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Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

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Standing Committee on the Interior

Comité permanent des affaires intérieures

Protecting Ontario's Food Independence Act, 2026

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

1st Session
44th Parliament

Wednesday 12 August 2026

1re session
44e législature

Mercredi 12 août 2026

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffier : Stefan Uguen-Csenge

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Wednesday 12 August 2026

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES

Wednesday 12 August 2026

Mercredi 12 août 2026

The committee met at 1000 in the Listowel Golf Club, Listowel.

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 Andrew Dowie to be the Chair.

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

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Yes.

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

PROTECTING ONTARIO'S FOOD INDEPENDENCE ACT, 2026

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

Consideration of the following bill:

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

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Good morning, members, and welcome to Listowel. The Standing Committee on the Interior will now come to order. We're 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, every presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. After we've heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes in this time slot will be divided into two rounds of 6.5 minutes of questions from each recognized party. I will provide a verbal reminder to notify you when you have one minute left for your presentation or allotted speaking time. Just so you know, it will be an interruption or speaking over to keep our clock going.

ONTARIO VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

TRIPLE A CHEESE LTD.

PERTH COUNTY BEEF FARMERS

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): I will now call on the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association, John Stevens, CEO; Triple A Cheese Ltd., Jay Kirktown; and Perth county beef producers, Joost van der Heiden. Come on up to the front.

We will start with John Stevens of the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association. You will have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard and you may begin.

Mr. John Stevens: Good morning. I'm John Stevens, chief executive officer of the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association, also known as OVMA. Thank you for having me here today. I am very pleased to be here today to speak to Bill 109, specifically schedule 9, which relates to the Veterinary Professionals Act.

I would first like to take this opportunity to thank Minister Jones and the ministry team for their continued work on the Veterinary Professionals Act. We appreciate the collaborative approach and ongoing stakeholder engagement to ensure that the act reflects the needs of the profession, pet owners, farmers and Ontario's animals.

This act has been more than a decade in the making but is still not in force. Bill 109 is an important step towards implementation, and OVMA and its members want to see it move forward.

Through the development of the act over these past 13-plus years, OVMA has highlighted the challenges that veterinarians face under an antiquated regulatory framework that no longer reflects modern veterinary practice. The Veterinary Professionals Act is a significant step forward, supporting coordinated, team-based care while protecting animal and public health, food safety and Ontario's agricultural sector. Bill 109 is necessary to advance the implementation of the Veterinary Professionals Act.

We've proposed amendments to strengthen the act, enhance its effectiveness and its longevity. These recommendations are outlined in our submission to the committee.

One proposed change to section 21, regarding accredited facilities, concerns us. This section has been the subject of ongoing discussion and misunderstanding. Given that, OVMA recommends that the government strengthen the proposed language to clarify the intent surrounding the accreditation exemptions. Section 21 specifically addressed the circumstances in which members may practise outside an accredited veterinary facility, and OVMA supports the specific exemption concepts that were developed through the College of Veterinarians of Ontario transition council.

Specifically, we believe that exemptions should be limited to those working for the crown, those practising under federal or provincial legislation, and veterinary technicians carrying out a treatment plan developed by a veterinarian. These concepts were extensively researched and refined, including through public consultation.

Our concern is that the wording in Bill 109 goes significantly beyond those circumstances. As drafted, it would create a much broader regulation-making authority that could later be used to permit independent, stand-alone models without clear oversight from the veterinarian. This would represent a significant change in the delivery of veterinary care in Ontario, and that model has not been the subject of the same consultation, research or impact assessment that has informed this entire process to date. OVMA is recommending clearer language that limits exemption authority to circumstances that have been properly consulted on.

One of the clear themes that we have heard through these committee hearings is the need to improve access to veterinary care. We agree; access is an important issue, and we believe that Bill 109 is an important part of the solution. Improving access doesn't mean simply creating more points at which an animal can receive service. It means that animals can receive the right care at the right time from the appropriate professionals within a system where there is continuity, communication and accountability.

Veterinary medicine is strongest when veterinarians and RVTs work together as an integrated team. An integrated, team-based approach allows veterinary professionals to contribute their skills on maintaining continuity of care and appropriate oversight. That model can support access while also protecting animal welfare and public safety.

When care becomes fragmented, animals may only receive part of the care that they require, and they need to be referred elsewhere for diagnosis or for treatment. This can create additional costs for pet owners, delays in care and poorer outcomes, particularly when animals require timely or urgent attention. That is not improved access to care.

It's important to remember that veterinarians are the only professionals authorized to perform the full range of activities under the act. That's including making a diagnosis and providing high-risk medical treatment. These safeguards protect both animal and public safety to help prevent fragmented care and confusion about professional accountability.

Many jurisdictions allow varying degrees of delegation and autonomy, as will this act, but veterinarian-led diagnosis, treatment planning and accountability remain important safeguards in veterinary care.

A fundamental change to the delivery of veterinary care should be supported by evidence, research, consultation and clear assessment of the impacts before it's enabled through legislation. The new framework can and should provide greater flexibility in how veterinary professionals contribute to care while maintaining professional collaboration, continuity of care and clear authority. This framework has been designed to protect the public by ensuring veterinary medicine is delivered within an integrated, team-based model of care. So let's be sure to maintain that.

OVMA supports the Veterinary Professionals Act and would like to see Bill 109 passed so the new framework can finally take effect. We are asking the committee to adopt the amendments outlined in our submission that will preserve the safeguards around coordinated veterinary care and allow Bill 109 to move forward without unnecessary delay. These recommendations will protect animals and their owners while ensuring that the new legislation sets a clear benchmark for other jurisdictions to follow.

Again, I'd like to thank the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness and its work related to the Veterinary Professionals Act. I thank the committee for its time and consideration.

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

We'll move to Jay Kirktown of Triple A Cheese. You'll have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard and you may begin.

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Good morning. Jay Kirktown, acting on behalf of Triple A Cheese. I would like to thank the committee members for taking the time to listen to our presentation and obviously provide some feedback to the ministry on the proposed bill.

It should be understood that we don't oppose the introduction of Bill 109, Protecting Ontario's Food Independence Act, but oppose the proposed changes to the Milk Act. We believe the proposed changes to the Milk Act would provide additional authority to the Dairy Farmers of Ontario, DFO, which could limit choices for dairy products and weakens the consumer's choice for competitively priced dairy products.

Our understanding is, if DFO receives this additional authority, they plan to utilize end-use definitions on products that are considered finished products in many jurisdictions. With this assumption, they plan to upcharge dairy processors who utilize these finished products in their operations to manufacture other dairy products. This planned upcharge increases the operating costs of certain dairy processors who do not have the ability to recover this new cost of operating their business.

Maybe you're just wondering who Triple A Cheese is. I'll give you a bit of an outline here. Triple A Cheese Ltd. is a small-to-medium-sized privately owned dairy company that resides in Mississauga, Ontario. They have been in business for over 30 years. Current owners of Triple A Cheese have been operating the business for about eight years now, growing the business and continuing to invest in the business, trying to strengthen their ties to the consumers, to the industry and the community. Triple A Cheese manufactures a range of cheese products as well as some yogourt, sour creams and dips.

Triple A Cheese would be considered an outlier by DFO standards in the dairy industry. They do not buy milk from the DFO but rather buy dairy ingredients—cream, skim milk powder, MPC, butter, UF milk—from their competitors in the marketplace to manufacture their dairy products.

Triple A Cheese is exactly the type of company that DFO is targeting with these proposed changes to the Milk Act—by DFO definition, a non-milk buyer that manufactures dairy products. Why targeted by DFO? Because DFO believes Triple A Cheese has a competitive advantage by utilizing dairy ingredients that they buy from the marketplace. Most of these ingredients are purchased from their competitors. Does that sound like Triple A Cheese has a competitive advantage?

Currently, DFO has no authority to audit or review the dairy processing operation of a non-milk buyer with no association with DFO. Triple A Cheese is a registered dairy processor with OMAFA, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness; and CFIA, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and is audited regularly to meet industry standards. Triple A Cheese Ltd. is also an approved plant by USDA grade A standards and is required to meet dairy products standards for products sent to the US.

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Triple A Cheese is in a precarious position. They would like to buy milk to support DFO and the business and be a cheaper source of ingredients for their product mix. If Triple A Cheese went down this avenue, they would be required to spend millions of dollars to potentially receive milk from DFO, acquiring quota, a requirement in Ontario, revised processing equipment to manufacture, and constructing a new milk receiving date to meet the DFO requirements for receiving milk. Even though the growth of Triple A Cheese business continues to increase the consumption of dairy products, which increases the milk production in Ontario, Triple A Cheese is not entitled. DFO is trying to force the smaller, medium-sized non-milk buyer into a position that is not workable or upcharge their current business, which is not sustainable in the future.

Changes to the Milk Act: The proposed changes to the Milk Act would appear to be small, but they change enough in definition of "regulated products," currently defined as milk, cream, skim milk, and butter—basically, all liquid products traded between companies or plants that are not required or considered finished products. The proposed changes to "regulated products" would cover all milk products—powdered products, anything of that nature. This proposed change along with the regulation change in Ontario that's required would provide DFO the authority to audit and review all non-milk buyers' production, with the intent to upcharge these companies for any ingredients used in the manufacturers that classify dairy products.

Even more concerning, DFO's intent to upcharge these ingredients, utilized based on end product utilization—cheese, for example, in class 3, versus a DFO class 4 price from the skim milk powder USA competitive price based on their public class price, fully penalizing a manufacturer for not buying milk from DFO. DFO has no intent to consider the market price paid for these ingredients or reflecting the non-milk buyer's real cost of producing these dairy products. DFO's rationale for their potential upcharge: create a uniform marketing condition for all processors, being defined as fair for all processors. How does that equate to fair, if you do not have the ability to secure milk from DFO and they use this class pricing model to upcharge a non-milk buyer? The class pricing system was revamped as part of the customer trade agreement. Producers agreed to an ingredient class, class 4, for all components except for the butterfat, which remains at a domestic price, that is competitive to US dairy market price converted to Canadian dollars, adjusting for Canadian cost of conversion for these products. Producers believe they are losing revenue based on these finished products being utilized in dairy product manufacturing.

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

Mr. Jay Kirktown: These products' acceptable utilized jurisdiction—and certainly no upcharge is considered or required.

A reasonable question: Why aren't other processors objecting to the Milk Act? Most processors remain quiet on this proposed upcharge to receive milk from DFO, and charges that have no impact on them. As you might be aware, four large dairy processors control about 75% of the milk nationally, and even a higher percentage in Ontario. They're already the benefactors of the lowest ingredient costs for their dairy products. It remains a battle for these small, medium-sized processors to compete in the marketplace with the large processors, with the scale of their operations and the range of dairy products they can offer in the marketplace. With the proposed changes to the Milk Act, some of these small and medium-sized non-milk buyers will fail to exist, should this proceed.

Providing DFO more authority in the supply-managed system that we operate in today will do nothing to increase the consumption of dairy products and will only increase the cost of manufacture for some dairy products for the non-milk buyers, with the need to pass on increased costs to consumers.

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

Next, we'll move to Joost van der Heiden, Perth county beef producers. You have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: Good morning, Chair and members of the committee. My name is Joost van der Heiden. I'm a director for Perth County Beef Farmers as well as a director for Beef Farmers of Ontario and a local cow-calf-to-finished producer just outside of Listowel. I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I'm pleased to provide our perspective on Bill 109.

I want to begin by clearly stating that we support Bill 109, and we appreciate the government bringing forward legislation with such a strong agricultural focus. Ontario agriculture is diverse, and the challenges facing a beef farm in one part of the province can look very different from those facing a producer somewhere else. Bill 109 addresses several of these challenges, and we appreciate the government listening to the producers and bringing forward practical measures intended to strengthen Ontario's ability to produce food.

I'll address the three areas in the bill in turn.

First, the proposed changes to the Beef Cattle Marketing Act: We support these amendments and particularly appreciate the province listening to our members. These changes reflect resolutions debated and strongly supported by BFO members, going back to 2018 and 2019. Fundamentally, this is about fairness. The beef-cattle market has changed, and not every animal destined for beef moves through the traditional sales transactions. The amendments would provide greater consistency across marketing channels, while maintaining a reasonable personal-use exemption of up to two animals per year.

The second area is access to veterinary professionals. I recognize this issue may not resonate as strongly with producers here in Perth county as it does, clearly, in other areas of the province. But BFO represents producers from every region of Ontario, and access to large-animal veterinary care is a serious concern for many of our producers, particularly in northern Ontario as well as some areas in eastern and southern Ontario. For that reason, we support making better use of the entire veterinary team. The proposed changes would create regulatory pathways for registered veterinary technicians-owned businesses and allow authorized activities to take place outside traditional accredited veterinary facilities. That additional flexibility could be particularly valuable in areas where veterinary resources are scarce and producers may be travelling significant distances to obtain services or have to wait for veterinary services to be provided. As to how regulations are developed, we encourage the government to recognize that livestock veterinary care often looks very different from companion animal practices. Care happens at farms and barns and handling facilities, and sometimes out in the pasture. Regulations governing mobile and on-farm service need to reflect these practical realities. We also encourage continued consultation with farmers and agricultural organizations to ensure the final rules work for livestock producers and the regions where improved veterinary care and access is most needed.

