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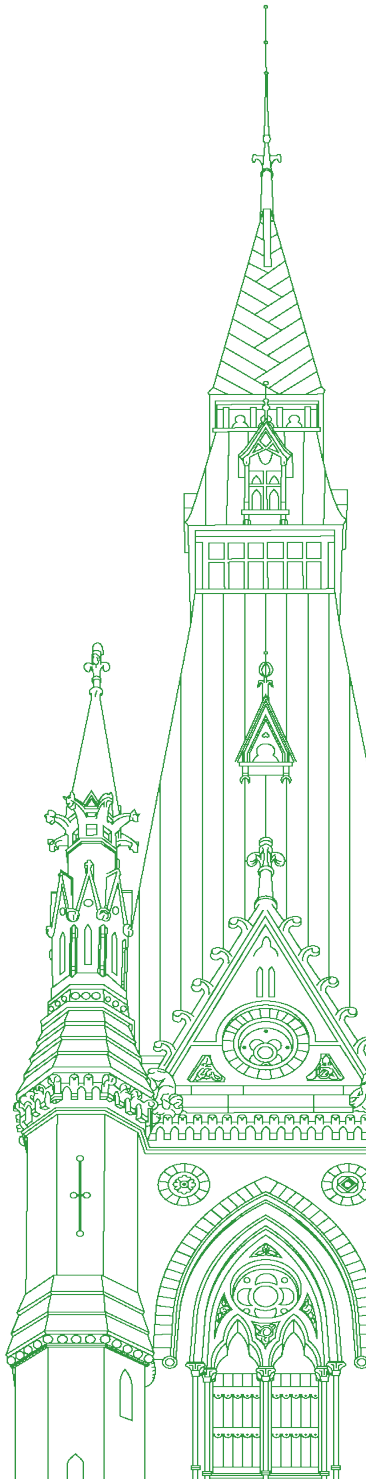

Chair: Michael Coteau

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

Thursday, February 26, 2026

● (1100)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 25 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person and remotely using the Zoom application.

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, February 10, 2026, the committee is resuming its study on science in Canadian agriculture and the closure of research centres.

I'd like to now welcome our witnesses for today.

As an individual, we have Alison Sunstrum.

From the Beef Cattle Research Council, we have Andrea Brocklebank and Reynold Bergen.

From the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, we have Tyler McCann.

Thank you so much for being here.

We will start with Mr. McCann for five minutes. Then we'll go to the rest of our witnesses, and then open it up for questions.

Welcome, Mr. McCann.

Tyler McCann (Managing Director, Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for inviting me here today.

Research, development and innovation are critical elements in the agri-food sector. Your review can highlight the essential role of the system and the pressures it faces, and you can make recommendations to strengthen it.

[*English*]

CAPI's work is increasingly focused on agriculture and food innovation in Canada. For the last 18 months, I have been asking people whether or not they think the innovation system is in a crisis. The broad consensus has been this: If we are not in a crisis already, we are certainly heading towards one. That is why I think it is important to look at the decision to close research sites as part of a longer-term trend in which research, development and innovation have been less of a priority despite their critical role in the sector's long-term success.

While the November budget unveiled the value of the cuts, the apparent depth of the cuts to research caught many off guard. While the cuts to people, labs and decades-long collaborations will be felt across the sector, it still appears to be too early to know what the impacts of the cuts will be.

The reality is that Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's R and D activities have been under pressure for years. For many, the work being done within the science and technology branch has become increasingly disconnected from the sector's success. AAFC has been able to shrink its investment over decades with little push-back or concern. The department faced a choice: spread scarce dollars thinly or consolidate and renew. It appears the department has chosen the second option. At least they have chosen to consolidate. Hopefully, they also choose to renew.

While the department appears to be taking a site-by-site approach in order to focus on what's next, there is a real need for a real dialogue on the future of the department's role in science. That dialogue should not just be internal.

The closures highlight the fragility of Canadian agriculture research. The system depends heavily on government as a funder and performer of R and D. As the private sector pulled back, public funding remained flat or declined. Tight budgets have meant there is no resilience and an inevitable push towards contraction. Consolidating research centres does not solve the problem of fragility. It simply brings it into clearer focus.

Those in the agriculture innovation system are keenly aware of the pressure it faces. They know that it cannot deliver the outcomes the sector needs without reform. They want to eliminate the duplication, break down silos and barriers to co-operation, and drive more focus on outcomes. Many have been waiting for the government to talk change.

It is too early to tell whether these department changes are part of the change the system needs. There are too many unanswered questions. What will AAFC's role be in the future? How does it want to fund and perform research? How will it partner with others in the system? What is the future of the research AAFC will no longer do?

These are not questions the department should answer on its own, but it developed its strategic plan for science largely in isolation. It made decisions about what to cut on its own. It should make decisions about its future with others.

I offer three recommendations to the committee.

The first is the need for more transparency and accountability. What drove the decisions and what is the department's plan for the future? What else is AAFC willing to change, and what needs to change? What else is being cut to meet the reductions announced last November? While the focus has been on these sites, the department has committed to cutting millions of dollars more. Where will those savings come from?

The second is for AAFC to embrace meaningful partnerships in science. There are too many who have too many stories about how hard it is to work with scientists inside the department. Some of those are logistical issues, some of those are cultural issues and some of those are practical issues. Too many are unsure of how the department sets its priorities. Partnerships are critical to a future with more impactful federal science. The department needs to change its culture and approach in order to put partnerships first.

Finally, there is a need to focus on the future and the changes necessary to get more out of the department's investments in R and D and innovation. A plan is needed for how AAFC can contribute to building the 21st-century agriculture innovation system that Canada and Canadian agriculture and food need. Announcing that innovation will be a real priority for the next policy framework, and it should be an important early step.

● (1105)

The impact of these cuts will be worse if they are not a starting point for more meaningful change. AAFC needs to renew its approach to science. It needs to consolidate its footprint. It is unfortunate that public investments have been cut, but governments, like farmers, can do more with less. AAFC should not be making these changes in isolation. It is a leader and a partner. The future of Canadian agriculture R and D and science needs it to embrace its role as one.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we'll go to the Beef Cattle Research Council for five minutes.

Andrea Brocklebank (Executive Director, Beef Cattle Research Council): Thank you for the opportunity to present today.

I'm Andrea Brocklebank. I'm currently the executive director of the Beef Cattle Research Council and the incoming CEO of the Canadian Cattle Association. I'm joined by Dr. Reynold Bergen, our science director. The BCRC funds research and knowledge mobilization on behalf of Canada's beef producers through the producer-led Canadian beef cattle check-off.

I will make three points and offer a recommendation.

First, recent cuts limiting research facilities, programs and expertise at Nappan, Quebec City and Lacombe will impair the beef industry's ability to remain resilient, innovative and competitive over the coming decades. We value efficiency and recognize the current fiscal pressures, but efficiency means aligning Ag Canada's research with the priorities of the agriculture sectors they're meant to support. These cuts will have far-reaching and negative long-term impacts for cattle producers, food security and Canada's efforts to grow the economy. The expertise, long-term datasets and specialized infrastructure lost in these cuts can't be rebuilt quickly or cheaply.

Second, innovation is a critical investment, not discretionary spending, and is essential for our sector's competitiveness. Over the past decade, Canada's beef producers have recognized that research is significantly underfunded and increased investments through the national check-off by more than 600%. The most recent independent analysis found that every check-off dollar invested in research produced a return of $63 for beef producers. We need Ag Canada to be a stable partner in that effort.

Third, universities and private industry cannot fill the gaps these cuts have created. Public-good research is essential where market incentives are limited and where independent, unbiased expertise is required to support regulatory decisions, market access and consumer trust. Furthermore, universities are facing significant fiscal pressures themselves and cannot mobilize the capacity to fill those gaps right now.

To remain internationally competitive, Canada's beef sector needs productive forages, hay, and pasture crops. Canada faces different environmental challenges than other countries do. We've spent decades bringing together an effective national forage research network. Closing Lacombe, Nappan and Quebec City severely undermines this.

Researchers at Lacombe and Quebec are developing higher-yielding, winter-hardy alfalfa varieties. Nappan's researchers develop pasture and grazing management programs suited to Atlantic Canada and breed improved trefoil, red clover and alfalfa varieties that have been adopted across Canada. This is what a functioning national network looks like and is only one example of that—regional strengths connected to national outcomes. It aligns well with a one Canadian economy approach.

Impartial beef grading ensures producers are paid fairly and is key to export competitiveness. Lacombe's work has allowed Canada's grading system to keep pace with the U.S.'s. Closing Lacombe eliminates Canada's only functioning meat science program. It eliminates the scientific expertise needed to demonstrate how Canadian beef quality standards are equivalent or superior to standards in importing countries at a time when Canada is working to diversify its international trade.

