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Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

Journal des débats (Hansard)

IN-19

IN-19

Standing Committee on the Interior

Comité permanent des affaires intérieures

Protecting Ontario’s
Food Independence Act, 2026

Loi de 2026 visant à protéger
l’autonomie alimentaire
de l’Ontario

1st Session
44th Parliament
Wednesday 29 July 2026

1re session
44e législature
Mercredi 29 juillet 2026

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffier : Stefan Uguen-Csenge

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Wednesday 29 July 2026

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES

Wednesday 29 July 2026

Mercredi 29 juillet 2026

The committee met at 1000 in Cedar Meadows Resort and Spa, Timmins.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Stefan Uguen-Csenge): Good morning, honourable members. It is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations? MPP Ciriello.

MPP Monica Ciriello: I nominate MPP Dowie.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Stefan Uguen-Csenge): Does the member accept the nomination?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Yes.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Stefan Uguen-Csenge): Are there any further nominations? There being no further nominations, I declare the nominations closed and MPP Dowie elected Acting Chair of the committee.

PROTECTING ONTARIO'S FOOD INDEPENDENCE ACT, 2026

LOI DE 2026 VISANT À PROTÉGER L'AUTONOMIE ALIMENTAIRE DE L'ONTARIO

Consideration of the following bill:

Bill 109, An Act to enact the Farmland Security Act, 2026 and to amend various Acts / Projet de loi 109, Loi édictant la Loi de 2026 visant à protéger l'autonomie alimentaire de l'Ontario et modifiant diverses lois.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Good morning, members. Welcome to Timmins. The Standing Committee on the Interior will now come to order. We're meeting today to commence public hearings on Bill 109, An Act to enact the Farmland Security Act, 2026 and to amend various Acts.

Please wait until you are recognized by the Chair before speaking—to all members. As always, all comments should go through the Chair.

As a reminder, each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we have heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes in this time slot will be divided into two rounds of 6.5 minutes of questions from each recognized party. I will provide a verbal reminder to notify you when you have one minute left for your presentation or allotted speaking time.

MR. STEVE RUNNALLS
ONTARIO SHEEP FARMERS
MR. NORMAN KOCH

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): I will now call on Steve Runnalls. You will have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for the Hansard and you may begin.

Mr. Steve Runnalls: Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today as you consider Bill 109 and the measures that are being proposed that will protect and strengthen Ontario's food sector.

I'm Steve Runnalls, a second-generation dairy farmer and fourth-generation owner of farmland in Thornloe, Ontario. With my family, I milk with 65 cows. We grow a variety of crops to feed the cows—and for sale on approximately 1,000 acres. We also have a flock of about 250 ewes, sheep. We sell mostly breeding stock and a small herd of beef cows. As well, we do some custom work and sell some replacement cattle.

I've also had the privilege to serve on the board of directors of Dairy Farmers of Ontario since 2012, representing dairy producers in Algoma, Cochrane, East Nipissing-Parry Sound, West Nipissing-Sudbury East, Manitoulin-Sudbury West, Rainy River, Timiskaming and Thunder Bay—basically all across northern Ontario, representing a broad rural region.

I want to thank you for bringing the committee to our region as part of your study of this important piece of legislation.

Together, the hundred dairy farmers operating in northern Ontario supply milk to six dairy plants in the region, with an annual milk production of a little over 81 million litres and a GDP contribution of about $233 million.

As dairy farmers, we are pleased to see the bill move forward with the amendments to the Milk Act, the first step in bringing Ontario's milk pricing policies into alignment with the national standards. These changes and the complementary regulatory amendments will create a level playing field and enable continued stability in the delivery of high-quality milk from Ontario farms to processing in Ontario. It is necessary to ensure we have consistently applied end-use pricing obligations that ensure all processers are billed equitably for their milk products.

We look forward to the passage of the bill and the introduction of the regulatory changes to complete Ontario's implementation of the national industry policy that was approved in 2020. Dairy farmers share the government's commitment to ensuring a stronger, trusted domestic food system, with a regulatory framework that supports continuous improvement and compliance of world-class, high-quality food safety standards for cow's milk in Ontario. Through DFO, we will continue to work with OMAFA on enabling legislation and related regulatory amendments to ensure we continue to uphold the high quality standard for cow's milk in Ontario.

Sustaining a viable and growing dairy agriculture sector in northern Ontario is important to maintaining our local communities where we raise our families, while contributing to the local and provincial economy. It is vitally important that we recognize the importance of farmland in all regions of the province and have in place policies that support farm families.

In addition to provisions in the bill, I also want to acknowledge the government's support for business in our region through the work of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. As was noted in the announcement last week, this ongoing support is vital to driving rural economic growth, strengthening our northern Ontario agriculture by directly supporting farmers and businesses who live, work and invest right here.

To that end, I'd also add that finding a way to work with the federal and local governments on infrastructure needed to safely and efficiently move goods is of great importance to our region and critical to securing Ontario's food independence. Highways 11 and 17 are vital Trans-Canada routes that serve as the backbone of Ontario's east-west agricultural supply chain, moving approximately 8,400 trucks and 87,000 tons of goods worth over $200 million every single day, including grain, livestock, dairy, produce, feed, fertilizer and farm equipment that sustain agricultural operations across the province. They are critical for getting Ontario-grown food to processors, markets and export hubs, and for ensuring farms have timely access to inputs.

Now more than ever, we need to protect and grow our farming and food sector. Modernizing the Milk Act is one way we're working with the government to secure continued growth and investment in Ontario dairy. By working together, we can secure a more competitive, resilient and self-reliant agri-food sector, starting with our farmers, delivering every day for Ontario families. For dairy, that means dynamic, growing farms and more processing capacity that drives economic growth and serves the Canadian market while protecting Ontario's advantage. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you, Mr. Runnalls.

I'll now call on the Ontario Sheep Farmers, represented by Helen McRae, director. You will have seven minutes for your presentation, and please state your name for Hansard. You may begin. Go ahead, Ms. McRae.

Ms. Helen McRae: Hi. My name is Helen McRae. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I'm on the board of the Ontario Sheep Farmers organization, representing all of northern Ontario.

For some background before I share thoughts on Bill 109: Canada's sheep farmers currently fulfill only 35% of our domestic demand for lamb. Due to increased immigration, domestic consumption of lamb and mutton per capita is increasing at a rate of 3% annually. The market opportunity for halal lamb and goat meat is projected to grow from $214 million to over $300 million in the next five years.

Our board has set an exciting direction for our industry: to fulfill 50% of domestic market demand by 2040. This target will more than double our production of lamb within the next 15 years. This will have significant benefits to the province, including a doubling of sheep farmers' economic contribution from $200 million to $400 million. This growth will also displace imports from Australia and New Zealand, and increase the amount of lamb processed at provincial abattoirs and value-added processors.

To do this, we will be focusing our resources on ways to improve market efficiencies and market information, improve the genetics of our flocks, address production challenges that are limiting growth, and support new and expanding flocks with education and programs.

The changes to the Protecting Farmers from Non-Payment Act are important to our sector. In particular, the additional language within this field related to the governing requirements of the financial protection program will improve the financial security of the program and reduce risks for producers.

Once this bill passes, our organization would like to be first in line for a financial protection program for sheep farmers. Our preliminary calculations, based on the cattle program, indicate we require a fund size under half a million dollars to support the financial risk within our industry. Without a financial protection fund and program, our sheep producers are nervous about exploring new markets and sales channels, due to the financial risk. Improving this program and opening it to sheep farmers will build an underpinning of financial security to help us achieve our growth objectives.

The changes to the Beef Cattle Marketing Act to collect licence fees on cattle that are custom-processed will also benefit our organization. OSF has collected licence fees on custom slaughter for many years. These changes will standardize the approach to licence fee collection, and reduce confusion and administration costs for our organization.

OSF is also very supportive of the process of updating the Veterinary Professionals Act and implementing regulation. The availability of small-ruminant veterinary care in Ontario has reached a crisis point. This deficit is continuously growing as large-animal veterinarians retire without replacement. Many of our members have vets further than 100 kilometres away from their farm, and in northern Ontario, it can be hundreds of kilometres further. It is important to finalize the Veterinary Professionals Act and focus our attention on increasing the number of veterinarians and supporting current veterinarians that practise in rural and northern Ontario.

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We also require more health service providers like pregnancy ultrasound technicians in our province, though we appreciate the act allowing for confirmation of pregnancy through ultrasound for sheep and goats by technicians to be exempted from the oversight of a veterinarian.

On behalf of Ontario Sheep Farmers, thank you for the opportunity to share our support for Bill 109. Our organization looks forward to these changes being implemented and the resulting benefits that will come for our industry.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very much.

I will now call on Norman R. Koch. You will have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Mr. Norman Koch: Norman Koch. I'm from Earlton, Ontario, born and raised down in southern Ontario in Waterloo county. Now, with my family, we crop farm, about 12,500 acres in Timiskaming. As well, we are licensed grain elevators in Ontario and Quebec. We have a trucking company and various other things. I have been on many boards over the last years in agriculture, the federation of agriculture and NOFIA, which is for developing stuff in northern Ontario, always promoting northern Ontario.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here. I read through parts of Bill 109. It kind of got overwhelming as I got looking into it more, but we would like to support the agriculture components. We also need to be aware of food security.

I have some stats from the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and I want to just share a few of them. I don't always agree with everything that they publish, especially the fact about the farmland we lose each year, but I get shut down when I say that I don't agree with it. But, anyway, in Ontario agri-food counts for $51.4 billion in economic activity; 10% of the workforce—867,000 jobs; $28 billion in agri-food exports; in northern Ontario, $290 million in farm cash receipts; $575 million in economic activity; 4,220 agri-food businesses; 27,800 jobs. I have these if people want them afterwards.

Also, they're saying that food processing is Ontario's second-largest manufacturing industry, just behind automotive. We don't think of that as much up here in northern Ontario, we don't see as much food processing as what there is, of course, in southern Ontario. All these are very important in light of our southern neighbours' leader—not necessary the southern neighbours, but the leader. Having all that processing, we would like to see processing more in northern Ontario, but there's always all kind of things that make it necessary in the south. So that's the OFA stats.

Crown land is one thing I would like to talk about as we have been working for many years to be able to utilize more of the land that was actually farmed at one time through northern Ontario and other land that could be farmed. The Timiskaming area where I'm at is known as a small Clay Belt, the large Clay Belt or the Great Clay Belt is north, which is kind of from Cochrane out past Hearst to Calstock. There's lot of land there that could be farmed, could be cleared—re-cleared and farmed. Crown land is a necessary option to be available to sustain food production in Ontario. Climate change, plant breeding, tiling land—all of that has tremendously helped the yields that we get for growing feed and food to feed the province, but as land gets taken away for various reasons in southern Ontario, and in northern Ontario somewhat but not to the same extent, we need to get more land cleared and working. The urban development or—I hate to use the word "urban sprawl," but coming from southern Ontario, you do drive down and you see it kind of sprawling a little bit sometimes, but for commercial, industrial housing, highways and other transportation—but all of those things are also necessary for Ontario's strength and Ontario's growth. So we just can't stand on our pulpit and chirp about farming to be better for Ontario because everything is necessary for Ontario's strength.

In 2016, the census reported that we were losing 175 acres of farmland per day; that's 63,875 acres a year. The 2021 census said we're losing 309 acres of farmland per day; that's 160,435 acres per year—582,175 acres over a five-year period. If this is true, and if, per acre we can feed—one acre could feed 15 people, on average of whatever is grown. I know an acre of potatoes could feed 400 people, enough potatoes for 400 people, but you need other stuff. So if one acre can feed 15 people, whether it's crops or pasture for cattle or whatever, in five years, we have lost the ability to feed about 8.73 million people. That's according to the stats.

These are some of the reasons that some crown land needs to be opened up, sold or leased or in some way made available for agricultural production, whether it's pasture, whether it's farms for cattle, whether it's growing grain, whatever it might be. A lot of land could be used and would be made available, especially with the fact of tiling land. That has sure helped the climate and the farming in northern Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left, sir.

Mr. Norman Koch: Okay.

If you've driven across the north, you can see, from Cochrane over toward Hearst, many old farm barns that were built years ago. So this shows that there was farming through the north, further north, at some time. My understanding is a lot of that land has gone back to the crown. Approximately 52,000 hectares was privately deeded at one time, has gone back to the crown. So my thinking is that that should be able to get reverted back to agriculture quickly.

Just quickly: If we look at the Matheson area, Val Gagné, we look at Algoma, we look at Charlton—where the Mennonites and Amish have moved in and cleared tens of thousands of acres and made livings for themselves and helping the local.

Thanks for the opportunity.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Perfect timing. Thank you so much.

The first round of questions will start with the government. So go ahead, if there's a government member who wishes to start. MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: This question is for Norm. You were talking about the lack of processing and further marketing up here in the north, as compared to southern Ontario. Do you think by opening up these acres that that would allow more potential to invite processors and marketers up into the area by opening up these lands?

Mr. Norman Koch: Well, I think it would be. We have to look at several things. If we're processing—let's say we're crushing canola for oil. It's no problem to move the oil into biofuel. But the feed, the meal by-product, is—we need more animals to use that. We've looked at it ourselves a few times, but of course, the oil has to get moved south or blended up here. But there's not enough animals in the north to feed the meal, the protein. So opening up to more farmers, especially animal farmers, would greatly help that.

Another thing that would be nice to have in northern Ontario would be chicken processing. There are a lot of backyard chickens, and a lot of people—they can go up to 3,000 now per year. But we don't have a processing—we just have a couple of small abattoirs that are processing now that are slowly getting going. But I think it would help. How much it would help, I'm not sure. Of course, I think about growing grains a lot, most of the time, not so much about animals, but they are both hand in hand. I see somewhat of a help. I don't say it would be—we wouldn't order—make a plant.

Flour, for instance: We should have a flour processing. Back in the day, when we were first in the north here, New-Life Mills out at Hanover had two tractor-trailer loads of flour a day going to Rouyn to the bakery, one tractor-trailer load a day going to Timmins. The bakeries are gone now. So if flour processing wasn't done up here, can that be revived? Probably not, you know. The big bakeries that can truck the finished product—probably simpler.

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The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question is for Norm, too.

You have a large grain farm and stuff, so what opportunities—it's a two-part question. What's the biggest opportunity you see this bill has in unlocking for yourself, people like yourself, for grain production? And the second one is, we've seen how tile drainage has really expanded our opportunity to farm some of these lands that were never farmable before for grain production, and as we move forward, the Bill 109 for the farmland security, the farmland bill—protecting Ontario farmland from foreign acquisition—how important is that to you and the area farmers also?

Mr. Norman Koch: So, first of all, I think by having ourselves—we not only ship grain by truck; we ship it by rail. Actually, we're in the process right now of getting a transloading facility built at our operation in Earlton, which will help the north tremendously. We also load rail cars in Kapuskasing, at the old government research farm. There's a site in there. So that is necessary. We want to expand agriculture and grain production.

Like I say, up until 1992, we were a grain-importing area, and since then, we are exporting way more than—we're importing corn and dairy feed, mainly. Now, we probably ship about 225,000 tonnes out of northern Ontario each year.

So enhancing rail traffic—I mean, we can't do all this by truck. The highways are plenty busy enough, so rail is an important thing for the north.

What is the protecting question again, mainly? Oh, for the tiling.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: For the foreign acquisition.

Mr. Norman Koch: Yes. So, tiling, of course, has been a very, very great help to northern Ontario. Back in the day, we have a couple farms that people, when we bought it, they said their tile—how close to the tile? Two hundred feet. I said, "Oh, okay." I mean, now, tiling is at 40 and 50 feet some places. The vegetable guys are at 20, 25 feet.

Foreign acquisition might be okay, but foreign takeover would not be okay, and I think they come hand in hand. Having said that, who backs some of the large companies that are buying land now? Like, if people slamming us—I mean, we farm 12 and a half thousand acres, you know—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Norman Koch: Pardon?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): For the government's time, there's only one minute remaining.

Mr. Norman Koch: Oh, sorry.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: So you can take it up, or—

Mr. Norman Koch: Yes. Anyway, who backs us? I mean, a big farmer used to be 200 acres. Now and then, a big farmer is 500 acres. Now, what is a big farmer? Is it 20,000? Is it 30,000? It goes up the same as animal production farmers. Thank you.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thanks.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: I'm probably not going to do you justice to the question, but I can ask it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That's your choice. Twenty seconds left.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: I won't bother. He won't get the time to answer it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): All right. Thank you. That concludes government's side.

We will move to the official opposition.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: My question is to Mr. Koch also. My colleague John Vanthof was supposed to be here, but he cancelled—a farmer expert to a forest worker.

But I just want to ask you: You mentioned that for farming, foreign—and I want to continue on the foreign acquisitions. You said there's good and bad, but in Timiskaming, you lived that, because when they hire—they pay taxes on the building. So they bulldoze the buildings, but then municipalities are having a hard time surviving or facing close to bankruptcy. So any input—we could do better to avoid this particular scenario—since you're from the Timiskaming area, you must be aware of that situation. If not—but that is happening, so I would just like to hear you on that particular point.

Mr. Norman Koch: I am very aware of that, and I get reminded by several townships. It is an issue. But, like I have said to these townships that are bellyaching because we take down buildings, if the laws would have allowed us to sever off the building—sever off the house, sever off the barn—and sell it, then there would still be the taxes. But whatever loss took place that—that wasn't allowed. So then if buildings got a little bit decrepit, they just got taken out, taken away.

But I have told these townships—and maybe it's legislation, I don't know; nobody has ever given me a straight answer—increase our tax from 25%. There is no reason that we have to only pay 25% taxes for our farmland. I get very much shot down by other farmers when I say that, but if it was 30% or 32% or 33%—we know the townships need money. We know their costs keep going up. Ourselves and our situation and a couple of other larger farmers in our—we work with the townships. We don't work against them. We'll do some ditching for them with our high hoes. We'll do stuff to help the townships.

Dairy farmers—not to blame anybody in particular; we have big equipment too, and we have heavy equipment. But when people start hauling their liquid manure tankers and start busting up side roads and then the answer is, "We pay taxes"—but that's not what your taxes are for, to break up side roads.