The third area is farmland security and agricultural access to crown land. We strongly support the intent of protecting Ontario farmland from foreign acquisition. Farmland is the foundation of our ability to produce food, and protecting both its ownership and its continued agricultural use is important to Ontario's long-term food security. Ontario continues to lose farmland to non-agricultural development. And once land leaves production, it's effectively gone; once paved over, it will never be a pasture. Strong safeguards that help keep agricultural land in the hands of farmers and available for food production are therefore important to our sector. The crown land provides another area where the regional differences in Ontario are worth recognizing. For a beef producer here in Perth county, access to crown land is understandably not a significant day-to-day concern, but for the broader Ontario beef sector, particularly for producers and communities in northern Ontario, it represents a real opportunity. The great northern Clay Belt has significant potential for agricultural expansion. Bringing even a relatively small portion of suitable land into sustainable agricultural production could support new farms, strengthen northern communities, help maintain processing and infrastructure, and increase Ontario's overall food-producing capacity. The key is making access practical. We support both the sale and long-term lease of suitable crown land for agricultural production. We believe the province can help by identifying appropriate parcels and addressing some of the significant preliminary requirements associated with accessing land, including environmental and archaeological assessments and Indigenous consultations. We would also encourage the government to expedite crown land applications and consider reinstating the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp.'s former land clearing grant, which previously helped support the growth of northern beef production.

I think that regional perspective is important when considering Bill 109 as a whole. Not every provision in an agriculture bill will have the same significance to every farmer in every part of Ontario. Veterinary access and crown land may be less pressing concerns for producers in Perth county, but they can be major barriers or major opportunities for beef farmers elsewhere in the province. As a representative of both the local association and the provincial Beef Farmers of Ontario, we see value in policies that recognize those regional differences and strengthen the sector as a whole.

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In closing, we support Bill 109, and we appreciate the government's focus on agriculture. The bill improves fairness within our sector, creates opportunities to improve access to veterinary care, strengthens farmland protection and opens the door to responsible agriculture expansion in northern Ontario.

I'd like to thank you, and I'm pleased to answer any questions from the committee.

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

The first round of questions will begin with the government side. MPP Rae, the floor is yours.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you to all the presenters, and welcome to Perth–Wellington, to my colleagues who may have not visited our beautiful part of the province. I want to apologize to everyone for the construction that we had getting to the beautiful Listowel golf course today. But as you know, we're talking about building Ontario as a government, and it's a prime example of a $10-million investment in the north end of Listowel, part of our $235-billion plan to build infrastructure across Ontario. So we did have to take a dirt road to get into the golf course, but half my riding is a dirt road, so you now understand my daily struggle in some instances as well but also, as some of the local presenters—and I know John Stevens has connections to this part of the world as well.

Talking about the importance of agriculture locally, Perth–Wellington has the most commodity groups, family farms—not total, but the most production in the entire country—well, total as a value of farm cash receipts, even more than some Quebec ridings. I'm very proud of that fact. It's a billion-dollar industry locally. I know some of my colleagues were commenting on how beautiful it was today, and lots of investments here locally. So it's great to be here and have the committee here to talk about Bill 109 and our government's proposals under this: obviously, modernization across a couple of acts, also supporting our beef farmers, as Joost was mentioning.

Joost, you were talking about the proposal to ban foreign ownership of farmland in the proposed government bill. I was just wondering if you could share with the committee, roughly, what is the cost per acre in Perth county right now for a piece of farmland?

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: Right now, prime land will sell for as high as $50,000 an acre.

Mr. Matthew Rae: So $50,000 an acre, for my colleagues who may be watching online—and just demonstrating a lot of potentially nefarious foreign actors looking to land-bank just based off the value of that land, and then that is not then, potentially, in production. Obviously, I don't want to speak for Joost, but locally ensuring that remains within a lot of family farms—there are over 4,000 family farms just in my riding alone—and ensuring that we have that protection there, Chair, to ensure that it's there for the next generation and it's not a foreign conglomerate or a foreign government, in some instances, coming in and purchasing that land.

Sticking with the beef farmers: I know you were talking about some issues locally for Perth county but also at a larger level as well around crown land from—some of my colleagues in—northern Ontario as well as in the Clay Belt. I was just wondering if you could expand a little bit on that, Joost, why that's so important for the province to look at how we can continue to work with the Beef Farmers of Ontario around expanding some of that land in the Clay Belt and other areas to really provide that opportunity for the next generation of family farms.

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: Any opportunity for cheaper land for the next generation—because as we talked about, the cost here of land in Perth county starting off, for a young producer, that's one of the biggest barriers. If he can access crown land in northern Ontario, it's at a lot cheaper cost.

Another thing that we can do to help young farmers start up, and you are well aware of this, is the access to community pastures anywhere in the province and hopefully forming alliances with some of our conservation authorities to make the land accessible. That would be a great opportunity for young producers to actually carry on the torch.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Yes, that's great. I know I hear it from people my age and younger in the agriculture sector, the need to unlock some of that land in community pastures. Even in southern Ontario—I know, down in my colleague's part of the world, in Lambton, the St. Clair conservation authority does some great work with the local beef producers around community pastures there as well.

Switching a little bit to Jay, another great constituent of Perth–Wellington, I just want to say, here this morning representing his employer: I know Triple A Cheese has grown a lot over the years. I know you weren't with them the entire time of your career but working with them recently. I was just wondering, in your opinion—I know you've worked for a variety of milk processors or producers—what can the provincial government do more to support that industry, especially the processors or the cheese manufacturers? We have some locally too, smaller ones. What do you think the province could do to support those individuals?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Thanks, Matthew, for the question.

In reality, Triple A Cheese, even though we're not a milk buyer, are supporters of the supply/manage system. It has worked well for all processors and has worked well for producers.

Our concern is, where do you draw the line to giving the producers, the DFO, the authority to start managing every component of the milk? You sort of have to step back. Where is the finished product, and where does it start that—you know what?—DFO is now controlling the total marketplace, not just the milk supply? That's what they were assigned to do, control milk.

They're now in a situation where they want to control all the components, how it's used and how much they can charge for that.

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

Mr. Jay Kirktown: That becomes concerning for small or medium-sized operations. It just does not line up well to keeping all processors in the same environment as we try to move forward.

Mr. Matthew Rae: I appreciate that, Jay. It's, I think, important for all of us to hear that and how we can support some of those smaller cheese processors and others.

I think of Stonetown cheese in St. Marys in my riding as well—not the same size as Triple A Cheese in Mississauga, but obviously, we support there. How can we continue to support those food processors?

I think I'm out of time, right, Chair?

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

Mr. Matthew Rae: That's fine. I'll give you back the 20 seconds, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): All right, thank you.

We'll move to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you to the presenters. It is an honour to be in Perth–Wellington.

We've travelled a lot in the last couple of days. I farmed my whole life in the northern Clay Belt, and I farmed in the Clay Belt before it was sexy. There is no comparison; it's a great place to farm, but it is not here. This is a fantastic place to farm.

I just want to put on the record that there should be more access to crown land. We should fix this, but we are losing so much land in southern Ontario, where it's the best land, probably, in North America, and it's not an even trade. If you're going to clear 400 acres a day in northern Ontario and say we're gaining farmland, that is not the actual truth.

Anyway, what we're really here for is to listen to your opinion. I would like to start with Jay. We've worked in the same circles for a long time, and I respect your opinion.

On the processing side, part of the issue, I think, is that how milk was sold used to be much simpler. Now it's broken down into much more—I'm not trying to defend. We're in support of this act, but when you mentioned upselling, is it—what I'm trying to understand is: DFO is going to given the power to look at components when they're sold the first time, but are you concerned that they're going to be able to recharge on the same component again?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: That's exactly it, John. With the proposed changes, they will get the revenue when they make a finished product. That finished product—and we'll pick an example: either skim milk powder or MPC. If it is sold to another processor that utilizes those components—because it's really just protein and lactose—in a manufacturing of another product, DFO's intent with this authority change would be to upcharge them; that is, increase the price of those components back to the original class. It would be a class 4 component that they originally got paid for. They would want to upcharge that company that is using the components to whatever class they used in—in most cases, cheese—therefore costing the current manufacturer even more money than we're buying from the marketplace.

Our concern is, DFO is not interested in what you paid for or how you secured those. They're going back to their class-pricing system and upcharging you right from the base. We're saying, "Guys, that is not fair to any operation and in any business environment."

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. You're indicating that they could, but are you sure they're going to?

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Mr. Jay Kirktown: John, again, fair question. Again, in our conversations—and I've got some examples from work the DFO has done with their thinking on the system—the intent would be exactly that. They would be going back to the class-pricing system and upcharging the processor based on those components.

Mr. John Vanthof: Is there a side to this to try and stop components coming in from other markets?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Again, valid question, John. It's one of these situations where our understanding is from the DFO's perspective. They would upcharge imported ingredients, the same as they would if they were produced domestically. To us, that becomes even a grave concern. Our international companies that export product to Canada would not see this as a fair trade by any stretch.

Mr. John Vanthof: I would really like to thank you for coming because it adds a perspective that I think that we need to look at going forward.

I'd like next to go to Mr. Stevens. Thank you for your presentation. I know during my farming career, when I started—I'm old enough—the only time you called the vet was for a big problem. Later on, actually, the most important role of the vet was herd health. If we're consultative—you obviously called the vet when you had a big problem, but the biggest role was to prevent the big problems from happening. The changes that are being proposed here will allow veterinary techs to help with vaccinations and things that are more—I don't want to use the word "easy"—more mechanical than the actual consultative part. You're in favour of that, in principle?

Mr. John Stevens: That's been the foundation of this entire legislative reform project, is determining that we would use with the utilization of RVTs so there are functions that they're able to provide that are items that the veterinarian wouldn't have to do with.

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

Mr. John Stevens: The concern that we've shared is the amendment as it's written is really too broad and the pathway to creating a fragmented system of care that really could make access more difficult—because as you've referenced, a herd health approach, you have a veterinarian who arrives on site, does the herd health check and the little problems become big problems if they're not caught. The veterinarian's presence in many of these cases continues to be vital, so the concerns that we've expressed is the legislation as written could create fragmented care where the appropriate health professional is not on site when they need to be, and that's a concern to us.

Mr. John Vanthof: Just—and I'll do it in my next section—that doesn't address areas where there's actually just no longer veterinarians, where they're retiring. In my next section, I'm going to ask what your advice would be on that.

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

We will move to the third party. MPP Smyth, the floor is yours.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Hi, everybody. It's lovely to be here today, despite the construction—I know it's not under your control—but we're used to that wherever we go anyway. Anyway, I'm really happy to be here on this committee. I've never sat on this before so it's really great to hear concerns in agri-business in this province and learn more and more about it.

I think with my question, I wanted to start with you, Joost, Mr. van der Heiden, about the beef producers and when it comes to veterinary care. You were talking about access to large-animal vet care being a real concern, especially in northern Ontario. You support making better use of the entire veterinary team. Could you just explain to me again what that looks like? You were talking about the mobile teams and what you're hoping for that would help producers in the region.

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: Some of the vets that are available in northern Ontario already work for the government in the form of the animal welfare services or inspections in livestock areas. If we can access and make use of their services on a part-time basis and provide more care in the north—because we are so limited in the number of vets that can actually practise in the north. The challenges of the north are, too, that because of distance, the veterinarian can maybe make five calls a day in the north, compared to veterinary down in this area can make 20 or 30 calls in a day and actually make a decent living.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And that's the mobile part of being able to take it on the road. Typically, you don't take to a facility, do you? Is most large-animal vet care on premises? You can educate me on that.

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: In most cases, especially if the clinic is not set up for it, the veterinarian will visit the animal in question on the farm. Here in southwestern Ontario, sometimes we can bring animals to a clinic and they can be treated there. But most practically, and to reduce the stress on the animal, it's normally better to do it on the farm than it would be to load an animal and transport them when they need care.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay.

And then, I guess I wanted to take your comments to John Stevens. Hello. Hi there. What are your thoughts on what we just heard with dealing with vet care in the north and that proposal?

Mr. John Stevens: I mean, we're all here to discuss access to care, and I think one of the items to highlight at the beginning is the changing nature of access-to-care challenges. We're talking both the large-animal and, of course, on our side, the small-animal world.

We're all familiar with pandemic pets and access-to-care issues during the pandemic. That has seen a significant change since the end of the pandemic. So, again, in the pandemic, you had long wait times at emerg clinics and veterinary practices not accepting new patients and that sort of thing.

Really, what we're seeing in the data, broadly speaking, is a slowdown. We do track veterinary practices that are hiring, who are looking for veterinarians, and we're looking at a roughly 10-year low in terms of practices that are hiring. So what we're really moving into is less of a broad access-to-care issue and not enough veterinarians. What we're running into is not enough veterinarians in specific locations.

OVMA has been very, very busy advocating with the various ministries and with this government on programs. We have seen the Veterinary Incentive Program that incentivizes new graduates to work in northern and remote communities.

We've been very, very active on the Veterinary Assistance Program. That's a program that provides support for veterinarians in northern and remote communities for travel costs, mileage. That will help increase access. We would like to see much, much more happening with that program. It has a significant level of potential.

In terms of broad access issues, there is slower traffic within practices. We just need efforts to get more veterinarians in the places where they're needed in remote and northern communities.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Kind of reflects human care, too, in this province.

