who has the responsibility for the oversight of those facilities? It is your department. It is the minister and the Department of Agriculture. That responsibility falls upon the department, not on those researchers on the front line of providing good science for our producers.

The Chair: Next we'll go to the Liberals for five minutes.

Welcome to our committee, Mr. MacDonald. You have five minutes.

Kent MacDonald (Cardigan, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister and Deputy.

I guess my colleague across the way here feels that Atlantic Canada may not be well represented by a succession of agriculture ministers from P.E.I. The current minister and the previous minister were both from Prince Edward Island.

I want to assure Atlantic Canadians that, as a member of the Liberal caucus, I am an active farmer in caucus and I'll be a strong advocate for those potato producers who are trying to re-establish a seed market with the United States. There are complicated issues there that have to be worked out. In the entire sector in Atlantic Canada, I will speak up strongly.

Minister, today I wanted to talk about the OFCAF program. I know some of my Conservative colleagues don't hold it in high regard. That's unfortunate. I wish they would take a look at how it works effectively, and I'm going to speak to that today.

In P.E.I., the OFCAF program has been in existence, as you would know, Minister, for several years. It's offering incentives for farmers to implement it and to reduce emissions. We've been talking about research and necessary realignment of research facilities in Canada. OFCAF is an on-farm research facility that's provided to farmers to make decisions right on their own farm.

We certainly see practices in P.E.I., in particular nitrogen management, cover cropping and rotational grazing. These are all things that are improving our soil health and our productivity, and we're still supporting Canada's climate goals. This current year, 290 farms or producers were supported across P.E.I. with the OFCAF program. It's well delivered by the P.E.I. Federation of Agriculture, an advocacy group for island farmers across all commodity sectors.

The other thing we should look at is that since its inception, we've covered 95,000 acres in cover cropping, 68,000 acres in nitrogen management and 15,700 acres in advanced grazing. Now we're talking about an expansion of this program. There has been \$300 million announced nationally, going forward. P.E.I.'s share of that is small at \$12.5 million, but it is making an impact.

In particular, I want to highlight a couple of projects that were brought to my attention.

Minister, you may know of the Mooney farms in St. Catherines, P.E.I. They did a grazing project this year, and for committee members here, I'll say they were able to do that by....

They're potato growers, but they co-operated with beef producers, and beef cows were brought to their farm. They put in an electric perimeter fence, and then they put collars on these beef cows, similar to the collars that you might use on your dog to keep it in your yard. They were able to do intensive grazing. The big knock on intensive grazing is the amount of labour it takes to move that fence every day.

This was all brought about by OFCAF. It is a successful project that's going to create co-operation to get manure on land that potato farmers are using. It will build up and protect the soil structure of that land.

On my own farm, Pondsedge Farms in Little Pond, we did a couple of different projects. We did a corn project: nitrogen enhancement. Anyone who talks about applying fertilizer to land knows it's complicated to get it on at the right time and get it incorporated. We were fortunate enough that with this nitrogen enhancement, we've seen higher yields. All the nitrogen got used up.

You know the sensitivity to nitrogen use in P.E.I. Ninety-nine per cent of people there drink groundwater, so nitrogen leaching is an

issue that the Department of Agriculture on Prince Edward Island watches very closely.

Cover crop is also very important to the potato industry because we have an island surrounded by wind and water, and—

• (1145)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Kent MacDonald: —we don't want to see....

Oh. Minister, can you speak about climate action, please, if there's anything left to say?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: It's beneficial to have a farmer in my caucus who's close to me. We're not related, by the way.

Look, there's a perfect point, that—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister, but we've run out of time.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'm going to be fair here. We have about 10 minutes left, so we're going to do four minutes and four minutes.

Go ahead on your point of order.

[*Translation*]

Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. Could you allow the minister to send his response in writing, given the length of the question that has just been asked? It deserves at least a response. Can you give the minister permission to forward that response?

[*English*]

The Chair: You can make the request to the minister, but that's not a point of order.

We have nine minutes left, so I'll do three and a half minutes, three and a half minutes and two minutes. Is that fine?

It's three and a half minutes for Mr. Bonk.

Steven Bonk (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you.

Minister, when you were here in the fall, we discussed strychnine. I asked you about it directly, and you gave a very direct answer. I asked whether you grant exemptions for strychnine use, because it's a huge problem in the Prairies right now. Your own communications department, the CBC, said that about \$800 million in damage a year is caused by Richardson's ground squirrels. We have producer groups and others all wanting this program: R.J. Sigurdson, the agriculture minister in Alberta; Daryl Harrison, the former agriculture minister in Saskatchewan; David Marit, the former Saskatchewan agriculture minister; SARM; APAS; Canadian Cattlemen's Association; stock growers; and the Saskatchewan Cattlemen's Association. It's a huge problem for Saskatchewan and western Canada.

What is your response today?

• (1150)

Hon. Heath MacDonald: I'll stand by my comments from the last meeting.

There's an exemption that is part of the legislation. I think that exemption should be looked at and obtained. When we dig deeper into it and see what's happening in the U.S., in places like Nevada, there are criteria that can be built around the application side of this. I think the farmers and—

Steven Bonk: Excuse me, Minister.

Why was this exemption not granted?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: That's a PMRA resolution. As you know, I don't have any control over the PMRA.

