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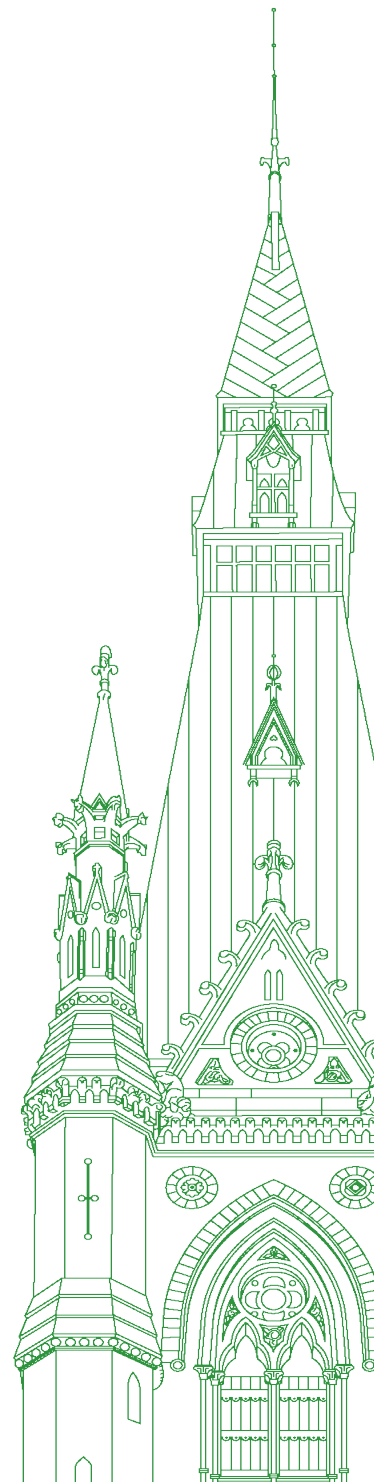
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Chair: Michael Coteau



Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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• (1540)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow (Foothills, CPC)): I would like to bring this meeting to order.

Before we get going, I will thank Mr. McWilliams very much for coming. I mentioned to a couple of my colleagues that Mr. McWilliams is blind. He has his wife, Cheryl, here helping him. We may have to give him a little extra time when he's answering questions.

When you are asking him a question, please make sure that you articulate quite clearly that you are asking Mr. McWilliams, so he knows he is the one who's going to be on the hot seat.

Welcome to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. We have some members here in person, and we have Ms. Verwey on Zoom as well.

To our witnesses, please wait until I recognize you by name or you are asked a question directly by a member before speaking.

Ms. Verwey, as you know, as you have been here before, please have your microphone on mute unless you've been asked a question or are speaking.

To our witnesses, you have an earpiece for interpretation, and you can listen to the proceedings in English or French. If you're having an issue with your earpiece or with the interpretation, please get our attention, and we will fix it to make sure that you can participate fully. I'll remind you that all comments are to go through the chair.

I will now introduce our witnesses for this first panel as we are completing our study on food security in the face of global instability.

Today, as individuals, as I mentioned, we have Mr. Wyatt McWilliams and his wife, Cheryl McWilliams, farmers and co-owners of Navandale Farm. From the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, we have in person Brodie Berrigan, senior director of government relations, and with him is Jill Verwey, vice-president.

Brodie, it's good to see you again.

Jill, it's good to see you again as well.

Finally, from Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre, we have Joseph Murdoch-Flowers, the executive director.

Thank you very much for being with us.

You will each have five minutes for your opening comments. I will give you a wave if you're getting close to the end of your time.

Cheryl, I hear you're just going to elbow Wyatt when he's getting close.

I will give you a bit of time if needed, but please try to stick to your five minutes. Then we will go to our members of the committee, who will then ask questions.

We'll start with you, Mr. Murdoch-Flowers, for your opening introduction. You have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers (Executive Director, Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre): Thank you.

Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre is a food hub in Iqaluit. We are affiliated with a national food organization called Right To Food. Our centre serves the community with multiple holistic programs that provide food access, food skills and advocacy in response to local needs.

I wish to speak to you today about three topics: first, our community meal demand; second, our research partnership on the relationship between food insecurity and income supports; and third, our vision for food sovereignty in Inuit Nunangat, and Nunavut in particular.

First is the community meal demand. We are most well known in our community for our daily meal program. We cook and serve between 300 and 700 meals per day, five days a week. We have observed steady increases in the number of meals that we are serving every day. We have seen our daily meal count increase from 58,000 meals in 2022 to almost 91,000 meals last year. This year, we are on track to surpass that and to surpass 100,000 meals this year alone.

I am very proud of the team at Qajuqturvik, who continue to meet the staggering demand for free, accessible, nutritious, quality food. We serve homemade meals in a comfortable setting, where people joyfully eat and build community together. We believe that the increase in demand for meals speaks to the increasing economic challenges that people face in our community.

● (1545)

[Translation]

Second, we have a research partnership with Sappho Gilbert, a researcher at Harvard University. She's looking at the relationship between economic supports such as the Inuit child first initiative and the demand for our daily meal program. We see the demand for our daily meal program as an indication of food insecurity. In other words, if people are food insecure, they are more likely to join our daily meal program. Our research shows that when funds get deposited in bank accounts, food movement in the city follows shortly. This causes a temporary pause for the demand for our daily meal program.

[English]

Our research with Dr. Sappho Gilbert supports the proposition that increasing people's income leads to decreasing food insecurity. We offer a number of other food access programs, such as a produce box, a free weekly country food offering to elders, an evening Inuit women's program, and a range of special events, always involving food.

[Translation]

We believe food sovereignty in Nunavut and Inuit Nunangat must extend beyond emergency food access to support a truly northern food economy. That does not mean we are going to open greenhouses or turn containers into heated gardens.

I would now like to describe our vision for food sovereignty in Inuit Nunangat.

[English]

It's a hunting economy that supports Inuit food systems. Hunters and fishers have knowledge and discipline and skills that should be valued in the same way that farming is valued. Canada does not yet have a coherent harvest-to-table framework for Inuit food systems across Inuit Nunangat.

Inuit already harvest substantial amounts of local food, but there are real barriers to getting that food beyond the individual harvester and into the wider community food system. Depending on the region, a hunter or fisher may face restrictions on selling their harvest. There may be no appropriate local processing or inspection facility. A restaurant, a retailer, a school, a hospital or an elders facility may face different rules about purchasing or serving it. Moving food between provinces and territories can trigger an additional federal regulatory system.

These barriers are different across the Inuvialuit settlement region, Nunavut, Nunavik and Nunatsiavut, because Inuit Nunangat crosses territorial, provincial and federal jurisdictions.

I would encourage the committee to examine the entire Inuit harvest-to-table pathway—from harvesting, processing and inspection through storage, transportation, sale and institutional procurement—and identify where legislation, regulations and infrastructure are preventing Inuit-harvested food from reaching Inuit consumers.

Canada should work with Inuit to create a coherent Inuit Nunangat harvest-to-table framework rather than expecting four regions to navigate separate systems on their own.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to the Canadian Federation of Agriculture.

Mr. Berrigan, I don't know if it will be you or Ms. Verwey.

Brodie Berrigan (Senior Director, Government Relations and Farm Policy, Canadian Federation of Agriculture): It will be Ms. Verwey.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Okay.

Go ahead, Ms. Verwey.

Jill Verwey (Vice-President, Canadian Federation of Agriculture): Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to appear on behalf of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. The CFA is Canada's largest general farm organization, representing 190,000 farmers and farm families across the country.

My name is Jill Verwey. I am first vice-president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and a fourth-generation farmer, based in Manitoba.

Canada has tremendous agricultural potential. Our agricultural and agriculture food system contributes nearly \$150 billion to GDP and supports approximately 2.3 million jobs. We welcome the government's national food security strategy and the recently proposed productivity mega deduction. Together, these measures reinforce the importance of productivity and the investment in a resilient food system.

From the perspective of Canadian producers, I want to leave you, the committee, with three points.

First, food security starts with economically viable farms and a policy risk management framework that gives producers the confidence to invest in growth, innovation and long-term resilience. Global instability reaches the farm gate through trade, supply chain disruptions, volatile input markets, uncertainty of access to key inputs, and changing export market conditions. When farm businesses are under sustained financial pressure, it becomes harder to absorb disruptions, manage risk and make the investment needed to strengthen productivity and competitiveness. This matters because food security is not only about how much Canada can produce today. It is also about whether producers have the capacity and confidence to invest for the next decade.

Access to working capital is an important part of this resilience. This is why CFA recommends permanently setting the interest-free portion of the advance payments program at \$350,000. While temporary increases in place for 2026 are helpful, producers need longer-term predictability rather than relying on year-to-year changes. At the same time, governments should maintain and enhance funding under the next policy framework to ensure that producers have access to business risk management tools, innovation programs and strategic investments needed to strengthen resilience, improve our productivity and support Canada's long-term food security.

