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Tuesday, December 1, 2009

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Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC)): We'll call our meeting to order.

We still have a few members who will show up here in the next few minutes, I'm sure.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here. First of all, we're going to hear from Option consommateurs. I apologize if I'm not saying that right. We have Mr. Arnold and Mr. Décary-Gilardeau here.

Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): I remind you that, at a previous meeting, I withdrew my motion about SRM. Since that time, I have discussed the motion with beef producers. Basically, they are all quite in favour. So I would like to introduce it again.

[English]

The Chair: Okay. Do you mean before we deal with the witnesses?

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Yes, please.

[English]

The Chair: We'll need unanimous consent to do so.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: No, we do not need unanimous consent.

[English]

The Chair: We have committee business scheduled at the end of the meeting.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: I am just afraid that we will have to vote at 5:30 p.m.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: The motion reads as follows:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food recommend to the government that it immediately implement an assistance program for the cattle industry to help it cover the \$31.70 cost per head, which represents the competitiveness gap between Canada and the United States caused by Canada's

Specified Risk Materials standards; and that the committee report to the House of Commons.

This is exactly the motion that we discussed; it is based on requests from the Canadian Meat Council and the Fédération des producteurs de bovins du Québec.

[English]

The Chair: You are right. You can table this, Mr. Bellavance.

We do have witnesses here, and I'm certainly very disappointed to make them wait and to take away from report time, but you have that option.

Mr. Atamanenko and then Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): I understand this is an important motion, but I also understand that we have witnesses here. It would be my preference to do this right after the witnesses, before we move into the report.

The Chair: Are you making...?

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: That's just my comment.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Actually, Mr. Chairman, this is a motion that will take a bit of debate, I think.

I suggest that we move to our witnesses. They're here. I think if we want to have that discussion.... But we've also had the discussion around our report, which I'm thinking we want to get through this year.

I can't support that right now. I think we should hear our witnesses.

The Chair: Mr. Lemieux, I have you next on my list.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): I'm sorry, I'm just arriving now, but I would make a comment about an order. There's an order that we're following in terms of motions, so when it comes to actually debating motions, as much as possible we should follow the order unless there is unanimous consent to change the order, which we in fact have put in front of committee before.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): You have a short memory.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): It's amazing how rules change around here.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Remember a couple of weeks ago?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I don't recall.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Short memory, boys.

The Chair: His motion, by procedure, can be debated. I would prefer to deal with our witnesses and our report as well.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Okay.

The Chair: At the same time, he has tabled it. Unless Mr. Bellavance pulls it off the table, we're in debate of it right now.

Is there further discussion?

Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Mr. Chair, we've got our witnesses here; I think we've reiterated that. They have spent time and effort to come here to talk to us. I think it's only fair that we listen to them. After that point, we can decide on this motion.

The Chair: Mr. Eyking.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think we could deal with this motion really quickly. It's been talked about quite a bit. We know that all the beef industry has signed off on it. It's very straightforward. This is what the industry needs and wants, and I think we should just bring it to a question and then we can move on to the witnesses.

The Chair: Mr. Easter, sorry, I didn't see you. Then I have Mr. Lemieux and Mr. Shipley.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Are we on the motion?

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Okay.

I speak strongly in favour of the motion, Mr. Chair. You have—as we had in a letter of October 27, 2009—all the key players in the beef industry, who came before this committee, all agreeing on the need for this \$31.70 per head, which is a competitiveness gap between us and the United States. This letter—the industry totally coming together—was signed by the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, the Dairy Farmers of Canada, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, the Canadian Meat Council, the Canadian Renderers Association, la Fédération des producteurs de bovins du Québec, Levinoff-Colbex, XL Foods, Atlantic Beef Products, and Beef Value Chain Roundtable. Now, that's a pretty impressive representation of the industry. When they come together and all agree on basically what André's motion is, then I think we have to support it.

We've seen one plant in our beef industry in Ontario go under basically because of the SRM removal fees and the non-competitive position that put them in.

This is not a lot of money. For anyone going to vote against this, Mr. Chair, let me tell them that in December 2007 this standing committee, then under the chairmanship of James Bezan, made a recommendation on this very issue. I'll just quote what it said in that report of two years ago:

Finally, it has come to the Standing Committee's attention that government officials may have underestimated the cost burden associated with the specified risk material ban compliance for meat processors. Although a joint federal-provincial initiative does exist to provide assistance for processing plants to invest in new capital requirements, this program does nothing to alleviate the effects of increasing disposal costs resulting from the SRM ban, which contrary to the situation in the United States, automatically brought the value of SRM down to nothing. Therefore

—and I'll read the recommendation—

Recommendation 6: The Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food recommends that Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada review program funding available to beef producers, processors and renderers to help them with the disposal and storage costs of ruminant specified risk material.

Well, that was two years ago. Nothing has happened. As a result, we're seeing the decimation of a lot of small cow-calf operators in the country. If you go to any stockyard in western Canada or eastern Canada, you'll see pregnant animals going through for slaughter because people are leaving the industry. Our industry is non-competitive, and as I said earlier, never have we seen the beef and hog industries in as much distress, never. And never have we seen a government do less. It certainly hasn't done anything on these recommendations that are here.

For all those reasons, Mr. Chair, I think this motion is of critical importance. And we could go back to what the witnesses said before this committee on November 3, though I'll not bother going back and going through all the evidence presented. I congratulate André for bringing it forward for us to pass here. If the government could act on it, it might—it might—help in the survival of some beef producers in this country. In terms of the cost to the government, it's about \$24 million per year.

● (1535)

We already know, as Pierre and I debated in the House last night, that the Government of Canada this year has spent \$961 million, \$400,000 less in business risk management, when they could have reprofiled the money to the beef and hog industry and didn't do it. So that hurt the industry. We know as well that they've lapsed, under Agriculture and Agri-Food, about \$150 million under various grants and contributions on environment, food safety, competitive initiatives, etc. So \$24 million, given what the government has lapsed and failed to put towards the industry, is not a lot of money.

Given that the industry is united in this request to come before this committee—the committee itself recommended action some two years ago—I would call on the committee, with the greatest urgency, to pass this motion and to get this money through government and to make them more competitive in the hands of the processing industry and primary producers.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you, Chair.

I would like to highlight the fact that there was a motion that was approved, I believe unanimously, by the committee regarding SRM. That motion came after we had witnesses here talking about the challenges that SRM was posing to their industry. This particular motion somewhat goes against the motion that we passed previously. The motion that we passed at our last meeting, Chair, just to remind you and of course remind Canadians who might not have been following the committee back then, suggested that the government work with the industry to find suitable solutions to these challenges that are faced by the beef industry with respect to SRM.

The very next motion we have now actually proposes a solution. No study took place, not yet. The dialogue that we were hoping to have during the last meeting, of course, is not taking place because André has kindly provided the solution. This is the solution. I would have to raise a question about this being the solution, because I think there are other things that might better serve the beef industry. Even Mr. Easter said in his words just a few moments ago that this might—Chair, it might—help the beef farmers. I don't think we should be working with speculative solutions and the word "might". I think we need to find solutions that will help them. I think more time is needed to consult with the industry in order to find out what will help them.

Chair, I want to put in front of you an excellent example. It's a timely example. On the pork issue, the first solution put forward regarding the pork crisis was a per head payment. It was not workable. Trade sanctions could have been levied on that. A tremendous amount of work was done with the industry, Chair, by our government and with the Canada Pork Council. Now the programs that are being delivered are far better than a per head payment would have been.

So that initial solution, Chair, what was thought to be the solution at the time, was not the solution at all.

I think we're going down the same road, where Mr. Bellavance and his colleagues on the opposition side feel that this is *the* solution. There's no room here for expanding upon this. We heard from some witnesses. Bang, they have all the answers, let's vote on this. That's what they want. I'm saying no. What we actually approved unanimously at the last committee was no, let's work together, let's work with industry, let's investigate solutions that will help, not might help, the industry.

The second thing, Chair, is that the last time the Liberal government did something like this was during the BSE crisis, and it was a complete fiasco. Even they admit it was a big fiasco. The money went to the wrong people, to the wrong players. They themselves were worried about how they had mismanaged the program, Chair. These types of things need to be taken into consideration. Who needs to be targeted in this type of government programming? Where should the money go? How should the money be delivered? Well, right now we're just being given a very concise, narrow answer with no discussion amongst ourselves and no discussion with industry. So I think this is very inappropriate.