Anyways, townships do need help, but I think if we could sever off lots, sever off buildings—maybe not just the lots; buildings that are there already—it would help the tax.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: You mentioned the Clay Belt, of course, and that's in my riding of Mushkegowuk–James Bay. You talked about Hearst and Calstock and all the way down to Smooth Rock Falls.

We're seeing some development happening for farming, which is great. But in my riding, there's a huge forestry industry, and forestry—right now, we're struggling. So how do you see this working out when we talk about crown land?

Forestry is concerned because all these are wood allocations that they have on crown land, which is close to the roads, close to low-cost for them to reach volume. How do you see that working with forestry? Because it's not covered in the bill, as we speak, but we hear the minister speak about the potential of crown land. You mentioned crown land also, so how do you see forestry and agriculture working to find solutions so that forestry is not losing its volume? And if there is, how do you see them moving towards that when it comes to crown land and affecting the forestry industry?

Mr. Norman Koch: I've always talked about, before we—when we want to get crown land released for agriculture, there are five components that have to come together: We have to get agriculture, mining, forestry, First Nations and tourism; all have to sit down and talk. And if all five can't sit down and talk, then there is no point in talking about it because, five years down the road, one of the five will block it. So we have to negotiate.

But also, keep in mind, agriculture gets rejuvenated every year. Every year, there are plants planted and there is a harvest done. Forestry gets rejuvenated in perhaps—I'm not sure—70, 80, 90 years. Mining gets rejuvenated in zero. An ounce is taken out of the ground; there's nothing put back. So having said that, I'm touting a little bit for agriculture because we can possibly do more regenerative than what other things can do.

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But my understanding from the minister in Thunder Bay at a previous meeting somewhere that Ontario is only using, I think the number was 47%—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Norman Koch: —47% of the allotment of trees to cut. And I know, because of the tariffs etc., we're not cutting the wood that we should, but unfortunately the forest fires are doing it for us, so—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I know your business must be impacted by highway closures, and I'd like to hear it from you. We're talking about agriculture, but it does affect agriculture when we see road closure after road closure after road closure, especially in the winter.

Can you elaborate on how we can do better to make your agriculture better in northern Ontario regarding highways?

Mr. Norman Koch: Yes: Ship it by rail. But that is one of the reasons I used to get lambasted at meetings, when I would hear people talking in the background about, "What's Mr. Koch doing, talking about working with a railway when he owns a trucking company?" We do own a trucking company of 20 trucks.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you, Mr. Koch. We appreciate that.

We will now move to the third party.

Mr. Ted Hsu: One of the things that one hears all across the province is the shortage of large-animal vets, and so I have a question for Ms. McRae from the Ontario Sheep Farmers.

Schedule 9 of this bill, Bill 109, modifies the Veterinary Professionals Act, which was passed only two years ago in 2024. I was wondering if you could explain what was missing from the act that was passed only two years ago that requires a change now. I guess I'm asking this from the point of view of sheep farmers. Why wasn't legislation from only two years ago exactly what we needed?

Ms. Helen McRae: So the main act was passed, and I think there was a minor update to the language in it. We were just happy that the act didn't change the ultrasound exemptions for small ruminants. We feel that it's time to stop working on legislation and regulation, and to begin implementation so we can focus on our work growing the number of food-animal veterinarians in our province.

Mr. Ted Hsu: So just to be clear, you just want to get on with the implementation.

Ms. Helen McRae: Yes.

Mr. Ted Hsu: So you're happy that whatever changes didn't affect small ruminants, so these changes—

Ms. Helen McRae: Yes. We're supportive of the fact that it did not affect the small-ruminant ultrasounds.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. And then with these changes, it will open the door to implementation of the things that you need.

Ms. Helen McRae: Yes.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. Thank you very much.

My other question is about schedule 8, again to the sheep farmers. Ms. McRae, you mentioned that schedule 8, the financial protection fund, was needed to reduce risks, to help producers explore new markets or new channels. Can you just help educate me? What's an example of something that could go wrong, that you would need that financial protection for? Could you just give an example to help us understand?

Ms. Helen McRae: Yes. I have a little bit of a write-up on this one. We're seeking financial protection for our members for two reasons: to protect our members from nonpayment when selling direct or through a broker-dealer, and to protect our middle players—like auctions and broker dealers—from nonpayment by processors.

The two issues are: There are a few auctions and broker-dealers with large receivables who are concerned that they are holding the risk of the industry to help sheep farmers access the end market. The other one is, some auctions give terms that extend their debt by millions of dollars, and this is paid by farmers in commissions that can continue to rise. Today, our organization has a small handful of processors that owe us licence fee money that they have collected and not remitted. If we have the financial protection program, we will be able to withhold their licence until they pay us.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. Thank you very much. So there's a whole chain from the farmer to whoever the consumer is, where there could be nonpayment. In fact, you're saying that currently, there are nonpayment balances that you're dealing with.

Ms. Helen McRae: Correct. We're going into hearings shortly with certain people, yes.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. Thank you very much.

My third question is for Mr. Runnalls, and it's about the changes to the Milk Act in Bill 109. I understand you're coming from the producer side—you're on the board of the DFO—but I was wondering if you could just comment broadly, amongst all the stakeholders, just to maybe give us a little warning. Are all stakeholders happy with changes to the Milk Act, or are there some that might—

Mr. Steve Runnalls: I'd be—

Mr. Ted Hsu: Not you, but there might be others that have some concerns. Is there anything we should look out for?

Mr. Steve Runnalls: I think some stakeholders may not be happy if they're getting opportunities to buy product at a discounted price, if we're referring to the end-use billing. If you're able to get a product at a lower price, you're not going to be happy with this change—you might be paying a higher price—but the end-use billing will make sure that every buyer of milk, whether they're a first processor or further processor, pays the same price. It's about fairness.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. Thank you.

Then the next question—if I could just write down some notes here. I was wondering if you could just comment about schedule 4 and how this bill affects supply management.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Unfortunately, the Americans are making it a big topic of discussion. How will Bill 109 affect supply management?

Mr. Steve Runnalls: Are we just talking about the end-use billing, or other—

Mr. Ted Hsu: I guess I just want to open it up to speak more broadly, if you wanted to.

Mr. Steve Runnalls: I think that the end-use billing is the main thing for us. Because of negotiations with the United States, they had to change the national policy, so Ontario was not able to enforce a policy the same as the rest of the country. So it will bring us in line with the rest of Canada there in the pricing policy.

And I think that there are changes in here on adjudication, and we don't see any issues for supply management there.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay.

How much time do I have? Only a few seconds?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You have eight seconds.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'll give up the eight seconds.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Okay. Thanks so much. That concludes the first round.

We'll return to the government side with MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: This is for Steve Runnalls, as well. The Food Safety and Quality Act changes in this bill would allow delegated authorities like DFO to take on more responsibility. How would maintaining DFO's regulatory authority over milk quality under this new structure benefit consumers?

Mr. Steve Runnalls: One of the things we're looking to do is changing the penalty program to make the food safer and better-quality all the way along. That's what currently is administered under OMAF, and it will be under the Food Safety and Quality Act.

But it will also ensure that our regulations are under the same body of food safety and quality as every other food product in the province. It sets those standards there, and then it'd be administered through DFO, through our quality people and the director of regulatory compliance. It kind of aligns us with everybody else in Ontario.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: My question is going to be for Helen here. As the province works to advance Bill 109 alongside its broader Grow Ontario strategy, what would you like to see prioritized in strengthening and supporting the sheep farmers of Ontario? And how could this protection in this bill, such as farmland security and stronger payment protection, help lay the groundwork for their growth?

Ms. Helen McRae: Like I said, we are trying to increase production. The demand, we just cannot reach at the moment. We're nowhere near meeting demand.

For sheep farmers, because we are not a large industry, to be able to buy farmland would be very beneficial, and the protection would be very nice for our board, so that we can support our sheep farmers in growth with education etc.

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Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: So you agree with Bill 109. Is that what you're saying here today?

Ms. Helen McRae: Yes, we support Bill 109.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you for that.

Ms. Helen McRae: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Ciriello.

MPP Monica Ciriello: My question is for Steve. Steve, thanks so much for appearing here today. I think you bring a really interesting perspective from northern Ontario. I know you mentioned Haliburton too. As someone who represents dairy producers, both across northern Ontario, in Haliburton and the like, what would you like to see from the government to ensure that this legislation that's being proposed continues to serve the needs of northern dairy farmers specifically?

Mr. Steve Runnalls: Specifically, it's difficult because I think all of the dairy farmers in the province follow the same regulations. I guess one thing would be the opening up of the farmland. If there's more farmland available, it might entice farmers who have trouble accessing more land in southern Ontario to move dairy farmers up here like we had seen in Matheson. So that ability to get crown land could benefit the dairy industry in the north.

The specific changes, like going to food safety and quality, I don't think really affects northern Ontario farmers, and the end-use billing doesn't affect us either. I'm not sure if that answers your question.

MPP Monica Ciriello: No, that's very helpful. Thank you so much. I really appreciate the insight.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: With this question, I'll go back to Norm here again. The Grow Ontario Strategy is developing and has the ability to change with the times. Is there anything that you would like to see get prioritized in this strategy to help northern Ontario to grow more efficiently?

Mr. Norman Koch: I guess that comes back to crown land again—available land. Like Steve mentioned, when we think grain farming—but with animal farming, you just look at the massive scenario. I believe either nine or 10 new dairy farmers have started in the last five or six years. I think there would be quite a bit more of that further north as well. We've lost so many dairy farmers in the north.

When I first came up here in the 1980s, there was something like 128 dairy farmers in Timiskaming, something like 16 in Cochrane, something like seven in Matheson, three in Kap and nine in Hearst—something like that. Almost all of the northern ones are gone, but now it's coming back.

The "grow north" strategy, making more land available to farm—these families that are moving up from the south mostly are Mennonites and most of them are large families as well.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Norman Koch: It's not necessarily that a whole bunch more families might move up, but the families that are up here already will be expanding just as they did in southern Ontario. If there are three or four children who want to farm, making more land available would definitely help.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): So, 40 seconds left, MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: That's fine.

You talked a little bit about the dairy farms. What about the beef farms? Do you think they would prosper with the opening up of the Clay Belt and more available land?

Mr. Norman Koch: Beef farms could prosper for sure, and cow-calf especially, but also finishing. Up in northern Quebec, over in Val-d'Or or the La Sarre area, there are two large beef farms that feed lots—3,000 head—and we have none of that in northern Ontario for some reason. If we had more access, more availability—of course, we have to be able to grow the hay and we have to grow the feed for them. But that would save shipping some of the feed out of the area in southern Ontario.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That concludes the government's time.

We'll move to the official opposition. MPP Bourgouin.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: When I was driving, I was listening to French Radio-Canada and they were saying that in Canada, over 80% of farmers don't have a successorship plan. They were also saying that usually it's from family to family, but some family members, just like other industries, are not interested—because let's face it, it's hard work and it's very demanding. There's also the labour shortage that becomes involved with that because there's a shortage of labour also.

I'd like to hear from all of you, if you don't mind. What are your thoughts on that? Because this is throughout Canada, yes, but Ontario is probably facing a similar or the same thing—that there is a shortage of labour; not every family member is—and I know in Quebec—I was listening to a show about that—that they have a hard time passing down to the family.

What are your thoughts, all of you, on the successor? How do we move forward as a province on these subjects that our farmers are facing?

Mr. Norman Koch: I'll quickly just say, we have to have foreign labour. It has to be an option. People say, "Well, Tim Hortons and wherever—there's not very many local people working there." It's probably because they don't want to work. We have a lot of people that come out of university, and they think they should start at the second-top rung of the ladder, not the second-bottom rung of the ladder. When we have temporary foreign workers or foreign workers that come in, they're happy to do the job.

Just a quick note: We were down in Costa Rica years ago. We went on a tour up in the mountains with a guide. Way down in the valley, we had seen a bunch of little tin shacks, and I said, "What's that all about?" He said, "Well, that's the Nicaraguans." I said, "Oh." He said, "They come here, they pick the melons and then they take the money home." And I said, "Well, why don't you go pick melons?" He said, "Well, I wouldn't do a job like that."

So, I mean, we have that same thing here in Ontario—the same thing in Canada. We need to have—we have said—people that are willing and happy to come to work, and that doesn't always happen with our own people.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Anybody else?

Mr. Steve Runnalls: I'll speak to it, if I could.

I agree with Norm on that requirement of foreign labour, but I also think the infrastructure—especially on the highways—is a really big thing. The highway needs to be four-laned. I understand in the United States, when they four-laned across to the western side of the country, then, everything developed.

And when you get people from southern Ontario, they come up here and you have a congested highway that's actually dangerous—they don't want to move up here; that commute back to their family is difficult.

By four-laning that highway, it's going to speed up the movement of freight and make it cheaper to move cattle—all those things that we need. It would also allow more people to live here, knowing that they could commute and get back and forth safely. I think it would be tremendous for the north to improve that highway.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Go ahead, Helen.

Ms. Helen McRae: I will echo the thoughts on foreign workers, especially with the sheep industry. The access to skilled foreign workers, especially from New Zealand, Australia and the UK, assisting during lambing is vital to the sheep farmers, especially with large flocks. People that are already skilled and know how to lamb out a flock really reduces the mortality rate during lambing.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: The highways are such a big issue here in northern Ontario—and the road closures, especially in winter. I'm thinking of when you travel livestock, and then you get stuck in road closures—there could be two days of road closures—what do you do? How important is that to your industry that—because Steve said, "No, we need 2+1, or divided highways is what we're aiming for." But you know that needs to happen. We believe that needs to happen, but I'd like to hear from all of you on this, because that affects your business directly, because the abattoirs are not close; they're far.

Can you elaborate on how important these highways are to the agriculture industry. If we are going to develop up north, we need highways that support the industry, also.

Mr. Steve Runnalls: I can speak to that first, if you want.

I think it's very important to not just our industry but the entire industry. If I have a piece of equipment—like we have a milking robot—and I've had a time when we had to get a part from the Guelph area. It's a six-hour drive. Now, if the highway was closed, I could wait two days for that part, and my cows don't get milked.

It's the same for equipment—like, Norm rosters a lot of equipment. If he's missing a part on a million-dollar machine, that machine sits until he gets that part. If the highway is closed, that machine could be sitting for two or three days.

So I think that not just for agriculture but for all industry in the north, it's vital that we improve that highway.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute remaining.

Ms. Helen McRae: I will agree. I'm from Algoma. I don't think I stated that. I'm on St. Joseph Island, and yes—the same issue. If the highway is closed, we don't get our feed. All of our feed is coming from southern Ontario, and we don't have access to that if the highway is closed—and all of our equipment that we use for haying etc.

1050

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Do you want to go ahead?

Mr. Norman Koch: I would echo what they said.

Also, one of my—quick—pet peeves is, when there's an accident, why does the highway have to be shut for so many hours? If there's a fatality, it could be 10, 12, 14 hours. Why can't pictures be taken with drones and re-established back in an office? I mean, it can be done with other things; why not on the highway?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very much.

We will move to the third party. MPP Hsu.

Mr. Ted Hsu: My first question is back to Mr. Runnalls. The Food Safety and Quality Act is expanded to cover milk from all species—so, cow, sheep, goat, buffalo. Mr. Runnalls, you mentioned that you have some sheep. I'm just wondering if you could tell us a bit about how that particular expansion of the Food Safety and Quality Act—does that affect your farm at all?

Mr. Steve Runnalls: I don't think it affects our farm. Most of the sheep are sold as breeding stock, so they're not for human consumption. There is a little bit that goes for the meat market, but I don't think the Food Safety and Quality Act overseeing that will affect us here. That's probably a better question for the sheep producer.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, so then I'll go to Ms. McRae to ask her what the effect of that expansion might have on her members.

Ms. Helen McRae: What was the question? Sorry.

Mr. Ted Hsu: It was the expansion of the Food Safety and Quality Act to cover milk from all species, including sheep, goats, buffalo etc.

Ms. Helen McRae: Dairy production in sheep is booming. We are seeing more and more. We support the industry in regard to marketing the meat—the offspring, the lambs—but they are their own industry.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. Staying with you, I just wanted to ask, once Bill 109 passes and it comes to implementing the Veterinary Professionals Act, what are the top things that you want to do right away when it comes to addressing the large animal vet shortage?

Ms. Helen McRae: We would love to get some more vets in this area. The Ontario Sheep Farmers had a meeting in Timiskaming area at the end of June, and we were talking to a vet there. She said that she would take a day of just travel to go and access people that didn't have access to vets. Just getting and advocating for more vets in this area would be huge in the north.

Mr. Ted Hsu: The Ontario Veterinary College has been expanding in a program in Thunder Bay, which is pretty far away from northeastern Ontario. I'm just wondering if you might support a similar kind of expansion in northeastern Ontario.

Ms. Helen McRae: Yes. I think more access to more large animal vets would be better. It's becoming an issue. We're seeing it amongst all of our members, but northern Ontario seems to be really struggling.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, great. Thank you very much.

I wanted to go to Mr. Koch. This is a little bit off-topic from the bill, but when we spoke earlier, you talked about expanding the capacity for rail transport of products from the north to ports in the rest of the country. I'm just wondering if you could tell the committee for future purposes what is needed from the provincial government's side to improve transport of agricultural goods from northeastern Ontario to the rest of Canada.

Mr. Norman Koch: Well, I think the rail access expansion that we've negotiated with Ontario Northland, which is the government, I suppose—just to have that available.

Agricultural shipping by rail had dwindled to nothing for a bunch of years. Only going back 20 years ago, if you wanted to ship four cars, eight cars, you were kind of a pain in the butt for the railway because they had all this lumber and paper and iron ore being shipped. Things have changed, people have changed, and now they want to increase it.

And the same with the Northland passenger train. That's going to help people to get to the north, just like our plowing match did in 2009. A lot of people came to the north that had always wanted to come. One interesting thing was the government of the day at that time—there were 50-some MPPs who took the train in North Bay and came to Timiskaming for the plowing match, which was great.

So, any help that the government can give us with—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Norman Koch: I mean, it's not only government help that we need. People have to help themselves too. I think it was Mr. Kennedy who said it's not what the country can do for you, but what you can do for the country. You kind of get tired of people saying, "We want the government to do this. We want the government to do this," and then, next week, they bitch and complain because it's too many rules put out by the government.