I'm an advocate—a loud advocate, in some cases—but I think there are further discussions that need to take place. There are additional things we should be able to do. Do a comparable...to other parts of the world using strychnine and using it safely. The application—

Steven Bonk: Will you commit to speaking with the Minister of Health so we can get this across the line? Time is of the essence for farmers in western Canada.

Hon. Heath MacDonald: You have my commitment.

Steven Bonk: Thank you, Minister.

The next things I'd like to talk a little about are research centres.

I live very close to the research centre in Indian Head. Those are neighbours of mine benefiting from the research done there.

I'd like to bring up a few things with you.

One is that I know your government is very concerned about climate. I would say that it's obsessed, in some cases. We have programs like OFCAF. My colleague just mentioned this to you. He was saying how they're doing programs like cover crops and rotational grazing. That's stuff we've been doing for 30, 40 or 50 years in western Canada. This is not new. Farmers don't need help with that. We had innovations come out of Indian Head from Guy Lafond and Jim Halford. We created zero tillage, which has arguably done more for the climate, in terms of agriculture, than any other technology developed. Now you see it worldwide.

It's only \$3.8 million to keep that research station viable, yet it's produced—I would argue—billions of dollars of value in agriculture. What is the rationale for closing a place like Indian Head, which has 140 years of research excellence?

The Chair: I'm going to have to stop it there and go to the Liberals for three and a half minutes.

Mr. MacDonald.

Kent MacDonald: It's great to hear that cover cropping has been done for a long time in western Canada, but no-till has been done across Canada for a long time as well. The research into that is ongoing on both files.

Minister, do you want to speak to the climate adaptation program in P.E.I., the OFCAF program? You didn't get a chance. I'm not usually known as long-winded.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Heath MacDonald: The hot topic here is science, obviously. I talked about more collaboration, taking science out of its silos and involving stakeholders at every level, including academia. Knowledge sharing is extremely important in agriculture and across the country, especially when we're dealing with issues like the ones we're seeing now, with droughts in some areas and changing climates.

Since 2022, OFCAF has trained approximately 3,000 agrologists in this country, and 27,000 producers have attended knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning activities. I don't think there are many things that are more important than programs that bring farmers, producers, growers and scientists together. I'm not saying that OFCAF is the end of the world with regard to that, but it's certainly playing an integral role in helping farmers across the country in some aspects. In other aspects, maybe it isn't so much.

There has to be a stringent evaluation done on it. I hope the national policy framework brings out that information that will help both sides of this table I'm sitting at with regard to their comments, and also shed light on how we forge ahead in the future.

• (1155)

Kent MacDonald: That's a very positive way of looking at it.

Every pocket of researcher funding has a timeline, and eventually we have to move on to other ways of being a bit more efficient in delivering our programming to producers.

There's the trade diversification funding you just recently announced of \$75 million over five years. Can you speak to how that's going to support market access to and supply chain readiness for these markets, particularly the ASEAN markets we've just introduced?

Hon. Heath MacDonald: It's one aspect of it.

When you talk to producers and those representing producers and stakeholders, Canada's high commission opening an office in an ASEAN country and opening a "protein office" in Beijing... Having boots on the ground in those countries is, without a doubt, one of the most important things.

To get those companies to the ASEAN countries, whether they're the beef farmers in Singapore or Manila, with us, it's extremely important to have them go back year after year, or maybe even more frequently, to build those relationships. Governments can only do so much. They can open the door, but they can't keep the relationship at that grassroots level. That's what we need, and we need more of that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have two minutes for the Bloc, and then we'll finish up.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There's a lot of talk about buying local, obviously, about buying Canadian in this context. However, it's becoming increasingly difficult to do so, particularly because labelling is an issue. Products are difficult to identify. We've seen it in grocery stores many times.

In your opinion, Minister, would it be time to make a real in-depth effort to improve labelling, to ensure traceability and the true origin of products, and to address transparency issues for consumers with respect to processing or the use of GMOs?

[*English*]

Hon. Heath MacDonald: With labelling, we talk about the costs to producers, processors or manufacturers in some of these cases. I think the whole system should be looked at in regard to...whether it's buy Canada labelling or what we have to do....

We also have to keep in perspective the costs that may arise from some of these initiatives. We're obviously having an affordability issue across this country, and putting more costs on a producer, a manufacturer or a processor is going to translate into more money that the retailer is going to charge the local individual coming in to buy those products.

There's a whole system that has to be looked at. It can't be just one or two things that we have an interest in.

I agree with you to the extent that it should be clear what's Canadian and what's not. That's extremely important. I think we've made a lot of headway in that regard, but obviously, there's a lot more to do.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: I invite you to also consider the cost of not adopting traceability labelling and, of course, the health issues it

may cause. We know that traceability data are often available and quite accessible. It's just about making them available to the public.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That concludes this part of our meeting.

Minister, Deputy Minister, thank you for your time, as always.

We'll suspend for five minutes.

- (1155) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1205)

The Chair: [*Inaudible—Editor*] until I recognize you by name or you are asked a question directly by a member.