You talked about that team-based approach to veterinary care. What exactly does that look like? You were talking about the fact that the vets are the ones that do everything, from diagnoses etc. How does that team-based care model look in your eyes, on the ground?

Mr. John Stevens: Well, it's integrated, team-based care. The notion that we've been talking about through this whole project is, "one profession, two professionals." So you have integrated team-based care working as a team within a practice. You have the veterinarian attending to duties that are appropriate for them and registered veterinary technicians attending to duties that are appropriate to them.

When it's in a singular practice or an integrated care environment, you have medical records that are consistent, you have communication and the animal owner has that proper expectation of what to expect. When you're dealing with fragmented care, you would have the public with the perception that they're going to one care provider that maybe actually can't provide the level of care that they're thinking about. You then end up in a situation where the animal owner perhaps has an acute problem, they're going to seek that care from someone and that care is actually not available. So the best solution would be to have that integrated care facility, which is the veterinary practice.

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

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Right.

You mentioned some amendments that you've put forward. Can you just quickly highlight, for those who don't know and don't have access to those, in bullets—less than a minute—the key amendments?

Mr. John Stevens: Yes. With an accredited veterinary facility, we already have that level of delegation. But within the act's regulations, in our recommendations, we're looking for concepts related to the exemptions for being able to work in an accredited practice, including veterinarians working under the crown—that's federal and provincial legislation—and veterinary technicians working under a treatment plan developed by a veterinarian. So again, integrated care. And that's in our package, of course.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Right. Thank you very much.

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

We'll turn back to the government side. MPP Cuzzetto, the floor is yours.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I would like to thank all three presenters here, but I'd like to speak to Jay on this. Jay, it's great to hear that your factory is set up in Mississauga. I know it's north, not south where I live, but thank you for setting up there.

1040

Now, how large is your facility? I heard it's 100,000 square feet, but compared to Santa Lucia, Salerno? I know Saputo is much bigger, but compared to Santa Lucia?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Actually, Santa Lucia would be larger than they are.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Larger than Triple A?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Yes.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Okay. Well, I've known Domenic for many years. I used to—

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Actually, the other way around: Triple A Cheese would be larger than International Cheese.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Okay, which is Santa Lucia, correct?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Yes.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: You were talking about the DFO affecting imported and domestic cheese. Can you elaborate on that a little bit more?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: No, impacting domestic and imported ingredients such as skim milk powder and/or MPC or UF milk sort of thing—that's where they would be targeting: the potential upcharge to get it back to the class pricing that they expect to receive for the product.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: And what would you like to see in this bill to avert that issue?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: The simple answer is, I would like to see the Milk Act stay the way it is. I'm not a supporter of seeing DFO secure more authority around—again, DFO's authority is exactly that: marketing milk, controlling the finished product—or, let's call it semi-finished, which is cream and/or skim milk or even liquid MPCs that move a lot today. That should still be in their control because it's not a finished product. Once you move to a finished product such as butter, skim milk powder or MPC, their authority should not continue. You're now interfering with the marketplace and the value of various products.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: And do you support supply management?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Absolutely. As Matthew indicated, I've worked for a number of companies—a multinational, a very large co-op—and I'm very supportive of supply management. It has done wonders for both producers and processors in this country. But you just need to decide, where do we draw the line to say, "We need control of this system"?

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you.

Mr. Jay Kirktown: You're more than welcome.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Gallagher Murphy, the floor is yours.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you to the presenters today for being here. I have to admit, being a suburban gal, it's wonderful to be out here in this great riding of Perth–Wellington, so thank you to everybody who lives in this wonderful riding for hosting us here today.

My question is to John Stevens for the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association. Thank you very much for your presentation. There's something I picked up on that I wanted to ask you a question about to make sure we're on the same playing field here. We all know that the Veterinary Professionals Act was created in 2024. It has not yet been enacted because we are working out the regulatory items. That being said, I noted something you mentioned when you were answering a question to MPP Smyth. You talked about the concepts of exemptions. In the proposal that we have forward in Bill 109, we are specifically looking to get exemptions that would clarify, really, both the individuals and businesses who are providing the care services to animals outside of the accredited facility. So, that could be the veterinary technician. It could be, as you spoke about, the mobile care providers, which I think is great and something that I've been hearing just yesterday and so far today is necessary, to go and visit the farm. The team approach sounds like the perfect one.

That being the case, when I think about OVMA, you truly have a long history—150 years, and that was in 2024. When you go back to how you originated, it was with surgeons who met up in Toronto in 1874. I think that's an interesting history, so I'm glad you're here at the table today because we are creating history here too.

So, my question to you, John, is, how do you see Bill 109's modernization of veterinary legislation building on the long history of the OVMA?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): There's one minute left.

Mr. John Stevens: Great.

Well, thank you for the question and thank you for the research. We're very proud of this profession and the role OVMA has played in promoting it through the decades.

Bill 109, in terms of the Veterinary Professionals Act—yes, so, it's not been enacted, and we would like to see it move forward. This has been a long-standing project that we and other organizations would like to see finished with the official proclamation and enactment of the act.

Bill 109 largely—perhaps I shouldn't use the word—is housekeeping. There are a few minor amendments that were required to finalize the Veterinary Professionals Act. The bulk of the work through the VPA has already been completed, and we're just looking forward to official enactment. We need the passage of Bill 109 to see that forward.

The challenge that we've expressed is that there is language in there that's creating unintentional results, where it's too broad. So, we're looking for very narrow amendments for concepts that have been approved by the College of Veterinarians of Ontario's transition council. These are concepts that have been very well researched—

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

We will move on to MPP Vanthof. The floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to go to Joost, and I'm following up: Bill 109 is one of the few bills where there's no poison pill in it, and we all support it. I would like to follow up to Mr. Rae's comment: We all are concerned about farmland being controlled by being a line item in a foreign corporation.

My question to you: Is there much difference in being a line item in a foreign corporation than being a line item in a Bay Street hedge fund? Because that's what's happening in our area. We support this bill, but I'm wondering, should we also be looking at land speculation by not just foreign actors but other people who have no interest in agriculture other than the speculative value of farmland?

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: I do believe that's a great concern. I do believe we need to make sure that the farmland stays in the control of the farmers and that we prevent speculation, which could drive, ultimately, prices up and it make it inaccessible to farmers.

So, yes—leave the farmland with the farmers and make sure there are rules in place so we know that what it's going to be used for is going to be agriculture.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. Thank you.

My next question is to you too: Beef Farmers of Ontario have been talking about expansion into northern Ontario long before other groups. You were talking about the Clay Belt before the Clay Belt was sexy.

But, having said that—and we're fully in support of developing the Clay Belt; I've made my living in the Clay Belt—would you agree with me that, if crown land is opened in the Clay Belt, it should be made available to farmers and not to investment funds and land speculators? To actual farmers—would you agree? Because what we're afraid of is that the land, if it's opened up, will be gobbled up and farmers will end up having to rent it, but the land's speculative value will never go to them.

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: Yes, this kind of builds on my answer to your previous question as well. Leave the land with the farmers so we avoid speculation and driving the land prices up, putting it out of reach of farmers, basically. Land owned by farmers will be maintained better than land rented by farmers. If it's yours, it's a lot easier and it makes more sense to take care of it as well. We are very willing to take care of the land, especially when it's owned by the farmers.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes. You mentioned community pastures and, obviously, crown land. Would your organization also be—would you be okay with long-term leases of crown land?

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: I think long-term leases would be an excellent way to get young farmers started—it would be at a lower cost—as long as we make sure that the leases don't get extended to such a length that it becomes almost an ownership position. That could create other problems, which means we would support leases, preferably less than 49 years but longer than five or 10 years, so it's actually part of long-term planning for the farmer.

1050

Mr. John Vanthof: I hear you, because a lease for pasture—you need to be sure that when you make the investments needed, you can recoup those investments.

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: Correct.

Mr. John Vanthof: But possibly a long-term lease with a buyout provision that you have proven that what you're using the land for is what it was intended for: That would be a viable solution?

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: That would be a very viable solution.

The other thing I do like to mention, too, is that when this would be put in place, the amount of area, the acreage, would be large enough for families to sustain. In southwestern Ontario, like you mentioned before, 100 acres can produce a fair bit. In the north, you probably need five times the acres to have the same production. So when we open this up for young farmers, make sure there's enough land available so they can actually make a go at it and don't have to supply their farming income with a part-time or full-time income off the farm, because it doesn't work well.

Mr. John Vanthof: Coming from northern Ontario, as much as it pains me to admit that, yes, maybe 500 acres in northern Ontario is equivalent to 100 acres in Perth, I kind of agree with you—as much as it pains me.

How much time do I have left?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You have a minute and 30 seconds.

Mr. John Vanthof: A minute? Back to Mr. Stevens: I know we've got more seats in Thunder Bay for vets, but is there anything else that we can do to ensure that there are going to be adequate veterinarians across the province, including northern Ontario? Is there anything else that we're missing?

Mr. John Stevens: I would suggest passage of this act with the amendments that we have put forward to tighten those exemptions, and that would ensure speedy passage of this. The work that the Ontario Veterinary College is doing to increase more seats, following the Northern Ontario School of Medicine model, is very, very strong, and we've seen data that shows NOSM having results in the north on the human health care side of things.

The veterinary assistance program that I mentioned earlier is under a different ministry than this one. That one, as I've shared—we've been very, very busy working with that ministry and would like to see some significant changes to that program. And then, the continuation of the veterinary incentive program for new grads would be a very strong option as well.

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

We'll move to MPP Smyth. The floor is yours.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I want to go back to Mr. van der Heiden and talk about farming and farmland, and 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 never be developed and only used for farming?

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: I would be highly in favour of that.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And when it comes to clearing crown land for farming, especially in, say, northern Ontario, how should we draw the line between agriculture and forestry and natural spaces?

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: Some of the land that's available in northern Ontario, to my understanding, has already been cleared, and it would be very easy to access for further development as farmland. When it comes to primary lands that haven't been touched, I do think we need to preserve the land for what it is. It's a very fine line, and it's going to be an interesting challenge for the people who want to expand there.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: We've talked a lot about—you've mentioned hedge funds and foreign ownership, and that is a real concern. That's happening because there's a speculative side of it but there's also the side—and you said a few times here, "Leave the farming to the farmers." How do we get the farmers? How do we maintain the farming industry domestically in Ontario, in our regions here?

Being someone from the city, it's not often you hear, "Let's go start some farming. Let's be a farmer." It's intergenerational, right? How does this sector get preserved so that it is passed on? Because we were talking about the cost of farming equipment, the cost of land. Farms can be passed down, but then my colleague here—he's got children, he's a farmer, but they're not farming. So what's the magic answer here?

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: I don't think I have the magic answer to the question—but making it attractive for young people. I immigrated myself. I came here to look for greener pastures—it might be fitting—and opportunities that weren't available in Europe. And yes, I've seen them. I was able to build a farm enterprise that has been successful. My sons are not part of it full-time—they work part-time off the farm—but they've definitely seen the benefits of it as well.

We need to make it attractive. I think in the last number of years, instead of people looking down at a farmer, we've actually gained respect. We need to do a better job in educating the consumer where their food comes from and appreciate what we're doing, and I think that's going to be one of the ways to get more people back into farming and interested in farming. We see more first-generation people farming than we have ever seen in the past. That's an indication that there's people willing and trying and want to choose, because farming is not just a job; it's a way of life.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: It sounds like a really good PR campaign for farming. Get the marketing going on there.

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: I'm passionate.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: You mentioned you're an immigrant. What are your thoughts on immigrants who want to come to this beautiful country, and access to farmland and how that should be handled?

Mr. Joost van der Heiden: I think people that have a plan in place for what they want to do should definitely be considered in what they want to do. And whether that's in farming or whether that's in a profession where there's a need, I would embrace people coming here with a passion for what they do and the willingness to work.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay. Thank you.

I wanted to go to Triple A Cheese. Everybody is very, very interested in your comments about what's happening with Triple A Cheese and with the DFO. The bottom line here is, does the survival of a small-to-mid-sized business—a non-milk buyer—is that in jeopardy with what's going on with this situation with the additional authority to the DFO?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Again, I—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: You're worried. You're clearly worried about what's happening in this industry.

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Absolutely. But because I'm worried about what's going to happen, does that mean they're not going to survive? No. Does it put more pressure on them, the processors that are non-milk buyers, to find avenues for their products? Absolutely.

Does that mean their demise? I think it depends on their size, the range of products they can produce and where they are trying to market their products. Some of these processors that market locally may survive, but their business model will not last for an indefinite period of time. It's just not sustainable. They're paying a penalty for manufacturing products because they don't buy milk from the DFO. It just doesn't work.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: What about the bottom line with the cost to these producers with these changes?

Mr. Jay Kirktown: For the producers? That is, the DFO?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Sorry. For the smaller—

Mr. Jay Kirktown: The smaller processors?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Yes.

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Again, it depends on the product mix they have. Unfortunately, I'm not going to quote numbers of the impact for Triple A Cheese in public. It just wouldn't be fair.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: No—understood. But you can see the economics of this.

Mr. Jay Kirktown: Oh, yes. Absolutely. It could be large dollars, for sure.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay.

How much time?