I'll go back to the pork issue, Chair. There are other things that are helping our pork industry, like we have our programs to help the pork industry, to deliver money. As I announced during question period, Chair, thanks to the great work of our government and the Prime Minister, who is now in China, effectively immediately, China has agreed to lift the ban on all imports of pork products into China from Canada. This is great news for pork producers, who now have renewed access to a \$50-million-a-year market. This is good news. It's part of the solution for the pork sector. It's not *the* solution; it's part of the solution. That's my concern with this motion, Chair.

This is, to them, *the* solution. No, we should be working on this a little bit more. We should be putting more time and effort into this, and we should respect the motion that we debated and passed at our last meeting.

Thank you, Chair.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Shipley is next, but right now he's...

Go ahead, Mr. Valeriote.

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If anything, Mr. Chair, I think we heard the sense of urgency associated with the request by the producers and processors who appeared before us. I think it's with that same sense of urgency that we have to address this motion.

There's nothing in the motion that states that it has to be that amount of money on an ongoing basis. We considered other options at that meeting, including the creation—I think everybody nodded their heads in agreement—of cogeneration plants beside processing plants so that we could use the SRMs for other purposes. We know that it will take a long time.

In the meantime, while there is merit in what Mr. Lemieux said about opening markets, we also know that it will take a long time to open those markets. If the government is making efforts to open markets for beef producers, that's a good thing. But my suspicion is that if it takes as long to open more markets for beef as it has for pork, we will lose a lot of livelihoods in the beef industry.

Mr. Chair, you yourself saw the facial expressions of people who were losing their livelihoods when they appeared before this committee. I think it is the intent of Mr. Bellavance's motion that this urgent situation be addressed now rather than later. It doesn't supersede the opportunity for any committee to come together and consider other solutions in the meantime.

I'm not in favour of paying \$31.70 per head on an ongoing, indefinite basis any more than the government is. Having said that, I think at this point in time that urgency has to be addressed. This is a wonderful stopgap measure, Mr. Chair, and I would hope that people would see it as that, as a stopgap, temporary measure, until those other solutions are developed.

Frankly, when it comes to deploying the money properly, I've heard, for as long I've been here—that's a year—how wonderful this government is at deploying money and making sure it gets into the right hands.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: It's true.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Well, that's what you've been telling me, so you shouldn't be afraid. You should not be afraid of finding ways and means to get that money into the right people's hands so that it's not given to the wrong people.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Back before Mr. Easter was on, I guess your name was on there, Mr. Bellavance. I apologize; I didn't see it there. I'll go to you now.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Lemieux talks about my solution, but it actually is not my solution. It is the industry's solution. It is what they have asked us for. I understand that Mr. Lemieux has not been a member of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food as long as some of the members around the table here. But the discussions on SRM are nothing new. This was not done off the top of our heads after the testimony of a few witnesses that we heard in the last session. We have been discussing this for years and the people in the industry have done serious work in order to arrive at serious solutions.

So, as I have always said, Mr. Lemieux's motion is like apple pie; you cannot be against it. Yes, the government should be talking with industry. But, to me, that is wasting this industry's time, or, at least, more politely, stalling for time. We can talk and talk and form committees. But we do not need to do that any more. We have heard so much testimony, we have read so many careful studies showing that there is a serious problem. Basically, the Americans do not have the same SRM standards as we do.

This did not come from the Bloc Québécois. The Canadian Meat Council study is very serious about the competitiveness gap of \$31.70 per head. Of course, the committee does not give out money. We just make recommendations to the government. Doing so does not put us in any danger, nor does it stop the government from continuing its discussions with the industry.

Mr. Chair, of course I did not want to hold up the committee's work by introducing this motion at the beginning of the meeting. But it is difficult to introduce motions this session. I do not know how many of my motions have been delayed or postponed. The list goes on and on. This situation is urgent because the Union des producteurs agricoles du Québec is holding its convention in Quebec City as we speak. One of the first items of business that they were discussing as the convention opened today was about SRM. So I feel there is some urgency in acting quickly.

I apologize to the witnesses, of course. But the quickest way to get to their testimony on GMOs is to move to a vote immediately. Everyone has been able to express their opinion. If people are against, that is their right. They can vote against it, and we are done. We move to the next item. That is the quickest solution.

• (1550)

[English]

The Chair: Excellent.

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you, Mr. Chair. And I apologize. I had a personal call that I had to take. I apologize for that.

In terms of this, Mr. Eyking and Mr. Easter have said that it's not very much money; they need it, they want it, we should give it to them. I think if they went back in history, they would find that has likely been said a number of times. As a government, they took some responsibility in terms of fiscal responsibility of this. When somebody comes along to hand out—

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, I believe we balanced the books. I believe you guys have a deficit. Is that correct?

Mr. Bev Shipley: So at the end of the day, I believe this particular motion, first of all, only speaks to one part of it. It only talks about those over 30 months. I think the discussion we've had with the industry is that it's not just about those over 30 months. It's actually about the livestock industry itself, not just in terms of the SRMs—that's a component of it—but other issues in terms of the processors.

Quite honestly, I'm still not understanding, and I don't know if everyone would be. If you do, maybe you could help me, André, to understand how giving the \$31.70 per head was actually not going to the producers. I'm just trying to understand, and maybe you can help me.

I know your urgency, I think, because there's an annual meeting on, but the urgency.... Quite honestly, the last time that happened, it went to the packers. The industry never got the money. I agree that we've got a group of industry people, commodity groups, signed on, which also includes the slaughter capacity group. But in the midst of an advisory committee that is being set up, made up of industry and processors.... It's still just being put together and will be coming out. I think it's a little premature to be doing it. It's \$31.70 per head, not addressing the full scope of what the competitive issues are about.

I just have a little trouble, Mr. Chairman, addressing that at this time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Thank you, Chair, and gentlemen.

I guess I'm just going to say that I'm a little concerned. I think this motion is very premature to bring forward until we've had a real chance to explore what exactly is going to happen here.

I actually asked some of the guys back in my riding last week what they thought of giving \$31.70 a head to the packers. The first thing they came back to us with was, "You're going to give money to packing plants?"

Keep in mind that there's been \$50 million available for slaughtering capacity to make improvements and gain efficiencies in dealing with SRMs and other things in their plants. We've done that for them. I think the last thing we want to do is take a company like Cargill, for example, and give them an extra \$8 million, \$10 million, \$15 million. That's who will get the money.

I know Mr. Easter said the farmers need it, but the reality is that this doesn't go to the farmers. This money will actually end up in the packing plants. It'll end up being utilized for their efficiencies or needs. It will not get passed on to farmers. I think the history has shown, in BSE, that programs like this that we think will funnel through the packing plants to farmers just did not happen or did not work. I can't see anything that has structurally changed in that scenario that would make me believe this would happen in this case.

The other thing I'm curious about is that they were asking for 30 months, I understand, for the \$31.70. What then, after 30 months? There has been no proposal, there has been no suggestion saying that after the 30 months we'll be at point Y or Z, and then we can deal with the market as the market delivers its results. I have that question.

Then we also have to talk about countervailability. Does it shut off markets? We haven't explored that. Is there actually a problem here, possibly, that if we do this, all of a sudden we have more markets shut down on us, which creates that domino effect that makes it harder and harder on our producers?

My goal is to help farmers, just like everybody else around this committee table. I believe everybody here is looking after their farmers, and that's what they want. I understand the industry and their ask, because they're trying to figure out a quick way to get results for farmers, but I think we actually have to go back and talk to some of our farmers a little bit more and find out exactly how we can best do that.

Actually, is the SRM side of this an issue that farmers really think is a...? Well, I think they think it's an issue. I think they recognize it's an issue, I won't say that. But how does the funding flow?

The other thing we need to look at as a government is if we have the proper regulations in place. Do we have the proper procedures in place for dealing with SRMs? Maybe we have to tweak that a little bit more too.

Mr. Bellavance, I can't support it because of that, because I think it's premature. I want to see any benefits actually get down to the farmers, and I just don't see that happening in this case. So I think we should take a step back and see if there's a better way of doing this that actually gets the results we want to see.

•(1555)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Atamanenko.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: I made a resolution a week or so ago to keep my emotions in check when I express anger, and I'll just tell you I'm angry that we couldn't have waited an hour to start debating this and to make a decision on whether we should do the motion or the report.