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. Those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. I will remind you that all comments should go through the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, January 27, 2026, the committee is resuming its study on the subject matter of clause 223, division 8 of Bill C-15, the budget 2025 implementation act, number 1.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses joining us here today. From Farm Credit Canada, we have Justine Hendricks, CEO and president; Corinna Mitchell-Beaudin, executive vice-president; and, in person, Darren Baccus, executive vice-president.

Thank you so much for being here. You have five minutes to make your presentation, and then we'll open it up for questions from the floor.

Justine Hendricks (President and Chief Executive Officer, Farm Credit Canada): Good afternoon.

Thank you for inviting me here today. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to celebrate this great industry and the extraordinary people who make it all succeed.

FCC exists to support Canada's agriculture and food industry and the millions of Canadians whose livelihoods depend on it. That is our mission, and it's huge. This is our biggest manufacturing sector. It employs one in nine people in this country, and it accounts for 7% of our GDP.

Allow me to offer some examples of the amazing work our customers are doing. Take the operation in Elm Creek, Manitoba, where an FCC client is using robots to milk their 1,300 cows. The cows wear computerized collars to monitor their movements and health. It is state of the art.

There's a farm in Guelph, Ontario, that's pioneering indoor agriculture. Imagine the difference that can make in places where sunshine and farmland are in short supply.

[Translation]

There's also a company in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, that's one of the leading producers of veal in North America and the second-largest sheep processing company on the continent. It's the future of agriculture in real time.

[English]

Demand for our services is strong. Over the past 15 years, we have tripled our book of business to \$63 billion, and we're on pace to hit \$85 billion by 2030.

In the past three years, total assets are up 24%, and 85% of our loans are \$1.5 million or less, meaning about 60,000 loans in the book. That represents a lot of Canadian families. FCC exists to support these families' success.

Consider our small team in Brooks, Alberta. Last year, they lent \$67 million to producers in that area. In addition to supporting our customers, that infusion into the community supported 275 jobs in Alberta and 148 additional jobs across Canada.

[Translation]

In fact, last year, Farm Credit Canada disbursed \$19.9 billion, which helped our industry add \$14 billion to the country's economy and support nearly 137,000 jobs.

[English]

I want to stress this: We are internally funded, meaning that FCC receives no money from taxpayers. In fact, we generate a reliable annual dividend to our sole shareholder, the Government of Canada, and we reinvest profits to benefit farmers and ranchers. As you know, there's no standing still.

In recent years, investment in the industry has lagged and so has productivity growth. We're evolving fast, improving our lending and other services while also igniting strategic innovation and investment. We are simplifying our lending process to serve customers more quickly and efficiently. We've redesigned our transition loan to help producers plan succession. We've introduced Root AI, our free virtual farm assistant, to help farmers solve problems on the go.

Our new FCC Capital unit is rolling out flexible financial products and proactively drawing private capital to the industry. Just since 2024, FCC Capital has directly invested more than \$300 million in ag-tech innovation. Let me be clear: Every dollar FCC invests is for the ultimate benefit of farmers and ranchers. Our commitment to this industry is long term.

Last year, we pledged to invest \$2 billion by 2030 to propel innovation and productivity growth. Earlier this week, FCC convened private investors who jointly pledged \$5 billion of new investment in this sector by 2030. That's \$7 billion by 2030. It is the biggest dollar commitment to Canada's agriculture and food sector—certainly in my lifetime.

• (1210)

[Translation]

Everything we're working on at this time is intended to support the success of this industry and the millions of Canadians who contribute to its growth. They won't be the only ones to succeed. It's essential for Canada.

Canada is a major exporter of food products, sending goods to over 190 countries. We're working tirelessly to support this industry as it diversifies its activities internationally.

[English]

We know the stakes for Canada now are as high as they have ever been. I'm here to tell you that FCC is on it.

Thank you for listening. I look forward to answering your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to the Conservatives for six minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Barlow.

John Barlow: Thanks, Chair.

Thanks, Mr. Baccus and Ms. Hendricks, for being here.

You said that every dollar that FCC profits from is to benefit farmers and ranchers. That was your commitment in your opening statement. I have to question that, Ms. Hendricks, when you have allocated in your time more than \$64 million to outside consultants and \$5 million to sole-source contracts at a time when you were saying every dollar is to benefit farmers and ranchers. At the same time as you have spent \$64 million on consultants, the executive team at FCC has almost doubled from 25 to 45 people.

Can you table with this committee the job description of each one of those members of the senior leadership team and their salary? Can you explain, in a time of financial restraint when every dollar is supposed to be benefiting farmers and ranchers, why you are spending \$64 million on consultants and, at the same time, doubling the leadership team? Why do you have to do both? Is the leadership team not doing their job?

Justine Hendricks: Let me start off by highlighting that, with the size of an organization such as FCC and the risks in the market that are increasingly becoming more complex, it's important for an organization such as FCC to stay on top of some of those risks. Many of those contracts that are awarded are to help FCC navigate some of those risks such as technology and cyber. In order to make sure we keep up with that, we have dedicated some dollars, yes, to transformation, and part of the result of those transformation dollars has resulted in the announcement we received earlier this week.

I would like to also state that, of the 300 contracts we award on an annual basis to help run our business, 98% of those contracts are awarded on a competitive basis.

I would like to give the opportunity to our chief financial officer, Corinna Mitchell-Beaudin, to talk to you a little bit about how we assigned those contracts.