Lacombe's researchers also developed food safety interventions that significantly reduce the risk of E. coli O157:H7 in Canada. Food safety research and the exploration of new technologies must occur in research facilities that replicate but are removed from commercial processing environments. Closing Lacombe impairs our ability to move food safety strategies from the lab into commercial practice. Canada's international reputation as a supplier of safe, high-quality beef will stagnate. Canada has unique challenges and opportunities, and we can't rely on U.S.-based research to solve them.

Therefore, we recommend that if closures proceed, critical programs and expertise should be transferred in a way that preserves their function, continuity, access to essential infrastructure, breeding lines and data. Emphasis is placed on the programs mentioned: forage breeding, food safety and carcass quality and data. Emphasis is also placed on ensuring that adequate funding supports are provided for the long-term longevity of those programs.

The beef sector is committed to constructive engagement with government to preserve key research capacity, manage transition well and ensure Canada maintains its global reputation as a producer and supplier of safe, high-quality beef.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input. I look forward to questions.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Alison Sunstrum for five minutes.

Alison Sunstrum (Entrepreneur, NYA Ventures Inc., As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to appear today.

My name is Alison Sunstrum. I have built and scaled agricultural technology companies from an Alberta garage to global markets. I've worked alongside producers and researchers across this country and internationally, some of whom are from the closing sites. Today, I invest in deep science and technology in food, climate and agricultural systems.

From this vantage point, I want to make one crucial observation. These AAFC closures are not simply cost savings. They are either a signal of erosion or one of renewal. If we treat this as a narrow fiscal adjustment, we risk weakening the system that underpins Canada's long-term competitiveness. If we treat this as renewal, we strengthen food security, climate resilience and economic growth.

Let us frame the conversation by answering three questions.

First, why is this happening?

These closures reflect decades of underinvestment in infrastructure and people, aging labs, deferred maintenance and constrained hiring. Over time, this has weakened our ability to retain and attract top talent and respond to climate extremes, emerging diseases, pests and shifting markets.

At the same time, funding has shifted towards short-cycle programs. These programs matter. They are valuable, but they cannot replace long-horizon breeding, multidecade soil research or foundational infrastructure. When fiscal pressure meets accumulated underinvestment, consolidation becomes inevitable.

Second, what is at risk?

Research capacity is not a budget line item; it is continuity. Long-term field trials, breeding populations, regionally adapted datasets and expertise have been built over decades. This is Canada's precious biological capital. It's living infrastructure built over generations that cannot be built quickly once broken. When continuity breaks, breeding gains stall, datasets fragment, expertise disperses and productivity slows. We can build capacity later, but we cannot regain the years of progress and competitive advantage that were lost.

Consider canola. It began as publicly supported breeding research. Today, it contributes more than $40 billion annually to Canada's economy. This Canadian agricultural success story required sustained infrastructure and alignment between public science and private capital.

Third, what does renewal really require?

Renewal does not mean preserving the past. It means building the infrastructure required for the next era of agriculture. We are in the midst of an unprecedented biological and digital transformation that will redefine how food is bred, grown, processed and brought to market. Artificial intelligence is accelerating discovery. Genomics is compressing breeding cycles. Advanced phenotyping and robotics are increasing precision and productivity. Precision fermentation and biomanufacturing are creating entirely new industrial categories in proteins, materials, enzymes and low-carbon inputs.

This is structural change. Canada has real advantages—land, water, feedstock, scientific depth and industrial capacity—but these assets and technologies deliver only when built on strong foundations. AI depends on deep, validated data. Genomics depends on stable germplasm and modern laboratories. Biomanufacturing depends on demonstration, processing at scale and regulatory clarity.

Without modern infrastructure, opportunity becomes aspiration. Public research builds the foundation. Private capital scales it. If public investment weakens, private capital moves elsewhere, and it rarely returns.

In a world of weaponized trade, agricultural resilience is economic defence. Food is strategic infrastructure. A nation that cannot feed itself is vulnerable. A nation that can feed others has strategic leverage.

A global race to build biological and food systems capacity is already under way. The decision before us is straightforward: Will we invest in the infrastructure that strengthens Canada's agricultural productivity and export growth, or accept slower growth in one of our core economic engines? Canada has the assets. The only question is whether we will choose to invest to lead.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much to all of our witnesses. We appreciate your testimony here today.

We're going to allow six minutes for each of the parties. We'll start with the Conservatives.

Mr. Barlow, you have six minutes.

John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

I want to start with the Beef Cattle Research Council.

Ms. Brocklebank, thank you for your comments. I just want to ask you a question on the impact the research closures are going to have on this industry.

I find it interesting that when beef prices are finally at a level where ranchers are making a profit, we see that Canada, after the CFIA missed the deadline by a year, now has a negligible risk status for BSE. We're opening markets in South Korea, and we're trying to get back into China. It just seems like it is ill timing to close three research centres—Lacombe, Quebec City and Nappan—that are focused on beef research.

Does it seem like it is—I don't want to say targeting—not good timing to close three critical beef research centres in Canada?

Andrea Brocklebank: For the industry, the timing would never be good, to be honest, because research is a long-term investment. It results in incremental change over time. The things we're realizing out of research now are because of historical investment over decades.

Really, when it comes down to it, I think it's about the expertise. You don't bring in expertise when you have a fire. A fire could be a drought, when we're talking about forage production, or a fire could be food safety. It could be questions around grading comparisons when we're navigating trade agreements. In all three of those cases, we need independent expertise. In the case of the Lacombe closure, we are losing that expertise, and we don't have a replacement. We don't have a meat science program that can speak to carcass quality and grading.

Absolutely, when we talk about ensuring that producers have support for the coming decade, because prices may not remain this high, we need to ensure that space is there. Also, if we want to continue to grow the economy, we need to navigate the technicalities of things like trade agreements and when we have issues like food safety, recalls and those types of things. That's where we're very concerned. You don't hire a researcher when you have an issue, because you're already behind the eight ball at that point in time.

John Barlow: Right. You're trying to be proactive and have the research and science done beforehand. That makes sense.

You mentioned in your comments that Lacombe is Canada's only functioning meat quality and grading program. We've heard from previous witnesses, including some of the deans of the agricultural universities in Canada and some research experts, that this research can't be transferred. This is not as easy as moving A to B, especially if they're talking about moving or transferring this research to somewhere else. They've also included closing two other beef research centres.

Can you comment on the impact that losing this specific research centre in Lacombe will have on the beef industry? Is it correct to say that this research and innovation is not easily transferred from one location to another?

● (1120)

Andrea Brocklebank: Absolutely. We're not even talking about the forage research that's being shut down in Lacombe. With regard to the Lacombe facility, it is the only federally inspected abattoir in western Canada that we can do research in. Our processing facilities are great partners, but they can't accomplish doing research within their facilities, especially when it's about things related to food safety. We need that independent, federally inspected abattoir.

The only other federally inspected research abattoir at this point is in Guelph, and there's no capacity around it. If we cannot see Lacombe remain open, we are strongly encouraging that Canada support the development of the Guelph program to use that abattoir. Without an abattoir, research around carcass quality and grading is not going to be easy to accomplish.

Likewise is food safety research. Again, you won't want that to go into your processing plants as you're investigating and mitigating pathogens. You need those independent facilities.

This is about the expertise, but it's also about having the facilities to do the work. We know those facilities and infrastructure are not inexpensive, but they are important from an industry perspective. It's not just for beef. Pork and other livestock species also use them.

John Barlow: Thank you, Ms. Brocklebank.

Ms. Sunstrum commented about the importance of infrastructure and having modern infrastructure to ensure that agricultural research or research can move forward. My frustration here is that AAFC just invested almost $4 million into the Lacombe facility to make a biosecure cold storage. From my understanding, almost $6 million was invested in Scott for additional infrastructure and development at that research centre, which is also slated to close.

We have a report that came out just today from the Canadian Wheat Research Coalition. It's talking about how 80% of all wheat fields in Canada are planted with AAFC varieties each and every year. Their concern with these budget cuts is about the future of Canadian research.

Ms. Sunstrum, I have about 30 seconds. Comment quickly on that comment you had about the importance of infrastructure and the signal that closing seven research centres in Canada is sending. What impact is this is going to have on Canadian producers?

Alison Sunstrum: As an investor, I look at this more from the standpoint that we're not looking at the return on investment of our agriculture. Your statement, Mr. Barlow, is absolutely correct. Producers are growing what we have bred. We are seeing our economic engine decline because we are not continuing that investment in research.

This is really about competitiveness. It's not about the loss of something that we can rebuild overnight. We're losing generational investment in research, and that will hit us economically.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we'll go to MP Chatel for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to welcome the witnesses here today.

This study on the future of science and innovation in the agriculture and agri-food sector is very important because, as the Prime Minister said in Davos, a country that does not feed its people has few options.