We have very important witnesses here who have come a long way. They have come a long way to share their expertise on a topic that we've just started to discuss and is to be debated in our country, while we're going back and forth getting comments on the record to please those people we represent.

I think it's inappropriate at this time, and Chair, I'd ask you to show some leadership and at least guarantee these folks that they will have an hour of our time whenever we finish this so that they don't go home having come here for just 20 minutes. That's all I'm going to say.

The Chair: Look, Mr. Atamanenko, I resent the fact about leadership. You could show some leadership. If you want to move a motion that we suspend debate on this motion and hear witnesses, then so be it, but I can't make motions from the chair.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: So moved.

The Chair: It's so moved.

Hon. Mark Eyking: On a point of order, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: There is absolutely no debate on it unless you have a distinct point of order, Mr. Eyking.

Hon. Mark Eyking: I thought I'd make a suggestion to you, Chair, and give you some assistance, because I faced this same situation three weeks ago. I was being flexible with the Conservatives at that time and I gave everybody a chance to give their opinion. But I think we also kept in mind the witnesses, so we brought it to a vote and got it dealt with, and then we brought the witnesses forward.

The Chair: I don't believe that's a point of order, Mr. Eyking.

I'm going to call the vote.

Do you have a point of order, Mr. Bellavance?

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Yes. I do not want my motion to disappear.

I think I explained why I had to introduce my motion at the beginning of this meeting, because it is very difficult...

[*English*]

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: I want to ask for the clerk's opinion on whether we have to vote on...

[*English*]

The Chair: I already have, Mr. Bellavance, and there's no debate on the motion. I'm going to call the question. All in favour of the motion?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: To suspend debate...?

The Chair: Yes, to suspend debate, hear the witnesses, and come back to business.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We will now hear from our witnesses.

First of all, we will hear from Mr. Arnold and Mr. Décary-Gilardeau. That's for five minutes or less, if you could, gentlemen. We would appreciate that. It is normally 10 minutes. I won't hold you right to the five minutes. It's just for questioning.

Mr. Michel Arnold (Executive Director, Option consommateurs): We will try to do it in seven minutes.

The Chair: Thanks again for coming here today, gentlemen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen, I am Michel Arnold, the CEO of Option Consommateurs. I am accompanied by Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau, the agri-food analyst for our organization,

First, I would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to share our thoughts on a consumer issue of great importance in the food chain, genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

At the very outset, I should like to introduce you to our association. Option Consommateurs has been in existence since 1983. The association's mission is to promote and defend the rights and interests of consumers. To do this, we employ a team of about 30 professionals.

Over the years, we have developed particular expertise in several areas, including budgeting and consumer indebtedness, financial services, health and food and energy. Moreover, we participated in the regulation of organic products and the development of the national standard on voluntary labelling and advertising of foods that are and are not products of genetic engineering.

Our guiding principles for consumer protection come from the United Nations. These principles emphasize that consumers should be protected “against risks to their health and safety”. They have the right to “access to adequate information to make informed choices”. This translates into simplicity, reliability and transparency in labelling. The information provided to consumers must be credible and verifiable.

For the last ten years, Option Consommateurs has participated actively in the discussion and debate on genetic engineering. Since 2000, we have produced eight research reports on specific issues related to GMOs, including food safety and the precautionary principle, Canadian readiness to provide traceability of food, and consumer participation in regulation. In short, over the years, Option Consommateurs has acquired a depth of expertise in consumer issues relating to GMOs.

The Canadian diet has changed radically in recent decades in terms of food consumption patterns and sourcing. Consumers have also become more demanding over the years. For example, since the latter part of the 20th century, the consumption of organic food in Canada has increased by 20% annually. More and more consumers want to eat healthy and good quality food.

Canadians want a real choice in matters dealing with GMOs. Approximately 80% of the Canadian population is in favour of mandatory labelling of GMOs. According to recent public opinion polls, in Quebec, it is 86% and in British Columbia, 79%.

Rightly or wrongly, consumers have many fears about GMOs. According to an Angus Reid poll, they worry about their health effects. They also wonder what impact this type of production has on the environment. We should note that Canadians know very little about methods of food production, whether it be in conventional agriculture, organic or genetically engineered food. Moreover, very few understand the regulatory process for GMOs.

• (1600)

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau (Analyst, Agri-food, Option consommateurs): Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen, given the level of consumer anxiety, Canada should have a great interest in formally adopting the precautionary principle. The widespread use of GMOs, including a significant portion entering the food chain, greatly increases the risk factor for this technology.

The adoption of the precautionary principle must be implemented through a strong operational approach. It must translate into a scientific approach characterized by a risk analysis in three stages: assessment, management and risk communication. Therefore, we encourage the consideration and implementation of all recommendations of the Committee on Ethics, Science and Technology of Quebec in its 2003 report entitled “The ethical management of GMOs”. The second recommendation addressed to the Government of Canada states that the approval of GMOs should be subject to a scientific assessment that takes into account the potential impacts of

these organisms on human or animal health and the environment and that it not be limited to an evaluation of foreseeable risks.

It is impossible today to talk about food safety without mentioning food traceability. For example, the listeriosis crisis and the mad cow disease crisis have raised many questions about the ability of the food chain to track animals and foodstuffs throughout the production chain.

When a government chooses to label genetically modified foods and implements a system of traceability and identification of those foods, it reinforces the allegations and, thereby, increases consumer confidence in this information and also in the entire food system. Traceability, however, must be controlled. And it must rely on a rigorous, consistent and reliable regime that is harmonized with international developments in the field.

Moreover, in light of our research, we can say that consumers want to exercise their fundamental rights to be well informed and to make informed choices through accurate labelling.

In April 2004, after three years of discussion within the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB), the Government of Canada created its own voluntary code on the labelling and advertising of foods that are and are not products of genetic engineering. The code is an effort to explore ways to identify those foods through labelling to help consumers make informed choices. Five years later, the CGSB was to conduct a mandated revision of the standards. We have observed that the code, unfortunately, has been highly inefficient. On the one hand, to our knowledge, no products appear voluntarily as genetically engineered. On the other hand, to our knowledge, only a few products were displayed without GMOs, and those that we have examined did not meet the voluntary code.

In 2004, Option Consommateurs had voted against this standard code because we believed it was inadequate. We were clearly right. In fact, the standard has not even fulfilled the intention of the code which was to better inform consumers.

The Canadian regulatory process for food crops and genetically engineered crops can be improved in terms of transparency, information and public participation.

In 2004, we conducted research that indicated that Canadians were concerned not only about GMOs, but the registration process. Five years later, nothing leads us to believe that the situation has changed. Instead, in a recent report published by the Government of Quebec, it is noted that, and I

quote: The lack of transparency and information regarding biotechnology in general can have an impact on the ability to choose knowingly or, alternatively, the ability for consumers to enter freely and intelligently in contract. This limitation may affect the credibility of economic agents, regulators and affect the very functioning of the economic performance of the sector.

We believe that many steps can be taken to improve transparency regarding GMOs. In our 2004 research, we made 21 recommendations and, although some time has passed, we believe that a majority of them are relevant to this day.

In conclusion, we take this opportunity to invite the government to fund independent research on GMOs. We have noted that, since 2004, the Office of Consumer Affairs has not funded a single research project on this still-relevant subject.

• (1605)

Mr. Michel Arnold: In light of our research, we respectfully submit three recommendations. I will briefly conclude with them.

First, Option Consommateurs recommends the adoption of the precautionary principle in relation to genetically modified organisms for which conditions of application are clearly defined, and where the process of decision-making is structured based on detailed scientific and other objective information. The precautionary principle is framed by a scientific approach characterized by a three-step risk analysis: assessment, management and risk communication.

Second, Option Consommateurs recommends that Canada adopt legislation as soon as possible for the implementation of mandatory labelling of GMOs in food and for an adequate system of traceability.

Third, Option Consommateurs recommends that labels do not merely indicate the presence or absence of genetically modified organisms in the product (the product approach), but also indicate the manufacturing process of a food product (the process approach).

Thank you for your attention.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to Mr. Yada, from the University of Guelph.

Dr. Rickey Yada (Department of Food Science, University of Guelph): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll keep to my five minutes or less.

The issue around GMO, I think, can be extended to any new technologies that face the food industry. We're seeing this with nanotechnology now, and some of the same kinds of debates that we saw with the GMO issue are arising. The issue is that we need to do a better job in educating our consumers. We need to give them balanced opinions about these issues. We need to have open and transparent debates about these issues.

