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**Official Report
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(Hansard)**

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**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

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**Standing Committee
on the Interior**

Agricultural Research
Institute of Ontario Amendment
Act, 2024

1st Session
43rd Parliament
Monday 18 March 2024

**Comité permanent
des affaires intérieures**

Loi de 2024 modifiant la Loi
sur l'Institut de recherche
agricole de l'Ontario

1^{re} session
43^e législature
Lundi 18 mars 2024

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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CONTENTS

Monday 18 March 2024

Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Amendment Act, 2024, Bill 155, Ms. Thompson / Loi de 2024 modifiant la Loi sur l'Institut de recherche agricole de l'Ontario, projet de loi 155, Mme Thompson	IN-373
Statement by the minister and responses.....	IN-373
Hon. Lisa M. Thompson	
Mr. John Kelly	
Ontario Federation of Agriculture; Dr. Ian Potter; Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario	IN-381
Mr. Mark Reusser	
Dr. Ian Potter	
Ms. Jennifer Doelman	
University of Guelph; Mr. Gerald Schipper; Berry Growers of Ontario.....	IN-390
Dr. Shayan Sharif	
Mr. Gerald Schipper	
Mr. Tom Heeman	
Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers; Chicken Farmers of Ontario.....	IN-398
Mr. Aaron Coristine	
Mr. Brian Lewis	
Mr. Kory Preston	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE
ON THE INTERIOR**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES**

Monday 18 March 2024

Lundi 18 mars 2024

The committee met at 0900 in committee room 1.

AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH
INSTITUTE OF ONTARIO AMENDMENT
ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 MODIFIANT LA LOI
SUR L'INSTITUT DE RECHERCHE
AGRICOLE DE L'ONTARIO

Consideration of the following bill:

Bill 155, An Act to amend the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Act / Projet de loi 155, Loi modifiant la Loi sur l'Institut de recherche agricole de l'Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good morning, everyone. I call this meeting of the Standing Committee on the Interior to order. We are meeting today to begin public hearings on Bill 155, An Act to amend the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Act.

Are there any questions before we begin? I see none.

STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER
AND RESPONSES

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): I will now call on the Honourable Lisa Thompson, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, as the first witness.

Minister, you will have up to 20 minutes for your presentation, followed by 40 minutes of questions from the members of the committee. The questions will be divided into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members and two rounds of five minutes for the independent members of the committee as a group. Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I like the way we're threading the cameras here just so I can make eye contact with you. Thank you very much, Chair. To the committee members, it's a pleasure to be here with everyone today.

Chair, I must say you've really ramped things up since I've last been in committee. You're treating your members very well with the treats on the side—good job.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's an honour to appear before your committee today as a sponsor of proposed changes to the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Act, or ARIO—I won't slur my letters. I say it so fast; I better slow down: ARIO Act, for short. I'm supporting the proposed

changes to the ARIO Act because I know that these updates will better reflect our world in the agriculture and food industry today and for years to come. It's going to absolutely address the future research needs of our agri-food sector and, most importantly, serve our industry so incredibly well for years to come.

I would love to do a quiz right now and ask everybody when ARIO was created, but ladies and gentlemen, before—*Interjection.*

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Okay, well done. We have a winner. The ARIO Act was created in 1962—yes, good job.

It hasn't really been addressed. ARIO and the board of directors that represent the agency are ready to take ARIO forward. This particular board-governed agency reports directly to OMAFRA, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

The ARIO Act was created for the purpose of promoting research to improve the agriculture industry. It can be seen as part of a continuum of dedication to research and innovation in Ontario's agriculture and food industry. It was first created focusing on three key areas that are reflective of the original three colleges at University of Guelph: Ontario Agricultural College, Ontario Veterinary College and Macdonald college, which was essentially—I'll equate it to life skills and food literacy and food science, if you will. So it's important that we update this legislation because it's so much more now.

Ontario is committed to advancing agri-food research and innovation to ensure continued progress in our sector, which is agriculture and food. Adopting new technology and research results is critical to maintaining to our position—and I say this sincerely—as a leader around the world.

Today, Ontario's agriculture and food industry offers a world of possibilities in research and innovation and is thus a very different context than the one in which, in 1962, the ARIO Act was created and introduced. The agriculture and food industry has become more specialized, with incredible progress made in automation, robotics, biotechnology, digital, artificial intelligence and other innovative technologies.

It was pretty cool; on the weekend, the University of Guelph hosted its 100th College Royal, and at the official opening, presidents who served in a leadership position for College Royal were there to celebrate the 100th year. Bruce Stone, I think, was one of the people from the 1950s that proudly served as president of College Royal, through to Mr. Jenkins—I can't call him Tom; it has to be "Mr." to

me—who just happens to be William A. Stewart’s son-in-law, and my all-time favourite ag rep, Don Pullen, from Huron county.

Then you leap-frog—those who were in the 1960s: Terry Daynard, a kingpin in Ontario’s agri-food industry, served as president in 1965. Then you start getting into the 1980s, the 1990s and the 2000s. It’s interesting; Chuck from Haggerty AgRobotics actually served as president of College Royal in 1996, so even the evolution, the experience and the career trajectory of presidents from the College Royal reflect the modernization in our agri-food industry as well.

I stand on their shoulders before you today in sharing my desire and my passion for updating this very important piece of legislation, because, again, we need to make sure that people can stand on our shoulders 10 years or 20 years from now and know that they had a government that understood the importance of improving and certainly better reflecting the current and future research and innovation needs. That’s why we’re here: We’re proposing to amend the ARIO Act.

Oh, Chair, these 20 minutes are going to fly by, because I’m only on page 4 and I’ve got a lot to say, so I’d better stick to my notes here.

Like any legislation in place for decades, particularly one pertaining to the continuity of heart when it comes to our agri-food industry, but most importantly the continually evolving field of research, it is important to revisit it periodically to ensure that it continues to serve its purpose efficiently and effectively. It’s crucially important to consider in these proposed changes where the industry needs to go in the future and to try to anticipate future research opportunities that may arise.

To use an old saying—and I’m going to be quoting a guy we all know, and it’ll be another quiz to tell me who said it—we need to skate to where the puck is going. We have to anticipate.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Gretzky.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, there we go. We have another winner.

We’re striving to ensure that this legislation regarding research and innovation, one of the most fundamental foundations of our agri-food industry, can support industry’s current and future needs. In fact, the emphasis on innovation is so foundational to the ARIO that we are proposing to change the name, actually, to Agricultural Research and Innovation Ontario. I think it’s very appropriate.

This focus brings us to the “why” of these proposed changes. The amendments being proposed involve updating the definition of “research” from what was initially laid out so many years ago. As I mentioned before, back in 1962, “research” described agriculture, veterinary medicine and household science. It’s so much more than that, ladies and gentlemen, today in 2024. The range of agriculture and food-related research initiatives occurring in Ontario today is so very different.

In fact, my ministry is continually evolving its research programming, recognizing the changing nature of research priorities and practices. The priorities we’ve developed are reflective of broad industry needs. We’re listening and

we’re acting, making sure priorities are not only heard, but, most importantly, facilitated upon.

Why are we doing this, ultimately? The work that’s being done across this province will lead to discoveries and innovations that not only will benefit primary production, but our food and beverage industry. More importantly, it leads to commercialization—and in some cases, commercialization of not only varieties, but initiatives and technologies that make a difference around the world. It all comes back to Ontario in terms of recognition for what we’re doing here in this province.

We know that formal and informal stakeholder engagement opportunities are key to identifying research priorities and needs. That’s why, throughout our work to modernize the ARIO Act, we made it a priority to reach out and ask stakeholders what it is we need to be doing to modernize this piece of legislation.

As a result, we’ve proposed an updated mandate for the ARIO that now includes consultation with academic and research experts, producers, processors, industry and other relevant organizations to determine the research needs of the industry today and beyond. And we’re committed to being flexible during these engagements, to ensure that unanticipated research needs such as emerging plant or animal diseases can be captured on an as-needed basis.

Research and innovation play a crucial role in driving Ontario’s \$48-billion agriculture and food industry, and we know that by working together, we can ensure the industry is positioned for continued growth.

0910

Today, areas of research are incredibly broad. They include food safety—hence the household science, going back to 1962—animal health and welfare, plant health and protection, soil health, water quality and quantity, sustainable production systems, productive land capacity, innovative products and product improvement, trade, market and targeted industry growth opportunities, and how to build strong rural communities to support our agri-food industry. To myself and the industry, this is clearly a far more diverse and far-ranging set of research areas of interest than in 1962.

In addition, we also have crosscutting priorities that go beyond the research priority areas outlined. These research areas focus on multidisciplinary collaborations to address complex research needs, emergency management, and innovation technologies and practices. For example, emerging needs like addressing the barrier to accessing large animal veterinary services in rural Ontario are examined, or research focused around enhancing knowledge on soil health. They also include building resiliency in rural communities and the agriculture and food industry, particularly where it pertains to climate change.

In light of the expansion of areas of research that benefit industry, the proposed changes to the ARIO Act would help it to be more aligned with our world today.

As I’ve outlined, research in the agriculture and food industry today encompasses far more diverse subject areas, and that is why Ontario invests strategically in several research programs that support the industry and rural com-

munities. Of note is the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance, a long-standing and successful collaboration between OMAFRA, the University of Guelph and the ARIO. Since 1997, Ontario and the University of Guelph have had a comprehensive agreement in place focusing on agri-food and rural research, laboratory services, veterinary education and research centre management. Through the alliance, the ARIO, OMAFRA and the University of Guelph are a tripartite team that works together to advance research and innovation that contributes to the success and the competitiveness of the province's agri-food industry. This also includes maintaining and maximizing the use of the network of state-of-the-art research centres owned by the government of Ontario through ARIO and managed by the University of Guelph.

Committee members, the ARIO provides the places and spaces where Ontario agri-food research happens. The ARIO owns a platform of 14 research station properties totalling 5,600 acres and over 200 buildings that support agri-food research in areas such as field crops, livestock, greenhouse, horticulture and aquaculture. These research centres are state-of-the-art hubs of innovative agri-food research. Just in the past year, the ARIO partnered with the pork sector to open the Ontario Swine Research Centre, and we are working with the poultry sector to open a new Ontario Poultry Research Centre in 2025.

In March of last year, OMAFRA signed the new, five-year Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance agreement, a collaboration with the University of Guelph and the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario. During the course of the next five-year period, over \$343 million will be invested in support of research and innovation in the agriculture and food industry. The ARIO's role in the renewed five-year alliance agreement is to support agri-food research projects, provide oversight of the ARIO-owned research centres, while the University of Guelph manages most of the ARIO's research properties. The renewal of this agreement builds on the success of the previous five-year term, which increased Ontario's GDP by \$1.4 billion and sustained more than 1,300 jobs. The programming in this agreement provides specialized expertise and access to agri-food research; laboratory services, as I said before; veterinary education; research centre management and training; and education and certification for agricultural producers. And that's very important, because around the world, when people choose to buy food from Ontario, they want to know it's done in a sustainable way, and I can tell you with certainty we have a beautiful story to tell in that regard.

The funding will also support the development of a highly skilled workforce that will lead to more economic growth opportunities for agriculture and our food and beverage industry.

Programs supported by the alliance continue to ensure that Ontarians have access to healthy, safe food and that farmers and businesses have the information needed to be competitive and sustainable.

The alliance also supports programming to help farmers and the broader agriculture and food industry build resiliency—I'm really proud of RALP, our resilient agricultural landscape program, as an example of that. This includes

managing threats to food production and food security such as African swine fever and avian influenza. And I have to tell you that people watching today or looking at Hansard later should have confidence because everyone in our government, right through to Treasury Board, is very read into and understands the priority in terms of preparedness when it comes to things like African swine fever and avian influenza. We managed AI incredibly well over the last couple of years. I saw tundra swans in a field close to home yesterday, and it's like, "Fly fast and fly far," you know? But I have confidence that biosecurity measures are well in hand now because of the work that's being done to support our poultry industry—or feathered industry, I should say.

Again, in terms of priorities, advancing science, research, innovation and commercialization of new products, processes and practices that support the long-term successes of the agri-food system is paramount. And building a future skilled workforce and developing talent that will advance Ontario's agriculture and food industry, including veterinary medicine, in the industry and throughout rural Ontario is a priority as well.

The research program is a main component of the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance, but the alliance also aims to advance research and accelerate the transfer of research knowledge through the knowledge translation and transfer program. The KTT program is integral to the alliance's commitment to ensuring that the benefits of agri-food research are available to the industry and rural and Indigenous communities. I'm going really fast, but I'm trying to get it all in.

In addition to the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance, research funding program opportunities under the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, like RALP, as I mentioned before, are open to broader eligibilities, such as the Ontario Agri-Food Research Initiative, or OAFRI for short. This innovative program provides funding for agri-food research and innovation projects in Ontario, which is a key pillar to our Grow Ontario Strategy. It gives a variety of researchers from Ontario universities and colleges, organizations and institutions access to the very valuable ARIO-owned research centres so that they can conduct applied research, demonstration, commercialization or knowledge translation and transfer that will impact Ontario's agri-food sector. For instance, in my own home riding of Huron-Bruce, we have a great research station near Centralia that is really valued by, particularly, our bean growers, and it's great to see the work that's going on there.

OAFRI strives to create an application process that adheres to the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, and offers opportunities to Indigenous communities as well. The goals of the initiative are to fund demand-driven research in the agri-food industry, support the industry and facilitate growth, improve knowledge or technology to address business challenges, and expand market opportunities locally and globally.

These initiatives are jointly funded by the governments of Canada and Ontario under the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, which, over five years, totals

\$1.7 billion. I was very proud last winter—March 2023, I believe it was—to be the first province to sign with my federal counterpart this very important partnership that is a 60-40 split. It's going to drive great ROI for our industry.

Oh, I only have two minutes left. Anyway, these wide-ranging projects are an example of our government's commitment to our agri-food industry, as well as our food and beverage sector in the province of Ontario, which is a huge driver of jobs. We're proud to continue to support research efforts, and we look forward to seeing exciting opportunities and technologies launched in the years ahead that will continue to drive our industry forward.

We've spoken a great deal about the research and modernization of and the proposed changes to the ARIO Act, but I have to tell you that we're doing this for all the right reasons. I really appreciate the remarks that our opposition critic shared in the House, recognizing the importance of moving research and innovation forward for our agri-food sector.

I want to recognize the incredible team that has been working on this: Deputy Kelly has joined me here at the table, and his team behind him, and my team here in Toronto. We're doing this because we're passionate. We understand because we listened to our stakeholders. And most importantly, we know that Ontario's agri-food industry can continue to drive the GDP in this province. Around the world, people look to Ontario farmers and our food and beverage processing sector as leaders.

I have to say that I was very proud of the consultation process that was facilitated by the amazing parliamentary assistant Trevor Jones. He's a great partner in making sure that we're working across the province to better understand the needs for today and tomorrow.

0920

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute, Minister.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Essentially, with PA Jones, we hosted three initial round table consultations from November 2022 through to January 2023, and the stakeholders were very well-informed and, hence, shared valuable comments. Again, to everyone who took time to participate in the consultations, we thank you, because you've made our efforts to modernize the ARIO Act stronger.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding Bill 155. In short, the proposed modernization will help us keep growing Ontario together, and with the support of government commitments we will also achieve our objectives within our Grow Ontario Strategy, which, again, is based on innovation and technology, stable and secure supply chains and attracting the very best talent, and the ARIO Act does that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister.

Now we move to the question part of our hearings. We will start with the official opposition. You have 7.5 minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you, Minister, and, thanks, OMAFRA staff for being here. Before I start any questions, I'd just like to make a short—we really appreciate, in the opposition, that this bill and other agricultural bills are presented independently as opposed to sandwiched

into something that might be a lot more controversial. It's much nicer and I think you end up with much better legislation when you look at things in between, when you look at one issue without having to have a poison pill. When we see good legislation—it's not hard to support good legislation; it's hard to support any kind of legislation that has one obviously politically motivated thing in it that we have to hear that we voted against because it had something, right? So this is an example. I commend the minister and the ministry. When you put forward legislation independently, the process actually goes quicker.

Minister, I appreciated the comments about that ARIO needs to be updated. As you were speaking, I was thinking about—so it was formed in 1962 and I was born in 1963. My first tractor—my best tractor was an International 1066 built in 1973, and I was so proud of that tractor. Now I'm on these Facebook sites and it's talking about great antiques. I'm thinking, "So it is time for stuff to be"—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Are you calling yourself an antique?

Mr. John Vanthof: Yeah.

Obviously agriculture has changed incredibly. The whole sector has changed incredibly, much more than many people know, I think. We all know the car industry; we all know that it's all robotic and all. But a lot of people don't know and still think the base of agriculture is mom and pop and a pitchfork, and while it is still mom and pop, it's more likely a computer terminal than a pitchfork. I think that's something that I appreciate that we need to change.

I hope that you can enlighten us—could you give us an example, Minister, of something you foresee the ARIO being able to help with research under the new structure that isn't possible currently?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I think the fact that, in 1962, it was focused on three main areas: household science, agriculture science and vet science. We need to be looking forward and listening, most importantly, to our stakeholders. For instance, the manner in which we grow fresh produce in greenhouses today is really important, and the sustainable way in which they manage pests. When you walk into some greenhouses, you might be flicking a bug off your shoulder—you don't want to do that, because that bug is working in that greenhouse. We need to be making sure that our research is reflecting the needs of today.