We will use this study as a starting point and incorporate this discussion on science, technology and innovation into the study of the next strategic partnership between the provinces, territories and the federal government. Based on what we have heard in committee, we would like that partnership to be anchored by a clear vision of science and its importance for the sector, as well as for our food security and sovereignty.

Mr. McCann, I really liked your three recommendations. I read your report carefully. I would like to address your second recommendation. We need to improve our partnership not only between governments, but between all players in the chain and all sectors. Research is certainly very regional and local at the moment. It should be expanded from coast to coast.

Can you give us more details on this? Among other things, you mention the Australian model in your report. I would like to hear your comments on this.

● (1125)

Tyler McCann: Thank you very much for your question.

We often talk about the role of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, but the department is far from being the only player when it comes to innovation and the research and development system.

We should encourage the existing ecosystem and reflect on this system. It is an ecosystem that includes the private sector, universities and producers from coast to coast. The problem we have today is that, although all these players work together, there is a lack of real collaboration. The system is built in a way that does not really encourage this collaboration. We conducted a survey of the players in the system, and they told us in that survey that there were existing rules that did not encourage collaboration and that worked against it. I believe that this is a culture that should change. I believe that Australia is an example of this collaboration.

[*English*]

If you look at the grain sector in Australia and the way their model works, you'll see that the sector invests check-off dollars and royalty dollars that are matched by government. In the grain sector in Australia, several years ago they unveiled a 2023-28 research plan that will invest $1 billion in grains research. That's not just government money. That's government money, producer money and the ecosystem working together to deliver better results. We don't have that model of collaboration in Canada. For too long, we've kind of made efforts at it. We take the time to say we're working together.

The beef industry is, to be honest, a bit of an example, but it's the exception, not the rule. It's seen 600% increases in private sector and producer investment. We don't see that in other sectors, and that's partly because I don't think that government has been a very good partner in encouraging greater investment in the sector.

Sophie Chatel: In the Canadian system, where we have provinces, territories and the federal level, how would this model look—and we have it, to a certain extent, with the beef science cluster—if we wanted to recommend it in a report for the next strategic partnership with provinces?

Tyler McCann: There are some examples that exist around how you can take this national approach, and it does exist to a certain extent in the science clusters today.

If you go back to the beef industry, there is a promotion and research agency that collects some of the levies, looks at the continuum from research and development to market development, and has a more coherent plan. I think Andrea can speak more to the strategy the beef industry has and where research and development fits into the bigger picture.

One of the problems is this. We often talk about the need for one Canadian economy. That's as much a cultural issue in agriculture as it is in other things. We live in a world where producers in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba all want the same research done in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, rather than asking how we can lean into a more national approach, recognizing that, yes, there are some differences, but often similarities are there.

We need to do a better job of thinking about our research investment not from a provincial perspective but rather from a national perspective. There are too many examples where we haven't had provincial producer groups willing to invest in national initiatives either.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Sophie Chatel: I'll turn to our witness from the cattle association for the beef model.

What would a good example be for us to study more generally? If you don't have time, please feel free to submit your answer in writing.

Andrea Brocklebank: The science clusters do work. The biggest challenge with the science clusters right now is that they're underfunded—

The Chair: I'm sorry. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

We'll go to the Bloc now, with six minutes for Mr. Lemire.

● (1130)

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Sunstrum, I will start with you.

In your testimony, you stated that public research builds the foundation and that the private sector scales it and further develops certain elements.

You work in the private research sector. There is a tendency to think that the private sector focuses first and foremost on creating products with commercial value. Do you believe that the benefits of basic research….

Can you hear me?

[*English*]

Alison Sunstrum: Yes, I can.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Okay.

What do you think are the benefits of basic research in the agricultural sector?

In your opinion, why should the government continue to invest in areas such as soil health? Can the private sector play a role in this?

[*English*]

Alison Sunstrum: Absolutely.

We're using comparisons today, and if we look at the Netherlands, which we could fit inside the province of Nova Scotia, we know they have boosted their agribusiness exports amazingly. They compete well beyond the level that Canada competes at.

As for investing in research, innovation is actually a combination of invention times commercialization times adoption. In Canada, we are very good at invention, but we are very poor at the latter two.

I think we attract private financing when we have solid public investment or invention to build upon. I cannot stress enough how research and development promotes our economic engine. With the amount of money we invest, we must move to a trifecta where we are incorporating public research, which provides the foundation, and then incentivizing capital to come to Canada, because we have an agile regulatory regime and an environment, as I said, that can spur on investment. This is Canada's greatest generational opportunity.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: I really like the consistency of your vision.

Rickey Yada, Dean of the Faculty of Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences at the University of Alberta, said that the loss of research centres was dramatic. At the end of his testimony, he emphasized the importance of creating a shared database to enable researchers to pool their information so that they can work together rather than work in isolation.

Do you think this is a strategy that should be promoted?

[*English*]

Alison Sunstrum: I think anything about data and virtual connectivity is very important, but I believe that with the tools that exist today with AI, we can be in different centres and be highly creative in communicating with data, so Rickey is correct in his assumption.

I believe we have the strength in AI, given that we have the literal godfathers and grandfathers of AI sitting at the University of Toronto, the Université de Montréal and the University of Alberta. We must take what we invest in other sectors and embed it into our economic engines.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Mr. McCann, I would also like to hear your opinion on the importance of having access to open and multiple data in the field of agriculture.

Tyler McCann: It's essential. One of the challenges we face today is that we don't really have a system that works together. There are universities across the country, there are public and private research centres, but there's no real way for us all to work together.

I think it's not just the fact that we're closing research centres that's problematic. It's also the way they're being closed. It's the fact that there isn't really a plan for the next few years. A decision has been made, and there's an obligation to act and find solutions in the coming weeks. The impact would have been less severe if the government had told us that, in the coming years, we would be required to make cuts and work together. However, that is not how the decision was made.

● (1135)

Sébastien Lemire: I feel that the private sector has its place in research, of course, but as I said, the pursuit of profit is inevitable. Sectors such as soil health, or even biological productivity, seem to me to be more difficult to finance through the private sector.

How can we ensure that private industry is also keen to improve our knowledge in the biological field?

Tyler McCann: It is essential to think of the innovation system as a system. In some parts of the system, public investment is mandatory because there is no private sector interest. However, in other parts of the system, there is definitely a role for the private sector as well.

The problem is that today, it doesn't really work as it should. In some places, the public sector sometimes competes with the private sector. There are also places where there is a lack of investment because the public sector is not investing there or because the private sector has no interest in doing so.

We need to think more carefully about the system. It is important to understand that the public and private sectors have very different roles to play.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to the Conservatives for five minutes.

Mr. Bonk, you're up next.

Steven Bonk (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): My questions will be for the Beef Cattle Research Council.

So far in this committee, we've taken more of a 30,000-foot view of how these cuts to our agricultural research centres will affect the framework of how we do research in Canada. Is it possible to drill down a bit on what is being affected? How does research that you're doing have an impact on the Canadian cattle producers and, by extension, worldwide?

I know of the good work you're doing on TB vaccines, for example. What I'm really interested in is the genomic work you're doing in feedlots on the microbiome for antimicrobial resistance or the good work that Dr. John Ellis is doing on BRD.

Could you talk a bit more about the specifics of why this research is so important and how the biological constraints of generational reproduction in cattle make this research so important that it needs stability to go on in an ongoing fashion?

Andrea Brocklebank: Well, I think a few of the speakers have mentioned this. One of the points is that research is a pipeline, and one piece is that, honestly, there isn't private incentive to develop it.

Forage breeding is a great example of that. The private sector can't capture the value of it to invest, yet greater forage varieties preserve grasslands that ultimately contribute to public good, biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and overall resilience for our producers. That's a great example where we've seen a lot of progress.

When we talk about animal health and genetics, obviously microbes, diseases and all of those things continue to evolve, especially in a global framework. We have to continue to do research and ensure that we're continuing to look at opportunities for vaccination and at mitigation opportunities. That doesn't happen easily or quickly. It's also about having a baseline understanding. We've seen this relative to genomic opportunities but also with regard to things like bovine respiratory disease, as you mentioned, in our feedlot and cow-calf sectors. Added on to that, we see climate impacting those things.

We have a lot of research in the U.S., but we need to make sure that it's relevant in Canada. Whether this means adopting that research and working with those researchers or doing independent work, we need to understand the diversity of Canadian production systems across our country, particularly when it's something like beef production, where you have not only a diversity of climate landscapes but also a diversity in terms of cow-calf, feedlot...background in those.

We cover a lot of areas. We cover animal health, welfare, forages, feeds, food safety and beef quality. We look at it as not picking one of those but managing long term a portfolio investment across all of those areas. We rely heavily on Ag Canada in certain spaces, especially the public-good ones like animal welfare, food safety, quality, and forage and feed production.