So we have to do things ourselves, too, along with some government help. Some percentage help from the government is always great, just like the tiling program. It's a help; it's great.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Just one last quick question: How does the success of the passenger service side of the Northlander affect this negotiated expansion of rail service to move agricultural goods?

Mr. Norman Koch: Well, you'll get people coming up. First of all, the nostalgia of riding the train—you'll get people doing that. And you'll get people coming up because it's a safer mode of transit than driving. Because of the publicity the highway being closed has been getting, there are people—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That will have to conclude our round of questions.

Thank you so much, Mr. Koch, as well as Ms. McRae and Mr. Runnalls. We appreciate the time you put into your presentations today and all the effort to be here. Thank you very much.

AREA ONE FARMS

MR. JASON DESROCHERS

RAINY RIVER CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): We will move on to the second round. We'll call up Area One Farms, Luke Dinan; Jason Desrochers; and the Rainy River Cattlemen's Association, represented by Kim Jo Bliss.

A reminder to presenters: You can take the microphones here at the presenters' side just opposite me.

We will start with Area One Farms, represented by Luke Dinan. Welcome to committee, sir. I just wanted to let you know that each presenter has seven minutes for the presentation, and then after we've heard from all three presenters this round, the remaining 39 minutes in the time slot will be divided into two rounds of 6.5 minutes of questions from each recognized party, so you've got the government, opposition and third party.

Please wait until you're recognized by the Chair before speaking, and as always, the comments should go through the Chair. I will provide you with a verbal reminder to notify you when you have one minute left for your presentation or your allotted speaking times. That goes for all the presenters today.

Mr. Dinan, the floor is yours.

Mr. Luke Dinan: Thank you very much. My name is Luke Dinan. I am the director of northern Ontario operations for Area One Farms. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today regarding Bill 109.

I'd like to start with a little background on Area One Farms for anyone who is not familiar with us. Though we are often described as a farmland investment company, that description doesn't quite capture what it is that we do. We're really a farm partnership company. We work alongside Canadian family farms by forming equity-sharing partnerships within which we help them acquire land, improve it and build operations that are large enough and profitable enough for the next generation to return home and stay on the farm. We believe the future of Canadian agriculture depends on keeping family farms strong, competitive and Canadian-owned.

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Over the past decade, Area One has committed well over $100 million towards agricultural development in the Great Clay Belt, including land clearing, tile drainage installation and the construction of grain-handling infrastructure. To our knowledge, no private organization has invested more effort into understanding and developing the agricultural opportunities in the Great Clay Belt than Area One Farms.

I want to begin by saying we strongly support the objective of Bill 109. Ontario should absolutely be protecting its agricultural land and strengthening its food security.

Recent global events have reminded all of us that secure domestic food production is no longer just an agricultural issue; it's an economic issue, a strategic issue and, increasingly, a national security issue. However, Ontario's food independence depends not only on protecting the farmland we already have, but on responsibly creating new farmland where that opportunity exists.

Most discussions around farmland protection centre around farmland that is already in production in southern Ontario. That is perfectly understandable as, according to the 2021 Statistics Canada Census of Agriculture, 319 acres of agricultural land are lost in southern Ontario to development per day.

But there is another conversation that deserves to be had as well. Northern Ontario contains one of Canada's last truly significant opportunities for agricultural expansion. The Great Clay Belt stretches across northeastern Ontario from Matheson to Hearst and contains four million acres of land already identified as having agricultural potential. Though attempts to realize that agricultural potential have been made in the past, it is only now with developments in tile drainage technology, farm equipment, crop genetics and improving growing conditions that that opportunity can finally be realized.

To put the scale of that opportunity into perspective, bringing just 50,000 acres into production would contribute more than $76 million annually to Ontario's GDP, with that contribution expected to grow by 5% per year. Bringing 70,000 acres into production would increase that contribution to well over $100 million.

Unlike other economic stimulus projects, these benefits are recurring. They continue year after year while creating permanent employment, strengthening rural municipalities and expanding Ontario's food-producing capacity.

Agriculture truly has the potential to become the third pillar of northern Ontario's economy alongside forestry and mining, providing stability and diversification to communities that have historically depended on industries that are subject to boom-and-bust cycles.

Bill 109 provides an opportunity to help make that future possible. However, we would respectfully suggest that two components of the legislation deserve careful consideration to ensure they encourage investment rather than unintentionally discourage it.

The first concern is how the legislation defines "foreign ownership." Currently, there are two approaches to this topic that have been employed in different provinces. We can call them the Alberta approach and the Saskatchewan approach. Put simply, the Alberta approach defines "foreign ownership" within the bill itself, and it defines it as foreign-controlled or over 50% foreign-owned, whereas Saskatchewan defines "foreign" as any organization with any single non-Canadian beneficiary.

Now, Area One Farms is proudly Canadian. Our business exists to strengthen Canadian agriculture and we fully support ensuring that Ontario farmland remains under Canadian control.

However, modern investment structures are often complex. Canadian pension funds and institutional investors may include limited foreign participation while remaining unquestionably Canadian-controlled and operating entirely in Canadian interests. So we encourage the committee and the government to ensure that the legislation pertaining to foreign ownership follows a path similar to Alberta's, wherein the focus is on foreign control rather than simply the existence of any foreign investment whatsoever. Doing so would protect Ontario farmland from inappropriate foreign acquisition while ensuring that legitimate Canadian investment continues to flow into agriculture.

The second issue concerns the disposition of crown land for agricultural purposes. Much of the land capable of supporting future agricultural development in the Clay Belt is currently crown land. In order to realize the enormous potential of the Clay Belt, crown land must necessarily form a part of that picture. Though there has been a program in place through the Ministry of Natural Resources for the disposition of crown land for agricultural purposes, the recent move toward long-term lease rather than outright purchase creates a significant obstacle to investment.

Developing raw land carries significant expense. Before a single crop is planted, let alone harvested, the land must be cleared, tile drainage must be installed, oftentimes roads and other significant pieces of infrastructure must be repaired or upgraded, and then critical infrastructure for the commencement of commercial agriculture, such as elevation, storage and drying capacity, has to be constructed. The scale of those investments is in the many thousands of dollars per acre, and that level of investment simply cannot be justified without secure ownership of the land.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Luke Dinan: One more minute? Perfect. Thank you.

Thus, our recommendation is straightforward: Rather than relying solely on long-term leases, we encourage the province to continue allowing outright purchase of crown land for agricultural purposes, subject to clear performance conditions that ensure land is actually being developed for agricultural production. We would also encourage the province to establish a pilot program that allows experienced organizations to work collaboratively with government to demonstrate an efficient and transparent process for the agricultural development of crown land, which would reduce uncertainty while allowing government to evaluate the results before expanding the program more broadly.

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, Bill 109 is indeed an important piece of legislation. Ontario has an opportunity not only to protect the farmland we already have, but also to responsibly develop one of the greatest agricultural opportunities anywhere in the country. The Great Clay Belt represents millions of acres of potential, billions of dollars of long-term economic activity, stronger rural communities, greater food security and a more resilient provincial economy.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you so much.

I will now call on Jason Desrochers. You will have seven minutes for your presentation and please state your name for Hansard. You may begin.

Mr. Jason Desrochers: Good morning. My name is Jason Desrochers. I'm not going to make a fancy speech—it's pretty hard to follow that up—but I am a grassroots, third-generation farmer who was born and raised in Val Gagné in northern Ontario, so where all the Matheson Mennonites are kind of moving in. I'm from there. I could speak to you from—I'm on the board of NOFIA. I'm on the advisory council for all the beef sector in northern Ontario. I'm on the OFA board. But here, I'm here to speak to you as a farmer and as a champion of expansion of agriculture in the north for many years.

BFO had pursued and was pushing to get beef expansion in the north quite a few years ago, and there were a lot of people talking about whether it was going to work or not. I think we can see it working in Matheson. There's a lot more cattle there than there ever has been. The Mennonites have been pushing. A lot of the arguments, too, have been that you needed large investment, but we've proven that small farms can do the trick; like in Matheson, all the small farmers are expanding a lot. But anyway, that's a little bit of background on myself.

I was going to touch on crown land and vet access, because that's something that affects all the farmers in my area, including my farm. We farm a fairly large farm: cow, calf and backgrounder, and then some cash-cropping. On crown land—I'm going to touch a little bit on myself. We've applied for some crown land, just a 160-acre parcel that my grandfather used to rent, my father used to rent, my brother used to rent—had the option to buy. Cattle prices were rock bottom; he got out of cattle. That all went south. I was too young.

Having said that, my farm is successful. We're expanding. My kids are interested in taking over—succession. We've applied for a piece of crown property. I applied May 3, 2022. We are now in 2026. This is how long this process has taken.

Now, I've been denied and I've appealed because I didn't accept their denial, considering some wetlands and that—which I had clearly stated in the original application that I had no interest in draining the wetlands and I wanted to keep it intact for a wildlife corridor, because we do that on our own farm. We can put our money where our mouth is. Anybody can tour our farm; it's sustainable. So that was already part of the plan. I got denied for it, so I appealed and then I won the appeal. So I'm on the second stage, but the second stage doesn't seem to be moving forward. I've hired a consultant to help me with this process, because it's taking just too much—I am farming a large operation; there's just so much paperwork I can do.

The process and the protocol that is there is clearly not working. We're not saying that you can't buy crown land; the process is not working properly now. And this varies from district to district for every crown—if you go to Timmins to Kirkland Lake to Kapuskasing, everybody is getting different responses.

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I think I'm going to touch a little bit on leasing versus purchasing land, because you hear a lot of opposition against lease and a lot of my peers are also for the purchase of land, so I'm not going to discount what they're saying, but I'm going to give a bit of a different perspective, that lease land is actually a great option to keep this land in agriculture and to keep that farmer invested.

For example—I'm going to use me as an example, but you could do this anywhere—this particular lot, we would clear a little bit more land on it because there's already some clear, because it was previously patented. That's how hard it is to get this previously patented land. But we would clear a little bit more, tile it, just the top land, and we would not touch all the wetlands. We would save that. Having said that, the process is not going fast enough as far as our farm is expanding. So we—sorry, I just lost my train of thought here.

So the next step, I guess, is with the leasing. The long-term lease would work fine if we don't have a large amount of money to bring up to buy the land. So if you buy it, you've got to put a lot of money in. If you're just simply leasing for an affordable rate—because you're taking land that's shrub land and you will be transforming it. So if that land would be assessed as shrub land and you lease it for—what we were thinking was 49 years with an option to renew, and then that gives the farmer the operating costs to put the money in tile and land-clearing, you're not coming up to buy it and then clear it and then tile it. That's great for investment companies, but for existing farmers—young farmers who want to expand—I think the lease option works, and that's the option that MNR is kind of pushing, and that's great for them, but there's no protocol, so nobody knows what this lease is going to look like, what the dollars are going to look like and the term. So that makes it very difficult for us as farmers. So we've done all these steps and now we don't even know where we're going with that.

That's something on crown land. I can answer questions later, and then I'm going to touch on—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): We've got one minute left.

Mr. Jason Desrochers: Yes. I'll just touch on vet access real quick. Again, we've got about 550 head that we winter. We are not veterinarians. It's very difficult to assess and diagnose disease. I can pull calves out; I can do a lot of the physical stuff—we're getting real good at it because we haven't had a vet in years, and it's one thing—but we cannot diagnose disease and we need to prevent that, and that's for the industry and food safety and animal welfare. It's just not acceptable that in 2026 we do not have 24-hour vet access in our district. It's just not acceptable.

That's all I've got to say. I'll just answer questions later.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very, very much.

We will now start out first round of questions with the official—

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Oh, my apologies. The Clerk has reminded me we still have the Rainy River Cattlemen's Association, Kim Jo Bliss, secretary.

Welcome to committee.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: Hi. Yes, thank you. Good afternoon, Chair, and members. I guess it's "good morning," but almost afternoon.

Good morning, Chair, and members of the committee. My name is Kim Jo Bliss and I'm a beef farmer here in Rainy River district and I'm currently a director on the Beef Farmers of Ontario. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of Ontario's 19,000 beef farmers.

At the onset, I want to say that the Beef Farmers of Ontario is pleased to support Bill 109. We appreciate the government's continued focus on agriculture through legislation that recognize the importance of food production, food security and reducing unnecessary barriers for farmers. Bill 109 addresses a number of practical issues that our members have raised over many of the years, and we commend the government for listening to us.

I'll touch briefly on three components of this bill—first, the proposed amendments to the Beef Cattle Marketing Act. BFO supports these amendments. They reflect resolutions passed by our members several years ago and create a more equitable system by ensuring producers contribute fairly, regardless of how they market and process their cattle. We also appreciate the inclusion of the personal use exemption, which strikes an appropriate balance for farm families. These are practical, commonsense changes that improve fairness while reducing regulatory gaps.

Secondly, the proposed amendments to the Veterinary Professionals Act: Access to large-animal vet care continues to be one of the greatest challenges facing livestock producers, particularly in northern Ontario and many other rural communities, as you just heard from Jason. We support expanding the role of registered vet techs and creating a new pathway that better utilizes the entire veterinary team. As regulations are developed, we simply encourage the government to continue to consult with livestock producers, so that the rules reflect the realities of on-farm care, mobile vet service, and not just the traditional companion-animal practice.

Finally, I would like to take a moment on what we believe is the most significant opportunity within Bill 109: protecting Ontario's farmland while expanding responsible access to crown land. Ontario continues to lose productive farmland every year, and once that land is converted to non-ag uses, it effectively is gone forever. Protecting farmland ownership and ensuring it remains in agriculture production are fundamental to Ontario's long-term food security and economic resilience. We strongly support the measures that restrict foreign acquisition of Ontario farmland, and reinforce its continued agriculture use.

At the same time, we believe Ontario has an incredible opportunity to respond and expand agriculture through improved access to crown land, particularly in the great northern Clay Belt, where Jason and you guys are all today. Ontario has millions of acres with agriculture potential. Even bringing a small portion of that land to sustainable beef production would strengthen the provincial food system, support rural communities in increasing processing capacity and creating economic opportunities across the north.

To realize that opportunity, we encourage that the province go one step further by identifying sustainable agriculture parcels in advance, completing environmental Indigenous consultation work upfront and streamlining the application process for farmers. We would also like to encourage reinstating the northern Ontario fund corporation's land-clearing grant, which previously played an important role in helping to establish new farms in the north. These practical measures will significantly accelerate agriculture development while reducing risks for producers willing to invest.

In closing, the Beef Farmers of Ontario strongly supports Bill 109. We believe it strengthens Ontario's agriculture by improving fairness, modernizing regulations, protecting our farmland and creating opportunities for further growth. Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very much. Just for Hansard—I should have done this at the beginning—please state your name for Hansard before we move on to questions.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: My name is Kim Jo Bliss and I'm from the Rainy River district.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Terrific. Thank you very much.

We'll start with the official opposition: MPP Bourgouin, go ahead.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: My question is for Jason. Jason, tu parles français—with the name of Desrochers?

M. Jason Desrochers: Je parle français.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: We will continue in English, because I was just curious.

Where are you from? Where did you say your farm was?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: In Val Gagné.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: You're still in Val Gagné?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: Yes.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: So my question: When you talked about crown land and the problems you had—and you're right, every forest is managed differently by forest management. My question, I guess: What was the big hurdle—because you got refused one, and we're saying that we know that the forest industry is huge in your area like it is in mine, especially in my riding, Mushkegowuk–James Bay, and it's right in the Clay Belt. There's a lot of land available, but there is crown land, and then the forest industry is concerned, and so is probably some of your industry in your area that has close by wood access, which is important for them because of the cost that comes with it, with everything that's happening with the forest industry.

But I am very curious: The denials that you have received and then you appealed, the process is now moving—and I'd like to hear from you about that, but also the lease part. That was part of my question: Is lease something that would help farmers like you to develop because there's security in that? They say there's cash flow involved and all this.

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Please elaborate on this because I'm very curious on how we move forward. The forest industry is concerned. How can we eliminate some of your problems that you face when you face the problem?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: I'll apologize; I should have elaborated better. I got a little nervous. I'm not used to speaking in front of people that much.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: That's what we're here for.

Mr. Jason Desrochers: For the forestry industry, my family, my brother, my grandfather—they are loggers. We know first-hand everything about the wood industry. I worked for my brother in the wood industry when I first started out.

What we're asking for as agricultural partners, industry—every commodity; basically, we're all in unison on that one. We're not asking for virgin crown land up the line in Kapuskasing or Abitibi limits there. We're asking for Highway 11 corridor. Most of that land was already previously farmed and patented. To be clear, that should—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: That was given back to the crown.

Mr. Jason Desrochers: Yes. It went back to the crown because of taxes not being paid, because farming was not profitable for some years way back and industries were booming. So, that question.

And then, the following question was regarding crown land and the lease. We'll just throw a number out there—let's say $80,000 that you would have to purchase a property. Well, if you don't have to purchase a property for $80,000 and you can put $80,000 towards land clearing and tile draining, and you can pay a yearly lease on that property, the government will still end up, in the long run, getting that $80,000 that you would have bought that properly for, plus it will be improved.

And if ever that landowner releases that lease or gives it up after 49 years or before, the government will then have a value-added property that they can either rent at a higher value because it's all cleared and tiled to the neighbouring farmer or whatever, or what we've been telling First Nations is it can go back to the nature.

If you let farms go—there are great examples where I am—if you don't touch it for 100 years, it's just going to go back to bush. That's something that we have in agriculture that mining does not. Forestry is more intensive than we are; everybody knows how that can be. But we actually have an industry that's sustainable, that could go back if it had to. If 100 years from now we need more trees and we don't need as much food, it could go back.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: We're not against this bill. We're able to support it. Of course, there are some concerns that we have, like any other bill that we're facing.

When you talked about the land, was it the forest industry that was opposing that you buy the land, or was it more of the water situation—

Mr. Jason Desrochers: We only had a response from the Ministry of Natural Resources. I'm not sure who is putting pressure for how these lands are available or not. We just got response on this particular property that—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay. And where is your appeal now?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: We've won the appeal. We're on to the next phase, which is a very large list of things we have to accomplish: business plans, land surveys, environmental assessments. That's when I decided I was hiring a consultant because I was overwhelmed by everything that was on there for something that was actually farmed by my family.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Luke, you mentioned that crown land is something your group is interested, but there is huge cost to that. Are you asking that, once it's harvested, once forestry has taken the wood they need, these crown land lots be available, or is it, "No, we want standing timber there, same as if it be cut"? I'm just curious. What are you looking at?