Second, Canada must position itself as a global leader in agricultural innovation. Canada has the opportunity to position agriculture as a leader in the adoption of data-driven innovation and artificial intelligence. The Government of Canada's AI strategy, combined with measures such as the proposed productivity mega deduction, can accelerate investment in precision agriculture, digital technologies and other productivity-enhancing tools.

However, innovation requires more than favourable tax treatment. Producers and agri-food businesses need a supportive policy and program environment that provides confidence to invest in new technologies and to scale their innovations. This includes clear and trusted data governance frameworks and sovereign AI infrastructure that protect producers' interests, support interoperability and enable secure and trusted use of agricultural data. For this to happen, the Government of Canada should work in partnership with the agriculture and agri-food sector to identify and fund priority agricultural incentives that enhance the on-farm utility of AI technologies as part of the national artificial intelligence strategy.

Third, food security must be treated as a whole-of-government economic priority. Agricultural competitiveness is influenced by far more than just ag programming. Decisions related to taxation, transportation, infrastructure, immigration, trade, regulation, competition and innovation all shape the conditions under which farmers invest and produce.

For that reason, CFA has recommended establishing a small, senior-level national food security advisory council. This would bring together producers, private sector leaders, financial institutions and key federal departments to provide a practical business and competitive lens to the implementation of the national food security strategy. This should not be another broad consultation body. This should be a working forum that identifies barriers to investment, tests policies against commercial realities and helps ensure that public investments translate into measurable improvements in productivity, processing capacity, resilience and growth.

• (1550)

I would like to close by emphasizing that strengthening domestic food security should not mean turning away from international trade. Canadian farmers depend on both strong domestic opportunities and access to international trade.

A resilient food system is one with economically viable farms, sufficient product and processing capacity here at home, diversified markets, and the ability to absorb shock and continue to supply Canadians and customers across the world.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you, Ms. Verwey. We appreciate that.

Now it's time to go Mr. McWilliams for five minutes, please.

Wyatt McWilliams (Farmer, Co-owner, Navandale Farm, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. McWilliams is my dad. I'm Wyatt McWilliams and my wife is Cheryl. It's an honour to be asked to join you today. I was hesitant when I was asked, because I lose my train of thought, so you'll have to bear with me.

The bottom line is that we're here on behalf of our family. We go back to the 1800s, when the first of our clan came over.

On the same note, we've had a lot of trials and tribulations on the farm. My grandfather died when he was 59, from a heart attack. My father had just purchased the farm next door, so my uncle took over that farm. In the early seventies, my other uncle purchased what just happened to be the neighbouring farm across the road, so we're all kind of in the same area. In 1979, I graduated from Kemptville College in agriculture, and I was lucky enough to get the farm a mile down the road, so there are four family farms all in the same area.

We have been impacted hugely by the Alto high-speed train. It's not just because we're in the corridor. We're getting letters to do soil testing on our property and whatnot, but I also have a brother-in-law just east of us who has gotten the same letters, as have a lot of friends and fellow farmers.

There are about 500 farmers in eastern Ontario who could be affected by this train, and we don't even know how many will be affected in the Ottawa to Toronto corridor, because we don't know the exact corridor yet. We don't know if it's going to be in our backyard or a mile or two away from us, but it's going to affect everybody. We're all taxpayers.

I had a farm accident back in 1980. I was driving in the sun, delivering corn silage for my uncle, and they almost lost me that night. I was in a coma. The bottom line is that, thanks to our Canadian health care, I'm here today.

We're dealing with higher traffic. We're only half an hour from Ottawa, and the traffic is just getting worse. It's steady during the day, but then we have a bit of a rush hour. My daughter pulled up behind a milk truck that had been sitting there for a little while, waiting to turn onto the next concession from where we are, and she had to wait about 15 minutes for the milk truck to finally get out.

Whether it's in trucks during harvest time, with over 40 tonnes of wheat, corn and soybeans to transport, or whether it's just getting over to another farm we have towards Cumberland, we have to go on that one main road. Now, if we have this high-speed train, we're going to have the corridor where there will only be no-ground crossing, so it will all be overpasses. Then we'll have to go a distance to cross over, let alone all of us having to go on these main roads that are already crazy busy.

There was an accident this summer. A gentleman on Mitch Owens Road, a young lad, got hit by a transport. He was lucky to not end up.... Anyway, the bottom line is that it's an accident waiting to happen. A lot of people don't know what slow-moving vehicle signs mean anymore.

Now, we've dealt with a lot of trials and tribulations, whether it was an ice storm, the BSE crisis or the drought they had in the west. We tried to help there as much as we could, because we had had a great year here. Then there were the floods.

• (1555)

The derecho is a thing that hit all of our community. It affected not only our four farms, but we always help each other out.

Again, I have another couple of seconds. Given that it's agriculture awareness time and Thanksgiving time, I just want to say that, if you ate today, thank a farmer. I love farmers because I love food, and Cheryl gives me a kick every time I get into agriculture, but it serves you every day.

There are a couple of sayings that have come up since this Alto has come around: No farmers, no food. Our land's not for sale. Canada's strong, and we need your support to be our voice on agriculture.

Thank you.

• (1600)

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much Mr. McWilliams. Wyatt. I will take my lead from you.

Now I will go to the members of the committee to ask some questions. We will start with the Conservatives.

Mr. Epp, you have six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for your appearance today.

Let me begin, Mr. McWilliams, by saying thank you for Hay West and for your work in your community on food aid. It's an example to all of us.

You mentioned a number of stresses that your farm has gone through, and now there's Alto. Can you describe the level of stress and the uncertainty with respect to the consultation process or the lack of consultation process that's occurring? You're a multi-generational farm. How are you planning for the future? You've been here since the 1800s. Your daughters are involved. Where do you go from here?

Wyatt McWilliams: Again, there hasn't been any consultation. There was one meeting that was down in Vankleek Hill that we heard about after the fact. On the same note, there has been very little communications on this.

There is a lot of propaganda saying that farmers are going to maybe get paid three times the value of their property and whatnot, but you cannot put a price on the infrastructure damage that will happen to rural communities, whether it's a school bus, a snowplow or our first responders like fire and police. Our fire station is only a mile and a half from us right now, and our road will probably be dead-ended because of this other road a mile away that is quite a busy road. Again, it's the infrastructure.

Dave Epp: In your testimony, sir, you also referenced taxpayers. Why did you raise the point of taxpayers?

Wyatt McWilliams: Again, it's billions of dollars. They started out at \$60 to \$90 billion. Now I hear it's like \$110 billion.

I know that the agriculture committee has been looking at how much Agriculture Canada was cut back this year. I think it was \$1 billion from research centres and our food inspection branches.

Again, we need support in agriculture to continue with food sustainability. Concerning processing plants, we have to wait six months to nearly a year to get.... Whether it's our cattle or.... We keep a few pigs and turkeys for the freezer.

Again, it's just all stuff that needs to be supported by Agriculture.

Dave Epp: Thank you, sir. Thank you to your family for your service to agriculture.

To the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, you represent farmers across the country. There's not only Alto; there are other infrastructure projects. What is the process that you would like to see? Have you seen a business case for Alto? Should, as was alluded to in previous testimony, the value of the potential loss of farmland and all the effects of that be taken into account, into a cost-benefit analysis, into a business case, when reviewing national infrastructure projects?

Jill Verwey: I'll answer this, and maybe Brodie can add to it.

From the Canadian Federation's standpoint, we are 100% standing behind the preservation of agricultural land for the production of food here in Canada and mandatory agriculture impact assessments on the farmland. When you're dealing with major federal infrastructure like this project or any other projects that we're looking at, it needs to be a real necessity. Further to that, I think it has to be acted upon quickly, early in the process and not at the time when you're closer to, in the end, expropriation of farmland. It has to be timely, and it has to be done speedily at the beginning to ensure that we are preserving farmlands and that we're looking at all of the impacts that would affect producers.

• (1605)

Brodie Berrigan: Maybe I'll just add that what Wyatt mentioned is a comment that we are hearing across the country. It's not specific to Ontario and Quebec, although I think what's happening with the Alto rail project is of serious concern to our membership.

In British Columbia, there is pressure on the agricultural land reserve. We hear about that in various projects across Ontario, such as Rouge Park, and the acquisition of land for new radar stations. Pressure on agricultural farmland across Canada is ramping up. It's significant. We have lost the equivalent of the territorial land mass of Nova Scotia in farmland in the last 20 years in this country.

The census of agriculture was launched just a few months ago. I will be very interested to see what comes out of that. Unfortunately, I highly suspect that there's going to be more bad news on that front.