Steven Bonk: We can look back at some of the work done, for example, by Dr. John Basarab—I believe he was at Lethbridge at the time—on feed efficiency in livestock and EPDs, and what that's done for the beef cattle industry.

Could you talk a little about quantifying some of the financial gains that are made by public research?

● (1140)

Andrea Brocklebank: I'll let Reynold feed into that one because he's a lot more knowledgeable on the genomic side.

Reynold Bergen (Science Director, Beef Cattle Research Council): A lot of what we're talking about is a continuum. Any sort of improvements in efficiency on the farm, on the animal side, ultimately go back to genetics, and it takes decades for those things to flow through. John Basarab has been working a lot on genomics. A lot of others have been as well, including in some of the programs at Agriculture Canada that were cut in Edmonton recently.

Two researchers at Agriculture Canada in Edmonton have been offered transfers to Lethbridge, which is good. That expertise has been saved, but Lethbridge has no cow herd. It's going to be really difficult for them to maintain progress on genetic improvements in feed efficiency when they don't have resources to work with. I don't know how that's going to work. It will be interesting to find out what the plan or strategy is there.

One of the important points to raise here is that feed efficiency is hugely important in all sectors of the beef industry—both on the ranch and in the feedlot—because it allows you to produce more beef with less feed. It's more profitable that way. When we have more efficient cattle, it also means they're using fewer resources, so there's an environmental benefit to that as well.

Steven Bonk: As a really quick follow-up, could you talk about the financial implications of this? What can that produce for the Canadian livestock industry?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Alison Sunstrum: Reynold, could I handle that one, please?

Reynold Bergen: Knock yourself out.

The Chair: You have to limit it to 15 seconds, if possible. Thank you.

Alison Sunstrum: Okay.

I developed the technology that measured feed intake and feed efficiency, alongside Dr. Basarab and several other researchers across the country. I'm an “overnight success” after 29 years of research and development.

Here's what that meant. It meant that feed was reduced by 12%, methane was—

The Chair: We've gone over by 25 seconds. I have to move to the next folks. I apologize.

Next we'll go to MP Connors for five minutes.

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes, you're good.

Paul Connors: First of all, I want to thank the witnesses for coming out.

My first question is for Ms. Sunstrum.

In your opening remarks, you had three questions, and the third question talked about renewal and strategic leverage. Is there an opportunity now, with some of these closures, to restructure collaboration? If so, how should the government work with the industry to strengthen research and science?

Alison Sunstrum: I think we're entering a field of deep science and tech driving everything in agriculture. That's something we really need to understand. It's about the acceleration of crop breeding, leveraging the microbiome, as mentioned, and population-level genomics that can drive what we know about animal behaviour, health and welfare. I think we're missing that opportunity. Indeed, we could restructure. We need to know a map of what we are losing when we close these centres.

I apologize for stepping on Dr. Bergen's moment, but I will tell you that I deeply know—by interacting with researchers and scaling a very successful business—the relationship and connection among producers, farmers and researchers solving the problems in the field. We haven't solved the problems. Every day brings a new problem. That's what we must understand. Every day, climate change is one of our greatest effects. Every day, we are faced with challenges that can only be handled by science and technology.

Investors understand this. I understand this. I am investing in deep science and tech, which will drive the solutions to the problems and the economic engine. I must continue to emphasize what an opportunity we have ahead of us.

● (1145)

Paul Connors: You also mentioned invention times, commercialization times and adoption. You told us that Canada is very good at the invention and innovation piece but not so good at commercialization and adoption.

Research at research facilities is where they usually do the invention and innovation piece. Who should be responsible for the commercialization and adoption piece?

Alison Sunstrum: All of us should, everyone along the chain, but commercialization is really ignited by government support. We could spend the same kind of money we do today and crowd in private capital. We could use our policy levers or our tax structure. We've invented on a dime where other countries have invented on a dollar.

We're very capital-efficient. Let's keep that capital efficiency, but let's also become much more agile. Let's understand that we must attract capital. We must attract partners. The government sits in the ignition chair. If we want that rocket to take off, we must bring in new capital, and we must always understand what we have. This isn't about closing buildings. This is about, as I said, losing our biological capital.

Paul Connors: Thank you.

I have a question for Ms. Brocklebank now.

I don't have a whole lot of time, but you mentioned that university and private research cannot fill the gap. Can you elaborate on that a bit for me?

Andrea Brocklebank: They absolutely can if they're properly resourced. We know they're facing significant financial pressure right now, and it's not like overnight they can fill the gaps we see without adequate government funding to assume some of these programs. That's very important.

Short-term funding to absorb some researchers is very different from long-term program funding. We know our universities are fiscally challenged right now. They can be an outlet if properly resourced to assume some of these programs. That's the key.

The Chair: Next we'll go to the Bloc Québécois for two and a half minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Lemire.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for the representatives of the Beef Cattle Research Council.

I would be interested to hear your thoughts on the reputation of the beef industry. Many people, particularly those involved in vegan movements, claim that the beef industry is one of the most polluting industries. I therefore believe that research is essential not only to improve production and reduce environmental impacts, but also to provide more scientific data in these debates, which are often emotional and, let's face it, not necessarily constructive.

How can research address the industry's concerns about the reputation of a sector that is crucial to our economy, but also to people who enjoy eating beef?

[*English*]

Andrea Brocklebank: That's a great question. Meatless Mondays became an issue for our industry, and for a long time, there was great concern that we needed to reduce beef consumption. It was about science, industry and government in partnership generating science to evaluate our environmental footprint, but also identifying where we could reduce it moving forward and have science to quantify when we have reduced it. That makes the public feel better about eating our product, but also lets us understand where we can continue.

It allows us to measure things that are less visible to the public. Grasslands can be replaced by crops in some areas, but that impacts biodiversity and carbon sequestration negatively. If we can assign values to those things that we can communicate to the public and the government, there's a better understanding of why it's important to preserve grasslands. It's not just about greenhouse gases but also about other trade-offs.

Lastly, with public trust and those types of questions, animal welfare becomes another one. It's really important for us to have independent science. That's what we've seen with the benefits of working with Ag Canada on those spaces, but we have seen a shift in public trust, with an understanding that there are other reasons for eating beef, like maintaining grasslands and preserving ecosystems beyond beef production. In many cases, there's a lot of agricultural land in Canada that can't be used for crop production. If we can use it to produce beef and maintain healthy landscapes, that's our focus, and that's where science really helps us.

● (1150)

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, my speaking time is up.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go to two four-minute rounds.

For the Conservatives, Mr. Barlow, you have four minutes.

John Barlow: Thank you very much, Chair, for the time.

I find it interesting that the Liberals' line of questioning is that universities should pick up this lost research. We heard from the dean of Dalhousie last week, and the University of Alberta as well. They don't have the resources. Their budgets are being cut as well. I would have hoped this consultation would have happened before these research centres were cut. To just cut them and think universities will pick up this research and nothing will be lost is clearly not the case.

Ms. Sunstrum, I want to give you an opportunity to finish answering the question you were asked earlier. I just want to preface this with an example.

In the fall, the Liberal government came out with new regulations around methane emissions reductions. My understanding is that the Nappan research centre was doing extensive research and innovation on new feed and forage, including seaweed for cattle, to reduce methane emissions. Wouldn't it make sense to encourage that kind of development and not shut it down?

You were talking about the economic impact these closures would have. You were talking about cattle feed as one example. I would like you to have an opportunity to finish the answer to that question.

Alison Sunstrum: Thank you.

What we learned through research.... Nappan was one of the centres where my technology was installed. I want to give you a little idea of that. The producers in three maritime provinces gathered together to install this technology and then to work with scientists across the country. I think we have examples of public-private partnerships everywhere. Feed efficiency research is probably one of our most stellar. The Beef Cattle Research Council was very involved. It's one of our stellar responses.

I'll give you simple reductions, not scientific reductions—a reduction in feed intake. We found that feed-efficient cattle were in the conversion of turning around efficiency. They reduce manure, reduce methane and seem to be healthier. These are not necessarily research assumptions, but through the process of research that was conducted in Canada, these efficient cattle and this method of selection have gone across herds. We're into multi-generation. This has a resulting compounding effect. Researchers from across universities were involved in this. It's a great Canadian success story.

We also developed the first carbon offset protocols. One thing I would say is that fundamental research did the very hard work, and then we saw it multiplying throughout the country.

John Barlow: Thank you very much.

I'm going to relinquish my time to Mr. Epp.

Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): I'm going to start my questions with Mr. McCann.

I was intrigued by your comment that you often feel there's an ecosystem in Canada where all players are involved. How would you envision that ecosystem fleshing out the research angles of esoteric or fundamental—whatever term you want to use—versus applied? How would the different responsibilities from the different players apply differently to those two lines of research?