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

MPP Stephanie Smyth: You know, I'm okay. I'm done. Thank you very much, everybody.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That will conclude the second round of questions. Thank you to all the presenters for the time and effort you put into your presentations.

PERTH COUNTY FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURE

THE ONTARIO GREENHOUSE ALLIANCE

NORTHERN BRUCE PENINSULA MUNICIPAL DRAINAGE COMMITTEE

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): We'll now call up our 11 o'clock panel of presenters: Laura Good of the Perth County Federation of Agriculture, Jan VanderHout from the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance and John Rodgers of the drainage committee of the Northern Bruce Peninsula.

We will begin with our first presenter, Laura Good of the Perth County Federation of Agriculture. You'll have seven minutes for your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard and you may begin.

Ms. Laura Good: Laura Good, Perth County Federation of Agriculture. I'm here on behalf of more than 1,800 farm families that reside here in Perth county. I'm representing Perth County Federation of Agriculture, and I am here to speak in support of the intent of the legislation in Bill 109, Protecting Ontario's Food Independence Act.

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With regard to schedule 2, the Farming and Food Production Protection Act, we at Perth County Federation of Agriculture have concerns regarding merging boards into larger tribunals in the name of efficiencies. We are concerned that the larger tribunal will de-specialize agricultural dispute resolution and will, in fact, result in slower timelines and cases being assigned to adjudicators without relevant transferable knowledge.

It is essential that any panel hearing involving a normal farm practice dispute is staffed by adjudicators with agricultural knowledge. Perth county farmers deserve to be heard by professionals that understand our industry.

With regard to schedule 3, the Farmland Security Act that bans designated persons, foreign nationals and prescribed foreign entities from directly or indirectly purchasing or acquiring any interest in Ontario farmland, we hope you will consider tracking beneficial ownership by looking through corporate layers.

We hope you will protect foreign individuals intending to reside and actively farm in Perth county. It is a diverse patchwork of immigrant farmers. I myself and Mr. Vanthof are only second-generation Canadians. Without protecting foreign-born individuals who intend to reside here from this legislation, I would not be here; in fact, an overwhelming number of Perth county farmers would not be here.

We hope that this legislation will ensure that no red tape is added to domestic farm transfers and ensure that we are not adding red tape and extra burden to our farmers here in Perth county.

New Canadians, recent and from past generations, have contributed significantly to building Ontario's agricultural sector by bringing their knowledge, skills, innovation and strong work ethic to rural communities across the province. Agriculture continues to provide meaningful pathways to employment, entrepreneurship and community legislation for immigrants seeking to establish new lives in Ontario, and very much so in Perth county.

As the sector continues to face labour shortages and growing demand, we want to continue welcoming new Canadians and creating opportunities for them to contribute their talents, experience and perspectives to Ontario's agricultural future. Here in Perth county, we sorely need more new farmers. We need help. The farms here in Perth county are lacking people to work for us, and it is a wonderful way to get your foot in the door to being a farmer here in Ontario.

With soaring farmland costs posing a significant barrier for new, young and expanding farmers, in a recent survey, over 80% of OFA members indicated the price of farmland was too high given the income generated from farming it. With the price of farmland in Perth county sometimes eclipsing $50,000 an acre, farm ownership is next to impossible. For farmers under the age of 35, 100% of respondents told OFA the price of farmland was too high relative to farm income.

OFA believes that the Protecting Ontario's Food Independence Act can work to partly address soaring farmland costs by restricting international investors from making future speculative investments in Ontario farmland. Although past records indicate low levels of foreign purchases of farmland, this legislation could prevent a future surge in farmland purchases by foreign speculators. According to Ontario land transfer tax information, only 147 farm property transactions in 2018 and just 138 in 2019 involved a foreign purchaser.

Agriculture is a highly capital-intensive industry. As we look at ways to curb speculative purchases of farmland, we must be careful not to implement blunt policies that inadvertently choke off the vital investment needed to modernize and grow Ontario's agri-food sector.

As you look down Perth county side roads, very few farmers that live here now did so 70 years ago. Our rural landscape continues to change and evolve, and the faces will also continue to change with the evolution of agriculture. Ensuring that those that buy our farmland intend to settle here is paramount.

We at PCFA would like to commend the provincial government on making Ontario's food independence a priority and with a few exceptions, we feel that Bill 109 will be exceptional legislation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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

We'll move to the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance. Mr. VanderHout, the floor is yours. I believe you're virtual.

Mr. Jan VanderHout: Yes, thank you very much. Jan VanderHout with TOGA, the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance. I'm happy to be able to present to you today on behalf of all the greenhouse growers in Ontario. I really want to speak to Bill 109. It's precision, not breadth, that should govern Ontario's farmland security framework.

Ontario has identified a real problem: the real risk to our domestic food and agriculture security from unaccountable foreign capital acquiring farmland in the province. At the same time, it is also true that foreign capital can also be beneficial and a real asset to Ontario's agri-food sector. This includes Ontario's greenhouse sector.

The introduction of the bill includes a contextualization that the effort to limit foreign ownership is precautionary, rather than reactive, legislation. Minister Jones stated the legislation is intended to be forward-looking legislation to avert risks, citing the possibility of land being banked and left fallow or farmed only to export a single crop. Independent estimates of foreign ownership of Ontario farmland suggest the current scale of the problem is modest. The rationale is nonetheless coherent. Ontario is aligning with five other provinces and a number of US states that already limit or restrict non-domestic farmland acquisition.

The act's definition of farmland is broad by design—that is, land used or capable of being used for farm purposes and buildings on it. There is no carve-out distinguishing open-field agriculture from controlled-environment agriculture, CEA. Indeed, the government's own communications around the bill have pointed to a CEA operation, a highly automated greenhouse facility in King City, as an exemplar of the food sovereignty outcome the legislation is meant to protect. Greenhouse and floriculture land is therefore squarely inside the bill's scope.

Ontario's greenhouse sector is among the most capital-intensive segments of the province's agri-food economy. New builds and expansion projects are frequently financed through structures that include institutional and pension capital, minority foreign equity, joint-venture partnerships and long-horizon debt. Because of the capital intensiveness of the sector, we often interact with domestic and international capital markets that operate on a fundamentally different logic than the land banking or single-crop export activity that the bill is designed for.

While TOGA supports the objectives of the bill, we would caution that a regulatory framework calibrated to stop opportunistic land acquisition by unaccountable capital could, if not carefully drawn, also catch the accountable, productive capital that many greenhouse expansions depend on. There are three points of genuine exposure, in our consideration:

(1) The undefined corporate designation: The criteria that will determine whether a corporation, partnership or other entity counts as a designated person have been left entirely to regulation. Until published, every greenhouse operator with a joint-venture partner or an institutional minority investor is planning transactions against an undefined standard.

(2) No compensation, no defined timeline: Section 22 of the act bars any claim for compensation arising from its application, and the minister's permission process under section 7 carries no published service standard. For a sector where financing is typically committed years ahead of construction, that combination is itself a source of cost through higher risk premiums, more conservative lending and slower deal execution. These risks are independent of how the final regulations are written.

(3) Succession exposure: "Foreign national" is defined by reference to federal immigration law, not by any test of economic control. Multi-generational greenhouse operations with adult children, in-laws or estate beneficiaries of residents outside of Canada face a live question about whether ordinary succession planning could trigger the act's prohibition. This is a risk outcome we believe would not be intended by a bill aimed at sovereign capital.

So, the case for sectoral precision—again, we are supportive of the bill's underlying premise. TOGA's position is not that Ontario farmland should be open to acquisition by state-linked sovereign capital with no accountability to the province's food and agricultural system. Concerns in that direction, including with respect to sovereign wealth fund activity, are legitimate and merit a targeted legislative response.

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We believe the legislation should be narrow in its definition, that the instrument built to solve that problem should be precise enough to solve only that problem and limit unintended consequences. It will also be important to ensure that we do not limit Ontario farmers' and investors' access from ownership in farms outside of Canada and that any restriction will not drive repercussions for companies with landholdings in other countries.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share our perspective this morning, and we look forward to the ongoing conversation.

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

We'll move to John Rodgers, chair of the drainage committee of the Northern Bruce Peninsula, virtual. Mr. Rodgers, you have seven minutes. Please state your name for Hansard and you may begin.

Mr. John Rodgers: Thank you very much. Yes, my name is John Rodgers. I am the chair of the drainage committee of the municipality of the Northern Bruce Peninsula.

I guess, upfront, I should ask first. This presentation is basically directed at increasing sector resilience, which is part of this initiative under which Bill 109 falls, but I also don't want to distract the committee from their important work on Bill 109. So if I could get some indication that this is an appropriate presentation to make at this time, I would like that to start with.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Mr. Rodgers, you're free to present what you feel is necessary for the committee to know.

Mr. John Rodgers: Well, thank you very much.

I think I have covered my introduction and my position. Just basically, the drainage committee of the municipality of the Northern Bruce Peninsula is a committee of council that was instituted just in 2024.

What I'll be covering today is trends in climate or trends in rainfall that we have seen and what the implications are for agriculture and the resilience of the sector, some of the short-term strategies that we have been dealing with to cope with those and then tools for long-term management as we move forward with upgrading our drainage infrastructure.

I'm also vice-chair of a local committee known as the Bruce Peninsula Biosphere Association. Basically, we initiated a sedimentation study of a lake at the terminus of one of our important drainage channels. This was done by Kyle McCarrel in 2019, supervised by Dr. Jackie Cockburn of the University of Guelph.

Basically, the sediment analysis provided a physical multi-decade record of exactly what's happening with rainfall patterns here in the Bruce Peninsula and probably reflects those patterns that are happening on a wider scale. In particular, this sedimentation study was nailed down by isotope analysis, so basically looking at the isotopes and the layers that were released by nuclear events, like nuclear testing and, of course, the Chernobyl incident.

Basically, the outcome of the study indicated that the timing of peak flows has changed significantly even within that short amount of time. So rather than being in a single event, which tended to happen sometime in April, now there are multiple rainfall events that cause severe flooding, and they tend to happen any time of the year. So we're getting the once-in-100-year rainfall every few decades.

The implication for having a big flood or a large rainfall event during a warmer period basically is the impact that it has on crops. Because the temperatures are higher, respiration demands are greater. For every 10 degrees of increase, you get double the oxygen requirement, and so we see a lot of crop damage as a result of the change in the rainfall.

The upshot is, basically, our old drainage infrastructure is probably not set for the new rainfall pattern. It's interesting to note that, really, there hasn't been all that much increase in the total amount of rainfall in the year, but it has been the distribution that's made the difference.

Anyway, there's an accompanying presentation. But basically, what we're trying to do in the short term is manage the shoulders of the flooding, so prior to the flood stage, trying to manage the water, trying to move more water through the system and then, at the end, trying to hold more water in storage in places where it's more desired. As we've moved through this, we have noticed that there are questions related to who owns the drainage infrastructure. For example, we'll end up with bridges where the drain ends, and the drain will have been re-reported and re-channelled, but underneath the bridge, basically, the drain is the old drain, and nobody knows who it belongs to.

There are similar pieces of infrastructure put in by other ministries that do not conform to the drain report for individual drains, and they have a pretty big implication for the ability to manage that water in the shoulders of the flooding.

The tail end of the shoulder—basically, one of the things we're working on with the biosphere association is trying to increase the water storage in headwaters areas that are non-agricultural by decommissioning old drainage infrastructure. This is challenging, and it's not a provincial issue, but basically, as you decommission drains, they are considered a restoration effort. It's considered the same as any construction effort where the by-product of what you're doing cannot be considered as an offset. So if you are building a pier, you couldn't consider providing fish shade as an offset, but if you're restoring something, you can consider the restoration to be an offset. It makes it twice as expensive to conduct those exercises.

As a drainage committee, we've noticed that there are technologies that are available and developing that make questions easy to answer and probably could be used in a more widespread manner and could be used by the province. One of them is the—

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

Mr. John Rodgers: —models of the—so, for example, the digital elevation model.

I think I'm out of time. Anyway, thank you very much for your time.

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

We will begin the next round of questions with the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: In the spirit of full disclosure, Laura is my cousin. She is one of the people who legitimately can call the member of Oxford county Uncle Ernie.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: So we like her now.

Mr. John Vanthof: Well, I was about to say, don't hold it against her that she's related to me.

Anyway, Laura, you brought up some really good points. One point that you brought up that hasn't been brought up a lot is the merging of the tribunals. We farm a long ways away from each other, and the issues that might come up at a tribunal in Timiskaming could be totally different than the issues that would come up in Perth. Could you just elaborate on how important it is that the people sitting on those tribunals know the local conditions and also that the tribunals are actually quick enough—because this is touted as a way that's going to be more efficient. How important is it to actually have the tribunals, the renderings and the hearings quick enough that they actually help the person who's being hauled before the tribunal?

Ms. Laura Good: Almost all of the things that we do are seasonally based. So if there is a problem, it needs to be—honestly, a 30-to-60-day window is all that we have, because in 60 days, crops could be off. In 60 days, a fenced road is—I'm not even sure how big the farm practice problems could be. But we live in such tiny—we turn over crops. We turn over livestock. Everything gets turned over so fast in our line of work that to wait 120 to 200 days to see a tribunal—everything that has happened, we can't even show it to you anymore. It's gone. It has grown; it is gone. To explain those things, the jargon and the positions, to explain that to people that have no agricultural background, it's not impossible but is next to impossible. It's going to take twice as long, three times as long just to explain what the difficulties we are having are. To sit that in front of people who have no agricultural background, it's next to impossible to make people understand what it is that we're talking about. Right now, we have people in place that are going to take care of it and have an agricultural background.

