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Standing Committee on the Interior

Protecting Ontario's
Food Independence Act, 2026

1st Session
44th Parliament
Tuesday 11 August 2026

Comité permanent des affaires intérieures

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

1^{re} session
44^e législature
Mardi 11 août 2026

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffier : Stefan Uguen-Csenge

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 11 August 2026

Protecting Ontario's Food Independence Act, 2026, Bill 109, Mr. Jones / Loi de 2026 visant à protéger l'autonomie alimentaire de l'Ontario, projet de loi 109, M. Jones	IN-667
Friends of the greenbelt, Dufferin-Caledon; Grand(m)others Act to Save the Planet; Mr. Keith Emiry	IN-667
Ms. Sharon Sommerville	
Ms. Victoria Creese	
Dairy Farmers of Ontario, region 6, Dufferin, Peel, Simcoe and Wellington; Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario; Ms. Gail Little	IN-675
Mr. George Van Kampen	
Mr. Paul Bootsma	
Ms. Rosemary MacLellan	
Dufferin Federation of Agriculture; Caledon Agricultural Society	IN-683
Mr. Bill McCutcheon	
Mr. Ed Taccone	
Beef Farmers of Ontario	IN-689
Mr. Jason Leblond	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE
ON THE INTERIOR****COMITÉ PERMANENT
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES**

Tuesday 11 August 2026

Mardi 11 août 2026

The committee met at 1000 in Shelburne Golf and Country Club, Melancthon.

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 Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I nominate Steve Pinsonneault to the Chair.

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

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: I do.

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 Pinsonneault 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. Steve Pinsonneault): Good morning, members, and welcome to the Shelburne golf club here in Melancthon. The Standing Committee on the Interior will now come to order. We are meeting today to continue 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. 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 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.

FRIENDS OF THE GREENBELT,
DUFFERIN-CALEDON
GRAND(M)OTHERS ACT TO SAVE
THE PLANET
MR. KEITH EMIRY

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We will now call on Friends of the greenbelt, Dufferin-Caledon, Sharon Sommerville; Grand(m)others Act to Save the Planet—GASP—Victoria Creese; and Keith Emiry.

I will now call on Sharon Sommerville. You will have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard and you may begin.

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: Good morning, Mr. Chair, and committee members. My name is Sharon Sommerville. I am a resident of Mono and the coordinator of Friends of the greenbelt, Dufferin-Caledon.

As our name suggests, Friends of the greenbelt works to ensure that the greenbelt remains intact to provide food, recreation and open, vibrant green spaces for Ontarians to enjoy today and for generations to come. We have over 1,100 supporters in Dufferin-Caledon.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to address the committee this morning and thank you for the invitation to be here. We would also like to begin by thanking the government of Ontario for identifying the urgent need to protect Ontario farmland, and with it the \$51-billion agri-food sector that is built on farming and the jobs of 72,000 Ontarians that are directly employed in primary agriculture. More broadly, the agri-food sector employs 871,000 Ontarians, and Ontario agriculture supplies 60% to 65% of the food that Ontarians eat. It is critical that Ontario's farmland be safeguarded to protect jobs and Ontario's food security.

Friends of the greenbelt, Dufferin-Caledon, is here today because we welcome Bill 109. However, we think that the bill does not go far enough to address the existential threats facing the preservation of farmland in Ontario. The bill's narrow scope does not deal with the expanding aggregate extraction industry and continued urbanization of areas zoned as greenfields, which imperil Ontario's farmland.

We know that every day Ontario loses 319 acres of irreplaceable prime farmland to development. Bill 109's focus on foreign ownership obscures the real threat to preserving Ontario's farmland.

Our question to the government of Ontario is: Why choose to ignore the real and growing threats of aggregate extraction and urbanization to focus on the minor risk that foreign ownership represents? The consequences of ignoring the actual threats only contributes to the crisis by allowing the tally of lost farmland to continue to add up.

One of the other key elements of Bill 109 is to develop agriculture in the Clay Belt. While this might be a reasonable avenue to pursue, allowing the best farmland in Ontario to continue to be vulnerable to ongoing loss looks, at best, short-sighted. Agricultural land needs to be protected from land-banking speculators and developers. Removing land from agricultural production to build urban sprawl is no longer a sustainable model. There are other viable prospects for urban and suburban redevelopment without impacting agricultural land. Land banking rural land drives up the cost of farmland, which becomes a barrier to young farmers who want to farm. All of you have been to the International Plowing Match and recognize that the farming community is aging. Not only must we preserve arable land, we have to ensure that the land is financially accessible to young people who want to farm. Bill 109 does not address this looming problem.

Friends of the greenbelt, Dufferin-Caledon, calls on the government to recognize that building the proposed Highway 413 will destroy 2,000 acres of prime agricultural land, including 400 acres of the greenbelt. At a time when supply chains are under pressure and insecure, food insecurity is at an all-time high for many in our province. Knowing that forests and wetlands are key to cleaning our air and preventing flooding, it is unconscionable that the government of Ontario would remove 2,000 acres of farmland, woodlots and wetlands to build a mega-highway which will only bring more urban sprawl to farmland directly adjacent to the greater Hamilton and Toronto area.

So we ask that the proposed 413 be cancelled to protect farmland and agricultural production in Caledon and Halton Hills. There are better transportation alternatives which don't require destroying 2,000 acres of first-class farmland, including 400 acres of the greenbelt. The estimated \$15-billion cost to build the proposed 413 would be better used to subsidize truck use on the 407, which would remove an estimated 12,000 to 21,000 trucks per day from the 401. Not only would 12,000 acres of farmland, woodlots and wetlands be saved, but the 400-series highways would be safer for all users.

Your job, the job of any government, is to ensure the safety of its citizens. This includes our water, our land, our roads. It is our sincere hope that you take your responsibility seriously.

Thank you for your kind attention to our delegation this morning.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you. We will now call on Victoria Creese.

Ms. Victoria Creese: My name is Victoria Creese and I am co-chair of GASP, Grand(m)others Act to Save the Planet, a grassroots climate action and advocacy group with more than 170 members across Ontario. We are

committed to creating a sustainable environment for future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on Bill 109. My remarks will focus specifically on schedule 3, the Farmland Security Act.

Farmland is a non-renewable resource that forms the foundation of Ontario's food security. It supports rural economies, sustains biodiversity and strengthens environmental resilience. As climate change, population growth and global supply chain disruptions place increasing pressure on food production, protecting Ontario's most productive farmland has never been more important. Every acre of farmland permanently lost today reduces the province's ability to feed future generations.

There is broad agreement that Ontario is losing farmland at an alarming rate. According to figures based on the 2021 census of agriculture, an average of 319 acres is lost every day. That is a staggering number and one that demands meaningful action.

We commend the government for recognizing this issue as schedule 3 provides the framework to regulate foreign and other designated persons from speculating on Ontario farmland. However, the proposed legislation does not go far enough. If the objective of Bill 109 is to protect Ontario's food independence, it should address all major sources of speculative pressure, not only foreign ownership. GASP therefore recommends that both foreign and domestic speculators be explicitly identified as designated persons in the act itself rather than left to future regulation. Doing so would provide greater transparency, permanence and certainty.

Much of the farmland being removed from agriculture production is owned by domestic investors and developers who purchase land for speculation rather than farming. The Ontario Farmland Trust has identified domestic speculation as a growing threat to the long-term viability of Ontario's agricultural sector. Speculative purchasing inflates farmland prices beyond what working farmers can afford, making it increasingly difficult for the next generation of farmers to acquire land.

1010

The limitations to schedule 3 become clear when we consider farmland that is already under threat from domestic speculation and development decisions. An example is the proposed Highway 413 corridor and the lands adjacent to it. In anticipation of the highway and the development opportunities it is expected to create, developers have purchased large areas of farmland, all of it class 1 and class 2, with the expectation that it will eventually be rezoned for development. The highway itself is projected to pave over 2,000 acres of prime farmland.

This raises an important public policy question: How do we balance the need for transportation infrastructure and housing with the equally essential need to protect prime farmland and ensure long-term food security?

Research has consistently shown that Ontario can build the affordable homes it needs within existing urban boundaries through more efficient land use and higher-density development. Protecting farmland and meeting housing

needs are not mutually exclusive goals. Similarly, in the case of the 413, multiple transportation experts, including the government's own analysis, call into question whether the highway will provide meaningful long-term congestion relief.

Fortunately, alternatives to Highway 413 exist, such as making greater use of the 407 for truck traffic and investing in public transit. Thus, the permanent loss of Ontario's best farmland can be avoided.

When alternates to development exist, protecting prime agricultural land must take precedence over decisions that would result in its irreversible loss. Bill 109 provides an opportunity to ensure that future decisions better protect Ontario's farmland, regardless of whether pressures come from foreign ownership, domestic speculation or infrastructure development.

The decision to build Highway 413 should be reviewed through the same lens to ensure it aligns with the act's objectives of safeguarding Ontario's agricultural land for future generations. It is not too late to change course on this highway, as the design phase has not yet been completed and federal permits have not been granted.

GASP respectfully recommends that schedule 3 be amended to include the following additional protections:

- introduce stronger protections within the act itself against all speculative pressures, both foreign and domestic;

- require a transparent and fully accountable agricultural impact assessment process before any farmland is removed for development or infrastructure projects; and

- require an assessment of alternatives to determine whether the proposed project can be delivered in a way that avoids the loss of agricultural land.

As a long-term solution, GASP supports the creation of a food belt as proposed in Bill 21, introduced by MPPs Mike Schreiner and Bobbi Ann Brady.

Ontario's farmland is not just land—it is our food, our resilience against climate change, our legacy for upcoming generations. Once it is paved over, it is gone forever.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): You have one minute remaining.

Ms. Victoria Creese: Thank you.

The decisions we make today will shape whether our children and grandchildren inherit fertile farmland that can feed them, or whether they inherit the irreversible consequences of choices that put short-term development ahead of long-term food security.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you for that.

Keith Emiry is virtual and he's having technical issues, so we will go back to him. Keith, you're good to go?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Yes, I am, actually.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): You have seven minutes to do your introduction.

Mr. Keith Emiry: Perfect. Thanks so much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Please state your name for Hansard.

Mr. Keith Emiry: Yes. It's nice to be on. Thank you. I don't know—who is chairing today?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Steve Pinsonneault.

Mr. Keith Emiry: I hope the audio is okay. It seems a little bit scratchy on my end. I'll keep going unless I get interrupted.

First, appreciation to the government for bringing this legislation forward and the standing committee here today, and especially staff. Thank goodness for Yana getting me on here because I think I'm a little technologically challenged some days, but I think we've got a good connection.

I'm a dairy farmer from the Massey area—

Interruption.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Could you state your name for the record?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Yes, it's Keith Emiry.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you—

Interruption.

Mr. Keith Emiry: Are we still good here?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Yes, you're good. Go ahead.

Mr. Keith Emiry: I'm a dairy farmer. I live in the area of Massey, which puts me in the Algoma-Manitoulin riding. I don't intend to necessarily use my whole allotment here right now. Hopefully that makes a few minutes available to others in the committee, if that's valuable to you, but I'll go through what I have and I think people will find I'm a little bit—

Interruption.

Mr. Keith Emiry: My comments here today are not meant to be in any way an admonishment of past difficulties or failings in government legislation or the service work that the Ontario service does, but rather I'm intending to pose some helpful questions and ensure that we have better relations and better processes coming forward and hopefully we're aiming toward a more efficient public service for Ontarians and northern Ontario businesses specifically.

Today, I really wanted to focus on—

Interruption.

Mr. Keith Emiry: —and I'm aware that—

Interruption.

Mr. Keith Emiry: —really doesn't address that in a very sufficient way and I think some time ago—

Interruption.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Can you mute your phone? It keeps beeping when you've got a call coming in.

Mr. Keith Emiry: I'll try and do that. Yes, sorry about that. I'm assuming it's really breaking up my commentary. I apologize about that. Hopefully we don't have that—I've got it muted right now.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): It's actually coming in quite clear at this end.

Mr. Keith Emiry: I think that there was a time in this province, and it's long since passed, when Ontario busi-

nesses were growing, especially in the farming sector. Our provincial government really saw the need for efficiency in this department of being helpful and really growing Ontario businesses, particularly in the farm sector. That push really helped effectively grow Ontario agriculture at that time and really the establishment of the industry happened in that period, and we grew enormously, this past year, in our food processing and production systems. We also established a whole network of efficient and viable services in rural communities and ensured farmers could create financially viable businesses and generational businesses. That was a huge benefit to the province and really to all of the country at the time, and still is now, because we created a whole economy based on agriculture that was well situated both geographically and within the whole industrial complex to really support what our society is today.

So after opening farmland access across Ontario, essentially, our public service has really built this muscle memory of how to do that around the use of crown lands and their use for agriculture. But I think, in recent generations, it seems to me that this was a vital public service that started to become more regionalized; it's become divided in focus between various ministries; it was more poorly administered because it didn't have as much business to do over the years and eventually it simply became largely forgotten. I think Ontario's northern farmers now once again need our government to focus on making this process efficient. We need a centralized northern office for crown land issues and access, especially and particularly for our agriculture and making expeditious use of land clearing grants, again through NOHFC or other funding sources. It really needs to happen once again, creating supportive programs to ensure efficient, environmentally responsible expansion of farmland here in the north.

Using long-term leases or lease-to-purchase arrangements will and can create an investment environment that helps Ontario's farmers move forward, growing the capacity of our province and our most promising area of the economy, which really is agriculture. We have the resources that we need to do the job, we just need to make sure that we're using them most efficiently.

1020

My questions for the committee today are: Does this, or does existing legislation or will future legislation—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): You have one minute remaining.

Mr. Keith Emiry:—help preserve a more nimble approach to growth in Ontario farmland that's going to support the expansion of farm business in our province? Will foreign ownership rules help focus investment in primary farming and farm business services where needed? And will this legislation continue to support new farmers and new farm businesses as a most vital component of growing Ontario agriculture?

It's simply to say that it's time once again to build the capacity of Ontario's public service to do this job and be effective in growing and supporting Ontario's economy. Ontario's farmers, new farmers and rural businesses are

keen for this challenge. I thank the standing committee for their attention and helping to meet these challenges with effective legislation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you.

We'll move to the round of questioning, starting with the government. MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank all the presenters for being here, and the ones that are online as well.

My question is for Keith. Before we start, Keith, I'd like to know how long you've been a dairy farmer for.

