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—
Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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• (0850)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Chloé O'Shaughnessy): Good morning, honourable members.

Honourable members of the committee, I see that we have a quorum. We can now proceed to the election of the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the government party. I would also like to inform members that the clerk of the committee can receive motions only for the election of the chair. The clerk cannot receive any other types of motions and cannot entertain points of order or participate in debate.

I am now ready to receive motions to that effect.

Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): I move that Larry Miller be chair.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. Storseth that Mr. Miller be elected as chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Larry Miller duly elected as chair of the committee.

Before inviting Mr. Miller to take the chair, if the committee wishes, we will now proceed to the election of the vice-chairs.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): I move that the Honourable Mark Eyking be one of the vice-chairs.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. Hoback that Mr. Eyking be elected as first vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any other motions?

Mr. Eyking.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Bellavance.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): We're just asking you if you accept. Do you accept?

Hon. Mark Eyking: Yes, I accept. I thought they were looking for a vice-chair

The Clerk: Actually, I'd just like to remind members at this time that according to Standing Order 106(2), the first vice-chair must be a member of the official opposition.

It has been moved by Mr. Hoback that Mr. Eyking be elected as first vice-chair of the committee. Are there any further motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Eyking duly elected as vice-chair of the committee.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the second vice-chair shall be a member of an opposition party other than the official opposition party.

Yes, Ms. Bonsant?

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): I nominate Mr. André Bellavance.

The Clerk: Are there any further nominations?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Bellavance duly elected as second vice-chair of the committee.

I now invite Mr. Miller to take the chair.

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thank you once again, ladies and gentlemen.

As you know, as the clerk has been calling this meeting, basically it's over, but I would suggest that we use the rest of the time we have today for a steering committee or a subcommittee, whatever you want to call it, to set direction.

Wayne.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, I think we should try to determine our agenda through to at least the end of November and perhaps Christmas, Mr. Chair. I know I have a couple of motions on the floor. We're not dealing with those now, but those motions, or the intent of them, could be dealt with, I think, at the steering committee by looking at the agenda we should follow.

I had put in a request to look at the advance payments program, and the payback terms for hogs and beef. I would like that, if possible, to be considered at our initial meeting.

I have actually three cases I'm working on that are in financial trouble. It looked as though two of them were going to be able to cashflow their operations, but when the announcement came on the advanced payments and they set dates, those cashflows were thrown out. So I think we need to talk about that issue and have the department in to see whether other payback terms can be arranged. Otherwise there are going to be quite a number of people who won't survive. So I see that as a priority.

Certainly the second area would be inspections of imported food products. The CFIA auditor gave a report, so I think we should look at that fairly early too. The minister is saying one thing, but he's mostly talking domestic. The audit is saying something else. Farmers are concerned that imported products don't have to meet the same production standards or inspection standards as theirs do, so we need to deal with the facts.

I'd suggest those two issues. They might take two or three meetings at the most.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Thank you, Chair.

First of all, I want to welcome everybody back here this fall. It's great to see you all.

Of course, the weather out in Saskatchewan is a little wet, just like it is here this morning; there definitely are some challenges out in my part of the province.

I just want to make the committee aware that there will be a notice of motion coming forward. It's a joint motion from Mr. Valeriote and me. If we have unanimous consent, we'd like to bring it forward. I understand we need unanimous consent to even do that.

What we'd like to do is have the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food conduct a study on the status of the Canadian biotechnology sector: that we travel to universities across Canada where this technology is primarily being undertaken; that we recommend, where necessary, legislative, policy, and regulatory changes in order to foster an innovative and fertile biotechnology industry in Canada; and that we report our findings as a committee to the House of Commons.

Mr. Valeriote, I'll turn it over to you, if you want to talk about that a bit.

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Sure.

I think it's very topical at this point in time. Through the summer, I met with many people in my riding and elsewhere who emphasized the importance of biotechnology. Particularly if we're going to enter the new economy that we speak of, we have to bring rural areas and farmers along with us. This is the way to do it.

The Chair: We won't get into any further discussion on that notice of motion.