1120

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. Am I fair to say—because we're also in favour of the bill—that it's not so much the merging, it's that you want to be ensured that the new process is actually stronger and quicker than the old one, that it's not just a cost-cutting measure?

Ms. Laura Good: Yes, that's right. If you just add it to another pile and add more days, it's not going to work for us. We need fast and effective land disputes. We need fast and effective. That's what we're looking for.

Mr. John Vanthof: My next question is going to be to you and to Jan because you talked about the same things. I'm going to use a term that Jan used that I haven't heard before, and I really liked it. It's unaccountable investment, unaccountable foreign investment. That's a good term because foreign investment—if we put regulations in to not allow anyone from another country to invest in agriculture, there would be a lot of empty back roads—

Ms. Laura Good: There would be.

Mr. John Vanthof: —in all parts of the province. But we all agree. I call it speculative investment, but unaccountable is probably better.

I ask this to everyone: Is there a difference between unaccountable foreign investment and unaccountable Bay Street hedge fund investment? Is there really a difference? Should we also be looking at that investment in agriculture that really isn't tied to agriculture, that's simply a line item that says it's better to invest in farmland than crypto at the moment? It's a serious question.

Ms. Laura Good: I think we would just like to ensure that the people buying farms are wanting to come here and farm. We not only need the investment; we need the bodies. If you want to invest here, that's great, but we want to make sure that the people buying farms here are living here, are paying into our pay structures here and doing things here.

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

Ms. Laura Good: And I appreciate that there are lots of suitcases of money floating around, but there needs to be accountability to that as well.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You've got 50 seconds.

Mr. John Vanthof: Jan, I'm going to go back to you. Again, how important is it that if we change these rules, it's predictable for your industry?

Mr. Jan VanderHout: It's really important that we have predictability, but I really want to touch on your earlier comment about Bay Street versus foreign. I think you're right. There is not a distinct difference necessarily. The accountability is really the key. We need to have people who are going to run these farms and continue to produce the food that Canadians and Ontarians need.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): All right.

We'll move to MPP Smyth. The floor is yours.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you for being here. I wanted to interview my colleague's relative as well.

I'm really interested in the tribunal aspect of what you're talking about and the impact on farming—to help me understand. I don't know really much about agriculture; I admit that.

On tribunals, I think it would be critically important that we see people who have a knowledge, as you've just discussed, about what is going on. We have seen, as I sit on the Standing Committee on Government Agencies and tribunal appointments, where many people are appointed to these tribunals that are not at all aware or have any knowledge of what they are making decisions on.

Can you talk to me, please, about what kinds of concerns you have about tribunals with the merging right now, specifically when it comes to understanding the critical decisions as you made that have to be timely and by someone with a real depth of knowledge?

Ms. Laura Good: We would prefer not to be put in a giant pile with things that are not agriculture related.

Our problems are very diverse. From commodity to commodity, they can't decide—there's so much diversity between all of the aspects of agriculture. But to make the tribunals understand, you need to have agricultural voices. It needs to have somebody who understands where we're coming from, to make other people on the board understand what is going on. It's—what was it called? It is normal farm practice disputes. So having a board of people who understand what normal farm practices are—that that doesn't have to be re-explained, to lengthen the process, to make it even a longer lineup to stand in, would be so effective but hard to do if you're just going to throw us in a giant pile with everybody else.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So your ask of the government to this bill, which we support—but what would be the best thing that you could ask for?

Ms. Laura Good: You need to have agricultural voices on that tribunal. To put it in front of a tribunal without agricultural voices on it is going to lengthen everything that you do and erase any efficiencies that you're going to discover from becoming a tribunal.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And where would you suggest the government go to find these agricultural voices to sit on these tribunals?

Ms. Laura Good: We have long lists of people who have been in agriculture for a long time, who would be more than effective. OFA could get you in touch with many people who would be effective at this. The University of Guelph graduates them all the time. We have lots of people who have worked in agriculture their entire lives who would be more than effective to help you in this.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Great, because understanding what you do is three quarters of the battle. When you get to that tribunal, you just need to have things understood, and decisions made in a timely manner.

How much time have I got left?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You have three minutes.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay.

Talking about foreign ownership, which is obviously a great concern—for many years, it was hard to trace that ownership. We have made some strides. But are you confident right now that we can trace foreign ownership? It's complex. It could be in a hedge fund. It could be from anywhere.

I know that with Bill 109 there was a technical briefing for journalists, and one of them asked—and they wrote a column about it—how much farmland is foreign-owned today? At the same time, it couldn't be answered right away by the ministry because it hadn't been tracked, in all fairness.

So now do you feel that enough research has been done and there's enough knowledge out there that we are able to say at this point in time how much foreign ownership there is? You can't manage what you can't measure is the point.

Ms. Laura Good: Yes, and we're very happy that you're being proactive on this, that you're trying to get ahead of it. We don't want our countryside all owned by foreign entities as well. We just hope that the people who are investing, the people who are buying want to come here, live here, run it here, pay into our tax structure here.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And then I guess you can't really understand that that's going to be happening if, say, it's a hedge fund.

Ms. Laura Good: Yes. I hope that the land isn't being bought up by hedge funds; I don't think it is, and from what information I got from OFA, it doesn't appear to be. We know that that's something that is probably on its way, but we don't see it in the numbers that we have.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I know that in Alberta it's actually defined in the bill. In Manitoba, it's less clear—

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

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay.

It's less clear in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. There have been committees that have been set up which could have a review, which means get a handle on this a little bit better.

Would you be in support of those kinds of committees that would go around—and actually say in the bill exactly what defines foreign ownership?

Ms. Laura Good: Yes.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): We'll return to the government side. MPP Pinsonneault, the floor is yours.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you to the presenters for taking time out of your day to be part of this process. It's nice to be here in Perth county with our great colleague Matt Rae. I must say, the crops here look almost as good as they do in Lambton–Kent–Middlesex.

1130

I have two questions. My first one is for Jan. The number of greenhouses in my riding of Lambton–Kent–Middlesex are growing. It's truly a growing industry right across Ontario but more so in southwest Ontario.

As Bill 109 moves through the committee, what would you like to see prioritized in the Grow Ontario Strategy to support the continued growth of Ontario's greenhouse sector?

Mr. Jan VanderHout: Thank you for the question. I think the main important thing is that you don't limit access to capital for farms that are trying to be built or expand. That would be a big concern.

I also think it's really important that we don't impact—if we impact some of the countries we were talking about, those are also countries that Canadian farmers are investing in as well, and I would hate to see any repercussions because we're limiting their access to owning parts of our farms. So making sure that we have access to capital would be the priority, in my opinion.

Another thing is that you don't want to create a situation where we add more administrative burden because, well, we're going to verify that you're not foreign entities and we've got to verify that you're accountable and so on and so forth. So, ensure that we don't create a mountain of red tape or bureaucratic red tape for farms that are trying to expand as well.

Thank you.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you for that.

Second question is for Laura, Ernie's niece. As vice-president of Perth County Federation of Agriculture, how do you see Bill 109's overall goal of strengthening food independence benefiting the more than 1,800 farming families that you represent?

Ms. Laura Good: We think that Bill 109 is a wonderful piece of legislation, that you're well on your way to having great legislation to help us. Cleaning up red tape, moving everything under one banner—you're ahead of the curve on this. There are just a couple of quick housekeeping things that need to be done to make it great legislation.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Okay. Thanks for that input. That is the reason for these consultations, to make sure we hear from groups like yours.

Ms. Laura Good: Thank you.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: That's all I have, Mr. Chair.

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

Another member of the government side: MPP Rae, the floor is yours.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thanks, Laura. Thanks, Jan, as well, and Mr. John Rodgers on the line, too. I appreciate your presentation as well.

I'll start with Laura. How much time do we have, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): You have three minutes.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Okay—all the time in the world.

I was just wondering if Laura could expand on some of her comments around Bill 109. And 100% of the feedback we heard and had discussions on, at least in the government caucus, was on how you nail down that foreign ownership thing, because unless you're Indigenous, you came to this country at some point. How do we attract that investment still while obviously protecting Ontario and that ownership from potential—I know everyone talks about hedge funds, which has been a topic today, but first thing that comes to my mind is China, in some cases.

So I was just wondering, Laura, if you could expand on how the Perth County Federation of Agriculture would like to see potentially some of that, either in regulations or in a future piece of legislation or in this piece legislation. How would that be solidified, or what ideas would they have around that definition of foreign ownership?

Ms. Laura Good: We would really like to see, if farms are being purchased, that the people are coming and farming and residing here. That is what we would like to see happen. If you're buying it as a conglomerate and farming it from somewhere else, that doesn't pay into our tax structure; that doesn't help us build communities here.

I come from Perth South, at the far end of Perth county. We only have 4,000 people that live in our township. It's very rural. Every time we take a house down, we lose tax base. So we would like to see people come, live here, become Canadians, enjoy what we have to offer. That's the reason why our family came in the first place.

And I get to see it from both sides. My husband's family bought our original farm from the crown, so they're not Indigenous. They are one step removed. They've watched all the new faces come in and change what Perth county is.

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

Ms. Laura Good: It gets better all the time, but it only does if the money comes here, and it comes with people.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Yes. I appreciate that very much, Laura, and all the great work the Perth County Federation of Agriculture does, obviously.

I know we've been talking about tribunals, Chair. It's also great to see, on the current normal farm practices board, two constituents from Perth–Wellington—farmers—serving on that board and bringing that expertise to the table. I know all the government colleagues from rural ridings want to see that continue in the new iteration, if this bill is passed.

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

We'll move back to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to go back to Jan for a second, because the term "unaccountable foreign capital"—I think it should be "unaccountable capital," because the greenhouse industry is more capital-intense than anything else in agriculture. But we're all looking for foreign investment—the government as well. We all are. When a processing plant is—when a car plant is—it's often foreign investment. But it is accountable, because they are building something to process, or building some—and it's accountable, where some of the current investment in agriculture isn't.

In my part of the world, a very rural township, the population went from 500 to 100 and all the land is currently controlled by two investment companies. The township is going bankrupt; that's not accountable. That they rent it back to the farmer is not accountable.

Would you agree that we should focus on the accountability of the investment rather than exactly where it's coming from—other than state actors? If it's a state actor—okay. I agree with you on the China thing. But what would your comment be, Jan?

Mr. Jan VanderHout: Yes, 100%. It is the accountability that is key. And when you tell stories like that, it makes me nervous. One of the things that makes me nervous in the greenhouse sector is we see an amalgamation. Several large organizations are often buying up farms as well. It's the same number of employees, and often they're expanding. And so, there's more employees, often driven largely by export markets. So, it's a good thing for all of us. It also creates demand for large-scale operations like ours.

The reality is, because it's so capital-intensive, it's very difficult for someone to enter into this business. In the absence of a generational succession, we kind of depend on having some of that outside money coming in to drive the ongoing value of our farms. Because if we can't produce cucumbers in them—or tomatoes, or peppers, or flowers—there's really no value to these structures. So, yes, it's kind of nerve-wracking.

Sometimes I wonder, with these hedge funds, are they slowly trying to drive us out of business? Because they typically do have deep pockets—and I'm also hoping they're not creating some kind of a bubble. I think it's a different dynamic than what you would have with farmland. I don't think there's going to be a bubble on farmland, because they're not making any more of it, so demand should stay high. But you can build more greenhouses all the time.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

My next question is going to go to Mr. Rodgers. Although drainage might not be specifically in the committee's purview right now—but it is in a way. Because as the government is talking about crown land, in many of those areas, there aren't even townships. So there is no way to initiate drainage projects.

You've got experience in drainage. Could you just tell us how important having an adequate drainage system to agriculture is? Not only to a municipality—because the Drainage Act is the oldest piece of legislation in Ontario for a good reason. Because if you can't drain your farm—and specifically in northern Ontario—you cannot grow anything. So, could you just outline how important drainage actually is? You've got a background in it.

1140

Mr. John Rodgers: Absolutely. It's like you're saying: Drainage is critical. Good drainage is critical, and in a place like the Clay Belt, it's going to be particularly critical. Basically, I imagine that if you don't have good drainage—and that includes tile drainage—in an area like the Clay Belt, it will be completely uncompetitive. So you really need to put that infrastructure into the Clay Belt. You need agricultural infrastructure, and you need social infrastructure as well, but without that infrastructure, it will likely be a fraught endeavour.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you. Part of the issue is, where you have organized municipalities, when you petition for a municipal drain, the municipality takes on the engineering and they're recouped. But when you have no organized municipality, that doesn't happen. Or when you have a municipality that's gutted, like that one with only 100 people, they have no more reserves. They cannot initiate the drainage study, and they're being threatened with being sued by the hedge fund for not initiating the drainage study.

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

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to thank you all for coming, specifically to Laura, for bringing up the drainage tribunal thing.

As an example, on our dairy farm, we have liquid manure. We didn't spread on weekends, but every time I spread manure, I got calls, because they knew I was a local politician: "How come I couldn't?" That's one of the things. You need to be able to defend normal farm practices. It's really important.