Mr. Keith Emiry: What age are you allowed to call yourself a dairy farmer? I was born on the farm and grew up here.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: So approximately how many years?

Mr. Keith Emiry: I took a few years off, let's say. After university, I started my family in Guelph. I was working for the Ontario Federation of Agriculture at that time and what was at that time the Ontario Cattlemen's Association, now Beef Farmers of Ontario, and the Ontario Veal Association. So not counting those years of direct involvement, give or take, I've been about 35 of my 50 years milking cows and flipping bales and all of that great stuff.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you for that. I just wanted to ask you a question on Bill 109 about the Farmland Security Act to help keep Ontario farmland in the hands of Canadian farming families. What would that kind of protection mean for multigenerational families like yours, operating for many generations in Ontario?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Yes, it's a good question. In my area, it had been very much a closed community here for my whole youth, because at that time, farming in the north was contracting in some places. We simply just didn't have a base of services where small farms could continue efficiently. A lot of those fellas had grown up on the farm and still own the farm, but they had gone to working in other industries, mostly forestry and mining, and then, obviously, any number of other service industries in the local area—but very few in agriculture and very few in agricultural service. I think at that time, we would have welcomed lots of outside interest and outside investment to kind of keep that capacity here in the local community.

Now, Mennonite folks, mostly from the Mount Forest and Linwood areas, started buying local farms in 2008, and since that time we've seen a huge resurgence in our local community in capacity, in services—in competition for farmland, yes, but also just a rebuilding of the rural community here. I think that foreign investment could be the same thing, but it needs to look like investment in local communities.

I was thinking about this point this morning vis-à-vis large, corporate farms that have come in recent years and purchased lots of farmland. That has seen a driving-up of farmland price, which is to be expected, and some significant investment, but ultimate failures because they were part of integrated systems that weren't well planned out. I'm thinking of some beef production farms that were

aiming towards specialized or particular markets. They were part of a system that was to specifically go on labelled products, and it was all integrated based on the fact that they were going to get a hugely higher price from the end-user. For whatever reasons, those systems didn't transpire properly, and those businesses ended up folding and being sold off again.

Those types of situations are expected, I think, in business in all sectors. But the fact is that I think any businesses are going to be more successful when they're community focused and their true investment is in the community and staying in the community. We've all got to make money, but when your singular focus is, "We're going to make a huge amount of money at the end of the day," eventually something else is going to get in the way of that if you're not already invested in the community and staying in the community.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I just want to ask another question as well, Keith. How do you get your milk out of the farm? Is it by transport truck? And how do you get products into your farm?

Mr. Keith Emiry: The local producers here own a milk transport company. We're only a small number; I think nine, now. But we own our own truck, so we negotiate that directly with DFO as to what that transport contract looks like. A lot of inputs are trucked into the local area, but I think that we're just on the cusp of seeing that change.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Keith Emiry: One of two major local companies that transport has built elevators—what I would refer to as locally; they're over 100 kilometres away from me here, but we're on the path. They're on Highway 17, so that creates some efficiency and certainly is going to benefit us in the long run.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: And how many trucks do you have coming in and out of your farm on a daily basis?

Mr. Keith Emiry: The milk truck, of course, is every second day. I'd say, on average, there's probably one or two trucks a week that are here for one reason or another.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: That's only your farm, correct?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Correct.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Okay. Thank you.

How much time do we have left?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Six seconds.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Keith.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We're going to move to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you to the presenters for coming. I'm going to focus my first couple of questions both to the Friends of the greenbelt and to GASP. I'd like to thank you both, particularly Friends of the greenbelt, for your work in defending the greenbelt—it's been quite an issue over the last few years with the province—and for your comments regarding the 413.

I'd just like to ask your opinion on something. The federal government is proposing high-speed rail through eastern Ontario, and 11 MPPs from the government side,

including a couple of ministers, have written that there hasn't been a good enough consultation process regarding farms and farmland in that project. I think they understand—and you know what? I agree. But do you think there has been a good enough consultation process and a voice for agriculture in the province's construction plans regarding the 413 or other big industrial uses?

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: Thank you for that question. I would say that, overall, the consultation process has been quite weak, both for farmers and other community members. So I would say that this project is not well founded in terms of what it's intended to do. It is not actually a very significant addition to the road infrastructure in Ontario. It is pretty much designed to open that land up to development, because we know that there are a lot of large, speculative landowners along that corridor. And, because of that influence, there has been very little real, public consultation on the 413—farmers included.

1030

Mr. John Vanthof: We are in favour of Bill 109, as far as it goes. But in your presentations, you both mentioned, I believe, that speculative investment, whether it comes from foreign or domestic—that is an issue.

Foreign investment—and I think we're all thinking a foreign actor, like China. But speculation in investment—does it really make a difference? Do we need stronger legislation in this province to actually protect farmland from speculation of any type? And I give that to both of you.

Ms. Victoria Creese: Sure, I'll go first.

Yes, we do need to put some controls on domestic speculation, because we know it drives up prices so that young farmers can't buy into farmland. That's a big problem. We have an aging farming population, so we need to have our young farmers be able to come in to do what they want to do—to farm.

The Ontario Farmland Trust has done some studies to figure out how much land is from foreign investors, and they estimate it's around 3%. It's really, really low. But we do know that there are domestic speculators, because I live in the GTA, and there has been lots of information about developers who have bought land along the 413 and throughout the greenbelt.

We need to have both: stronger domestic and foreign—and I think it needs to be not in regulations, but within the bill itself.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: I would add to that. I think we're looking at two different kinds of foreign ownership here. One is ownership of farms themselves, for the purpose of farming, as Mr. Emiry talked about. But what we're talking about is ownership of land, either domestic or foreign, for urbanization. That loss of farmland to urbanization is really jeopardizing Ontario's food security and opportunities to farm, obviously.

We really need to address the land speculation for the purpose of urbanization, which Bill 109 does not touch at all. That is one of its deficiencies.

Mr. John Vanthof: Regarding a provincial food bill: The official opposition, we've proposed an actual agricultural assessment process with teeth, that when a piece of agriculture land is transferred or applied to be transferred, the first question in a two-stage process is—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. John Vanthof: —“Is there a better use for this land than producing food?” And if there is—so, a meat processing plant in this area, or a vegetable processing plant in Holland Marsh would be an obvious yes, and a subdivision, not so much. Would you agree with that?

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: Absolutely, 100%.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We will now move to the third party: MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair, thank you all for your presentations today.

Sharon, I just wanted to ask. As you likely know, there was supposed to be a 10-year review of the greenbelt.

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: Yes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: And that I don't believe has started yet. I'm curious if you know if they've started that review or not yet. Have they engaged with you, and what would be your thoughts around that?

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: My understanding is that the review has not begun.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: In terms of that timeline, I think we've seen the government change a couple of things around, even the committee and the folks that are involved with it. So I'm wondering, if and when that 10-year review does take place, what your thoughts are and what you might want to say around that.

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: Thank you for the question. I'll be quite honest here: We're quite happy to let sleeping dogs lie. We are concerned that if the review goes forward the government's intention will be to undermine the protections of the greenbelt and that it may jeopardize the current protection that is in place.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Just around farmland, Sharon—I may as well stay with you—what else do you think the government could do to protect farmland and support the next generation of farmers?

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: I really wish I had a deeper policy answer for you on that. I don't, but I do think that it's also about the direction and intention of the government. We're quite clear: We can see that this government's singular policy intention is to build houses at all cost—and that cost is Ontario farmland. Just looking at Ontario farmland as a future subdivision does not help this province and future generations have opportunities to actually farm and provide food security for Ontarians. That's a very serious issue, is the direction of this government.

I don't think it's that hard to look at other urban and suburban redevelopment. We know that there is enough land within the current urban boundaries to supply all the housing that we need. Unfortunately, this government does not look at it that way. We know that one of Doug

Ford's favourite comments is, “Who cares about a grasshopper?” Well, it turns out that we do need to care about our open land and about our farmland and our green spaces, because they are really quite critical to cleaning our air, preventing flooding and ensuring that we have food security.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I just want to pick up on the topic of food security. As we think about our trade dispute with the United States right now, if we think about what's going on across the world, in many different parts of the world, access to food, access to water is incredibly important. I would even say it's a national security issue in some ways, because if we don't have access to food made here, if we don't have that production taking place here as well, I would argue that we're weaker on the world stage.

So your position is, “Let's keep things where they are; let's focus on sustainable urban development.” How do we deal with, I guess, some of the transportation and gridlock challenges that we have in the GTA? I'll admit, coming here today from closer to Toronto wasn't too bad, because I was going against traffic, but what do you think the government can be doing or should be doing around helping us move around the GTA quicker?

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: Again, thanks for the question. We know that we have to move people, and we know that we have to move more people every year. But if the government was to take the substantial investment that they're looking at for the 413 and invest that in faster, more reliable public transit, there's no question that we'd be able to move many more people with the same amount of money.

A recent report by Transport Action Ontario and Environmental Defence indicated that that same amount of money applied to enhanced public interurban transit would move two and a half times as many people as the 413 will. And I think that's a pretty substantial number of people, and moving in much greater areas than the very limited 52 kilometres that is the 413.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Victoria, why don't you pick up on both of the two questions that I had just asked in terms of what you think the government could do more to protect farmland and support the next generation of farmers, but as well, what do you think should be done around reducing gridlock and helping people get around quicker and faster in the GTA?

Ms. Victoria Creese: I agree with what Sharon said: The 413 is estimated to cost around \$15 billion, and the money could be better spent with more people moving if we invested in public transit.

1040

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Ms. Victoria Creese: Farmland is important also because we are facing water capacity problems in Waterloo, in Guelph, in Brantford, all because we have been building on land that needs to be recharged. Those are our cities that get their water from the ground, and we can't keep paving over our land. We need to recharge areas so that those communities have safe water in the future.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you. That concludes the first round of questioning.

We'll move on to the second round, moving over to the government. MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: Thank you to the presenters today for expressing their opinions and bringing more information to the committee.

The one thing, Sharon, that you started out with is—you talked about aggregate extraction. We struggled with this when I sat on the OFA board because farmers are some of the biggest users of aggregate. If we don't allow aggregate pits to be developed, where will we get our aggregate?

I'm not trying to be too cheeky with this comment, but do you have a paved laneway?

Ms. Victoria Creese: No.

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: No, I do not.

MPP Paul Vickers: Many people do have paved laneways. When I'm building up my laneway and filling in the potholes every year, I think, "Jeez, it's pretty easy to say we don't need aggregate extraction when you already have your house built and your lanes paved." So I just wonder, what do you propose that we do?

If I'm reading it right, if you're somewhat against aggregate extraction, how am I supposed to build a driving shed? The last driving shed I built, we probably used about 1,000 tonnes of aggregate.

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: That's a big driving shed.

MPP Paul Vickers: We had a lot of equipment, and the barn we wanted to build was even going to take more.

Again, just trying to figure out—where do we get this aggregate if we don't have the pits?

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: I think that's a really important educational question, Paul, and I really appreciate it. And your question wasn't too cheeky either.

We know that Ontario has current aggregate reserves and gravel reserves in existing quarry pits to last for 38 to 40 years, so there's enough licensing out there right now today. We don't need additional quarries, and I think that is the point.

When you're talking about agriculture in Dufferin and Caledon, there are two main issues: One is quarries, and the other is urbanization. We know that, for example, the CBM quarry down in Caledon and Halton is going to take out 400 acres of prime class 1 agriculture. We know that we have reserves that will last 38 to 40 years.

There's absolutely no reason for that quarry. I know some people say, "Well, you know, those reserves are really far away from where we need them." Oh, that's just not the case; there are 38 years of reserves in the Golden Horseshoe.

MPP Paul Vickers: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you all for presenting here today.

My question is for Keith. Good morning, Keith. Almost every day, as we watch our news, we see supply manage-

ment being talked about as a bargaining chip in our tariff wars. We know as we move further north, there are more challenges. As a Holstein dairy operation, how important is regulatory clarity and consistency for day-to-day realities of running a family farm like your own?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Hi, Bill. I apologize. I had a bit of noise here in the background, so just rephrase your question again or re-ask your question.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Almost every day, we watch the news and we see supply management being talked about as a bargaining chip for the tariff wars. We know as we move further north, there are more challenges for dairy farms like yourself. As a dairy operation, how important is the regulatory clarity and consistency for day-to-day realities of running your dairy farm?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Yes, fair question. Obviously, we're one of the most highly regulated industries in agriculture, if not all over everything, and that's understandable. It's a highly perishable product.

Let's speak primarily to supply management, because that is really key for us. I recognize that that really looks like a federal issue in most ways, but the provincial legislation is very important, because when it comes to those contaminant issues and the actual oversight business, those are very much provincial responsibilities and we do need strong legislation on that. There's no two ways about it.

I think for us, the challenges that that poses—yes, the more we know and can appreciate the strength of regulation and understand what rules we're playing by—having strengthened regulation is really important for us, so that we can have ourselves best prepared to make sure that we're providing that highest-quality product. I guess in terms of ourselves as a business—and we're in that fortunate happenstance to own our own milk truck, along with our neighbours—that strength through the system becomes really obvious.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Keith Emiry: What we need more than anybody else is how that transfers from farm to product to processor, and then all of us in the whole system are understanding them and playing by those same rules, so to speak. I hope that answers your question and was what you were looking for.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Yes, thanks, Keith. And thanks for taking the time off this morning; I'm sure your wife is looking for you to do something out on the farm.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Okay, 28 seconds left. MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Just very quickly, Keith: I believe you're a farmer in the Sudbury district, and the Clay Belt is an important part of this legislation. We're trying to have one window into developing the Clay Belt, similar to Quebec, as they're much further along. Are there any thoughts you have in closing on the Clay Belt?

Mr. Keith Emiry: You know, the rest of northern Ontario farming, we're kind of all—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes the government's questioning.

We will now move to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: My second round will once again go to the Friends of the greenbelt and GASP.

I think a common misconception of people who oppose a certain project or a certain activity is that they're opposed to everything. What I've heard very clearly in your presentations is you're not opposed to development and you're not opposed to new housing. You want it done responsibly. We have the research—we have the brainpower, for lack of a better word—to do things responsibly.

One of the suggestions that was put forward in another area is there are places in urban areas that are brownfields that could be redeveloped, and perhaps the government would be in some ways better off looking at those areas that could be redeveloped, as opposed to farmland. I get it; I'm a farmer. It's easier to build that farmland, but is it the responsible thing to do? To both of you.