Mr. Luke Dinan: I would say, overwhelmingly, it would work best if the logging contractors were able to be there first.

Just to provide some more context, I am actually a forest technician, and I worked in the forest industry prior to my current role. While I'm involved heavily in Area One's work in developing agriculture—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): I'll have to interrupt there. Perhaps we will be able to complete the answer in a future round, but the round is now over for the official opposition.

We will now move to the third party. MPP Hsu, go ahead.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I have a series of questions, starting with Mr. Desrochers. You mentioned a lease with a length of 49 years and an option to renew. I'm just curious: Does that option to renew trigger a land transfer tax or no?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: The goal of the 49 years was that if you go over 50 years, you do have to pay land transfer tax. So if you go to 49, you would eliminate that, because that would be an extra burden on farmers. You would have 49 years, and then you would renew another 49 years, and you wouldn't have to pay the land transfer tax.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, so the option doesn't trigger the land transfer tax. That's good to know. Thank you very much.

I guess I wanted to get a little clarification from Mr. Dinan about a 49-year lease with an option to renew. I understand that if you're clearing and tiling land, you've got to put up fences. There's a large investment, and then you have to have many, many years of returns to justify that upfront investment. Could you just explain a little bit? Why wouldn't a 49-year lease with an option to renew be enough? Why would you want to purchase?

Mr. Luke Dinan: Well, for us, ownership of the property is a critical component of how the whole thing works. The partnerships that we form with family farms within Canada—at the end of the partnership term, the family farm has the opportunity to do either a partial or full buyout. If it's partial, then we would enter into another term, at the end of which they would complete the buyout process.

The idea with what we're doing is that once the—call it low-quality land, or otherwise unimproved land—cycles in, it gets invested in. It gets improved. It cycles out into sole ownership by that family farm, at which time that family farm has achieved their scale necessary for their children to be able to work full-time on that farm.

Just to give you an example, we have a partner near Iroquois Falls. He has seven children; all of them want to be on the farm. We usually think you need to add about a thousand acres per full-time job, so it's just absolutely not possible to do down south, to add that number of acres. Without crown land being a part of the overall picture, dealing just with private land that is currently for sale, it's very difficult to make that vision come to life.

There's nothing wrong with the option to lease being available for producers where that fits better into their model and their business, but I think that not having the option to purchase whatsoever is going to create a really significant obstacle to the level of investment necessary to realize the potential that we're looking at here.

Mr. Ted Hsu: So is it fair to say there are families who are hoping that over 10, 20 or 30 years, they can pay off a mortgage and their kids don't have to lease?

Mr. Luke Dinan: Oh, absolutely.

Mr. Ted Hsu: And that's the goal of that?

Mr. Luke Dinan: Absolutely.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. Understood.

I wanted to stay with you and ask about the schedule in the bill regarding foreign ownership and foreign beneficial ownership. I understand the contrast between how it's defined in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

I wanted to ask you: How confident are we now that we can actually trace foreign ownership? Because for many, many years, Canada was known as a place where it was very hard to trace the beneficial ownership at all. We've made some strides, but are you confident that we can trace beneficial ownership? You mentioned that modern ownership is very complex, which is why you didn't want to burden the rules, having to check whether there is even a single non-Canadian beneficial owner. But how can you be confident that we are able to trace beneficial ownership?

I'll give you some context. There was a technical briefing for journalists for Bill 109, and one of the journalists who later wrote a column about this asked, "How much farmland is foreign-owned today?" The ministry, at the time, couldn't answer the question right away. Now, presumably, they can go and do their research and find out, but just the fact that they couldn't answer the question right away. Now, presumably, they can go and do their research and find out, but just the fact that they couldn't answer the question right away became fodder for a column by this journalist. How confident are you that we can trace foreign beneficial ownership?

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Mr. Luke Dinan: First and foremost, I'll just have to acknowledge that it's not my area of expertise, so I can only render an opinion. I would say that I am confident, within Area One and the investment that Area One has, that they are able to confidently determine what is and is not foreign. But I think that where the larger problem comes in is just how muddy it gets when there are not very clear definitions about these things, as is the case in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

For example, with a pension, if you have one of your pensioners leave the country, that person is now considered a foreign beneficiary. The Canada Pension Plan would be considered foreign investment. It starts to get very unclear. I think that at that point, it is missing its objective. I think that the objective is to make sure that the farmland remains under Canadian control and that the interests and benefit of that land remain domestic.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Forty-five seconds left.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Just for a point of information, in Alberta and Saskatchewan, are those definitions of foreign ownership done in the laws or in regulations to those laws later? Is it done in the statutes? I'm curious as to whether it was actually in the bill or whether the governments defined it later on, in regulation.

Mr. Luke Dinan: Yes. In Alberta, it actually is defined in the bill itself. In Manitoba and Saskatchewan, it's less clear. There are committees that have been set up. If it triggers a review, which means that there's any single non-Canadian beneficiary—in Manitoba, it would be on a parcel over 40 acres; in Saskatchewan, it would be over 10 acres—then it has to go to this committee—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That concludes the time for the third party.

We will move on to the government members. MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question is for Luke. As a farming community, the average age—with Jason being an exception—is about twice as old as Jason, probably. It's a great opportunity in the Clay Belt to open up for farming, for sure, but the investment cost is high. For young farmers starting out, that opportunity, with land costs—where do you see that? Can you give us some numbers comparable to down south, comparable to the Clay Belt, what that would be?

Mr. Luke Dinan: It's just apples and oranges.

Just to provide a little additional context, I myself am also a first-generation farmer, mixed vegetables. I farm small-scale. I market direct to consumer. I'm at the farmers' market here on Saturday. I bought a 75-acre half-lot cutover after the private land logger was done with it. I was able to buy that in 2014 for $30,000, 75 acres. Prices have gone up since then, but it is still 100% a possibility to be able to buy land for less than $1,000 an acre in the Clay Belt. But that's raw land and it requires significant investment. That investment—I didn't have the money, so it was all sweat equity on my side. But that's absolutely a viable pathway for young people who are looking to get into agriculture. The biggest barrier is just that it's a heck of a lot of work. But that opportunity is there for anyone who is willing to put in the work. I'm a living testament to that fact.

I would also say that a well-developed agricultural community surrounding those young people is an invaluable support network. It means that all those tertiary services are there. When we're talking about opening up crown land, one of the criticisms is that it's very export-oriented and the farmers who are going to be able to utilize this are going to be primarily large cash-crop growers. I would say that there's still enormous benefit for young farmers who are looking to get involved and maybe starting with something that's at a smaller scale, because when those larger growers are there, all the support network that they require comes in as well.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Just because of how important that lease part of it is compared to buying—because a young person has no equity, so he's going in just with hard work and lots of sweat.

Mr. Luke Dinan: Absolutely.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: But he's got no equity, so that lease would be very important for—

Mr. Luke Dinan: Sorry to interrupt, but I would say that if a young person is able to scrape together a deposit—if they would be able to get a mortgage on something that they could own but they couldn't get a mortgage on it if they lease, and then if they have a chance to get in and they have a chance to start putting some work into it, they could force equity in that property. Now they own something and they have something that they would be able to borrow against to be able to invest into their operation. I'm only speaking from personal experience here—that's what I was able to do. If I had only been able to lease that property, I would not have been able to grow my farm to be able to feed the 50 families for the eight months of the year that I'm currently feeding them.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Luke Dinan: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: This question is actually for Luke and Jason. It's an interesting conversation we're having, the difference between leasing and owning a property. Jason, you're a fan of the lease; Luke, you're a fan of ownership. Do you think there's some way that we could do both, or do you think it has to be all of one or all of another? And how would you see that working? Would you see certain areas would be all leasing or all owning? Do you think it could work in between? I'm just looking for your opinions.

Mr. Luke Dinan: There's lots of room for both strategies to be employed. I think that so long as the option to purchase exists, and if that's what an applicant wants to pursue, then that avenue is there for them.

Alternately, if it began with a lease with an option to renew or purchase at the end of it, it gives somebody the opportunity to develop their enterprise and get some cash flow, put some savings together.

It's absolutely not all or nothing. The more options we have, the more flexibility we have, then the larger the playing field is for a wider variety of players on it. But I just think that not having the option to purchase whatsoever is going to significantly restrict the investment ability and our ability to really realize the potential of the Clay Belt.

Mr. Jason Desrochers: I'll be short. I think they both exist as long as the focus is on producing food, keeping it local and having farmers farming this land. If there are too many entities in the same pot, too many hands in the same pot, how is that farmer going to be successful? So the best way for that is for the farmer to own or to lease that land themselves. But there is opportunity for both, yes.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): So, 50 seconds left.

MPP Paul Vickers: Just a quick one: So you really believe a lease with the option of buying is definitely needed? Or do you think a straight-up lease is practical?

Mr. Luke Dinan: Personally, I don't think that just the lease with no option to be able to purchase at any time would work for our goals.

MPP Paul Vickers: What about you, Jason?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: I think the option to buy would be great. If it comes down the line where a young farmer didn't have the money to buy land, he does the improvements and 10, 20, years down the road he can afford to buy it and then he buys it, that would be great. But again, that would give them that opportunity.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: If I can just jump in: I just think that they're looking for long-term certainty—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You know what? We'll have to interrupt there. The first round is now concluded. The government's time is concluded.

We'll return to the official opposition. MPP Bourgouin, go ahead.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Kim, you can continue what you were going to say. I'll give you an opportunity to say what you need to say on this subject.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: I was just going to say that I just think that the producers are looking for some sort of long-term certainty because they're going to have to invest in that land with infrastructure and livestock. It's like a long-term certainty. So if it is, I think both options would work, but the option to buy is more of an incentive. I'm not sure if that helps or not.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Some of you talked about the vet issue. I can tell you, in my riding, I hear all the time that they need more vets.

I think Ted asked you a similar question—I wasn't sure if it was this group. Would you support some veterinary schools in the northeast? Because we know there's one in Thunder Bay, and then there's one also down south, but there's a huge demand in northern Ontario.

In fact, I had two young women who wanted to become vets. They had to go to Australia and one went to a different—because there was no place for them to continue their education. There were not enough seats. I know we have created more seats, which is great, but there is still a need to have more vets in Ontario.

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What are other solutions that you think we need to do as a government to make sure that we are keeping our vets here in northern Ontario? Because it was based on their grades—they had great grades, but still it was not high enough, no different than a doctor, in fact. They couldn't get a seat.

Any of you—I would like to hear from all of you because you're impacted by this, maybe not as a grower—but definitely both beef farmers I'd like to hear from because that's a key to your success also to have vets close by to save your animals in some cases. Anybody can go first.

Mr. Jason Desrochers: Okay, I'll just jump in really quick since we actually don't have vets. It's kind of important.

One thing I've heard many, many times—I work on a working group with the College of Veterinarians and the beef farmers and we've heard many, many times how we have students coming out of Thunder Bay and it's going to be great. That will not even cover the amount of vets that are retiring in the next few years—just to keep that in perspective. That will not put new vets on the ground in areas that don't have any. That's just a Band-Aid. It's great, it's good news because there was nothing happening before that, but we need to look further. I don't know—we had proposed a vet technician program and that kind of got shot down by government, maybe just because it wasn't planned out properly.

I'm not sure as producers we are the ones that should be coming up with that solution. We have done every possible thing we can. We have every skill and trade as we are welders and mechanics. We're doing everything we can, but somehow we need to get veterinarians in northern Ontario.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Go ahead, Kim.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: Just quickly, the Beef Farmers of Ontario have done a ton of work with the university—Jason sits on that committee—hoping that they could maybe change some of the ways that they accept students. It's not just about having the top grades, but it's also looking at your background of where you came from: Did you grow up in the north? Did you grow up on a farm? That sort of thing.

We also have talked about some other models that are in other parts of Canada. For example, I think on the east coast, the provincial government—I don't know if you call it subsidized—they actually employ vets. We were thinking that it would be neat because of the new PAWS regulations and having access to a vet for that organization is also very important. Is there a way that we could work with the government to have a vet in these communities? It is the north, but like Jason said, many people are going to be retiring so it could be the whole province soon. These vets would be employed partially by the government at certain times and then also do the work on farm as well.

There are some solutions that we've been obviously putting on the table. And as for the vet techs, we feel that that's very similar to a nurse practitioner-type program. There are some cases where it may not work, in areas—there's large distances that these vets have to travel in the north, obviously, so sometimes sending a tech out ahead of time in an emergency situation may not work, we get that, but there's other things like preg-checking and basic herd health issues that a vet tech could do. I could certainly gather more of that information, but we have been putting some, I think, pretty neat ideas forward and some of it is working in other places in Canada.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I have to ask you this question because I know our highway situation in northern Ontario—I was going to say a word I would probably be called out on, but anyway—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: How does that impact your industry? You have live animals, you need the food delivered, you need maybe animals to be shipped. Winter comes around, and it's road closure after road closure. It seems now they're closing roads for precautionary measures and even for two days. I'd like to hear from each and every one of you. How does that affect your business? Kim, you can start.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: Luckily, I'm tucked away a little south of the Trans-Canada, but it's every day that there is an accident—it don't matter the weather and it don't matter the time of year. Obviously, inputs come in to us on those roads, and transportation is a huge expense. It does hold up business, it does impede business, and it's very real. Our families are travelling on this highway. We are selling our products at markets in Kenora, in Dryden, so we're on those highways. So, it's a very real—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): We'll have to conclude our time here. I will move to the third party. MPP Hsu.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I wanted to just go back to one point. Mr. Desrochers mentioned that leasing land was a good option to help keep land in agriculture, but my actual question is for Area One Farms, and that is, do you think that farmers would accept purchasing land with a farmland easement, so in other words, giving up the right to do anything else with the land other than farm it, or maybe let it go back to nature?

I'm just wondering if that—and that usually means that the cost of purchasing it is less—is an option that would be acceptable?

Mr. Luke Dinan: Most certainly.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, great. That is very interesting to know.

Mr. Luke Dinan: We think of farmland—once we've created an acre of farmland, that that land stays in production in perpetuity. We have no interest whatsoever in seeing an acre of land that we've worked so hard to bring into production, fall out of it.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, great. I'm very happy to hear that as an option. It's something that's been suggested for dealing with urban sprawl and the loss of farmland in southern Ontario. It can be an expensive thing to do, but if you're converting crown land to farming, it might be a good time to do it when the cost is actually not very much. It's really great to hear.

But, Mr. Desrochers and also Ms. Bliss, just getting back to large animals—that's specifically to northern Ontario: I understand that there are many students who aren't able to get into the veterinary college. But I'm just wondering, do you have any ideas about how we can encourage more young people in this region, in northeastern Ontario—or, well, I guess, northwestern Ontario—just to get young people interested in being a large-animal vet as a career? There's no shortage of finding people who want to treat household pets, but how do we get young people more interested?

If they come from a region, they're more likely to go back, after school, to practise in that region. I'm just wondering if you have any ideas about that before we leave this subject, either of you.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: Jason, are you going to go?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: You can go ahead.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: Just quickly, I think, like I mentioned, that it's not only looking at grades, but looking where they come from—do they come from a beef farmer, a dairy farmer, a large-animal farm? That makes a huge difference. But also, within the program, like in their fourth year—in their last year of vet school right now, there's a group. Anyway, the two of our vets host some large-animal vets for the month, where they get to come and work with that vet and do all the hands-on work. But it's their fourth year and last year. Most of them that come here, they come in the month of March for calving and that sort of thing. Most of them, in that last year, have already decided or been offered a job in another clinic.

Somehow, we need to get these large-animal ones. There's not as many of them, but we need to get those in the north. So many comments have been, "Oh, wow, I didn't realize." You know, I think they just don't understand that there is a very big agriculture industry in the north.

But they also need support—like when you graduate, you need to be able to have somebody. They can't not come here. It's no different than a doctor. You can't come here and expect to take on 1,600 patients in your first year.

So, it's having support, and somehow supporting the vets that are here that maybe could somewhat offset some costs of mentoring these guys into our communities.

But I want Jason to talk, so I'm going to be quiet.

Mr. Jason Desrochers: We've gone through many different strategies of trying to get students to come. One thing that was brought up a few times was something similar to the OPP program for the police, where when they get out of school, they have to do their first three years in an isolated area or whatever.

Interjection,

Mr. Jason Desrochers: Oh, four years? I'm sorry. Again: I'm a farmer; I don't know all these things. But it's something similar to that.

And then, to get the students to university to go into veterinarian—right now, there had been a lot of emphasis from Guelph to take in foreign students, it would be a much higher tuition than local students and it was all based on grades. If you didn't have a 93% average, you weren't getting in. I think that's where we are losing focus, where there are some great students that are from the farm with maybe an 89% or a 90% average that would be great veterinarians.

But right now, the dollars are controlling that. They're accepting those foreign students that don't have any background as long as they have that 1% or 2% higher grade and more money. That's sad, but that's the way it is.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Going back to Ms. Bliss, I wanted to ask about schedule 1 in the bill, and one of the things that it does is it tries to get some consistency.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Ted Hsu: It charges the $7 licence fee for those who process their own cattle, but there is an exception for up to two heads of cattle processed for personal consumption. And I understand this licence fee is just $7, so I'm just wondering how much extra work does this exception take? I'm just surprised.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: It's not going to take that much work. I think everything is set up pretty modern now that when I come in and take my animals to the abattoir and the two that I'm feeding my family with just won't have that $7 taken off. It doesn't seem like a lot, but I do think this is a really great way—we have people that are not appearing on membership lists because the smaller producers that are feeding a bunch of cattle and only take them to the local abattoir are not on the Beef Farmers' mailing list because they're not paying any check-off dollars. I don't think it's a big deal, and $7 is not that much. I guess either way, it wouldn't make a difference, but I think that it really shows great incentive from the government to say that we'll exempt two for the people to feed their families, so I think that's—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That will conclude the round of the third party.

We'll move on to the government members: MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thanks to the three of you for being here to participate in the consultation on this important bill—really good conversation, I mean really good.

My question is for Kim. Luke and Jason spoke extensively on crown land and how it relates to their business—leasing, buying—but I want to go a little bit simpler. The Rainy River district is home to a cattle herd of about 20,000, which is a significant number and means you guys have got it going on. How would opening more crown land for grazing support the growth for the producers in your district?