Tyler McCann: The first thing you do, which we often struggle with in Canada, is get everybody in the same room. You put them in the same room, you make them act together and you ask how we find the right balance.

I think most people, especially those who understand the innovation continuum, understand the role and the need to have this work go from one end to the other—to find the right balance between foundational science and applied research at the other end, and commercialization. First and foremost, it's about creating a space and creating conditions to spend more and invest more.

Very briefly, I want to go back to the comment Andrea made earlier.

The problem with the science clusters today is that they're underinvested in. If you do a comparison, on the grain side, I talked about the billion-dollar investment from the grain industry in Australia. The Canadian wheat research cluster is investing $20 million over five years. It's a bit apples and oranges, but the scale is absolutely different between the two.

If you put money on the table and you get people in the same room, they'll figure it out.

Dave Epp: I'll go back to those points in the next hour.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now go to MP Dandurand for four minutes.

● (1155)

[*Translation*]

Marianne Dandurand (Compton—Stanstead, Lib.): I extend our sincere thanks to all of the witnesses for their very relevant testimony.

[*English*]

I'm going to start with Madame Brocklebank.

Thank you for being here and talking about the importance of forage for the cattle and dairy industries. I know your organization is really involved in that.

I'd like you to expand a bit more on how it currently works between the government and your organization when it comes to research. What's the balance? What types of programs currently exist? Most importantly, how can we improve what already exists?

Andrea Brocklebank: I'm going to use the opportunity to talk about the cluster. It's been mentioned a few times.

Previous to the cluster, we would fund a project, or Agriculture Canada or a province would. It would be small. It would have a few researchers and limited collaboration. The cluster allowed us to create networks. We did it around antimicrobial surveillance. We did it around forage production, where we had researchers from across the country working together on forage breeding and collaborating. It created a model wherein we could work with Agriculture Canada and universities together. Industry could invest, and so could Agriculture Canada. Yes, there were hurdles with the cluster—we could talk about them for days—but overall it built that network.

The model was attractive because industry could invest and government could too. We increased our investment as a result of that. We saw the value. We were also able to do extensions. However, it's underfunded and maxed out. Government started to be very prescriptive about what priorities could be funded under the model as a way to reduce applications. They started to put in restrictions, not necessarily always recognizing industry priorities. That's where the challenge came in.

I'll be honest with you. The program could work, but right now the restrictions are limiting it. We have numerous examples of moving from very isolated, siloed research to having collaborations that not only reduce duplication but also improve efficiency and mobilize things more quickly because you have a team, with industry engaged. Our role, in many cases, is for when the private sector won't jump in—new grazing management practices are an example. It's BCRC putting out those extension resources now and making sure they're getting to the sector. That was also helped through those models.

To the points made previously, whether it's clusters or not, there is a strong basis we could build on.

Marianne Dandurand: Thank you so much. That was very relevant.

I'd like to turn to Madame Sunstrum.

In your opening remarks, you referenced talent and the preservation of talent. I understand that AI is going to be very interesting in the future, but I don't think it can replace people.

What role should federal policy play in strengthening agritech talent?

Alison Sunstrum: I think AAFC and others have a great role to play.

You made a point about AI. AI is built-in infrastructure right now. It moves the frontier faster by identifying promising directions earlier. The time compression in scientific discovery is now two to 10 times in many workflows.

What we have to understand is that we already are a very skilled and talented population. We have scientific depth. We could have more. We need to attract more. Agriculture is now becoming a very scientific and technical field, more so than ever before. There's a real need to skill up at the farm level and the processing level, with new, innovative foods we could be releasing that bring more value to our crops.

The Chair: Thank you so much. That was four and a half minutes.

I want to thank witnesses for being here today. Your testimony was very insightful. Thank you for lending us your expertise. It was quite good.

We're going to suspend for five minutes while we set up for the next panel.

● (1155)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1210)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of our new witnesses.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking, or when asked a question directly by a member. For those participating by teleconference, please click the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, please use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

As a quick reminder for all members, please place your earpiece on the table away from any electronic devices when not in use. This helps prevent interference and reduces the risk of acoustic shock, for the safety of our interpreters.

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, February 10, 2026, the committee is resuming its study on science in Canadian agriculture and the closure of research centres.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses.

We have Mayor Hibbs. Thank you, Your Worship, for being here with us today. We appreciate it.

We also have John Ireland here. From the Public Service Alliance of Canada, we have Patrick St-Georges and Sébastien Paquette.

We'll start with you, Your Worship, for five minutes.

Thalia Hibbs (Mayor, City of Lacombe): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity today to speak to you as mayor of Lacombe.

I'm not here to repeat previous testimony, but to further contextualize it and ultimately ask for a measured, responsible and proportionate response.

The closure of the Lacombe Research and Development Centre will create an economic and social shock to my community of 15,000. The RDC is one of our largest employers. Lacombe will lose families that bring worth to the community, scientists will leave, tech teams and operational and seasonal field positions will cease, and critical science-based employment opportunities for local students will evaporate. Gone, too, will be the international visiting scientists, industry collaborators and trade missions to our world-class facility and our community. This loss of training and collaboration will cascade negatively throughout national research networks.

Furthermore, there is a domino effect on local business. The combination of the elimination of the centre's significant local purchasing and the reduction of former staff's economic contributions will result in declines. There will be a downturn in the housing market and out-migration, both of which are harder for a small urban centre to absorb. The closure announcement has also sparked fears of the site becoming a greyfield, and I've heard no plan for this.

It goes beyond our community. It goes beyond our province. This is a national concern. For 119 years, Canadians have invested in building one of the country's most integrated agricultural research ecosystems. The Lacombe site is not simply any laboratory; it's a full-cycle federal research asset, from soil and forage development to livestock genetics to federally inspected processing and carcass analysis—all on one site.

Few facilities in Canada combine this level of integration across an entire agricultural value chain. That integration matters. Once disrupted, it cannot be restarted. Multi-generational livestock genetics cannot be reconstructed in a budget cycle. Long-term soil and crop trials cannot be recreated once broken. Research teams built over decades cannot be reassembled once dispersed. If this centre is dismantled, the loss will be permanent.

This research centre occupies approximately 2,000 acres woven directly into our community. It borders residential neighbourhoods. This is not a remote facility on the outskirts of Canada. It is physically and economically embedded in the city of Lacombe. The centre itself supports 112 direct positions—22 of them research scientists—and anchors a constellation of partnerships with Western Crop Innovations, Lakeland College, the University of Alberta and producer groups across western Canada.

This intellectual ecosystem cannot be relocated without consequence. Centres on the Prairies are not interchangeable. Our environmental conditions are unique compared with other sites.

The research at Lacombe has resulted in impactful advancements, through its integrated farm-to-fork facilities, in meat quality, safety, sustainability and innovative processing, while also being able to respond to industry crisis—all in the heart of Canada's cattle production. Closing Lacombe will eliminate the primary player in keeping Canadian beef, pork and lamb globally competitive. There will be a halt in advances in meat science, including AI, robotics and advanced imaging. Most critically, there will be an increased vulnerability to future threats.

We do not oppose the government's fiscal objectives. We understand that difficult decisions need to be made. What we are asking for is fiscal due diligence. We are asking that these federal assets undergo full life-cycle assessments prior to their disposition.

Specifically, we are requesting a structured 12- to 18-month validation period within the existing wind-down timeline—requiring no new funding—in order to inventory active research assets, genetic materials and long-term trials; to assess sequencing and protection measures to prevent irreversible loss; and to publish a transparent, site-specific cost-benefit analysis comparing near-term savings to the long-term national impact. A pause costs very little; a mistake costs over a century of public investment.

This committee has heard testimony that the agricultural research in Canada delivers among the highest returns on public investment and is a significant portion of our GDP. If even a fraction of that value is placed at risk, the savings projected from the closure must be examined carefully and transparently.

Are the short-term savings coming at the cost of a significant risk of loss over time? Canada's agricultural competitiveness, disease resilience and export reputation are national concerns, not municipal ones. If we are wrong, a validation period will confirm that. If we are right, it will prevent irreversible loss.

Members of this committee, you are currently studying the impact of these closures. We respectfully ask that irreversible actions not be finalized before your work is complete. Pause, validate and then decide.

● (1215)

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

John Ireland (Reeve, Lacombe County): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members.

First off, I would like to thank you for your invitation to speak here today. My name is John Ireland. I am a farmer, but I am also the reeve of Lacombe County, a municipality spanning 3,000 square kilometres, where 98% of the land is zoned agricultural.

In Lacombe, agriculture isn't just an industry; it is our identity. At the heart of that identity sits the Lacombe Research and Development Centre. For over 119 years, this station has been an engine of innovation. It manages 17 quarter sections of land, with critical soil and crop data that simply cannot be replicated or moved. However, I'm not here today to talk about this history. I'm here to talk about the future.