Ms. Victoria Creese: Yes, it's probably easier and more profit-making to build on farmland. But I'm co-chair of GASP, which is Grand(m)others Act to Save the Planet. We are very much focused on the legacy that we leave behind to our grandchildren. We like to make decisions that are responsible, that are sustainable.

I am worried for my grandkids. We have climate change. We have food security issues because of climate change. So, yes, let's build responsibly. Let's look at the impact that this is going to have and let's make decisions that are evidence-based and science-based, and not go along with whoever puts the most pressure on the government.

Ms. Sharon Sommerville: I think it's really important for the government to decide who they represent. Do they represent the building industry, the aggregate industry, the aggregate extraction industry, or do they represent the best interests of Ontarians? When we look at, again, the direction of this government, it seems pretty clear that they are primarily interested in servicing large industry.

1050

I've always had this practical idea around additional housing. When I look at the kilometres and kilometres of old 1950s, 1960s and 1970s one-storey strip malls that are in urban areas, that are connected to utilities—the bus stop is right at the door—it makes an enormous amount of sense to redevelop that kind of former development, which was based on a very different kind of idea, that we had endless amounts of land; just keep building. We don't have endless amounts of land.

We know it's important. As MPP Cerjanec said, our food chain, our food supply system is a national security issue. We have to preserve what we have so that we can continue to grow what we need right here at home. When we know that Ontario's agriculture provides 65% of what we eat here in Ontario, we need to really look at the land use as it is today and find those other places to build.

But in addition to that, there's already lots of brownfields within urban boundaries.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to direct my next question to Keith. As a fellow northern Ontario farmer, I agree that we have to have a much better process to look at crown land for current farmers who are farming next to a chunk of crown land. It's so frustrating.

But I would like your opinion; what about the transfer of crown land to investment funds, mega-farms, on large blocks? Should we look closely, if we do that? And should we be very careful with that process?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Yes, well, clearly we need to be careful and responsible any time that we're looking at large assets of any kind transferring.

I think that BFO had made a policy statement, something to the effect of a 1,500-acre or 1,600-acre block; I think that's reasonable. I haven't looked at the entirety of the land inventory numbers to have an appreciation of how many 1,500-acre blocks that may end up looking like.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Keith Emiry: But, certainly, at this time that seems like a really reasonable number to work with. I think it's a small enough number to be a deterrent for the investment community alone. We need investment; there's no two ways about that. But we need to make it look like community investment. I think that's what I'm always trying to pound in: If this isn't us being involved directly in our community structure, then how effective is it going to be? We've got many examples that show that it just doesn't work if it's not looking like an investment in the community.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you. Just to close off: BFO said that they would be fine leasing that land as well.

Mr. Keith Emiry: Understood, yes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We will now move to the third party: MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: I appreciate your presentation today, Keith. We can also hear you much better now. I think everything in the room is going quite well.

I wanted to just ask, regarding the purchase of crown land for farming, would you support that idea of selling that crown land with the farmland easement so it can't be developed and only used for farming in the future?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Oh, sorry. So that it can only be used for farming, or that it could be transferred away from farming?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Only be used for farming in the future, if the province is selling crown land for farming—so, selling that with an easement so it can't be developed and only used for farming in the future.

Mr. Keith Emiry: Yes. This is another thing. So we as farmers are prepared to put investment into the land through tile drainage and farmland improvements. That's significant to begin with. For sure, we want to see farmers be able to make their investment back, presumably through direct agricultural production.

I think if we're going to be supportive of new farmers and expanding farms in the north, especially on large

tracts, presumably that's going to look like long-term leases to begin with. I think we should be structuring buyout clauses so that that land is made available to that farmer who started the lease through a buyout clause.

I think there are examples of other programs internationally that we should be looking at; they'll have statistics that show us what's most effective, like how many years of investment should we be expecting both to make a return for the farmer and to make that farmland available, moving it into the permanent farmland inventory. Presumably we need to set some rules around that that are going to make sense, both for the farmer and for the government as the leaseholder.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Do you see any barriers to, maybe, long-term multi-decade leases of crown land?

Mr. Keith Emiry: I think, if we're talking about new farmers, the barriers financially are much higher, and so for sure we need side-by-side programs in terms of farmland improvement—tile-drainage projects that are going to work, making loans available that are going to work. The more that we can create a set of rules that's understandable and, really, fair for that farm owner, the higher the likelihood that we'll see investment, presumably mostly from the banking community, but from investors who do want to see that as agricultural investment, not necessarily a foreign operator who is simply bottom line driven. Yes, we're looking at a program that needs to be an investment in Ontario agriculture long-term.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Around foreign ownership—and I know this is one of the pieces here in the bill—I think, until recently, Canada has had a pretty poor record on tracking and tracing beneficial ownership. I do think it's well intentioned in the bill that the farmland that we have here really should be for Canada, should be for Ontario, and we should continue to develop that ecosystem.

You had mentioned at the beginning of your remarks just around—the public service over many years has built a muscle memory on agriculture, in some ways viewing it really as a public service, which I would agree with. So how important is it for the government of Ontario and the public service to be working in partnership with farming communities across the province?

Mr. Keith Emiry: Very much so, and that is pretty much what I was meaning to focus on in my presentation. Having that as a primary source in public service, where farmers know exactly where to go to—it's a trained voice who is working on behalf of farm business in order to make those connections happen and really strengthen the industry through a program that's going to bring more farmland into production and more farm businesses onto the scene.

To me, I think that if we haven't sourced that and looked at that foreign-investment piece, it does speak to the huge influx of—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Keith Emiry: In the dairy business, it was primarily Dutch farmers coming into Ontario and understanding and immediately knowing where their place and capacity

was within the Ontario system. We can continue to do that. We just need to be sure that, if that means expansion of farmland, we know exactly what those rules look like.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: And just finally to end the time: any other comments you might have around the Clay Belt? **1100**

Mr. Keith Emiry: I don't have anything more specific to the Clay Belt in northern Ontario. But I am appreciative of the comments I've heard around the greenbelt and the necessity of locking down farmland. I'm certainly supportive of the opposition position on creating a system where you have to have good reason to be taking farmland out of agriculture—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes questioning for the third party.

We have concluded this round of presenters. We're going to move on to the next round of presenters.

DAIRY FARMERS OF ONTARIO, REGION 6,
DUFFERIN, PEEL, SIMCOE
AND WELLINGTON
CHRISTIAN FARMERS FEDERATION
OF ONTARIO
MS. GAIL LITTLE

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We have the dairy producer committee, George Van Kampen, and Rosemary MacLellan virtually; Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, Paul Bootsma; and Gail Little.

I will now call on the dairy producer committee, George Van Kampen. You have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard and then you may begin.

Mr. George Van Kampen: I am George Van Kampen. I'm a dairy farmer. I farm with my wife and family just south of here in Amaranth township. I also have the pleasure of representing producers on 478 dairy farms in the counties of Dufferin, Peel, Simcoe and Wellington. I'm on the board of directors for Dairy Farmers of Ontario.

Today with me is Rosemary MacLellan. She is our executive director of communications and corporate affairs for DFO.

I want to thank you for the opportunity of presenting here today.

As you consider Bill 109—it's an important legislative proposal to strengthen our domestic food production while supporting Ontario farmers and our commitment to providing quality food for Canadians. It's a pleasure to welcome you to this part of Ontario, which is often referred to as the milk shed. There are over 2,100 farms across southwestern Ontario producing well over 2.2 billion litres of milk annually. Then it is shipped to 49 dairy plants, providing stable jobs for our communities. Together, we contribute over \$6.1 billion to the GDP just in that milk shed.

When you consider that we also sit on one of the largest food manufacturing regions in North America, we should not underestimate the crucial role that Ontario plays in

securing Canada's food supply. This is also true in dairy, where Ontario represents over 30% of dairy production and over 30% of dairy processing.

What we do in Ontario matters. It matters to Ontario, and it matters to the rest of Canada. What we do in Ontario dairy matters. In communities across the province and across the country we need to lead to maintain our strengths as a dairy province, and we need to ensure our legislative and regulatory framework supports the growth and investment plans that we are working on today to ensure a strong domestic dairy and food sector for tomorrow.

As dairy farmers, we are looking forward to completing the work to update the Milk Act, the first step to bringing Ontario's milk pricing policies into alignment with national standards. These changes will create a level playing field and enable continued stability and the delivery of high-quality milk from Ontario farms for processing in Ontario. We need to have consistently applied end-use pricing obligations that ensure all dairy processors are billed equitably for their milk products. The current regime requires refinement to ensure compliance with the federal policy for all processors making dairy products. As a province that has over one third of Canada's dairy processing, it is vital that Ontario is able to enforce the national policy.

Consistency and coordination is also important to provide the stability and predictability that our processing customers expect and enjoy from supply management.

We look forward to the passage of the bill and the introduction of the regulatory changes. As dairy farmers, we share the government's commitment to ensuring a stronger and trusted domestic food system with a regulatory framework that supports continuous improvement and compliance with world-class, high-quality food safety standards for cows' milk in Ontario. Through DFO, we will work with OMAFA and the enabling legislations and related regulatory amendments to ensure we continue to uphold the high-quality standards of cows' milk in Ontario.

Now more than ever, we need to protect and grow our farming and food sector. It is encouraging to see the priority and commitment that the government is putting into and behind the agriculture sector, recognizing the collective value we bring every day to Ontario's rural economy, local communities, social fabric and overall well-being as a province.

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 dairy farms and more processing capacity that drives economic growth and serves the Canadian market while protecting our Ontario advantage. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you for that.

Paul Bootsma, you will have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard, and then you may begin.

Mr. Paul Bootsma: I'm Paul Bootsma, policy adviser at the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario. The acronym for that is CFFO. I'm joining you virtually as I was unable to come be present.

I'm going to begin by stating CFFO's vision for Ontario and how agriculture plays a major role in the province of Ontario's economy. Ontario is a vast geographical province, with many different areas that have their own characteristics. Ontario's farmers have used these characteristics and overcome the challenges to become successful in their industry.

The agricultural and food production industry is one of Ontario's major contributors to the GDP—one out of nine jobs come from this industry. This makes the industry a major job creator for Ontario residents, and it therefore is an industry that should receive significant attention from the government.

CFFO is confident that there is great opportunity for growth in these industries, particularly in the processing sector and in research and development. Science and technology continue to increase productivity and bring in new opportunities. More research and development should be happening in the province.

CFFO is concerned that too much of our raw product leaves the province or country for processing, only for consumers to repurchase it as an imported product. This is at the expense of value-added possibilities. More processing plants in Ontario will create more jobs and opportunities for export. With more exports, the potential for more production opens up.

Canada is a country with many natural resources and should strive to bring manufacturing here, including that of farm equipment. As we see less confidence in our trade agreements, bringing more manufacturing into Ontario will provide security for jobs and supplies for consumers.

As soil is one of the resources that is valuable to us, planning for future development, housing, infrastructure and public buildings all need to be considered carefully, where these should be established. Agricultural areas have great economic value.

The CFFO represents business people involved in these industries and therefore is concerned about how our soil is used and for what purposes. The CFFO supports Senator Black's soil report, Critical Ground, and as such, hopes to discuss with the ministers about future planning for Ontario development, housing and agriculture.

1110

Our goal is to work with government to build the Ontario economy, with agriculture doing its fair share. But that also requires a commitment from our government leaders to support our farmers and all those who are part of this industry, supplying the consumers with healthy food. We are optimistic about the province of Ontario and its economy.

The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario is an accredited farm organization representing the interests of over 4,100 farm families in Ontario who are called to the vocation of farming. CFFO policy promotes economically, socially and environmentally sustainable farming, ad-

vocating that farmers receive fair returns for their production and stewardship efforts.

Now, some comments to some of the headings in Bill 109—first, improving equity and reducing the regulatory burden of the Beef Cattle Marketing Act: This industry is finally recovering from the 2003 BSE disease crisis. Now is the time to provide the industry with improved access to processing facilities, less restrictive regulations and government commitment to prevent cheap foreign products on our grocery shelves. Currently, there is a shortage of beef being filled by cheap Australian product, but that should be a temporary situation. We need to be prepared when beef production increases here in Ontario and Canada. Ontario can provide all that this industry requires to be a thriving industry. When the government indicates confidence in a sector, the producers will find a way to excel.

Comments to the proposed amendments to the Veterinary Professionals Act: This act may have good intentions, however, the bigger challenge in Ontario is the lack of large-animal veterinarians in some of the remote areas of the province, particularly in northern Ontario. If agriculture growth in northern Ontario does succeed, this could alleviate some of this challenge. What is needed is a less restrictive entrance or application process for new students into the veterinarian program, resulting in more graduates who will then be able to spread across the province to serve the industry.

Expansion in northern Ontario is a logical investment. However, there is a difference between production in this area compared to southern Ontario. It is not an acre-for-acre exchange with regard to production yields. CFFO continues to call for well-thought-out planning when it comes to land use in southern Ontario.

The Farmland Security Act, a legislative framework to restrict foreign acquisition of Ontario farmland: Owners must have a stake in the ongoing business of the land, and investment firms should pay the full rate of property tax, not what the farmer pays.

The food security act, 2001: Farming and food production needs to continue to be able to function without challenges from others in rural areas of the province. This type of industry does produce certain consequences that should be acceptable under proper implementation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Paul Bootsma: Finally—one more—a response to the Ontario Food Terminal: This is an important link between producers and vendors and needs to be protected from other land uses that would challenge its intent. Properties around the terminal should not be used for residential units, as the two land uses will cause friction when situated too close to each other.

That's our response to Bill 109. We thank you for the opportunity to join you today.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We'll now call on Gail Little. You'll have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard, and then you may begin.

Ms. Gail Little: I am Gail Little from Amaranth township in Dufferin county. I would first of all like to thank you for this opportunity to comment on the planned passage of Bill 109. I would like to speak specifically to two items referenced in the document.

But first, I would just like to give you a little bit of background information. I am a municipal politician, and I am an executive with the DFA, but I am here today as a first-generation farmer. I was raised in Toronto in a household without pets, and as a child I focused on the breeding of guppies—not overly inspirational or satisfying. I purchased my first farm in Dufferin county in 1977, 49 years ago. At the time, I was breeding horses, and then I added my first seven head of beef cattle to the mix. Although I did not own a single piece of farm equipment, I did have a good job in downtown Toronto, so I was able to support the farm through that income. Soon after purchasing the land, of course, the value of real estate dropped and interest rates soared.