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: So the truth is there's just not the same amount of crown land or potential farmland available here in the northwest. But the Clay Belt, like in northeastern Ontario, that land that they're looking at was once agriculture land. That's not the case—there are some small parcels here and we kind of revisited, we did do a bit of—I don't know if you call it inventory, but somewhat of an inventory when we had a very significant drought in 2021 to see if we could actually get some fences around some crown land that cattle could still graze because we were so short on pasture.

It's just not the same impact in the northwest, though we fully support our neighbours to the east of here. There could be some small pockets that people would be interested in, but it's not as significant in the northwest. A lot of that crown land, once you get into the rock and the lake area, it's just not really fit for cattle either, believe it or not. So it's not quite the same impact that it would have on our friends east of here—I'm fully supportive.

We do have other pressures that are—our grain numbers have increased here, so that's taking away some grazing land. Also, there are some potential solar projects that are looking at taking away some grazing land which is causing some grief in the northwest here, if that helps you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank all three presenters here today. My question will be for Jason. Jason, you're a third-generation farmer that bought your father's land in—well, he came in 1928, correct?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: My grandfather.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Sorry, your grandfather. That's really great. My family has been in Port Credit for four generations. It's really important to have someone that lives in the community, to stay in the community. I find that really amazing, so congratulations on that.

On Bill 109, how could that help keep more farmland in local Canadian hands?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: The crown land?

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Correct.

Mr. Jason Desrochers: The way I look at it with the model with the lease is, usually, if you're going to lease crown land, you've already owned another property that you have, so then you can expand. So young farmers—or larger farms, like myself—we can keep expanding a little bit more. But that makes sure that we have farmers—Canadian, Ontarians—farming.

And the way I'm looking at it, if your principal residence can be in that community where you're renting your crown land, that, to me, is important. I'm not talking on behalf of BFO; I'm talking about someone who's lived up here and whose wife teaches in schools. The Mennonites maybe are a little bit separate—and it's too bad that their kids don't go to school with mine and play hockey or ringette or whatever; that's too bad—but they do live and pay taxes in that community. So I have no worries; if ever they would get access to crown land, they will contribute that to northern Ontario, whereas we've got to make sure that that stays the case.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: And do you think Bill 109 would attract more youth in the farming industry?

Mr. Jason Desrochers: Well, if we get veterinary access up north, it's a lot more of an incentive for farmers to move north, if they're going to have livestock of any kind.

And then again, I know quite a few farmers. I was just south at a conference for BFO, and a lot of young farmers would be interested in moving up here if they could buy a couple hundred acres and then lease or rent or buy some crown land as well, to just kind of get that—you need a little bit more than one lot if you're going to do it in the livestock industry. So I think, yes, Bill 109 is very important.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Jason.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Okay. MPP Ciriello.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you to everyone for being here today, providing some really great input on our bill. I'm looking forward to seeing what we can include.

My question is for Luke—this is more your perspective in your role with the Claybelt Development Corp. What would you like to see from the government to ensure regulatory clarity supports continued land conversion and the expansion in this region? What would you like to see?

Mr. Luke Dinan: I think that, to echo Jason's point, where we have an issue is with the Ministry of Natural Resources and the flow of communication going in and coming back out. It is way too often the case that phone calls don't get answered, emails don't get answered and things take, like—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute.

Mr. Luke Dinan: —Jason, you're four years into the process? We actually are just wrapping one up where, eight years into the process—they've had the cheque since April—the cheque is not cashed, so we cannot finish this transfer. It's just not functional. So that would be one of the biggest things, is getting MNR out of their silo and improving communication pathways so that we can move these things along in a more efficient manner.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Perfect. Well-taken example; thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): So we've got 20 seconds.

That will conclude the government side, and thank you, members. This concludes the morning portion of our public hearings today. The committee is now recessed until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1158 to 1300.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee will resume public hearings on Bill 109.

ONTARIO FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURE
COCHRANE FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURE
BEEF FARMERS OF THUNDER BAY

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): The panel presenters will each have seven minutes for their presentation, with the remaining 39 minutes for questions from members of the committee. Our scheduled presenters for this hour are the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, represented by Angela Field; the Cochrane Federation of Agriculture, represented by Frank Haasen; and the Beef Farmers of Thunder Bay, represented by Jason Reid.

I will now call on Angela Field. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Ms. Angela Field: Thank you. Angela Field.

Thank you very much, and good afternoon. I'm a member of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture; I am a director-at-large. I am also a member of the Renfrew Federation of Agriculture.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak about Bill 109. I'm here today to speak about an issue that is particularly important to the farmers here in northern Ontario: access to crown land for agriculture, specifically.

For many farm businesses in the north, crown land access is one of the greatest barriers to expansion for the new entrants and for farmers currently at work. Ontario has significant agricultural potential in regions such as the Clay Belt, where substantial areas of class 2 to class 4 soils remain under crown ownership. The challenge is that the current system is often described by farmers as unclear, inconsistent and unpredictable. Application timelines can extend for years; in some cases, even approaching a decade. Applicants may also be required to undertake extensive and costly studies before their applications can proceed. For a family farm, this can often be an insurmountable barrier.

A farmer may have a viable business plan, the equipment, the skills and the willingness to invest in a community but not the financial capacity to undertake the kind of lengthy capital-intensive studies more commonly associated with major mining, forestry or infrastructure projects. At the same time, decision-making can vary between regional offices. That lack of consistency makes it difficult for farmers to understand what is required, how long the process will take or whether an application will ultimately be successful. The result is that farmers cannot make reliable business plans. A farm expansion may require lands secured today in order to justify investments in equipment, buildings, drainage, fencing or other infrastructure. When access to land is uncertain, often for years, those investments become absolutely impossible to plan.

This is where Bill 109 and the broader effort to modernize crown land administration can make an important contribution to expand agricultural production in northern Ontario, by making it easier for Ontario farmers to lease or access arable land on the Clay Belt. Ontario needs an agriculture-specific approach to crown land administration. The current system should recognize that agricultural applications are different than applications for mining, forestry or major infrastructure. The scale, capital capacity and risk profile of a family farm are different. A regulatory process designed for large industrial projects should not automatically be imposed on a farm business seeking to develop local agricultural land.

First, Ontario should establish a clear and transparent province-wide framework for agricultural use of crown land. Our farmers need to know which crown lands may be eligible for agricultural disposition, what types of agricultural uses are permitted, what tenure options are available, what the terms and conditions will be and whether purchasing the land is an option or whether leasing is the only pathway. This clarity is essential for both new entrants and established farm businesses.

Second, the application process must be scaled to the realities of agriculture. A family farm should not be required to complete unnecessary studies that are disproportionate to the size and nature of the proposed agricultural operation. Environmental stewardship is important. Farmers understand that land development must be responsible and sustainable, but the regulatory process should be risk-based and proportionate. Requirements should reflect the actual scale of the proposed farm operation and the potential environmental impacts, not simply mirror the requirements applied to much larger industrial projects.

Third, there needs to be stronger coordination between the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness. Agriculture-specific applications should benefit from agricultural expertise. The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness understands farm business models, agricultural soils, farm economics and the realities facing new and expanding farm operations. That expertise should be a part of the review process. A coordinated approach would reduce duplication, improve consistency and help ensure that applications are assessed with the proper understanding of agricultural realities.

Fourth, lease rates, terms and conditions should be standardized, wherever possible, across northern Ontario. Farmers should not face fundamentally different expectations simply because an application is being handled through a different regional office. Standardization would promote fairness and transparency. It would also make it easier for farmers to build realistic business plans.

Fifth, farmers should have access to both leasing and purchasing pathways. Different farm businesses have different needs. Leasing may provide an important entry point for a new farmer or a farm business that cannot immediately purchase land. Purchasing may be more appropriate for an established operation making a long-term investment in buildings, soil improvement, drainage or other infrastructure. Providing both options would allow farmers to choose a tenure model that fits their business plan. It would also support new entrants while allowing established farms to make long-term investments.

Sixth, applications involving patented land that has reverted to crown landownership should be expedited. Where a land has previously been held privately and has subsequently reverted to crown ownership, there may be opportunities to simplify the current approval process. The government should examine whether these applications can be handled through an expedited pathway while still meeting appropriate environmental and public interest requirements.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Ms. Angela Field: The broader point is that crown land access must become predictable enough for farmers to plan. Agricultural development is a long-term investment; farmers do not make decisions based only on the current year.

This system also undermines Ontario's broader northern economic development goals. If Ontario wants to encourage population growth, entrepreneurship and economic development in northern Ontario, agriculture should be part of that strategy. Access to agricultural crown land can create opportunities for new farmers, support existing businesses, attract investment and strengthen local food systems. Those opportunities will not be realized if the process to access the land is too slow, too costly or unpredictable.

I want to be clear that farmers take stewardship of the land seriously. They have a deep commitment to sustainable land management.

An appropriate environmental review process needs to be clear, proportionate, coordinated and appropriate. I encourage the committee to support an agricultural-specific approach to crown land administration in Bill 109.

In closing, crown land—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you, Ms. Field—appreciate your presentation.

I will now call on Frank Haasen from the Cochrane Federation of Agriculture. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Mr. Frank Haasen: Good morning. My name is Frank Haasen. I'm the president of the Cochrane Federation of Agriculture, and I'm speaking on their behalf today. My family operates a 700-acre, 240-head dairy farm here in Timmins, so I'd personally like to welcome you to the city with a heart of gold. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

With steady land development—both clearing and tiling—and the migration of farmers from southern Ontario, Cochrane district is enjoying an unprecedented growth in the agricultural sector.

The OFA has already outlined many of the policy recommendations we support. I would like to focus on the reality on the ground for farmers in Cochrane district.

For years, governments have talked about the tremendous agricultural potential in northern Ontario. We hear about the Clay Belt. We hear about food security. We hear that agriculture is our priority.

Our question is simple: If agriculture is truly a priority, why can't farmers get access to the land? Our members are becoming increasingly frustrated because they continue to encounter a system that talks about expansion but rarely delivers it.

We have members whose applications have been sitting for years. We have members who have hired consultants, people with decades of experience and personal relationships with the MNR, who still cannot get basic responses or timelines. We have land identified by the Crown Land Use Policy Atlas as suitable for agriculture, yet applications simply don't move. One farmer accepted a lease option that the ministry proposed but is now waiting for details necessary to move forward. Another is individually negotiating lease rates and terms, a process that doesn't lend itself to consistency, transparency or accountability.

This isn't a policy problem; it's an implementation problem. Government can't continue to say northern Ontario agriculture is a priority while maintaining a process that prevents farmers from accessing the land. If a handful of qualified farmers cannot successfully negotiate the current system, how can Ontario realistically expect large-scale agriculture expansion across northern Ontario?

The government must lead this effort, and history shows that it can. Following the First and Second World Wars, Ontario actively encouraged agricultural settlement in the north through veteran land programs and the ARDA initiatives. Government identified land, developed process and helped families establish productive farms. There was political will to make that happen. Today, we made that same commitment.

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For northern Ontario, expanding agriculture means new business, more employment, increased demand for equipment and services, stronger rural communities and a more resilient food supply. Recent trade disruptions and tariffs have reminded all of us why food security matters. Producing more food here in Ontario isn't just an agricultural objective; it's an economic and strategic priority.

Agriculture also differs fundamentally from any other resource industry. Mining and forestry are essential industries, but they operate under a very different business model. Large corporations have dedicated regulatory staff and substantial capital to manage lengthy approval processes—most farms do not. I would say all farms do not. Farmers are investing their own money, often borrowed against everything they own, to develop land that may take years before producing an economic return.

Agriculture is also a reversible land use. Responsible farming protects soils and water, and if land is no longer farmed, it can be returned to other uses. This is very difficult for permanent industrial developments. We need a crown land process that reflects these differences. One of the reasons the current system struggles is that crown land intended for agriculture is administered primarily by a ministry whose primary responsibility are forests, wildlife and natural resources. As a minimum, there needs to be a stronger coordination between the MNR and the ag ministry.

The ag ministry understands soils, drainage, farm economics and what makes a farm business viable. In the longer term, the government should consider whether agricultural crown land would be more effectively managed through the agriculture ministry or through a dedicated agricultural-focused crown land program. If the government's objective is to grow agriculture in northern Ontario, then the ministry responsible for agriculture should play a leading role in achieving that objective.

For land access, our members strongly believe that purchasing crown land should remain the preferred option wherever appropriate. Ownership gives farmers the confidence to invest in clearing, draining, fencing and building, as well as soil improvement, that can easily cost hundreds of thousands of dollars before a farm becomes profitable. Historically, that worked well. Farmers developed the land, demonstrated how it was productive and then purchased it. Many members remember that process taking about two years, not 10.

We recognize that leasing could also play an important role, particularly for new entrants. A long-term renewable lease such as a 49-year lease with affordable rent could work, provided it offers genuine security. Renewal terms should recognize the original value of the land, not penalize farmers for increasing its productivity through decades of investments. While we would find more stability and security with an even longer lease, we're concerned about the land transfer tax implications that would arise from lease terms beyond 50 years.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Frank Haasen: An expedited process for previously patented land would also be appropriate, as that land has been reverted from private to crown land in the past. Government also needs to be strategic about where agricultural development occurs.

Our message today is straightforward: Northern Ontario has the land. Ontario has farmers who are prepared to invest. What is missing is a government process that allows these two things to come together.

Northern Ontario farmers are ready. We need the government to be ready too.

Thank you. I would be pleased to answer questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very much, Mr. Haasen.

Next up, we'll have Jason Reid from Beef Farmers of Thunder Bay. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Mr. Jason Reid: Hello. My name is Jason Reid. Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. I'm a beef farmer here in the district of Thunder Bay, on the northwest side of northern Ontario.

I'm here today on behalf of the Beef Farmers of Thunder Bay, an affiliate organization of the Beef Farmers of Ontario. We are pleased to be here today to support Bill 109. We appreciate the government's commitment to introducing legislation that addresses important issues facing Ontario's agriculture sector. The measures in the bill reflect the conversations our industry has been having for years with the government and brought forward directly by our members.

Today, I'd like to briefly touch on three key points covered in the legislation. Firstly, with respect to the Beef Cattle Marketing Act, we support these amendments. These changes stem directly from conversations we have had with our members and producers on how to modernize the collecting of fees while maintaining the exemption for the cattle process for personal consumption. We believe that the amendments create a fairer, more consistent system that better reflects how cattle are marketed today.

Secondly, with regard to the Veterinary Professionals Act—which is of particular importance for beef producers across Ontario, especially in the north—reliable veterinarian services continue to be a challenge, especially for those farms in rural, remote and northern parts of the province. Expanding the roles of veterinarian technicians is a practical step that can help to improve access to animal care by allowing professionals to provide additional services where appropriate outside of the traditional clinic setting. As this work moves forward through regulation, we encourage the government to continue to consult with livestock producers. Caring for large animals has its unique challenges that are often very different from companion animals. Veterinarian care often takes place in fields, barns and handling facilities, and those realities need to be reflected in new regulations. A practical, flexible approach will help ensure that these changes deliver real improvements for producers.

Finally, as mentioned before by the previous two presenters, I'd like to touch on crown land and dealing with farmland protection. Protecting Ontario's farmland is essential to maintaining a strong and secure food system. Productive agriculture land is a limited resource and, once lost, is very difficult—sometimes impossible—to replace. Therefore, we support measures that strengthen farmland protection while increasing production and limiting foreign ownership of this valuable asset. We support the government's efforts to improve access to crown land for agriculture purposes. As a producer here in northwestern Ontario, I know, and see, the opportunities that exist in the north. Making it easier for responsible, sustainable crown land access can support farm growth, encourage new investment and strengthen northern communities.

Overall, beef farmers across Ontario and here in the north support Bill 109 as a positive, balanced piece of legislation that will benefit both today's producers as well as the future producers in Ontario agriculture. We appreciate the collaborative approach the government has taken through this process and encourage the committee to support this bill.

I'd like to once again thank you for this opportunity to be here today, and I'm pleased to answer any questions you may have.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very much.

We'll now turn to the rounds of questions. There will be two rounds. Each of the parties get seven minutes, and we'll go around twice.

The first to ask questions will be the third party. MPP Hsu, go ahead.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you to the witnesses for coming here today.

The first question I have is a general question. We talked about access to crown land, and how the process is taking a lot of time and it's costly and it's inconsistent. I'm just wondering if you can tell me a little bit about what the politics are. What interests are causing delays or complications that we might have to address to try to resolve the situation? Can you just give us an idea? You don't have to mention specific groups or anything like that, but what are they thinking about when they design these processes—or don't design them?

Ms. Angela Field: I don't think that it's any one thing. From my understanding, speaking to different farmers, it's almost like we have two ministries that are trying to do something, but they're not actually working together. The MNRF is sort of responsible for the land up here, and the Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for agriculture land. But the crown land, currently, that people are looking at, it sits in limbo. So this might be where the Ministry of Red Tape can come in and say, "Okay, this falls under the responsibility of X ministry," instead of having it go between two ministries. I think that's a lot of the holdup right there.

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Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay.

Mr. Frank Haasen: May I add something?

Mr. Ted Hsu: Mr. Haasen, yes, please.

Mr. Frank Haasen: Certainly, members in the Cochrane Federation of Agriculture—just to be clear, I don't have personal experience with accessing crown land, just because of our location. But those members in our federation that have had problems basically see it as the Ministry of Natural Resources being interested in forestry and wildlife and no interest in agriculture. The people with experience, I think, would lay the responsibility at the feet of the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. I don't know if Mr. Reid has anything to add; if not, I have more questions, so don't feel like you have to.

Mr. Jason Reid: Yes, I would just concur with the other two presenters. I think that it's probably just mostly a lack of understanding by the Ministry of Natural Resources to what it is that is needed, what would make a difference, and how developing agriculture land doesn't take away from mining and forestry. It can work right alongside them. We're not necessarily even looking at the same pieces of land. The land that mining and forestry would be looking at is very different from what agriculture would be looking at. So I think a lot of it comes from a lack of understanding of the two industries and what is needed. I think just a more collaborative approach of getting the two ministries in the same room and having open dialogue is really where a lot of the issues probably come from.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. Thank you very much.