Let me try to address some of the points the committee had sent us in a message on some of the issues it would like us to address.

From an agronomic point of view—and I'll raise issues more than solutions—there is the issue of herbicide resistance, which was the initial intent of some of the genetically modified products. But we've also seen now that there's the ability to enhance the nutritional quality of foods to portions of the community and to the world where they are nutritionally deficient. There are issues around tillage. One can debate the issue of lower tillage and of actually lowering the carbon footprint through lower tillage. There is the issue of a reduced reduction of exposure to herbicides and pesticides that can probably result.

But despite the benefits, there are some concerns. And the concerns are around allergens, the possible health issues around allergens through the introduction of genes. There is the issue of the

escape of genetic constructs. My colleague Dr. Ellis is more well versed in these issues and he could address those.

Where's the research being conducted? Well, the research is being conducted by companies such as Monsanto and Dow AgroSciences. We've seen a number of those products on the market.

If members take a look at the website for Health Canada, there's a comprehensive list of products and plants that have been approved. They talk about a 7- to 10-year period for these products to come to fruition. During that process there is a pre-market safety assessment. And I'll speak to the pre-market safety assessment a little bit later on.

Some of the other benefits, as I've mentioned before, include the production of possible medicinal products such as antibodies and, as I said, the whole issue around enhancing nutritional quality.

With regard to trade issues, there is the issue globally, of course, of countries that do and do not accept genetically modified organisms or plants. I was in Japan just recently. The Japanese food industry loves Canadian agriculture for the quality of the product that comes from Canada. They also like the ability to source both non-GM and GM products.

Finally, I'll talk a little bit about the regulatory system. The regulatory system, as members realize, comes through the office of biotechnology and science, which is under the purview of Health Canada. And my colleagues referred to the labelling issue. This is an issue that we debated when I was part of a Royal Society panel back in 2000. Dr. Ellis was the co-chair of that, so I hope Dr. Ellis will speak to that point.

According to some of my colleagues who have looked at the regulatory system—and no regulatory system is perfect—they feel that the regulatory system as mandated by Health Canada is one of the best in the world. But I understand there is still debate around this.

Finally, I'll mention to members that there is a valuable resource right in the city of Ottawa, and that's through a Genome Canada initiative called VALGEN, which is value generation through genomics. My colleague Dr. David Castle, at the University of Ottawa, leads this, so I would refer members to Dr. Castle for some of the ethical and social implications of genetically modified organisms.

With that, Mr. Chair, I conclude my comments.

• (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much for staying under the time.

Mr. Ellis, from the University of British Columbia.

Dr. Brian Ellis (Professor, Michael Smith Laboratories, University of British Columbia): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This is a huge topic and there's no way we're going to do justice to even a part of it. I'll comment on a few issues, as well as some that I'm simply not qualified to comment on.

Of the ones I'm aware of, one is the regulatory process Dr. Yada has referred to. I think it is a good regulatory process. However, it is still founded on a general concept of safety that is decades old. From my perspective, I think there are better tools that could be used within that regulatory process. I say that simply because the original tools were as good as they had at the time, but science has moved on and we have much better tools these days for understanding where changes in crops—and eventually, I suspect, animals—have occurred and what the implications of those changes might be. So I think there is room for improving the regulatory process.

Another place that can be improved is in transparency. As far as I can see, the government has consistently hidden behind the commercial information privacy acts and said they cannot reveal information that has been disclosed to them as part of the approval process. That is true; at this point they are pretty much hands-tied on that issue. But that's something that could be modified relatively easily. When I talk to the biotech companies, they say that most of the information they release to the regulators is not sensitive information and they would be perfectly comfortable releasing it. As a matter of fact, in the United States they do release it. The same information gets made public in the U.S. and is retained under cover here in Canada.

I don't think this sets the right tone for the public to be confident in the accuracy and validity of the regulatory process. I'm not faulting the regulators, but I'm saying that, the way the process has been going, the public has retained a strong undercurrent of suspicion about the suitability of this technology and its acceptability in the marketplace. It's very unfortunate that we've gotten to this point, because the next generation of GM crops that one might like to see come into the marketplace to resolve issues that might be of more interest to consumers is going to find it very difficult to get through the regulatory process. It's just going to get harder rather than easier, I would say, over the next few years.

So I see some distinct problems coming. I think some of them can be resolved. There's certainly an opportunity to pull better science into this picture. And there is an opportunity for the government to establish a more meaningful dialogue, as Dr. Yada said, with the public and interested parties to try to build a consensus around this technology and how it should be deployed.

I'll leave it there.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I hope everybody is agreed on five-minute rounds, like we did last Thursday. Is that okay with everybody?

Mr. Valeriote.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: I'd like to see you give the full hour, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm definitely doing that. That's not what this is about. It's to go to five-minute rounds from seven.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Gentlemen, thank you so much for attending. I'm sorry you were delayed in your presentations.

I just got back from the FAO summit in Rome last week. We all know there are a billion starving and undernourished people in the

world. We know our population is going to grow by another three billion by 2050, and we're going to have to increase food production by 70%. Frankly, in my mind, we need to deploy every strategy possible to do that in a meaningful way.

The problem with GMOs, of course, as you've noted, is that the public thinks there's a problem with them. And perception is reality. I've heard you say that transparency, research, traceability, and labelling are all things that will lead to a greater acceptance of GMOs, but I still sit and wonder if there's a problem with them. Is there a problem with GMOs? We know some countries are trying to resist the importation, etc. Yet I'm told that in Canada almost everything we eat has something GMO in it, right?

My question is this. After 10 years of transgenic varieties of canola, soya, and corn, do we now have reliable public data on the advantages and disadvantages of those GMOs from an environmental, agronomic, economic, and health perspective? You might debate this between you, if anyone has a differing opinion, which is fine with me.

Mr. Yada, can I ask you that first?

Dr. Rickey Yada: Thank you, Mr. Valeriote.

On the whole question of whether we can have an absolute zero and ensure absolute safety, I would be remiss if I were to say yes. No one can ever guarantee absolute safety, but with the current science, as Dr. Ellis has indicated, there are new technologies allowing for traceability. I would still argue that Canada has one of the safest food systems in the world. I would say that the fact that we've adopted this technology in certain sectors would be a good thing, and that we've done the necessary homework on the environment, health, and safety.

With regard to the consumers, I'll be absolutely candid about the consumer issues. As a consumer myself, I fear some of the unknowns in the future. The current science would say yes, there is an adequate safety net for these products right now, but will my future health be impacted? I don't know.

I don't know.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Before I ask my next question, is there anyone else?

Dr. Brian Ellis: I would just comment that there's no published evidence so far of negative health effects from the current generation of GM crops. There is certainly a series of studies out there about environmental changes that have occurred as a result of large-scale GM crop deployment. Just to be the devil's advocate on that, there were large-scale changes that accompanied the widespread use of pesticides and fertilizers too, so this is part of the ongoing manipulation of the environment that humans have indulged in for thousands of years.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: While I was in Rome, I attended an alternate conference at the same time, a conference of NGOs and farmers who were smallholders. One of their concerns expressed was about a control and a monopoly, really, of seed by—I hate to say it—Monsanto and other large companies...controlling the sale, controlling the use, etc.

Is that a legitimate concern? If it is, how do we manage that as a government?

•(1620)

Dr. Brian Ellis: [*Inaudible—Editor*]...touching that one.

Voices: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Arnold: I will be very honest with you. At Option Consommateurs, we do not claim to be experts in GMOs. However, I feel that what is important for earning the trust of the public, of our fellow citizens, is for the process to be as transparent as possible.

In Canada, we can commit to being as transparent as possible in studying GMOs. Whatever technology brings, we must provide the public with all the information. Then they can make the choice whether or not to use products containing GMOs.

[*English*]

Mr. Francis Valeriote: But why the hesitancy to answer my question? You guys chuckled. Who wants to answer that one?

Dr. Brian Ellis: Well, I mean, it's a political question; it has nothing to do with science. I'm a scientist. Do you as a government want to take on Monsanto? By and large, I think it's a tough battle. They have more lawyers than they have scientists—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Dr. Brian Ellis: —and I mean literally.

So yes, it's not an easy answer. Is it a problem? At the present time it is a problem, but part of it's also a perception problem. There are countries in the world that do not want to touch this technology because they see the corporate lock on the technology and they don't want to get tied up in that. So yes, it is an issue.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Okay.