Another example would be—actually, it was just on a national news program, either CTV or CBC, late Friday night I believe I saw it—and recognizing we need to continue to attract more and more people to our primary production. It was demonstrating and celebrating, this piece on the news Friday night, a robotic that was actually picking tomatoes and the AI—I'm talking about artificial intelligence here—the artificial intelligence and the research that had to go into perfecting that arm. Again, it was just in its testing phase, but what a difference that will make in terms of the direction and the efficiencies that can be realized.

Then again, I mentioned Chuck, being the 1996 president of College Royal; he also has just featured recently a cart that follows behind. Typically, you would think of a

pet that would follow behind or a little kid. This cart is autonomous and has the technology to follow behind. That's where we need to be going as we look to fill gaps in our workforce—technology is really, really important—but, moreover, it's also really important to continue to do research on soil types and growing seasons so that we can be producing the greatest yield in every location across Ontario.

Mr. John Vanthof: Which leads me to my next question: As you mentioned—and I wouldn't say most people in the province, but the people in this committee room certainly know that there are 16 AI—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Fourteen.

Mr. John Vanthof: Fourteen. I remember when I first got elected, the site in New Liskeard was slated for closure.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes.

Mr. John Vanthof: So the local community stepped up and the then Minister of Agriculture—I give credit where credit's due—at that time was Ted McMeekin. We signed a deal for a two-year moratorium while we could regroup to see how to save it, but that taught us a lesson. And to credit the University of Guelph, they realized that if you're really going to take agriculture in northern Ontario seriously, you also have to do research in northern Ontario. At that time, honestly, they didn't appreciate that. They were going to shut down the New Liskeard research station. We cut a deal, sold the old buildings, OMAF financed building new—and we give credit where credit's due to you and to your ministry as well.

Is there any safeguard that we won't have to go through that all again? Like, we understand that the centre of excellence for dairy, for poultry, that can be anywhere, but the centre of excellence for research for northern Ontario should be in northern Ontario and maybe not just in New Liskeard and Emo. Is there any safeguard in this new structure that there's some way we can put some kind of input? Because if we hadn't heard that through the grapevine, New Liskeard would have been closed without us even having a chance to say a word. We need to know that that's not going to happen again.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: We need to be talking about the output and the value that research stations in Emo and New Liskeard—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister. Unfortunately, the opposition side's time is up.

Now we move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, you have five minutes.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Minister, thank you for being here this morning. I'll echo the MPP from Timiskaming—Cochrane's notes around that it's nice to have a bill that I think most of us can get behind and to have it not be part of other bills, so to speak, or other issues.

John, I just want to say to you and your team, thank you for your great work. I was getting coffee the other day at Timmies on Stone Road there, I had my trillium on my jacket and somebody asked, "Oh, do you work at Stone Road?" I'm like, "No, but I certainly appreciate the work everyone at Stone Road does," so thank you to your team.

I want to follow up a little bit maybe on the previous question. I absolutely agree with you, a lot has changed

since 1962. I don't know if I'm an antique yet or not, but a 1040 John Deere was the tractor I learned on, just so you know. I had the right colour from day one, but a lot has changed since then. A lot has changed at the University of Guelph since then. I mean, it's a completely different place than it was in—it didn't even exist in 1962, technically. So I appreciate the fact that this bill expands the research mandate for the ARIO, and I think it's much needed.

So the question then becomes—and I know you can't speak for the finance minister, but I'm just wondering, do you anticipate additional financial resources for ARIO to be able to fulfill its mandate in this expanded role just to ensure that it's adequately resourced in a way that can produce the kind of innovative research we need moving forward for the food and farming sector?

0930

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Well, thank you very much for that question. Since we're putting all our colours on the table, honest to goodness, I grew up with Ford tractors, so I'm dating myself. The younger ones in my family—although my sister used it all the time—we had a Ford 4500 that my dad would let us drive. Anything bigger was left to my brother and others, but anyway, yes, I had blue tractors, even our lawn mower. How do you like that? Yes, that's what I was with. I had the Ford lawn mower. Everybody else got to drive the bigger implements.

But with that, I think it's really important that we recognize that our commodities and our food and beverage industries have really matured through the years as well. Take a look: We're just working through the latest round of approvals for OAFRI projects. When you see industry partnering with institutions, partnering with government, that defines success, because everybody has got a stake in the game to get it right. I'm really buoyed by that because, again, industry knows that they need to step up and be engaged with what's happening as well. Whether it's directly on property that's managed by ARIO or even some other initiatives that they're working on, I'm really proud of the work that they're doing.

I want to go back to the New Liskeard research station. For example—again, it's all about efficiencies and increased yields—stemming out of New Liskeard is a new variety of asparagus. I'm really proud of this. It is called Millennium, and it has taken a yield per acre from 2,000 pounds of asparagus to 6,000 pounds of asparagus per acre. That has revolutionized the manner in which we grow food in Ontario. Moreover, it's been commercialized, and that particular variety of asparagus, originating here in Ontario, is sought after throughout North America and it's talked about around the world. So that's the type of work that's being done. And, again, it is important to recognize that industry, through commodity organizations, government and, most importantly, our institutions, like University of Guelph, are all working together to continue to drive, most importantly, yields and efficiencies on farm.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Chair, I'm probably almost out of time, so maybe more of a comment: I know you're a huge champion, Minister, of the University of Guelph. I just want to put a plug-in that University of Guelph, like

all post-secondary institutions, is in really significant financial challenges right now. I mean, they're undergoing an entire strategic review to figure out how they can operate more efficiently, but at some point, you can only cut so much before it actually starts affecting your ability to be a full research participant, so I'm—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Schreiner, for your time.

Now we move to the government side. MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: I appreciate the opportunity to ask a question. Minister, it's fairly obvious from the comments that were made by both the NDP member and the Green Party member that this is a non-contentious bill that seems to have a fair bit of support. I would suggest, then, that that's probably because of some of the exceptional work of some of the staff members that you have and the research that they've done. Are there any staff members in particular who are here in the audience who we should say thank you to and appreciate the work that she has done?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, there is. There's a whole host of them, but if we start taking a look in our MO, we have a passionate and dedicated team. In particular, I have to tell you, they eat, sleep and breathe this, to get it right for Ontario farmers. One of the people who leads by example is an amazing director of strategy. Her name is Lindsay Smith. I can't see her—oh, she's behind Kelly.

Mr. Dave Smith: I might be a little bit biased on that.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, I get that.

Mr. Dave Smith: Minister, it's great to see my daughter do so well. This is the first piece of legislation that she has put through, so I'm extremely proud of her that way. I wanted to make sure that that was on the official government Hansard for her. I'm looking forward to the opportunity to speak to this bill in third reading when it comes forward.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: You betcha.

Mr. Dave Smith: You mentioned that with the modernization act, it will help assist the government in meeting the goals of its Grow Ontario Strategy. Could you provide some further details on the strategy and how this bill will help meet the goals of that strategy?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Sure, certainly. Again, I am absolutely committed to making sure that stakeholders know how valuable they are. We go out and we consult, and we listen. We go back and ask questions, and then we have amazing teams like Lindsay and her colleagues, and Andrew and Ryan, and of course chief of staff Tara. The list goes on and on. But we're really making sure—and, I guess, Jack Sullivan, if I want to add one more name. He worked very, very hard to make sure we had a strategy in Ontario that tied every sector within our industry together.

The strength and the effectiveness of this strategy to date is because people see themselves in the strategy. You know you've hit the ball out of the park when even municipalities look to the Grow Ontario Strategy as a benchmark for their own strategic plans, which is happening across this province.

We try to be straightforward and recognize that based on what we heard, everything boils down to three key

pillars or priorities. Again, that is a safe and secure supply hub—because, again, the consultation for the strategy was on the heels of the pandemic. We have a Premier in Premier Ford who, understandably and rightfully so, says that we can't be dependent on a supply chain that could be threatened and broken. We need to make sure Ontario can stand on its own two feet.

For goodness' sake, if we were a country unto ourselves, we would be the third-largest trading partner with the United States of America. That's how powerful we are. We took that to heart and recognized—we're doing everything we can within our strategy to make sure our food supply chain and our primary production supply chain are as strong, autonomous, thriving and future-looking as possible.

The second pillar in our strategy is innovation and technology. That's the sweet spot for what we're talking about today in terms of modernizing the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario. It's really important to be able to stand up and say there's a government here in Ontario that knows we need to keep pushing the envelope and continue to lead by example when it comes to encouraging and enabling industry to invest in technologies.

Let's be real, ladies and gentlemen. I just have to get this on the record for the benefit of our friend Minister Fedeli. I think we had autonomous grain buggies way before any other piece of technology or EV or AI came down the pipeline. We were already doing it. The combine is an office now, complete with computerized data management that feeds the systems back home. The innovation is important, again, to drive efficiencies.

We need to recognize Ontario is a significantly sized and diverse province. We need to be facilitating research that drives efficiencies and productivities in Chatham, in Thunder Bay, in Winchester, in Renfrew county, in Cobden—oh, okay, Cambridge and in Stirling and in Peel region. There are a lot of good people—

Interjection.

0940

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes. There are a lot of good people in the Caledon area, and of course, Peterborough is just a mecca for animals. We need to make sure that whether it's soil type or livestock, farmers have the research that will make them be the very best—that old cliché, “Make them outstanding in their field.”

When I talk about Peterborough, I think livestock. Some of the important research that's happening in our research stations on Elora road in both the dairy research centre and beef is reducing methane. It's stunning, the technology that's in that centre. I wish we could take everybody there because—I hope everybody knows methane is generated from burps, nothing else, and they have technology in those research barns to measure the methane that comes out of a cattle beast or a dairy cow, and with that, they're taking a look at how they can feed to manage those ruminants to reduce the amount of methane.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: That's important. That's about sustainability. We don't talk about it enough. Some

people may giggle when they hear that mentioned, but the fact of the matter is, it's really important work.

Then, the third pillar in our strategy that supports and makes what we're doing with ARIO in terms of modernization so important is we want to attract the very best talent. When people see investment of industry, investment of government and investment of institutions into our agri-food industry, they'll be excited and want to work and support Ontario's agri-food industry as well.

We're going to be absolutely bullish and say Ontario is the place to work.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister. The first round of questioning is concluded.

We'll move to the second round. We will start with the opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: I listened intently to your remarks, Minister, and I agree that consultation is really important. I'd just like to put on the record that I hope that not just your ministry but the government has learned how important consultation would have been with the three-lot severance, with the protection of the greenbelt and with the protection of farmland. This is a very well-consulted bill—I give credit—but we also have to recognize that farmers aren't always consulted.

I would like to get back to something that you started on about—and very few people know that New Liskeard is the asparagus capital of North America. What is happening now in New Liskeard? If you could give an update—we've talked about it previously at a committee table—regarding the SPUD Unit, the future of the SPUD Unit. Basically, the SPUD Unit is a laboratory that takes seeds and, through a process, takes all viruses, all contaminants away and starts again with purer stock. It has had a few problems lately. It's aging, but based on your comments, I think we all realize how important it is.

You have said before it is going to be replaced and going to be replaced in New Liskeard. I would like to see if there are any updates on that process that you can share with committee.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Again, in the spirit of attracting the very best talent—I want to say Candy. Yes, it is Candy. She's awesome. She has got institutional knowledge that we need to be bottling up, because a lot of our varieties for strawberries and asparagus—it's not just potatoes. You might get distracted with the title SPUD, but the fact of the matter is, it's a really important unit.

Mr. John Kelly: And garlic.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Oh, and garlic. Oh my goodness. Thank you for that, Deputy. Yes, garlic is huge in terms of getting some starts there in terms of varieties and the research going in that.

I want to say that Lindsay Smith and I were heading north to go to the Earlton Farm Show—and on record, oh my goodness, Martin Cook, if I could be there this year, you know I would be, but my schedule's not allowing me. Just know I'm going to be there in spirit. When we were heading to Earlton Farm Show a year or two ago, it's like, we have—it was a Friday afternoon, on the way up. Because that's what you do. You drop in, right? That's the old-fash-

ioned way of doing things. I think I made Candy really nervous, because I was like, "We have time. Why don't we drop in to the SPUD Unit?" It's so impressive what goes on there, and that value is not lost on me.

We need to be working, again, with our garlic growers, with our fruit and vegetable growers, with our University of Guelph and, as a team, find the path forward, because I will try to lay down cornerstones to ensure that the value that's there today continues to grow.

Mr. John Vanthof: I can add that we will do whatever we can to help you or push you. But—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: There's a space on the other side of the Holstein, you know, the—

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, there is. ARIO has a very good space on the other side of the road, right next to the new crop research station. Again, that is a jewel. The New Liskeard Agricultural Research Station has always been very important to us. I'm going to be upfront: When we cut the deal to sell half and keep half, it hurt a bit. But now it's modern, and I think we all realize how important northern Ontario is going to be for agriculture in the future. It's not going to replace southern Ontario. I say this in interviews all the time: I have a farm in Earlton, some of the best farmland in northern Ontario. If I could trade it for the same amount of acres in Oxford country, I'd be there in a second.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: There's no place like home.

Mr. John Vanthof: Let's not kid ourselves, okay? The productivity is not exactly the same, but it certainly is part of the future for Ontario. I'm encouraged that you understand how important the SPUD Unit is, not just to our area but to the province, to the country. And anything that we can do together to keep that and rebuild it—it needs to be renewed. It's worn out. It's like my 1066: It's done a great job. But there is a quality of people and an experience of people there that can't be replaced. I appreciate your comments.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Just to follow up on that, prior to coming to Queen's Park with you in 2011, I would be in the New Liskeard area at least a couple of times a year. I would bring home my fair share of clay on my boots. And I recognize very much that growing conditions are very different. But do you know what? Another thing—potatoes. We didn't talk about potatoes. Alliston is a potato mecca now, that area, but we need to recognize that potatoes were a foundational crop that was grown in northern Ontario as well.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, it's your turn.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Because my time got cut off, I want to make sure what I had said was actually on the record. I'll say this in the context: Minister, I really appreciated the work that you had done, we had done together, to support the expansion of veterinary program at the University of Guelph and the partnership with Lakehead and just the importance of large animal vets, especially in northern Ontario. But I also want to just re-emphasize that if universities are going to be the true research partners they have been and, I hope, will continue to be, they are

going to have to be properly funded. Just to put in a shout-out—I know you're a champion for the University of Guelph—that those research programs play a vital role in the work that ARIO does and need to be adequately funded so we can produce the kind of research that is needed.

My question, though, is going to be following up on your comments around the importance of food security and local supply chains. I 100% agree with that, absolutely agree with that. One of the questions—those of us in the opposition talk about the loss of 319 acres of farmland each and every day and the threat that could be to our food security and our local supply chains. I've got to give a shout-out to the member from the Brantford–Brant, who's always questioning me in the House about, “Can you give me a breakdown on those 319 acres?”

And I know the Ontario Farmland Trust is doing good work on this, and I've started seeing some of the more detailed research, but I'm just curious if you see ARIO playing a role in doing the kind of research we need to do to ensure that we protect those local supply chains and we maintain Ontario's food security to feed Ontarians but also to feed people around the world, which we do, as well.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: To answer your question, I want to share with you that I was just with president Yates on Saturday, and I applaud her for understanding the direction from our government. She is working so incredibly hard, and she has a really good working relationship with the Minister of Colleges and Universities. I really respect how she's focused on delivering. I can't say enough about president Yates.

0950

But with that said, I want to talk about Grain Farmers of Ontario as an example of industry working with government, working with institutions, to drive research and adoption of best practices and new varieties that not only have demonstrated adaptability to growing seasons, but also to soil types.

That kind of leads to drainage, as well. We have—it's not a research centre, but in my riding we have a demonstration site. It's stunning, the drainage today, in 2024, that can hold on to the water, as opposed to seeing it just flush off the land. Drainage will hold water in place for when it's drier later on in the season.

So I tip my hat to Grain Farmers of Ontario. They are a commodity organization that is walking their talk, and they're putting a lot of their own dollars into research. As a result of working with colleges, universities and our government, since 2019, Grain Farmers of Ontario have increased their yield by 60%. And when we talk about the sustainable manners in which they are working the land—again, when we're travelling around the world, promoting not only good-quality food, but the sustainable practices that get us to that food and beverage production phase—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: —I can tell you that people are very receptive to what's being done.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Sorry, Minister. I just want to get one more question in. I'm almost out of time—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Okay. I'm sorry. Once I get going—

Mr. Mike Schreiner: No, no; the GFO is doing great work, and I totally agree.

Real quick: The climate impact assessment that the province released last summer had some really frightening statistics around climate impacts on agriculture. I know we probably have about 20 seconds here. Can you just comment on the role that ARIO can play in helping farmers be climate-ready?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I think it's really interesting. I can't speak to the applications in terms of protecting people's privacy, but I'm really buoyed by the type of applications that are coming forward for OAFRI funding and, under the umbrella of our Resilient Agricultural Landscape Program, through SCAP as well—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister. The time is up.