My next question is for this Ms. Field. This is about the length of leases. I know there is the option between purchasing or leasing land, and I understand that the leases need to be long enough to justify investment in fencing, tiling, draining, clearing, soil improvement, whatever. But I am wondering, what minimum length of leases are needed to justify the improvement they have to put in upfront?

Ms. Angela Field: Typically, if you're looking at tile drainage specifically, you're looking at a 10-year minimum before it's actually paying itself back. So, obviously, in this case, longer term would be better. The ministry offers hunt camp leases, crown land leases for 99 years. So seeing something that's actually going to be functioning and making money for both the province and the owner or leaseholder, 10 years would be minimum. I would say most farmers would like to say 50 because buildings can be brought in and you're actually reaping the benefits of the improvements that you have put into the land.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. There is a land transfer tax that gets triggered at 50 years. Is that an issue? Is that something that you'd like an exception to make the long-term leasing a better option?

Ms. Angela Field: That isn't something that I'm familiar with at this stage of the game, so I'm not going to say yea or nay, but it would definitely be something that would need to be discussed with the parties that would be interested because some would say, "Yes, absolutely, we want an exemption," and others would say, "Well, at 50 years, I would think that we would be okay to pay a tax." So it would be a discussion.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. Thank you very much.

For Mr. Reid, you mentioned, talking about large animals—I think, if I understood correctly, you were talking about some changes to the regulations around their practices, the practices of large-animal vets. I just wanted to give you an opportunity to elaborate on that point, because I think you were only able to touch on it briefly.

Mr. Jason Reid: Yes. Well, really, what it comes down to is the fact that we have a lot of small, remote productions in sporadic locations across northern Ontario, none of which are large-enough communities to really sustain a full-time large-animal veterinarian. We may only have 10, 12—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You have 45 seconds.

Mr. Jason Reid: —maybe 20 producers in an area. So we really need to find way of more cost-effectively putting—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): We have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Jason Reid: A more cost-effective way to put that production to other people rather than putting the burden of responsibility directly to the veterinarians.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, thank you. That's enough.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you. We'll move to the government side.

MPP Ciriello, go ahead.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you to all the speakers for providing their comments today.

My question is to Angela. I would like you to talk a little bit about your experience—and as someone who's been passionate about the role of women in agriculture as a whole, I would like to know how do you see this legislation supporting new and existing farmers as they build sustainable operations moving forward.

Ms. Angela Field: Thank you very much. I see opportunity with this legislation. I see great opportunity not just for farm families but farm women as well, more owner-operators getting the opportunity to perhaps start with a small plot of crown land and build from there or expand their own operations already in existence maybe to include their family and other women who are interested in the same thing.

Farming has come a long way from what it was, and I was not born and raised a farmer, so I've learned a lot in my 20-plus years here, and this legislation goes a long way to help support consistency and sustainability as well as opportunity.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Beautiful. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you to all the presenters for participating in this process.

My question is for Jason. You said your group supports the amendments. You give your concerns about the vets, the vet techs and concerns about accessing the crown land. What would the Thunder Bay area beef producers and farmers like to see prioritized in future policy or the Grow Ontario Strategy to further support growth and competitiveness of the beef sector in northern Ontario?

Mr. Jason Reid: Oh, that's a big question. I'm going to say that probably access to that crown land would be a big benefit. It's less of a benefit very close to the city, but our real opportunity for expansion is outside of the city, and if we have good markets and good opportunities right now in profitable, sustainable markets and a huge, growing demand for local production, if we have veterinarian care and we have profitable markets and access to markets, I think that growth will follow. Nothing creates better growth than a positive attitude in a community, so I think that the entirety of this legislation is a huge step forward to creating that positive attitude in a northern community.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: That's good. Thanks for participating today as well.

Mr. Jason Reid: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Any further questions from the government side? MPP Vickers, go ahead.

MPP Paul Vickers: So, Frank, you've lived up here all your life and you've been a very progressive farmer over the years. As an early adopter to farming technology, do you see legislation like this helping northern producers stay competitive and continuing to innovate in the agriculture sector?

Mr. Frank Haasen: The simple answer is yes. I'm sure you want me to expound a little bit on that. It just goes back to the things all three of us have mentioned: Everybody needs scale; everybody wants their business to grow. You need to grow a business if you're going to take on another generation. Our own farm is in the third generation of existence, I guess, and that happens because every 20 years, we were able to double. So if you're a beef farmer in Thunder Bay or a beef farmer in Cochrane, the opportunity to grow needs to be there, and if the land next door is crown land and particularly if that crown land used to be in farming but has reverted back to the crown—which is often the case; it's not always the case, by any stretch of the imagination—and you're dealing with a ministry who doesn't have development of that land for agricultural purposes as a priority. It's a challenge that we think can be overcome—we're hoping it can be overcome—through this legislation.

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MPP Paul Vickers: And do you have any examples of innovation that you and your family have done over the years that would be more—

Mr. Frank Haasen: Well, we were the first farm in Cochrane district to put in tile drainage. I can talk about a lot of livestock things that we did innovatively. But tile drainage—as you know, Paul—is probably the number one thing to make any land anywhere in Ontario productive.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute.

Mr. Frank Haasen: But before you can tile it, you have to clear it. So that's the example I would use in this case.

MPP Paul Vickers: Sure. It's a good example, and I think nobody would argue with that, about tile drainage being the foundation, like you said, after clearing.

Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): With 40 seconds—does the government wish to use it? MPP Rosenberg, go ahead.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Angela, quick: I know that you're a councillor in the township of Admaston/Bromley—I don't think I knew that before, but—along with your role, how do you see Bill 109's overall goal strengthening Ontario's food independence and benefiting small and rural communities like yourself? And how do we continue to make the general public, through Bill 109, show how important agriculture is to Ontario?

Ms. Angela Field: I think Bill 109 has brought agriculture to the forefront in Ontario, and that in itself is making people more aware. For smaller municipalities, the more we are able to grow our agricultural areas—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That will have to conclude the government's time.

We'll move on to the official opposition. MPP Bourgouin.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Thank you to the presenters for being here. We have been hearing a lot about crown land, we've been hearing a lot about leases and we've also been hearing a lot about foreign ownership. That's the first question I want to ask, Jason, because you did mention it.

In this bill, there's a potential threat for foreign ownership on ag land. What safeguards should we put in place to ensure that these large landholding investment companies do not become a front for foreign ownership?

Mr. Jason Reid: I think that foreign ownership is a real risk to the crown land process, and I think that is one of the hesitations that the government and producers in general have had in going forward with this. I think that we really need to put a focus on trying to make sure that this is family-owned, family-operated northern Ontario community farms that are at the forefront of this. We need to have a screening process built into the program in order to make sure that it is northern Ontario families, northern Ontario farms, that are the first to benefit from this and are protected from inflated prices that could come from foreign ownership.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Let me ask you: What matters more, who owns the land or what regulations are in place to protect its use?

Mr. Jason Reid: I think the two have to work hand in hand. I think that local ownership of the land innately protects that land. Farmers are the first ones to see it when land is not protected, when land is not looked after and when land is polluted. The farms and the families that live on that land are the first to be affected. So I think we put a great deal of responsibility on those farms to be able to understand and know what is environmentally sustainable to be done.

But not taking away from the fact that there needs to be some ground rules and some regulation around what we're going to do and what we're going to protect on that land. Waterways, water courses, the water tables in general: That needs to be all taken into account.

So there needs to be regulation, but oversight by farmers on the ground with their families living there is probably your best protection of the land—having people living on it.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I want to get back to the crown land stuff and questions part of this bill. In fact, the north Clay Belt is in my riding, Mushkegowuk–James Bay. We welcome it, because I drive this highway and I see old farms that have been turned back to crown land, to the ministry, and there's huge potential. We've seen the potential has already started. There are some that are in development. But these are low-hanging fruit that the ministry could easily get done.

I come from forestry. My background is forestry, so I know how forestry works. I know how the MNR works. But what I'm hearing from you is the problem is that we have a ministry that doesn't understand agriculture. That needs to change. Because we're hearing all the right words from the ministries, but the actions are not there—unless they don't understand agriculture.

So I want to hear more from you. How do we move forward—especially these low-hanging fruits? Because forestry is not interested in these crown land parcels because there's no wood down there to be harvested. They're thinking more of the crown land that is already forestry; it has never been agricultural. That's where the timber is. I can understand why they're all so protective of that. But there are ways to work around that and find solutions to that, because I think there are solutions to be found. But the other ones that are there, I don't understand why this government—we heard an individual who spoke before you who has been waiting now for eight years. The ministry has the cheque in their hands and they haven't cashed it.

So please enlighten us: How can we move things forward? Because I think the government is there, but there seems to be a process that the ministries are not working. Please—if you can talk more about this and explain it more so we can all understand, so we can move forward in helping. Because we want the development in my riding. It's welcome, but things have to move. You can't wait eight years or 10 years. You mentioned a decade. Things have to change. I'd like to hear from all of you.

Who wants to go first? You can go first.

Ms. Angela Field: I would think that the process is in place, but there are no guardrails, there are no timelines, and I think those need to be adhered to.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute.

Ms. Angela Field: Perhaps if we got the Ministry of Agriculture involved, because they're aware of farmers and their requirements and that sort of thing—not that they should take over the crown land, but they need to be involved—to explain to the MNRF that, actually, this is a great application and maybe tighten it up. Timelines—you'll know within a year; you'll know within six months, whatever it is. If timelines have to be adhered to for us to apply, then timelines should be adhered to by the government looking after it as well.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Go ahead.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You've just got about 20 seconds.

Mr. Frank Haasen: I think the comments from the member said it all. What I can add to that is that different MNR offices seem to have different protocols. We need one set of rules. You do X, Y and Z, and things move ahead.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you.

We'll move on to the third party. MPP Hsu, go ahead.

Mr. Ted Hsu: There's a bill before the Legislature. It's called Bill 21, the food belt protection act, from MPPs Brady and Schreiner. It's a private members' bill. It talks about things like protecting farmland and discouraging foreign ownership of our farmland. I'm just wondering if you're familiar with the bill. Should we be voting for that bill when it comes before the Legislature?

Ms. Angela Field: I think I can take this one too.

I have not read it end to end, but I believe that this is something that should be voted for. Protect it at all costs, because once it's gone, once it's under a highway, once it's under a subdivision, it is not coming back.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thanks, Angela.

Would the other witnesses like to comment at all?

Mr. Frank Haasen: It's really important to maintain the farmland that we've got. Like Angela said, once it's gone it's not coming back. While we love the development of farmland in northern Ontario, we do recognize that southern Ontario has some of the finest land in the world.

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Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you very much. Thanks for your direction on Bill 21. It's supposed to come before the Legislature, so I'm looking forward to looking at it.

This is a question for Mr. Reid. On the same subject, in terms of preserving farmland, I understand that the Beef Farmers of Ontario have been working with other groups, like the Ontario Farmland Trust and maybe some conservation groups, about taking advantage of beef farming to help restore some of Ontario's grasslands. We only have about 3% of the original grasslands in Ontario, but pasture land is a way of helping to restore that.

I was wondering, Mr. Reid, if you were familiar with that and whether you could just educate me a little bit more about it. I heard about it just in a passing remark, but maybe you have some more to say about it.

Mr. Jason Reid: I think that cattle and livestock in general are greatly misunderstood in their value of the maintaining and development of grasslands. When you look back on the history and the way that the natural environment of North America worked, the grasslands were maintained by the buffalo, and that is the way that nature intended for things to operate.

Similarly to what we see, the devastation we're seeing across northern Ontario with forest fires right now—it's unfortunate that we lose infrastructure and these types of things. But maintaining the natural ecosystem through fire, through bison and through livestock raising—there's huge opportunities to work with nature here to be able to maintain the infrastructure and build up the natural soil, the fertility and the production.

There's land in this country that is not designed or intended to grow corn and tomatoes; it's designed for grass, cattle, sheep and productionable livestock. Where livestock belongs, we need to put livestock. We can create some of the best-quality protein in the world using some pretty low-quality land and be very, very productive, efficient and environmentally sustainable at the same time.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you very much. Staying with you, Mr. Reid, I just wanted to understand a bit better this exemption for personal consumption with regard to the licence fee, the $7 fee. There's an exemption for two head of cattle for personal consumption. I'm just wondering if you could lead me through how that process would work. Hopefully, it doesn't involve any paperwork; you just do a declaration. Do you know what that's going to look like for you?

Mr. Jason Reid: I'm unsure exactly how it will look, but the essence of that exemption is the intention that the farm family who raises these livestock—as a family, like we've talked before, they're part of the community. They're living on the land. They're doing the work. They're maintaining this land. And so, we give them an exemption for those two animals that an average family would be consuming for their own use, because in essence, the check-off dollars—fees that we're paying—are what is maintaining the industry. We're not marketing that beef. We're thanking those farm families for the work that they're doing in producing food for our country. It's a small token that's given to each farm family for the work that they do in producing food for the rest of the country and around the world.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thanks very much. With my remaining—do I have a lot of time?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute and 10 seconds.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'll just go to Mr. Haasen. What would members of the Cochrane Federation of Agriculture like to see in terms of improvements to infrastructure that would help their farm businesses?

Mr. Frank Haasen: You mean beyond—

Mr. Ted Hsu: Beyond what we've talked about. It's an open question for you. I just want to get a little local flavour.

Mr. Frank Haasen: I live in Timmins. I'm blessed with great infrastructure right here, not that it can't continue to be improved.

Probably the number one infrastructure item would be getting Highway 11 up to a standard that reflects the Trans-Canada Highway. Passing lanes—you know, you guys hear it over and over again, I'm sure, but that's the number one thing that comes to mind for me.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you very much. Would anybody else like to add any local infrastructure points? No? Well, that's fine.

Okay, that's it. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you so much.

We'll move to the government side. MPP Vickers, go ahead.

MPP Paul Vickers: My question is to all three of the participants here. Jason and Frank, you've been in the agriculture industry for quite a few years—Angela, not quite as long, I don't think. What do you think—if you had to paint a picture, what would the picture look like in 20 years? We've talked a lot about the lands. Let's not talk about the land anymore. What would the picture look like in northern Ontario or eastern Ontario, if you had a way of painting it right now?

Mr. Frank Haasen: You can start, Angela.

Ms. Angela Field: So ideally, I would see northern and eastern Ontario treated somewhat equally. We need processing. Across the board, all commodities, we need processing facilities. We need the infrastructure to move that product, whatever it may be. So in 20 years, we have enough capacity, we have enough buildings, we have enough operations that farmers don't have to go hours and hours away for their grain, for their meat, for their milk.

Our milk in Renfrew county used to be sent to Sudbury, then the Sudbury processing plants got shut down. Now, it's sent to Winchester. When Winchester is overfull or otherwise, it gets to Toronto. Everything is getting less and less spread out. We need to look at more local processing and the infrastructure to get it there. That's the ideal.

Mr. Frank Haasen: My comments will be a little different 20 years from now. I have seen—you're right, Paul, I've been at this game a long time. I'm 71. I was two going on three when we moved to the farm, so we'll do the math that way.

But I've got a very optimistic view of what's going to happen in northern Ontario, and that's been demonstrated in the last 15 years by our Mennonite friends that have moved up from Mount Forest and from the Kitchener-Waterloo area. They're doing a wonderful, wonderful job in Black River-Matheson and Iroquois Falls. They've shown what the potential—I take pride in that our farm showed what the potential was in northern Ontario. These guys came up. They started growing corn, something that I thought was just stupid. And I've told them. I said, "I have been here a long time. I know what I'm doing." Well, those guys came up and they showed us they know what they're doing. They showed us the potential in northern Ontario.

So 20 years from now, Paul, there's going to be lots of corn. There's going to be lots of beans. There's going to continue to be canola. There's going to be more dairy farms because there's going to continue to be pressure on southern Ontario. In spite of all the efforts of government and the federation of agriculture, there's going to be less land in southern Ontario to farm on if we're going to grow our population in Ontario, which all of us want to happen. So there's going to—yes, 20 years from now, it's going to be wall-to-wall cows, canola, corn, beans. It's going to be wonderful.

MPP Paul Vickers: Jason, what about you?

Mr. Jason Reid: Yes, I would agree with both of the last two. I am an eternal optimist. I came from southern Ontario 24 years ago, moved to Thunder Bay, started farming.

The opportunities here in northern Ontario, I think, for young farmers to start are unlike anywhere else, pretty well, in Canada. I believe that our community spirit will drive growth.

I totally agree that infrastructure and processing are some of our greatest hurdles, but I also see more and more collaboration between—like we have talked—the forestry and mining industries as well as our First Nations communities. I think that, as we move forward with more collaboration, we can help each other and feed off of each other's growth. The growth of agriculture can support northern communities. The growth of agriculture can be supported by the mining growth in the mining industry. We can really thrive together, I think. I see more and more collaboration as we move forward, and I really am optimistic about how we can move this industry or this economy—as a whole northern economy—forward together, really building off of the momentum of each other.

MPP Paul Vickers: Thank you very much. You all sound positive.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Pinsonneault, you have, for question and answer, a minute and 35 seconds.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: My question is for Frank. In your comments, you talked about being the first farm to tile. And obviously, you've seen the potential in northern Ontario. I loved hearing all of you talk about how you believe the future is bright up here and I think we tend to agree with you.

1350

How do you see legislation like this helping northern producers stay competitive and continue to innovate, just as you have throughout your 69 years?

Mr. Frank Haasen: I don't want to sound like a broken record, but I'm going to reiterate the crown land item. Certainly from the Cochrane federation standpoint, if this bill did one thing for northern Ontario, if it made crown land more readily accessible, that would be my number one thing.

Going back to the other elements of the bill, I should have familiarized myself more with them, because my vets talked almost endlessly about the changes to the vet portion of the bill—am I describing that correctly? That's important because northern Ontario will never become Oxford county. We'll continue to be isolated, we'll continue to have to deal with long distances and making these services from veterinarians and others more easily accessible.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you. That will be the end of the government's time.

We'll move on to the official opposition. MPP Bourgouin, go ahead.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: One of the MPPs asked you a question about infrastructure and roads. This is something we live with in northern Ontario—continuous road closures. I asked this question to other presenters. I'd like to hear from you because this is right across the north, so it goes all the way to also you, Jason, all the way to Thunder Bay. How does that affect your business and what do we need to do? Because it's all nice that we developed this, but if we don't have the infrastructure to support it also, we're still behind the black ball, if I can use that term. We need better infrastructure, we need to make sure that our roads are there to support the industry—mining, forestry, agriculture and the list goes on.