Do I still have time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: No, you don't. We'll now move on to Mr. Bellavance.

Five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you for your testimony.

Mr. Arnold, you mentioned polls. This is not the first time that there have been polls. As long ago as 1999, when I was an assistant with the Bloc Québécois, we introduced a bill on the mandatory labelling of GMOs. Of course, we did not come up with a bill like that overnight. There were public and stakeholder consultations. Even back then, there was the same concern for transparency and for making sure consumers could know exactly what was on their plates. Recently, we took up the cause again, with another bill that was unfortunately not passed. That does not mean that we will not try again.

I have some questions about labelling. This is a voluntary program that the government agreed to put in place and that is currently in force. If I recall correctly, that was under the Paul Martin government in 2004. The voluntary code allows a tolerance of 5% for GMOs that does not have to be on the label. This is the same policy that we have today.

As an organization, have you reviewed that policy in the five years since? It need not have been an exhaustive study. I imagine that you are able to tell us if the policy is effective or if there is a place for such a policy. Or are you here again today to tell us that we need to be transparent, because, in fact, with a policy like this that is not at all binding on the industry, nothing has changed?

Mr. Michel Arnold: Unfortunately, our experience with voluntary codes is not a happy one. In the financial services area, for example, there are a number of voluntary codes. Unfortunately, voluntary codes are, as their name implies, voluntary. They include little or nothing in the way of enforcement measures, so people comply only if they want to comply. Sometimes, that creates much more confusion than anything else, because, often, the people who should be applying the codes have no idea that they exist.

I will let François answer your question on labelling GMOs, because he has more practical experience in the area.

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: I have the voluntary code here. It contains a number of issues and problems that have been severely criticized. They are what made us decide to vote against the code in its present form. Of course, the tolerance level of 5% was a problem. In Europe, they have a tolerance of 0.9%. There are various tolerances, but they are often in the region of 1%.

In my view, one of the most insidious things about this code is that it comes with obligations. I mentioned that in my presentation. If you want to make any mention of GMOs in a product, you have to follow the voluntary code. So then, there are steps in place that are not compatible with it. For example, it even became an obstacle for flour organizations and producers in Quebec. They wanted to tell consumers clearly, to the best of their understanding, that their products did not contain GMOs. But they were not allowed to do so because their logo, their trademark, did not conform to the code.

On the one hand, no company has voluntarily indicated that its products contain GMOs. On the other hand, those companies that wanted to show that their products did not contain any were not able to do so. That is the extent to which the code is rigid and inflexible. You can easily criticize the code from a number of perspectives.

•(1625)

Mr. André Bellavance: You mentioned tolerance levels. At the moment, a little more than 40 countries have mandatory policies on the labelling of GMOs. I assume that everyone agrees that there must be some tolerance.

Mr. Décary-Gilardeau, you mentioned some countries. If I remember correctly, the level is 0.9% in Europe and 1% in New Zealand.

Do you have reports from those countries that show how the tolerance levels allow them to produce the desired effects? Do you know whether consumers really know what they are eating and whether agricultural producers are unduly penalized by those standards? Even if you are very strict and set the tolerance level at 0%, it is difficult to ensure that a product is completely harmless, as Mr. Yada said.

Does your organization feel that the tolerance level is adequate? Is 1% acceptable?

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: Perfectly. You mentioned New Zealand. There is Australia too. Both are under the same jurisdiction. New Zealand is one of the world's largest producers of GMOs. There is no inherent contradiction. It is just that labelling is mandatory there.

We could easily make labelling mandatory in Canada too, even though we continued to produce them. Perhaps consumption habits would change, but the two things are not incompatible. You can see that in New Zealand, which produces GMOs.

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bellavance.

Mr. Atamanenko, you have five minutes.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Thanks to all of you for being here. I don't think we've really had a very thorough debate on the effect of GM foods in Canada, and I think it's time this happened. Hopefully this committee will initiate that and this will be part of that whole process.

For the information of committee members, there is a meeting this evening at seven o'clock at Saint Paul University dealing with SmartStax corn, entitled "Canada's lack of assessment for Monsanto's SmartStax GM corn", if anybody's interested.

It seems to me there are arguments for and against. I could summarize it with a paragraph from an article by a fellow by the name of Don Lotter. It's called "The Genetic Engineering of Food and the Failure of Science". He says:

A major conflict over this issue has developed. On one side are scientists, universities and corporations who have invested nearly 25 years and tens of billions of dollars in the genetic engineering of crop plants. On the other side is a flood of evidence that the process of food plant transgenics (genetic engineering) is deeply and fatally flawed and has been resting on a theoretical foundation that has crumbled away as the science of genetics reinvents itself.

One of the points he's making is that there's a whole idea of genomic disruption. There are genetic and protein integrity problems arising from crop transgenics. If I try to get it down to my level of understanding, this means there are health problems. There are studies that have been found throughout the world. For example, in the 1990s, one of Europe's genetic engineers found that genetic engineering of potatoes caused health problems in rats. I met with Professor Seralini from France a couple of years ago, who said that he had done studies that showed liver problems in animals. Often, GE foods were released in the environment within four months of testing, and we didn't really know the effects.

I'll stop there, but it seems to me that we haven't really used the precautionary principle in looking at the health aspects. Could I ask you to comment on this?

• (1630)

Dr. Brian Ellis: I think it's fair to say that the precautionary principle has not been the mainstay of the regulatory system.

I would also say that I have not seen any credible scientific reports—I mean reproduced in other labs and confirmed—of health effects, even at the laboratory level. Those are scattered reports and they have not been reproduced, to the best of my knowledge. I'm not necessarily defending the technology, but I will defend the science.

Just to turn the coin the other way, there were a couple of papers in recent years showing that when genomes are disrupted by inserting a transgene, there are definitely changes in the transcription—in other words, the readout of genes—from the rest of the organism, and they are stable changes. This is part of what I was referring to when I said there is better science today than what we had ten years ago. We could be doing a better job of monitoring what's going on in those plants. I don't think that necessarily translates into health issues, but it does send a flag up that says putting this gene in is not as simple as the industry sometimes likes to portray it, that we know exactly where it goes, we know exactly what it does, end of story. That's not the way organisms behave when they get a new gene. I think there are some issues that could be addressed better, yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: Clearly, we are advocating the precautionary principle in Canada. In the case you mention, it was not applied. With GMOs, there are certainly economic and political issues, but, at the end of the day, the most important thing is to find out the effects on human and animal health. We cannot always base ourselves on foreseeable effects. Whether GMOs are approved or not, we really have to have independent scientific studies done, so that their claims can be verified. That, for us, is the precautionary principle.

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: We do not claim to be health experts. As the gentleman mentioned, perception is often very close to reality, even with science behind it. I am sure of that.

The fact that Canadians are so afraid of GMOs perhaps shows that more research should be done and more information should be made available. It is not right that analysts, people who carefully follow the area, should have an enormous amount of difficulty understanding the approval process. My colleagues in other organizations also say that we have to constantly look for explanations and information. The processes are cumbersome and complex, which makes people distrust them. They distrust the science. This is a matter of trust. Trust will return if we are transparent, and unambiguously so.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Atamanenko.

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

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you very much.

The Chair: I'm sorry, it's Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback: First of all, gentlemen, I want to thank you for having the patience and the time to stay. I apologize for the performance we had before your presentations, which was unfortunate. It's the nature of politics around this table, which is also unfortunate.

I'm going to start off with the benefits of GMO. Mr. Yada, you talked about some of the benefits, for example, reduced tillage and reduced fuel costs. Do you want to highlight some of the other benefits to the consumer of the different GMO products?

• (1635)

Dr. Rickey Yada: Further to those discussions, I think the fact that you can possibly reduce the acreage of the crops you're growing because you get less damage to those crops would be an advantage, so as I was indicating, the carbon footprint would be an advantage.

I think the whole issue around the nutritional quality of products that can be enhanced through genetically modified technologies is a real benefit, given that many parts of the world are suffering from nutritional deficiencies. Mr. Valeriote indicated that we are facing world food shortages. GMOs are part of that strategy. We need to improve the way we transport some of our commodities to parts of the world.

Mr. Randy Hoback: It's interesting. I grow GMO canola, for example, and looking at my crop yields from probably 10 years ago, if we got 25 bushels an acre, we were excited; we always dreamed of 40 bushels an acre. This last year we pushed 45 bushels and were disappointed we didn't get 55. If you go to the corn industry, it's probably threefold or fourfold that.