I guess what I would suggest, Randy, is that it will probably come up for discussion—

Mr. Randy Hoback: At the subcommittee.

The Chair: —at the steering committee, yes.

Alex.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): It's nice to be back.

Colleagues, I would just like to remind all of you that we do have a priority of legislation, and that's my bill. We kind of held it back a bit because we wanted to get that report through. I agreed to that in our last session. But I would like to see us make this bill number one priority and finish it. It is an important bill.

I have nine witnesses, and I know that you have a number, Larry. André has at least three, according to my information. The analysts have seven or so. We're looking at around 30 witnesses, so my—

The Chair: Actually, Alex, I think the last time I looked at the list, it was more at around 40.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: At any rate, those are my calculations, based on.... I know that I have nine. In all fairness to the witnesses, and in all fairness to the folks that you propose, Larry, we should get to the bottom of this.

I would even go so far as to suggest that we could do five-minute rounds. We could do five witnesses per meeting. That would give us six meetings, and maybe one or two to tidy it up. That would put us to November 4.

We also have a report that's outstanding and that we should finish. We've been dragging that along. Then I think we should get into some other issues and new business.

My report requires.... We have to agree to an extension; you know, there was summer, and there was the fact that we didn't get into it right away. So we would have to get that mechanism going.

Theoretically—

The Chair: Alex, sorry to interrupt, but have you officially requested that extension?

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Well, I believe we have to do it as a committee. I'm not sure what the procedure is.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: So, you know, that has to happen. Theoretically, in an ideal world, we could start this next week and start moving through this so we could get it out of the way, get the report out of the way, and get into some of this other business that's really important.

So that's my request to my honourable colleagues on the committee.

The Chair: My thoughts are that starting Tuesday, we certainly will deal with committee business and I guess what comes out of the steering committee today. We appreciate your comments, though, Alex. I think we need to definitely get started next week on all of this.

Mr. Storseth.

● (0900)

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome everybody back as well.

Mr. Atamanenko stole what I was going to say about how many meetings we're going to have, but the priority is legislation. That should be the first thing we do.

Obviously we have to give due diligence. I know that I saw at least 30 witnesses as well. Plus, then we have to finish off our report that we've been working on.

I would think those would be our two priorities before we come up with a bunch of new things, as many important topics as there are. It sounds like Mr. Valeriote and Mr. Hoback also have something that they agree on. I don't think we can really get into those things until we've at least finished off the legislation, which is a priority for this committee, and then moved on to finish off that report. It should only take a meeting or two to finish off that report.

The Chair: I would think two meetings should do it. One might do it, but I'm doubtful.

Mr. Bellavance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): We have just heard a list of priorities again. We all have them, I have some too. We have enough for a year or more, given all the topics. I am afraid that we might spend all the time on one or two of the topics and then have no time to study some urgent matters affecting agriculture. I would just like to remind members of the committee that I arranged for the program review to be discussed. That greatly affects agricultural producers everywhere, in all areas, in all sectors. We had two half-sessions. We never heard from officials, we never heard from the minister. This is an urgent situation, a priority that should be a unanimous one around this table, it seems to me.

We also really have to finish studying Alex's bill. I should say that our party is in favour of the bill. I actually think that we are the only party in favour of it. Having a number of witnesses come when positions are so firm...Everyone has given speeches...I fully understand that the Conservatives are totally opposed to the bill. They can call 50 witnesses if they like, but I am afraid that it would be just to waste time, and I do not want time wasted in this committee.

I say again that I support the bill. I say again that we must hear from the witnesses we have not heard from yet. I understand that my colleague Mr. Atamanenko will also want to convince other colleagues in the House to change their minds about the bill and vote for it. I am not opposed to that, but we must be careful that it does not take up all the time the committee has available.

Some of the motions that Wayne has tabled are extremely important and also deal with urgent matters. So we have to consider them as well as finishing the report on the future of farming. Like Brian, I do not think we need a great number of sessions on that: we seem to be off to a pretty good start on that report.