Thank you very much for coming, all of you.

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

We'll move to the third party. MPP Smyth, the floor is yours.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I would like to ask about the greenhouse situation, and that would be Mr. VanderHout. MPP Pinsonneault was talking about the growing greenhouse industry in southwestern Ontario. I am here today in place of my colleague MPP Ted Hsu, and he's from eastern Ontario: Kingston and the Islands. As I'm sure you probably know, there are far fewer greenhouses in eastern

Ontario, and yet there is, really, some significant land that is available for projects such as greenhouses in that area. There are fewer land pressures as well.

What do you think the government could be doing to spur on growth for TOGA in other parts of the province? We all know it's a great industry. We know that there are great tomatoes, strawberries, lettuce and all kinds of other products coming from the greenhouses, and it would be really great to see that expanded. If you have any ideas on how we could actually grow that industry—keeping in mind also that Kingston and the Islands is just 45 minutes from the US border, sitting right along the St. Lawrence Seaway and the 401, so it seems like a really great place to grow the sector.

Mr. Jan VanderHout: I think there is opportunity to expand the greenhouse sector into various other areas. Kingston could be one of them. Our family farm is in Hamilton. But I appreciate what you're saying. There seems to be a focus.

What could be done to improve the opportunity for people to expand greenhouses into other areas would be better access to the infrastructure and better access to programs that drive on-farm income aside from produce. We're probably way off-topic here, but if we can grow produce and we can generate electricity, and use the waste heat from the generators to heat our greenhouses, this becomes a very efficient model for the greenhouse operator, but also for the province and also for the utilities. I think there's a big opportunity there, but it really hinges on having a grid connection and natural gas capacity close by as well.

And access to markets: Because our products are fairly compact, an extra hour on the truck isn't what makes or breaks it. You do have to be careful, though. Building greenhouses in Kapuskasing, for example is probably ill-advised. I was actually in MPP Vanthof's area, looking at, "Oh, is this a place where we could build greenhouses?" There were too many flags. Access to market was one, but also the day length in the wintertime—long winter nights there.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Right.

Mr. Jan VanderHout: Focusing on areas that have the temperature and sun and, secondarily, access to market, but the infrastructure is key.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay. Thank you for answering that question.

What opportunities or concerns does TOGA see in Bill 109's regulatory streamlining measures when it comes to municipal approvals, natural gas, electricity access and site development for new greenhouse acreage?

Mr. Jan VanderHout: I'm not as well-informed on Bill 109 in terms of those features. Our focus has really been on the foreign ownership piece, so I don't really know how to answer that question; sorry.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: That's okay.

I guess I wanted to move to Mr. Rodgers. I think what I wanted to ask you is about a regional food hub in southwestern Ontario. Would that be useful to your region for the development of specialty crops or helping smaller producers get into supply chains?

Mr. John Rodgers: I think, based on the distance—we are in Bruce county—I doubt that this would give us greater access to supply chains. Once again, I'm not particularly familiar with the operation of those markets and I wouldn't be sure, but I would say that it might not have that much impact.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay.

I just wanted to ask you a question about drainage. Again, for people who don't know much about the importance of this, can you explain to us—you were talking about resilience today. You're looking at the trends in climate and rainfall. What do we need to know about the importance of the drainage and the climate that we're dealing with right now and how that can impact our agribusiness and the agri-industry?

Mr. John Rodgers: Yes. I hate to sound like—I'm not sounding like grandpa, actually. But basically, it does seem that we're having more rainfall events that are falling outside of the norm that have a large impact on crop development and making the outcomes more uncertain.

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

Mr. John Rodgers: And it affects our business model, basically.

The old drainage infrastructure is probably inadequate to handle these: the new events, this change in climate. So we need to look at our drainage infrastructure carefully and try and find a way forward to improve it. Those fixes are going to be expensive, but they can be economized.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay. Thank you very much, and thanks to everybody today.

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

We will continue with the government side. MPP Gallagher Murphy, the floor is yours.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: I would like to thank Mr. Rodgers for making your points regarding drainage. I started thinking back in my head about drains, because this always came up. My family back in Ireland are dairy farmers, and the thing I always heard from my uncle: "Always got to work on the drains. The drains need to be done." And I kept wondering why, so your response to one of my colleagues made so much sense. Of course, as a young girl, I didn't ask him a bunch of questions then, but now I'm thinking about it, especially when we're thinking about the Clay Belt.

You noted how critical it is for the Clay Belt. It's always important to have good drainage on farmlands, but for the Clay Belt even more so. And you noted that if it was not available, these farmers won't be competitive. So thank you for raising that, because that just brought back a bunch of memories.

So my question to you is—I'm going to make it a bit open-ended here because I'm curious—given all the work that you do with the Bruce Peninsula municipal drainage committee, I'm wondering why you think it's so important that the ministry work with stakeholders on potential program changes for drainage infrastructure. Maybe you can further add some comments to that. Thank you, John.

1150

Mr. John Rodgers: Yes. Actually, I'm impressed that you brought up the issue of Ireland. I did at one point visit England, and then I visited Ireland. In England, a lot of the land is owned by lords and lairds who are not resident and rely on other people to farm for them. In Ireland, I think the ownership structure is more local, which relates to this whole ownership issue. When you drove through England and then you drove through Ireland, you noticed a very significant difference in the way the drainage infrastructure operated.

In terms of what we need to look at if we need to do an overhaul—and I'm not entirely sure if maybe it just needs greater attention, but one of the issues that we're having is just, basically, we need to have a better understanding of who owns the infrastructure and who influences the infrastructure.

We can have fairly simple things like branches of the ministries. For example, the MTO is very clear that the purpose of MTO drainage infrastructure is to drain the roads, not the drains, and yet they are an integrated part of our drainage system. We lose drainage capacity even beyond what's in the report, because we don't own all of the drains or not all of the drains are part of the report.

Anyway, I think there are some small overhauls that we could do in the short term, and some better modelling and application of technology that could happen that might be inexpensive ways to better understand how we need to upgrade—and the least expensive pathway.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: That's interesting. When it comes to other jurisdictions to look at who's doing things best, it's interesting. Yes, Ireland is very much local. My family have been farmers there going back to the 1700s, and it was all done themselves by hand, working with stones to create drains.

If you think about jurisdictions where we could look to, especially looking at the north, what would you recommend as a jurisdiction that maybe has nailed down the drainage process?

Mr. John Rodgers: To be honest, I think Ontario is a good example. Manitoba is another place where we could look where they have similar issues of trying to establish a relationship between the upstream and the downstream and the drain, and everybody taking responsibility for that.

But, yes, to be honest, the Drainage Act is a nice piece of—well, it's a collection of functional legal tools that have operated well. What we need to do is be looking at these changes that we see in rainfall patterns and rainfall events and be ready to make the additional investment that we need to upgrade our existing infrastructure.

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

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Okay.

I wanted to quickly go to Ernie's niece, Laura. My comment to you is this one, real quick: What do you think about us creating a one-window email for clients interested in land use farming?

Ms. Laura Good: So it would be one—can you repeat that again?

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Yes. It's creating a one-window system if people are coming in and looking for agricultural use of our lands, especially as we look at the north. What are your thoughts on that? Because I understand, with current processes, you have to go through a few different windows. And this specifically comes from the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Ms. Laura Good: That sounds like a wonderful idea. If it's one-stop shopping, that sounds like a wonderful idea.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Excellent.

Ms. Laura Good: The less red tape, the better.

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

I want to thank all the presenters for being here today and for the time and effort you put into your presentations. And thanks to the members.

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

The committee recessed from 1155 to 1300.

MR. WILLEM VENDRIG

DAIRY FARMERS OF ONTARIO

BRUCE COUNTY FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURE

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee will resume public hearings on Bill 109. The scheduled presenters are Willem Vendrig; from Dairy Farmers of Ontario, Cheryl Smith, CEO, and Mark Hamel, board chair; and Chris Cossitt, president of the Bruce County Federation of Agriculture.

We'll now call on Willem Vendrig. Please state your name for Hansard and then you may begin.

Mr. Willem Vendrig: My name is Willem Vendrig. I'm from Wilma Farms and Wilma dairy.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members. Thank you for this opportunity to speak about Bill 109 and how it could possibly affect the dairy goat industry.

A little about ourselves: We started milking goats in Huron county about 10 years ago, in 2016-17, with Ontario Dairy Goat Co-operative out of Teeswater. At that time, they were the only ones that would give us a contract for the milk. The dairy goat industry was quite a new industry at that time, so we needed them to secure financial backing. Unfortunately, three months after we started milking goats, the industry had a bit of a downward turn, and they capped us at 25% of that volume that they had promised us, so trying to make mortgage payments at 25% of the income became rather tough.

In 2018, I started brokering milk, also, to a processing plant directly, and that went quite well over the time till now. Now we supply four processing plants, and I currently buy milk from five other local farmers.

And 2022 was the year that we totally split away from the Ontario Dairy Goat Co-operative.

And then 2024 is when I picked up the three additional farmers, to make six of us in total. This was definitely some turmoil in the whole industry, as originally it was dominated by two main brokers, Gay Lea and Ontario Dairy Goat Co-operative. So when we left, we did take quite a large milk volume with us, and it actually in turn stirred enough waves in the industry that it was beneficial, and everyone did get about a five-to-10-cent-per-litre raise due to that.

I believe that with separate brokers there's a little bit more competition, which I believe is positive in an open market market, let's say. Before that, like I said, it was only dominated by Gay Lea and Ontario Dairy Goat Co-operative. And our belief is that with this new Dairy Goat Farmers of Ontario, they are trying to regain that power. It should be noted that we are not against Bill 109 at all. Everything that is in there looks positive for us. Our main concern is what kind of powers could be given to this new organization and how it could affect us as farmers and milk brokers. We wouldn't be against an organization, but we would prefer that we know what rules, regulations and bylaws were there, because right now, the way they have it structured is that we are voting on a blank slate. We first have to vote it in, and then all the rules and bylaws will be created. So we don't know what we're going to get and which rules are going to affect us the most, and there are just too many unknowns, misinterpretations and room for error in the creation of this organization at the moment. We need more industry support in the goat world, not more industry regulation.

If the DGFO is created, they will try to get as much information as possible, which would hurt us as individual brokers because it takes away the competitive price or quality or volume aspect that we now possess as separate brokers. Too much information could fall into the wrong hands, which could result in an overreach of power. The creation of the DGFO is right now mainly being steered by Gay Lea and ODGC general managers. We have tried to be part of that creation; however, they keep us out of it, as separate brokers. There is a committee now being created by farmers, which is one third Gay Lea, one third Ontario Dairy Goat Co-operative and one third private brokers. There are actually four milk brokers in Ontario: Ontario Dairy Goat Co-operative; Gay Lea; myself, as Wilma dairy; and one group of producers in the east of eastern Ontario. Like I said, too much information could fall into the wrong hands. If we look at Europe, which is right now getting a lot more regulation, and in the agricultural sector it's detrimental—too many rules, regulations there, and just the mental stress on the farmers there and here could be very much added. More government and organizational oversight will only end up with more rules and regulations on farmers.

Goat farming is a very labour-intensive industry, and our costs per animal are very much so similar to the dairy side or the beef side of things. However, our volume that we have to pay for these costs are about one tenth to one twelfth of that. Like I said, for one cow, we would have to have the same as 12 goats. So for a one-year tag—which is a very big thing right now: traceability—our costs would be 12 times as much. Our management, our paperwork side is 12 times as much for a lot less litres to justify the costs.

Quota system is great. However, in the goat world, I believe that we would never get a federally backed quota system. However, with an organization like a co-operative or Dairy Goat Farmers of Ontario, it would be shares, so there would be the regulated volume but not the stability of the price. The goat market is a lot more like the world milk market; it's based on supply and demand, which has its pros and cons. It's a lot more cost effective to get into, so you see a lot more smaller, younger people or Amish communities getting into goats. But the negative is, of course, that we do not have as much price stability or volume stability—

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

Mr. Willem Vendrig: I'd better hurry up. Sorry.

An organization like the DGFO is only as good as the person that manages it, and that's why we went out on our own. We have skin in the game, and it seemed like that is the drive. The DGFO is only giving their general manager $60,000 a year, so it would be tough to lead a good organization or to find a person that could fill that role for that kind of price.

I'll skip to the bottom before I run out of time. I guess our ask today is that the DGFO be paused until Bill 109 is complete, at which point, along with a development committee of producers—that each main broker, not just Gay Lea and ODGC, have a voting administrative member to help support the development committee. Once the bylaws and regulations are complete and Bill 109 is passed and the DGFO rules are established by the farm marketing products committee, that it then be put up to a transparent vote—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you very much. That concludes the time for the presentation.

We'll move to the Dairy Farmers of Ontario: Cheryl Smith, chief executive officer; and Mark Hamel, board chair. We'll have seven minutes, so please state your name for Hansard, and the floor is yours.

Mr. Mark Hamel: My name is Mark Hamel, and it's a privilege to be with you presenting today. I look forward also to any questions at the end.

Just a little background information: I'm a fourth-generation dairy producer with my wife and my son, Matt, and daughter-in-law, Larissa. We operate a family farm just north of here by the village of Elmwood. I also serve on the board of Dairy Farmers of Ontario and represent farmers in the counties of Bruce and Grey.