What also excites me in the canola industry is the end product from the GMO side—for example, the IMC canola that Cargill brought out and how it's adding healthy oil into the food system, reducing cholesterol and the like.

Mr. Ellis, you talked about there being no credible reclamation. We hear stories that this is not safe, and we have this study here and that study there. Is it true, though, that there has been no positive peer review on those studies to say that they're credible?

Dr. Brian Ellis: Are you asking whether those studies that have reported deleterious effects have not been—

Mr. Randy Hoback: Deleterious, negative effects. Correct.

Dr. Brian Ellis: I haven't seen any studies that have confirmed deleterious effects on human health or animal health.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Looking at making sure our food is safe is the main responsibility of government, is it not?

Dr. Brian Ellis: It's presumably one of them, yes.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Is it our responsibility to market the product?

Dr. Brian Ellis: No.

Mr. Randy Hoback: So the government should have no role in marketing of a product, whether it's GMO or non-GMO. Is that correct?

Dr. Brian Ellis: The government presumably wants to do what the citizens ask.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Okay. And presumably our role in this case would be wanting to ensure that when a consumer takes on a product, it's safe.

Dr. Brian Ellis: Yes, but you have to realize that the safety record is the result of 10 years' of deployment. It's a historical record, not a projection forward.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Nothing is guaranteed, and you can't project with 100% certainty; I think we would all agree with that. But you have to look at practicalities and use reasonable forecasting, to the best of your abilities. I feel the industry has done that. Would you not agree?

Dr. Brian Ellis: I think the industry could do a better job, and I think the regulators could do a more transparent job. I'm not faulting the regulators for what they do, however. I think they do it well.

Mr. Randy Hoback: You're just suggesting there are new tools they can maybe look at? I think we'd all agree on that.

Dr. Brian Ellis: Yes.

Mr. Randy Hoback: When it comes to labelling, is there legislation preventing you from marketing as non-GMO?

[Translation]

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: Yes, there is the voluntary code. People who want to sell a product without GMOs have to comply with the voluntary code. People who want to sell a product that contains GMOs and indicate that fact on the product use the warning “contains GMOs”. They must comply with the voluntary code. As soon as you want to say “GMO” on your product to indicate that it does, or does not, contain any, the voluntary code becomes mandatory.

Is that the question you were asking?

[English]

Mr. Randy Hoback: Yes. But the voluntary code is just ensuring your statement is actually true, is it not?

[Translation]

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: Yes, in fact, it...

[English]

Mr. Randy Hoback: If it were organics, you'd have a voluntary code you would have to meet, would you not?

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: I'm sorry. Could you say that again?

Mr. Randy Hoback: They have a code amongst themselves that they have to meet to prove organics are grown on organic land.

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: For organics, there is a regulation.

[Translation]

It applies to cross-border products. For example, the “Biologique Canada Organic” label is mandatory for products that are going to be shipped from Saskatchewan to Alberta. But the situation is quite different for products that are going to stay in Alberta.

Mr. Michel Arnold: The important thing to understand, I feel, is that, if a company wants to label its products, it has to comply with the voluntary code. But the fact is that it is not required to label them. That is where the difference lies, in our opinion.

• (1640)

[English]

Mr. Randy Hoback: I guess my comment back to you on that is that the role of government is to ensure the product produced is safe by all reasonable means, which in this case we have. It is not our responsibility to market. We have an issue right now going on in the U.S. with country-of-origin labeling, where we have a classic example with beef that we know is safe. They know it's safe, but they're trying to create a regulation through COOL that prevents Canadian beef from coming in.

So that's the problem with trying to get involved in marketing products as a government instead of just regulating the safety of the product.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: It is true that the government must ensure the safety of its citizens, but it also has to respect one of the major rights of consumers, the right to have the information necessary to make informed choices.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hoback.

We'll now move to Mr. Easter for five minutes.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank you folks for coming.

We did have a little debate previously, and I just want you to know, when you listen to the sympathetic word on the other side there, that some of your time was taken. We had a committee meeting in which witnesses waited for over an hour or an hour and a half. We had to extend the meeting because there was a filibuster on the government side. It's not the first time it's happened, but they're trying to make it seem that way.

Mr. Randy Hoback: It was your side, Wayne.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Anyway, folks, that was just to set the record straight.

This is an extremely serious issue in terms of trust. I'm from Prince Edward Island. We are selling an increasing number of products to Japan, and one of the great difficulties in that marketplace is that they want absolute assurance that it's GMO-free, for their public's reasons, whatever they may be. I think our people who are in the industry that ship GMO-free products to Japan are certainly very concerned when another GMO product of a completely different crop comes in and starts to be produced, because of the impact it could have on that market.

I think the key—I believe it was Mr. Arnold who said it—to the future here is all about trust. This relates to transparency a great deal. What has to be done to make the system more transparent so that trust can develop? That trust isn't there right now.

Part of it is related to big companies. I actually led the fight against rBGH in terms of Monsanto's injection of the product into dairy cows to produce more milk. The only one that was going to gain from that was Monsanto, certainly not the cow and certainly not the Canadian dairy industry. I think there are good GMOs and bad GMOs. Some work in some countries; some don't in others.

What do we have to do to achieve that trust, which relates to transparency?

[Translation]

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: First, as Mr. Ellis mentioned, it could publish some industry documents. We are guessing that the documents contain secret material. But the research we did in 2004 showed that they were going much too far. Access to any information about the industry is systematically denied. We ask if the industry really wants to issue the information. We could find a happy medium that would keep trade secrets confidential. But there is still plenty of other information that could be published.

Actually, environmental and consumer organizations are asking for a lot of epidemiological reports and want access to this industry data. We are not asking for access to secrets. We just want to be able to see what kind of scientific research has been done so that we can go to research professionals and ask them whether the science is good or bad. Then things would be getting more transparent.

How can we tie other things into the approval process? There is a huge mistrust of the industry and of the government's approval process. I do not think that it is the officials' fault. But there has to be some public thought on the matter, and we are not seeing that at the moment.

• (1645)

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Does anyone else have anything they want to add?

Dr. Yada.

Dr. Rickey Yada: Mr. Easter, I think the issue around trust or mistrust is really an issue of understanding and for us to do a better job as scientists to educate the public and the consumer about what we do as scientists, so that they have a better idea of the kinds of studies that are being undertaken. We need to do a better job of explaining those results.

As my colleague was saying about trust or mistrust, I really think it is an issue of understanding and science literacy. I think all countries need to do a better job of increasing science literacy.

The Chair: That's it, Mr. Easter, unless it's very brief.

Hon. Wayne Easter: That's okay.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley, for five minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to follow up a little bit.

In terms of the GMOs, I've reaped the benefits of GMOs on my farm. I think all of us would recognize some of the concerns. I think Mr. Valeriote raised some very solid questions regarding where we would be without GMOs.

Can anyone tell me where we are in terms of the number of GMOs in Canada?

Dr. Brian Ellis: Do you mean the number of approvals or the number of crops?

Mr. Bev Shipley: Well, let's go with GMO crops. What's the number we would be growing in Canada that are actually genetically modified?

Dr. Brian Ellis: I'm sorry to be difficult, but is that at the level of a variety or at the level of a crop? There are many different canola varieties out there that are GMO.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I think that helps. Actually, we have canola and there are a number of varieties within it. We have corn and there are a number of varieties within corn. We have in fact soy beans.

Dr. Brian Ellis: Yes, maize.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I guess what I'm talking about—I think the point has been raised and has been answered—is the fact that a number of GMOs are actually playing a significant role in agriculture right now. We're just going through a study on competition, and I can tell you that without the help of genetically modified organisms, agriculture would be in a much more difficult situation.

I think we always have to be science-based, so I appreciate your comments. I support GMOs in most cases, but I think we always have to have that alert bell in terms of knowing what we're going to do when the approval process comes along.

You talked about a number of them in terms of the benefits. I want to bring up an article I read on the growing of rice in countries where salt water has been filtering into the fresh water system. Obviously rice won't grow if it isn't in fresh water. There's now some genetically modified rice that is actually able to grow, or it's being proposed that it can grow, in salt water. These are not in countries like Canada. These are in countries where they actually are struggling to grow foods that become staple for them.

It seems to me that absolute safety is where we're going with regard to the labelling or with regard to the research that goes with it. Whether it's conventional, whether it's GMO, or whether it's organic, any of those three, is there any absolute safety? Is the risk any higher in GMOs, and have there been any studies to indicate that?