So I'd like to hear from all of you: How important are these roads to your businesses, keeping them open, and making sure that your products can be delivered? Because some of you have to go far for being processed—like, I'm hearing from you—far for processing. If your animals are stuck in the middle of nowhere at minus 40, you might lose animals, because sometimes I have seen two-day, three-day road closures. Once you're stuck, you can't move.

I'd like to hear from each and every one of you how important these highways affect—even though this bill talks about agriculture—but it is important. The roads are important to your business—whoever wants to start first.

Mr. Frank Haasen: If I may start, Mr. Chair.

In the dairy business, which—I mean, every dairy farmer is also a beef farmer, but our primary business is milk. Every tank load of milk in northern Ontario is going to get on Highway 17 or 11. I can't give you the exact numbers, but I could get that for the committee, if they're interested—that there were tank loads of milk that were heading down Highway 11 from Thunder Bay that never were able to get to the dairies because of transportation, and every tank load of milk is 40-some-thousand litres of milk. The numbers are significant, but I don't want to quote them here because I don't have them. Nevertheless, that would be number one—Highway 11 winter closures—the biggest impact I'm aware of to the dairy industry.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Number one—you said number one. Can you repeat the last part you said?

Mr. Frank Haasen: For the dairy industry, these are truckloads of milk that don't make it to the processer because the highway is closed.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: That's the number one problem. Okay.

Go ahead.

Mr. Jason Reid: Yes. If it's okay, I would like to build on what Frank said there. I think that the infrastructure building and expansion like we talked about earlier—four-laning, passing lanes, building up that infrastructure on that highway to connect us—is a very, very important long-term goal. In the interim, we need better maintenance of the infrastructure that we have. Like Frank said, winter road maintenance is a huge issue.

Here in Thunder Bay, we have very little feed in storage here. Like was mentioned, the milk that leaves the area—most of our feed is coming into the area from Winnipeg. If that road closes—our industry here relies on four or five trucks a week bringing feed in here, and we just don't have the capacity without that highway open. We have to have that highway open. Three or four days of that road closure can take the agriculture industry in Thunder Bay a couple of weeks to recover, adding extra trucks on the road to be able to make up for those down days, because of that just-in-time delivery system that we have somewhat moved to here. We need that highway open, we need it maintained and we need more investment in four-laning and passing and better training for some of these freight and other drivers that are on the road, to make sure they understand just what it is you're getting into when you drive on Highway 11 in January and March.

Ms. Angela Field: I would say, to add or finish, that the Trans-Canada Highway in northern Ontario isn't—it's closed far too often. Our milk is picked up every second day, so just do the math there. It's multiple tankers every time there's a snowstorm. Where does the milk go? It has to be dumped, because they have a finite timeline to get it there. If you're looking at animals—any kind of livestock that is stuck on a highway in a tractor-trailer longer than they are supposed to be, you're going to have deadstock—not all of it; some of them will survive. But when you're talking about beef farmers in particular, if those animals aren't eating—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Ms. Angela Field: —then they're actually losing weight because they're living off their stocks or their fat stores. So it's also, if they do make it to the processing plant, that farmer has also lost money because the carcass is going to be lighter.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: And there's no compensation for you when that happens?

Ms. Angela Field: There is no compensation for the beef producers. Dairy farmers are a little bit different: They have a pool that they draw from. So if Frank's milk doesn't get picked up, or if it gets picked up but dumped, he's still going to get his paycheque. It's kind of an assurance thing.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay.

Mr. Frank Haasen: We share the loss.

Ms. Angela Field: The entire dairy industry in the province of Ontario shares the loss for the Trans-Canada Highway that is not in northern Ontario.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: How much is worth one beef? I'm curious.

Mr. Jason Reid: That depends on what beef you're talking about. We're having weaned calves now selling for in the ballpark of $6 to $7 a pound. In an average animal, depending on whether you're weaned calves or finished beef, you're between 600 and 1,800 pounds. So it's an open question that's really tough to put a pinpoint on, but—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That concludes our time for this round. I want to thank all the presenters for being here.

With that, I will ask our next round of presenters—that's William Orford, James Rogers and Selina Rogers—to come forward.

But thank you so much to our presenters today, Angela, Frank and Jason, for your preparation, for your presentations. It's been a meaningful contribution to this legislation.

MR. WILLIAM ORFORD
MR. JIM ROGERS
MS. SELINA ROGERS

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): I will now call on William Orford. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Failure of sound system.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): William, we're not able to hear you, so we'll have to just pause as we try to figure this out.

Interjection.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): William, we see the "mute" symbol on your Zoom there. Okay. I think you're unmuted now. Go ahead.

Mr. William Orford: Yes, I'm unmuted. Thank you.

Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. My name is William Orford. I farm in Manitoulin Island in northern Ontario. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

This is on crown land access: Northern Ontario has tremendous agricultural potential, but the potential will only be realized if farmers can access crown land in a fair, transparent and predictable way.

1400

Access to crown land could support many different types of agriculture: for example, beef cattle operations through pasture and forage production, crop production in areas like the Clay Belt and maple syrup production in areas with healthy hardwood forest. An important thing to note is that farmers do not generate returns overnight and that access to crown land in a timely and predictable manner will be the key to increasing agricultural production in northern Ontario.

In regard to the current application process to obtain access to crown land for agriculture, it has been described by farmers as unclear, inconsistent and unpredictable. Farmers often hear different answers depending on which Ministry of Natural Resources field office they're dealing with. Currently, the requirements differ, timelines differ and expectations differ. In some areas, applications move, while in other areas, applications remain unresolved for many years.

For example, the application process in one area lasted for more than 14 years with no decision being made. The lengthy timeline and indecision by the ministry and municipalities led the farmer to abandon the process altogether. It is a situation like this that makes the current crown land system unpredictable.

Also, the application process to access crown land should have considerations for agriculture. The process would provide the same environmental stewardship and public accountability but in a way that is more practical, efficient and workable for farmers. Most farms in northern Ontario are family-owned businesses. There are no teams of consultants or regulatory specialists. Every dollar that the farmer spends on the application process is a dollar that is not going to be invested into farming operations. That doesn't mean lowering environmental standards; it means creating a process that is relative to the size and nature of the farming operation.

We do not expect every application to be approved. We understand that there are environmental values, Indigenous interests and other public priorities that must be respected. But what we do expect is a process that is transparent, accountable and consistent across all northern Ontario.

Things that all farmers need to know when applying to access crown land:

(1) what crown land may be available for agriculture;

(2) how to apply;

(3) tenure length options available, including lease or purchase and the rates for each;

(4) how decisions will be made and by who; and

(5) how long the process should reasonably take.

This also means that the rules should not change between locations or because an application crosses into another MNR district. There also needs to be better coordination between the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ministry of Agriculture and the municipalities involved. Decisions about farmland need to include people who understand farming and what it actually takes to develop agricultural land. Northern Ontario has the ability to produce more food, strengthen local economies and attract the next generation of farmers.

With this in mind, as we, as farmers, feel that there is a need to improve the application process to access crown land to expand agriculture in northern Ontario, the government needs to develop a transparent process that provides consistent rules, consistent decision-making processes, reasonable timelines and the ability to secure long-term access to crown land.

Thank you very much for your time.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very much.

Next up, we have James Rogers. You'll have seven minutes. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Mr. Jim Rogers: My name is Jim Rogers from Kapuskasing and I'm thankful for the opportunity to present here to you all this afternoon. I had time—I read over the bill a bit. I didn't understand everything but, anyway, I read it. I want to talk a little bit about the part on foreign investment and some of the conversation about developing northern Ontario.

I think foreign investment is detrimental to agriculture, and also uncontrolled—even Canadian—corporate equity investments. In our area, we have 250,000 acres of land that was owned by the mill. They disposed of it a couple of years ago, and so now it's not even available for forestry or agriculture. So those are some concerns I have. If there are no controls, we could end up seeing—like down in the Amazon, where people just do whatever they want.

No doubt, though, capital is required to develop this land. We've been in the Kapuskasing area now for nine years and it costs a fortune to bring that land from bushland to growing crops, but it's a rewarding process. So I believe there needs to be a mechanism so that investment can be put into the land and it be developed.

One other thing is building the communities. I think that's really important, as we're looking at it, because strong communities are important for the fabric of the area. If you have people that are living in the community—their kids are going to school, they're spending money on groceries etc.—I think that's a really important aspect that needs to be looked at, and I believe, with planning, we can see that happen. I know when we first moved to the area, a lot of land was purchased by speculators, and once the speculators buy it, it's really hard to get it back. Since COVID, a lot of land was bought by people that just want a place to go and hide, whether they're from Toronto or from another part of the world.

For us, it's really hard to grow our farm because the land access just isn't there. We started trying to buy crown land nine years ago and I don't think we're any further in the process now than we were nine years ago. So it becomes sort of a hopeless game, right? My kids are in their twenties now, but if this goes on for another 10 years, they're going to be in their thirties. They're going to have moved on to other careers, other businesses. Our oldest son is out west, farming there now, because there just isn't the opportunity to grow in northern Ontario. So access to crown land is critical and vital if we want to see that sector grow.

I think it's important to support the model of a family farm business. If we don't support that model, then I think it comes to where there's that speculative model, sort of like the Amazon, where companies are buying up the land to clear it and hopefully to gain appreciation.

If we all work together, it's possible to get the capital, do the investment and grow the agricultural economy in northern Ontario. I think agriculture could be an equalizing economic force in northern Ontario also. With the forestry suffering right now, agriculture could buffer that because it's something where you spend money every year to grow a crop. Whether we as farmers make money or not, we go and seed a crop next year. It's just the nature of our business, because we just do it every year. If we grew a million acres of cash crop, which is what I do, it would generate about $750 million of revenue each year. Like I say, every year, you just go out and plant and do it over and over.

I look forward to that happening, but it's not going to happen unless the government moves forward with a plan to release some of that land to agriculture. Until some land is released, I don't see any future in agriculture in the north.

Like I say, we've been trying for nine years. We can't get land. We're just about done clearing the land that we have bought, and it's far short of what it takes to support our family. At some point, we're going to have to assess whether it makes sense or not. That's all.

1410

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Okay. Thank you very, very much.

Next, Selina Rogers. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Ms. Selina Rogers: My name is Selina Rogers. I am the wife to Jim. We started this journey back in 2015 when we took a couple of trips into northern Ontario, looking from Dryden to New Liskeard. My perspective is going to come, probably, from a mom's perspective and the one who does all the applications.

At that time, in 2015, our kids were seven, nine, 10 and 11 years old. In 2016, we purchased two lots and our kids pooled some of their money and they bought themselves a lot as well. In 2017, in August, is when we submitted our first application into MNR. Slow movement—I'll get into that, if time permits, a little bit later. August of 2018, we moved to the experimental farm, and September of 2025, we completed paying that off, and so it's fully ours.

Through our journey, we've been here demonstrating how agriculture can happen, what you can grow—it was interesting, the comment about corn, that it can't be grown—and just showing people what can happen but being quiet about it.

Today, our kids are now 20, 22, 23 and 24. Unfortunately, our oldest didn't see that there was going to be an opportunity in northern Ontario. While we are close to having, as Jim said, the acres that we have purchased cleared, that is enough to support ourselves. It is not enough for the next generation to come in. We need a bit more for ourselves to continue growing and improving the land and adding infrastructure, because there's not very much up there.

The crown land, the foreign ownership potentials—there's great news in the bill to protect the next generation coming up. I hope that we can get to the point where our kids can say, "Yes, I'm going to raise my family here, because it's not 20 years; it's not 30 years; it's 50 years." If they see that there's a potential that agriculture is going to be a key player in these communities, then there's going to be a future that we're going to have processing come in.

Right now, the amount of money that they have to put into processing to bring in the crush plants, to bring in elevators up to deal with the grain, to package it and to take it to Robin Hood and make our flours etc.—they want to see that we have 50 years', 100 years' planning. When we sit at our table, we're planning not for next year, but five years, 10 years, 50 years. By that point, we probably will not be here, but our kids will, then. It's the next thing.

We refer to agriculture as a workhorse. It doesn't matter what's going on in the world. It doesn't matter if there's a war, if there's a famine somewhere. Farmers still go out and plant. They still spend that money every year.

Protecting the crown land even from, as Jim had brought out, Canadian investors, speculators: It is important to protect this land even from them because, even last year, I was asked, "When are you guys leaving? When are you moving? The other guys have left." In 2017, when we started clearing, there was also another area that had clearing happening as well. They've had, I believe—I don't know if it's two, but I do believe it's three different farmers go through to look after that. That was an equity type of project that was going on there. They don't have skin in the game. I have skin, I have sweat and I have tears in the land that I clear. You walk; you have memories on every piece of dirt that you see there: where you got stuck, where you hit a stump and you fell off the seat. Sometimes you should wear a seat belt. But protecting this is important to the communities.

I've become involved in my community with many different things, and they don't want to see a suitcase farmer. We're asking the communities to change their landscape, to change what they're seeing. We need the farmers who actually live there, the ones that are going to go to the hockey games. They're not coming in for planting season and going back south—coming in, taking the crop off and going back south. The investment and the money are not staying in our communities.

Myself, I've become involved with our garden, and we do a thing in the community. Over 600 people in Kapuskasing come and walk through our corn maze in the dark, and 25% of the gross proceeds go back into the community. That's just shy of 10% of our community having involvement back into our farm, being involved with the summer camp kids coming and just seeing what different things are.

I'm involved with the vet recruitment. We're losing our vet at the end of August, and so we have a plan creating a co-op. Hopefully we'll have a model for other communities. So the other part of the bill, the veterinarians—agriculture works with so many different areas within the economy in our communities.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Ms. Selina Rogers: Thank you. I'm pretty close to wrapping up.

I do have some passion with this, seeing the next generation developing our communities and just being a stable factor for everyone else. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very much. I want to thank each and every one of the presenters for their presentations.

We'll begin the questions. We'll start with the government side. I see MPP Pinsonneault. Go ahead.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thanks to the presenters for being here today and taking time out of your schedule.

I guess my question is for Selina and Jim. You've expressed the challenges in acquiring crown land—that has been a common theme today—and your support for the farm protection from international ownership, and the fact that one child has left to go out west farming for bigger opportunities. What has it meant for your family's operation to have both provincial funding support and now legislation attention focused on northern Ontario's agriculture potential?

Mr. Jim Rogers: We've participated in the tile drainage program, and that's integral to clearing the land, because it greatly assists in the costs associated with clearing, tiling and bringing it into production.

We did get some support when we initially moved from Saskatchewan to Kap from—NOFIA, right?

Ms. Selina Rogers: NOHFC.

Mr. Jim Rogers: NOHFC, okay—which helped us build some infrastructure like grain bins and that kind of thing, and that's helped a lot.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Okay. It will be nice to see if we can get somewhere here with—well, we know the international ownership—I think that is going to definitely work in your favour, and hopefully you can lure your child back if you can show there is some potential here for years to come. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Rosenberg, go ahead.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question is for Bill. Good afternoon, Bill. How are you doing?

Mr. William Orford: Oh, I'm doing great, Bill.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: I know you spent a long part of your career in the dairy operation, and your family also, and so you understand what it takes to establish and sustain a farm in northern Ontario. Bill 109 introduces the Farmland Security Act to keep Ontario farmland accessible for local and Canadian producers, rather than foreign ownership. From your perspective, how important is legislation like this that protects Ontario farmland?

Mr. William Orford: It's very important, because you've got to think—it's like Jim and Selina said: It's the next generation. You're building whatever it is, the dairy industry or crop. You've got to have guidelines and parameters that will let you expand as a family farm and not have to compete with foreign investor dollars. Hopefully that will answer your question.

1420

MPP Bill Rosenberg: I've just got one quick follow-up question, Bill. Looking back on your years of experience, what would you like to see included in the future policy to continue supporting agriculture in northern Ontario?

Mr. William Orford: To keep the next generation in the farming community—my daughter is one of them that left and she'll never be back. We had to make that harsh decision. It's just a case where that next generation is very important to me to stay on the farm, if possible.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Okay, thanks, Bill.

Mr. William Orford: You're welcome.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Any remaining questions from the government side? MPP Vickers, go ahead.

MPP Paul Vickers: This question is for Jim and Selina. You guys made the move from Saskatchewan to northern Ontario, and you've seen the hardships about making the move from one province to the other. Is there anything that you think Saskatchewan does better that would help protect Ontario farmland from foreign ownership? Well maybe not Saskatchewan—we've heard a little bit about Alberta here today, also. So do you guys know much about what they do out there?

Mr. Jim Rogers: Yes, so when we farmed in Saskatchewan, we rented a lot of what we farmed, and so it was investors that were owning it. Some of them were foreigners, and for whatever reason, there are loopholes and they would find their way around it.

The one guy in particular that we rented from was from Ireland, and he found a way through the system to own it. I know he wasn't supposed to, but—yes.

So I think when we're talking about this, it's critical to figure out what loopholes people will take advantage of and try to close them up before.

The reason we moved to northern Ontario was we could afford the land, and we wanted to get away from renting because it was just digging ourselves a hole. We never built any equity doing that.

You know, we had a large farm. Before we moved, we were farming about 17,000 acres. In Kap, now, we have 2,000 acres—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. Jim Rogers: —but we're building equity for ourselves, and our kids will be able to use that equity to farm in the future to keep growing.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: If you ever have suggestions, you know we'd be more than happy to listen to them and to take your advice—the ways to help close those loopholes. I think a lot of the time, we don't understand that sort of thing. I think it would be important that if you have suggestions—or even yourself, Bill, if you have suggestions—to make sure you forward them on to government.

Hopefully we can get the legislation right the first time, and there isn't a need to close up the loopholes.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): About 20 seconds left.

Mr. Jim Rogers: I think that one of the things is that the guy that we were renting from found a way to start a corporation or something in Saskatchewan, and using somebody else's name—I'm not 100% sure what he did, but he was finding a way to—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That will end the government's time.

We will move on to the official opposition. MPP Bourgouin, go ahead.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: James and Selina, since you've started, now everybody knows your farm. I've got families; my grandkids are going—you're well known in the community. You've taken it to a whole new level that nobody thought—we saw what it was before, and now, what you have. So thank you for that.