I agree with you, Larry. We should immediately get a steering committee together so that we can at least map out a draft agenda and present it to the full committee.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Atamanenko, you were on the list twice.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: No.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In just a quick response to Mr. Bellavance, absolutely, there are a lot of priorities we have to address but it wasn't just.... The Conservative Party is the only party that is against this bill at this point in time. That's the reason why, after the last vote, it came to this committee: because the position of the Liberal Party—and especially of their critic—is not very well known. It has kind of flipped and flopped on this.

The other point is that most of the witnesses are Mr. Atamanenko's; it's not our party that is trying to delay anything. I honestly think that Mr. Atamanenko has been more than open with delaying this so that we could get topics of the day continuously in front of it.

The legislation is a priority of this committee. I think Mr. Atamanenko has taken a lot of time on his bill and I think we owe him at least the courtesy to hear the witnesses from both sides, have a good review of this, and make an informed decision. Hopefully we can educate Mr. Easter a little bit more on the topics of this bill.

The Chair: Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When we go to the steering committee, to members, we have before us the legislative issues that need to be dealt with. You know, folks, we will continually have—as we have two or three now—motions in front of us that will be the topic of the day. We'll always come in and think that we had better get those done, that they're really important right now.

I know Mr. Easter has two or three farmers. I guess we can eat up a bunch of time talking about that. Back at the start of 2010 and actually in 2009 what was really important was the future of farming. We've spent I don't know how many meetings talking about that. It was really important, because we're losing farmers. We don't have enough coming on, and the industry is going to collapse. We heard it all, mainly from around the table. Now it's not important, and we're allowing everything to jump in front of it.

Through the summer people said, "I thought you guys were doing a report on the future of farming." Well, we were. We travelled across the country. We've had multiple witnesses, but you know, we just never got it done. So I would encourage those at the steering committee today to get our priorities right. Get this report done, and then start to prioritize what comes next. To my mind, if we have one or two or three farmers who have an issue around the advance payments.... We will always have those sorts of issues. Maybe we can work that out somewhere other than at this committee.

Let's look instead at what's going to sustain the industry. What's important to farmers is what is going to sustain the industry and to keep it being a viable and strong industry into the future. I think, as Mr. Hoback and Mr. Valeriote have said, that is the type of discussion we should be having, because that's actually what is really important to the progressive farmers and to those who are going to be in the industry for many years to come.

• (0905)

The Chair: Thanks. Actually the future of farming issue became a hot topic in February or March 2009.

Mr. Bev Shipley: It was 2009.

The Chair: We never actually really got much of anything done on it until spring.

Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I will say one thing about this side at least, and that is that we have an open mind.

Bev, it isn't just two or three farmers on the advance payments program. It is the whole industry.

Now, Blake, I hate to remind you, but in Ontario alone, the Ontario Cattlemen's Association tells me, there could be as much as 50% of the industry in default on that loan effective next June. In Prince Edward Island, it will be 80% in default, and the cases that are trying to get their financing now out to the future in terms of the livestock industry can't get financing because of the ministry's announcement on August 6. I thought it was a good announcement—it was about deferring payments—but when you get into the details, I would say that the Department of Finance is running the Department of Agriculture.

The whole theory behind the emergency advances was that you would go to repayments when conditions were such that advances could be repaid. Well, those conditions are not there yet. I think there is urgency, because the people who are trying to do their refinancing.... I'm dealing with at least two, and if I have two, there are likely thousands. They can't refinance through Farm Credit Corporation because of the problem of repayments that will hit next June. I think that's an urgent and pressing issue that affects especially the industry east of the Manitoba border. It's a little different in the west; the Alberta government made payouts and so on that other farmers haven't been eligible for.

I do see that as an urgent matter. I agree we have to deal with the legislation. We have to deal with Bill C-474, but I think on that one we need to limit the number of meetings. Let's ask the steering committee to prioritize the witness list, to boil it down somewhat, and to ask the remainder to send in written submissions. I think that would be the easiest way to deal with it, and we'll try to take as few meetings as possible on it. That's where we are.