Go ahead, Corinna.

John Barlow: I don't need to know how you assigned those contracts. The fact is that you spent \$64 million on contracts at the same time as doubling your leadership team. To me, it's one or the other, not both.

Ms. Hendricks, I'm sure you're expecting this question. In a video call with your staff, when you were asked which leader you admired most, you stated Fidel Castro. You said that you admired his courage and how he stuck to his values, his rage and his tenacity. On admiring a communist dictator who imprisoned journalists, academics and political opponents and perhaps murdered tens of thousands of his own citizens, do you think it's appropriate for the CEO of a Canadian Crown corporation to be emulating a dictator like Fidel Castro? Do you regret those comments?

• (1215)

Justine Hendricks: My biggest role model is my mother. I misspoke at that meeting.

John Barlow: I find it hard to believe you misspoke at that meeting, because you've had quite a long.... I could give you the transcript of your description of why Fidel Castro was an idol.

I would hope that you would write a letter to the staff at FCC and apologize for those comments. That is not a leader you should be emulating. Certainly, from the dozens of emails and letters we've had from FCC staff who are talking about the toxic culture within your agency, perhaps there is some concern that those leadership tendencies have trickled down to FCC.

More to a specific case and again because you talked about how every dollar is to benefit farmers and ranchers, FCC gave Aspire Food a \$40-million loan, of which you have recovered \$15 million. What has happened to the additional \$25 million? Is that going to be recovered by FCC? Who signed off on that agreement? Is someone going to be held accountable for losing \$25 million of FCC money?

Justine Hendricks: I would like to give Darren Baccus, who heads that division of ours, the opportunity to provide an answer to you in regard to Aspire Food.

The Chair: You have a minute and a half left.

Darren Baccus (Executive Vice-President, Agri-Food, Alliances and FCC Capital, Farm Credit Canada): Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to speak on behalf of FCC for the Canadian food and ag industry.

Regarding Aspire Food, as you correctly stated, we did recover \$15 million from that file. The file is currently still open, and due to confidentiality and commercial sensitivities, we're not able to speak with further details on that file.

I do wish to assure the committee that FCC applies rigour and governance, both in its initial investments and the asset management of the investments, and to ensure that the maximum recovery occurs should some of these investments meet challenging times.

John Barlow: Thank you, Mr. Baccus.

I would be concerned that you're saying that due diligence was done before this loan was agreed to, and yet neither one of you is taking responsibility for who signed off on it. The fact that this company went bankrupt within a year shows me that you did not do your due diligence to find out if there actually was a commercial market for the product that Aspire was making, which is a cricket protein. Had you done your due diligence, I think you would have seen there was no market.

With my last few seconds, Ms. Hendricks, I want to highlight that prior to your time, the Liberal government invoked the Emergencies Act. During that time, we asked FCC if any lists of Canadian farmers, or clients of FCC, were shared with the government to hold them accountable for participating in or potentially funding a peaceful protest. FCC said that did not happen.

After we did some additional research and access to information requests, we found out that FCC did keep that list and did share it with the Liberal government. Are there now mandate changes or rule changes within FCC that a Crown corporation will not share confidential information from its clients with the government? Have those members been told that their information was shared?

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

MP Dandurand.

[Translation]

Marianne Dandurand: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being with us.

Ms. Hendricks, frankly, I want to start by thanking you for your work. I represent a region in the Eastern Townships with a large number of farmers. I'm regularly told how grateful they are for the work of your representatives in the field and how much it helps them. I thank you.

One thing I notice is that, in the fall budget, agriculture is referred to as one of Canada's strategic industries. Farm Credit Canada was given more resources to support our farmers.

Can you tell us a bit about the funding you received and how you'll support agriculture to keep it a strategic sector?

Justine Hendricks: I'd like to start by sharing the new strategy we've implemented over the past two years. It has three pillars. This will answer your question about how we can do more for a sector that has so much potential.

The way Farm Credit Canada wants to intervene in the market is first by being bold; second, by playing our role as a catalyst; and, third, by ensuring that we always maintain a balance between the short term and the medium or long term.

When I say being bold, I'd say it's about coming up with new products and solutions.

With respect to your question about how to use funding announced in the budget to see how we can deploy more resources, it's about us being able to really understand and grasp what the challenges are for farmers of all ages. It's also about seeing how an organization like Farm Credit Canada can offer its funds or products to maximize the success of the products created.

It's also about playing our role as a catalyst. I would note the announcement earlier this week about the creation of a coalition of investors who we've brought together. This is an example of the efforts our organization can make to bring together industry stakeholders. I want to stress that, in this case, these are investors who were not necessarily involved in agriculture and agri-food, and that really changes things.

These are two examples of how we're able to do more.

• (1220)

Marianne Dandurand: Thank you very much.

Farmers I regularly talk to in my area are from the next generation, members of the Fédération de la relève agricole du Québec and also members of the Syndicat de la relève agricole de l'Estrie. We have many young people who want to get into agriculture, and the first thing they tell us is how difficult it is for them to access financing and acquire a farm.

I'd like to know a bit more about how Farm Credit Canada can help them. How can you support them more in the future with the money allocated to you by the government?

Justine Hendricks: To answer your question, I'd like to take this opportunity to tell the committee about a new product we've created: a transition loan.