I'm pleased to be here today in the role as chair of Dairy Farmers of Ontario along with, as you mentioned, Cheryl Smith, who is virtual, to share how the Milk Act amendments will strengthen our industry and support our growth in investments, both on farm and with the dairy processors, thus enabling us to continue to deliver the high-quality, safe food for consumers in Ontario and across Canada.

In 2025, DFO managed the timely pick up of over 3.1 billion litres of milk with a farm gate value of $3.13 billion.

That was picked up from 3,100 dairy farms across the province.

With our processing customers, the Ontario dairy industry sustains 91,000 jobs and contributes $8.7 billion to the provincial economy. That impact is felt nationally. Ontario represents over 30% of Canada's dairy production and 30% of the dairy processing. Our processing customers are businesses of all sizes, making a wide range of products using Canadian milk and components.

This economic powerhouse is supported by a strong foundation of supply management, one of the three pillars being predictability and fair return to producers for the milk we produce. It is further supported by a regulatory and policy framework that is continuously adapting to changing market needs and demographics while serving our stakeholders.

For over 60 years, the Dairy Farmers of Ontario has served the province as the regulator and sole delegated authority for the marketing of milk. We're accountable to the Ontario Farm Products Marketing Commission—and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness as well—and administer the Raw Milk Quality Program. Our mission is clear: to provide leadership and excellence in the production of Canadian milk. Our vision is a dynamic, profitable, growing Canadian dairy industry for the benefit of all Ontario producers collectively.

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As dairy farmers, we look forward to completing the work to update the Milk Act, the first step in bringing Ontario's milk-pricing policies into alignment with the national standards. These changes will create a level playing field and enable continued stability in the delivery of high-quality milk from Ontario farms for processing here in Ontario. We clearly need to have consistently applied end-use pricing obligations that ensure all dairy processors are billed equitably for their milk products. As the province has over one third of Canada's dairy processing, it is vital that Ontario is able to enforce the national policy. Consistency and coordination are also important to provide the stability and predictability that our processing customers expect and enjoy from supply management.

We have worked on our relationships with dairy processors and have continued to strengthen them through collaboration and communication. Our sector is stronger, more resilient and positioned for growth. We have created an environment that is encouraging investment and openness to finding mutually beneficial solutions on the challenges and opportunities before our sector.

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, trusted food system with a regulatory framework that supports continuous improvement and compliance with world-class high quality and food safety standards for cow's milk in Ontario. Through DFO, we will continue to work with OMAFA on the enabling legislation and related regulatory amendments to ensure we continue to uphold the high quality standards for cow's milk in Ontario.

Now more than ever, we need to protect and grow our farming and food sector. By working together, we can secure a more competitive, resilient and self-reliant agri-food sector. For dairy, that means dynamic, growing dairy farms and more processing capacity that drives more economic growth and serves the Canadian market while protecting the Ontario advantage.

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

We'll move to Chris Cossitt, Bruce County Federation of Agriculture. Please state your name for Hansard, and you have the floor.

Mr. Chris Cossitt: I'm Chris Cossitt, and I'm from Bruce County Federation of Agriculture. I represent 1,800 members up in Bruce county. I'm here to present on a few items.

A couple of things I wanted to speak on in schedule 1: They talk about the beef marketing board act, changing the levy. We support the entire document of Bill 109. One thing: We wanted to make sure that, when the rules change on the collection of check-off dollars, the description of it is clear, precise and transparent for our membership to understand what is required to receive a levy.

The next—on schedule 2, we're talking about farming production and protected agriculture. One thing that we want to ensure: that the adjudicator or the people involved with this transition have agricultural knowledge. We're concerned that there's been an extreme disconnect with agriculture and that there are some people who get hired in to do the process who don't understand agriculture.

For example, if we phone in to speak to a certain person, they may know it by the prescription of their books in agriculture in front of their desk, but they don't know the actual ground-roots production system. That's something that I think we are looking for support in, moving forward: to understand agriculture as a whole, and it's not something you can read from a book; it's unique.

The next thing is the purchase of land by foreign investors. We are concerned with that. Whatever the government designs needs to deal with corporate layering to ensure that it doesn't get lost in that corporate confusion of who actually owns it. It's not a huge problem in Ontario currently, but potentially it can be.

There is some foreign ownership. That ownership is there and has been going on for a number of years, but it could potentially become a problem like we have in precious minerals and all that type of stuff, as we're hearing in the news now with everything, where foreign ownership is controlling where stuff is marketed; we're trying to avoid that. Getting in at the ground level to be effective and to be transparent with that, who owns what, that can be done through some land transfer information. It can be dealt with through different mechanisms to identify the registration of that corporation and removing those front people there.

Dealing with the Clay Belt, you previously received a presentation from John Rodgers just before lunch, and he is actually from Bruce county and had our information to present to you as well.

Food safety: We are very supportive. I'm from a pork operation. I do breeding stock. I understand the biosecurity aspect of it. It's something that is very important to food quality. So whatever is designed by government needs to understand that each commodity has their own quality assurance programs. They're all named differently, but ultimately, there is stuff already in the works. They need to reach out to the commodities and understand where they stand on that protection for food safety and why they are going out in that direction. That's something that is important as we move forward, and for people that don't follow the rules in that type of thing with food safety, have a robust penalty that will deter that type of act.

The next one was the milk, which was already covered.

There's concern with dealing with the extension of—through the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, dealing with the tribunal—a written decision, concern with government processes being already slow. Agriculture being all small businesses that are brought together, that's something that we don't need to add more time to. I understand it's 10 days, that they're going from 20 to 30 days, but let's try to keep it robust, because decision-making on the farm needs to be done now, not later. That will affect the previous year of production—some decision-making—if it's delayed.

The Ontario Food Terminal Act: We applaud you for the changes. Thank you very much. It will help support and make them stronger in the food terminal.

The protection of nonpayment: We support some changes with that. We're really looking at that nonpayment being robust. Being from the pork industry, we remember when there was a packer in Toronto that had closed down, and there were a lot of farmers that were left nonpaid.

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

Mr. Chris Cossitt: One minute? Okay. Well, I'll be less than that, hopefully.

The Veterinary Professionals Act: We support that in its entirety, but we need to be, realistically, in the underserviced areas. The potential that the changes I see in there—I don't read anything that will actually help underserviced areas. That's something that is important. We need to get the veterinaries out there, and whatever is brought in needs to understand that each commodity has their own animal care components within their production models, and those animal care components need to work with the veterinaries.

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

The first round of questions will go to the third party. MPP Smyth, the floor is yours.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you, gentlemen, for being here today. I'm a midtown Toronto MPP, so it's a great learning experience. I like to learn from your expertise here, so thank you. Forgive me if some of my questions are not as in the weeds as what you know, but this is the point of me being here and learning.

We all agree that Bill 109 has some great elements to it. I just have some questions, and I wanted to start with you, Mr. Cossitt, from Bruce county. You mentioned crown land and ownership of land, and I was wondering: Regarding the purchase of crown land—we have talked about this before—for farming, would you support the idea of selling crown land with a farmland easement, so that it can never be developed and only used for farming?

Mr. Chris Cossitt: Yes, I would support that.

One thing that we need to be aware of is that when you are talking about the northern areas is it's a unique way of farming, and when you clear those lands for agriculture, you need to be aware that there are going to be infrastructure issues, transportation issues of getting things down. In saying that, the price of land is cheaper, so you need to balance that out.

Drainage is so important up there. As you said, with the Clay Belt, working with a clay soil, you need to have a different strategy to work with it and you have to have different knowledge. You can't just throw somebody up there and think they're going to do that. So it needs to be responsible. You need to be able to give them enough land that they're able to make a living out of it, that it's not short enough that it's enough to basically defeat their business.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Are there any barriers you see to long-term, multi-decade leases of crown land for farming so that farmers can justify the up-front investment to prepare the land for farming, like fencing, clearing, tiling and soil preparation?

Mr. Chris Cossitt: It would be beneficial if there was government participation such as grants and loans and that type of thing. That would be well received. In saying that, that type of clearing product and stuff like that, sometimes the availability of equipment up north is limited, so you're going to have to be able to have the infrastructure yourself to work this stuff in. You should be able to go up and clear it and do it yourself without penalty and you should be able to still access government funding even though you may not be hiring a business to support that.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: You represent the Bruce County Federation of Agriculture, so I'm wondering: Tell me something about your region that is special when it comes to Bill 109.

Mr. Chris Cossitt: Bill 109? We're special because we are in beef. We are mixed farming—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: As it relates to the bill and your region.

Mr. Chris Cossitt: Yes. The impacts are foreign land investment. We also have issues with pressures from—because we're with Bruce Power—generation of hydro, which we support.

But now we're being pressured with prime farmland being taken out of production because of battery storage. I was at a meeting last night and that's what it was about, and I have another one on Thursday. We're looking at aspects of that, trying to protect our farmland but understanding that we need to move forward in that process. Moving forward may take prime agricultural land out of production, but we're still trying to be responsible. We're not trying to stifle that. We're trying to work with neighbours, to have that storage for our cities and our towns to work with—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Is it a big concern?

Mr. Chris Cossitt: Yes. Up our way, there's a big concern. A lot of it is environmental. They're concerned about the remains and what happens if, for example in the battery storage, there is a fire.

Windmills—we've got issues with them. They're great. They produce hydro and all that type of stuff, but there's a footprint in which they will be standing there, and how long will be there? Who is responsible for removing those? Who is going to be responsible for maintenance of that stuff?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Right. Well, thank you for that picture.

I wanted to move on now to Mr. Vendrig, talk about your goat farming—amazing to learn about the goat-farming industry. I guess I wanted to ask you—you talked a lot about concern about regulation and how that can impede what you're doing. Can you talk specifically to what regulation you're worried about?

Mr. Willem Vendrig: There are some changes coming in the Milk Act. There's been in the news a little bit—

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

Mr. Willem Vendrig: Sorry?

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

Mr. Willem Vendrig: Oh.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: You don't have to rush, because we've got another round.

Mr. Willem Vendrig: Okay. Yes, just to do with somatic cell—right now, it's left to the brokers and to the processing plants. It could be that this new organization could get handed down the authority to regulate the quality—that was another one of my notes—the payment terms, penalizations, deductions from the milk cheque in order to make sure that those are in check. Those are powers that a third party or an organization like that we don't believe should have.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I'm just trying to figure out exactly how that would harm your business. If you're talking about the quality and stuff like that, those checks would be in place no matter what. I'm just trying to understand what you mean by that.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): That'll have to wait until next round.

We'll move on to the government members. MPP Rae, the floor is yours.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Willem, you can finish your last sentence.

Mr. Willem Vendrig: Oh, thank you. It's more just that, right now, every broker is in charge in that relationship between the processing plants, so it's in the whole industry's best interest to deliver top-quality milk. Again, right now our industry is regulated by OMAFRA. On the cow side, I believe OMAFRA has delegated those responsibilities to the DFO. Now, I believe that they may be trying to do that as well. However, the DGFO would possibly have these regulatory aspects but not the marketing side, so you're trying to get three or four people who are trying to market all separately to processing plants but yet still controlled—and deductions being taken off and things like that—by one organization while it's actually from another organization. So there's a little bit of too much information going from one to the other.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thanks, Willem. I'm sorry; that's a weird set-up, but don't say I don't do anything for the Liberals.

Laughter.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thanks to all the presenters for their presentations today.

I guess my first question will be to Mark. Full disclosure: I've talked about it in the House, but I'm the son of dairy farmers, so I have a little experience in that sector of agriculture.

I know the Dairy Farmers of Ontario have been advocating for amendments to the Milk Act for a while now because of the changes at the federal level. I believe you mentioned it, Mark, in your remarks earlier around end-use pricing policies. I was just wondering if you could elaborate a bit on why the alignment is important for protecting Ontario's supply management program and sector.

Mr. Mark Hamel: Okay. Thank you, Matthew, for the question.

For us, it's the first piece that is required—the changes to the Milk Act—so that we can have the consistency of the end pricing across the nation. That's very important for the processors that are working in multiple provinces. It brings that predictability or that stability and consistency for them, which filters down to the producers as well. That's what's driving the growth, the investment, the future: that predictability and stability. So that's the main driving force behind that.

Mr. Matthew Rae: And for others are not as knowledgeable on the nitty-gritty details, what other provinces have already aligned with the federal—because you mentioned some have already.

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Mr. Mark Hamel: I'm not 100%—I'm not sure if Cheryl Smith knows, exactly.

Do you know, Cheryl, specifically, if it's all the provinces?

Ms. Cheryl Smith: I won't go through individual provinces, but what we do know is that the bill is the first step for enabling the regulatory work to be done to align. What we do know is, Ontario had the most changes required, and so the other provinces are all waiting for Ontario. And then the commitment that was made at the national level, the CMSMC level, was to implement at the same time for consistency, for processors, and to ensure. So Ontario just had a couple of layers that other provinces didn't have.

Mr. Matthew Rae: I appreciate that very much, Cheryl. Thanks for joining us virtually.

How much time have we got left, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Two minutes and 20 seconds.

Mr. Matthew Rae: I'm going to go to Chris now. I know you represent a variety of commodity groups, obviously, in Bruce county. I was just wondering if you could elaborate on how Bill 109, this legislation—its importance on considering the plethora of livestock operations, whether it's beef, pork, dairy as well, and how they're working to support those varieties of sectors. We heard earlier today from some of the witnesses that obviously each sector is a little different. But how do you see Bill 109 attempting to support kind of the gambit that you see in Bruce county and many other counties?