I should say that I have three sons and eight grandchildren. My three oldest grandchildren—18, 16 and 14—are now embarking upon their own agriculture ventures. So I'm sharing this story because I know and understand how much commitment and passion is required to build a farming operation with a sufficient productive land base. When you start without access to a previous generation's contribution of land, equipment, knowledge and connections, it's very challenging.

I want to just speak to the opening of the land in northern Ontario. It's an interesting concept that will have many challenges. The clearing of the land will result in large carbon emissions to the atmosphere—20 times the carbon released by the destruction of the rainforest in the Amazon. The soil will require drainage and will need to have the top layers of peat mixed into the clay base. It may be fertile, but it will not produce the crop diversity or yields currently achieved by the soils in southern Ontario. A start-up farmer in the north would need to have all their own equipment, as the time required and the cost of transporting equipment back and forth would be insurmountable. It may increase the total agricultural land, but it must not be considered as compensation for the land lost to development in southern Ontario.

We in southern Ontario are so fortunate to have the growing conditions for perpetual, sustainable food production year after year. Supported by the three Great Lakes, we have a moderate climate with relatively stable conditions, clean water and a variety of soil types to support diverse agricultural products. We can grow almost any crop or raise almost any kind of livestock here in southern Ontario. Unlike other natural resources, our soil can continue to deliver, and in fact can increase its productivity, as long as we maintain and improve the soil health into the future. We can continue to provide jobs in the agricultural industry for many years to come, while benefiting the citizens of Ontario and beyond with a much-needed commodity.

The second item I did want to address is the issue of controlling foreign investment into Ontario farmland. At

this time, I do not believe we have the background information on which to base this decision. Do we know how many farms are being purchased and for what purpose? Are the landowners residing in Ontario, or are they based in other countries, and in which countries? Are they providing jobs for the residents of Ontario? Right now, residents of Canada currently own millions of acres of land outside of the country. Will this interest in controlling foreign ownership here block Canadian producers who want to invest in land outside our borders? Decisions of this nature must be studied carefully and must be based on factual information.

Thank you very much for listening and for your time today, and for your interest in looking into this issue.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you for that.

We're going to move to our first round of questioning. We'll start off with the official opposition: MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you to all the presenters for providing your views. This is a very important part of the process of making government work.

I would like to go first to—if I may use your first name—George. Just for background, I think all the parties supported Bill 109 on second reading, and the official opposition—I see no reason why we're not going to support it on third. I would like to concentrate on the Milk Act. I'm a former dairy farmer, as you're a dairy farmer. We had Lactalis here and they were supportive, but they were concerned that other provinces might not be going the same speed that we are, and you mentioned that we're trying to keep up to the federal legislation. Could you maybe—either you or Rosemary—help me understand what Lactalis's concern was?

1120

Mr. George Van Kampen: I'll let Rosemary answer that. She's the director of communications.

Ms. Rosemary MacLellan: Good morning. Rosemary MacLellan, Dairy Farmers of Ontario.

Yes, so, what this is, as you understand, is a coordination across the country. So this was a policy that was approved at the Canadian Milk Supply Management Committee back in the spring of 2020. That was a national table where consensus was achieved across the industry, across all provinces, along with the Canadian Dairy Commission. So now, in order for this to be implemented in Canada, we have to go all the way back to our respective jurisdictions. So in Ontario, that would be DFO, with the farm products commission, to move forward with making the change and implementing it. Ideally, we absolutely do want to have that coordinated across the country.

What we found since 2020 was that Ontario needed to make the legislative amendment before we could make the regulatory amendment. Not all the provinces need to do that, just because the structure is slightly different in how they're set up, to where they have those authorities. So now, once this bill is passed and we can get moving on the regulation, then we can absolutely—the intent is to coordinate that implementation so that this is consistent. Again, a big point of this is to be fair and equitable and

consistent across the country, so we need to do that in coordination with the other provincial authorities as well as the CDC to move forward.

Mr. John Vanthof: Perfect. I remember Rosemary used to answer all my questions when I was on DFO too.

We had one other presenter regarding the Milk Act. It was a smaller ice cream processor, and they didn't buy any products from DFO directly. I just want to put on the record, they were concerned that they might be caught up in a lot more regulations for that; I just want to put that on the record. I don't think that was—is—the purpose of this, right? It's to make sure—and please correct me if I'm wrong—that the way milk is sold now, because of the way it's dissected, is much more complex than it was 10 years ago, 20 years ago, and we're simply trying to keep up to that. Is that—

Mr. George Van Kampen: I'll start, and Rosemary will probably jump in.

But yes, that's right, John. Right now, we have, really, only control on end-use products on people that buy raw milk. Like you said, milk is dissected, butterfat and many different kinds of protein, so we have no control on the end-use—or we have no legislative authority, actually, right now on end-use for the processing on the milk components rather than just the raw milk.

Ms. Rosemary MacLellan: I'll just go back to this, John, and this is with respect to policy objective: There was a policy objective that was determined nationally, and with it then this was the solution they came up with. The idea is to come back to: Make sure we have a policy regulatory framework in dairy across the country that is respective of what today's marketplace looks like, that takes advantage of all the technologies and of all the opportunities that we are seeing before the sector. But how do we do that in a way that is fair and equitable? So that is the policy objective, which is what you're doing with the legislation.

Once we move to the regulatory part—and this is something that DFO does all the time; we do it regularly with the commission and OMAFA, is where and how then do we develop and implement and ensure compliance, which is I think what Gilles was going back to last week with respect to enforceable. Where and how then do we ensure we have a regulation that is reasonable, and that it is reasonable in its application as well as then the checks and balances to ensure that everyone is following the requirements the same way to ensure that this is fair and equitable? All that goes back to supply management. It is rooted in stability and predictability, and for producers, it's rooted in that first pillar of a fair return on pricing for the milk they're producing and selling to any processor that's using it to make any dairy product in Canada.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much.

My second question will go to Paul. You, in your presentation, talked about increasing veterinary service in rural areas, and the changes in the act will help—I agree—but they're not the total solution. You mentioned that we should perhaps change the entrance requirements for entering veterinary college, and that's come up once before—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. John Vanthof: —because the people who are going to go into large-animal veterinary practice aren't necessarily the same people who are going into small animals. Not to dumb down the process at all, but the entrance requirements are so high, sometimes we could be missing good people. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Paul Bootsma: Yes, I would. We can give examples of that from our own membership. Two young lads grew up on a farm. They were well trained in taking care of animals, and they missed the entrance because they were one percentage short on their average grades. We felt they were two very good candidates who would be large-animal vets, and they missed by one percentage. And our response to that is that character upbringing—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes questioning for the official opposition.

We'll now move to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: Paul, why don't I let you continue, because I want to follow up on the veterinary piece.

Mr. Paul Bootsma: Thank you. In that example, we felt that there were two candidates that had the character, the upbringing and the physicality, that they would be able to handle large animals. And it was one percentile that kept them out of the program. I think the application process has to include more consideration for character, upbringing and knowledge of animals than just a high percentile in the grades.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you, Paul. I know my Ontario Liberal colleague MPP Ted Hsu has had some conversations with you folks before around this, I believe. So if I'm hearing you correctly, does that mean we should have, potentially, a separate, less academic stream for large-animal veterinarian students for the agricultural sector?

Mr. Paul Bootsma: I guess—the sense is that it's the academic stream that is what allows them into the program. Perhaps that needs a little less emphasis and more emphasis on the character. If the grade is the sole factor that gets them in or out, we feel that you're missing other potential candidates. Being a veterinarian is more than academic knowledge; it's character, it's understanding of animal behaviour. The natural feel, I think, has to be considered as well, rather than just simply a high-grade value when it comes down to applying for that program.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Is there anything else you think that the province could be doing to help relieve this shortage of large-animal vets?

Mr. Paul Bootsma: Well, I know that they've expanded, made more room for applicants, and we're hoping that in a few years we'll be seeing the results of that. The current situation that there is that plays into this is that there's a large number of veterinarians that are going to be retiring. So if there's any way of just allowing more into the program, that would certainly alleviate the shortage or the expected shortage.

But also, if we have more graduates—Ontario is a large province, and if these graduates want to get into the large-animal industry, there will be opportunities in other areas. That is what we find is happening. The bulk of the veterinarians are more in southern Ontario, southwestern Ontario. And if there are more graduates, then more will be tending to go further east, going more north, and that's why I mentioned in my presentation that there's an increase in agricultural activity in northern Ontario in the Clay Belt, as it was referred to. That will also attract some of these graduates to practise in those areas. So there are opportunities, absolutely, and I think there are ways to overcome the shortage of large-animal veterinarians, but we have to work together and make it happen.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you very much for those comments and suggestions. I'm sure they're well taken by members of all parties and the government here. I have a question around long-term, multi-decade leases of crown lands for farming: Do you see any barriers to that, so that farmers can justify the upfront investment needed to prepare that land for farming?

1130

Mr. Paul Bootsma: There are two ways of looking at it. When we're looking at different things—you can put restrictions down.

I think one of the best ways is, if the industry is successful and profitable, we can manage a lot of the issues that come around our way. Maybe we need to have less restrictions for agriculture so that there is greater opportunity for the industry to grow and expand, which would then make it more competitive when it comes down to other industries competing for land, for space and so on like that.

It's one of these—do you know which side of the coin you want to look at? Do you want to restrict others so that agriculture stays productive? Or do you support agriculture to make it successful so it can work as part of the economy and continue to grow naturally because of its own success?

I'd like to think that the government would be supportive of the agri-food industry. I think we need to talk about it as an agri-food industry, which is the production of food, but also the processing and transportation, including the sales at the grocery store.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Paul Bootsma: If there's good support for that, the industry will thrive on its own. And then, we don't have to focus so much on putting barriers up, or restrictions. It just simply, naturally, grows on its own.

I think that should be the goal for any government and for all the industries: to allow them to be successful on their own.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Great. Thank you very much. We'll move on.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We'll move on to the government side. MPP Gallagher Murphy.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you very much to the presenters today. I would like to address my ques-

tion to George Van Kampen of the dairy producer committee.

I have to say, George, I thought the stats you brought were very interesting. You represent 780 dairy farmers—pretty phenomenal. That's almost 40% of our dairy farms across this great province. Obviously, you bring a lot of knowledge and a lot of voices to the table, so thank you very much for being here today—yourself, as well as Rosemary.

When I heard the stat, “\$6.1 billion in GDP”—that is huge. I am also with the natural resources ministry. That's larger than our fisheries industry in Ontario by approximately \$600 million. That's pretty phenomenal. So this is a significant industry.

What our government is doing with Bill 109 is really creating an opportunity for increasing competitiveness, as well as unlocking economic potential. If we talk specifically about schedule 5 in the Milk Act—and you did reference that in your comments; you spoke specifically about the milk pricing being brought into more of a standard, and I think that's important.

Now, I'm not a farmer myself, but I have farmers in my family, back in the old country, in Ireland. This is something my cousins always talked about: the importance of the consistency of pricing. I want to get into that specifically, because I know our government has been listening to the DFO.

You've been requesting amendments to the Milk Act since 2021 to align it with the end-use pricing policies. For someone like yourself, who has served on the local milk committee—and you have all these voices behind you—my question is, how is that kind of alignment important for protecting the supply management system?

Mr. George Van Kampen: As you know, we seem to always be under attack with the supply management system.

But just to get back—I actually represent only 400. Like in my four counties that I represent, it's 458. So, I'm obviously not very clear. And the other number is southwestern Ontario. Like all of Ontario, our GDP is almost \$9 billion in GDP, but that was just southwestern Ontario. Interest is very important just to keep the whole system—like Rosemary was saying, it was agreed upon nationally—just to keep processors honest, for lack of a better word, we need to then induce pricing to come into effect. But I know that Rosemary is a pretty eloquent speaker. She can fill in the gaps.

Ms. Rosemary MacLellan: It just comes back to the fundamentals of supply management, which has served Canada well for over six decades now, and this really comes back to that stability and predictability in the marketplace. What this will do, these changes, is they will reflect the changes that were identified back in 2019-20 that we were seeing with respect to new technologies, to how milk components are being utilized, to where those opportunities lie, to how we assure we have the right policy regulatory framework across the country to really take advantage of those opportunities. That strategy started to get worked on back then. It's very much now

focused on processing investment but also investment on farms.

What we need is to have this policy framework that ensures that we've got a fair, equitable pricing system for the milk that farmers are shipping to processors—regardless of what type of processing plant they have, if they're making a dairy product—so that we've got that fair and equitable, at that level, set on stability, predictability and supply management. For producers what this means is that consistent, fair, predictable pricing for the milk they're shipping, regardless of where and how it's being utilized at the end of the day. It really comes back to how we ensure we have a level playing field across the industry, how we continue to set ourselves up, but that we also have a framework that is evolving with the market changes that were identified almost seven years ago.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: That's great, thank you very much.

On that note, I know that the dairy end-use pricing—this includes any dairy ingredient like milk powders as regulated product under the Milk Act. I'm just curious, my own curiosity as well, given that the dairy end-use pricing is a system where raw milk is sorted into basically distinct classes based on how it's consumed or processed—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: —I don't know if you can just comment further on that, and I don't know if that's best for Rosemary or for George. How does that work exactly?

Ms. Rosemary MacLellan: It will completely depend on the product and where and how that is being utilized but there is a very transparent, predictable, published class-pricing system for all processors to use and avail. And again, this comes back to really ensuring that we have a level playing field across the industry and that it is fair and equitable across any and all types of processing. But at the end of the day, it comes back to a clear price as well for a fair return for the producers for the milk.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Excellent. Great. Thank you very much, both of you, for your comments today and for participating.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We will now move on to our second round of questioning, going over to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to direct my first question and comment to Gail. I agreed with your presentation, particularly that southern Ontario has got unique soil and climactic conditions. Yesterday, we went from Chatham to Orangeville through the back roads and it's amazing what grows here—fully agree. I farm in northern Ontario, near New Liskeard, and it's pretty amazing what we can grow there, too. It's not an acre-for-an-acre trade. I'll be the first to admit that. My family grew up in Oxford county, and an acre in Oxford county is more productive than an acre in Timiskaming. Timiskaming is a great place to farm.

But you quoted a stat—I've never heard that stat before and I'm going to challenge it—that clearing an acre in the

Clay Belt of northern Ontario is 20 times more carbon than in the Amazon. Where does that stat come from?