Now we'll move to the opposition. MPP Bresee, go ahead.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you to the minister. Minister, you've talked about how widely you consulted with various stakeholders across the province yourself, and the PA did a wonderful job with that. I had the privilege of joining you on one of those consultations at the Donnandale Farms in Hastings county, with a group of both beef and dairy cattlemen. It was a great event, a very blunt and open event, which was absolutely what was necessary.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Absolutely.

Mr. Ric Bresee: My question to you is, can you tell me how those consultations impacted the amendments that are put forward in the ARIO Act today?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: You know, it's interesting. I really value the opportunity to be in as many counties as possible. It's a small world when you get out and about. And it's the dotted lines that make you want to pull up your socks and work harder when you figure out, “Oh, his kid was at 4-H camp when I was there, facilitating that leadership opportunity,” or “I went to school with somebody's sibling,” and things like that. It makes it real for me.

That particular round table was fascinating to me because, again, it demonstrates the need to modernize. In fact, I was just talking about that dairy barn not too long ago, because we're kidding out on our farm—actually, just for fun: We had another set of quads last night. I got in very late. But anyways, I'll show you pictures after.

But with that said, we need to recognize the scope of practice. When we were in that barn, his medicine cabinet was stunning, and you could tell that that farm family had a really good working relationship with their veterinarian. It's research that goes towards vet science that helps that family and helps that vet clinic be their very best selves and, most importantly, support animal husbandry on farm, when and where you need it, because there's nothing more anxious than being a pet owner or a livestock owner and you know you have a cow going down or you're having trouble in calving season. We need to make sure that research is driving the very best practices, but also pointing to the fact that—in the spirit of attracting the best talent—we have training opportunities and people like veterinary technicians that can have an expanded scope of practice. It's research and studies that enable us to support our livestock farmers as well. I'm sorry I went off track

there, but I think about that medicine cabinet in that particular barn.

The other thing was the manner in which they were dedicating themselves to nutrient management. That nutrient management is an exact result of research that goes into how you best work with your soil types in the spirit of soil health, and the precision now that goes into where you spread those nutrients, when you spread those nutrients and how you spread them. I was really impressed by that farm, to see research that had driven best practices actually being applied on farm, so I thank you for that opportunity.

I could go on and on, but the fact of the matter is, consultations have informed so much of where we're going, but I also want to take this moment to give a nod to the board of directors that we have on the institute right now. Lorne Hepworth is chair, and they're looking at, now, modernizing and moving forward and branding the research that we're doing in Ontario as well.

And just to get it on record, I want to congratulate our chair of ARIO, Lorne Hepworth. He has been called to the Order of Canada based on his commitment and work that he has done in the field of agricultural research. I share that with everyone because it shows the calibre of people that we have dedicated to Ontario's agri-food industry.

I think I'll leave it at that, but I remember very clearly joining you on that dairy farm. Daryl Kramp was there as well, and he was just an equal part of the overall success of that day.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Absolutely. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Riddell, go ahead.

Mr. Brian Riddell: I understand Ontario's agri-food sector contributes over \$84 billion to Ontario's GDP, which is amazing, and employs one in 10 people in the province's labour force. Minister, can you explain how this bill will assist in encouraging continuing growth of this industry?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, absolutely. I alluded to it before when I mentioned the Grain Farmers of Ontario. Based on research that has driven best practices and precision agriculture, they have actually increased their yield of grains and oil seeds by 60% since 2019, since we've been in government. That partnership between government, institution and industry has really proven in this instance to be exactly the tripartite relationship that we need to be driving.

I want to share with you as well—I mentioned asparagus. Again, that's huge news. But also, the apple growers of Ontario, they're increasing their yield. Once upon a time you would see orchard trees with the traditional apple tree. But now, when apple growers are starting out a new field of trees, you have to look hard because you might think it's a vine, a grape grower planting some new vines—like just north of Guelph, in between Guelph and Elmira. But, in actual fact, they're growing their trees in such a way, based on research, that's increasing yield but, more importantly, reducing waste, because reducing food waste is an important part of research as well.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I just tip my hat to all of our commodity organizations that are really demonstrating

that not only do they understand the need for research, but they value the outcomes.

Another example would be aquaculture. We have a research farm near, I want to say Alma, but it's—

Mr. John Kelly: It's Alma.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Okay—Alma. And it is fascinating to see what they're doing there in terms of the different species of fish that they're figuring out in terms of the growing environment for everything from arctic char to trout and whitefish. It's an example of where they're working with Indigenous communities in freshwater as well as individuals who have fish farms. It's a protein that is growing in demand—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister. The time is up. Thank you and your staff for your presentation, and the committee members for being here for this session.

Now, our committee will conclude. We will take a recess until 1 o'clock.

The committee recessed from 1001 to 1300.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good afternoon, members. The committee will resume its public hearings on Bill 155, An Act to amend the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Act.

The remainder of our presenters today have been scheduled in groups of three for each one-hour time slot. Each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation, and after we have heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be for questions from members of the committee. The time for the questioning will be broken down into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent members as a group.

ONTARIO FEDERATION
OF AGRICULTURE
DR. IAN POTTER
AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH
INSTITUTE OF ONTARIO

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Now I call upon the Ontario Federation of Agriculture's Mark Reusser, Ian Potter and the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario's Jennifer Doelman to take their chairs.

I see they are already in their chairs, so we will start with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

Mr. Mark Reusser: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Mark Reusser. I'm a farmer from Waterloo region. I'm also a director with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, and I'm here today representing the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. As the largest general farm organization in Ontario, with about 38,000 family farm members, we have a strong voice for our members and the agri-food industry on issues, legislation and regulations administered by all levels of government, and it's my job today here to try and represent their interests.

We are generally in favour of the bill. This is a good update for something that hasn't been updated in a very long time. Rather than go through the bill stating what we support, I will simply say again that we're in general support of it. Good job. Thank you for doing this.

We do have some concerns and some suggestions with regard to the bill, and I will focus on those, if I may.

The first one has to do with the mandate. The proposed updates to the mandate or objects of the ARIO are a significant expansion of the objectives. The core function of providing advice to the minister remains, and OFA supports that a key objective for ARIO is to advise the minister on high-impact, transformational agri-food research and innovation. Establishing programs, consulting with academic and research experts, establishing and strengthening relationships, increasing innovation and commercialization, and knowledge translation and transfer are new to the mandate.

OFA appreciates that the mandate expansion will increase collaboration, and we support increased engagement of the agri-food sector. Engagement with agriculture organizations, industry and researchers is key for the sector to reach its full potential, and ARIO will be more effective in its role with cross-collaboration.

However, to be successful in determining research needs and promoting research opportunities, farmers must be recognized and included as key participants, not merely consulted stakeholders. So OFA recommends that ARIO engage directly with farmers and producer organizations on research needs and objectives as a key priority, and indicate that this is necessary for the sector to reach its full potential with respect to agri-food research.

The second issue: OFA is also concerned about how the increased function of the ARIO will be delivered without negatively affecting the core mandate or duplicating existing processes. No additional resources, staff allocation or expansion of the board is proposed, so the capacity to effectively deliver an expanded mandate is of concern to us. It will be imperative that an expanded mandate consider existing programs, initiatives and processes in the agri-food research space within and without OMAFRA, and that ARIO consider and complement such programs, rather than duplicate, to make best use of our limited resources.

Inclusion of encouragement and facilitation of knowledge translation and transfer into the mandate is promising, but efforts here must align with and provide a complement to the existing ecosystem of agricultural research. We strongly recommend that ARIO's specific role with respect to knowledge translation and transfer needs to be clearly defined to complement, rather than compete with, the role of other organizations in this sector, particularly the role that OMAFRA plays in this area.

Third concern: ARIO research station properties and related infrastructure are critical assets essential to the function of agricultural research in Ontario and vital to the long-term success of the sector. OFA is concerned that the core functions of overseeing the existing ARIO-owned research properties and related infrastructure is missing from the newly proposed mandate. While it is clear in Bill

155 that the power to enter into property and financial agreements, construct and maintain buildings, and establish research programs remains, this crucial function must continue as a part of the ARIO mandate. So OFA strongly recommends reinstating this core function as the primary purpose of the ARIO updated mandate.

Number four: Given the essential function of the research station properties, ongoing investment in the management and operation of this infrastructure is vital. It is important that ARIO have the resources not only to maintain existing infrastructure but to invest in the facilities, equipment and technology. ARIO must also maintain the ability to hold funds in trust for such investments when property is divested. Ongoing investment in the research infrastructure will be key to attracting talent and delivering innovation. OFA recommends or advocates for greater investment in agri-food research, both direct public investment as well as incentives and support for private sector research and development.

Number five: Bill 155 adds a provision that allows the minister to make regulations under the new act, with specific references to imposing fees for programs and potential for—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Mark Reusser: I will skip directly to my last two recommendations.

OFA maintains that agricultural research must continue to be the fundamental function of research station properties. We also recommend that the majority of the appointed ARIO board consist of industry representatives that reflect the diversity of agricultural products in Ontario.

And finally, OFA envisions development of an agri-food research priority setting process that involves all commodities and partners in the sector, addresses the needs of the value chain and looks beyond Ontario's borders in order to effectively implement innovation.

Thank you very much. Agricultural research in Ontario is vital to us competing in the world. Ontario is a trader; so is Canada. Intellectual property, especially, and basic research is—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Mr. Reusser. Your time is up.

Now, I call upon Mr. Ian Potter to deliver his remarks.

Dr. Ian Potter: Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Ian Potter, president and CEO of Vineland Research and Innovation Centre. For those of you who have not been to Vineland, we're a world-renowned horticultural innovation entity located in the Niagara region. I'd like to thank the committee for the opportunity to share my thoughts on the changes to the ARIO Act and engage in a wholesome discussion.

While I don't consider it a conflict of interest—but in the spirit of full transparency—I'm extremely thankful for the support that the government of Ontario, through OMAFRA and ARIO, has provided Vineland and our predecessors over our 118-year history, in terms of our role as the property manager for the Vineland Research Station. Now, in Vineland's case, this has been since 2007, but I also would like to acknowledge the government invest-

ment—and note I use the word “investment,” not “funding”—to support projects and infrastructure through a variety of mechanisms, either directly or indirectly, through federal-provincial government mechanisms such as Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, its predecessor mechanisms and the current Grow Ontario Strategy.

In my experience, based on a review of the existing Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Act, there was a clear, present and timely need to update the act with respect to the act’s lexicon and bring it to an improved level of agency governance function and transparency.

1310

Many of the terms used in the current act and how we view them today are dated, such as “to inquire into programs of research in respect of ... household science.” When I was a kid, it was “home economics.” I think it was then “domestic engineering.” I’m not sure what it is nowadays; I apologize.

Further, in today’s need for an innovation-driven economy, the word “research” is useful but simple and fails to fully define the needs of the system and the role that ARIO could play in support of the government of Ontario’s holistic agricultural innovation system. As such, changing the name from the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario to Agricultural Research and Innovation Ontario reflects more than just research and advances economic development through innovation and moves away from the notion that as a research institute ARIO is actually doing the research.

The proposed changes to the act would also appear to provide clarity to the ARIO agency governance model but also, more importantly, show a line of sight to ARIO’s future support by:

- stimulating economic development for Ontario and beyond;

- being able to support the benefits management of intellectual property for the province and the agriculture ecosystem; and

- lastly, providing a stronger role to play in ensuring that technology development, adoption and adaptation is provided the support to be market-ready today and tomorrow.

As you’re aware, ARIO, today and into the future, is the custodian of significant, effectively pre-capitalized infrastructure for the province. It is critical that ARIO, through the act and the resulting agency operating model, is provided the ongoing support to ensure there is sufficient and appropriate innovation capacity, both in terms of people and facilities, in place in the province to actively and quickly address the current and future unknowns in terms of the challenges—such as pandemics, climate change, plant viruses, invasive species—but also the opportunity to develop the Ontario system and drive export opportunities to the rest of Canada and globally. This is timely in the construct of food security and long-term food supply and quality to consumers in Ontario.

As you’re aware, based on the available data, the agricultural sector in Ontario employs 67,000 people and contributed over \$9 billion to the provincial economy in 2021, with output increasing about \$750 million in the last year. But also, with \$5 billion worth of imported fruit and

vegetables in Ontario a year, I strongly believe there is a near-term opportunity to build and grow agricultural capacity and specifically the horticultural sector in Ontario, reducing our reliance on international trade and actually increasing the importance and the produce and equipment of resources in Canada rather than buying offshore.

Outcome-and-impact-driven innovation has an enormous role to play in optimizing controlled environment production for existing crops, new crops, from low-tech hoop houses through to greenhouses, to indoor and high-tech vertical farming. Ontario is already a leader in controlled environment production, and we have the opportunity to push this even further with new technology solutions such as Ontario-adapted plant varieties, biological crop protection and improved production practices.

Just over 100 years ago, the government of Ontario made a strategic investment in Ontario’s agricultural infrastructure. I think the changes to the act are well timed to bolster the next 100 years of agricultural innovation and economic development in the province.

I thank you, and I’d be happy to address questions when the time arises, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much.

Now, I call upon Ms. Doelman, representing Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario, to deliver her remarks. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: I had submitted some slides. Are they able to be shown or not? Would you like me to go ahead and start? And then if you can post them, that’s great; if not, don’t worry.

Interjection.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Yes, they were sent whenever I confirmed my appointment.

Interjection.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Don’t worry. It’s okay if not. I don’t need to set you all back. I just wanted to make sure, in case. It was a reminder to have them prompted. That’s fine. I’ll make do; don’t you worry.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Okay. All right.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: It’s just nice for them to have visuals, right?

Dr. Ian Potter: I can do graphics next time.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: I was going to have great graphics—imagine great farmland pictures. My accent isn’t nearly as awesome, so you’re just unfortunately going to have to listen to the Ottawa Valley talking instead.

Mr. Trevor Jones: We hear it all the time.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: And you still had me come.

Good afternoon. It is my pleasure to be here to speak with you in support of Bill 155, the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Amendment Act. My name is Jennifer Doelman, and I’m a board member of the ag research institute of Ontario, most commonly known as ARIO. I’ve been serving as a board member since 2021, and I’m currently in my second term.

A little bit about me: I grew up on a family farm in the Ottawa Valley. I also teach at Algonquin College, Perth campus—agribusiness—and I’m very involved in the

agricultural community. We farm a diversity of crops, including canola, sunflowers, corn, soybeans, wheat, cover crops—you name it, we grow it. I'm also a beekeeper. I graduated from the University of Guelph with a bachelor of science in agriculture and am an alumni of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program in Ontario.

I'd like to provide some context on the role that ARIO plays in our agri-food system. The ARIO has been around for more than 60 years. It was created in 1962 and is an agency of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. On the ARIO board, we like to kind of call ourselves the places and spaces where agri-food innovation and research happens in Ontario. That's because ARIO, in addition to promoting and advocating for agri-food research, also owns the province's network of 14 research station properties.

Interjection.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Thank you—we can go ahead to slide 2. There are your research institutions for you folks to see where the province of Ontario invests in our communities.

So we have 14 different research properties. They have approximately 5,600 acres and more than 200 buildings. These research stations, as you can see, are located across the province. We've got them north of Thunder Bay all the way down into southern Ontario and in my beloved eastern Ontario. We host a broad spectrum of agri-food research, ranging from field crops, livestock, greenhouse, horticulture and aquaculture.

The ARIO is a partner with the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance, which is a partnership with ARIO, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and the University of Guelph. So a lot of the time, folks will think of these institutions as the University of Guelph but, really, it's a partnership with all of us working together to advance research. This has built a world-class, cutting-edge platform for agri-food research that builds a better Ontario. We can go to the next slide, please.

The importance of why we want to modernize the act: As some of the other speakers today have spoken about, the current act includes some outdated terms and definitions; "household science" being an example. So in order to reflect the current and future research environment in the agri-food sector, we've proposed changes in the act that put a focus on high-impact research and innovation, the management of properties for agriculture and food research, the cultivation of strategic relationships and the support of growth of agriculture and food sectors.

What this means for our sector: What this means in real terms is the creation and maintenance of those places and spaces so that agri-food research can happen to position the sector for a strong and resilient future. Plain and simple, we're the ones that create the fertile seed bed for growth and innovation to happen—I think in farmer terms, sorry. Members of ARIO have, for example, recently completed some new agronomy research stations in New Liskeard, eastern Ontario in Winchester, and Ridgeway, which represents the modernization and renewal of three

important field crop research nodes in the province where we've got diverse climate and soil regions of the province.

Together with our industry partners, the ARIO completed the new Ontario Swine Research Centre, which will enhance the province's capacity for research, innovation and the development of new technology to benefit Ontario pork producers and consumers. And we're just starting planning on a new poultry research centre which will again further research and innovation and agri-tech development for the poultry sector and consumers.

Delivering for Ontario, then—what this means to you: These are some examples of how we're strengthening Ontario. Modernization of the act will broaden the mandate of ARIO to allow the agency to build and maintain world-class agri-food research facilities, develop innovative technologies and ensure the translation and transfer of research into practical solutions for Ontario farmers. Those actions are reflected in the government's Grow Ontario Strategy, which outlines a vision for increasing agri-food innovation and adoption, and the ARIO plays a key role.

As a farmer, I'm proud to be part of an agency that strengthens the agri-food sector and is taking action to be a world leader in agri-food research and innovation, and the changes that we're proposing will accomplish that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you to our three presenters for your detailed input.