That's for Mr. Yada, Mr. Ellis, or whoever.

• (1650)

Dr. Brian Ellis: There's no absolute safety in anything, obviously.

Is there any evidence that can quantify the risk? I would argue probably no. First of all, just what range of factors do you take into account? How many of the externalities do you address? It's almost a meaningless question.

I'm not saying it's something the public isn't interested in. I just don't think it's addressable. I think the question is far more complex than that.

Mr. Bev Shipley: And maybe that's it; I think it is a question, actually, that consumers are really concerned about. You can say that it isn't one of value, but I think somebody should be able to tell us if the risk is higher in any of them. Is the risk higher in GMOs than it is in organics or in conventional? I think somebody should tell us that.

We've been having GMOs for I don't know how many years. If we're going to continue to adopt GMOs, somebody is going to have to raise the flag and say that this was a huge issue, that we did scientific research, that we did study after study. When that issue comes to us, then we're going to have to start looking at how we can actually feed some of the third world countries.

How many countries do you know of that have now opened their borders to some sort of acceptance of GMOs? Do you know if there are any coming in, mostly with grains?

Dr. Brian Ellis: Countries that didn't accept it before that have now accepted it?

Mr. Bev Shipley: That's it.

Dr. Brian Ellis: I'm not sure of the numbers. I think there may be, yes, a small number that have, particularly in Africa. I know that Australia has moved from a non-GMO stance to accepting GMO.

Once we get into GMO wheat, which is back on the agenda again, it will change a lot of things around the world agriculturally.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Do I have any more time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You're just on the edge. If you have a very quick question, I'll allow it.

Mr. Bev Shipley: That's all right. I want to make sure my colleagues have another turn.

The Chair: Okay.

I'll move to Ms. Bonsant, for five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Arnold, a little earlier, you said that studies show that some GMOs are harmful to animals. Animals and humans are not far apart. You also said that they may also be harmful to the soil.

Do they dry the soil out? Does it contain more nitrogen or pesticides? What do GMOs do to the soil?

Mr. Michel Arnold: François is in a better position to answer your question than I am.

Ms. France Bonsant: One or the other.

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: As we mentioned in our presentation, it is a question of perception. The data we have come from polls in which Canadians were asked what concerned them. Some brought up allergies. These are perceptions, they are not scientifically proven. But they are widely held.

As Mr. Ellis mentioned, the risks are extremely complex and extremely numerous. There are issues of genetic contamination and there are long-term health concerns. We do not know. That is why we support the precautionary principle so strongly. Especially since, in some cases, industry data shows that 90% of some products are modified. So I assume that it is true. In Canada, the amount of modified canola is extremely high; 50% or 60% of soya and corn are modified. Inevitably, these products will show up in the food chain.

We feel that that comes with risks, but we are unable to put figures to it because we do not have the scientific data that would enable us to nail it down. But it is so pervasive that, at a minimum, the precautionary principle has to be applied. The precautionary principle states that, in the absence of certainty...When the risk is high, the principle must be applied. Science will never be able to give us 100% certainty.

Ms. France Bonsant: Do you mean that GMO producers and scientists cannot guarantee 100% that there will be no side effects, just as they cannot guarantee 100% that there will?

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: Science will never be able to do that.

Ms. France Bonsant: Neither one nor the other.

Mr. Michel Arnold: No.

Ms. France Bonsant: Let us take companies like Cargill and Monsanto as examples. It always goes back to what happened in India. Monsanto was making cotton-based products, but the cotton was infested with pests and half the cotton fields were devastated. When people found that out, they began to be afraid of GMOs. But the seeds must have been approved.

Who approves these products? Is it the company, like Monsanto or Cargill? Is it done in strict secrecy? Perhaps they do not want to reveal their secrets. Is approval done by Health Canada scientists? Who grants the certification, the approval for a product before it can be sold?

• (1655)

Mr. Michel Arnold: Are you talking about Canada?

Ms. France Bonsant: Yes. They do not have the same laws in India. I live in Canada.

Mr. Michel Arnold: It is Health Canada.

Ms. France Bonsant: Health Canada approves products that come from...

Mr. Michel Arnold: There is a process that the industry has to go through to get its products approved.

Ms. France Bonsant: Is the approval not done by an independent company? Is it only done by the government?

Perhaps the scientists, Mr. Yada or Mr. Ellis, can answer the question. Do private companies do the approval or is it done by the companies themselves? That is where I am a little confused. I am

uncomfortable with approving natural products. I am wondering where the approval of Monsanto products is done.

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: Natural health products are something else entirely. The company just sends in its own documents and there is no checking. That is a whole different world.

With GMOs, there is a whole process. Health Canada reviews the documents that the company sends, including the ones that deal with how wholesome the product is.

Mr. Michel Arnold: I guess Health Canada scientists do it.

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Yada, have you...

[English]

Dr. Rickey Yada: Thank you. As my colleague has indicated, Health Canada is responsible for setting up the criteria, the company will then supply the data, and then Health Canada will do the assessment.

I'll turn it over to my colleague Dr. Ellis.

Dr. Brian Ellis: That's true for the health issues. Environmental impacts and the non-health issues are dealt with by CFIA. Then finally, all these recommendations come to an approval committee. They don't talk about approval, they talk about "not denying"—but it's an interesting turn of phrase.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: Average people, who are not scientists and do not understand any of this, just want to do their shopping. They want to know whether the products they are buying contain GMOs or not. Young families, mine included, are less and less enthusiastic about having chemicals in the products they buy. More and more, they want natural products. Having labelling that is not mandatory complicates things.

Mr. Michel Arnold: At present, labelling GMOs in Canada is voluntary. It is really not mandatory.

I want Option Consommateurs' position to be very clear here: we are neither for nor against GMOs. In some cases, we might say they can have some beneficial effects for agriculture, and so on, but we also have to take a long-term view. That is not the issue. We do not have enough information to take a position for or against GMOs.

However, we are for consumers having information, such as whether the products they buy do or do not contain GMOs.

Ms. France Bonsant: So you are in favour of choice: consumers can decide whether they will buy them or not. It is a bit like the people who are allergic to peanut oil. In their case, they have no choice, but at least there is a label on the products saying "may contain peanut oil".

[English]

The Chair: France.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: Right.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: That's okay. You were making a point, so I let you go on, Ms. Bonsant.

We'll now move to Mr. Lemieux for five minutes.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On the good discussion we're having on GMOs, I want to underline that food safety comes first—particularly health safety—when we're talking about humans and what they consume, as well as livestock and the impact on the environment. I think everybody has agreed on that. I don't know anyone who says that safety should not come first. I think it's an important point. Madam Bonsant was asking about that, and people are concerned about their health and whether something is safe. They want to know what's in the products. So I think it's fair to say that everybody has the health and safety of Canadians, livestock, and the environment in mind.

Second, it is important that we make science-based decisions. In fact, we are very open about putting pressure on other countries that don't make science-based decisions. So science-based decisions are a very important part of the regulatory process.

On the regulatory process, either Mr. Ellis or Mr. Yada said they felt that approvals were going to become much more difficult in the future, or almost impossible. Could you elaborate on why you think that is the trend?

• (1700)

Dr. Brian Ellis: It's primarily because a lot of the products under development in the pipeline right now involve modifying the plant's natural characteristics. So you're basically pushing it in a particular direction using its internal machinery, as opposed to the products out there right now, into which what I would call an alien gene has been dropped. It does its job. It's sort of like a spaceship out there. But when you start to push the plant to become more cold resistant or to enhance its resistance to a fungal pathogen, you're really stretching the internal machinery. I don't think the tools we've been using until now to assess those plants are going to be as informative as they should be.

On the other hand, the bottom line in the assessment process is whether this thing grows, looks, behaves, and tastes like canola. As far as we can tell, it does. So that's probably still the criterion they're going to use. But I would argue that these more subtle changes that are being contemplated right now will be very hard for the regulators to deal with.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Does anyone else want to comment on that? No.

I'd like to know what sort of interaction you have had with commodity groups. There are the science-based arguments, to be sure, and then there are market considerations. One of the things I've noted is that market considerations tend to be made mostly by the actual groups and organizations that represent a particular commod-

ity, because they're the ones trying to facilitate trade into other countries.