Dave Epp: It could very well be that it would be in the national interest to build projects that remove farmland, but I'm hearing you say that this has to be evaluated in a business case. Have you seen that?

I'm told that six different options were examined for Alto. I haven't seen the business cases. Has the CFA reviewed the different options? Have you seen the impacts on farmland as they were examined in the different options for national infrastructure?

Brodie Berrigan: When it comes to consideration of major infrastructure projects, there is no systematic review across the Government of Canada of the impacts on agricultural land. It does not happen.

Dave Epp: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much, Mr. Epp.

We'll now go to the Liberals.

Mr. MacDonald, I believe you're up for six minutes, please.

Kent MacDonald (Cardigan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for appearing here today.

I'll start with Mr. McWilliams.

You'll be happy to hear that the federal government has invested many millions of dollars into agriculture in this year alone. Just last week, I think, or maybe two weeks ago, we announced a food secu-

rity strategy component, with \$1 billion for the food-link fund to support food hubs regionally and support processing regionally so that small grocers can be part of the food chain and compete with the five large grocery chains that control our groceries.

We know that food processing in Canada is very concentrated too. I was very interested to hear your comment that you can't find a place to get your products processed. That's a common theme in Atlantic Canada as well, where I come from. In particular, we have a small beef processor and we have some dairy processing in Atlantic Canada, but by and large, a lot of our commodities travel to Quebec or international markets unprocessed. That is where the Canadian government has identified the chance to increase our food sovereignty and increase our food security by taking measures to invest in regional processing and in regional food hubs for distribution.

This question could also apply to the Federation of Agriculture for a response: What do you see? Are there any more words of advice?

For these investments, we've analyzed what we think the challenges are. I'm open to a conversation.

Wyatt McWilliams: Again, we're just a small family farm that's looking at our next generations. My daughter and granddaughter do not want to pay for the infrastructure and the cost to our community for this train.

On the same note, it's just the.... Millions of dollars for investment are nothing compared to the damage this is going to do to our infrastructure across....

It's a rural-urban divide. It's not a Canadian building process. There's nobody in the rural community who is in favour of this.

Kent MacDonald: Would the federation perhaps like to give their opinion on the question I asked, please?

Jill Verwey: Brodie, do you want to comment additionally on that as it relates to the processing and food hubs?

Brodie Berrigan: Yes, thank you.

First of all, the food security strategy was a very welcome announcement from the agriculture sector's perspective. I think one of the signals it sent was a commitment to more long-term structural, productivity-enhancing, value-added production in Canada.

From our perspective, going forward, what we would like to see as part of the wholesale implementation of the food security strategy, including the food hub links and value-added processing investments, is the wraparound enabling conditions for success related to it. That includes creating the right regulatory modernization initiatives, a competitive tax environment, and the right labour conditions, so that a lot of these value-added manufacturers can continue to operate. They need enough labour, as well as a number of other enabling conditions for success, which is why we've recommended, among other things, the establishment of a national food security strategy advisory council.

This would sit not to study reports ad nauseam and then produce a bunch of recommendations that would sit on a shelf, but to be more of a task force with the right perspectives from the private sector, but also with the right people around the table from the Government of Canada—representatives from Finance Canada and other key departments—to ensure that that money is really landing where it needs to land and having the impact it needs to have.

• (1610)

Kent MacDonald: I agree 100% with what you're suggesting, because what's happening in Canada is that way too many of the products that we produce, the good-quality products, are being processed in other countries, most of them in the U.S. If we really want to control our food system and increase our exports to world markets, then we do have to take control of the processing industry, and that's where we're weak and we're failing.

I'm going to move on to Mr. Murdoch-Flowers.

I had the distinct pleasure of being in Iqaluit in late June. I think I met you at the time and toured your facility. I thoroughly enjoyed it and learned a lot, because I went there thinking we had to build greenhouses in the north, but that's not the answer for the north.

Expand on what you said in your opening statement on the strategy that's going to work for the north. I think all the committee members here will be interested in hearing that.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: Yes, it was a pleasure to welcome you and some of your colleagues to the food centre this summer.

The perspective that Qajurturvik brings is that food sovereignty, food security, in Nunavut will be different from what some of my colleagues on the panel here are talking about today. Essentially, though, the core of what we're saying is the same. It's that we want to have access to our own food and to have it done in a sustainable way.

What's relevant in Nunavut is that we have a hunting and fishing economy that is integral to Inuit culture and supports Inuit wellness in every single way imaginable, so if we're talking about true food sovereignty in Nunavut, it has to be focused on country food. That means the foods that we get from the land, sea and sky.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Mr. Murdoch-Flowers, I'm sorry, but it's well over time. I gave you an extra 30 seconds or so, but

hopefully you'll be able to expand on that in some of the other questions from our colleagues.

Kent MacDonald: Mr. Chair, could he table a report to us?

Would you be able to do that? Could you table your suggestions to us and send it in to the committee?

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I certainly can. Absolutely.

Kent MacDonald: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): We have Mr. Lemire for six minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

Mr. McWilliams, I know you don't want to be called mister, but, with all due respect, I will show you that courtesy, especially after your touching remarks. Farms are often a long-standing family legacy, and as the fourth generation to run the family farm, you are an example of this.

I would like to know how the uncertainty surrounding the Alto rail route impacts your family goals and why financial compensation simply cannot make up for a farm that would be potentially split in two.

What would you say to my Liberal colleagues across, particularly Mr. Daniel Gobeil who is also a farmer? As a former chair of the Producteurs de lait du Québec, I think he understands you.

[English]

Wyatt McWilliams: Thank you.

This time I'll try to answer the question. You'd swear I was in question period. Again, I'm sorry, guys.

I think the bottom line is that we have to look at the cost to the communities and the rural sector as regards this infrastructure damage. Whether it's the 417, the 416, the 401 or something to that effect going through the communities, it does affect the rural economy big time because of your having to travel a long distance to get across to the land you might have on the other side. On the same note, the bottom line is that it's an accident waiting to happen with the amount of traffic on our roads now. The machinery has gotten bigger.

I've been there. I've been in the hospital. I realize that I was lucky enough to listen to Terry Fox and what he was going through, and that was the Canadian spirit at the time. For a week, I was sitting up in that hospital, thinking that maybe I should be doing something other than farming. On the same note, I don't want to see any of our family in the same position.

● (1615)

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. McWilliams.

You know, it's called a question period, not a question and answer period. That said, I can assure you we rarely get a detailed answer such as yours in question period.

There are often concerns about the haste with which Alto works. Under Bill C-15, Alto can proceed with land acquisition even before environmental impact studies are conducted, particularly regarding the impact on agricultural land.

What are your thoughts on that, especially since we know Alto is currently sending letters to property owners requesting access to their properties so it can run soil tests?

Has your farm been contacted? Why do you think so many property owners are refusing to give Alto's team access to their property?

[English]

Wyatt McWilliams: Four of my cousins have received their letters, as well as my brother-in-law and a lot of my fellow friends and farmers.

The bottom line is that if the business case showed that this was going to be a benefit to the country, we could see a future for the high-speed train. However, we already have a train system a couple of miles to the south of us. This high-speed would be only a mile from us.

On the same note, it's not just because it's in our backyard. It shouldn't be in anybody's backyard. The Via Rail system that goes right across Canada could be supported more, and it's already running at half capacity. It could be done so much better. It could be subsidized for families and seniors. It would help tourism hugely if we just supported the system we already have.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Your farmland depends on an often complex underground drainage system that we, Quebecers and Canadians, have financed through various public programs.

Are you concerned about the impact of Alto's work on these delicate systems? Do you think that could impact your productivity?

[English]

Wyatt McWilliams: Yes. One of the items in my train of thought that I forgot to mention earlier is that it's not only the above-ground damage with this train system. We're in Canada. We have to keep these rails clear in the wintertime. The de-icer, or whatever it is, will be going into the water systems that our cattle and horses drink out of. We really don't know what kind of damage

it will do to our tile drainage and ditching. We have to have drainage. This was one of the wettest summers we've ever had.

On the same note, the climate is changing, and we can't afford not to be a step ahead instead of a step behind.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you, Mr. Lemire.

Now we'll go to Mr. Bonk for five minutes, please.

Steven Bonk (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): I'd like to start with the McWilliams.

I'd like to thank both of you.

For those who don't know, they spearheaded a campaign in 2002, called Hay West. They sent hay to drought-stricken farmers in western Canada. You have to keep in mind that this was right after BSE.

I want to let you know that you will never, ever have to buy a beer if you come to western Canada.

I'd like to ask you a simple question when it comes to Alto rail. I'm the fifth generation on our place in Saskatchewan. Our place was homesteaded in 1895.