Now we will go to the questioning, and we will start the first round with the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, please go ahead.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much for coming to present today. As you're likely aware, this bill is supported by, I believe, everyone in the Legislature, but it makes it even more important to come so we understand what the complexities are and if there are things—actually, perhaps there are things we can make better and all agree on to make better.

First, I'd like to go to—I've never been to Vineland, but many people from my area have been. This little explanation will lead to the question.

1320

When ARIO land in New Liskeard was going to be abandoned by the University of Guelph, we sent people to Vineland to see how it was done there, because the Northern Ontario Farm Innovation Alliance had to step in to try to save our research station. We were very well treated by the people of Vineland. It was to learn how that relationship worked because, to many—and certainly to us when we started in this process—research in Ontario is only the University of Guelph. ARIO isn't really the first thing that comes to mind, and Vineland is a good example, if it isn't all University of Guelph.

I think I'll go to you first, Jennifer. How do we convey what ARIO's role is in research overall so that it doesn't get lost?

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: That is a great question, because I think for a lot of us in Ontario, we all just took for granted that these institutions existed and they kept everything running. Then, when you have to make difficult decisions,

it's hard to know when we were honestly sometimes the best-kept secret.

I have to admit, when I was asked by Minister Thompson to come to the board, I had to google it, because, again, I thought it was the University of Guelph as well. This is the one thing: Especially as producers, as an example, we're so busy doing our jobs that we kind of forget to tell the rest of the world about it. As a board, we're aware of that. We're actually in the midst right now of moving forward on a communication strategy, which this will help us with.

University of Guelph is a vital part of ARIO, because, again, ARIO is the caretaker and we give advice to the minister, but we don't actually do the research ourselves. We're just the places and spaces. In no way do I want to undermine what U of G has done, especially as I'm a graduate. However, U of G has its focal points and its strengths, and obviously—and you can speak to northern Ontario and myself in the east—there are parts of Ontario that are not as well served, and maybe some industry that is not. We are working with them, not to in any way take away the amazing work they do, but to see how we can bring more stakeholders to the table to collaborate.

But again, you spoke to northern Ontario. When resources are limited, we have to work on where we can focus. Sometimes that means the heartbreaking truth of having to—for example, Kemptville College got closed. It was not serving the goal anymore. It was no longer what it needed to be. Therefore, we had to pivot. Again, I'm really glad to see, personally, that northern Ontario is getting that much-deserved rebirth.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm going to go to—may I call you Ian, sir?

Dr. Ian Potter: Sure.

Mr. John Vanthof: How important is it to have research based in areas that actually—I take it that we wouldn't do the same research in Vineland that we would in New Liskeard. How important is it to have area-specific research for greenhouses? How important is it to have area-specific research?

Dr. Ian Potter: I think it goes back to the definition of research. Universities, colleges—that's their game. They're there to do the research, generate the knowledge, grow the people and make sure that those people have the skill set to go out into the industry, into government, wherever they end up; maybe they stay within academia.

I very rarely talk about research when I talk about Vineland. I talk about economic development and being a tool for economic development. You could argue that is also a role of universities, but it's probably further downstream—or upstream, depending on which way you are.

To answer your question directly: A little bit of duplication is good. I would never claim that I have all the answers. A lot of it is collaboration, so we collaborate with colleges and universities throughout the country. We collaborate with Guelph. I have Guelph professors on-site. We're very careful where we collaborate because just working with them, just doing stuff, is not really the outcome that I'm trying to achieve for Vineland and for the province. The outcome I'm trying to achieve is for the sector, so my lens is, "What does the client need?"

And I'm very careful with the word "client." We don't just do what everybody wants. We have to maintain that lookout to the future and challenge people on their business and operating plans. If I just did what the client wanted, it would be, "What's today's problem?" As an innovation centre in this sort of business, I have to look out a good 20 years. I have that ability to do the strategic planning and the operating planning and then direct my team to do so. The universities don't have that latitude per se. They can provide the infrastructure, but the professors do their thing, and they do it very well.

Duplication is good; overduplication is not good. Overduplication in the resourcing in the facilities is especially where you can focus. We have amazing infrastructure in horticultural science. There is some of that because you need it in the universities and colleges. Niagara College, for example, has got a greenhouse building at the moment. Brock just got some investment in viticulture. That's good because it trains that group of people.

So the system works. It's not one or the other; it's the system that comes together to support economic development and—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Dr. Ian Potter: —the sector at the end of the day.

Mr. John Vanthof: So the upgrades in the act—will that make it easier to do this?

Dr. Ian Potter: I think the upgrades to the act provide more clarity. I think there's a lot more beyond the act, and when you actually operationalize it with a communications strategy—similar to what was just mentioned about, "Who is ARIO?" What does it do? What does it not do? How does ARIO manifest through the Vineland and through the Guelph system for us to advocate for the greater good, if you like? There's still a lot of work to do, but this is the enabling act to actually make that happen in my view.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Now, we move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, you have four and a half minutes.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thanks to all three of you for coming to present.

The member from Timiskaming, you've got to go to Vineland sometime. Before I got into politics, I used to do a lot of local food work with Vineland. Now that I'm in politics, I got a tour of Vineland a couple of months ago—amazing facility. Ian, you're doing a great job there.

I'm going to direct my question first to Mark and then to Jennifer. I think we're largely pretty supportive of this bill. I think you've heard that at committee and in the House. But it doesn't mean we don't have a role to improve the bill if the opportunity presents itself. What I heard you saying, Mark, from the OFA perspective, is that the bill needs to engage more directly with farmers. From your perspective, how could the bill better do that? Would there be some slight amendments to the bill that would enhance that?

As a follow-up, Jennifer, just in the interest of time, if you want to follow up on what Mark has to say with just your experiences as a farmer on the board.

I'll start with you, Mark.

Mr. Mark Reusser: I'll start by sharing some experience I've had on other committees with very intelligent, very smart people. I, being a farmer who actually does things with my hands—there is a value in having practical experience. Research is wonderful, and we need it. Sometimes, it's helpful to have the practical commentary from someone who actually utilized that research on their own farm, in their own business. I'm not sure exactly how one does that other than by including farmers on committees and boards and so on so they can at least have some comment with regard to what is proposed and what happens. I think it's valuable. I think other people find it valuable, too. Let's involve everyone in the value chain in helping make decisions rather than just a select few.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: If I could just follow up really quick—through you, Chair—you would like to see that incorporated into the bill in a more explicit way?

Mr. Mark Reusser: I think it would be helpful in some way, yes.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Great. Thank you, Mark.

Through you, Chair, to Jennifer: You've been on the board as a farmer. Are there ways that we could see more direct engagement of farmers in the work of ARIO?

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: I would say absolutely, but the caveat has to be the fact that I'm an expert on my farm but I'm not an expert on research. The researchers are experts on research, but they're not necessarily experts in their industry. We have our industry groups that help connect a lot of those dots, but they're not actually the ones literally in the trenches doing the work.

So I think the key here is that we all recognize cross-pollination and hybrid vigour from having stakeholder engagement, having people with the same common goal, and that's a stronger Ontario, innovation, more food security. There are a lot of things we can agree on, but it does take that ecosystem of different specialties coming to, probably, various tables, because otherwise you're drinking from a firehose.

An example is that a lot of us are very specialized, especially in research. But those specializations unfortunately create silos, which is another agricultural term there; sorry. We need to be doing more busting of silos, and farmer engagement through working with the farm groups, working with organizations, and having ARIO not necessarily leading it—but creating an opportunity for them to come together and give advice to us so we can advise the minister accordingly.

1330

Mr. Mike Schreiner: How many farmers are on the board right now?

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Currently, I believe there are four or five of us. We're seeking more board members, actually, in a lot of the spaces that we're not strong on—so innovation, controlled environment and stakeholder engagement.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: How much time have I got?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You have 28 seconds.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: We'll get to the rest in the next round. Thank you for that. I appreciate it.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Now we'll move to the government side. MPP Yakabuski.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, Ian, Jennifer and Mark, for joining us this afternoon.

I'm going to start with Jennifer, because you're a constituent of mine and we've known each other for many, many years. I want to start by thanking you. At one time, you were a junior farmer, and now you're actually one of the go-to people—

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: I'm not so junior anymore.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Yes, I wasn't going to get into that because I have many—well, what I have left is growing grey.

You're now one of those people in the Ottawa Valley that people are turning to as an experienced farmer and one who is so committed to the vocation—I'll call it a vocation because it is more than just a job. So I want to thank you personally here, in front of the committee, for not only the work you do, but the leadership that you continue to show. There's no farm-related thing going on in the valley that you haven't got your hands on these days, and I know it's a lot of work.

And I guess I'm going to have to get to Vineland one of these days. John, maybe we can make a trip together.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes. You and me.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Yes, we'll go to Vineland together—not Disneyland; Vineland.

Jennifer, we've talked about the research—you've talked about it; everybody has talked about it. There are not very many places as big as Ontario. The soil that exists in one part of the province is not the same as the soil that exists in another part of the province, so when you're trying to maximize yields and stuff like that—and weather is not the same. So is that some of the stuff that—by the way, A-R-I-O is just the last four letters of the province of Ontario, so it's very, very appropriate—they can continuously work with to ensure that they're maximizing yields and outlets with our farm sector?

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Absolutely. In some ways, Ontario's vastness is a blessing and a curse. We have these unique ecosystems, like the Bradford Marsh, the Niagara Peninsula, where they can create such amazing value-added items. Research has to be focused there. The economic development and the specializations need to be birthed and developed there, as well. However, we also have a lot of spaces in between that aren't necessarily as sexy but are great at food production. Solutions that, for example, we find in eastern or northern Ontario can actually be used to provide assistance to southern Ontario and vice versa. In some ways, this builds in the resilience. So we can focus on original specializations, but we also have the ability to bring in different perspectives and unique opportunities across the province. So we absolutely need to have that full spectrum there and then focus the research where it has the best impact.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Riddell.

Mr. Brian Riddell: My question is for Jennifer. I'd like to understand how you feel this will really help you in your endeavours, some of what you're doing, the—

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: The ARIO?

Mr. Brian Riddell: Yes.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Plain and simple, it's going to allow us to actually move forward when it comes to innovation. A lot of the wording in there, when we're giving the minister advice, which she may or may not take—you see in there we have “domestic science.” In 1962, this didn't exist.

How are we supposed to be leading innovation in a policy that's great and has served us well but in some ways is overly prescriptive? We need to allow for modernization so that the legislation allows for this to happen but then the nitty-gritty details of making sure that we have the proper capacity and we don't limit ourselves. So really, that's what this is.

I know our chair, Lorne, says there's two things you never want to see made: legislation and sausage. So I admire all of you for that. I don't mind the sausage part of it, but this is definitely a learning curve for me as well. But I definitely trust the people that give advice to the board as to the best way to actually move our goals forward.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. MPP Jones.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Through you, Chair: Thank you, Ian, thank you, Jennifer, and thank you, Mark.

I have a brief question that I'll direct to Mark first, because it was part of the consultation process. OFA, through its leadership team, was constantly consulting and providing feedback on things like, especially, the definition of “research” as it pertains to the act. Now that we have a clear definition—we've embedded innovation and technology in that framework—do you, as a leader for your members, feel this definition reflects the changes you were seeking?

Mr. Mark Reusser: I think it does, and I stated at the very beginning of my presentation that we think that—as Jennifer mentioned, times have changed. Legislation needs to change and follow, in a sense. So many things exist today that didn't exist years ago. OFA's position is that those definitions are better than they were in the past, and that is welcomed. Even the changing of the name of the organization from ARIO to ARIIO—

Interjection.

Mr. Mark Reusser: —remain the same. To reflect innovation, I think, is so important. Innovation in this world and research in this world help countries move forward. The countries that spend the most on innovation and research are the countries that get ahead, and I think that is such an important thing.

Can I relate a story? My grandfather was a professor of poultry science at the University of Guelph when I was a kid, and I remember my grandfather touring me through what are now ARIO facilities as a small child and him showing me what he did—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Mark Reusser: —and telling me why he did it. He said, “Mark, I do this to help farmers and to help farmers make a better living. I also do it for consumers, because they have a better, safer product.”

I think that's what research does. That was true back then; it's true today, and we need to continue to fund it.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Well said, Mark. Thank you for that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. Since we don't have too much time left for the government side—you have 30 seconds, unless you want to move to the second round.

Mr. Trevor Jones: We can move ahead, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Thank you.

We will start our next round of questioning with the opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you, Chair. In my next round of questioning, I'm going to bounce off something that the representative from the OFA, Mark, said, but the question's going to go to you, Jen. The real estate management part of ARIO, now with the expansion in your mandate, how are you going to handle—is the mandate going to increase the responsibilities and the work of ARIO, in your view? Either one of you—I'll go to her, and then I'll go to Mark.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: I can start that. Tentatively, yes, it will, but the key is that we need to make sure we're getting the right return on investment. Overhead is expensive; management is expensive but, as we know all too well, there are resources that don't necessarily require the same level of overhead, and so by being able to expand our mandate, we can leverage those resources better and, ideally, bring stakeholder support to help those dollars that the province can give go further.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. Mark?

Mr. Mark Reusser: I try and illustrate things, as a practical farmer, with a practical example: You have a bag full of money. When ARIO started, the vast money of that bag full of money was used to do basic research, and there was a little to look after the land, look after the buildings and so on. Today, things have—they haven't totally flipped around, but they're in the process of flipping around, so that we're spending a lot of that bag of money on just maintaining the plant and less of it, as a percentage, on doing actual research. That may not be a problem at this very minute, but it will be a problem in the future if things continue with that same bag of money. I think everyone has to realize that. We're doing good things, but we're spending more and more of a percentage of that bag of money on looking after the plant and paying people, which we have to do.

1340

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Would you mind if I added to that? Is that okay?

Mr. John Vanthof: Oh, no, please do.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Earlier, you talked about New Liskeard and being able to keep it open. We all know the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago and the second-best time is today.

We do have infrastructure that, if you folks wanted to propose this now, people would think you were ludicrous. But we do need to manage it well. Unfortunately, the funds set aside for it have stayed the same. We appreciate that, but we all know too well that money doesn't go as far as it used to, and there are a lot more standards. We have to

deal with making sure we're engaging with our Indigenous communities, heritage status on buildings, equity and diversity—there's a lot of things that, in 1962, we didn't have to do out of our budget.

But we recognize that resources can only go so far, so the goal here is to help leverage what we do have, maintain those crucial nodes and then further allow for innovation by potentially bringing in new resources.

Mr. John Vanthof: But on the flipside, if you don't have enough resources, you would be forced to make—

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: It would move to caretaker mode.

Mr. John Vanthof: And that's why, in our area, we are so tender to that, because this wasn't 50 years ago; this was 10 years ago that the station in New Liskeard was just going to close—too bad, so sad. At the same time, the government said, "Oh, northern Ontario is very important for agriculture, but the research can be done somewhere else." That's why we're so tender to that.

I have no criticism for the people who are sitting at the table, but we know it just takes one decision to change—and not just for New Liskeard, but for the province. That's why anything that we can do to make sure—and this legislation is going to pass, but we can make sure that ARIO is funded enough to do the increased job that it's being given, the capacity it's being given.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: And we need to be creative to make sure that we're bringing resources to grow Ontario too, right? This is a partnership.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes.

Getting back to Ian and to Mark, more of a comment: Farmers are very practical, but they are trying to solve today's problems—because my mortgage payment is tomorrow. But often we need to look a little bit further. Perhaps universities are looking a lot further, and a place like Vineland is looking at today and tomorrow. Am I correct in thinking that?

Dr. Ian Potter: That's a fair assumption. Mark was mentioning earlier the need for priorities in agriculture. I can't speak to the whole of agriculture, but in horticulture we do that today. There is a research priorities process that we go through every year. We reach out to a variety of stakeholders, and there will be more this year: "What are the challenges that you're facing in your day-to-day lives?" That report goes to OMAFRA and ARIO, and gets fed into the system for investment.

But the reality is, if I gave you that whole list, you couldn't afford it. It would be impossible. So one of the challenges that I've made to Lorne Taylor—Lorne Hepworth, sorry; not Lorne Taylor. There's a different Lorne Taylor in Alberta. I used to be in the Alberta system, so I slip every now and then. But it's, "What is that five-, 10-, 15-, 25-year agenda? Which races are we going to stay in?" You can't be everything to everybody, but which are the priorities that the government of the time wishes to step, and how do we keep them solid?

Due respect to all of you, but research innovation doesn't work in electoral cycles. It's an eight-, 20- or 25-year breeding cycle for most things. We need to maintain that

game plan. But if things change, we also need to get out of it and do the right thing. We can't be everything to everybody, and we need to invest in certain things at certain times. That selection process is the purview of the government. I will respond accordingly, but I will give them strong advice to do so.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. I think that actually twigged something else: In politics, we all try to protect our home base and our home area. I'll use New Liskeard as an example. If there had been some type of consultation process to say, "Okay, here's why we're thinking about"—but there wasn't, right? That's why consultation is so important, because ARIO and others might have to make difficult decisions in the future. As long as we all understand what those difficult decisions are based on—and we're not all going to like them. But we can't be in every race. I really appreciate that we need to be in the races that we can win on behalf of the people we represent—in our case, politically, but in your case, agriculturally.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We move now to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, go ahead.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I think my first question is going to probably go to Jennifer, but all three of you may want to be part of this question.