This is going to be interesting, because I think we're going to be coming back to GMOs in the future. Mr. Atamanenko has a bill that touches on it, and I think we're going to have a study on this when the bill comes in front of the committee for review. So I'm wondering if you've had any interaction with the commodity groups, and what kind of information you're receiving from them on GMOs.

Dr. Brian Ellis: In my earlier career I worked with the Canola Council, and there's no question about how receptive they are to GM canola. It's been a real success story. On the other side of the coin, I have interacted with greenhouse growers in British Columbia, for instance, and with berry growers, and neither group wants to touch GM.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Is that based more on a scientific concern or a market concern?

Dr. Brian Ellis: It's absolutely a market concern. This gets back to the labelling business. Nobody in their right mind would put a GM label on a product in the marketplace right now if they didn't have to. So voluntary labelling will not work. It is so demonized as a technology, in the public's view, so why would anybody do it?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: On the other side, have there been any interactions with industry and local associations?

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: Yes, we have worked with organizations that deal with organic products, including oils. They are very concerned about cross-contamination.

At the moment, the organic sector is not asking for testing. Products are not tested to see whether they contain genetically modified material. The approach is rather to check whether the processes comply with the standards that are in place. So the checkers make sure the producers comply with the required standards and then let them use the seal that says that the product is organic.

I am looking 5, 10, perhaps 15 years down the road, because the pressure is now more and more on the product itself rather than on the process. The time will come when products cannot contain GMOs. As I said, it will not happen overnight, but it will happen eventually.

Some oil producers are running into difficulties because their organic products are contaminated. We have heard a lot about the contaminated flax that was found in Europe. Flax exports have been halted. Flax is considered a very promising health product because of its high omega-3 content. It is a major value-added market that is in great demand at the moment. This is literally a disaster for flax producers this year, since Europe is also part of their market.

These are not things that Option Consommateurs has studied a great deal. It is not in our research area. But some people we work with are afraid, perhaps with justification, perhaps not. But the fears are certainly to do with the market.

●(1705)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: The fears come from consumers. It is the consumers who can put pressure on the producers.

Mr. Michel Arnold: Actually, the perception is that consumers get products that may be genetically modified.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Arnold, your last comment was on perception, and sometimes perception can be deceiving. Before I move to Mr. Eyking, I want to comment on something Mr. Décary-Gilardeau said.

I think you were implying that fear of the unknown should keep us from moving ahead. And I guess my comment is that a certain amount of testing has been done. Whenever you go to approve a new product, whether it's a pharmaceutical, a pesticide, a herbicide, or an animal drug, there's a certain amount of testing. I think you're saying there's not enough testing, and I don't think that's a fair assessment.

The fear of the unknown shouldn't stop us from going ahead. There'll always be debate about a reasonable amount of testing. Everybody has a certain opinion on it, and that's fine. I don't know whether you want to comment on that. But if there's that perception about something and both sides haven't been shown—or all of the truth—I don't think that's healthy, do you?

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: With all respect, Mr. Chair, I say that the best way to change perceptions is with information—the clearer the information, the better. In our opinion, this is the only way to change perceptions. Yes, perhaps consumers may be prepared to get products labelled “GMO” if they have enough clear and pertinent information. That is not the case at the moment.

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: I feel that we can do much the same as Mr. Yada has done. It is important to do things in an organized way and to do them well. We are hearing a lot about nanoproducts at the moment. Consumers are becoming more and more concerned because they do not know what they are. Once again, it is a matter of education, scientific education. They are complex questions.

There are consumers and other people who feel that things are being done backwards. At the moment, there are 2,000 products on the market that contain nanoparticles and they are products that are applied to the skin, that are in direct contact with the skin. Do we currently have the science we need to be able to say that they are safe? I do not know. But there is the perception that things are perhaps happening a little too quickly.

But, Mr. Chair, the questions you are asking are very good ones.

[English]

The Chair: I will just carry that out, if I could. When individuals or organizations like yours put that out there and feed that perception, is that really fair? Is that really the direction they should take? That's how I see it, to a degree. You talk about wanting to get that information out there, but if you feed bad information into a computer, you're going to have bad information coming out.

●(1710)

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: Once again, Mr. Chair, with all respect, I have to tell you that we are not feeding this perception that consumers have, we are just passing it on to you.

Mr. François Décary-Gilardeau: Our communications, in fact, are all about information. We have never been opposed to GMOs. We look at what people want and we communicate that. That is our modest contribution.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, thanks very much.

Mr. Eyking.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This week *The Economist* magazine had a large article dealing with the challenges of feeding the people of the planet in the next 50 years. They cited the different reasons we're going to have pressure on our food supply. The population will be hitting 10 billion. They talked about the Asians eating more meat, which is going to translate to more grains being used. They talked about biofuels. And the other major one is climate change, where you're going to have less agricultural land and you're going to have more pests and diseases.

They mentioned how in the sixties and the seventies we had the green revolution in Asia and how it took these countries from being starving countries to becoming economic powerhouses. But then they went on to say that GMOs might be the answer in this century to how we can feed the planet and how we can deal with the shortages, especially in Africa.

There was a bit of a debate about whether we should introduce GMOs in Africa or Central America. The question could be to anybody here, or maybe everybody could give me a little bit of an answer. What do you think? How are the GMOs going to play, or how could they play, a role in dealing with the challenge we're going to have in feeding the planet in the next 50 years?

Dr. Rickey Yada: I think the challenges we face are population growth, water shortage, and energy crises. GMOs could be part of that solution. And Dr. Ellis, being a plant scientist, could probably comment on this. There is a tremendous amount of work being done on salt-tolerant plants, drought-tolerant plants, as we face some of these climate issues. As I said, it's part of the solution to the problem.

Dr. Brian Ellis: I think they will probably be useful and might even be quite important in some areas. Are they useful and important in the North American industrial agriculture? I would argue no, they're simply a way of making the producer's life easier and of probably making more money off the crop. That doesn't feed the planet, necessarily.

So yes, I think the technology is actually going to see its real value in specific agricultural challenges, not in the current models.

Hon. Mark Eyking: You have no comment?

Mr. Michel Arnold: I have no comment. Absolutely not.

Hon. Mark Eyking: I'll go back to Dr. Ellis. How would you see that dealing especially with the African challenge? How do you see this translating there? Should we be working with the Africans—because they have different climates, different plants—on it?

Dr. Brian Ellis: There's a lot of interest in some quarters of the world in working with the Africans on the crops that are important to Africa. I know, for instance, there's a big project on cassava and trying to get better yields and better disease and pest resistance. That addresses a very real need. It's the staple crop of some countries in Africa, and there's no way you're going to substitute something for it, realistically.

So yes, there are situations like that, and the risk tolerance will be higher in situations like that. This kind of decision will be taken over and over again in different contexts.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Should the UN be involved in monitoring how this is dealt with in underdeveloped countries? Should there be a watchdog so that some of these chemical companies will not take it over and, the next thing you know, they're faced with the same challenges as we have here, such as farmers not being able to use their own seed? Should there be a different world order on how that's dealt with?

• (1715)

Dr. Brian Ellis: I don't know what the best regulator would be. The example of golden rice was a classic one. You've probably heard about that at various levels. It was developed with the idea of making a nutritionally enhanced rice. When they actually tried to roll it out in rice breeding programs, it was tied up in so many patents owned by

so many different companies that it was impossible to release it. It took years of negotiation, and the companies finally had to agree, by and large under public pressure, to allow those varieties to be bred into rice stocks. Farmers could use it cost-free, as long as they weren't making something like more than \$10,000 a year. It had to be kept out of commercial production, but it could go to small-hold farmers.

That was a creative solution. As for whether it's a model for future decisions of that sort, I don't know, but it's a different environment altogether when you come to small-hold farmers in other countries.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Eyking.

The bells are ringing, gentlemen. That's our notice to go for a vote.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I think we have time for a vote, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much to our witnesses for being here today. I appreciate your being patient with us.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a small budget item to deal with—the money allotted for this GMO study. We would be very quick, if I had your agreement to do it.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chair, let it be left to next meeting. We can vote on André's motion first, or we can vote on this.

The Chair: First of all, Mr. Bellavance can bring his motion back on the floor anytime he wants. He hasn't done that at this point, but I have this here.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, this is no longer Mr. Bellavance's motion, first of all. It's the committee's motion.

The Chair: Exactly.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Second of all, the bells are ringing. As per the rules, unless you have unanimous consent—

The Chair: It doesn't look as though I have consensus to go ahead with it.

We are adjourned until Thursday.

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