We already had a transition-focused product on the market, but as the committee members know very well, the value of land and the cost of production are so high that it's hard for the next genera-

tion to finance these transactions. That is why we created a transition product, and I'll use a mortgage analogy to describe it.

As you know, when you take out a mortgage, you're young and it's to buy your first home. In the first years, often the first 15 years, you're primarily paying interest before you start paying down the principal. With the new transition loan, we did the opposite. We set it up so that the principal is paid first to minimize the interest. For example, a loan to purchase a farm for about \$5 million would save almost half the value of the loan in interest thanks to the new product we just launched. It's only been a few months, but we're already hearing from the market that it's greatly improving things.

Marianne Dandurand: Thank you very much. I'm glad to hear that. I'll certainly talk about it a lot with the people in my area.

I have one last question, because we have little time left.

In my opinion, diversity in agriculture is largely about youth and a lot about women. I'm very close to an organization called Women Farmers of Quebec, which you're also familiar with, because I know you work a lot with women in agriculture.

We just talked about youth. Can you tell me about the support you provide to women in agriculture?

Justine Hendricks: Certainly.

First, I'd like to mention to the committee that 25,000 of Farm Credit Canada's 103,000 clients are women. We're very proud of that.

I can tell you that our portfolio, if I take Mr. Baccus's portfolio, which is more in investment here than in primary agriculture, is about half a billion dollars. We'll certainly provide the right financial solutions, and there's also the whole advice and support component that we're putting in place. We also often organize summits across Canada, by province. As a result, each market segment can get together to engage in dialogue and learn from each other. We're very proud to be able to bring in examples or experts who can share their experience. We do it not only from a financial standpoint, but also from a consulting perspective, and we're able to bring these communities together throughout the year.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

Mr. Lemire.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hendricks, since we're on the subject, I'd like to ask you a similar question, but from a different angle.

On page 48 of annex 6 of the 2025 budget, there's a description of the changes to the Farm Credit Canada Act, and it's stated that a legislative review is important because farm operators are predominantly older white men.

Why was that put in the budget? Shouldn't we help farmers, regardless of their age, gender, race and so on, without discriminating? Why was it important to specify that?

• (1225)

Justine Hendricks: Thank you very much for the question.

That part of the budget is an exercise by the department. That concept or the exercise carried out, which was intended to look at considerations, does not concern us directly. As a result, I can't share an opinion or give advice in that respect.

Sébastien Lemire: The Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food justified the closure of research centres by stating that the government can't be the only one investing in innovation.

Do you share that opinion? Do you believe that science and research should rest on the shoulders of agricultural producers? What solutions are you proposing in terms of science and research?

Justine Hendricks: Thank you very much for the question.

At Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, we strongly believe that there's a direct link between investment in innovation and increased productivity.

As for how Farm Credit Canada is able to support innovation, I'd like to share a statistic with you. If we compare ourselves to our neighbours to the south in terms of investment in technology and innovation in agriculture, the ratio is 23 to 1. There are several components to Farm Credit Canada. We're establishing many partnerships with learning farms to support farmers, so they can come together or so we can test new technologies.

We also sometimes work with research organizations to try to advance and accelerate research and technologies. We really see ourselves as a catalyst in this respect, by being able to balance that innovation and how our organization can support innovation, which is directly related to an increase in productivity, and that's what we're trying to achieve.

Sébastien Lemire: I was indeed going to cite your analysis, which shows that there is 23 times more investment in venture capital in the United States. Their population is 8.5 times ours. There's therefore a major impact.

How will your funding or measures help in understanding the factors that affect the diversity of agricultural conditions across Canada?

Justine Hendricks: We're a national organization, so when we make decisions about where to make these investments, we look at the situation from a national standpoint.

I'd say that one of our advantages—and this is somewhat related to two aspects of our strategy—is that we believe we can really be a

catalyst and that we can strengthen resilience. We're able to bring together the ecosystem and have an overview of it.

You'll often hear me say that sometimes people don't know what's happening in British Columbia. Are the people in Quebec aware of the research being done?

We are truly taking on the responsibility of bringing researchers together. If we look at the national situation, we can accelerate our innovation twofold. This is how we're going to change the game.

Sébastien Lemire: You've just signed an agreement with 20 investment firms to invest \$5 billion in agriculture and agri-food.

How will those funds be used not only to ensure agricultural succession and the development of services and infrastructure in rural areas, but also to strengthen the position of major players, who are becoming increasingly large?

Justine Hendricks: I'd like to take this opportunity to mention that over 90% of Farm Credit Canada's \$63-billion portfolio is allocated to small and medium-sized businesses. I'd say that about 60% of our portfolio is dedicated to granting loans under \$200,000.

I'm here to tell you that Farm Credit Canada is here first and foremost for rural communities and small producers. In working with these coalitions, we know that what matters is being able to put the best possible technologies in the hands of these producers. How can we achieve that? It's by ensuring that we can test the technologies with the help of people who know how to do it on a daily basis. The sooner we can put cutting-edge technologies in the hands of our producers, the more influence we can have on increased productivity nationally.

Our goal is not to focus on large producers, but instead to ensure that all stakeholders in the sector are able to access the best possible technologies to innovate as quickly as possible.