Now, I can imagine just the emotional ties that those farmers have to their land. I can't imagine getting these letters that you've had. Do you think this Alto rail issue deserves its own stand-alone study at the agriculture committee?

● (1620)

Wyatt McWilliams: Yes, and it should have been studied a lot more before we started getting these letters. A lot of us haven't been sleeping very well at night because of the worry about our future.

Again, it's not a Canadian-building project. It's a Canadian-dividing project, and I wish I could relate the conversations around the restaurant with my fellow farmers. They're at their wits' end on what's going to go on with this darn train that is not needed.

Steven Bonk: I can't emphasize enough to those who aren't involved in agriculture how deep this runs with farmers: the land and the connection to the land.

Maybe I'll move quickly to Mr. Berrigan.

Could you comment on what you're hearing from your producers when it comes to the letters that have been sent out about the Alto rail situation? What are their main concerns and how is your organization addressing them?

Brodie Berrigan: Thank you for the question.

As noted earlier, I think there is a lot of anxiety out there among farmers about this particular project, but also about the loss of productive agricultural land across the country.

I think we also need to think big picture about this. We're going to see explosive international population growth and an incredible demand for more food and agriculture products around the world. Canada is very well positioned to meet that demand. We have a comparative advantage over many countries. It is a driver and an engine of economic growth in this country. We cannot take for granted that natural endowment, that farmland that we have.

It is very personal, as we've just heard. We're hearing that from our members as well, but it's also about our economy, and it's about our future. We need to be taking steps by incorporating mandatory agricultural impact assessments on all major federal infrastructure initiatives going forward.

Steven Bonk: Would it be the position of your organization to do a stand-alone study in the agriculture committee on the Alto project?

Brodie Berrigan: I think what we would like to do is have a study and look more concertedly at the loss of agricultural farmland in Canada and at what the impacts of some of the pressures are, including from major infrastructure projects like, for example, the AI-rail project.

Steven Bonk: Now I'd like to ask Ms. Verwey some questions regarding the Mercosur trade deal.

We're talking about food stability and security in Canada, yet we've seen what happened in the States when President Donald Trump made a tweet, I guess, or a post, saying that he was going to import 300,000 metric tons of beef from South America and he was going to drop the price of beef by 25% at the grocery stores. It fell by 2%, yet cattle prices dropped by \$200 to \$600 per head.

Now we have the Liberal government trying to push us towards a Mercosur deal as well, and there are huge concerns that we're hearing from across Canada from cattle producers. I'm just wondering if your organization has heard the same things.

Jill Verwey: Thank you for the question.

Yes, we have been hearing those concerns.

I think that Canada is well positioned to look at the trade deals that we currently have across the world and certainly at the options to expand those, but I think it has to be looked at very closely as to what the benefits are or what some of the inherent risks are from not getting any benefit in those trade agreements.

Again, I think that at the end of the day, we look at our trading relationship in the continent of North America and the integrated system that we do have, particularly in the beef and pork industries and how that works seamlessly, and we really need to encourage the continuity of that, as well as looking at other opportunities across the world.

• (1625)

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much, Ms. Verwey.

Thank you, Mr. Bonk.

Now we'll go to Mr. Casey for five minutes.

Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thanks to our witnesses for being here.

I'd like to bring Mr. Murdoch-Flowers into the conversation.

You mentioned in your opening statement the obvious link between income and food insecurity. I expect that your career path included time in the legal aid justice system. What you're doing now would give you a frontline perspective on both.

I'd be interested in your thoughts, if you're prepared to give them, on an idea that has been around for many years, which is a basic income guarantee, and where it would fit in terms of the challenges you see on a day-to-day basis.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I don't really care what we call it, but we know that when people get more money, they're going to end up buying food as one of the base needs of life, under Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We know that when people receive money, they spend it on food.

We do advocacy around poverty reduction and poverty alleviation. From Qajuqturvik's perspective, poverty alleviation in the Nunavut context must work on giving those income supports that we see, through our research with Dr. Gilbert, are effective. We also look to the long-term sustainability of that.

When I'm talking about building up a truly Inuit food economy, that means placing hunters and fishers, as food producers in the Nunavut context, on the same plane as farmers in the south. We know that if we have the infrastructure and the resources to support the development of an Inuit food economy, then base incomes will increase for Inuit hunters and fishers. The result will be the greater circulation of culturally relevant Inuit foods within Inuit communities.

Sean Casey: If I understand it correctly, your collaboration with Harvard is related. Can you expand on that collaboration?

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: Qajuqturvik does a lot of work around country food. Country food is caribou, Arctic char, seal, walrus and whales. We procure that food from hunters and fishers around the territory, bring it into the food centre and make it available in a diversity of ways, such as with sliding-scale price models or by simply giving it away. We also integrate that into food skills programming. These are some of the ways we bring country food into our work.

Sean Casey: How can the Government of Canada support that?

We heard a lot about country food from a witness who was here just a couple of days ago. Clearly, it's a focus for the north. I would appreciate your advice on how the government can support that.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: When we look at the development of food hubs, these are going to look different in the north. Food hubs must focus on the truly local food economy of the north. That is going to focus on country food processing and the infrastructure we need to hunt, package, transform and distribute country food within the territory. It would look at how that would function across the four jurisdictions of Inuit Nunangat. There are five if we talk about southern Canada, because there are significant numbers of Inuit in southern Canada as well.

Inuit food sharing across territories and provinces, and north and south, would be supported significantly by that infrastructure for processing, packaging and distribution.

Sean Casey: Thank you.

I'll turn to Ms. Verwey.

You're advocating an advisory council with respect to how the national food strategy is landing. Is there a mechanism for that now, that has some deficiencies, or would this be another group altogether with a different focus? I'm trying to get a sense of how it would fit in the current plan.

• (1630)

Jill Verwey: Brodie, could you expand on that?

I understand that it would be a separate body, but I think it would certainly look at how producers would fit into the realm, as well as the rest of the agri-processing sectors.

Brodie Berrigan: I will say very quickly that there is a precedent for these types of models. They've been, from our perspective, very process-heavy. They take a lot of time. We are not looking for something like that.

This would be nimble and time-limited, with no big report or recommendations coming out the right end. There would be the right people around the table, including private sector and farm representative perspectives, to perform and provide private sector advice and business case advice on the implementation of the food security strategy. It would not be just the food security strategy, but also the AI strategy and other national federal frameworks that will benefit from that perspective from industry.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much.

Now, for our final round of questions, we have Monsieur Lemire for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Murdoch-Flowers, first of all, I found your remarks very interesting.

Through my office, I began a study on how Abitibi-Témiscamingue can create links and synergies, especially with northern Quebec. We are working with the Forest Lavoie consulting firm, in co-operation with Agropole Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

We went to Chisasibi this summer to see what it's really like in an indigenous community. Ideally, links would also be made with Quebec Inuits and perhaps Nunavut Inuits, obviously, as well as

with communities like Radisson, and with Hydro-Québec, among others. The idea is to see how the regions can create synergy.

Something that struck me there was the price of a piece of meat: The sticker said \$31. However, we could see there was another sticker underneath that showed a price of \$17. That says a lot about the price of things—in this case, meat—which is essentially 40% higher.

There is one road in Chisasibi, so the community does not necessarily get all the benefits of nutrition north Canada. I would like to hear your thoughts on how we can develop partnerships between indigenous and non-indigenous, especially between the north and the south, to maintain or bring affordability and originality to the development of northern products while supporting local initiatives.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I think answers will vary slightly depending on whether it's just within Quebec or whether it's inter-provincial or interterritorial. I imagine that means partnerships within Quebec are much easier to establish.

You have to navigate all the systems. There are no CFIA-approved slaughterhouses in Iqaluit. I believe there is one in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut. It is very difficult for us to send products from Nunavut to other parts of Quebec.

Therefore, it would be a good idea to invest in infrastructure for adequate production and distribution across the country. I think that's the beginning of an answer to your question.

Sébastien Lemire: That's perfect.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much, Mr. Lemire.

[English]

Thank you, as well, to Mr. Murdoch-Flowers.

Thank you very much to our witnesses.

That will conclude this panel.

As an Albertan, Mr. McWilliams, I would be remiss not to thank you as well. Certainly, many of my friends lost their ranches to BSE, and Hay West was a huge relief. It's not often we have an Order of Canada recipient with us. I want to thank you for everything your family has done as well, and certainly for your time here.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Colleagues, we have a number of witnesses in the next panel, so I'm going to suspend briefly. Please don't wander away too far. We'll try to get this set up as quickly as possible and get started as quickly as we can get everybody online.