You talked about foreign ownership and speculators. What safeguards should we put in place to ensure that large land-holding investment companies do not become fronts for foreign ownership?

Ms. Selina Rogers: Your office is a tractor. You know, whoever is going to be owning the land, you actually are sitting in a tractor or on a combine. You've got dirt under your fingernails. Like, I clean my nails up pretty good, but no—you actually are doing work.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: But as a government, what protections should we be putting in to protect, so that we don't fall into that trap of foreign investors?

Mr. Jim Rogers: I think it's a tough thing because in my farming career, the system that was available in Saskatchewan, I needed the investors to buy the land so I could rent it. I made some money. It was a tough way to do business, but it allowed me to build a little bit of equity to come to Ontario and actually buy the land here. I spend some time thinking about it because I know a lot of younger people won't have the capital necessary, and I don't have a solution; I'll be honest. But if there's a way to make it so it's more like a bank financing so that the person that's making the decisions is the one that's on the land—but I know capitalism is tough to sort through that, because—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: There are some provinces that do protect more than others, and that could be put into law.

But I want to get back to crown land, because that's something I really know about. I come from the forest industry, so I know what it is. There's lots of land available. As you know, on Highway 11, we see these old farms and it's overgrown now, but it's nothing that forestry wants. These are potential low-hanging fruits. And you said now, nine years that you've been waiting and working with MNR to buy land, and yet you're still in a stalemate? Or what are the reasons they've given you? Not so that we—because I want to go back on this when I get back home, because I'm really curious now as to what's going on.

Ms. Selina Rogers: I have a file folder. But they will lease to us.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: They will lease to you, but they won't sell.

Ms. Selina Rogers: They will lease—an LUP and then lease—that is pretty vague. They don't know what it is. As you've heard before, the ministries—it's not consistent from one office to another. I ask questions. For example, the misunderstanding—we'll just use financing—is, in other industries, you can use the crown land or the lease with the crown as backing for your financing; while it is true for agriculture, it is not an industry practice. We've had several different account managers where we've reached out to and say, "Hey, what is this policy?" They say, "No, we don't do that, but it is policy there." But they don't do it. So the ministry does not understand agriculture, and they need some people that understand agriculture.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: So we've got Bill 109 here saying that, "Oh, this needs to happen," and then you have another ministry that doesn't know—

Ms. Selina Rogers: What they're doing.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin:—probably what Bill 109—because they don't speak among themselves, and it seems to be the hurdle. This is what we've been hearing all day, that their ministry, MNR, seems to be the problem, that they don't understand agriculture, and how do we move forward? Because we know that land should be sold because there's huge potential, in my riding, in fact, and it's welcome; we're supporting this bill. But there needs to be—I guess there's somewhere that MNR is not understanding what this other ministry, agriculture or northern development, is talking about, because we heard Minister Pirie talk very clearly that there's a huge potential. We need to develop, though, and then this is the future for northern Ontario. Well, I guess they're not speaking, so we need to change that—and for your support, because that is the difference between your family staying and growing your business.

Ms. Selina Rogers: Yes.

Mr. Jim Rogers: I want to mention about leasing the land, because that's the last thing that they said we could do, but it was quite vague. But it makes no sense, because 100 acres—you put $500 an acre into that land—or I mean $5,000, not $500. It's $5,000 an acre you put in to clear it and tile it and everything, and then you can rent it back. That makes no sense: 100 acres, $500,000 and then you don't own it and then you've got to rent it back. That's one thing that has stopped us from even proceeding on the lease part.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: So in nine years, you haven't had an inch of success, or they've just been stonewalling you and not giving you the opportunity to move, or they're just saying, "No, you need this more paperwork, you need more"—

Mr. Jim Rogers: We could lease it.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: You can lease it. So, LUP, that's their land use permit—

Mr. Jim Rogers: So, 100 acres, and we could spend $500,000 and then lease it.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: That's the only option they've given you?

Mr. Jim Rogers: Yes.

Ms. Selina Rogers: We should have coffee.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Yes, we will.

Okay, so just getting back, I'd like to touch on the—because we've been hearing a lot about vets, and how does that affect your business, the shortage of vets? Especially for big animals, because we're going to lose a vet in Kapuskasing, as you know, which hurts everybody. I'd like to hear from you, if you don't mind, on this, because this is a huge issue in our riding—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That concludes the official opposition's time this round. There will be a second round.

We'll move on to the recognized third party. MPP Hsu, the floor is yours.

1430

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'd like to first come to Jim Rogers to ask about your experience in Saskatchewan with this foreign landlord that found a loophole. The reason why I want to come back to this is that there is a question of how easy it will be to trace the ultimate owner of some corporation, some purchaser of the land. This was amplified because there was a technical briefing for journalists for Bill 109 and one of the journalists said, "How much farmland is owned by foreigners right now?" And the ministry said, "Well, we don't know." It probably would take them some time to figure out, but they didn't know the answer because it probably wasn't easy to figure out at the beginning. And in Canada, we have had this history that has only been corrected recently—we have had this history of being a country where it's hard to trace the ultimate owners of something.

I know that you have tried to say a little bit about how this particular foreign owner got to own this land in Saskatchewan that you were renting. I'm not asking you to tell us how they did it because, clearly, it's complicated and difficult to figure out. But do you have an idea of how the government of Ontario could find out about that example to make sure that whatever regulations we put forward covers cases like that? Who would you go to, to find out how that happened?

Mr. Jim Rogers: Yes, that's something I don't have too many ideas on because it's a complicated process these guys go through and they don't necessarily publish it. I know he's dealing with lawyers. The best I can understand was his name wasn't attached to the corporation or the money, but I don't know how that works.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Do you think the Ministry of Agriculture in Saskatchewan would—somebody there would know about that or maybe there are court records or something that the government of Ontario should have a look at before putting forward our regulations?

Mr. Jim Rogers: I can't really speak to that because—

Mr. Ted Hsu: Oh, it's fine. I don't mean to put you on the spot. I just want to know if maybe there is something we can learn and use here.

Mr. Jim Rogers: I just know I rented it from him. I went and signed the lease at his place in Ireland, so I wrote the trip off—

Mr. Ted Hsu: Oh, so it was pretty clear that they were from Ireland.

Mr. Jim Rogers: Oh, yes. It was clear, but how he got around the rules and regulations, I don't know.

Mr. Ted Hsu: And I just wanted to learn a little bit more about your son who went to Alberta. What was the process? Did he get recruited? Did he look all across the country and say, "Oh, there's an opportunity in Alberta?" How did that happen? What was the thought process?

Mr. Jim Rogers: Well, we still have a farm out there: my dad's land in Saskatchewan. He decided to go back there because there's no opportunity to grow here. We kept that when we moved, and I'm glad we did, because we've grown probably at about 25% of the pace we had hoped to when we initially moved.

Mr. Ted Hsu: And a final question for Mr. Orford: You're on Manitoulin Island. I just wanted to understand and invite you to tell us, is there anything special or particular about Manitoulin Island when it comes to access to crown land for farming? Are there any particular things that you'd like the committee to keep in mind that are very local to you in Manitoulin Island? We have heard other witnesses, many other witnesses, talk about access to crown land, and I was just wondering if there was anything particular to Manitoulin Island that you want to leave us with.

Mr. William Orford: Thank you for the opportunity and the question. Yes, the Manitoulin Island is very unique: 99% or more is privately owned land—very little crown land except for around some provincial parks. I do not have the number of acres—I've heard different numbers. But one thing I do like about the Manitoulin is its privately owned land.

To answer some of your other questions of when I made my statement, I know I've got a family member there that's been trying to access crown land for over 14 years for maple syrup production.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute left.

Mr. William Orford: He's abandoned that because he cannot get anywhere between the MNRF and the municipality. The municipality needs to have better guidelines and know what their responsibilities are, along with the MNRF especially releasing land that he's been working on that is landlocked by him.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you very much for that story.

Mr. William Orford: Thank you. I appreciate it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You have 20 seconds. All right, well, thank you, you two.

We'll move on to the government side, starting with MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question is for Bill again. Bill, maybe you can just expand and let everyone know about the beef check-off—you know, how important that was for the beef farmers. It doesn't affect the end-user price. It was a loophole that got closed for the beef farmers. And we've talked over the last few months about the large-animal vets and stuff, and how the vet techs are being allowed to do a little more outside of the vet facilities—and about the current Learn and Stay program, if you know about the Learn and Stay program for the vets.

Mr. William Orford: Going back to your first question on the beef check-off: That increase, I think, was great. It puts more money back into education and other avenues.

Now, the vet side of things: I'm personally involved with that. Like you said, you and I have had conversations. We here, on the Manitoulin—our vet has basically retired, and we're in the process of trying to recruit a large-animal vet. I've got a financial institution that is willing to put some money up towards a graduate. We've just got to work out some of the details. But I really feel that OVC, which is the Ontario vet college, has not been a very big help for releasing names of potential large-animal vets. That's my biggest complaint.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: I've never known you to complain, Bill, over my time that I've known you.

Mr. William Orford: Thank you for that.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: We're moving forward, so hopefully we can get some large-animal vets in the area because we know it is an issue.

Mr. William Orford: Yes, it is.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Next: MPP Pinsonneault, go ahead.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: This question is for Bill as well. Having spent your career farming and serving on committees right across Manitoulin Island, how do you see nonpayment protections in this bill benefiting the producers in your region?

Mr. William Orford: I have to be honest; I am not up on that information. So I can't honestly give you a proper answer. I apologize.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Okay. I guess I'll pass that on to the other two.

Mr. Jim Rogers: That part of the bill—I don't really understand 100% what's in it, but I know a lot when it comes to agriculture out west. The bigger companies, you have protections. We find in some of the smaller companies, there's no protection, so if they go bankrupt, then we just lose our money. When we moved out here, we tried to look for the most reputable companies to sell product to and protect ourselves that way.

1440

So, like I say, what's in the bill 100%, I'm not sure, but any protection for payment is a good thing.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: All right. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Vickers, go ahead.

MPP Paul Vickers: This question is for Jim and Selina. Over the years—I guess I don't quite exactly remember how many years you've been here in Ontario. It's been 10, 10-plus?

Mr. Jim Rogers: About nine years.

MPP Paul Vickers: So in the future, with the change in climate, and the area actually gaining a little bit of heat units and stuff, and the frost-free times in between the beginning frost and the end frost kind of expanding, do you think there's an opportunity for other crops to come into Ontario? I'm assuming you would have maybe grown lentils out in the west, maybe some of the pulse crops. I see Selina smiling. Is there any future for those kinds of crops to actually come into northern Ontario?

Mr. Jim Rogers: Yes, for sure. The climate here at Kapuskasing is quite similar to where we come from in Saskatchewan. We were in central Saskatchewan, North Battleford area, for anybody that's been there, so we're growing canola, wheat, oats, barley. We can grow that kind of thing in Kap.

We've tried soybeans and—ehh. But with climate change, if it's happening like they say, for sure we will be growing soybeans at some point in the future. The technology that we have nowadays, the tile drainage is a big help. It gives us an extra couple of weeks of the season. That's huge.

And of course, the crops, they keep breeding them to work better and better in different climates. Our neighbours, they grow some peas. Peas are, I guess, doing okay.

Some of these crops, though, marketing is the problem. There's just not a big enough market. I think as the north has opened up, as we have more acres, we can then look at some of these other crops because then you can develop the market because you can grow enough. Agriculture is one of those things—modern agriculture—where you have to have lots of volume to make it work.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thirty seconds.

MPP Paul Vickers: Just from my own personal view, if you can grow a good crop of canola up there in Kapuskasing, I wouldn't worry about soybeans because—

Mr. Jim Rogers: Yes, for sure.

MPP Paul Vickers: —a good crop of canola is—although the market is slipping these last few days. It's unfortunate. Anyway.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you. That will conclude the government side.

We'll move to the official opposition. MPP Bourgouin, go ahead.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Back to James and Selina: You understand that the crown land for agriculture is not in Bill 109. We've been hearing a lot about crown land because people up north want access to crown land, which makes sense, to be honest with you, especially the ones that were old farms and returned. But if crown land is not part of Bill

109, do you see any future for northern agriculture in northern Ontario?

Mr. Jim Rogers: Without crown land being—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Purchased.

Mr. Jim Rogers: —purchased, there's no future besides what you see in northern Ontario.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay. And I'm curious: The yield, is it the same in Kap as back where you were from in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Jim Rogers: There are places in Saskatchewan that will probably do better, but where we were farming—we're getting probably 10% better here than we were back at our farm in Saskatchewan.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay.

I want to get back to the vets because I know we were cut off and I know it's very important for a lot of people in the region. We heard a lot about the vets here also this morning for northern Ontario, the shortage, so I'd like to hear from you. What needs to happen?

Ms. Selina Rogers: With the vets, I headed up the veterinary recruitment retention committee for Kapuskasing and area. We did have livestock, and we have let it go because when you need it, you needed it yesterday. For that reason, we disposed of our animals.

But still, veterinary care is so important, because it's going into the human food chain. There are a lot of backyard deals going on, just because they have no access to veterinarians to look after their animals. So having care and working with this act and the universities and colleges in Thunder Bay—things are happening. We need a place for these students to actually go to. A part of what our committee is doing—and hopefully we have a template for other communities—is to do mentorship, actual mentorship, and get them into our communities to look after these animals.

We're looking at the co-op model in taking over the existing clinic so that the veterinary care—the building, the equipment, everything—stays there. You have a veterinarian as a director, and with the vet techs being able to do more, that's opening up more care for the pets and the livestock.

Our pets can carry diseases so much more transporting back and forth from south to north. There are diseases that have not gotten into our northern communities, but they're coming, and that can impact our human population as well. I forget what it's named. But with two veterinarians sitting on our committee that are going to be a part of this co-op model for Kapuskasing, they share a lot of stuff with us: what is possible, what is not, what we need to be watching for. Just having more care is very important.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: We asked a question to other presenters. We know there's a veterinarian school in Thunder Bay, and also down south. Would it make sense to have one in northeastern Ontario, a small campus or something that could help the situation here in our region?

Ms. Selina Rogers: If the opportunity was presented and it could be done, I think it would be a good thing, because it would keep more locals more local, rather than them going to Australia, which—they'll be back soon.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I know. She came to my office, and she went because there was no seat available. I was blown away. She had great marks, but it didn't qualify her, because even though her marks were in the 90s, she still couldn't get one of the seats in Thunder Bay. The government opened more, but one presenter said even though we have these seats, it won't even cover the retirees, so we need to be more aggressive on that particular file.

The last subject I want to talk to is highways. How much are highway closures affecting your business? Because you probably were surprised with, in the last nine years you've been here, how many highways and how many times our roads close. Even now, it's for precautionary measures. How much does that affect your business?

You can answer that also if you don't mind, William. How much do highway closures affect your business?

Mr. Jim Rogers: If we're bringing product in or taking it out, of course, a truck sitting on the road is no good. We've starting logging. That's different than agriculture, and that's really been bad because last year I'm sure the highway was closed, like, 30 days. It just seemed like day after day that we don't have critical things like livestock or milk.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): One minute remaining.

Mr. Jim Rogers: But agriculture—if we've got to go get fertilizer or ship grain out and the trucks don't come, it's just another spoke in the wheel slowing you down.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Great.

William, if you don't mind—a few seconds left.

Mr. William Orford: We've been fortunate in Manitoulin. One of our main arteries to the island is our bridge, but we've been very fortunate for highway closures. It does happen, but not like Highway 11, 17, 69.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay. Thank you.

How many seconds left?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I'll waive them. Thank you, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you, MPP Bourgouin.

We'll move to the recognized third party. MPP Hsu, go ahead.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'd like to follow up on a remark that Mr. Rogers made about marketing. I'm assuming you're talking about marketing, more especially crops, and the ability to do that affects whether or not you can take advantage of that.

There's a section in Bill 109 about the food terminal in Toronto. It's been suggested that we need to have regional food hubs, because if you're in Kapuskasing or anywhere up here, it's a long drive down to the food terminal. Have you thought about regional food hubs and how that could benefit farming in the future in northeastern Ontario?

1450

Mr. Jim Rogers: I'll admit that I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about it, but I can see that there's a reasonable argument for having more regional food hubs. We have a market garden, and if we have access, there's no way to get rid of it besides through on-farm. Or if we want to bring in some apples or peaches or whatever, there's no way, really, to access that. Because I think in our little garden store that my daughter runs, definitely in peach season or different seasons like that, it would be good for her to be able to bring in produce. So yes, a regional food hub could benefit us a lot.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Great. I don't know if Mr. Orford has anything to add to that. If not, I just have one other question.

Mr. William Orford: Sorry, was that question directed to me?

Mr. Ted Hsu: This is about a regional—what if you had a little food terminal in northeastern Ontario? Is that something that you'd like to see for farmers in northeastern Ontario?

Mr. William Orford: Of course we would, because freshness means a lot to the consumer, you know? The longer it's on a truck, then it's that much older by the time it gets to the consumer in the northeast or northwest. I would suggest at least two, if not three, more food terminals.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, thank you.

I wanted to just expand on another point—I think it was Mr. Rogers who mentioned this—about processors who are looking to invest in northeastern Ontario. I'm going to paraphrase this; I hope I got it right. Processors looking to invest in northeastern Ontario want to see that farmers have long-term production plans so that they know they have producers for the processing plants. Could you elaborate on that a bit? Maybe there's an example that you have in mind that you could elaborate on.

Mr. Jim Rogers: Yes. When it comes to food processing, it's volume that matters. We don't have near enough land in production to even dream about processing at the moment. Some of the specialty crops, you can have less acres and process. Our major crops like oats, canola, wheat, barley—those, I don't think they'll ever be processing in northern Ontario. But some of the specialty crops such as peas or some beans—not soybeans, but different types of beans and stuff—I know out west there are smaller processing facilities that deal with those, and that is a potential in the future.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, great. Thanks very much.

I don't have any further questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you to all the presenters. This will conclude today's public hearings on Bill 109.

Is there any further business? MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I move that the committee enters into closed session for the purpose of organizing committee business.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Cuzzetto has moved a motion. Is there any debate? If none, I will now put the question. Are the members ready to vote? Shall the motion carry? It looks like everyone is in agreement. The motion is accordingly carried, and we'll now recess briefly before going into closed session.

The committee recessed at 1456 and later continued in closed session.

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