The challenges facing central Alberta farmers today are more complex than at any point in the last century. We are operating in climate extremes. Thirty years ago, one of our biggest fears was an August frost. Today, we have gained nearly 23 frost-free days to our growing season. While this allows for higher-yield and longer-season crops, it also brings new weeds, new pathogens and a desperate need for drought-tolerant varieties. As rainfall becomes more unpredictable, we have moved almost universally to minimum tillage to conserve every drop of moisture.

These shifts require real-time, region-specific research. You cannot manage a farm in Lacombe using data gathered anywhere else in the country, even from southern Alberta. Despite being in the same province, our climates, soil profiles and moisture levels are vastly different. Relying on a single southern station to serve the entire province is like asking a doctor to diagnose a patient he has never met based on a chart from someone four hours away.

To remain world-class, we must address three critical realities.

First is the economic reality. We know that every dollar invested in agriculture research returns up to $63. In what other sector would you consider cutting a program with a 6,000% return on investment? To forgo research and development in a sector that contributes so significantly to Canada's GDP is not finding efficiencies; it is being short-sighted.

Second is the geopolitical reality. As a farmer, I can manage the weather, but I cannot manage global politics. We have seen our primary producers used as pawns in trade disputes, such as the recent canola embargo. When tariffs and sanctions hit, our only defence is the superior quality and efficiency of our product. That edge is sharpened exclusively through robust public research and development.

Third is the reality of unbiased science. There is a role for the private sector, but AAFC research is unique because it is empirical and unbiased. It is not tied to a corporate marketing plan or a specific seed-and-chemical package. Public research gives farmers the confidence to adopt new practices, because the data is focused on the producer's success, not a shareholder's dividend.

In closing, agriculture will still be here in 10 years regardless of these budget decisions. The question for this committee is, what will that industry look like? Will it be a robust and innovative leader that feeds the world, or will it be an industry limping along at the mercy of our global competitors?

Agriculture research requires a 20-year vision. It should not be subjected to a four-year political mandate. I urge this committee to recognize that the Lacombe research centre is not just a collection of buildings. It is an essential piece of Canada's economic and food security infrastructure, putting us on the global stage.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Next we'll go to the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

I believe you're splitting your time. Welcome.

Patrick St-Georges (First National Executive Vice-President, Agriculture Union, Public Service Alliance of Canada): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, my name is Patrick St-Georges. I'm the first national executive vice-president with the Agriculture Union. We represent approximately 2,500 agriculture and agri-food employees across the country.

We believe that the recent cuts at AAFC will have serious negative consequences for Canadian agriculture in decades to come. Our 494 affected members hold positions as laboratory and greenhouse technicians, grounds and facility maintenance workers, and administrators, and have other roles that are essential to supporting Canadian farmers, agricultural innovation and research.

Among the proposed closures, the closure of the Quebec Research and Development Centre, as well as a sub-centre in Saint-Augustin, stands out as a decision with profoundly and deeply troubling consequences. This centre is one of the few federal research hubs explicitly dedicated to understanding agricultural systems in cold and humid climates. Research conducted at the Quebec centre directly supports agriculture in these environments by focusing on productivity, sustainability and environmental performance.

Research in cold and humid agro-ecosystems relies on long-term trials, region-specific forage species and decades of accumulated scientific data. When the federal government closes a site like this, the research legacy is not transferable.

The Quebec RDC mandate includes development in sustainable forage systems designed to improve environmental performance while maintaining and improving productivity, which is essential for reducing emissions, improving soil health and supporting low-input agriculture. The closure of the Quebec RDC will hinder innovation in the cattle sector, weaken our forage research capacity and remove a pillar of scientific expertise in cold and humid agriculture.

We call on the government to reconsider its budget cuts at AAFC before the damage to Canadian farmers, the Canadian economy and our environment becomes irreversible.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Paquette (Regional executive vice president - Quebec, Public Service Alliance of Canada): Good morning. My name is Sébastien Paquette and I represent the Public Service Alliance of Canada in Quebec.

For us, these recent decisions seem illogical. Significant investments have been made over the past 10 years to upgrade the equipment at the Quebec City research centre, and some of those renovations are still ongoing. When employees were informed of the unfortunate news, renovations were under way in adjacent rooms. These renovations were a good decision, a long-term investment. Now we need to make it pay off.

This centre had several partnerships with Laval and McGill universities. This means that two of Quebec's academic flagships are affected. This closure will negatively impact the training of many students in the agricultural sector. Our farmers need the results of this research, otherwise Canadian farms will become less profitable, leading some owners to close their operations.

On the flip side, the cost of groceries will increase significantly. The Agriculture Canada report "Canada: Outlook for Principal Field Crops, 2025-12-17" states that "The primary driver of higher production was improved yields, as the total harvested area remained largely unchanged".

I believe this is the path we should pursue if we want to help our population. Given the current geopolitical climate, we must be able to optimize our agriculture to meet Canada's needs, and potentially export our agricultural products. Our food and economic security depend on it.

Thank you.

● (1225)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you to our witnesses.

We'll go to the Conservatives for six minutes, and we'll start with Mr. Calkins.

Welcome back to the committee.

Blaine Calkins (Ponoka—Didsbury, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses, and thank you to my neighbours and friends who are here today.

I'll start with questions for both of you.

Mr. Ireland, I'm going to start with you. Could you just talk a bit about the breadth of agriculture in Lacombe County, 98% of which is zoned for agriculture and where I was born and raised?

John Ireland: It is a very intensive agricultural industry. A significant component is dairy, which is ongoing. It is a major crop-producing area, for feed for forage, and for the dairy industry in particular. The black soil zones are critical to the productivity of our region. Generally—not in the last two or three years, but generally—we have ample rainfall to produce these amazing crops.

Blaine Calkins: Would it be fair to say that we have virtually everything Alberta has to offer, save maybe sugar beets, which is more of a southern crop? We have intensive livestock operations with supply management, like dairy, chicken producers and egg producers—that whole segment—and have pork producers, beef and all of the red meat. Plus, virtually every grain and oilseed that is growable in Canada happens in Lacombe County. Would that be fair to say?

John Ireland: It would be fair to say, yes.

Blaine Calkins: That is not unique to your county. It would be the same for Ponoka County, Red Deer County, and virtually every county that's in the parkland black soil region in Alberta.

John Ireland: It's the same for all of us.

Blaine Calkins: Are you aware of any other Government of Canada research site in that black soil area?

John Ireland: I am not.

Blaine Calkins: Neither am I.

You mentioned in your opening remarks the difficulties that our area has been having the last number of years when it comes to moisture. We've been through these kinds of things before. The government has tried to do carbon taxes—industrial carbon taxes and consumer carbon taxes. They seem to be unable to change the weather.

What is the benefit of the Lacombe research station in adapting to climate variability and some of the stresses that our farmers face?

John Ireland: Regardless of the cause or the reason for not getting moisture, we need to adapt to that and produce varieties that do not require the same level of precipitation on a yearly basis.

Blaine Calkins: If we lose the ability to do that in the black soil area, and if this becomes a long-standing problem, what is the consequence to our producers in not just Lacombe County, but virtually everywhere in central and northern Alberta?

John Ireland: There is going to be a significant reduction in production.

Blaine Calkins: Mayor Hibbs, you talked about the social fabric affecting the community of Lacombe. Is there anything you'd like to expand on?

I know that you've started up a working group with many other community leaders. Is anybody from the research station itself allowed to participate in it, or is all of your contact indirect?

Thalia Hibbs: Unfortunately, it has put us in an awkward position, because we're advocating for a facility that we're not actually able to communicate directly with. That facility is so integrated into our community. One of the reasons that Lacombe even exists is the existence of that station. We all have experience, connections and relationships. These people are hockey coaches in our community. Spouses may own businesses. We're a very integrated community because we are small. We are thankful that we're able to see the impacts.

I had the pleasure of touring that facility somewhat recently, within the last couple of years. It was eye-opening for me. I'm not a scientist, and I obviously live in the city so I'm not a farmer, but it was very eye-opening to see the work being done there. You could see how that would benefit our area, as well as the nation.

The social and economic health of our entire region, which includes the county, also has an effect on us as an economic hub and vice versa. The impacts of this closure are hard to quantify. We won't really know until it's too late and it's over. We really need to have this decision reversed.

● (1230)

Blaine Calkins: Thank you.

I'll go back to you, Mr. Ireland.

You talked about how the proposal right now is to take a handful of scientists and move them down to the Lethbridge facility. I don't think there was any discussion about them taking their technical staff and their technical teams with them. You and I have been Albertans long enough to know the difference between Lacombe and Lethbridge. We don't begrudge anything that happens at Lethbridge. It's a critical part of our agricultural community in southern Alberta on the prairie part.