• (0910)

The Chair: Any time we do a study, it doesn't matter what the issue is, Wayne, in the event we don't get to all the witnesses, they are always encouraged to submit written proposals.

We'll have two more speakers, and then we're probably going to adjourn and go into the steering committee.

Mr. Hoback and then Mr. Eyking.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Thank you.

There's no doubt that legislation has to be the priority. That has to be number one. That would be my recommendation to the steering committee.

Then number two definitely needs to be Mr. Shipley and completing the report on young farmers and the future of farming. There are a lot of things for the steering committee to consider, and I trust the steering committee to do its job. That's why I brought forward this notice of motion with Mr. Valeriote, because it needs to be part of that mix.

One thing I really do know is that when this committee goes on the road and looks at the future of things and starts to look at policy and items in that context, it does good work. It does very good non-partisan work, and I think that's where maybe this committee should be going.

Again, I trust the steering committee. We can go around the table ten more times and talk about all these topics and subjects, but the reality is the steering committee is going to decide it. My suggestion is let's wrap this meeting up, and let's let the steering committee do its work.

The Chair: Mr. Eyking.

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

I think no matter what government is in power or how things roll here, our agriculture committee, after a break in Parliament, should always have a meeting with the department—at least one meeting anyway—and most of the time we do, just to get a sense of what's happening on the farm, what's happening out there, and how the programs are rolling out. I think that should be a given. I think it's our responsibility to have that meeting anyway to see how things are.

As for the rest, I agree with André that we should have a few meetings to tidy up the bills and talk about GMOs, and then we can continue finishing up our report and the other things. I don't think there's a big disagreement here. I think it's a given that we should have the department here, maybe or maybe not with the minister, and have a whole meeting to see the lay of the land out there, and how the payments are rolling out, and what's happening. I think it would make it easier for us going forward to know that, but I think we'll deal with that at committee.

The Chair: There's just one thing, and the clerk isn't aware of this either. I was just approached the other day by some representatives of the slaughter industry. They have put out an invitation for the committee at some point to go to a plant and concentrate on the dentition or the mouthing of cattle 20 months old and younger in the slaughter industry. There are some issues out there, which I won't go into detail on here, but just discussing them with one gentleman I learned quite a bit more myself. So I put that out there for your information. That might be something we could do down the road.

Before we adjourn here, my intention is to have a steering committee here right after. Normally, first thing Tuesday we would have a report from that steering committee. I don't know how much time that report will take, so I need some direction. My intention would be that we invite witnesses for Tuesday on Bill C-474, but in order to set out future directions, so we would kind of know, I would hope we'd deal with that report. The last thing I want to do is have that report come here and have witnesses end up sitting here while we spend all day on it. So I need some comments on that.

Wayne.

Hon. Wayne Easter: The steering committee is going to report back. It's a matter of moving and seconding the report, I think, Chair. We can argue with the agenda all we like, but I'd say if we can't do that in 15 minutes.... So I'd say invite witnesses and have them here for an hour and a half, or an hour and 45 minutes, and we'd get four or five witnesses behind us.

The Chair: Okay.

Randy.

Mr. Randy Hoback: In that spirit, if we do the witnesses first, Chair, then do the report at the very end of the meeting, it should be fine.

The Chair: We'll go with whatever your wishes are, but I think I'm hearing from both sides that we limit it to 15 minutes. We're not going to extend the meeting. The only reason I'm bringing this point up is that it has happened before that a report has come back from the steering committee and it's not been unanimous, so you're going to have to bear with me. I will limit debate on it. We'll try to be fair, but at the end of the time, we'll deal with that report in 15 minutes.

Randy.

• (0915)

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Chair, I'm not sure if it's necessary to limit debate on it. You've got the last 15 minutes of the meeting and we've got our witnesses, who have been here and have been taken care of. If it needs to go to the next meeting to be debated again, I see no problem with that.

The Chair: Fair enough. This is what I want, direction from the committee. We'll deal with that steering committee report in the last 15 minutes of the meeting.

The regular meeting here is adjourned.

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