Thank you.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1645)

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Colleagues, we have Ms. Higginson from Restaurants Canada on Zoom, and we're having some technical issues. What we're going to do because of the time is we're going to begin and we'll try to resolve this as we go. Maybe Ms. Higginson can join us through the process. We're going to get started.

I'm going to dispense with a lot of the housekeeping, and I know most of you have been here before.

Ms. Durant, you heard it at the beginning, so hopefully we can just get going.

I will introduce our panel that's here with us today. We have from Durant Barristers, Erin Durant. From the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, we have Shannon Sommerauer, senior director of government relations.

Shannon, it's good to see you.

From the Association pour la santé publique du Québec we have Thomas Bastien, general manager.

Thank you very much for coming, as well.

To our panellists, you will have five minutes each for your opening remarks, and then we will go to our members for questions.

Oh, and we have Ms. Higginson.

Ms. Higginson, welcome. I'm glad everything got resolved. That's great. We're going to save you until the end for your opening remarks.

We're going to start with Mr. Bastien for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Thomas Bastien (General Manager, Association pour la santé publique du Québec): Mr. Chair, committee members, my name is Thomas Bastien. I am an agricultural engineer and the general manager of the Association pour la santé publique du Québec, or ASPQ. The ASPQ is an independent organization that puts health at the heart of collective decisions.

I would like to begin my remarks with a critical question: How resilient is our food system?

In Canada, we have a strong agriculture and amazing farmers, including lamb and dairy farmers. We have a lot of agricultural land and a successful agri-food sector. However, all the previous remarks show that something is broken.

On the one hand, farmers are caught between increasing operating costs, the specifications of major buyers, and their difficulties in

obtaining compensation that matches their work. On the other hand, a growing segment of the population is struggling to feed themselves properly, since the cost of groceries has gone up by 27% in the past five years. Meanwhile, we have handed over a progressively larger part of our processing, supply and distribution capacity to a limited number of players that I'm sure you are familiar with.

This means we find ourselves with a choice issue. Farmers have access to fewer buyers to sell to, and consumers have fewer purchasing options. When there are fewer choices, our collective resilience goes down.

That's precisely why we have been working for several years in Quebec to build a non-profit food system, which includes more than 40 partners from the agricultural, solidarity, economic and health sectors. The idea is not to replace the traditional market, but to offer an alternative: a food chain with the capacity to produce, process, store and distribute food, but whose primary purpose is not to maximize profits. The purpose of this system is to connect stakeholders who too often still work in silos: farmers, processors, food banks, grocery stores and solidarity markets, community organizations and institutional players in the food sector. These organizations have very similar needs. They buy or receive food and store it, they sometimes process it, and then distribute it.

Our goal is therefore to change the scale: to go from a multitude of remarkable but often marginal initiatives to a true food infrastructure of collective interest.

This is where the federal government can play a key role in helping to build agency. To achieve this, three federal actions are needed.

First, we need to invest in the financial infrastructure this sector needs. We also hope part of the food-link fund will be reserved for the solidarity sector.

Second, we need to develop a connected technology infrastructure. For this system to work, these organizations must be able to link, and even mutualize, their purchases, inventories, storage and transportation capacity, to know farmers' supply and institutions' demand, and to share logistical data. In other words, we need to build this new sector's nervous system.

Third, there is still one missing piece, and it's probably the most important one: opportunity. Each year, the federal government buys significant amounts of food, including for the military and the prison system. This public spending can become a powerful lever for resilience. We therefore ask the federal government to consider turning to collective enterprises, co-operatives and non-profit organizations for a portion of its institutional food purchases, where applicable trade and procurement rules allow.

An industry cannot rely on subsidies forever. To be strong, it needs customers. To be sustainable, it needs revenue. To be resilient, it needs its own infrastructure.

There are already several thousand non-profit and co-operative community food organizations in Canada. They feed people, and they rescue, store, process and distribute food. What is missing is not the web of actors, but physical and technological infrastructure that can turn those actors into a true economic sector, and contracts to make that sector sustainable.

We are not asking the government to choose between the private economy and the solidarity economy. We are asking it to give Canadians another choice, but above all, to increase food capacity. Food resilience isn't just about having enough food; it is also about having enough roads so food can go from field to fork. We are building the second road, and I'm happy to continue the discussion to build that road with you.

Thank you.

• (1650)

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much, Mr. Bastien.

[English]

Now we'll go to Ms. Sommerauer for five minutes, please.

Shannon Sommerauer (Senior Director, Government Relations and Industry Technology, Canadian Produce Marketing Association): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon, committee members.

On behalf of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

For those who may not be familiar with our organization, CPMA is a more than 100-year-old not-for-profit representing the entire fresh produce supply chain, from the farm gate to the dinner plate.

Our more than 900 domestic and international members are responsible for 90% of fresh fruit and vegetable sales in Canada, not only making a substantial contribution to Canada's economy but also playing a critical role in Canadians' health and well-being.

At the same time that our sector faces geopolitical uncertainty, supply chain disruptions and escalating severe weather events, we know many Canadians are struggling with the cost of food.

CPMA's consumer research on price perceptions has found that the steeper spikes in prices that were reported two to three years ago have given way to a feeling of a steady creep upwards. In Q3 of this year, 80% of Canadians reported seeing produce prices increase over last year.

Consumers are responding by increasing their visits to discount stores and purchasing more frozen and canned fruits and vegetables.

Canadians 65 and older are both more likely to feel these price increases, and they're the quickest to cut fruit and vegetable purchases in response.

This is deeply concerning with our aging population, as fruits and vegetables have been found to provide a protective effect in reducing the risk for cardiovascular disease and certain types of cancer.

At the same time, lower produce consumption is also associated with higher health care spending that has been estimated at \$8 billion of annual economic burden.

All of this points to a need to prioritize Canada's food system as core infrastructure, so that we can not only grow more food but also ensure that food can move efficiently, affordably and reliably from where it is produced to where Canadians live.

When dealing with perishable goods, cold chain capacity, logistics and distribution efficiency are fundamental components of food security.

In the fresh produce supply chain, final prices are shaped by the cumulative effect of a wide variety of factors, from farm input and energy costs, labour availability, shipping and packaging to inspection and border efficiency, regulatory requirements, seasonal availability, quality variation and more.

All of this is complicated even further by the high perishability of fresh fruits and vegetables, which cannot be stored as long as shelf-stable products or held back until market conditions improve.

Therefore, it is important to understand that price increases may result not solely from retail practices but because a product is scarce, more costly to move, or more expensive to preserve at the quality Canadian consumers demand year-round.

Nearly half of industry respondents to a recent survey by the Global Coalition of Fresh Produce stated that they are unable to sufficiently pass their cost hikes on to their buyers, and 80% indicated that rising costs have hindered investments in land, greenhouses, warehouses, machinery or other productive infrastructure.

Government efforts to improve affordability should therefore take a balanced approach to support stronger supply chain resilience, infrastructure investments, predictable labour programs, more efficient border and inspection processes, practical regulatory alignment, and clearer consumer pricing information.

I would like to close with three recommendations for government action to support Canada's food security infrastructure.

First, prioritize agriculture and food production as a strategic cornerstone of the build Canada economic strategy, framed through a whole-of-government approach and shared departmental ownership. CPMA welcomed the government's announcement of the national food security strategy, which has the potential to position our food system squarely among the government's policy and infrastructure priorities.

Second, ensure the timely, efficient deployment of the food-link fund to establish and expand food terminals and regional food hubs, and explore their potential in supporting other objectives such as facilitating distribution of the national school food program, expanding food processing and mitigating food loss and waste.

Finally, streamline the movement of low-risk perishable goods at ports of entry through priority lanes and a dedicated trusted trader pilot program to reduce costs for industry, consumers and government alike.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I'm happy to take your questions.

• (1655)

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much. I appreciate you guys for keeping this under five minutes. You're really helping me out with the time.

No pressure on you, Ms. Durant, but please go ahead for up to five minutes.

Erin Durant (Lawyer and investigator, Durant Barristers): I'll take the extra minutes.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Erin Durant: Thank you for having me. It's an honour to be here. It's my first time testifying at a committee. I'm a long-time watcher and a first-time attendee.

I'm here to talk about the Alto project. I'm a lawyer who lives in the study corridor. Unfortunately, when you're a lawyer who lives in an area that is under stress, you get a lot of calls, so I've been hearing from a lot of people who are very upset and concerned about Alto. Now, it's difficult for me to help these people due to a lack of information, so I'm just going to cover off four points in my opening, and I'm here to answer any questions you may have.

The first point is that the lack of information is causing distress, and it's also already impacting investment in the corridor. When I

talk about lack of information, I'm not talking about the route. Anytime you talk to Alto about the lack of information, they come back with, "Oh, we don't know the route yet." That's true...or maybe it's true. I'm not sure.