I share the concern of the conversation we've been having around—I support the expanded mandate. The world has changed since 1962. We need an expanded mandate for ARIO. But I do share the concerns that Mark raised around the funding implications of that expanded mandate. Are we going to, then, weaken the existing things we're already working on as we expand the mandate? And how do we juggle that, as Ian has been talking about?

As I see it, there are three main partners: There's the government, there are industry stakeholders and then, primarily, the University of Guelph. We all know the challenges universities are facing right now with funding, the University of Guelph included. Jennifer, you had talked about being able to access additional stakeholder dollars and new resources. Could you be a bit more specific on where you think those additional resources would be and could be coming from?

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: I do want to clarify that we're an advisory board, and so the people who are sitting behind me could answer that question a lot better, but they're not able to today. But I do want to make sure—I have absolute faith in their ability for this. The key here is that, as we all know, the overhead is massive.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Yes, it is.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: We need to make sure we're maintaining it, but that can also mean through engagement. Again, when you look at investments in some of the new technologies that are being put into these farms, engagement with those companies, producer groups are a big part of this. GFO, Grain Farmers of Ontario, for example—we do a lot for research, and a lot of that is actually also leveraged there.

A lot of this is simply that when you look at the research landscape across Canada, you're seeing a lot more cluster

models and things like that, where you can actually have universities that have different levels of specialization being able to collaborate on a project. It may be that you're doing a project for greenhouse gases, for example. You'll be testing a model. You'll be testing the genotype of the cattle. You might be testing the feed additives.

The thing is that by being able to tier a lot of these and move forward on that, as well as developing our intellectual property opportunities, ideally it would help attract more as well as increase some self-funding, because as we innovate, as we push more out—I think you heard about the Yukon Gold potato, Millennium asparagus and greenhouse gas this morning from Minister Thompson. Those are all products of ARIO. So that can help generate funds as well.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Through you, Chair, I'm going to ask Ian: I know Vineland has been in this space, trying to navigate that. Do you have some thoughts on where Vineland is accessing resources?

Dr. Ian Potter: I'm happy to talk to you. We get a lot of our support, as I explained to you a couple of months ago, through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership. There's about \$3.85 million a year in that, which is research- and innovation-focused. We also get support through ARIO to maintain the property, both in terms of—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Dr. Ian Potter:—daily, day-to-day work, but also long-term investment into capital.

But there's a plethora of mechanisms out there. As a researcher, in my life, money has never been a problem personally. There's always somebody willing to pay if you've got the right idea or you've got the right value proposition. The federal government has got so many mechanisms: FedDev, CFI, ISED with their various SIFs. The acronyms are just terrible, but there's a lot out there. But we're also seeing international, with Eureka and other mechanisms like that, where we believe we can access support.

It doesn't address the infrastructure side of things primarily. Last year, Vineland invested \$3.5 million into, effectively, ARIO infrastructure because we needed to move it forward. There are mechanisms out there, and it behooves us to chase and go after it—be the hunter. And that's part of my role as the hunter, to look for those mechanisms to support the system.

1350

Mr. Mike Schreiner: And do you think this legislation will assist you in that?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. The time is up.

We move to the government side. MPP Yakabuski, go ahead.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you again for joining us. You all may want to comment—well, maybe not Ian, but Jennifer, you were there when we had the consultations. Then-PA—at that time, he was one of the PAs, along with PA Jones—Rob Flack was heading up the consultations in our area. We're talking about consultations directly with those involved and even consultations with people in the agriculture side of it, but also in the veterinary side of it

because of the changes that are being made as part of this act. I mean, it's not the biggest part of the act, but I think it's very important.

Maybe I could get you and, if possible, Mark, to comment on the impact that those changes will have for the industry, because we know we are in a stressed situation when it comes to, particularly, large animal vets. So maybe if you would be willing to make a comment on that?

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Do you want me to speak to the vets or how ARIO is going to help at the farm level with stakeholder engagement?

Mr. John Yakabuski: No, on the issue of veterinarians, because you're a farmer first. You're a member of the board, but you're a farmer first.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Well, I'm a grain-and-oil-seed farmer who actually does need a vet for my bees just to be able to access antibiotics. But I'm part of an ecosystem, and that ecosystem is reliant on having healthy dairy farms, healthy beef farms and poultry farms. OFA is well known for saying there is only one landscape in Ontario and the economic development that these all thrive and work together in, and so whether it is vets themselves, whether it's the amendments to this act, all of those are required to modernize. Because, again, when all of this was put in place, this didn't even exist, right? And as farmers, this is my office. This is how you manage my rain gauge, my drill, your dairy barn; if this didn't even exist, how could we have research legislation that can't even allow for us to bring in these absolutely phenomenal new ideas?

I hope that answers your question.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Well, and maybe specifically some of the changes, and maybe Mark—because the OFA is involved in all facets of agriculture, but the additional spaces at Guelph and Lakehead; the \$50,000 travel allowance, which is massive to someone who is travelling to do veterinary work at a farm that's 50 kilometres away and maybe even more sometimes—those kinds of things and the impact that they could have on the industry itself.

Mr. Mark Reusser: I'll respond in this way, and that is that agriculture is like a big puzzle: all kinds of pieces and pieces some of us don't even know about. But without all those pieces, you don't have a picture of when you complete the puzzle, and you really need a completed puzzle.

So I'll use my experience as a turkey farmer. I absolutely rely on my veterinarian. He's on retainer; he comes and visits me every flock. I want the very, very best information I can get from him that I can possibly get, and I'm willing to pay for it. It's part of the puzzle. It helps me. I think that you need to be careful when you prioritize because you don't always know what's going to happen tomorrow. You don't know what you don't know. I would hate for us to prioritize on just three things at the expense of everything else.

I think basic research has to be relatively broad. If you're going to say—70 years ago we didn't know about gene transfer that has completely revolutionized plant breeding. We didn't know about it. No one knew. Now it's a thing. We've got to anticipate that there are going to be

new things and have our basic research be broad enough that it can support whatever is coming next.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Specifically, the changes to the veterinarians?

Mr. Mark Reusser: That would be helpful, too, yes. Absolutely. Like I said, again, a veterinarian is an incredibly important piece of the puzzle for my industry and many others.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much. Anyone else?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You have close to three minutes.

MPP Riddell.

Mr. Brian Riddell: My question is for Mark. OFA has had an important role to play in ensuring your 38,000 members are using best practices and the most up-to-date technology. Could you describe how this bill will ensure that your members continue to adopt new technology and innovation in this sector?

Mr. Mark Reusser: I'm not sure it can help them adopt; it can ensure that there's something there for them to adopt. I think that today, when farmers are being asked to do so many different things—sequester carbon and maintain the soil and look after the water and a huge, long list—sometimes we struggle with, “I want to do something. I don't know what to do, not because there isn't a long list of things I can do but because the thing that probably would be the most helpful is the new thing on the list that I don't have yet.” So we're still waiting for it, and that's where research comes in: It helps provide those things that we don't know that we yet need.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Can I add to that, if possible?

Mr. Brian Riddell: Definitely, Jennifer.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: It would be—we have the places and spaces. We collaborate with OMAFRA, so in eastern Ontario the Winchester research station is our mecca. In Guelph, it's Elora. For the poultry folks, it's going to be the new build. For horticulture, it's Vineland. It's the place for the space to happen, and that's vital. Without that, we can't have that. It's a five-hour drive for me to get here today. I didn't need an airplane. A lot of Ontario—this is the reality. And guess what? We have to get home to feed the cattle, so it has to be regional. And good luck finding child care—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: —or someone to actually run the tractor today while I'm here. Those are the things that make for a stronger rural Ontario.

Mr. Brian Riddell: It makes you wonder why you wanted to be a farmer, but I thank you for—

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Oh, we're sick. It's a sickness. I love it.

Interjections.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: No, I don't want the cure.

Mr. Brian Riddell: My parents came off a dairy farm, so I get it. Thank you very much. That's all.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP McGregor, go ahead. You have 43 seconds.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Oh. All right, then. Well, I will just use the time to talk—I come from a community where I think our last farm was built probably over 20 years ago. We had a horse farm 10 years ago. But we know that without the work that you folks do every day and farmers do every day, we don't get to eat. Just on behalf of my constituents and our government, thank you for everything you're doing. We really appreciate it. With 10 seconds, if you have anything else you'd like to add.

Ms. Jennifer Doelman: Thanks for being our customers.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Love your products.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mark, Jennifer and Ian, for your presentations.

We will now switch to our next panel. We have the University of Guelph, Gerald Schipper and Berry Growers of Ontario—

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Upon popular request, we are going to have a five-minute recess.

The committee recessed from 1400 to 1405.

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

MR. GERALD SCHIPPER

BERRY GROWERS OF ONTARIO

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We're back. I would like to invite the University of Guelph, Gerald Schipper and Berry Growers of Ontario to take their seats.

We will start with the University of Guelph. Go ahead, please. You have seven minutes.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for giving me and the University of Guelph an opportunity to present in support of Bill 155. My name is Shayan Sharif. I'm a professor of the Ontario Veterinary College and the associate vice-president of research for the University of Guelph. It is my absolute pleasure to join you today on behalf of the university to speak in support of Bill 155.

As a leading research-intensive comprehensive university, the University of Guelph is proud to advocate for the modernized act because we know research and innovation are central to the long-term success and sustainability of Ontario's agri-food sector. We have the privilege of working with the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario, ARIO, in managing 13 of its 14 research sites across the province and, as a fellow signatory to the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance, the long-standing collaboration between the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, ARIO and the University of Guelph. By working together, we've seen first-hand how the research infrastructure and leadership of ARIO has contributed to the sector's success.

Indeed, Ontario's agri-food sector is a homegrown success story. In 2022, it contributed more than \$48 billion to the provincial gross domestic product and employed one in 10 Ontarians. The sector not only makes safe, home-

grown nutritious food available to the people of Ontario; it's also the cornerstone of a thriving economy. In 2022, Ontario's agri-food sector accounted for more than \$23 billion in international exports.

The modernized act will ensure ARIO can continue to grow Ontario by supporting world-class research and innovation that meets the needs of the modern agri-food industry, and the University of Guelph is there to be counted on as a long-term partner and advocate. We have had a long-standing relationship with OMAFRA and ARIO that has stood the test of time. Our commitment to Ontario's agri-food sector is rooted in history, but focused on the future.

This year, the Ontario Agricultural College, which is situated at the University of Guelph, will be celebrating 150 years of powering Ontario's agri-food sector. Over the century and a half, we have trained thousands of agri-food leaders, thought leaders, and we've delivered made-in-Ontario solutions that grow the economy and deliver Ontario-grown food to your grocery cart, including the Yukon Gold potato, Millennium asparagus and a variety of soybeans. These advancements—and by the way, these were just a few examples; the list can go on and on—are thanks to the expertise and ingenuity of our research community and have been enabled by ARIO investment.

In fact, many of our made-in-Ontario solutions have been built on the world-class research platform provided generously by ARIO. The 13 ARIO-owned research sites across the province that are managed by the University of Guelph through the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance are indeed sophisticated research farms that are used by researchers to deliver farm-tested solutions for the sector. I really want to emphasize that delivering farm-tested solutions to the sector is really one of the key deliveries of this particular alliance between the University of Guelph, OMAFRA and ARIO.

These crop and lifecycle research farms span sectors, soil types and microclimates, which makes this particular alliance initiative extremely unique across the globe. These research centres are operated by leveraging the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance to deliver an innovation platform that is cutting-edge and truly unparalleled across the globe. Since 2018, we have celebrated the completion of more than \$90 million in new infrastructure projects and capital improvements, again thanks to the funding secured by ARIO.

1410

With new research buildings opened across the province, from Centre Wellington to Winchester, just to name a few of those sites, Ontario boasts an outstanding platform for agri-food research, innovation, talent development and knowledge mobilization. I could provide many examples of individual research success stories that have been built on this platform, but the bottom line is that research and innovation identifying new evidence-informed practices drives the success of Ontario's agri-food sector, and ARIO-owned research farms provide places to carry out this important work.

Let's put this into some plain terms: The average dairy cow is producing three times more milk now than 50 years ago. The advances to make production more efficient are because of research—research into breeding, feeding, genetics, welfare and animal health. Another example is that major agricultural crops are now 50% more productive, meaning higher yields and more Ontario-grown food for everyone in Ontario and for export. That, too, is because of research—breeding research to develop new, better-performing varieties of crops like wheat, corn and soybeans, with higher yields and better traits, like disease and pest resistance.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: Also, over the past 120 years, more than 500 new plant varieties have been developed at U of G, and we are not done yet.

Modernizing the ARIO Act means continuing to broaden the scope of research and innovation in Ontario to help the agri-food industry stay cutting-edge. I speak on behalf of the university when I say that I'm proud of what we've accomplished by working with the province of Ontario for decades. The updates proposed to the act are poised to ensure our decades-long collaboration will continue to deliver impact for Ontario for decades to come. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much.

We move now to our second presenter, Gerald Schipper. Go ahead, please. You have seven minutes. Identify your name and who you represent.

Mr. Gerald Schipper: Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to be here today. My name is Gerald Schipper. I chaired a dairy advisory committee at Ridgeway college. It was about 14 years ago that I was asked by a former Conservative MPP by the name of Ken Monteith to set up this committee as an advisory to the structure and education of the Ridgeway campus.

Since then, we have made up a committee of dairy producers like myself, and a few industry people are on the committee as well. We felt like a lone voice in the desert many times, and that's why I'm here, as a way to make sure that the colleges and those different sites that the ARIO has jurisdiction over are not forgotten.

There is a tremendous amount of research—good research—work done at the University of Guelph, as my counterpart shared. We were beneficiaries of some of that research. I actually grew up in South America and Brazil, and we used some of that research that was done at the University of Guelph both in our cash crop operation as well as in our livestock operation.

But there's a missing link now between the research being done here at the university, which is that no ordinary, next generation of dairy producer is really ever entering those facilities that are at Elora. Hence, we have a structure at Ridgeway Campus that is 60 years old, that is kind of being legislated out of existence because the ways they take care of the animals there are not conforming to today's standard anymore. That's one of the reasons why we created this committee: to advance those kinds of facilities, to have a new facility built.

We have industry partners that are willing to invest dollars. We also have other folks that want to come alongside. But so far, we've been always stymied and say, "The main research is done at the University of Guelph, and perhaps just hold on to your horses. Don't push too far and fast."

The result is that today we have DeLaval, which is one of the largest dairy companies in the world, investing money at Trent University for their own technical advice or to further their clients, their technicians to be trained at the university in Peterborough. Also, there's a lot of our students who are leaving Ontario and getting educated at Lakeland College in Alberta.

Many years ago, I was told that good education trumps geography every day of the year. So we feel that if we enhance the practical education, if you do the research at University of Guelph, have a transfer of knowledge to our student base at Ridgetown, then we can keep our students in our own province and educate the next generation of practical farmers—plus also the support that they need with other industry partners that will also hopefully invest money into the college and also then train their own technical advisers who will support the farmers.

The other thing that makes Ridgetown very unique is that there is a methane digester on site. I don't know of any other agricultural institution in North America that has a methane digester on site. We haven't even come close to capitalizing all the benefits of having that right in Ridgetown. A larger dairy facility there would also increase the amount of methane and manure that would be put through the digester.

If we could collaborate with the skills side of our industry, the colleges that support skill sets, train individuals to visualize and work with that kind of technology and then have the side benefit of capturing that and becoming a carbon-neutral-equal so that—and then also, further along that, wouldn't it be a great win-win for everybody if we could say that, for instance, 600 houses in Ridgetown were capturing the energy that's created out of that methane and using it in their houses? Those are the kinds of innovative things that we hope ARIO would support and would just expand on their current mandate to cover all that.

The other thing is that we are world leaders. It's heard so many times, and we stated it quite often today as well. We're world leaders, and the rest of the world is looking toward us. They want to come to Canada for that reason. Yet, at the same time, in that aspect, the quality of practical education has kind of gone by the wayside. That is unfortunate because we're not capitalizing on an avenue that is sitting in our own backyard.

If I go to the south and talk to my friends who are cash croppers, grain farmers, most of them know where Ridgetown is because of their southwestern ag conference that they have in January, which is so well attended both physically and also virtually. It's utilized as one of the stepping stones in furthering your knowledge in agriculture, and that hub we'd like to create as well in the dairy industry.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Gerald Schipper: That's why we're seeking that you expand your mandate to cover that as well.

Like I said, we've been at this for 14 years, and we're not a whole lot closer than the day we started. Therefore, we love the opportunity to be able to come here and share that challenge with you today. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much.

Now, I would like to call upon Tom Heeman to make his presentation. Please identify yourself and the organization you represent.

Mr. Tom Heeman: My name is Tom Heeman. I'm the research chair with the Berry Growers of Ontario, and I'm a farmer at Heeman Greenhouses and Strawberry Farm—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Can you sit back a little bit, because you are too close to the mike?

Mr. Tom Heeman: Is that better?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Let's try this way.

Mr. Tom Heeman: Sorry. I'm used to microphones that aren't as sensitive.