Ms. Gail Little: Well, it was referenced to me by someone else. But it's because of where the carbon emissions are coming from—the soil versus the leafy part of the forest. So, because it's coming from the soil in northern Ontario, it is a higher emission.

1140

Mr. John Vanthof: I have never heard that before. I agree with part—but I am going to challenge that. Where I come from, the soil is clay loam, and we cut trees. I would 100% agree that there are challenges to agriculture and development in northern Ontario that no one has really thought of—who don't come from there. There are incredible challenges. I'm not sure that that is one of them.

I'm glad you brought up the Amazon. In the Amazon, under current regulations, if you clear land—even on the least environmentally impacted land—you need to leave at least 20% of the original cover. There's nothing like that in northern Ontario. So when the government is talking about selling crown land, perhaps they need to think about the mistakes that we made when we cleared Timiskaming—because we did make mistakes; we've got huge erosion problems because of some of those mistakes, and I'm just as guilty as the next guy—that we don't make those mistakes.

You also brought up foreign ownership. I think the original of this bill—and we agree with this bill—part of the issue is to identify how much foreign ownership there actually is. Would that be a fair beginning?

Ms. Gail Little: Absolutely. I think it's about knowing what the facts really are, not just surmising what they might be or what we think they are. That's the really important part of that. So what I'm asking is to make sure that that research happens and it is based on true facts, and then we know exactly what might be involved and what the outcome of that ruling might be. I don't think that that thorough research has yet taken place.

If I could just quickly go back to—I am not opposed to farmland in northern Ontario. What I'm just saying is that it cannot be a substitute for what we have here.

Mr. John Vanthof: It's not an even trade. I fully agree with you.

I'll go to Paul. On the issue of foreign ownership, you mentioned we need more processing. If you really think about food security, should we be looking at how much foreign ownership or foreign control is in the processing sector as well? Because if a big processor decides—and it's happened here—“We're moving out of the country and grow something else.” If we're really serious, should we be looking at the whole sector, not just ownership of the land?

Mr. Paul Bootsma: Absolutely. I think we need to look into this because the question that we ask is, why has there been so little investment in new processing plants in Ontario? One of the conversations that we've been a part of is, “Let's look at what we can control here in Ontario and Canada.” The thinking is that there are regulatory burdens that prevent growth and expansion or even new

facilities being established here in this province that would automatically further the industry by processing value-added products.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Paul Bootsma: We need to look at that as well to try to keep the Canadian ownership here in Ontario and Canada because that would benefit us immensely.

Mr. John Vanthof: It's become pretty clear that your organization is in favour of—not less stringency in regulations, but more sense in regulations. But do you believe that there should be more regulation in the protection of farmland, regardless of who owns it?

Mr. Paul Bootsma: I think what you had mentioned earlier is an important part: Let's find out exactly what we mean by foreign ownership and how much of that is really there. But as I said before, if the industry itself is healthy, foreign ownership shouldn't necessarily be a big issue because the industry itself will protect itself from that. I think—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes questioning for the official opposition.

We'll now move to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you, and through you, Chair: Thank you as well to both of you here in person for your presentations today.

George, when I look at the bill here, schedule 4 and schedule 5 in relation to the Food Safety and Quality Act and the Milk Act, should there be more included in this legislation, or right now, we're waiting for kind of what the regulations are going to be and then responding from there?

Mr. George Van Kampen: No, I think we're pretty happy with just getting that end-use done.

Getting back—I know it wasn't addressed to me, but John's question, I think, has a lot of merit, actually, because farmland is a limited commodity. Once it's lost, it's lost forever, so I agree with that statement personally.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much.

Mr. George Van Kampen: Sorry about that. I think I answered that okay. But if Rosemary wants to add something, go ahead.

Ms. Rosemary MacLellan: I will just clarify: With respect to the proposed changes, this is just an enabling legislation so there will be considerable work needed to do with the regulations for moving some of those provisions from the Milk Act over to FSQA.

What we do share with the government is a very strong commitment with respect to milk quality as well as food safety standards in Ontario, and, certainly, we'll be working with them to make sure we continue to uphold the stringent raw milk quality provisions as well as the Raw Milk Quality Program that DFO is responsible for on behalf of the province.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I may as well continue with you folks around. Paul was talking about it earlier: that the province could encourage greater investment in research and development. What do you think that might look like for the dairy sector?

Mr. George Van Kampen: Guelph is pretty strong for animal safety and animal health for sure—probably a little bit more research, personally; probably a little bit more research on dairy processing, different ways of processing and different products. I think it's missing, probably, in a lot of industries, but in dairy in particular.

For animal health and stuff, I think we're pretty good with Elora and Guelph. But if Rosemary's got anything in her mind—probably; there's a lot in her mind.

Ms. Rosemary MacLellan: I would just say that, from a research and innovation perspective, it's always looking at this as a total ecosystem. So as we think about dairy, it's even upstream from the farm to then all the way through processing all the way to the consumer to then what eventually comes back around.

We do need to think about it in that more broad scope as to where and how we have those efficiencies, where and how we continue to sustain the very high standards that we do have on quality and on food safety but also, as well, animal care. Increasingly, as we're looking at the United States with some of the outbreaks that they've had, how do we also ensure we continue to maintain that strong herd health, that we have all those good requirements across the board?

Research plays a critical part in all of that. It isn't always the sexy parts of it, so I think we do need to make sure that we're considering research from all the various aspects and we don't overfund in one area versus another. But we can also be looking at where and how some of those synergies play with some of our other priorities with respect to bioeconomy, and that certainly then feeds into where and how that also supports having a very strong competitive processing sector in the province to food manufacturing. How does that relate back to some of those other challenges that we have with respect to packaging input and any of the other waste that may already exist in the sector? How do we best manage all of that?

This is a huge space and opportunity. But, again, it really comes back to, how do we look for short-, medium- and long-term? What we think of a research innovation plan—but how do we think of it as a whole ecosystem and not just silos?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Last year, I had the opportunity to visit a dairy farm, and what really struck me was the level of technology and automation that was involved in that farm. We had asked then, "Okay, the equipment that's there—where did it come from? Where was it made?" The response was the Netherlands—Holland.

Is there more that we can be doing here in Ontario and maybe Canada to support the creation of new start-ups or businesses that might already be operating and expanding into this area?

Mr. George Van Kampen: That's a very good question. I have a bunch of kids involved in dairy as well—a daughter with us and two farming on their own, and, actually, one in Nova Scotia farming on her own.

1150

We just put up an expansion where we have robots and scrapers and the whole nine yards. When you're estab-

lished, you can get the money to make those investments. But our daughter—we helped them get started, but they desperately need modernization, and we can't help them. We're stretched.

So, somehow, if farmers can get access to money, cheap money—even just access to money, because it's tough to get a loan. As you know, banks want to make sure they're good and secure before they give you any money.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. George Van Kampen: So if we can get, somehow, some money—cheap money—or just access to it even, for young farmers.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We will now move to the government. MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to all the presenters for coming out this morning to speak about Bill 109. We really appreciate all of your presentations.

I want to start with you, George. It's good to see you again. As you know, I'm the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Red Tape Reduction. You've been able to participate with me for some red tape reduction round tables.

One of the red tape reduction items in Bill 109 has to do with the merger of the Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Appeal Tribunal and the Normal Farm Practices Protection Board. I wanted to see if you had any thoughts on that change. Hopefully that will make things more streamlined for farmers.

Mr. George Van Kampen: I'm going to actually throw that to Rosemary. Personally, and as a board, we haven't talked much about that. I'm just going to let Rosemary speak on that.

Ms. Rosemary MacLellan: It's our understanding from the discussions we've had with OMAFA as to how that change will occur that it will have no impact on the business operations of Dairy Farmers of Ontario as we undertake our delegated authorities for the province. So we have not identified any issues or concerns with it.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Okay. Thank you for that.

Moving over to you, Paul: You talked about, in your presentation, the system that we have here in Ontario for getting food from the fields to market and making sure that whole system is streamlined and efficient.

There are changes in this bill about the Ontario Food Terminal—changes to the board, as well as the creation of a reserve fund to strengthen and make sure that the Ontario Food Terminal is there for many years to come, serving farmers in the community. I wanted to ask if you had any thoughts on those changes to the Ontario Food Terminal Act.

Mr. Paul Bootsma: Thank you for that. First of all, our concern was we were notified that there was a potential redevelopment of a piece of property next to the food terminal in Toronto, and that would have some negative implications to the terminal itself. So that's where that concern came from.

In terms of the rest of it: No, we're supportive of that. Having more places for people to go to increases competition and competition is good, so in the long term, we see that as a positive.

But at the same time, there's more places around the province that are running into land use issues on neighbouring properties. That's our concern, that there's just some land uses that don't suit well next to agriculture, next to processing, grain elevator storage facilities. What we're looking for is a little bit of support from the government to ensure that those facilities can continue to operate to the full extent without these challenges from different land uses coming close to them.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Yes, I completely agree with you, Paul. I think that's why it's so important to see these changes to the Ontario Food Terminal Act. It demonstrates our government's commitment to those facilities across the province. Thank you for that.

I did want to follow-up: You talked about the foreign ownership piece. Scripture—I think it's in Leviticus 25—says, “You shall not sell your land to a foreigner.” Now, I believe that's referring to Israel—that's my interpretation—uniquely. But we are seeing provinces—PEI, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta—that have already put in these kinds of restrictions.

So I wanted to ask, when we're facing so much competition in farmers trying to access land, just if you had any more thoughts on the proposed change and making sure that Ontario does not fall behind other jurisdictions in Canada.

Mr. Paul Bootsma: Yes, I think we can go along with that. For us, the conversation always turns to, why does it happen that there's so much foreign competition to landownership? Sometimes, I think the situation allows for something that is not productive. Why are foreign companies coming into Canada to purchase that land? That's because they see potential in something different than agriculture or food production. That's why we're saying, if the industry itself is strong, it can compete against this.

I think governments need to look at their own policies a little bit and ask if they've made it a little bit too easy for foreign ownership and maybe change those guidelines a little bit. But I think we all would agree that a healthy industry of any kind can support itself. Sometimes, I think the focus here in Ontario, particularly in the last little while, is so much on housing and development that we've given up on supporting some of our industries in the province.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Paul Bootsma: So the government needs to have a look at its own regulations on some of these things and say, “You know what? We've got to support Canada. We've got to support Ontario,” and make the regulations so that foreign ownership is not necessarily stopped, but not as easy as it is currently.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Absolutely. Again, that's why I'm so encouraged to see Bill 109 come forward with a

number of items in it that you've discussed today, supporting our farmers, which is really, really exciting.

Minister Jones likes to focus on the PEI example. The reason they brought in this regulation to restrict foreign ownership is a farm was purchased by a country from out east. It was a potato farm, as you have in PEI, but they changed it over to soybeans. They would farm the soybeans and then ship them directly right out of country.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes this round of questioning. Thank you, members.

This concludes the morning portion of public hearings. The committee is now recessed until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1158 to 1300.

DUFFERIN FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURE

CALEDON AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee will resume public hearings on Bill 109. The scheduled presenters are Bill McCutcheon virtually, Dufferin Federation of Agriculture; and Ed Taccone, Caledon Agricultural Society.

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

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: This is Bill McCutcheon calling. I'm chair of the Dufferin Federation of Agriculture. I think it's really important that we have food security, and I like a lot of things that are in this bill.

What I found in the past is, the weak link is sometimes the lower-tier municipalities not following the provincial policy statement. I think that's an important thing to recognize sometimes: how that gets addressed and dealt with.

Then the other one is protection of farmers through the nonpayment act. I think it's important for all commodities to have protection when not paid by processors or kill plants. I think for all commodities—I'm a livestock producer, so I'm speaking from a livestock perspective, but we have very little protection on the lamb and goat side for going direct-to-packer. We're pretty vulnerable with the legislation in place now—it really gives us no protection at all—so I would hope that you would consider including more commodities in that protection, because it's pretty difficult the way it is now, and we are very vulnerable.

Just recently, we had a packer that left us with \$122,000 in debt. We did get that money, but it took us two or three months to get it out, and then we have, really, no recourse when that happens.

The other is development of land in the north. Certainly, I think it's important to protect this land in southern Ontario, because it's the most productive land in Canada. We can certainly go north and develop that land, but the productivity is going to be far less than what we have here in the south, and I think that's really important to recognize. Maybe what also should be considered: We should put housing in in northern Ontario and not just consume the farmland here in southern Ontario.

Those are my concerns and comments on the act.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you.

We will now move to Ed Taccone. Please state your name for Hansard, and then you may begin.

Mr. Ed Taccone: Good afternoon, honourable committee members. Thank you for the invitation to speak to Bill 109, the Protecting Ontario's Food Independence Act, 2026. My name is Ed Taccone, and I'm honoured to appear today as president of the Caledon Agricultural Society. We believe strongly in the protection of farmland and in support for sustainable agriculture. We welcome this legislation, and we're here to urge the committee to strengthen it further.

Farmland is a non-renewable resource. Once productive farmland is paved over or fragmented for non-agricultural use, it is gone permanently. We ask this committee to treat high-capability agricultural land as a non-renewable resource critical to our security—something to be spent only with the greatest care.

The stakes are not abstract. Ontario loses 319 acres of farmland every day, and it's our best, most productive soils disappearing fastest. Between 1976 and 2021, the province lost more than 20% of the farmland base. That trend is unsustainable, and it's exactly the trend Bill 109 must be justified against.

The Farmland Security Act component of this bill—restricting foreign and non-resident acquisition of Ontario farmland—is a meaningful step. It will help curb speculative buying, keep land in domestic hands and give local farmers a fair chance to acquire the land they work.

But ownership rules alone won't stop the loss of farmland to development. Existing land use policies were also meant to protect agricultural land, and the numbers above show how far short that protection has fallen. Bill 109 is a chance to close that gap, not just to decide who can buy farmland, but to make sure there's farmland left to buy.

We urge the committee to pair the ownership protections in this bill with stronger, enforceable limits on converting high-capability agricultural land so growth is directed to existing urban boundaries and transit corridors rather than outward onto the best soils. As one leading Ontario planning researcher has put it, the goal should be growth that builds "in and up" instead of out, and that principle should guide how this committee thinks about farmland protection.