There are many practical questions that farmers and other rural residents have that aren't answered. The biggest one is when expropriations start. They haven't given a date for that. Only recently did they give an updated date in terms of when property acquisitions would start. They haven't given any information in terms of how the government plans to deal with blight, which is the impact of decreased property values in the study corridor. People are concerned about their mortgages, both farm lending as well as private lending, in terms of what happens when part of your property is expropriated. Has Farm Credit Canada been involved? Has CMHC been involved?

There's a lot of concern about the municipalities. Municipalities are going to take over the roads after more bridges and underpasses are built. They're going to have to pay for those. A lot of these municipalities are very, very small and don't have any extra money. I met one mayor whose entire budget is, I think, \$1 million for her entire year. There are a lot of really practical unanswered questions that are making people anxious, and when people are anxious, they don't work well.

It's also causing issues in terms of investment. Pretty much right away, I was getting calls from people who had plans in the study corridor. I spoke to one man who was going to be putting up a new long-term care home near Sarsfield. He had the land, and he had the permits, but Sarsfield is smack dab in the middle of the study corridor, and he doesn't want to waste his time and money starting to build that project, so he hasn't. He was going to start in the spring. He has not started building it. There's a place where seniors could have gone and good jobs could have been had. There are many examples of that.

At my own place, we have a small orchard. I've been putting in a few trees every year. This year I did not put any trees in, because I don't know whether that orchard will be expropriated or whether I'll even be here next year. There are hundreds of those stories, people delaying construction on their homes and people delaying putting in pools. I'm concerned that the study corridor, both for farmers and for other businesses, is already seeing financial harms. That's point one.

Point two is that the farms and agricultural businesses can't really plan for their future when all of this is up in the air. I've heard that from Mr. McWilliams in the past. I've heard that from others, from people thinking about expanding a barn or buying another plot to expand the farm. People aren't doing those things right now, because they don't know what their future will hold.

The third point is this one. People are very upset and very much in need of information. There is definitely an information vacuum out there. Part of it, I believe, is caused by Alto's practice of requiring NDAs to be signed by absolutely everybody. By everybody, I mean municipalities, membership organizations, charities—you name it, they're signing them.

Alto's explanation is that, when you're developing a project, you need to have a certain zone of secrecy, especially over things like the route, technical information and things like that. I would agree with that, but the things in Alto's NDA go way beyond those. It covers things like marketing strategies. It covers things like the cost. It covers things like the timing of certain events.

● (1700)

The practical impact of that has been that people are writing to municipal leaders or to their membership associations for information. The response they're getting back is, "We can't help you; contact Alto." It's basically pushing people away, because they don't want to fall on the wrong side of these NDAs.

What's happening then is that they're calling me and other people in the community. We aren't being paid by anybody and don't really have any formal leadership role—I just live in the neighbourhood—but people need help right now.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): I'm sorry, Ms. Durant, but that's your five minutes. Can you wrap it up quickly, please?

Erin Durant: That's pretty much it.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Perfect. Thank you.

You will have lots of opportunity with questions.

Our final witness is Ms. Higginson for up to five minutes, please.

Kelly Higginson (President and CEO, Restaurants Canada): Thank, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to appear today.

My name is Kelly Higginson. I'm the president and CEO of Restaurants Canada. We represent Canada's food service industry across more than 105,000 restaurant and food service locations, from independent businesses to large national and global operators.

Restaurants are a significant part of Canada's economy and communities. As the country's fourth-largest private sector employer, the restaurant industry directly employs 1.2 million Canadians, with youth making up over 40% of our workforce. It generates \$130 billion in annual sales, accounting for 4% of Canada's GDP.

For this committee, I would like to emphasize another part of our economic footprint. Our industry purchases approximately \$43 billion in food and beverages every year, including about \$30 billion from Canadian farmers, producers and processors.

Restaurants are one of the important ways that Canadian agriculture reaches Canadians. Every day, Canadians make approximately 23.7 million visits to restaurants and other food service establishments. With an average transaction of about \$12 per person, restaurants aren't simply a luxury or a special occasion. They are an important source of food and nourishment for millions of Canadians, including seniors, students, busy families, workers, travellers and people for whom preparing a meal at home every day isn't always practical or economical. That's why restaurants need to be a part of Canada's conversation about food security.

Food security does not end at the farm gate. It depends on the entire food chain that gets food from Canadian producers to Canadian consumers, and restaurants are an essential part of that chain. That was the central message of "Feeding Canada Together", our submission to the federal government's national food security strategy, which we also provided to this committee.

We were encouraged to see that several priorities we identified were reflected in this strategy, including investments in food terminals and hubs, expanding domestic processing, reducing regulatory barriers and strengthening supply chain resilience. We welcome this week's announcement of the \$1 billion food-link fund to strengthen food terminals, regional food hubs and distribution infrastructure.

Current trade uncertainty has reinforced the need to build greater domestic capacity, including expanded year-round greenhouse and controlled-environment agriculture. Investments in domestic processing, better transportation, cold chain and distribution infrastructure, and removing unnecessary regulatory barriers can also create more opportunities for Canadian food to reach Canadian restaurants and consumers.

Thank you very much.

• (1705)

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much for your presentation.

We will now go to our members for their questions. We will start with the Conservatives.

Mr. Albas, you have six minutes, please.

Dan Albas (Okanagan Lake West—South Kelowna, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the committee for having me today.

Ms. Durant, I wanted to talk to you a bit about the NDAs. I notice, since this is a study about food security, that NDAs have been a problem in Quebec, specifically with Alto. The Crown corporation has been hiring evaluators that have specific expertise in agricultural properties. When you sign an NDA, you cannot accept work with anyone else.

Can you comment on the individual case and some of the questionable aspects of this corporation choosing this tactic?

Erin Durant: Sure.

I've seen a copy of those documents. I didn't file it today, but if you'd like I could file a copy of that.

Dan Albas: Please do.

Erin Durant: Essentially, what's happened is that Alto went to get its agricultural surveyors, which it obviously needs. The terms on which those surveyors are in business with Alto require them to not represent others in the community.

My understanding is that there's not a huge number of agricultural surveyors in the province of Ontario or the province of Quebec. What I'm hearing from the farmers is that the ones they usually use for bank loans and things like that are the ones who've been hired by Alto. There's a concern about who is going to help these people get valuations when the time is done, because there's not a large number of those people.

A related issue is that the first corridor, between Ottawa and Montreal, is very francophone. I can tell you, there are not enough French-speaking expropriation lawyers to help all of these people.

Dan Albas: In regard to the wider use of NDAs, I'm quite concerned that even those charitable organizations that receive support from Alto are thereby limited by what they can say, but I'm more concerned about municipalities. Even the Province of Quebec has signed one. It's my understanding that its Alto agreement can be terminated after 30 days.

The reason I say this is that if there are harms that this project will do to farming.... Obviously, we need to respect provincial jurisdiction, because they have the right to regulate in that area. Do you believe the province should look at this practice and consider whether or not, in public transparency and for food security and in support of farmers, it should look at terminating that NDA?

Erin Durant: The Quebec document can be terminated on 30 days' notice. They just have to let them know they're no longer going to co-operate with them. There are two documents in Quebec.

One is a co-operation agreement, and one is an NDA, so they're able to get out of it.

My understanding is that there are similar documents with Ontario, although I have not been able to get them and I don't know whether they're still only being negotiated or if they are in a final form.

In terms of the municipalities and the provincial authority over protecting farmland and things like that, this is the type of project that requires a significant amount of provincial and municipal co-operation to make it work. They want to bring this train into the middle of existing cities. They want to do land value capture. What happens is that you need the province and the municipality to, basically, use their MZOs to push it through.

If Quebec really wanted to make this a hard go for the government, unfortunately, it could.

Dan Albas: In some of the videos I've seen online, farmers and property owners are claiming to have been harassed by drones that are trying to do evaluations. Could you comment on the nature of those and what you know?

Erin Durant: One of the many places where there hasn't been good communication is around the work that's already happening on the ground.

In the spring, before the consultation was even over, at my house we started getting large survey Xs on the road and planes flying overhead, back and forth. After a whole lot of work, our city councillor was able to figure out that it was Alto. They apologized for not giving a heads-up that this was going to happen and said they would do better going forward and so on.

Unfortunately, over the past couple of months, many people, including me, have had drones flying over their house at night, in the middle of the night. I had it for a week straight. I wrote to Alto to ask what is going on and how long this is going to be happening, and I didn't get a response. I still don't have a response. I wrote them again this morning, hoping I'd have a response before I was here today.

There's a farmer in St. Isidore who actually presented at this very committee last year. She's had it almost every day, for months at a time, at night. She contacts the MP, and she contacts Alto. She tries to get answers. Nobody is giving this poor woman answers. It was so bad on Friday night that she made a video. She was outside with her husband. There were 20 or so drones flying around in a swarm doing something. She had no notice. She had given no permission. She and her kids were terrified.