I'm a berry farmer, beekeeper and cidemaker at a farm just east of London, Ontario. I believe that we're at a very pivotal moment today in agriculture. We're at the precipice of a number of new emerging technologies. I think it's important to highlight that ARIO is the very foundation upon which all innovation and research is conducted in this province.

If you'll indulge me, I have a little story about a famous Londoner. His name is William Saunders. Back in the 1880s, it was a provincial mandate that we wanted to grow more fruits and vegetables in this province. We had tremendous amount of grain and livestock but, you know, we weren't getting some of those vitamins and minerals that were important. So they appointed William Saunders, a chemist, to found not only the Fruit Growers of Ontario and the Field Naturalists of Ontario but the Entomologists of Ontario to further the study of growing plants and understanding and controlling their pests and diseases. William Saunders later went on to found the Dominion of Canada experimental farms and bred the Marquis wheat that allowed the opening of the plains.

1420

I say all this because one person, at the right time, with the right skills, can change the future of a country, and I believe that we are just that such moment.

At that time, what was common was they would just send fruits and vegetables out to farmers and landowners, people in their backyards, and through this citizen science exercise, we gained an understanding of how different fruits actually behaved in our province. Now, we live in a much more specialized world and we rely on experts to do a majority of this work for us. However, as you've heard earlier today, us farmers still believe that we have a role to play in the future of our industries, and a lot of this is carried out by the on-farm experimentation that still goes on today.

It's that experimentation, from an early age, in our farm, that got me interested in the Ontario berry growers and having a more active role in our future. I went to the University of Guelph. I'm a proud Guelph graduate. At that time, I had the privilege of joining my father as he visited the dean of the Ontario Agricultural College. I

thought that was kind of neat. The reason he was doing that was to cement the important priorities that the Ontario berry growers had, particularly around the New Liskeard research station and the tissue culture program.

That was about over 10 years ago, when I graduated. And when I graduated, I joined the berry growers board and I became the vice-president, and I took on those responsibilities.

So for the last 10 years, I've been meeting with the dean and the VP of research at the University of Guelph for the Ontario Agricultural College. Through that, I've met with three different deputy ministers, and I've had the pleasure of meeting with Minister Thompson.

I think this government has made tremendous strides in realizing the gaps in some of the technology that we are facing at New Liskeard, but again, I want to showcase that it's important to have relationships with the industry.

If you look at these changes proposed in the bill, I believe that having a manager, as opposed to a director, is a very vital step because, again, you look at what active management can do for research and for industry. That's why I told you about William Saunders, because I believe that, with the role of a manager in place, you have someone who can steward the collaboration with industry, with the University of Guelph and with OMAFRA.

I can tell you it's been a very challenging process to try and coordinate between the university, ourselves and with multiple people at OMAFRA, let alone the ARIO board. I understand that these changes are meant to benefit the ARIO, but we need to make sure that we're still collaborating with our stakeholders and making sure that the innovations that are occurring are beneficial to the industry.

I'll leave you with just another take-away: When I was at University of Guelph, it was number three in the world for agriculture, including animal sciences. The number two is Wageningen in the Netherlands, and the number one is University of California, Davis.

We in the berry industry have been very fortunate to have a large amount of growth. I know MPP Jones can attest to what's going on in his territory there with development of over 300 acres of greenhouse strawberries within five years. Again, those are genetics that were created in California with technology created in the Netherlands.

What have we contributed to advancing the industry? We no longer have a breeding program, and we need the tissue culture program in order to have clean, virus-free, pest- and disease-free genetic material so that we can even engage in a breeding program, so that we can import genetics from other countries.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Tom Heeman: That's the first stage in doing so. It breaks my heart that this past fall we had to stop shipments of genetic material from New Liskeard because the HEPA filter was not replaced and there wasn't a budget to do so. So our samples got contaminated with mould. I know that sounds like a small thing—a couple of plants had to be thrown out and started over again—but it takes over three years to replicate those dozens of plants into millions and millions of plants. Those plants go throughout the country.

They go throughout the United States. You may not buy Ontario berries all the time, but the technology in New Liskeard helps create those Florida berries that get imported during the winter as well.

I just want you to think about these changes. Adding intellectual property I think would be a benefit so that you can work with the university and have a clear guideline on intellectual property.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much.

We move now to the first round of questioning. We will start with the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, you have seven and half minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you all for attending. I'm going to make a couple of comments first and then a question. As far as the University of Guelph, when you mention the University of Guelph, anybody in agriculture, anyone in Ontario goes, "Yes, centre of excellence for agriculture in Ontario." I think that is unchallenged. I really think so.

I really feel, coming from northern Ontario, the lone voice in the wilderness, the lone wolf in the wilderness. We feel that a lot. We felt that when we lost our dairy research, we felt that when we lost the beef research and we still feel it with what's happening at the SPUD Unit in New Liskeard—tissue culture, a much better way of describing it.

It was obvious to everyone—is obvious to everyone—that that place needs to be rebuilt. We shouldn't have to worry about this filter or that filter. It's been there for 40 years. Can you expand, please? We've discussed this a few times around this table with the minister as well. I asked the minister this morning if we could have an update on where that process is to renew the unit. She did mention that ARIO owns a spot across the highway. Right now it's not on our land either. Could you give us an update from your side? You mentioned some frustration, but just how important is the tissue culture centre and where are you in the process?

Mr. Tom Heeman: Thank you. I don't think anything has changed. I was at this 10 years ago because we had a hard time getting contracts renewed. We'd call and call because we're a client and we didn't know who to talk to, and we've been able to expand that process up to the minister's level.

Again, these facilities are good but we need to have stakeholder dialogue. That whole mandate on technology transfer and expansion—OMAFRA does a tremendous job, but they need to have the people in place. It all started when we lost the faculty member. The faculty member retired and was never replaced. Now we just have a technician with an overseer in Guelph, so there's not active research being advanced in that facility.

I brought an example today of what it means. I don't know if you've all heard about the Ontario hazelnut story, but this is something that is a homegrown success story. It required the tissue culture in the New Liskeard plant in order to make sure that the varieties they were breeding and bringing into nurseries here were clean of virus. Now we have delicious Ontario hazelnuts. That's something we never had before.

That's why I'm here today, because I hope that this bill will allow for a clear guideline for an expedient result. I understand sometimes there need to be reforms before there can be investment, but I understand from discussions with the University of Guelph that Laboratories Canada has an interest in investing in a number of capacities, including a clean plant hub. Again, I don't think it's a matter of money. It's just, how do we get people together with like interests? Doing it twice a year on a conference call, it's not getting it done.

1430

Mr. John Vanthof: Obviously, this site is just an example. Forty years ago it must have been incredibly groundbreaking when the site was built. It was possible to do it then. It seems very frustrating that it's not possible to do it now when we know there is an issue. When I talk to the people at the SPUD Unit, they're as frustrated as anyone.

Mr. Tom Heeman: Yes. So how the Leamington industry is growing, they're just importing plant material straight from the Netherlands because the Netherlands has much more advanced verification. They did a public-private partnership; they spun off their lab. They are producing it and they're exporting. We don't have that capacity anymore.

We have a coalition across all fruits and vegetables that it's clonally propagated. All fruits and vegetables are genetically identical, for the most part, so they have to be cloned. That's where this process comes into play. It's about not just the past; it's about the future, because this capacity goes into phytosanitary certificates for crossing the federal border, and also bringing in new genetics that requires phytosanitary clearance and having new-bred genetics meet phytosanitary clearance. Without this capacity, we can't do that and we're falling behind.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm going to stay on this for another minute or so. The problem we had at the SPUD Unit, is it simply an issue of the building is too hard to maintain?

Mr. Tom Heeman: Well, we don't own the building anymore, so why would you make investments in a building that you don't own?

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay, okay.

Mr. Tom Heeman: Right? I was at an Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association meeting, on the floor for the northeastern clean plant hub, and someone came up to me afterwards and said, "You know, that building is for sale. I'm going to buy it." There was no consultation with us as stakeholders. Can you imagine how frustrating that is? This constitutes your livelihood.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you. I'd like to go to—regarding Ridgetown, you talked about that we are missing the practical education part. Could you expand on that? Start on that, and when I come back I'll go back to you again.

Mr. Gerald Schipper: Thanks for that question. At the moment, the facility is so behind the times that it's very hard to educate a lot of new technology in a practical way from a facility that is out of touch with what's going on today. The challenge is because Guelph—and I love their facility that they have, but it's because the next generation of dairy producers do not ever come into those barns as

part of their studies at the University of Guelph, for those who choose to go to Guelph. It's either too far off the grounds or because the educators there do not want to jeopardize—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. The time is up.

We will move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, the floor is yours.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I want to thank all three presenters for being here today.

Dr. Sharif, I want to ask a few questions about veterinary at the University of Guelph. But while we're on this conversation of capacity at the various campuses, I want to expand on that conversation a little bit, so maybe, Tom, I'll start with you.

I understand your frustration. You have a filter, it contaminates tissues and you lose, what, two years, I guess, of plant research. I'm trying to get at the reason that happened. Is it just lack of financial capacity to properly maintain the facilities? If that is the case, do you see this bill, which I think most of us largely support here, playing a role in addressing that capacity issue?

Mr. Tom Heeman: Thank you, MPP Schreiner. I'm here because it was recommended to me to be here by a current board member of the ARIO, and I've had discussions with them on this. Again, we've tried from the university up, we've tried from OMAFRA down, and it's getting better, but I think that—sorry, what was the question again?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It sounds like there may be a financial capacity issue around facility maintenance that led to the challenge you faced with a contaminated HEPA filter. So I'm just wondering if a bill here, which I think all of us pretty largely support, is going to address that capacity issue or not. What do you think it would take to prevent something like that—really, a facility failure—from happening again?

Mr. Tom Heeman: What has been communicated to me is that the challenge is the funding for the joint partnership agreement, where you can have funding for the facilities, but if you don't have funding for the faculty to operate the facilities, then you get a shortfall. Again, you don't have a lab director for that facility. They're under another individual out of Guelph who doesn't physically visit that spot, and you have a technician who is very skilled but close to retirement. She communicates with us, because she's very exasperated at times for not being listened to. I think it's a very difficult position, where she has all of these plants to keep alive and she knows that growers are counting on her, but I don't think that—because it's basically an orphaned facility.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Do you have thoughts of how to un-orphan the facility?

Mr. Tom Heeman: I think that there's a combination of things. There's physically siting it, which can require some reinvestment, and again, a lot of it is—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: You have one minute, he said. Keep going.

Mr. Tom Heeman: Okay. A lot of this stuff is not as costly as it used to be. So there's re-establishing the lab, whether that's on the additional site, part of the Guelph campus or one of the other 13 locations. I know the potato growers are particularly attached to the northern site for phytosecurity reasons. But there needs to be a reinvigoration in addressing it with the faculty member. That's why I made the point about capacity: You have the physical—the property and the infrastructure and the assets—but they need to be followed through with the human capital investment. That's what makes this partnership work. It's a partnership with so many different stakeholders, but there needs to be the capacity at the University of Guelph and—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

We move to the government side. MPP Graham McGregor.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Thanks to our visitors for being here with us today.

My question is for Mr. Schipper. You alluded to the fact about some of the innovations that the ARIO had pointed out that you had adopted and kind of put to work on your own farm, and I'd like to get to that.

But I do just want to say a hello on behalf of your local MPP, Mr. Rob Flack, and I want to read this into the record. He says about you: "Early adopter, fast thinker, entrepreneurship to the fullest." That's the nicest thing I've ever heard Mr. Flack say, except for when he's talking about me, so congratulations, sir. Good to have you here.

If you could talk a little bit more about those best practices tangibly, to get on the record about ARIO innovations or best practices we've developed here in Ontario that you're able to turn around on your own farm.

Mr. Gerald Schipper: Thank you very much for that question and those kind words. I don't think I'll ever live up to them, but that's beside the point.

In my previous life, I was also president of Holstein Canada. We implemented, along with Dairy Farmers of Canada, something called proAction: animal welfare, animal care and proper animal husbandry. Also, with collaboration, we were directly involved with the University of Guelph itself, and I think a lot of good work was done there.

1440

The missing link is the things that are researched and looked at as far as animal care goes and various forms of that. We have missed the boat that we're not transferring that knowledge from the university to Ridgetown. We're our own worst enemy right now at Ridgetown, because the animal care practices being done there, at the moment, are right at that level that they still fall under the radar, but they're one or two years away from being closed down, because it's not proper animal husbandry done at one of our own research facilities. To me, that is not a good thing.

We have made various, numerous attempts to get that looked at, to create a new facility, and so far we've also been stymied. That's why I said "the lone voice in the wilderness," feeling frustration as well. And to imagine that we had a vision for a new facility at Ridgetown, and then in about year four when we were into this, that very

same facility was built in northern Alberta. That's where a lot of our students who are going to be the next generation of dairy producers and technicians in this province are getting educated. When we have a research arm like ARIO in this province, I think we're missing the boat. There's a missing link there when that is happening.

Mr. Graham McGregor: I'll cede the floor to Mr. Jones.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Jones, go ahead.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Through you, Chair: Thank you very much for attending today and taking time out of your busy days to join us and to contribute on the record.

Having worked in government and worked in private industry in agri-business, I truly believe that governments need to create favourable economic conditions to attract business. Once you attract business that can scale, you attract those technology hubs of innovation, like Mr. Heeman is aspiring to. Because if we have those technology hubs, we're not just exporting fresh food; we're exporting technology and know-how. We become that living centre.

Recently, on that same theme, our government supported the University of Guelph through the five-year, \$343-million transfer agreement, the alliance agreement. It's historic, it's important and it's fundamental, because it brings in pure research—those ideas for those deep thinkers, those researchers—and that market-ready, innovative stuff that we need, that consumers need, to see as products on our shelves.

Professor, if you could expand a little bit on what this alliance agreement does to provide both those arms of pure research and market-ready products to consumers, we'd appreciate that.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: Yes, of course. Thank you very much, MPP Jones. Just very briefly, I'm going to bring up my own example.

I was educated at the Ontario Veterinary College, and ARIO facilities were basically bread and butter for my own program when I was doing my PhD. Then, when I graduated and I was recruited back by the Ontario Veterinary College, I had the privilege and pleasure of graduating over 80 highly qualified personnel. Many are thought leaders in the agri-food industry, many of them are veterinarians and so forth, and many of them work at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, as an example, basically protecting our agri-food sector.

The reality is that without the alliance program—or predecessors of the alliance program; it used to be called the partnership or the contract between OMAFRA and the University of Guelph—none of that would have ever been possible.

So I'm looking at it from my lens as an individual researcher. But taking it one step further, just to give you a couple of examples: Right at the moment, Canada is on the map for making better genetic stock for dairy cattle. The reality is that one of my colleagues, Dr. Bonnie Mallard, has created better solutions for a selection of dairy cattle that are healthier, that require less antibiotic treatment for diseases such as mastitis, and Semex has really captured that.

One of my other colleagues, Dr. Christine Baes, is working on creating better solutions for genetic selection of dairy cows to produce less methane.

My colleague here, my counterpart, who is talking about methane production and so forth—it's still in the primordial stages of development, but I can tell you that within the next few years, we are going to see a made-in-Ontario, made-in-Canada solution that would be in the form of dairy cows that have less methane production.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: I think without ARIO facilities, this would not be ever possible. So we're really talking about people, we're talking about places and we're talking about programs. ARIO and OMAFRA are basically doing exactly what is needed in order to propel research and innovation in Ontario and not just for Ontarians, but actually for Canadians and for people around the globe, because some of those dairy cows are being used all over the world. Everyone is the beneficiary to some of the research and innovation that got initiated here in Ontario, but a lot of people are benefiting from that.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Thank you, Professor.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You have 20 seconds, unless you want to move to the next round? Okay.

We'll move to the next round with the official opposition, again. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to go back to you, Tom, just for a second. You said something that stuck with me. The New Liskeard site is basically an orphaned facility or could be seen that way— orphaned. Basically, it's not on our land anymore? It has lost some of its research capacity or attention. I'm not trying to get you in trouble or anything, but I'm trying to make the argument that let's get this over the hill.

Mr. Tom Heeman: Yes, and that's the gut punch: When you sell a lab and you don't have a plan for it to continue, then basically, it's a death sentence. Thankfully, we were able to get a five-year contract versus a four-year contract, so that's a bit of a positive indication. I think it's great that there's the innovation partnership agreement, but again, in another life—I'm involved in municipal government. We pass a budget, we have line items and we know where, ideally, every project and program dollar is accounted for. I don't know where this money is supposed to come from. I understand there's an annual report from the ARIO board, but I don't know where I could find those internal discussions and how we could try and influence those internal discussions, or get that reassurance that there are allocated funds. I don't care where it comes from, whether it's the federal government—I think it just needs to be documented that it's going to continue.

Mr. John Vanthof: So if I could paraphrase: It's hard for you to plan for the future when you don't see a plan for the future from your partners.

Mr. Tom Heeman: Agreed.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

Getting back to Ridgetown and to Guelph, I think we understand—at least I understand as a former dairy producer—Guelph is a centre of excellence. But getting back to

the point about Ridgetown, a lot of people who want to train to be better dairy farmers, maybe than their parents were or better, don't necessarily end up in the research facility at Guelph. Is that the missing link? Could you expand on that, that that's the missing thing? Because in Guelph, we do like you do: very high-end stuff that's going to make a huge difference in our industry in the dairy sector. I'm using dairy because I understand that one. But that might not necessarily be where my child goes to get trained on in the latest technology that they are going to use in their career. Could you expand on that?