The Clay Belt must serve food sovereignty. We also want to raise the bill's proposal to expand agricultural access in northern Ontario's Clay Belt region. We support increasing public land access for the next generation of Ontario farmers. But we're concerned the Clay Belt proposal, as it stands, is oriented toward export production rather than toward increasing access to fresh, local food for the people who live there. Food sovereignty means more than producing food within our borders for external markets—it means the right of people and communities to define their own agricultural and food systems.

We recommend two changes: First, include smaller plots—150 acres and under—in the agricultural land

predetermination process so domestic-market-oriented farmers are part of the planning from the start. Second, publish clear, public-facing information on each Clay Belt plot—water access, housing, soil quality, infrastructure, road access, drainage and proximity to processing facilities—so a wider range of farmers can realistically assess those opportunities.

Farming requires a generational vision: Farming operates on a generational timeline, and policy needs to match that horizon. Decisions made in this committee will shape the economic viability of family farms—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Ed Taccone: —the health of our soils and the opportunities available to the next generation of food producers. Those considerations must outweigh the development pressures.

In closing, our domestic agricultural sector is aging, and one of the most important things that this committee can do is help restore young people's willingness to enter farming. The median age of Canadian farm operators is now 58, and over 60% are 55 and older—up sharply from just five years earlier. Ensuring a steady supply of young farmers isn't a niche concern, it's a matter of national economic interest.

I thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you to both presenters.

We're going to start our first round of questioning with the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

1310

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair: Thanks for both of your presentations today.

Ed, regarding the purchase of crown land for farming, would you support the idea of selling crown land with a farmland easement so that it can't be developed and is only used for farming?

Mr. Ed Taccone: I totally agree.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Do you see any barriers to long-term, multi-decade leases of crown land for farming so that farmers can justify the upfront investment to prepare that land for farming?

Mr. Ed Taccone: I can see its pros, yes, certainly, if the younger generation continue.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Out here in Caledon and Dufferin county—we've got a bit of a gridlock challenge across the GTA. I was wondering if you might have any thoughts or consideration around what the province maybe should be doing around transportation and moving people around the region.

Mr. Ed Taccone: That's a very good question, as a matter of fact. Certainly, Caledon, where I live, is very diverse in size, but we have a serious problem with transit. It's fine more towards the south end of Caledon, but as far as the northwest, we have a problem.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Bill, why don't I just pick up on that with the same question, just around getting around the GTA and gridlock and transportation. I represent a riding in Durham region, so the eastern part, and it's something

that we very much deal with in both urban and rural settings. I'm very curious, I guess, on your perspective, Bill, out in Dufferin county.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: I think there's some technology that we can use, similar to what we're using now, for people to work from home instead of having to commute. I realize that not all jobs can work like that; certainly, mine doesn't. But where we can use the technology, I think we have to maybe unlock ourselves from the traditional, "I've got a job, and I have an office, and I've got to be in the office"—well, maybe you don't have to be in the office to complete your job. Maybe that would take some of the volume off those highways and arteries that go to the GTA.

There's no rail line left here in Dufferin. There used to be one that went all the way to Owen Sound, and it's gone. I don't know whether that would be some sort of a solution for getting people from that corridor from Owen Sound through Grey county and Dufferin down into Toronto, whether that would be a viable thing to talk about. I really don't know the economics of running a railway compared to running roads. But certainly, there used to be a railway here, and maybe there still should be.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: And something you mentioned just around either working from home or hybrid work is something that I hear quite a bit. I'll have to admit, though, I was a little disappointed when the province mandated that workers should be in the office five days a week, because the more folks that are on our roads and public transit systems that are really at strain, it also impacts, then, the ability of trucks and goods and the movement of that economic activity throughout. So I would say that's something I would encourage a change in approach to.

In fact, at my constituency office yesterday, I was chatting with someone about this who works in a private business, and again, seeing some of the benefits—obviously recognizing that there are some people who have got to go in. If you're working on a farm, you're working on a farm, right—or if you're working in a store. But if we're able to get some cars and some things off the road, I think it does provide some benefits as we maybe look towards the long term around how you expand transit lines or add additional capacity to it.

Bill, just around the provisions here around foreign buyers, I think I got in your statement that it makes a lot of sense. Do you have any thoughts around the implementation of that and what the province might need to do or how much effort they might need to put into ensuring that it's effective?

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: I think it's a good idea to keep that in the hands of Canadians, because I think it's important that we control our food security somehow. I'm not sure how you police that. I mean, if somebody came to me from a foreign country and said, "Hey, Bill, will you go buy me a farm? I've got \$5 million," I guess there are ways of finding out that Bill doesn't have \$5 million. All my friends will know I don't have \$5 million.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: But I don't know. I think it's a good idea, but enforcement is the issue there for sure.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I would agree.

I think all parties have indicated that they're supporting this bill, and there are some really good things that are in the bill that will end up helping. But I guess the devil's in the details in what ends up happening afterwards, because I think it's well placed that the food we have here needs to be here, and we need to ensure we have that for future generations.

Thank you both for your time today.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We'll now move to the government: MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to the presenters for coming out this afternoon to share your perspectives on Bill 109.

I'm going to start with you, Bill, if that's all right. I want to ask some fairly specific questions about some items that are in the bill and any thoughts you might have on them. If you don't have any, that's okay, but I thought I'd try.

One is about the financial protections program. There are changes in this bill that are to support farmers, protect them from nonpayment. I wanted to know if you or anybody in your association had issues with that or any thoughts on that change in Bill 109.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: I think it's imperative for us to operate, regardless of what commodity you have, that you have the trust and the assurances that, when you sell product, whatever product that is, you're going to be paid. It's kind of a fundamental thing; I don't know if you'd call it a right. But we shouldn't have to spend our time chasing money down, getting people to pay us, and certainly that's the reality, in some cases, of what happens.

As I said before, we need to have financial protection in the livestock industry, not just for hogs and for beef cattle; it should be extended to all livestock. It's quite hard to operate when you know that you sell \$100,000 worth of livestock every week and you're trusting the people you sell it to to pay, and you know that if they don't pay, you have no recourse to get that money other than to beg and to plead for that money. I think that's no way to operate.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Absolutely.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: It's disappointing that we don't have that kind of protection.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Hopefully these changes to the nonpayment act make things better and cut that red tape, make sure that, even education-wise, businesses are aware of what their responsibilities are.

The other one that I wanted to ask about—

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: But I think it needs to specifically include those commodities because, if you don't, it doesn't make any changes at all. If the focus is on cattle and hogs and the rest of us all get left out, that's not really fair.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Right. Thanks for that feedback.

On agricultural drainage, we're wanting to make some improvements to the Agricultural Drainage Infrastructure Program to make it more responsive to modern needs.

How important is up-to-date, modern drainage for you and your members?

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: I think it's pretty important. I mean, Dufferin is in the headwater of all the rivers—that are in southwestern Ontario, anyway. We're at the high point; the air's a little thinner up here. It's important that the land has access to municipal drains that work.

I think that falls back on municipalities to make sure that we have functional drains, not drains with trees growing up in them. We have drains here that are owned by non-agricultural people. They really don't appreciate what those drains are for, and they don't really want you to come in there and clean out their drains, because they don't really realize what it's for and how it has to function. It's not just a problem for farmers; it's a problem for the municipalities too to be able to properly maintain those municipal drains so they actually work and drain agricultural lands so they're productive.

So it's extremely important for the area that I am in because we need some drainage, there's no doubt.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Absolutely. I'm downriver a little bit in Wellington county. Keep your drainage good. That's good.

1320

Moving over to you, Ed: It's nice to see you again. I met you when I previously served as the secretary to the Georgian Agricultural Society. You were nice enough to host us in Caledon.

You know education is so important in our community; it's making sure people understand what goes into the food that they eat, which is an important thing that agricultural societies do.

I had the privilege of visiting a few farms last week: a pig farm, a cash-cropping farm in Guelph/Eramosa and then as well a horse farm where they do some breeding—and at each of those three farms, there were members of the family there under 40 moving that farm forward, which is really exciting to see.

Through Bill 109, we're proposing to review the Grow Ontario Strategy. Can you just speak a little bit about education, that piece, and why that's important as we continue to make sure we have a thriving food system here in our province?

Mr. Ed Taccone: It is. Education for farming is very important. In respect to the agricultural society, we're expanding our education out there to the younger generation and the children. After our new building is up, that will be a main thing to do.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Ed Taccone: We are going to have classes for the local schoolchildren and teach them from seed to table and farming.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Wonderful. Thank you both for being here today and sharing your feedback on different aspects of the bill.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Okay, 38 seconds left.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I'm going to pass it over.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We'll move over to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you to both of you for coming to present. We really appreciate your perspective.

I'm going to go to Bill first. I appreciate your comments regarding how land in the north is not an even trade for land in the south. I farm in the Clay Belt. I've farmed in the Clay Belt my whole life and it's a great place to farm, but travelling through southern Ontario—it is not southern Ontario.

As a farmer, what I'm concerned with is we want to develop the Clay Belt, but I'm a bit concerned—and you alluded to it—that we're losing 320 acres a day in the south, and the government at one point is going to say, "But we're gaining 400 acres a day, actually, in the north."

Could you comment? Would that be a fair trade? I would like to hear your views on that.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: Sure.

I don't think that's a fair trade at all because, certainly, the soil type is different. It's hard-to-work-in ground and certainly later than what we have here. This is the best land we have in Canada in southern Ontario, if not North America. And we seem to be okay with giving it away at 319 acres a day. And yes, the Clay Belt is there, and it could be developed. I mean, that's 100%, but there is no infrastructure there.

My family moved here 200 years ago and we've kind of got things the way we like it here. We cleared the land ourselves. To go north, it's going to be at least—there's more technology now, but it's going to be at least two generations before you have enough infrastructure, before you can go to a local store and buy parts and fix equipment. You know, I have a wrecker right down the road, 20 minutes away, I can go get parts from. That just doesn't exist in the north, and it really handicaps what you can do.

So no, it's certainly not an even trade at all.

Mr. John Vanthof: You brought up another issue—actually, Mr. Racinsky brought it up—regarding drainage and municipal drains. And that's a very pertinent issue for northern Ontario because much of the land that is going to be developed in northern Ontario—no municipalities exist, so there will not be a municipality to work with to construct a municipal drain. Would you agree that that's something that we really have to look at before we start massive clearing projects and know where to drain the water?

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: Those drains have to be mapped out, and you have to know where they're going to be and where you're going to have drains, because cleared land in many areas of Ontario—including where I live—needs drains. That's the only way they're productive, is to have drains, and they need to be maintained and cleaned out.

When there's beavers in there, there can't be a whole bunch of people who love beavers and demand that you leave the beaver there. It's, "Well, the beaver has got to go," because it's more important that we have food to eat than to watch wildlife sometimes. So, yes, that has to all be worked out, because to clear land and not know how

you're going to drain it, that's not very good thinking, I would say. It needs to be the whole package.

Mr. John Vanthof: And not knowing who's going to pay for that drainage infrastructure, because no one's talking about that. I live in the Little Clay Belt, and we're already having townships who are basically going bankrupt because they can't afford to pay for the engineering for the drains, for the massive clearing that's going on already. In crown areas, there has been no thought of that at all.

I've got one more question for you. In your opinion, why were some livestock sectors left out of the livestock protection act?

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: I don't know that. I don't know what the history of that is. Certainly, the beef industry and the hog industry are much bigger industries and much bigger contributors to GDP than what the lamb industry is, but certainly lamb and goat is a growing industry. We're starting to do things like direct-to-packer sales and trying to grade product and make the quality better, and to do all of those things, we need some protection that we're going to get paid, and at this point we have zero.

It's a very, very difficult environment to operate in, and sometimes it makes it pretty hard to go to sleep at night when somebody owes you \$122,000. That may not seem like much to anybody, but it's a whole lot of money to me, because you commit to your producers to pay that—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: —and all of a sudden the processor doesn't want to pay. That is no way to operate—I checked my calendar this morning; it says 2026—that's no way to operate in 2026. We need better protection for the products that we sell, especially on the small-ruminant side.

Mr. John Vanthof: The Ontario sheep board met in Timiskaming just a little while ago, and I was surprised to learn that the sheep industry and the lamb industry is one of the ways that people are getting into agriculture now, so it would be incumbent to actually protect those people as they're getting in.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: I think it would help it expand. We're an industry that's pretty rare on the red-meat side, because we only supply 30% of what the domestic demand is—which is pretty amazing for us, but we can do a lot better. We need some infrastructure, we need some rules and we need some assurances that we can move that industry forward.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes our first round of questioning.

We will now move on to the second round with the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Through you, Chair, just to pick up on that, just a little personal anecdote: One of my most favourite things that I like to cook and smoke is a rack of lamb. If we could find more Ontario lamb here, I think that would be fantastic. It doesn't take too long in the smoker, as well, for those watching at home; it's not a brisket, which is very good as well.

But I'm very curious—and maybe this is the lead into that from both of you—what ideas that you might have to help get more young people into farming and to reduce those barriers to entry to get into farming, because we know the equipment is very expensive and there's a lot of capital that's required. I'm curious, from both of you, what could be done to get more young people into farming. We may as well start with Ed, who's here.

Mr. Ed Taccone: Certainly for young farmers to continue on, it has to be made attractive to them. Education is first and foremost. We do have some very bright people, a young generation of people that are attending Guelph university and expanding their knowledge on how to farm better. That in itself will grow into a great entity for food sustenance, sustaining food.

1330

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: What about K-to-12 education and part of school curriculums and showing that farming can and is a viable career, not just something that rural kids do?

Mr. Ed Taccone: That should be brought back. I remember as a young child going to school, and we were actually taught where our food came from. That's gone by the wayside.

It's just very evident when we have our fair. You get young kids that visit the fair from urban areas and don't know very much about—you know, some of them haven't even seen an animal, where their milk comes from or where their vegetables come from. So it is very important that there should be a curriculum in school starting at a very young age, yes.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you, Ed.

Over to you, Bill. What can we be doing to help reduce those barriers for entry to young people into farming?

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: [Inaudible] actual need for anybody in agriculture, if you're in an urban setting, and we need all the bright young people we can get.

Certainly, there is some curriculum at the grade 3 level, but it's been a long time since I've seen a grade 3 that knows he wants to be in agriculture when he's—or she's—in grade 3.