The lack of any communication is awful.

• (1710)

Dan Albas: Ms. Durant, if the Minister of Transport were in this room with you right now, and you could say one thing in regard to these drones and these activities, what would you tell him?

Erin Durant: They need to start taking this seriously.

People have been filing complaints on the Transport Canada drone complaint website. It goes off into the abyss. People feel that they're being spied on and watched.

For me, it was six or seven nights in a row. On the last night, I went outside and was yelling at the thing.

There are farmers who have shot them out of the sky, apparently. One guy was charged.

It's a very serious thing that no one seems to be dealing with. I had to call a former MP last Friday to try to get the attention of somebody at the Department of Transport.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much, Ms. Durant. I appreciate it.

We'll now move to the Liberals.

I believe I have Mr. Gobeil for six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Daniel Gobeil (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will start with Mr. Bastien, but I want to thank all the witnesses for their remarks. It is very interesting.

Let me reassure you, Mr. Bastien: This week, the Liberal government made an important announcement about community infrastructure needs. When there are elements that can help the community, our government makes them a priority.

In terms of transportation, you talked about regions and supply chains. Can you elaborate on your vision for the market? You talked about your vision, but the market isn't there to get the hat trick of tools you need for your structure.

Thomas Bastien: Yes. Thank you very much for that.

We certainly followed that announcement with a lot of interest. What we would like to know is whether money is set aside. It's always the same question, because when you share the ecosystem with a lot of other partners, the same ones might always get the money. We don't want that to happen here and once again reinforce some existing oligopoly.

However, there was a very good remark about markets, regional supply in general, and shortening routes. A lot of people think shortening routes has an interesting benefit. First, for farmers, it allows for more conversations with the public. Second, it gives more choice. What we also see a lot is that by shortening the routes, we can offer a better price, for both the agricultural sector and the consumer.

That is essential in this system of non-profit food chains with infrastructure that would make it possible to get closer to both consumers and farmers.

Daniel Gobeil: Thank you.

I'd like to bring something else to your attention. The government also has a national school food program, which establishes that link. It is definitely run in partnership with the provinces, but I invite you to use it as a model to create a market and close the entire loop in the food chain.

Thomas Bastien: I'm going to pick up on that. That's also very interesting. Certainly, the school environment is extremely productive for solidarity organizations, particularly in Quebec, where La Cantine pour tous and the Club des petits déjeuners do remarkable work.

What if we had that same type of infrastructure, but for the military? What if we had the same infrastructure for the prison system? In Quebec, more thought is being given to the health care sector, which does not fall under federal jurisdiction. We're thinking about the possibility of having major contracts with this institutional community, which would help structure an entire ecosystem.

• (1715)

Daniel Gobeil: Thank you.

We'll look into it and keep an eye on potential markets.

Ms. Sommerauer, thank you for your remarks, which were very interesting. I think your comments were taken into consideration when drafting the new food security policy. You asked for strategic infrastructure funds and the goal is to double the supply of fruits and vegetables. We were talking about \$750 million.

The goal is also to simplify the process. I am also a farmer and I would like to hear your thoughts on something. We introduced a bill this week to simplify paperwork relating to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and other agencies. I want to hear your thoughts on measures to further simplify the structure.

[English]

Shannon Sommerauer: Thank you for that.

Yes, I will say we've been happy with the government's efforts thus far in terms of the red tape reduction. There was actually, about a year ago, a bill that was passed. It was an omnibus regulatory package that did alleviate a significant number of labelling irritants for the fresh produce sector, which has been a long-standing issue for us. We were certainly very happy to see that.

For us—and it goes back to my remarks, and I know the previous panel spoke about this as well—it's really a whole-of-government effort. Oftentimes, when we come to the Hill as agriculture groups, we meet with CFIA and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, but the impacts for our sector extend well beyond that, such as to engaging with CBSA, with Environment and Climate Change Canada, and with Transport Canada. All these other departments also have a very large impact on the food sector.

What we've been calling for is a whole-of-government approach and shared departmental ownership to make sure that when we're looking at the regulatory frameworks, when we're making regulatory changes in one area, we do think about food, because not all the departments are used to doing that. It's not part of their regular mandate, but it can have significant impacts.

[Translation]

Daniel Gobeil: I'm going to switch gears and turn to the Restaurants Canada representative.

Ms. Higginson, thank you for your remarks and the beautiful, bilingual and very accessible document you submitted. You commend the Canadian government's efforts. You talk about Restaurants Canada's role at the table. How do you see your role in helping us improve distribution and affordability and be more present as an essential link?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Ms. Higginson, I know this is tough, but the parliamentary secretary is over his time. Could you answer that as succinctly as you can? I know I'm asking a lot of you here.

You can also submit your response in writing to the committee.

Kelly Higginson: Sure.

In our document, I think we've highlighted a few of the areas where we see the Canadian government...including in the food security submission for sure. Maybe that would be the best place to start, so that it isn't a rushed answer. Maybe that's the best answer at this point.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): That is the best answer I've heard today.

Kelly Higginson: I'm not sure about timing.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much, Ms. Higginson. I appreciate that.

Kelly Higginson: It is in our submission. I believe there were five recommendations.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor for six minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Bastien, I'll start with you, if I may.

Your project is interesting because it addresses a major concern, which is the concentration of distribution power in the hands of ma-

jeor players. How would farmers benefit from having access to a non-profit distribution system?

By the way, we often hear that it's impossible to make money on distribution or that the margins are too small. That's what grocers and major chains are telling us. How do you respond to that?

Thomas Bastien: Thank you for the question.

First, farmers need to have a choice. It's about giving them the option to choose whom they work with. Today, there are few choices, especially for large-scale productions.

Second, there's the price issue. In some sectors, unfortunately, prices continue to fall even though the specifications are quite stringent. Switching to an alternative sector would make it possible to vary prices and, potentially, make them more attractive to the farming community. This is key. We're talking about specifications. As you have seen, these specifications have developed significantly over the past decade. Having another option would also open the door to different specifications.

We're ultimately talking about relationships with the public. I would like to circle back to the comment that I made earlier. When we speak with the community sector, we're specifically speaking with the public. The goal is to give the farming community this close relationship with the public.

To address the major criticism levelled at oligopolies—that they don't make money with the farming community—I'll address the figures. The profits made in 2025 amounted to \$4.35 billion, compared to \$3.6 billion in 2022. If they aren't making money, it's a bit odd that they're raking in such large amounts.

Second, we hear that it's difficult to develop a sector of this nature. Yes, back in the 1980s, it was hard to work with pallets and to do things manually. However, today we have artificial intelligence and the digital world to support us. When we walk into a warehouse today, it isn't like the 1980s. We're in a good position to develop a new sector and to increase competition in an industry of this nature.

• (1720)

Sébastien Lemire: To follow up on a question asked by Mr. Gobeil, the government's agri-food hub strategy doesn't seem to distinguish between the private sector and the community sector. Do you believe that it's important to set aside funds for more co-operative or community-based models?

Thomas Bastien: That's for sure. Clearly, setting aside this money would place us in a much stronger position, especially when we want other partners in the community sector to join an initiative of this kind. Highly organized environments, such as the current landscape with its extremely powerful lobbies, make it quite difficult for us to carve out a place for ourselves. The ability to set aside funds is vital in an ecosystem of this nature.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

Ms. Durant, I was in Rigaud. I saw you speak with great eloquence. I learned through my research that you were also a member of the Liberal Party and that you tried to ask questions about Alto at the Liberal national convention in Montreal. However, you weren't allowed to do so.

I gather that this frustrated you. I think we all would have been frustrated. In politics, we're generally expected to answer the questions that are put to us and that can be challenging.

Why do you think that the Liberals are refusing to even let this committee look into the Alto project? There isn't any commitment to do so. The issue is constantly being put off. Isn't it our role here—and in the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, but particularly here—to study best consultation practices, to ensure that compensation programs meet farmers' actual needs and to hear what they have to say about the concrete impact of the project? We spoke earlier about drainage, for example.

Isn't democracy all about giving people a voice and listening to them?

[English]

Erin Durant: The short answer is yes. I do think there needs to be more study on this. In terms of your question about democracy and your comment about the Liberal Party, just so everyone else knows, I used to be a member. I did go to the convention. I wanted to participate in a debate that happened on rail, but debates are different at party conventions, so there wasn't really a debate that I was able to participate in there.