Would you say that a risk is being generated by closing down a facility in Lacombe? Could you talk about the productivity difference between central Alberta and the prairie regions?

John Ireland: The central Alberta region, as I mentioned earlier, generally has ample rainfall. With the Lethbridge station, you can grow very good crops down there, but it's on irrigated land, which is apples and oranges to us in Lacombe County. We would still be able to produce crops, but without current and relevant research on black soils in our climate, it would be at a significantly reduced rate.

Blaine Calkins: Can you speak to the nature of the relationships between the research station and the local producer organizations and how the research at that station is applied research? By that I mean it's not esoteric research. It's designed to be productive research to get our products to grow better, to be more productive and to be more resistant, as well as to get more product to market. That's critical when it comes to margins.

You're a farmer, sir. What happens to profit margins if you're no longer competitive?

John Ireland: Exactly.

Perhaps I could give a quick overview of how I am directly impacted by the research station. I attend field days, and I inspect the new varieties coming on stream visually. I look for lodging resistance, and I look for pathogen resistance naturally occurring. In the end, I examine the trial data that comes out: the days to maturity, the test weights, the thousand kernel weights and the relative yield potential with other varieties.

This is how I come up with my seeding plan. I then purchase seed from a local seed grower, one of whom is Ms. Oatway, who gave testimony a couple of days ago. Her family propagates the new seed that I purchase, and I put my seed into the same black soil zone. I apply a bit of expertise and a whole bunch of hope, and I generally come up with a high-quality product that I sell or contract to Rahr Malting, which is also in Lacombe County. It then takes my bulk commodity, adds value to it—to the tune of 140,000 metric tons per year—and largely exports it to the United States.

When you look at the progression—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but we've gone over time. I apologize for cutting you off, but I have to stick to a schedule here.

MP Dandurand, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

The subject is sensitive enough that I would prefer to speak French. It will be much easier for me to address you in French.

There is a research centre in my rural riding: the Lennoxville research centre, with a particular focus on the dairy and beef sectors. Fodder is also an absolute necessity—it's very important. I fully understand the benefits that a research centre can provide to a region. Children take the yellow bus to visit the research centre and see what it's all about. It raises their awareness of agriculture. In addition, there is significant community buy-in for a research centre.

There is one thing I find difficult about the research centre, which is a federal centre, fairly closed off, where high-level research is conducted: it seems like the more time passes, the harder it is to gain access to these people.

How do you view the collaboration between municipalities and the government in research centres like those at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada? How do you think we can be better positioned to talk about the importance of research and agriculture in your area? How do you envisage that?

● (1235)

[*English*]

Thalia Hibbs: I'm always open to a conversation. I know our community is very interested in economic development, and this certainly falls under that category.

You're right. I think our facility could be even better than it is, and that would be through collaboration with different levels of government, with more industry involvement and definitely with more post-secondary. I don't think it has to be any one group in particular, but collaboration will make the facility much stronger and more able to respond to the needs of industry, which we're ultimately serving. That ultimately serves all of us by protecting our agricultural sector.

John Ireland: I'll just reiterate something we heard in the first hour, which is that all we need to do is have the discussion. We need to facilitate the discussion, and who knows what will spring from that. However, to close these centres with one fell swoop is not anything but short-sighted.

[*Translation*]

Marianne Dandurand: In my region, closing the Sainte-Foy centre in Quebec City will have a significant impact on the industry as a whole. Discussions are under way with universities, the private sector and organizations to see how the quality of research can be maintained.

Are those discussions taking place in your area? How do you see the future of research in your region, given the assets you have?

To inspire me for my own community, can you tell me how you are working on this aspect?

[*English*]

John Ireland: As we said earlier in the discussion, we received notice of this decision on January 22. It is far too early to put any kind of comprehensive plan in place to resurrect anything from the ashes that we're dealing with today.

Thalia Hibbs: I think that is it. We don't have the time. That's why I've asked for a pause.

There are definitely some really positive solutions here, but we need time. If we don't put that in place right now, we'll already be damaging the research that's currently happening there, and we will lose that capacity. That's why we suggest pausing and revisiting, please.

[*Translation*]

Marianne Dandurand: Thank you.

Mr. Ireland, you are a farmer, and research and innovation certainly have an impact on your activities. Given all the extreme weather events that have occurred and the accelerated cycle of extreme weather events, how do you think research and innovation can support farmers? How important are research and innovation in this new context of extreme weather events?

[*English*]

John Ireland: It's research at any level. We have weather events all the time. We have always had them, and we will always have them in the future. Research builds on trends, and in the last five years in particular, we have been trending drier. I'm sure the research plots that were produced last year are implementing moisture-conserving varieties that will suit our area.

[*Translation*]

Marianne Dandurand: Thank you.

I'll now turn to the people from Quebec City, my region, who represent the people back home.

There is considerable expertise at the Sainte-Foy research centre. The federal government invested a great deal in Sainte-Foy's infrastructure.

Do you know if any of their researchers have already been recruited by Laval University?

● (1240)

Patrick St-Georges: That hasn't been confirmed yet. The employer offered researchers the opportunity to relocate and continue their research elsewhere. We are still in discussions with the employer about assigning technicians to the researchers.

So far, there are no researchers pursuing their research elsewhere.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Lemire, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. St-Georges and Mr. Paquette, I would first like to thank you and congratulate the Public Service Alliance of Canada for taking a stand against these closures, as did the municipality of Lacombe and its county.

We recently learned that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, or CFIA, laboratory in Longueuil is closing. That laboratory is critical to the health of Quebeckers and Canadians because it has the expertise to analyze nutritional information and the presence of allergens in food. According to the Canadian government's website, it is "the only CFIA laboratory with expertise in nutritional analysis to verify compliance of nutrition information in accordance with Canada's food labelling regulations."

Can you tell us more? How do you think we'll make up for the loss of this laboratory? What are the short-term risks to the public?

Patrick St-Georges: We are still in discussions with CFIA about closing the Longueuil laboratory, which analyzes food allergens and marine biotoxins, among other things. CFIA intends to move that analysis to some of its other laboratories, but it has confirmed that some analysis will have to be done externally and, as such, will have to be outsourced.

Sébastien Lemire: You say that this will be done elsewhere, but the agency's centres in the northeast and in British Columbia don't conduct specialized testing. Very specific examples come to mind, such as the analysis of shellfish for human consumption. So the impact is very specific. The analysis may be lost. How will the transition be managed?

You represent a union. According to the information I received, employees were given the news at a Teams meeting. Is that true?

Patrick St-Georges: It's not just about the work that workers and technicians do. It's also about the equipment they need to perform the analysis. It's very expensive equipment. The building in Longueuil is leased by Health Canada. So it's not a matter of saving money by closing a building, because the building will still be occupied by Health Canada.

As to where the analysis will be done, we don't have a precise answer from the agency yet. It's full-time work. The other analytic labs are already working full-time. Where will the analysis be done? We don't know yet.

Sébastien Lemire: Why do you think the government decided to make cuts where it's most essential, in research centres and experimental farms?

To what extent do you think Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada could have reduced its costs elsewhere? In addition, from what you told us, the building that the department wanted to close because it was obsolete was just renovated, and they're still investing in it at great expense.

Patrick St-Georges: That's a good question.

[*English*]

We feel that agriculture shouldn't have been exposed to severe cuts. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, since 2012, has reduced its workforce by 14%. It has not grown and shouldn't be subject to these cuts, because it doesn't have any fat to trim.

We think the closure of the eight research centres and sub-centres is an excessive measure and will have a significant impact on Canada. The context of future innovation and growth potentials are not realized. We haven't had time to absorb. We're still trying to process everything.

The research is not done in silos. It's collaborative. Lacombe, Nappan and Quebec do forage and beef research together. It's collaborative work. You're affecting all three, but if you affect one, it has an impact on the others. Here, you're looking at closing all three. What does that mean?

● (1245)

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: You've already talked about the impact of cutbacks at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada for the cattle industry. Can you tell us more about the impact that previous cuts have had on industries?

[*English*]

Patrick St-Georges: I just mentioned the three research centres: Nappan, Lacombe and Quebec at Sainte-Foy. Among other science and innovation work, they do research on forages and beef. It calls into question where that science is going to be done. This is long-term research. Where is it going to be done in Canada? Where will the long-term research work be done?

We don't believe that it could be done by the private sector. The private sector is always looking for short-term research and short-term gain. As mentioned, this long-term research brings monies back into Canada. It is profitable, but long-term research is done by the federal government. That is why we need to have this research continue.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: I can tell you that, near my region, the Kapuskasing research centre closed in 2015, and the impact was felt for about ten years in northeastern Ontario and Abitibi-Témiscamingue. The emergence of the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue and the research institute could provide a solution. The fact remains that, for about ten years, data and expertise were lost, because there's no more linkage to that data today. It's a huge loss.