I think it needs to be in our high schools, that it's a viable alternative, because there's lots of technology that's needed and lots of areas where we need expertise, and not just knowing how to farm but all those support industries and all that infrastructure that is needed. I think that their boards are a great tool to do that. I mean, I've been involved with many ag awareness programs, usually the Wednesday or Thursday before the fair, where we invite the schools in. We have stations with dairy cows, sheep, honeybees and all kinds of things—and crops. Those programs operate on a shoestring budget, and they shouldn't. It should be way more important to the public to have those educational programs in place for all levels of kids, not just kids in grade 3.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thanks, Bill. I asked a question to the other group earlier around research and innovation, partnerships with post-secondary and what more that we might be able to do here in Ontario to make farming not

just more economically viable—it is in many cases—but the use of technology and innovation here.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: Yes. Certainly, that's an important piece. The University of Guelph certainly does a good job at that.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: It probably could require more funding in that area, but absolutely. University of Guelph is a great place—I spent four years of my life there at one point—and it needs to be properly funded, for sure.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Just one last follow-up: Anything that you can think of, especially in areas near urban centres, that can help make farming more profitable? Because farmers are going to be less likely to sell land if you're doing very well.

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: I'm not sure about more profitable, but certainly, the public needs to be more understanding of how we get around on highways and normal farm practices—of what actually happens on a farm. And a lot actually has to happen on farms. For instance, for me in the sheep business, I have guard dogs running around and they bark all night, and so normal farm practices are important—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes this questioning.

We are now going to move on to the government. MPP Gallagher Murphy.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you to you both for being here and presenting today. I like that you're both from the local agriculture groups.

One of the items that we have not really discussed much today is what Bill 109 does as well with increasing competitiveness, specifically when it comes to tribunal reform. This bill does look to consolidate OMAFA's two tribunals into one. That's specifically—and I'm probably sure you're aware of this—the Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Appeal Tribunal as well as the Normal Farm Practices Protection Board, because both of them actually perform similar functions under the legislation, which obviously creates more duplication and inefficiencies.

The goal of this bill is to obviously improve operational efficiencies for the sector. By consolidating the two agencies into one under the new name—which is proposed as the Agriculture and Agri-Food Protection Tribunal—we are really looking to enhance client experience as far as enabling better use of technology, establishing a more consistent service standard and timelines for issuing decisions. When I look at that, I am more than confident that you would probably both agree that that is a good measure to increase competitiveness.

That being said—Bill, if I can start with you—given how Bill 109 is moving forward, what would you like to see prioritized for Dufferin's farm families as part of the province's broader Grow Ontario Strategy?

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: Certainly, all farmers need legislation they can operate under, and they need to be able to be free to do things that need to be done on farms that maybe residents that are not rural or living in the rural

community don't really appreciate or like. We move live-stock up and down roads—yes, there's manure on roads—and we have guard dogs that run around all night chasing coyotes and bark like hell in front of your house. I guess that conflict between those non-rural people living in rural areas is a problem. I'm not insinuating that most don't understand, because I think a lot of them do, but it's just another impediment we have to making money.

In my personal opinion, there are too many houses in the rural area in Dufferin already. We've fragmented our agricultural system by allowing—what we used to do is allow lots on rural designation that were still class 1 and 2 farmland, but now, there are three houses for every 50 acres on those. I think that is quite an impediment for all of us that want to make money in the agricultural business, and it needs to stop.

One of our biggest jobs as a federation is keeping an eye on our local municipalities to make sure that they don't encourage that, and it's a job—almost full-time.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you for your comments there, Bill.

Then, over to you, Ed, if you had any comments with regard to the tribunal reform. And then, same question to you as well: What would you like to see prioritized for the Caledon farm families as part of the province's broader Grow Ontario Strategy?

1340

Mr. Ed Taccone: Well, certainly, the security of farmland. Right now, in Caledon, there are subdivisions going up that are taking up so much farmland, and every time they take up farmland, that's less food that's going to be growing for the people.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Ed Taccone: Securing and saving farmland is ultimately what Bill 109 should concentrate on, and stick to that agenda for the future.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Well, thank you, Ed. I appreciate both of your feedback on that question.

I just want to throw out a couple more comments on the tribunal reform because I thought it was interesting to know that the Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Appeal Tribunal actually heard 168 cases over the last year, and the Normal Farm Practices Protection Board heard 12 cases. So when you think about that, the amount of administration and work and time that goes into it, efficiencies, obviously—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes the time for the government.

We'll now move on to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm going to concentrate on you, Ed, for a few seconds. You talked about education—and I'm going to recount something that happened to me. I have four kids. They're all hard-working and successful, but in high school, all four of them were told that they were too smart to be in agriculture by their guidance counsellor. And if there's one thing that I would change, is I would have every guidance counsellor in Ontario visit a modern

farm, a modern mill, a modern mine, so they actually realize what those industries are. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Ed Taccone: I certainly would. I certainly would.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm just going to go back to you for a second, Bill: Would you agree with that as well?

Mr. Bill McCutcheon: Well, I think that's part of the role of local chair boards, perhaps, and certainly of the federations. It's hard to train everybody at once, but we try and concentrate on the education system and get to as many kids as we can through events that the board of trade has on job opportunities. And yes, it's completely off the radar for most kids, that there are actually jobs in agriculture. And we need the smartest kids—we need everybody that we can get to help move this industry forward and keep it competitive.

There has to be a better link, somehow, between federations and local education—and how we can work together and share the resources we have to make sure that those kids know that those are really viable opportunities and viable employment, by going into agriculture.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, and there are not just jobs in agriculture; there are really good ones, and I think a lot of people don't know that.

Ed, all the parties are in favour of Bill 109 and the part about foreign investment in agriculture, but in the bill, there actually isn't anything that actually strengthens protection of farmland, regardless of who owns it. So whether it's a corporation, whether it's domestic, whether it's foreign, there's nothing in this bill that makes it any harder to develop good farmland into subdivisions. Do you think that should be added into the bill?

Mr. Ed Taccone: Absolutely, it should.

Mr. John Vanthof: So how important is it to actually protect farmland?

Mr. Ed Taccone: One of the things that is critical right now is the amount of farmland that's being lost. We need a turnaround to gain farmland and keep it as a very important entity.

How important is farmland? Let me say this: Would you put a residential subdivision on the Holland Marsh? No, we would not—at least I don't think we would. So it shouldn't be any different from any other farmland that's in our area.

One of the strongest things for securing farmland is that it makes Canada and our province more self-sufficient in the food sector.

Mr. John Vanthof: The official opposition has put forward legislation that whenever a piece of farmland has an application to put a transfer to, whether it's another farmer or a corporation or an investor, there should be an actual agricultural impact assessment with teeth. They would have to prove that there's a better use of that land than growing food.

And there might be. You used the Holland Marsh as an example. If someone wanted to build a vegetable processing facility in the Holland Marsh to process the vegetables that were there—you know what? That might be a better use for those acres than growing the vegetables, right? But

a subdivision would not be. Would you agree with a policy like that?

Mr. Ed Taccone: Well, I would, if it was to that benefit, but at the same time, it can't be vague, either. If you're going to put something in place and protect something, then so be it.

Mr. John Vanthof: Right, because—once again, let's make this clear: We agree with this bill. But the working title, the farmland security—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. John Vanthof: Would you agree that, actually, this bill doesn't make farmland any more secure?

Mr. Ed Taccone: That's where my vagueness comes in.

Mr. John Vanthof: Right. Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you. That ends this session here.

BEEF FARMERS OF ONTARIO

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): I'll now call on Jason Leblond. Please state your name for Hansard, and then you may begin.

Mr. Jason Leblond: I'm Jason Leblond. I'm with the Beef Farmers of Ontario.

Thanks for having us meet here today. I know there have been some hiccups with scheduling, and I was glad I was able to make it in. I happened to be down in Guelph already, as it was, so it just meant an extra sleep away from home, and my wife had to do chores for an extra day.

I'm Jason Leblond, Beef Farmers of Ontario's president. I'm a beef farmer from Chisholm township, near Powassan, Ontario, just south of North Bay.

Overall, BFO is pleased to support Bill 109. We appreciate the government's decision to bring forward legislation that is squarely focused on strengthening Ontario agriculture. The bill addresses several practical issues that have been discussed with our industry for years, and we want to acknowledge the minister and the ministry staff for working collaboratively to get this across the board.

We will briefly comment on three components of the legislation. Beginning with the Beef Cattle Marketing Act, BCMA: BFO supports the proposed amendments. These changes respond directly to recommendations that originated from our membership and create a more consistent approach to licence fee collection while preserving an appropriate exemption for cattle processed for personal use. In our view, the amendments improve fairness across the industry while recognizing that the way producers market cattle continues to evolve.

1350

Turning to the Veterinary Professionals Act, we believe these changes will help the legislation to have a meaningful impact for livestock agriculture. Many beef producers struggle to access timely vet services, particularly those operating in rural and northern communities. Addressing that challenge requires making the best possible use of the veterinary professionals already serving those regions. We

therefore support expanding opportunities for vet technicians to play a greater role in delivering animal care and providing services outside of traditional clinic settings, where it's appropriate.

We also encourage the government to continue to engage with the livestock producers in the province as regulations are developed. Large-animal medicine is very different from companion animals. Veterinary care often happens in pastures, in barns, in handling facilities—not examination rooms in a veterinary office—and the regulatory framework should reflect those realities. Practical, flexible regulations will help ensure these legislative changes achieve their intended objective of improving access to care for our animals.

Lastly, I'd like to speak to the provisions dealing with farmland protection and the crown land aspect of that. Ontario's farmland is one of our most valuable strategic assets. If our productive farmland is permanently lost, it is almost impossible to replace. We therefore support measures that help keep farmland in agricultural production and strengthen Ontario's long-term food security by limiting foreign ownership.

We also welcome the commitment to improve agricultural access to crown land. Northern Ontario represents one of the few remaining opportunities to responsibly expand agriculture in our land base. We want continued efforts to streamline the approvals process and reduce administrative barriers. That will help producers invest with greater confidence while supporting economic growth in those rural and northern communities.

In closing, we believe Bill 109 is a thoughtful package of measures that supports both today's farmers and the future of Ontario's agricultural sector. We appreciate the government's willingness to work with the industry, and we encourage the committee to support the bill.

Thank you for your time. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

If I could just give a forewarning: I am hard of hearing. I work real hard, and the speakers are pretty good. I could hear you back there, but sometimes I have to ask for a repeat.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): All right. Thanks for your presentation.

We'll start our first round of questioning with the government: MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you, Jason—nice to see you here today. First, I want to thank you for your commitment. I know in a couple of other meetings you told me that you took a year sabbatical from your job to do the job here at BFO, and that commitment proves how important it is to you and to all of us in Ontario.

One of the proposals of Bill 109, as we move forward, was beef check-off, and that's directly with communications with the Beef Farmers of Ontario. Can you expand on why that is so important to the BFO?

Mr. Jason Leblond: I was part of the counties that were putting these motions forward at AGMs for many, many years. We believe it's important for everybody to pay their way. There are many things that happen under

the BFO's daily operations that benefit all cattle producers across our province, including the whole nation, because we are members of the Canadian Cattle Association as well.

Our goal is to listen to the membership. It did take us several years to move forward with conversations with the government. This was ongoing for quite some time, but when we did finally start having those conversations, which would have been two or three years ago, it was about trying to find the right bill to put it into. I've actually heard other MPPs in the House talk about how it's hard to get everything in front of you all.

So it's important for everybody to pay their way. It's really that simple.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thanks a lot, Jason.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: It's nice to see you again. I saw you a couple of days ago in Wellington county, but I really thank you for coming and sharing your perspective.

I want to ask about the Clay Belt, since you're from northern Ontario and we're obviously looking to see what kind of opportunities there. I was just up there a couple of weeks ago myself, up in MPP Vanthof's beautiful area, a great farming area. So just speak a little bit about the opportunities that you see in the Clay Belt.

Mr. Jason Leblond: The opportunities up there are immense. What we're thinking of, and what has been discussed with many of you on different occasions—we're talking about a fraction of the amount of land that is available to go into agriculture. People have gone up there. We were doing what was called Beef North in, I want to say, 2018. It was right about the time I came onto the board. I had seen documentation, and we had dumped some of our own Beef Farmers of Ontario money and producer money into figuring out how to make that process work.

There was lots of information gathered from already productive farms in the area, and they gave feedback on what would be needed. The possibilities are—well, they're already occurring. You can take sideroads and see where land has been. Some land has been cleared. Productive farms are in place.

I was up there two or three weeks ago now, and there was an Amish community in—I think Charlton is the right little town. I was talking with those producers there, and they have a whole community built there. I think they told me there was 40 families; I'm not positive on that number. But that's one example and that's just one little, wee community.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: I agree. I saw a group of young people there from that community playing volleyball all together, a huge number of them, so that is definitely, definitely true. I actually passed some horse and buggies on the road as well.

I asked the previous presenters about changes we're making to the nonpayment act. Do you have any thoughts on that, on making sure that we're streamlined and that when you sell your cattle, that you get paid quickly?

Mr. Jason Leblond: I don't have a lot of experience with that part of things. I have never had a problem being paid. But the process needs to be clear, and the producers, as well as the sellers—everybody needs to be protected, right? So for that part, we worked with the sales activities and the sales barns and the livestock dealers.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Jason Leblond: It's important, and we think that that part, moving forward, was at the direct request of the people involved in the industry.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: And you mentioned you work, obviously, with other provinces. The foreign ownership of farmland restrictions—about five provinces across the country have already brought in those kinds of restrictions. How important is it for Ontario to keep pace with other jurisdictions like Alberta and Quebec when it comes to foreign ownership of our farmland?

1400

Mr. Jason Leblond: It's super important. Our land needs to be protected, and it needs to be protected for—in our case Ontario producers, but that has been seen and done across many provinces in different ways. I do recognize that different provinces have different rules.

It's important for it to happen. It's easier to protect now before we have a problem.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That ends the time for the government.

We'll now move on to the official opposition: MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thanks, Jason, for taking the time, and thank you for your support of the bill. This is one of the few bills that we all support, because there are many good things in this bill.

I'd just like to thank Beef Farmers of Ontario for helping us all out by being a sponsor of the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme; I think that's a pretty big deal. And thank you for taking some time. I took my intern to see your farm.

I would like your perspective, because you are a first-generation farmer. You started from scratch, and now you're chair of the Beef Farmers of Ontario. I would like your perspective: As the Ontario government, what are a few things that we could do to help more people get into farming? Because you know what it takes, because you did it.