• (1230)

Sébastien Lemire: I'd like to know how Farm Credit Canada defines rural. Something I find very frustrating about Ottawa is that people often get the impression that the money goes to the big cities and less to rural areas. That's a question I'd like to ask.

For the AgriSpirit Fund, you have an interesting definition. Broadly speaking, it refers to communities of 50,000 people or less. Could you perhaps send us your definition of rural in writing?

Justine Hendricks: Yes, but I'd just like to quickly—

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I have to stop there.

We'll go to the Conservatives now for five minutes.

Mr. Gourde.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hendricks, thank you for being here today. I looked at your resume and it's really very impressive. You spent 17 years at Export Development Canada and seven years at Royal Bank. You have a master's in business administration and a bachelor's degree in urban studies.

Where do you get your passion for agriculture?

You were selected, but did you apply for the position, or were you approached to be the president and CEO of Farm Credit Canada?

Justine Hendricks: Thank you for the question.

Yes, I applied for the position.

If I understood your question correctly, you asked me where my passion comes from. In fact, my entire career is defined first and foremost by a passion for customers. You're taking me back to my youth. I'd say that my affinity for agriculture and the agri-food sector stems from the fact that I'm the daughter of a dietician who was one of the first graduates in that field in Quebec, and I'm very proud of that. Food has always played a vital role in our lives.

Jacques Gourde: We can see that you've travelled a lot. You've travelled a lot in Canada, undoubtedly to meet with farmers, but also abroad, including to Colombia, Germany, France and Singapore.

Did you visit the research centres there? In Canada, research centres are becoming very rare. I hope you took advantage of those trips to see what's happening in agriculture. What was the purpose of all those trips?

You're almost at the top in Canada when it comes to these expenses, which need to be justified. You're in fourth place; just a bit more and you'll receive a medal.

Justine Hendricks: I'd like to answer in two parts.

As for my travel here in Canada, we have 103 branches across the country. I average over 100 meetings per month. Over 55% of those meetings are virtual. As for the choice of in-person meetings, I prioritize clients and stakeholders.

I'd like to draw the link to the announcement we received a few days ago. By going to see people, we're able to fully understand what's happening with them, so we can then meet industry expectations.

The purpose of the international trips is to better understand what opportunities are available. We're also invited to give talks, to share the benefits of the Canadian agricultural and agri-food industry. Allow me to say that it's an honour to be able to bring our story to the international stage, often leading to new opportunities for people in our industry.

Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Ms. Hendricks.

Now, I have a question for the banker.

Agriculture Canada has the advance payments program, APP, which provides short-term cash flow, like a line of credit. Farm Credit Canada has similar products.

Have you ever thought about partnering with the Department of Agriculture to offer this product, but in a more universal manner? This product requires the sharing of security with other creditors. Many farmers in Canada, a large majority of farms, can't apply for the APP because they have to provide short-term security on their business to access the program. If it were all in the same organization, the program would be more universal. Have you examined this possibility?

Justine Hendricks: The quick answer to the question of whether we've examined this specific issue is no. However, I'd say that we're always open to exploring the best ways to innovate in order to make things easier. Thank you for raising this possibility, but we don't have an internal study on the matter.

• (1235)

Jacques Gourde: I have another small question for the banker.

Farm Credit Canada is struggling to break into Quebec. Things are going well in the other provinces, but you're really struggling in Quebec. You have a small share of the agricultural loan market. Can you explain why that is?

Justine Hendricks: You certainly have the right to your opinion on that.

We're very proud of our portfolio of over \$6 billion in Quebec. There are over 13,000 clients and 13 offices serving the primary agriculture and agri-food sector. The portfolio is growing rapidly.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to the Liberals now.

MP Harrison.

Emma Harrison: I would like to start by thanking you for your commitment to agriculture, and the example you are setting for the next generation of women who would like to find themselves in a role in agriculture. Thank you very much for representing women.

Emma Harrison: My colleague touched briefly on the next generation of agriculture. We talk a lot about what producers need now, and obviously about the threats we're facing and the difficulties with climate change, tariffs and our new relationships we're building within the world.

I'd like you, if you could, to speak a little bit more about how important long-term planning is for the next generation. As well, could you talk about the support FCC has developed or will develop to support the next generation?

Justine Hendricks: If I may, I'm going to answer the question in a bit of a reverse way, but I'll get to the point.

When we survey our customers, we find out that two things are top of mind for them. One is speed and the second is advice and insights. What we've been doing to better understand, to your point, is really looking ahead at what the future looks like. We have a persona at FCC and her name is Sarah, and she would be a young woman who grew up on a farm and decides to go to Olds College. At her young age, she is thinking that it would be fantastic if one day she could own a farm, but at a young age she's not actually sure that she can.

What I'm trying to convey to you is that FCC is working on being able to start to work with Sarah when she's at Olds College so in her early days at Olds College we can be supportive, whether it's through education or how we demystify perhaps and help on the financial side to understand it, and then come along her journey to better understand what products and services can help her then maybe take the farm over from mom and dad.

That is the way that we're looking at the journey of a young farmer. It's through those key moments in their journey that we can really come in at the right time and, frankly, earlier, so that Sarah has the opportunity to think about it and to really see the potential and make it happen.