The problem we're having is that even my own Liberal MP will not respond and answer questions. The information void, I think, is causing more stress and anger than anything else. You know, when I talk to people, they're barely talking about the train anymore and what the train does. They're talking about not being listened to and Alto not coming to the communities. There have been meetings with hundreds of people, community members who've gotten together to talk about Alto. Alto would be invited, and they would not come. There's this concern that we're either forgotten about or not cared about, and we're certainly not given any priority in terms of the farmers who are trying to run businesses in these circumstances.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: You're a lawyer. You know the legislation. In a case of this nature, given the power that the government granted to Alto through Bill C-15, what's the balance of power between a person who could face expropriation and Alto?

• (1725)

[English]

Erin Durant: I think that issue is why I'm so involved. As a lawyer who trained under some senior people who felt the need to always help the community in times of need, the power imbalance is huge. People don't have the money to hire the lawyers who would be needed to contest something like this. Associations have been signed up under collaboration agreements early, and those associations are the ones with the money who would typically fund that type of litigation. In order for anyone in the community to challenge this, it's going to be individual farms pooling money into a pile and hoping that they can come up with enough to hire a lawyer to help them.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much, Ms. Durant.

Looking at the clock, colleagues, we have a bit of leeway because we started late, but we do have some brief housekeeping to deal with as well. Just so everybody gets a bit of a second round, we'll go two or three minutes for the Conservatives and the Liberals, and maybe one question for Sebastian, if that's okay.

Let's try to keep it very tight, team.

Mr. Gourde, you have three minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Durant, I'll be blunt. You said that Alto had a confidentiality agreement with the Quebec government. Is that true?

[English]

Erin Durant: Yes, and if you would like, I can file that as part of my evidence.

You can find it online.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Okay. It's really important. If you can send us that information, please do.

You also said that the Quebec government had 30 days to terminate the agreement. Is that a 30-day period starting from the date of the signature, or is it a 30-day period at any time?

[English]

Erin Durant: My memory is that it has to be 30 days' notice of when it will happen. I double-checked the wording of it when I submitted it, but I think it's 30 days at any point.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Do you think that it would be a good idea for the new Quebec government, which was elected last Monday, to immediately terminate this contract so that it would have a free hand to stand up for the farmers who voted it into office?

[English]

Erin Durant: I'm not a lawyer in Quebec, so I don't know if the terms are legal or not. I think that the government has expressed a desire to do that, and likely they're able to, given the terms of that agreement and also their ability to manage the province.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Is it ethical for Alto to have already hired all the property evaluators and awarded contracts to Quebec's largest law firms in order to tie the farmers' hands in the future?

[English]

Erin Durant: I understand why they've done it. They need to do a lot of valuations really quickly. I think the issue is that perhaps they did not know how few of these evaluators there are. I'm not sure if it's an ethical thing or if they don't know that market very well, but it's an area that's concerning to the people who want to hire their own help.

[Translation]

Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

[English]

Dave Epp: Thank you.

I have one question. You and I both attended the Transport Futures summit on Friday. Alto was on the program. They trumpeted their consultation process as being wide-ranging and so open. That was not the testimony that came from many of the other panellists there. Would you concur?

At the end of that session, there was a QR code. We could address, after the day, what the support was. What I felt in the room was overwhelming concern, yet the response from a curious QR code came back overwhelmingly in support of Alto. Did you find that curious?

Erin Durant: Yes, I was quite upset when I heard them talk about how well they were doing in terms of consultation, because it's the exact opposite of what I have seen on the ground. They haven't attended council meetings, when council has invited them multiple times. They did not originally schedule a meeting in Mirabel, of all places. They had to be begged to go to Mirabel.

Steven Bonk: Could I ask you a quick question? I'm sorry to cut you off.

Erin Durant: Sure.

Steven Bonk: Do you think it would be worthwhile for this Alto issue to have its own stand-alone study in the agriculture committee?

Erin Durant: Absolutely.

Steven Bonk: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you, Mr. Epp.

Now it's Mr. Louis. We're going to try to split your time with Mr. Blois, but we'll give the old chair a chance to ask his question.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses who are appearing today.

Farmers from our region, Waterloo region, and across Ontario load their trucks in the morning and drive hours to the Toronto food terminal to sell the food they grow. At the very same time, restaurant owners, caterers, institutional buyers and independent grocers are driving to Toronto to buy that food. This terminal is one of the largest wholesale produce terminals in North America.

However, as we study food security—and our government announced the national food security strategy, specifically the food-link fund, which will set up terminals and then local hubs—we've heard over and over again about the importance of strengthening the food distribution network.

Maybe I can ask for a brief answer from CPMA and then also from Restaurants Canada about what it's like to have your food sold locally and to have your food bought locally.

• (1730)

Shannon Sommerauer: Thank you for the question.

I'll try to be brief, so Ms. Higginson can get in there too.

As you said, the Ontario food terminal is a critical piece of food infrastructure in the Toronto area. I would note not only that it serves southern Ontario very well but also that shipments from the Ontario food terminal actually serve nine provinces across this country. It's definitely a model of distribution that can be adapted elsewhere.

There is work under way in looking at a Pacific gateway project in B.C., a model that would be similar but different, because the infrastructure that is already there is different.

I think the key thing moving forward will be looking at what's already in place and what the gaps and needs really are, and making sure that, as you said, we're putting these hubs in places where restaurant owners, small business owners and local growers can easily access them and there aren't hindrances to accessing those hubs.

Tim Louis: Thank you for that.

I have the same question for Restaurants Canada.

Kelly Higginson: Thank you.

It's a great question and something we talk about regularly, especially in our rural and remote communities and tourism communities of the country. They face significant distribution challenges to food security that extend beyond access and reliability. Moving the product from east to west within Canada is often more expensive and less efficient than shipping the same goods north and south in the United States. Investment in this distribution process is really critical.

[Translation]

Hon. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Bastien, you would like to see more co-operatives and greater involvement from the public sector. Which country in the world has the model that most closely matches your vision? Is it France? Is it Spain? Please keep your answer relatively brief.

Thomas Bastien: There are currently a number of models in place. In particular, the models are co-operative in nature. We aren't operating under a sector-based model. The only place where we see similar systems is the United States, specifically when it comes to food in grocery stores that cater to veterans.

[English]

Hon. Kody Blois: I will turn to Ms. Sommerauer very quickly. I appreciate some of the suggestions you have, and I know the committee will take them, as will the government.

I didn't hear anything about immediate expensing for greenhouses, which I have to assume is a big deal for your membership, along with 750 million dollars' worth of controlled environment ag in the platform. Mr. Louis was talking about the food terminal, into which the government is committing some investments. It doesn't have to be long, but I assume you would go on the record as saying those are very good things for your members.

Shannon Sommerauer: The short answer is yes. I would say that the greenhouse sector—and the member from Chatham-Kent-Leamington well knows this—is a booming superpower in the Canadian agriculture portfolio. Absolutely, there is more opportunity to expand.

Hon. Kody Blois: Just quickly, I have one last question, Mr. Chair.

It's good to know that the member for Leamington is championing those policies back home and sharing that good news.

To Ms. Durant, obviously the drone testimony that you just shared is concerning. You're a lawyer. For this committee's benefit, has there been any public confirmation that the drones in question are actually Alto's? Your testimony was that Alto was flying drones at one point, or that was the testimony of municipal leadership. Can you make clear for this committee...? I take notice that Alto has a

responsibility to confirm if they are or are not their drones, but is it your testimony, and do you have any verification, that these are indeed their drones? I think that's important differentiation.

Erin Durant: It is, for sure. As of now, I don't have that confirmation. I have been trying to get that confirmation for a long time, both from Alto itself and from Transport Canada.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thanks, Ms. Durant. We got the clarification. Thank you.

Mr. Lemire, you have just one minute, please, for a question.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Durant, you're welcome to join the Bloc Québécois if you want a democratic party that engages in healthy internal debates.

That said, we recently read in the media that Alto was in the process of signing confidentiality agreements with many registered evaluator firms. As a result, farmers won't be able to do business with these firms. We know that competition is quite tough in this situation.

How can we address this threat of having to negotiate land prices without a proper evaluation by a registered evaluator firm, given that most evaluations are carried out by Alto, which has the resources of a giant?

● (1735)

[English]

Erin Durant: What I'll say there is that we should look to how the Europeans do this. The Europeans have built high-speed rail for a while, and they have very good systems in place in terms of requiring information to be made public, like the business case and what the plans are, so that the farm communities and the associations can participate early, with the information. That information is not being hidden. I think that's what we should be doing.

The Vice-Chair (John Barlow): Thank you very much, Ms. Durant.

Thank you, Mr. Lemire.

Thank you very much to our witnesses. I know it felt like we were a bit rushed, and I appreciate your staying a bit longer.

We will now excuse our witnesses.

Colleagues, we will go in camera.

We'll suspend for a couple of minutes to excuse our witnesses.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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