Mr. Jason Leblond: You have to find some people pretty stubborn—that's myself, and my wife was agreeable to try. She didn't know what she was getting herself into, to be honest with you.

But, honestly, when we as Beef Farmers of Ontario come forward with ideas and things like what's in Bill 109, taking the time to listen. And then, of course—in my typical fashion, I'll be blunt—getting things done in a timely manner. For us to spend years asking for things seems counterproductive, especially to people who are our style of beef farmers. Our patience is not always so keen. So it's continuing to see and listen to us—all parties have had conversations with us in Toronto, and we appreciate

that—and continuing to recognize, like some of the things in the bill, that there's need for improvement, and working with us on those subjects.

Again, I use the number often: About 67% of the farmers in Ontario are a scale of operation like myself, and they work off farm also, so we are investing our incomes from our day jobs to make and feed Ontario. Like MPP Rosenberg mentioned, I took a year off from the job, so I don't get a paycheque for a year. Again, thanks to my sweet wife, I'm able to do this. But if we recognize that it's not always a large operation, and protection of farmland or access to farmland in northern Ontario for somebody who would be at my scale, a couple hundred acres, that would be pretty key, and in a timely—a good fashion. I'm sorry; I'm missing the right term, but a streamlined fashion.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to pick up on that, because it's a really good point. We're both from northern Ontario, and we both know the opportunity that is there. There is lots of opportunity there. And it's been very frustrating for individual producers to gain access to crown land. And I applaud—I don't often applaud the government, but they're going in the right direction for a one-stop approach.

The thing that might stop it, though, is: Is this access going to actually be for the starting, the small? The 67% of farmers, are they going to have access to the crown land, or is it going to be for institutional investors? And if it turns out that it goes to institutional investors, even if there's a caveat that it can only be used for agriculture purposes, the small farmer will not have access to that land. I think that's something that we need not to take 10 years to figure out because—you mentioned it—we need to have something in there that, in people's minds who should access that land, they actually have the ability to access it. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Jason Leblond: Actually, I would. Without seeing the structure of how things are going to work, it's hard to speak to that, but I would love to see where there is some type of criteria or a percentage so that it's fair. Some people—larger organizations—maybe have the skill set to push things through the system faster than a person just starting out. So that would be fantastic to see that it's equitable across our industry.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. John Vanthof: I think we would all like to see the process, because although we're discussing it at the same time, access to crown land isn't even in the bill. It's being discussed at the same time, but it's not part of the bill. So we would all like to see that process, because the process is going to be very important.

What we're concerned about on this side is that he or she who writes the biggest cheque—because there are big players in agriculture who can write one cheque and control big chunks, and a typical producer like you would never have access.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We'll move on to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: It's nice to see you, Jason. Thanks for being here. Sorry it's another day not at home, but I guess you'll be heading home right after, and now you'll have a lot of chores to do to when you get back to pick up the slack, right?

Mr. Jason Leblond: That's right.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I wanted to ask—it's not in the bill, but around the breeder loan program and why you think it might be taking so long, and whether you think it could have been included within this bill that we have before us today.

Mr. Jason Leblond: Again, my day job was a municipal government employee, so I do understand there are processes and it does take time. Nothing is ever fast enough for a guy like me.

With all due respect to the staff and the processes in place, I believe we are really close, actually. In one of my last conversations with OMAFA staff—and Minister Jones actually took time to meet with us on, I think, the 26th or the 28th—I think we are close. I think we are at least close enough that it could go on to treasury now for them to start to look at, because that takes time.

I don't think OMAFA staff had all the answers that they needed to include it in this bill. That's based on what I understand.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Fair enough. I understand it's relatively low-cost to the government itself, so I know this has been something that's been coming up a few times now. If we want to be keeping up with other jurisdictions in the country—I think Alberta, for example; Saskatchewan as well—it makes a lot of sense that we see more progress. We need to see more progress on this, so I appreciate your very diplomatic response today.

I know it was asked yesterday at committee, and the minister wouldn't say necessarily why, but that discussions are ongoing. It's our hope, as Ontario Liberals, that those discussions come to a conclusion soon and that we're able to see this and see progress here for the beef sector.

Earlier in your remarks, you were talking about the shortage of large animal vets. I'm curious, from your perspective, what more the province could be doing to help relieve that shortage.

Mr. Jason Leblond: Trying to be diplomatic, there's been investments: the increased intake of 20 additional students for vet school. There's Lakehead University: Beef Farmers of Ontario just donated \$75,000 to help finish off one of the meat labs—that's the wrong term, but one of the buildings—and a skeleton for them to study.

1410

So all of us are trying hard, recognizing the benefits for—there is currently a grant funding program for vets and they can get, I think it's almost \$50,000. I apologize; I don't have everything memorized. But it is coming to an end shortly—in a year, maybe—and that will be before any of the grad students, the first cohort, comes out.

The goal, ultimately, with this program for the vet college is to have people in the north so they learn to love the north, just like the northern medical school. I have a friend who is a teacher at the northern medical school, and it's working. The same concept should work for the vet school. I think we talked about it at Queen's Park on our barbecue day, about keeping that program going. It hasn't had great uptake, but there hasn't been the northern cohort involved yet. So we think it would have potential.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: How do you think we can get more young people to choose this as a career? Second to that, should we have a separate, less academic stream for large animal veterinary students for the agriculture sector?

Mr. Jason Leblond: We've been told that there are people turned away all the time. I know of some from my region, actually, who were turned away. It's a popular practice. The problem is it's a lot easier to deal with a dog and a cat than it is with a cow or a bull and horses and pigs and everything else that—I'm partial to cattle, right? That's work with the vet college and the CVO to figure things out, but they would know first-hand.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thank you. I'll just follow up on the next round.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): We'll move over to the government. MPP Gallagher Murphy.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you very much, Jason, for being here.

Now, I wasn't here yesterday. Could you tell me, whereabouts is your farm, then? You said it's in northern Ontario.

Mr. Jason Leblond: Yes. We are in northern Ontario. It's 20 minutes south of North Bay, so it's Powassan, and then just over to the right is Chisholm township. It's the northern border of Algonquin Park—in that northwest corner, is a way to say it. But I am the most southern northern Ontario guy in the—normally speaking.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Well, that's okay. I call that the north, so that's fine.

Thank you for that. I just wanted to clarify because it's going to go hand in hand with one of my questions.

But first, I want to start with a stat, because I love stats. I understand that 55,177 direct jobs and \$3 billion in GDP is tied to Ontario's cattle value chain. That's pretty amazing. I never realized it was that huge. I think that's important because it's one of the reasons why we are doing what we're doing with Bill 109, to make some important changes to the legislation so that we can keep the beef sector competitive.

Now, that being said, my question to you is this: What does having a one-window approach for agriculture land, for the Clay Belt—how will this help get access to land?

Mr. Jason Leblond: Coming from northern Ontario, if you have to talk to the Ministry of the Environment, then you're calling a 1-800 number. If you're lucky, you can find an office.

I work for the municipality of North Bay—a bigger community, just like Sudbury, right? So then, you're going to go the Ministry of the Environment, then you're going to go down the road to the Ministry of Natural Resources; you've got to bounce around all over the place. The city of North Bay, being the main hub-type area—if I went even further north, those offices may be only satellite offices, to be honest with you. It's time. Meanwhile, you still have chores, and it's haying season and then it's crops. You have a limited window. If there was a one-window type of location, that would be streamlined and far less onerous for producers to access that land.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Excellent. I'm the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Natural Resources, so of course I wanted to pose that question, because I've heard these types of comments from our northern neighbours. Thank you for responding to that.

Another question for you on Bill 109, because when we look at this bill and as it moves forward, my question would be: What would you see as being needed to be prioritized to support the beef farmers as part of our province's broader Ontario growth strategy?

Mr. Jason Leblond: It was mentioned by the opposition here or the other party, but the breeder loan program; it's going to see dividends, we think, within those first couple of years. People are getting access to financial resources to start your herd or increase the size of your herd at reduced interest rates and things like that. Those are all fundamental to growing our industry.

We've seen some investment in the production, like the meat processing sector. The chair and I were at the opening of the Parkhill meat plant just a couple of weeks ago. That was a great and sure sign that the sector is growing and has possibility to grow. I can't give you one specific thing, but working with us and having conversations with us and then, like I said before, acting in a timely manner—which I know is not easy. I don't do what you do for a living, or government staff. Continue to work with us to see where the investment in the industry would be helpful.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: That's great. I appreciate that feedback.

I was just going to comment that, last week, I was at a conference and one of the MLA representatives was from Alberta. We were having a discussion about beef, especially given we were eating beef, and the comment was around, "Well, you have plenty of this in Alberta." Actually, they're bringing in a lot of Australian beef right now. So I would have to say, the conversations that we've had with the DFO over the last few years now—I would have to think that this is prudent, that this is helping inform the revisions that we want to make in this legislation, because we would like to continue to eat our local Ontario beef, that's for sure.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes the government's time.

We're going to move over to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: You are a very diplomatic responder, and I commend you for that.

I also would like to commend Beef Farmers of Ontario because your annual barbecue is one of, if not the best event that's held at Queen's Park every year. I've just got to say that.

I'm going to express some frustration—not with you; I think you're doing a great job—but the breeder loan program, it's not reinventing the wheel. As the member said, we are importing beef from Australia, ungraded. This isn't last week's problem.

1420

It's kind of frustrating because you've been coming into my office for several years, talking about this. I've been talking to the minister, as have the third party, and—

Interruption.

Mr. John Vanthof: Someone is trying to call me. It happens to be my wife, and I'm trying to shut it off—there. You're the only person that I shut my wife off for.

Mr. Jason Leblond: I appreciate that.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm not trying to put you on the spot, but how important is the breeder finance program, and how successful has the feeder finance program been as a blueprint?

Mr. Jason Leblond: Thank you for touching on that. Feeder finance has been in place now for—I think it's 30 years.

Again, MPP Vanthof, you mentioned that I'm first-generation, so sometimes I make mistakes in the timelines because I wasn't around when they started, but it's a blueprint that is successful. Government has invested in that program and helped us increase the levels of involvement in the program, and it is working. We are actually maxed out, I believe, already, or really close to being maxed out. So that is a demonstration of a program, government-designed, with beef input, that is working really well. The breeder program is a mirror image of, so it should work.

The problem with prices and the importing of beef is because the beef imports are cheaper. Consumers are struggling and we want to help them in any way we can. Our cost of production in Ontario and in Canada, our cost of land, is higher, so that causes us to have that difficulty for our pricing. But the additional factor in that is the supply and demand, and our supply is drastically low. We had a very small increase in our cattle retention, our heifer retention, this past year, the numbers say—I think it was 0.4%. Again, I'm saying a number but without having it in front of me. Don't quote me. But that is all across our country.

We need the cattle herd to grow. The way we can do that in Ontario is with the breeder program. So the sooner we get that in place—we will be shortly into breeder sales next month and the month after. We are likely going to miss that window because the breeder program—hopefully, people are going to see and hear us talking about it

coming, but there is no guarantee of that. I guess if I'm going to be any type of negativity, it would be that: We need it now. We needed it yesterday. We needed it a year ago, one year previous May—when we brought it forward the first time.

Mr. John Vanthof: If I could just switch gears a little bit, talking about the Clay Belt and crown land, it's, for lack of a better term, really sexy right now; everybody wants to talk about it. But BFO was talking about it long before anyone else—long before. You had a sustainable model and it was a pilot project, I believe, that you were—if you could just lay that out a little bit.

But I just want to acknowledge that you were talking about it way ahead of anyone else and that you were focusing on sustainability—on grass, on pasture. I'd just like you to expand on that.

Mr. Jason Leblond: So predecessors to myself—it was still in place and conversations were being had when I joined the board in 2018. But the scale and the models were—there were seven test sites, pilot sites, that were supposed to start and never did.

I see it on my farm: Just the other day, I was prepping and there was—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): One minute remaining.

Mr. Jason Leblond: —a lady going past my driveway incredibly slow with her window open, but her phone was sitting up on the dash, and she was listening for birds. I get birders at my farm often. Sometimes, the wife drops off the husband, and he goes golfing at the golf course that's two doors down, and then she's birding. It's really interesting, but that's what's possible with these farms.

The scale of the farms in the projects that we had suggested was 1,500 acres—not 160, like most farms. In my area, a farm is 100 acres. In the north, in MPP Vanthof's area, they're 160 acres. But it's economy of scale and it's the scale of making the farm sustainable for two individuals to work on that farm.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): That concludes the time for the official opposition.

We'll move to the third party. MPP Cerjanec.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Thanks once again for all your comments, Jason. Sometimes I hear the Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade say we're in a war with the United States. One part, and I think rightfully so, the minister is doing is looking at new markets for Ontario, as he should be.

I'm curious: Within the beef sector, how does the expansion of the financial protection fund—or, let's say, other measures that might be needed—help explore new markets for great Ontario beef?

Mr. Jason Leblond: We're always working to try to expand our market, but the truth is Ontario beef is sought after worldwide. We have markets in Saudi Arabia and Japan, so protection of the financial protections in place helps when we're giving, for lack of a better term, the sales pitch about the security and the supply. Those are all factors why Ontario is sought after. Our systems in place, the fact that we have so much moisture here and our corn production: Those are all factors that create the incredible demand for our product.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Within the bill, do you think there's anything that could be improved in it? Are there any, maybe, ideas for amendments that this committee could consider after hearings are over?

Mr. Jason Leblond: We would definitely be open to talking with any member of the committee if there are ideas or conversations that they would like to have, for sure. Without knowing how things are laid out within the processes, it's hard to say for sure. I think my statement was pretty clear: We believe in the bill. Some of the comments around the table have been valid in wondering, and we have those same questions, but there is nothing that I see that I'm concerned about at the moment.

As a person that wants to see our land protected—the previous speaker was talking about that, having the land protected from foreign investment—we know it's a problem in other countries. Why would we wait for it to be a problem here before we act on it?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: One last question: What's your favourite cut of beef?

Mr. Jason Leblond: I'm a steak guy. We just had this discussion again the other day. I'm solid steak, and hopefully tonight when I get home, that is what I'm having. That's the treat my wife gives me when I've been away for several days: I'm met with a nice steak dinner and some French fries.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I hope that's there.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Steve Pinsonneault): Thank you, Jason, and thank you to all the presenters.

This concludes today's public hearings on Bill 109. Seeing there's no further business, this committee is now adjourned until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, August 12, 2026.

The committee adjourned at 1430.

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