That is how we are approaching our long-term view to be able to start earlier with our customers. Certainly I would say it's a great testament to all of the employees at FCC, when sometimes things don't go as well, how quickly our staff go right to the customer, with boots on the grounds, to understand exactly what the issue is and to customize for that customer exactly what is needed at that time. So it's a two-pronged approach.

Emma Harrison: I farm and I consider myself incredibly lucky to be able to have picked up where my parents left off. I think we need to continue to focus on people who maybe don't find themselves in the ag industry when they are young and the lessons you learn while you're growing up. There are so many young people interested in agriculture, but it is challenging to enter that avenue, so thank you for that.

In the FCC document that outlines FCC's commitment to the Government of Canada's priority mandates, number three is bringing down the costs for Canadians and helping them to get ahead. Could you speak to how FCC will support this critically important issue facing Canadians from coast to coast to coast?

Justine Hendricks: The way that FCC can do that is to really support investment in innovation. The more we can innovate and bring the cost of production down, the more that cost can then be reflected to Canadians across Canada. Our chief economist is not here with us today, but certainly he would say that that is a direct correlation where an organization like FCC can have influence.

• (1240)

Emma Harrison: Thank you.

Speaking of innovation, earlier this week there was an article in the Western Producer entitled "Artificial intelligence called future of farming". Can you talk about the role that you see AI playing in the future of farming and whether FCC is well equipped to handle this transition?

Justine Hendricks: You're giving me the opportunity to speak about one of the favourite innovations at FCC, which is called Root AI. In response to some of the gaps that we saw in the market and from what industry and farmers were telling us, we created a generative AI robot to be able to answer questions, whether you're in the middle of your field or you're up late at night.

Root AI was launched about six months ago and month over month keeps on accelerating. There is feedback for its value added, and it is a free service that FCC has launched into the market. We're also looking at this stage to partner with different provinces to see how we can expand to bring some key data at the right point in time to our customers across Canada.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to the Bloc for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hendricks, your annual report states that you have \$8.7 billion in retained earnings. That's a very large amount. You paid \$690 million in dividends to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

What are your plans for these retained earnings, especially since we know how much our agricultural producers are struggling?

Justine Hendricks: As a financial institution, we can use these profits to ensure future investments, for example, if we need to upgrade some of our systems, the cash management system or cybersecurity systems.

Ms. Mitchell-Beaudin, our chief financial officer, is in charge of that department. Every year, we conduct a review to truly determine the best way to invest these earnings. It's also important for an organization the size of Farm Credit Canada not only to stay at the forefront of technology, but also to look to the future to be able to invest today to accelerate growth.

As we mentioned, a financial institution has a lot of systems. There's risk management. There's also the importance of technology and cybersecurity. It's this balance that we study each year to ensure that we have the best balance for reinvesting in the organization to maintain our assets and advantages in the market.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

There's a lot of talk about better supporting our agricultural producers, who are dealing with climate change. Indeed, as we just mentioned, there are income stabilization programs, among others. There's a lot of talk about concentration in the processing sectors or even among retailers.

What role can you play to create more competition in the different sectors where there isn't as much?

Justine Hendricks: I'd like to ask for clarification. Are you talking about creating competition within the sector itself?

Sébastien Lemire: Obviously, more competitors are needed so that consumers can have better prices. We know how much of an impact that has, particularly in grocery chains. How can we increase competition among businesses?

[English]

The Chair: Give a quick answer, please.

[Translation]

Justine Hendricks: If we invest in innovation, we can support the commercialization of new ideas, and that will create new companies that will generate competition.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we'll go to Mr. Epp for five minutes.

Dave Epp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for appearing.

Many of us around the table come here with previously lived experience. I've had the honour and privilege of serving as chair of a governance and HR committee and the finance and audit committee of a public sector ag agency. As you know, in public governance, perceived conflicts of interest are just as damaging as real ones, particularly when they involve oversight regarding executive conduct.

My colleague asked about some of your travel. What was not mentioned is that it was \$460,000 of your travel...in your tenure—the same as all three ag ministers in that same period of time.

Where I want to begin is with investigations involving leadership, allegations of silencing internal dissent and decisions impacting the credibility of the board.

With respect to FCC board governance, what mechanisms exist to ensure independent oversight of the CEO?

• (1245)

Justine Hendricks: I'd like to call upon Corinna to speak about our governance framework at FCC to answer that question.

Corinna Mitchell-Beaudin (Executive Vice-President, Finance, Farm Credit Canada): Good afternoon, everyone.

First, I'd like to apologize for not being there in person. I sustained an injury and am not able to travel, but I am dialling in from Regina. FCC is headquartered there.

In terms of governance at FCC, we have a governance model that includes a human resources committee, which oversees the annual goals and performance of the CEO. We have a governance committee that ensures that the performance of the different committees, which further includes the audit and risk committees, is living up to industry standards. The board reviews the practices of management and the charters of the various committees to ensure that those are living up to industry standards for an organization of our size.

Dave Epp: I do have limited time. How often does the board meet in camera without the CEO present?

Justine Hendricks: At every board meeting, there is time in camera without the CEO.

Dave Epp: Did this occur, then, very recently as well?

Justine Hendricks: That's correct.