Mr. Gerald Schipper: Yes, thank you for that question. There's in fact great research done at the University of Guelph. But for any research to be validated, you need a larger population of the dairy cattle—if we're going to use the dairy cattle in this sense—to validate the research. So why don't we capitalize on increasing the size, which industry believes is necessary, use all the greatest technology there and have this next generation of dairy producers access the knowledge that's created at the University of Guelph, transfer that knowledge and utilize it at the next generation of dairy farmers at the University of Guelph campus in Ridgetown? That's the missing link. We're not seeing that right now.

1450

An interesting thing: I met with one of the top researchers in the world in genetics in Texas recently. He said that's one of the shortfalls right now in Canada. There's great research done, but that whole scope of validation is not being expanded enough into the larger population for validation and accuracy for that research, especially when it comes to methane. Therefore I think we could work together. That's why we'd like to see some of that attention paid to Ridgetown Campus.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay, thank you.

Now I'm going to go to the University of Guelph. You're in the veterinary profession?

Dr. Shayan Sharif: Yes.

Mr. John Vanthof: I think we'll talk about that at a later date in another bill that's coming up, but I've got a vet professor here from the University of Guelph so we're going to talk about vets.

There is an immense shortage of vets in the province. I give credit where credit is due: They've put more seats out to train more vets. Is it starting yet, the program in Thunder Bay?

Dr. Shayan Sharif: It will start, hopefully, next year.

Mr. John Vanthof: I just want to put on the record that I get lobbied a fair bit to put a whole program in Thunder Bay. I'm opposed, because I truly believe that every person who wants to be a vet should experience Guelph for part of their training—and not just the university, but should experience the agriculture experience in Guelph.

I don't actually have a question, but would you be ready for even more seats if we could? I think right now, even with the extra seats, we are not going to have enough vets trained for the future.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: The premise is absolutely correct. We are in a desperate shortage of veterinarians in Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: And it's not an Ontario problem; it's a Canada problem; it's a North American problem. We can't really import qualified veterinarians, let's say, from the US, because they also have the exact same issue. That's number one.

Number two, are we capable of expanding our capacity? Yes, we are. I'm not going to speak on behalf of the dean of the veterinary college. I'm sure that at some point in time he can appear before the committee. But I do really think that there is capacity to expand and there is obviously also motivation to expand that capacity. But more funding would mean more capacity, as far as I'm concerned. That's something for the dean of that college to comment on.

However, within the context of ARIO—because veterinary medicine wasn't mentioned very clearly in the previous—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. The time is up.

We move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, the floor is yours, if you have any comments or questions.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you, Chair. The previous member there, I thought he was going to say everyone should come to Guelph to experience their MPP, but I don't know if that's what he wanted to say or not.

I wanted to pick up on the discussion that was coming up out of that last question, because I have talked to the dean of the veterinary school and it's harder to get into veterinary school than it is to get into medical school in Ontario right now. There's so much demand and such a shortage of spaces. As I said to the minister earlier today, I really compliment the government on expanding the number of spaces and funding the co-operation between Lakehead and the University of Guelph. But we certainly need more, and I think the fact that it is so hard to get into veterinary school highlights the need for more veterinarians.

I also just want to say, as the MPP for Guelph, how proud we are to have a university like Guelph, which is a world-renowned university when it comes to agricultural and veterinary research. I certainly appreciate the role you play in that research.

One of the questions I have, because there's been a lot of talk today around capacity issues—do we have the capacity to deliver on the research mandate that we have? I'm just curious, at the university, how you're feeling constraints around funding capacity and your ability to deliver on the research mandates and visions that you have.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: Well, first and foremost, I just want to go back to the ARIO Act, because there is veterinary medicine incorporated into that now, and as part of the alliance program, we have the Veterinary Capacity Program, or VCP, which provides funding for training not only veterinarians, but also specialists in veterinary medicine, so that by the time the doctor of veterinary medicine students graduate, then they can enter residency programs, very similar to medical schools, and obtain specializations. That is absolutely critical for the well-being of the veterinary profession in Ontario, and really I want to say my kudos

to ARIO and the alliance program for incorporating that as part of the program. That's number one.

Number two is that universities, as you're well aware, are all facing some challenges, but the Ontario government has provided some relief for universities in the form of \$1.3 billion. I believe that that would make a positive and significant impact in terms of our operations for the future.

In terms of funding for research, I can tell you that even though the alliance program is significant amounts of funding for the University of Guelph, we leveraged at least, I would say, twice over in terms of the funding that we get from other sources. It is absolutely critical for the University of Guelph and for the well-being of our university, but at the same time, we bring a lot more to the table in the form of funding that we receive from the federal government and leveraging funding against private partners.

If I do my back-of-the-envelope calculation, I can tell you that for every dollar that we receive from OMAFRA through the alliance program, we can bring anywhere from \$1 to \$2 into that equation, so we do actually leverage that funding quite significantly. Without that funding, we would not actually be able to leverage.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: If I may just to diverge here and just point out one big important thing in regard to the SPUD Unit, because it has been discussed quite significantly and very extensively: I just wanted to tell MPP Vanthof that I don't really think that SPUD is orphaned. As a matter of fact, we are working with OMAFRA and we hope to lease out to industry to have a sustainable plan for the operations of SPUD. SPUD is not forgotten; it will never be forgotten. It is really critical for the industry and for the north. We recognize that, but we need to have a sustainable plan that would ensure its viability for the future—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. The time is up.

We move to the government side. MPP Riddell.

Mr. Brian Riddell: My question is for Tom. We all know that plant health and pest management are integral for many berry growers. Could you provide us with background on how, through research and innovation, you were able to meet these challenges, and how this legislation may help address them?

Mr. Tom Heeman: Yes, thank you for the question.

Mr. Brian Riddell: It's a mouthful.

Mr. Tom Heeman: I'll give it my best.

I heard it from someone in the FDA that almost every day, there's a new invasive species that comes into the continent of North America. Not all of those are devastating or economic threats, but we generally find that roughly every five to 10 years, we come up with a new economic threat. This summer, you're likely going to see the spotted lanternfly. We get a lot of questions about that. The research that's done on AIRO facilities helps establish a baseline of populations. It helps establish efficacy data for control measures. In the long term, our facilities—your facilities—also work with different levels of government on long-term sustainable solutions, such as biocontrol.

Again, to name a specific one, spotted wing drosophila is a vinegar fly with a serrated ovipositor that came from southeast Asia, and it causes problems because it can lay eggs in ripe fruit. We work with OMAFRA and their scouts, who are based, housed—their offices are on ARIO facilities, and they monitor. We have a pest-monitoring network throughout the entire province to give growers an early detection system. We've kept that going and we hope that we'll be able to work with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada to release a biocontrol vector, but we need some help from the Ministry of the Environment. But that's another committee, probably, so another day.

1500

Mr. Brian Riddell: Thank you for your answer.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Anyone else from the government side? MPP Bresee.

Mr. Ric Bresee: I really appreciated the comments coming forward. It encourages me to know that the opposition are supporting this and that with some, I'll say, hesitation or with some suggestions, your groups are supportive as well.

I'll go to Tom. Plant health and pest management: a huge, important and integral part of berry management. Can you provide us with some background information with regard to what research has been done to meet those challenges, and do you think this legislation will help with that?

Mr. Tom Heeman: Yes, I think so. Part of integrated pest management is using every tool, and one of them is cultural. Tissue culture is a cultural process that leads to disease- and virus-free planting material. If you start clean, you will require less control mechanisms in order to keep that crop healthy. That's why the work of the tissue culture facility is important.

When I talked about this being a pivotal moment, we're looking at emerging technologies such as autonomous vehicles, electronic tractors, drones, all those things that, through OMAFRA and private sector partnerships, are being worked out not only on growers' fields but also on ARIO sites.

An additional area of investigation is mRNA vaccines as applied to pest control, so you have highly, highly selective genetic mechanisms to silence pests, with almost no environmental impact. That's work that is being done at Guelph and at ARIO facilities.

You look at the microbiome, human health. What we put in our guts affects that, and what is put in the soil affects the health of the plant. Again, by looking at how, if we can clone things, we can also potentially clone an ideal root environment, that then requires less inputs to maintain healthier plants.

I think there are lots of different areas—and I didn't even talk about genomics, which would allow plants to defend themselves against pests and diseases without any intervention, which is ultimately the gold standard for sustainability. That work through breeding and advanced genomics—we need a roof over our head, and we need a place to get rid of the viruses, to start.

Mr. Ric Bresee: You've got to start clean. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Any more questions?

Mr. Graham McGregor: Time check, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): A minute and a half.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Just going down the line, looking at the bill as we have it, if we're faced with a decision on whether we should be supporting this bill, as Ontario legislators should we vote yes or should we vote no? Starting with our friend from the University of Guelph.

Dr. Shayan Sharif: I would say yes, wholeheartedly.

Mr. Gerald Schipper: I would support that, yes.

Mr. Tom Heeman: I would support it, yes. I think the changes in it allow for a more hands-on approach, which I think would deliver better results.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Awesome. I think we have our marching orders. Thanks for being here.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay, done? Thank you, Mr. Schipper; thank you, Mr. Sharif; and thank you, Mr. Heeman, for your presentations. Thank you very much. You can step down, and we will prepare for our next panel.

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention, please? The committee is going to take a recess until 3:30 because we have a vote coming and we should be in the House, all of us. So we will come back at 3:30.

My apologies to the next panel. You will be a little bit late, but, unfortunately, that is the way it is. We don't have a choice.

The committee recessed from 1507 to 1537.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The committee is back from recess.

Before I invite the two witnesses to present their testimony, I would like to ask the unanimous consent of the committee to allow Mr. Kory Preston to be in the room. Is there unanimous consent? Agreed. Welcome, Mr. Preston.

ONTARIO GREENHOUSE VEGETABLE GROWERS

CHICKEN FARMERS OF ONTARIO

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay, now I would like to call upon Aaron Coristine—I hope I pronounced it correctly?

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Perfect.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): —and Brian Lewis. Mr. Coristine is from the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers and Mr. Lewis is from the Chicken Farmers of Ontario.

I would like to ask Mr. Coristine to present his testimony first. Please identify your name and your organization. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Aaron Coristine: And you'll notify me of—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Yes, one minute before your time is up, I will notify you that there is one minute left on your time, so you are aware.

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Thank you very much. As I was driving in here today, I thought it was a great day for a

greenhouse. And so, with that opening, I would like to welcome and thank the esteemed committee of the interior, as well as the representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and my colleagues here from another segment of agriculture to speak to you today about the importance of the ARIO modernization act.

My name is Aaron Coristine for Ontario greenhouse. I manage our science, government relations and regulatory affairs portfolios. A little about the greenhouse sector here in Ontario is that, innately, we're innovators and we are technologic leaders. We push the envelope upon what's possible to maximize our production capacity, increase our exports and ensure that we can fortify food security and production capacity here in Ontario. As of last year, 2023, we exported \$1.4 billion's worth of peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers with a farm gate value exceeding \$1.5 billion.

The Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers are very proud and humble to represent 170 families that grow greenhouse fruits and vegetables. Peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers are grown annually, year-round, on 4,000 acres of greenhouse production. We have a track record for growth. Looking in the rear-view at the past 10 years, we've grown steadily at a rate of 5%. Over the next 10 years, we fully intend to have a similar growth rate. Our growth from private capital investment is comparable to the building of a new auto assembly plant every four years.

Our history of innovation and leadership in adopting innovative technologies to push the boundaries of what's possible to be grown under a greenhouse knows no limits. An example of this is installing highly technical and advanced lighting systems, primarily light-emitting diode, LED, lights that are not only energy-efficient but dialable and tunable to wavelengths that can optimize plant growth and increase yield production capacity and sustainability.

Why we're here today, though, is to talk about what the ARIO modernization act means to us. We see it in a few ways. When I spoke earlier about the innovation and technologic implementation, we see the ARIO modernization act as a way to not only reinforce and reinvigorate current research infrastructure for agriculture, but as a means to de-risk future innovations and technologies that could readily be adoptable and implemented on-farm. We see the ARIO modernization act as an opportunity to create a framework that is not prescriptive or restrictive to agricultural innovation and research but actually will enable innovative new ways of how research can be conducted.

For greenhouses, there's a well-known piece of infrastructure that falls under the ARIO Act and that is the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre. In partnership with Vineland, every year we work together to create novel projects and deliverables for our growers that can assist them in their efforts in integrated pest management, production capacity and innovative approaches to working under different climatic conditions to optimize growth.

With the support that the greenhouse sector has of ARIO, we're excited for what the future can bring and the collaborations with academic and institutional stakeholders so that we can continue to expand our production capacity.

A very important piece of this is the recently created and announced Grow Ontario Strategy. Increasing production capacity by 30%, export and trade activity by 30%, and creating well-paying, good jobs right here at home in Ontario by 10% are very realistic outcomes that can be realized with the modernization of ARIO. And, biasedly, we feel that the greenhouse sector could achieve those targets alone, but today we're happy to be here with a number of our colleagues across agriculture, joined by our friends in the feather board today, to reinforce the opportunities that we see here in Ontario and that, working with government and through this act, we can help realize.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

Mr. Lewis, the turn is yours. Please state your name and the organization you're representing.

Mr. Brian Lewis: Great. Thank you. My name is Brian Lewis and I'm a board director for Chicken Farmers of Ontario. I represent the district that encompasses most of the south-southwest part of the province, and I farm with my family in Denfield. My colleague Kory Preston is here with me today.

Mr. Kory Preston: Hi. I'm Kory Preston, senior manager of public affairs for Chicken Farmers of Ontario.

Mr. Brian Lewis: On behalf of the Chicken Farmers of Ontario's 1,300 family-run farms, I want to begin by thanking the standing committee for the opportunity to provide a deputation here today. Chicken Farmers of Ontario is supportive of Bill 155, Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Amendment Act, and we appreciate all parties considering the legislation.

The ARIO Act has not seen any substantial updates since its creation in 1962. This modification is necessary to accurately reflect the innovative and evolving nature of the agriculture and agri-food research needed to further increase the competitiveness and sustainability of Ontario's farmers and food industry.

ARIO plays a critical role in supporting livestock research that advances farm practices for farmers in Ontario, Canada and beyond. All Canadian chicken farmers follow the mandatory Raised by a Canadian Farmer on-farm food safety and animal care programs. These standards are based on the best available science and research, and the chicken industry is continuously looking to improve animal welfare, food safety, biosecurity and efficiency in farm practices.

Through our ongoing investments in the Canadian Poultry Research Council, which is nationally based, and work with the Livestock Research Innovation Corp., which is provincially based, Chicken Farmers of Ontario continues to support leading-edge research in disease prevention, flock management, food safety and sustainability, bringing forward-thinking and innovative ideas to Ontario's broiler chicken production.

With the competitive advantage of the University of Guelph's agriculture programs, Ontario is home to the majority of the research and the experts and academics that conduct this work. Ontario-based research improves the economic viability and competitiveness of the Ontario poultry sector, creating local jobs and cultivating Ontario's academic, technical and veterinary expertise in the sector.

ARIO's oversight in Ontario research programs, innovation, infrastructure and promotion is critical to supporting the chicken industry's advancement, helping us to meet the evolving demands of Ontario's consumers. To advance research and innovation priorities, the Ontario poultry industry requires in-barn research facilities that are modern and aligned with today's strict on-farm infrastructure and production standards.

That's why Chicken Farmers of Ontario applauds the Ontario government for continuing to support Ontario's agriculture and agri-food sector with the announced Grow Ontario Strategy. The Grow Ontario Strategy sets an ambitious and necessary goal to build and maintain world-class research infrastructure, including the announced poultry research centre.

In April of 2023, Chicken Farmers of Ontario, along with our other board members—the Egg Farmers of Ontario, Turkey Farmers of Ontario and the Ontario Broiler Hatching Egg and Chick Commission—formalized an agreement with the Ontario government through ARIO and the University of Guelph to build a new poultry research centre. Following the establishment of the MOU, Ontario's four feather boards and ARIO began work on the planning and design of the new Ontario Poultry Research Centre in Elora. This research barn will not only support risk management and disease prevention but will also provide opportunities to improve on-farm efficiencies, enhance sustainable practices and introduce new, innovative technologies to Ontario's farmers.

The proposed modernization of the ARIO Act is a fundamental commitment outlined in the Grow Ontario Strategy. Thank you for recognizing the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario as a key driver of important research projects leading to agriculture and agri-food innovations in Ontario. The modernization of the ARIO Act will enable the Ontario food sector to advance best practices, continue exploration and further help the sector to thrive and be successful.

Finally, Chicken Farmers of Ontario looks forward to this necessary change to enable chicken farmers, the chicken industry and the broader Ontario agriculture community to continue to flourish.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We move now to the question period. We will start the first round with the official opposition representative. MPP Bourgouin, the floor is yours.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: First, Aaron: I come from northern Ontario, in Kapuskasing, and I represent communities up on the James Bay coast. I've seen the price of food and vegetables on the James Bay coast. You said that greenhouses could be a solution, and I'd like to hear from you: Can it be done up on James Bay coast? I'm sure it can, but it's probably expensive. But also, what type of vegetables could we grow? Because it could be a solution for food for First Nations on the James Bay coast at a low cost. I'd like to hear from you on that particular point because I know there's been talk about it, but we haven't seen anything, and when we see the price of food up there, it's crazy. So

I'd like to hear your thoughts on that and how this could be done.