Please—keep up your fight.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we'll go to the Conservatives for five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Barlow.

John Barlow: Thank you very much, Chair.

Mr. Paquette and Mr. St-Georges, thank you very much. I want to ask you a question.

The government's argument is that to maintain the facilities was too costly. You mentioned that at the Quebec facility, an ongoing renovation had to be halted. Lacombe just had a massive investment for a level two biomeat lab, the only one in Canada. The Scott research centre, also scheduled to close, had a significant investment to build a new chemical storage, chemical mixing and grinding facility.

Does this hold water for you? They are now saying that these buildings were too difficult to maintain, while at the same time, in the last couple of years, they've invested tens of millions of dollars to upgrade these facilities. Does this make sense?

Patrick St-Georges: With a lot of these research centres, we're talking about 50 or 100-plus years that they've been there. Cyclic maintenance needs to be done, and it has been happening. In fact, when we heard about the closures at several of our centres, there were already significant investments being made in improvements at those research centres.

It's important to note that it's not just about the buildings, but also about the land and the soil types. It's about the climate. Canada is huge. It's diverse. We can't do all of this agriculture research in one, two or even 10 sites. Closing eight sites and subsites is very significant.

It was said that we can't do the research required for a northern, humid climate in a southern, dry region. It doesn't work. You can't compare the crops or forages grown in those areas to those grown in other areas. That's why we need to do the research across—

John Barlow: Thank you.

If you have a comment, please make it quickly.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Paquette: What I wanted to add is that the investment in the Quebec City research centre has already been made. The expense has been incurred. The money has just been spent and now the centre is being shut down. Economically, it makes no sense.

[*English*]

John Barlow: Yes, that's my point. If you had any long-term vision of this and you thought these facilities were too costly to maintain, why would you have invested all of that money over the last couple of years to now shutter them? It doesn't make any sense.

Ms. Hibbs, did you say you are not allowed to communicate with the staff, researchers and scientists at the Lacombe facility? Is that correct?

Thalia Hibbs: We have tried to reach out to representatives at the facility, and we are being told that we are not able to discuss this with them.

John Barlow: I find it interesting that my Liberal colleagues are asking what opportunities are there for you to collaborate with the research centre, the universities and the private sector. To me, that should have happened before, to see if this was even a possibility before closing these research centres.

How do you find those potential new partnerships if you can't even talk to the staff at the Lacombe research centre now? How is it even possible to find those alternatives?

● (1250)

Thalia Hibbs: It makes it very difficult. We need a plan going forward, and if I can't talk to some of the main actors, it significantly hampers that. We don't know what we don't know if we don't have those conversations; we need to know who needs to be at the table to have them.

We are fully committed to being involved in those communications. I'm sure the provinces are interested; I know industry leaders and local farmers are interested, for sure. We have all the parties, but we don't know what problem they identified as being an issue, so how do we address that?

Those communications and collaborations are super important, and we're being hamstrung. We don't have the ability to do those at this time.

John Barlow: We've already heard from the university deans that they simply do not have the resources to take this research on, which would have been an easy question for the government to ask the universities before it did these closures.

Mr. Ireland talked about the malting company and the seeding company.

Ms. Hibbs, could you talk about the economic impact that the closure of the research centre will have on Lacombe and the subsidiary businesses? What will happen in Lacombe and the surrounding communities?

Thalia Hibbs: As a major employer, it means that a significant workforce will be affected, whether that means they will now leave town or whatever the case may be. It's a small market, so this has a considerable impact, which means that people are shopping less and putting houses up for sale.

The facility itself spends a lot of money locally. It's a big facility and requires a lot of supplies, and that's going to affect a lot of small businesses and their bottom line. It's going to make it a lot more difficult for them to potentially even survive.

As a community, we were really trying to diversify and strengthen our economic development, and then this sudden blow out of nowhere happened. We're reeling from it, and we don't even know yet what the repercussions will be because it's so soon. With no heads-up, what are we even going to do to respond to that?

John Barlow: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

You're up for five minutes, Mr. Connors.

Paul Connors: Thank you.

Mayor Hibbs, you've mentioned a few times that you're looking for a pause. Can you give us a bit more detail on exactly what you're doing? I know that it's a work in progress and you haven't had a lot of time to put your plan together. Have you considered any amount of time? What are you looking for? What would you like to see the government do?

Thalia Hibbs: I've already asked for 12 to 18 months to do at least a study on what's being done there and what we're potentially losing. We're essentially asking if this is really a decision the government wants to proceed with.

In the meantime, we also need to start thinking about what plan B is, and I don't even know what that looks like. For our municipality, I am not prepared to lead that. I don't think that's a fair expectation, but I want to be involved. Lacombe County and I have been very strong in helping to get organized and talking to the various stakeholders involved in this. There are all kinds of options. We've brainstormed all kinds of possible collaborations involving post-secondary.

There is a plan B, but we need a chance to action it before the federal government shuts this down. I don't know exactly what that pause looks like. This is a little outside of my wheelhouse, frankly, but it's critical that collectively we need to figure this out.

Paul Connors: I agree.

Would this be something you could present in the next little while so we could include it into our report? Could it be done with exactly what you are looking for?

Thalia Hibbs: Yes, I can provide a follow-up.

Paul Connors: I want to go back to the idea of not being able to talk to staff or anyone at the centre.

As mayor, have you followed up with anyone with an official letter asking to speak to representatives at the centre?

Thalia Hibbs: I have not submitted a formal letter, but any attempts to communicate with staff at that site have been rebuffed—either politely declined or not returned.

Paul Connors: Okay.

Mr. Ireland, you mentioned that the closure could mean a significant reduction in production. Can you elaborate on that a bit for me?

● (1255)

John Ireland: Certainly.

We are a retailer, in essence. We produce the product the end-user wants, whether it be a feedlot, a malting company or an export-oriented wheat production that goes to China or Japan. As the market develops, as the place we sell to changes, we need to have the means possible to change our part of the production cycle to reflect that. That comes from research, and by and large, it would be most efficiently and significantly done at the local level.

Paul Connors: Thank you.

I think it was you, Mr. Paquette, who said in your opening remarks that there could be an impact on training in the agricultural industry or sector. Was I correct in hearing that? Can you elaborate on that?

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Paquette: According to reports from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, farming in Canada has been optimized over the past few decades. In other words, we've been able to do more with the same amount of land. Right now, things are going well, but if this research is halted, we will see a sharp decline.

The Quebec research centre has research projects focused on optimizing genetic strains. In some cases, they took 15 years to develop. If we close the centre, it's not something we can simply shelve and take out again in two years. That data will be lost. We'll have to start all over again when we finally realize that we shouldn't have done away with that resource.

If the centre is closed, some data will be lost. Even if a university takes up the projects, it won't be able to take them all up. Losses will occur during the transfer. Ultimately, that will be money down the drain.

Let's not forget the farmers who rely on this research. For them, the loss will be felt the very next day. They will no longer have the new genetic strains—

[*English*]

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

We'll go to the Bloc Québécois for two and half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Paquette and Mr. St-Georges, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's workforce decreased by 14% between 2012 and 2025. Can you tell us about the pressure this workforce reduction has placed on employees, and its impact on Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's ability to fulfill its mandates across its various services?

[*English*]

Patrick St-Georges: As I said before, I won't say Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada has barely recovered since 2012, but the cuts went deep in 2012.

You mentioned earlier the Kapuskasing closure. Kapuskasing had a herd of beef. Lacombe and Nappan have herds of beef. We're looking at losing those herds as well. These aren't your typical herds of beef. These are research animals that a lot of time, investment and breeding have gone into.

Cutting the eight research centres and sub-centres will have a significant impact on the ability to conduct research across the country. As I said, Canada is a vast country with very diverse climate, soil and environmental conditions. These research centres were established 50, 100 and more years ago. There's a lot of heritage that's on the line to be lost. It will not be possible to recover the very long-term research studies.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Cuts are being made to data, science and research. It feels like this whole saga is hurting my democracy.

What's more, like everyone else, we heard about the letters sent by deputy ministers to employees to prevent them from talking to their own MPs or blowing the whistle on problems.

Are we seeing this elsewhere, in other departments? How does the union address such issues, when people are muzzled in communities where everyone knows each other?

● (1300)

Patrick St-Georges: Of course, public servants always have to be careful when they speak to the media. But talking to the mayor of a city is another matter.

From what we've heard, it wasn't only in Lacombe that our members received emails telling them not to talk to anyone and not to let anyone enter the research centre for visits. They're not allowed to do so. Certain statements suggested some backtracking on the message, but those were not communicated in writing. The written word is what counts.

That's not right.

Sébastien Lemire: It's toxic.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. That concludes our meeting.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here. Thank you for your testimony.

Thank you for travelling so far to be here, Your Worship.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.