Dave Epp: Your colleague talked about the governance and HR committees. For how long did you serve both as CEO and as chief human resources officer?

Justine Hendricks: I served for an almost two-year period.

Dave Epp: How was governance approval acquired for that dual role?

Justine Hendricks: As it relates to the board—as my colleague Corinna indicated—all board committees have independent charters that are followed through on an annual basis, with specific work plans to work through. Items related to HR in the organization would be presented to that committee. The items that require a vote are recommended by that committee to be presented to the entire board and voted upon.

Dave Epp: Would that not have flowed through your office, as the CHRO, before it was presented to the board?

Justine Hendricks: That is correct. As the CHRO, I would be a member of the executive team that had accountability to the board committee around human resources. I would work with the chair of that committee in order to determine what the correct agenda items were.

To be clear, there is a work plan that is approved by the board each year regarding key items to bring up, and this is closely monitored.

Dave Epp: How is the obvious conflict of interest mitigated when you were acting in both those roles with respect to internal concerns about the activities of the CEO?

Justine Hendricks: We have processes available if staff have a concern, whether...directly to an executive or to the CEO. There is an independent process that takes place that is accessible, as well, to the public service. Should a complaint be triggered, at that point, our internal ethics and compliance officer would step in and independently look into any inquiries in that regard.

Dave Epp: Would that internal officer not report to you?

Justine Hendricks: That is—

Dave Epp: Would there be a venue so employees could go through that office and directly to the board?

Justine Hendricks: That is correct. That employee does not report to me.

FCC also publicly positions a report on all investigations that have taken place under the PSDPA each and every year.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to the Liberals for five minutes.

Ms. Chatel.

[*Translation*]

Sophie Chatel (Pontiac—Kitigan Zibi, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hendricks, I can't resist. While my colleagues are having fun talking about crickets and travel, I'd like to come back to the extraordinary challenges we're facing, this crisis fuelled by the Trump administration, a crisis that is threatening our economy.

As our Prime Minister said in Davos, a country that doesn't feed itself has very few options. This government, which is serious by the way, is addressing very important issues, such as ensuring the resilience of the agricultural and agri-food sector.

In this context, I'd like to come back to a point you mentioned earlier, the announcement of a \$5-billion investment. As you said, it's through a coalition of investors, but for our agri-food and agricultural sector. How can we leverage this and realize the sector's full economic potential at a time when we need it the most?

• (1250)

Justine Hendricks: I'd like to start by reiterating to the committee that this investment of \$5 billion and the \$2 billion in funding from Farm Credit Canada announced about six months ago represent a total of \$7 billion. I'd say it's probably the biggest commitment to the sector that I've seen in my lifetime, or certainly in the last few decades.

It's also very important to point out that investors who aren't fully involved in agriculture and agri-food are telling us they want to participate. That's big, and we're really thrilled about it. At Farm Credit Canada, we often say that agriculture and agri-food needs all of us.

Since we started the business line led by Mr. Baccus with respect to these investments, one of our goals is to ask ourselves whether each dollar our organization invests allows us to attract additional capital, and to find a way to answer that. Our current ratio is 1:3; for every dollar we invest, we're able to attract an additional three dollars in capital. If you take the total of \$7 billion dollars from earlier, imagine the potential that represents.

As you know, one success leads to another, and this is just the beginning. I can tell the committee that I don't think Mr. Baccus's phone has stopped ringing since the announcement earlier this week. This is exactly what we want, because it goes beyond this coalition of different organizations, including pension funds, which are reaching out to us to find out what's happening in our great sector and to learn more. In our opinion, that's really a positive sign.

Sophie Chatel: Can you tell us in concrete terms how this will benefit our producers?

Justine Hendricks: That's somewhat the theme of the discussion today. Specifically, it's about investing in innovation, supporting

the next generation and supporting women who are interested or want to grow their business. All these segments are important to ensure success.

At Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, we really look at the sector from the perspective of this value chain, from seed to processing. In each part of this value chain, if we can provide advice, inject capital, form coalitions and bring people together, the entire value chain will benefit.

As I said, our client portfolio is largely made up of small and medium-sized businesses. I can assure you that our 1,100 employees across Canada are more than happy to figure out how they can support all our producers.

Sophie Chatel: That's absolutely fantastic news.

This committee is also conducting a study on science and technology. We have invited you, by the way. Tell us more about the investments you're making in technology, because we have a productivity problem in the sector. How can your organization support this innovation on the farm and in the agri-food sector to achieve the potential?

[*English*]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

[*Translation*]

Justine Hendricks: I'd like to say that one partnership we believe is very important is with accelerators or incubators. For example, the Agtech Zone, in Quebec, brings together young entrepreneurs who are developing technology. Then, if Farm Credit Canada can help or facilitate the validation of that technology for those who need it most, that's how we'll truly have an impact.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for joining us here today. We appreciate your time.

Committee, we just have one item we need to work on. It's in regard to the closing of this matter, clause 223 of Bill C-15. We've heard from the witnesses, and I have an understanding that there are no recommendations going forward. The clerk and I would put together a letter and respond back to the chair of the committee, saying that we have nothing to report. Is that fine?

• (1255)

John Barlow: We have no amendments.

The Chair: There are no amendments. Are we fine with that? Okay. That's it.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you. We are adjourned.

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