1550

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Thank you for the question. I think there's a couple of pieces here to attack maybe bite by bite. That is quite northerly, James Bay coast. The first question that would need to be answered is, what's the condition and state of infrastructure? Second to that is, how quickly and well developed out could natural gas be because—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I'll tell you right now, there is no natural gas out there, to be blunt. We're talking way—like, we don't have it. We'll have it on Highway 11, but besides that, way up north you don't. Just so you understand that on James Bay coast there is no natural gas.

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Sure. In some instances—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Diesel, we have.

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Yes, or you can do pressurized and Carrier natural gas and propane.

Regardless, I would suspect that there are periodic challenges throughout the year on lighting also. Interestingly in the world of greenhouse, one of the number one factors that we do rely on for crop production is the external environment. So what's our DLI, our daily light integral, that our plants are getting? That would be item number two that you would want to really take into consideration because, if the lighting is minimal, say, in the winter or the shoulder months, you would want to make sure that you could tap into electricity for supplemental lighting, which is a reasonably common practice that we utilize down in the south-west. That's where the majority of the concentration of greenhouses are located—sort of the banana belt of Canada, if you will—in Kingsville and Leamington, and then Chatham-Kent, followed by Hamilton-Dundas. We see a significant amount of light. We have water resources, which would be another resource that you would want to ensure you could tap into, whether it be a raw waterline through to innovative ways of accessing and creating infrastructure.

But then to your question about what we can grow up there to ensure that we have a resilient food production system up there to address food insecurity challenges: What we are experts at are peppers and all their varieties, tomatoes and their varieties and cucumbers and their varieties.

More and more we see selective pressures in regions south of the border. We see unpredictable weather occurring in California. You have drought, you have wildfires in what was traditionally the salad bowl of North America—so a lot of row crops, a lot of berries and much lettuce. Then, conversely, across the coast, you look at Florida and the unpredictability in hurricane season and what it does to the prolific amount of field veg. So that's a selective pressure but an opportunity that we've seen here in Ontario.

How that relates to your question is that we have put in quite a bit of research with our friends at Vineland and through private research that industry is collaborated on, that growing strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, red lettuce, green leaf lettuce, spinach, your cut lettuces—and

as an aside, Canada imports 90% of lettuce from California— in addition root vegetables is all a possibility in greenhouses.

So ensuring that we can get some answers on the first parts of those questions around infrastructure, I would say that there is some reality and realistic opportunities that you could grow something in James Bay.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Maybe I should have started with how far north you go with greenhouses and [*inaudible*] Highway 11, because we're seeing more and more farms coming in our area. In Kapuskasing, people are seeing more farms growing, so that is very interesting for us. We've seen some greenhouses—one in particular in Opasatika that was growing lettuce and greens.

But my interesting point was that—I guess, in your short answer, if we can answer these first points that you talked about: Water's there. Yes, you do have electricity, and of course, it's all by diesel. It depends; some communities do have the lines coming in. So that could really be done. And for communities on the James Bay coast that don't—food is very scarce. Well, they have food, but it's quite expensive to go to the Northern Store and just buy lettuce. It's crazy.

So if that could be done there with the community and have—because there's a season that they'll grow. In the summer, of course, they can grow; it's easier to grow. But if we can expand that with greenhouses and have some of these vegetables that they could produce in their communities, it would make a huge difference in having good quality food for them. And that's why it's interesting what you were saying.

I guess the ARIO would help to develop some of these new technologies. I don't know what they use. I'm no expert; I come from the forest industry and am more industrial. What I am hearing today is that there is stuff that can be done.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Aaron Coristine: There are increasingly more accessible tools at industry's disposal in their collaborative efforts with academia and government research. A good parallel to draw is the modifications using some, I would say, biotechnology applications in canola and drought resistance and temperature resistance in the Prairies. Some of the things that could be explored with the fruits and vegetables we grow, when breeding seeds, are looking at how we can utilize the heat shock proteins within the plants themselves so that under cold or external stress of maybe not ideal temperatures, you can still get ideal yield.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, the floor is yours.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I want to thank all the presenters for being here today. I think I'll start my first question to the Chicken Farmers of Ontario. You talked about the poultry research centre. I go by the poultry research centre all the time. I'm just curious what the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance and that centre has done to benefit poultry farmers—and in giving that answer, maybe talk a bit about how the modernization of ARIO will benefit the sector as well.

Mr. Kory Preston: Yes, I can start. Thanks for that question. I think that it's really exciting what's happening right now with the poultry research centre and we're really grateful to the ARIO and the government of Ontario for partnering with the other feather boards, ourselves included, in helping make this happen.

When we look at the modernization of the ARIO Act and what's being proposed, I think it really comes from a lot of that kind of bigger-picture plan of what's happening under the Grow Ontario Strategy, ARIO modernization being a part of that. As well, included in some of the aspects is making it a little bit more collaborative as an organization or putting that directly in their mandate: to collaborate and work with industry partners like us towards these research goals, ideally positioning Ontario to be at the forefront of research and innovation across the sector. But for us in the poultry sector, the poultry research centre is what we look at as what's really going to be helpful in finding Ontario research-based solutions that are going to make chicken farming operations more efficient.

We do a lot of work on biosecurity and animal welfare, and these are all improvements that come through in barn research. That's what we are working towards with this poultry research centre, so it's really exciting.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Great, I appreciate that. Did you want to add to that?

Mr. Brian Lewis: Sure. I was just going to say, there's such a great tie to the University of Guelph there because the research centre certainly benefits from Guelph and Guelph benefits from the research centre.

I know in the previous comments that there are veterinarians and a shortage of them. When you have a research facility like that, it will attract people, and that's one of the long-term goals that we have as well, to keep veterinary research.

We see it in our barns as well. We have genetic research that has done more on the breeder's side, but it does get to us in our barns with broilers. We tend to see more feed-based research, some environment as well, welfare in terms of lighting and so forth. I think you mentioned lighting and different temperatures of lighting. We do all that as well. That's done at Arkell and those sorts of things will continue to be done at Elora as well.

1600

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Great.

My next question, through you, Chair: I'll start with greenhouse growers, but I'd ask both of you to answer. I think one of the concerns that was raised today, not necessarily as a criticism of the bill, but maybe just wanting to be on the record—the Ontario Federation of Agriculture just emphasized the important role, that direct connection to farmers, that farm organizations have in terms of participation, input with the ARIO. I'm just wondering if you might want to talk about what that could look like for greenhouse growers and for poultry farmers.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Yes. I believe, from our stance, that having strong governance and the mechanism of how stakeholder engagement occurs will certainly be vital in

the successes of the modernization of ARIO. We do see committees that can have the input and feedback from stakeholders, such as ourselves or edible horticulture as one group, feathers as another, where we can work together to determine what the best pathways forward are for ARIO, which can then be raised to the board. I think that just having that direct line of communication should de-risk the concerns around the structure of a board and not hearing stakeholders.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Great. I may be out of time, but we'll give you guys a chance as well.

Mr. Brian Lewis: Just very quickly, we're currently in negotiations with ARIO and the University of Guelph on the design of the new poultry research, so there is quite a bit of communication—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. The time is up.

We move to the government side. MPP Jones, go ahead.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Through you, Chair, I understand a little bit about the application of technology and innovation in greenhouse and field crops. I'm less familiar with chicken farmers and their adoption of specific technologies. We do know that 1,300 farming families contribute over \$1 billion to the economy in poultry. So could you explain how your members are embracing and using technology innovation and how this proposed act can further support them?

Mr. Brian Lewis: Sure. So there are a number of different ways. Part of it is genetics, and a lot of that research will be done in places like Elora, and it's done in different parts of Canada and worldwide as well. So we do see those genetic improvements.

Lighting is another thing that's very important to how chickens react and how they grow and efficiencies and so forth. You can test that as well. It's easier to test on a smaller scale than, certainly, on a commercial size. It's more prudent as well.

Feed as well, feed additives: How can we become more efficient with that kernel of corn, with that kernel of wheat, beans, soymeal and so forth? That's all digestion—probiotics, prebiotics, those sorts of things. What's the optimal amount of oxygen and temperatures and so forth? Those are all things that are being done, and they're monitored very, very closely, certainly in the feather industry.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Thank you. I appreciate that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Riddell.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Best practices are essential in any industry, especially the poultry industry, when it comes to biosecurity. My question is, could you explain to the members and provide some details on how the government has assisted you on working through this endeavour?

Mr. Brian Lewis: I can. One of the major topics that we have right now is avian influenza on the feather side, certainly, in more than just broilers—layers, turkeys and breeders as well. When we get into biosecurity, the government has provided some funding in the past to help ramp that up. We have a different—and through the board as well, but I would say there are others: LRIC, Livestock Research Innovation Corp. They as well do work, and it's

sending out information—PIC does as well—to producers. There's a lot of help in there.

Effectively, it's how do you maintain or how do you control an outbreak such as AI or other types of things? The first one is, how do you contain it? Secondly, how do you remedy it? Those are two different things. So the one thing we can do is try to stop the spread, and then at that point, the research comes in on how do you actually defeat it. So is that through vaccines or some other type of mechanism? Right now, biosecurity is our best defence.

Mr. Brian Riddell: Do you have anything to add to that?

Mr. Kory Preston: I'd just say, outside of the immediate scope, when avian influenza was present in 2022 and onward for a period of time—and it's still present in Canada, I should say. Ontario, at least on the broiler side, we've been—I don't want to say "lucky," because our farmers work very hard to make sure that it doesn't come into our farms. But the government made a number of changes, and OMAFRA worked very closely with the feather boards, through what we call the Feather Board Command Centre, which is a collaborative approach of the industry that we use to prevent, mitigate and then respond in these situations. So OMAFRA is very helpful there.

Earlier—I guess I should say last year—there were also amendments made that allowed the minister to move faster in putting up a control zone to basically prevent the transfer of birds to certain events, like fairs or auctions and those types of things—very helpful in preventing the spread when it comes through.

So yes, OMAFRA and the government of Ontario have been very supportive through the last 18 months to two years of us working towards this.

Mr. Brian Riddell: My riding is Cambridge. I think I have six to 10 big operations there, but it's also the place where Shaver started, in Cambridge, in Galt, years ago. But anyhow, I'd like to thank everyone for coming today, and I enjoy what you do.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP McGregor.

Mr. Graham McGregor: My question is for Mr. Coristine. I understand the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers commissioned a study on—a growth and sustainable prosperity study that you commissioned. I'm wondering if you have any findings from that study you'd like to share with the committee and get on the record.

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Yes, thank you for asking that question. In 2022, we endeavoured to assess what the future of the greenhouse sector could look like here in Ontario. So we worked with a professor at the University of Guelph, Dr. Lysa Porth, a pretty renowned agricultural economist and actuary, to help us develop what she coins an enterprise risk management framework, an ERM. I guess essentially what it did was it took a lot of the variables that would impact growth, positively and negatively, and laid them out to indicate: are they an enabler or an inhibitor of growth, and how do we do that, and what conditions do we need to create the successful situations of prosperity here in Ontario?

So this study informed us of where our blind spots were—the blind spots that we didn't know were there. And innovation and de-risking, integrated pest manage-

ment, trade and export and maintaining competitiveness through encompassing all of that was what shed light on our ability to not only maintain our current growth rate but exceed our growth trajectory.

Mr. Graham McGregor: I'm good on questions. Great answer. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You're good? Okay. Thank you very much.

We move now to the second round of questioning. Do you have any questions? MPP Bourgouin.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: The bill is supported by all parties in the House, but I just want to give you the opportunity to add anything else on record, because you have a short window to have a chance to express some of the stuff that you want to make sure that's on. But I want to give you my time—my seven minutes, I think—to give you the opportunity to add anything you want to add that you may not have had the chance to put on record. So I want to give you both the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Kory Preston: Thank you for the opportunity. It's kind of reiterating some of our points we made before, but, recognizing that this act hasn't been amended since 1962, this government's focus on putting together a plan for the Grow Ontario Strategy and then implementing it has given us—the industry and farmers—faith that there's some follow-through on this 10-year plan.

As well, in the actual changes to the act itself, clarifying the mandate, including industry in the objectives—like, right there, clear—that industry needs to be part of a relationship focus for the ARIO, updating the roles and that: It all makes sense, and we think it will enable ARIO to continue to do their great work and beyond. I think, overall, we're very supportive of the way the act is presented.

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Yes, thank you for the question and the opportunity. I would certainly tend to agree with my colleagues. I think that, from a broader perspective, Ontario's ability to maintain and increase our competitiveness with some of our global counterparts and ensure that research and outcomes operate at the same timeline at the speed of business, and that they can be dynamic and robust and move when business needs them to, will certainly be addressed in the ARIO modernization.

1610

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Schreiner, do you have any additional questions?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I do, Chair. Thank you.

A lot of the talk today has been about production-focused research, understandably so. I'm curious about—and I think both of your organizations are important on this—some consumer-driven research and how that might affect production practices. I'm thinking this affects probably layers more than broilers, so I don't want you to have to speak for the egg farmers. But you see all these labels now, like “free-range,” “grass-fed,” “integrated pest management,” these sorts of consumer-driven trends. I'm curious—and we'll start with chicken farmers and maybe go to greenhouse growers—how important you think that consumer-driven research is to inform your production practices to make the sector more successful.

Mr. Kory Preston: It's vitally important. Our national body does continual research on consumer response and consumer trends and we know that there is large support—over 90% countrywide—for a strong supply management system for chicken. But a lot of that comes from the fact that there's faith in the way that our farmers are able to grow their chicken. We only maintain that faith by constantly updating our practices to meet those consumer trends as they go.

A couple of examples that I have for you is the Chicken Farmers of Canada, our national body, implemented an antimicrobial reduction strategy, and that was in direct response to consumer request and consumer demand. We're way along the process of implementing that strategy, and all antimicrobial preventative use is no longer taking place for any antibiotic that is important to human health. We've eliminated category 1 and 2 from production already. That's one way. And we did that and were able to do that because of research and innovation that exists in the production practice.

Another is for animal welfare. By the end of this year, all Ontario farms will be modular-loading ready. Modular loading is a way that birds are caught and then shipped from the farm barns. It's better for animal welfare. That comes out of research, but also is in response to—we know that the consumer wants to ensure their birds are raised with the highest standard of care, and we take that very seriously.

Mr. Brian Lewis: If I may, quickly, that's part of our on-farm food safety protocols as well and our animal care welfare, as was just mentioned. Our retailers and our suppliers will tell us that a lot of the public know that each chicken, in our case, is raised to a certain standard, and they know that, right—from Ontario's and Canada's chickens. There's some safety there because it's all about self-sufficiency. It's all about making sure that our consumers have food on the shelves that's healthy and nutritious. I think we've been doing a good job of it so far with everyone's support and through supply management as well.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you for that.

Aaron, did you want an opportunity?

Mr. Aaron Coristine: Yes, thank you for the question. I would just round that out with sustainability. It seems that more and more frequently the consumers are interested in sustainable practices. When you're grown in a greenhouse, you are reducing your water consumption, you're maximizing your footprint, you are using less pesticide because you're using the IPMs and you're recapturing your CO₂ and waste-heat from natural gas. I think that it's a very positive story that we can tell our consumers and ensure that they have the confidence that in Ontario greenhouse-grown we're doing everything we can to help in the effort on sustainability.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you. Thank you, Chair. I'm done.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We move to the government side. MPP Yakabuski.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I just want to take this time to thank you all for coming today. I thank the members of the committee, including the opposition, for their great ques-

tions, but particularly the industry as a whole for the tremendous job and the work that you do ensuring that we here in Ontario and, indeed, Canada have the highest-quality, safest and environmentally sustainable food system in the world. We really do appreciate the work that you do. Thank you all for coming here today. Continue with the good work, and we'll continue to enjoy the products you produce. Thank you very much.

Other than that, the opposition has no further questions.

Interjection: The government.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Oh, yes. Sorry. Well, they don't have any either.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Messrs. Coristine, Lewis and Preston, for coming and for sharing your thoughts with us. That concludes this session of our hearing. You can step down.

That concludes our business for today. As a reminder, the deadline to send in a written submission is Tuesday, March 19, 2024, at 7 p.m. The deadline for filing amendments to the bill is Thursday, March 21, 2024, at 5 p.m.

Is there any additional business before we adjourn? Go ahead, MPP Yakabuski.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you, Chair. I move that the committee enter closed session for the purpose of organizing committee business.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We have a motion from MPP Yakabuski. Any comments? Any discussion? MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: I would just like to put on the record that I see no purpose in holding closed meetings for organizational purposes. I'd just like to put that on the record. It adds to the feeling of distrust in government when the government does that. That's the end of my comment. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. Any other comments? I see no other comments, so I'm going to put the question.

MPP Yakabuski put the motion to enter into closed session. All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? The motion is carried, so we're going to take a short recess until the staff rearrange for our closed session meeting.

The committee recessed at 1617 and later continued in closed session.

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