Mr. Chris Cossitt: A lot of the comments that are coming from 109 are kind of multi-functional for all of the different commodities. As you mentioned, commodities are different—they have different needs, and they require them at different times. I think 109 moves forward to help support them and give them the ability to react to different markets and different thinking to move forward with their business. Different commodities are impacted that way and will always change.

Mr. Matthew Rae: I have a minute left, or less than a minute?

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

Mr. Matthew Rae: That's fine. I'll give it back to the Chair.

Mr. Chris Cossitt: If you want, I could add—

Mr. Matthew Rae: Oh, sure. Go ahead, Chris. You've got 45 seconds.

Mr. Chris Cossitt: One thing that I just was wondering is if it would be a consideration that—we know that a lot of the government policies and changes come at a very slow pace. Is there possibility in some of the situations that we can go to a living document situation, where that document can be reviewed very quickly and either move forward or make some changes back and forth—and understand that it doesn't always work and sometimes it works very well. But to respond to that and to make changes to tweak it—sometimes it's very cumbersome and those changes come very slow.

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

We'll move on to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you for presenting.

I'm trying to think of how to ask this question. Cow dairy, under supply management, is very strongly regulated, and also the market is divided. You have a quota, and basically, the marketing is handled through DFO. With goat, parts of it are the same, but you don't have the marketing power that the dairy milk has. We've seen this in this committee over the last couple of days. The processing sector in dairy milk is—although they're partners, the dairy milk, they're also not always in agreement. There's an edge, and when you have no quota system, that edge is much more pronounced. Am I wrong in saying that one of the things you're worried about is losing that edge because you don't have the—I'll reword it. You want to be at the table when the rules are discussed, not have the rules dictated to you after the fact.

Mr. Willem Vendrig: We don't want to all of a sudden have rules that we don't agree with put on us as an industry rather than—if we were to get into the quota system, you are getting into rules that are already established. Right now, they are establishing rules to dictate. When we started, they gave us a quota and then, all of a sudden, it was up to the co-operative. And they were just like, "Well, today we feel like we are going to cap you at 25%. There's nothing you can do about it."

We don't have a cost of production to determine our price. Our price is basically on supply and demand. In 2017, we hit a plateau. The price dropped. The industry was in turmoil. We flatlined for approximately five years. Too many farmers fell away and that created a demand for milk again, so that raised the milk price. We're very like the US dairy on that side of things.

I am a strong believer that, at the end of the day, it's the consumer that has to be able to afford the end product. With the quota, like you said, there's battling. It's nice that the processing plants know that it's going to cost them this much, and if they can get the milk for that and if it's a fair price, that's perfect. However, I know that in the goat world or in Canada in general—I hope they never get rid of any quota system that's here. However, I don't believe that they will be willing to put in another quota system—also, because more than 50% of our product, either raw milk or end product, goes to the US. So that's where the people are; that's where the demand is.

But goats are a very finicky animal. A lot of people try to get into the business, do it for a number of years and fall away. So when we went on our own, as a small broker, we really prided ourselves on top quality and freshness, which, since our industry is so small, is tough to do as a whole. Would the industry benefit from an organization that took that on? Possibly. However, an organization like the DFO has been in business for 60 years. Like I said, we produce 60 million litres in Ontario. The general manager of the DGFO was going to get paid $60,000 a year. Like I mentioned, it's tough to get the driving force to make something successful for that kind of salary.

We had the same issue with our co-operative that we were. We sat down, we were having some issues with the cap at 25% and not being able to pay our bills. The general manager at that time told us straight to our face, "Sometimes we have to let farmers go broke for the betterment of the business." Those are not the words you want to hear from an organization as a farmer.

Are there pros and cons? Certainly. But there hasn't been enough competition in the industry up until this point to drive that price forward. The processors need to have top-quality milk in order to make a product that's marketable to the end user, and also at an affordable price. So it's a very loaded question, I guess.

Right now, our biggest concern is that we have given this organization the go-ahead with a blank slate that could all of a sudden, at some point, be given marketing powers, regulating powers, but we have no idea. The opinion vote was just, “Do we want this organization—yes or no? And we’ll figure the rest out later.” I don’t like making decisions on something like that. I don’t think other people should be making decisions on something like that.

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

Mr. Willem Vendrig: I believe that they should make the bylaws, make the rules, get it approved by the farm marketing commission, and then bring it back to the farmers and say, “This is what you are voting on. Are you okay with this?”

There are a lot of differences of opinion. We speak a lot with OMAFRA, the milk inspector side of things—very good friends, a very smart man. He really believes that if those things are actually going to be given to the DGFO, we’d be for it. However, we are afraid, especially with this new bill opening up the Milk Act. We’re not sure how it is going to structure the Dairy Farmers of Ontario, and that’s what is most concerning to us.

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Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. Thank you.

Do I have any time left?

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

Mr. John Vanthof: I’m a big supporter of supply management, but I don’t want people to think that supply management is good for everyone if they don’t have control of the market. You need to have market control, and you don’t have that.

Mr. Willem Vendrig: No, we do not.

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

Next, the third party. MPP Smyth, the floor is yours.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I’ll go back to Chris again. I just wanted to ask you: Bill 109 enacts the Farmland Security Act, and its focus is on preventing foreign ownership of farmland, which we know is important, but also there is very little in the bill about protecting farm “land” as I understand it, especially class 1, 2 or 3. We’ve seen a lot of pressures in the area west of Toronto on farmers and their farmland. So, what do you think we should be doing as MPPs to help protect farmland?

Mr. Chris Cossitt: You’re referring to the farmland that’s being taken out of production for residential development or whatever it may be.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Yes.

Mr. Chris Cossitt: As agriculture, we want to protect our farmland because, once we lose it, you can’t get it back. So, it’s saying that we need to, as government, think about, is there stuff like density with residential, industrial? Are we reusing areas that have been spent and are sitting there vacated, such as industrial areas? You know, commercial buildings that have been built 80 years ago and are sitting there and being owned by a developer—and that developer is sitting there for the dollar—which could be revitalized to be reused and recycled. Those are the types of things that we need to do. And is there an ability to move forward and effectively force that person into development? It would take the government to do it, or money. Someone who has the—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Or incentives to hand it over.

Mr. Chris Cossitt: Yes. So if we raise density, make sure that all the land that is sitting there unused within the borders of those municipalities or the cities or towns—if we utilize them, then we can stretch out and consider that movement. But we need to also look at moving our classes down, to protect our class 1 and then class 2, class 3 and further down; we can look at that.

When you talk about that development—and that’s one thing that I have mixed feelings with my meeting from last night—they’re going to be taking 30 acres, but they also have to put a driveway to the back end of the farm, so it’s going to be more than 30 acres. They’re going to push up. And yes, they can return it back. If after 20 years or 25 years they expend the viability of that site, then they can maybe return it back. But in saying that, they are taking that land out of use for that time, so it’s not effectively producing food, and safe food.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So it’s got to be something we can come up with, government or whatever in the future—incentives to let go or to do something with the land.

Mr. Chris Cossitt: Yes. For example, just to keep beating up the battery people, but I understand they’ve got so many regulations. They’ve got to be so far from the power lines. They need a certain type of land and all that type of stuff. But the original site was over by Tara, by Mr. Hamel’s place, and it was a poor site. Now, they’ve gone the opposite way where they are actually considering class 1 land.

So, where can we meet in between? I don’t want to come out and say we’re in support of it, but I don’t want to say we’re against it either. I’m just trying to walk that fine line. One day I probably will have to speak out to it. You’re going to get pushed that way. You already know, because the money is there and there’s the support. Local municipalities are being supported. There’s a lot of money being offered to help support them through infrastructure gains and that type of stuff. I support all that; that’s great. But we need to be responsible when we make those decisions.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I guess my final question—and all of you can answer this if there’s any time left. I’ll start again with you, Chris. Do you think educational things like adding farming pieces back into the curriculum in schools so people understand more about farming, aren’t hitting it blind about farming like many of us, so young people can be encouraged to get into farming and see it as a real viable career going forward—how important do you think that piece is, the educational piece with farming, in the general curriculum?

Mr. Chris Cossitt: Ma’am, very, very, very important that we get the next generation coming up. It’s important that we reach into the cities. A lot of that will be a double-edged situation that we have our consumers sitting there—have them understand where their food comes from—and then we are looking at educating them to be part of our industry.

Bruce county—we are with Grey county; we're buddies. We have a children's safety village just outside of Hanover. We've put up a barn, now. We're trying to educate the students who are coming through.

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

Mr. Chris Cossitt: I think it's between 8,000 to 10,000 kids that go through that annually. Some of them from down this neck of the woods come up there.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you.

Mark, you've got a hot TikTok account—an educational piece going for the young kids.

Mr. Mark Hamel: Yes, very quickly: It's a huge piece of our marketing budget and focused on not just the next generation but for the consumers—to show them all the quality attributes for milk. So, it is a huge piece. We try to have that opportunity every venue we can, whether it's a royal fair or any event.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I know goats are hot on social media, Willem. There's a big goat fan in the back here.

Mr. Willem Vendrig: All right. Super good. No, that's great. I think it is very important, especially in schools. There are a lot of things that the organizations are doing themselves. However, I do feel like that does not reach everybody. I think if we were to get it back in school, it would be an eye-opener because there are some people who think, "Well, why are we as farmers doing what we're doing? Why don't we just get our food out of the grocery stores like everybody else?" We definitely have to—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I would have really benefited from it. Thank you.

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

We'll move on to the government's side. MPP Gallagher Murphy, the floor is yours.

M^me Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, all, for being here today.

This is great and I'm intrigued, Willem, by the goat milking business, so I've got a few questions. One of them is going to continue on what you were just talking about, because I'm curious: What drove you to the goat farming industry? My first question is what drew you to it, and how has it changed for producers like yourself since you've been in it, since 2017?

Mr. Willem Vendrig: Yes. What drew me to the goat industry was actually the cow industry. My parents milked cows. They got out of the market in 2006. I spent a few years in the US. I had a great job in construction, actually, for dairy farms.

Loved what I did—however, my visa was up and I had to make a decision. My parents were still here. I said, "Do I stay here, not have a life?" I would do well, but I missed having something on my own. So I said to my father, who wanted to kind of get me back to Ontario—and he says, "Well, you know this and that." I said, "Well, if I come back to Ontario, I would love to do something in agriculture."

At the time, the way that the quota system had gone with the cows, I just could not afford to purchase a dairy cow farm—that would have been the goal. So I did spend some time in the Netherlands, and because goats were an up-and-coming thing here, I said, "Well, before we jump into it with two feet, we better go make sure we like what we're doing." Spent three months there working on a number of farms and I really quite enjoyed it.

However, we got into it in 2016, 2017. Three months later, the industry collapsed. That was detrimental, but there was also a lot of learning that we had to do. That's what everybody underestimates with goats; everyone thinks, "Aw, they're cute little cows. Awesome. They will eat anything. They're wonderful." However, that is most certainly not the case. They're a very finicky animal, from the newborns—a calf is born at about a hundred kilos; a baby goat is born between two and five kilos. So, we're very much a lot more representative to the humans than to the cow side of things.

A goat is very personable. I still love cows to this day—we still have a bunch of cows ourselves; I would actually like to pursue that a little bit more as well. But with the goats, with the health, with the possibilities, with how new the industry is in Ontario, I think there's a lot of potential for growth—a lot more potential for growth in that industry than there are in others. Like, the beef—they do well and they're very well-established. Dairy cows are very well-established—pigs, chickens. But we do see a lot.

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Everyone underestimates the amount of work when they get into goats, and we did as well. That's why a lot of our milk does go to the US. There are a lot of farms there that, say, milk between 500 and 600 cows, and because they do not have the quota system, a 500- or 600-cow dairy is not sustainable in the US anymore. So you see these people getting out of the dairy industry and saying, "Oh, we have a very nice barn. The goat industry looks well." Goats you can put in pretty well in almost any facility. They put the goats in. They realize within between two and seven years that, "Whoa, this was a lot more"—or disease-wise. Our biosecurity is similar to that of the pork industry, unfortunately.

Still, a goat is a very personable animal, a very fun animal. We have children; you don't have to worry. Now, we grew up on a cow farm as well—loved it. But with the goats—my four-year-old is up in the parlour, getting the goats on the parlour. You don't have to worry about him. If he's gone for half a day, you don't have to worry about him. It's wonderful. That's the part of being raised on the farm that I love as well.

Like I said, I love cows. It just financially was not in the cards at that time, and that's why we looked into goats. We've had tough years. We have. I'm a strong believer that if I make a mistake, I pay for the mistake. But what we were sick and tired of—excuse my French—was other people making mistakes and us having to foot the bill. That's why we went into brokerage ourselves. Now, with five of us, we produce about 18% of Ontario's milk.

We are a small group of large producers. We're really focusing on quality. That's how we've gone from one processing plant to four—quality, freshness, trying to get more of those better qualities. Because at the end of the day, like I said, we would like our consumers to have the best-quality product and an affordable product. The quota does add a cost aspect on the farmer's side but also on the consumer's side.

For small farmers, large farmers, 100%, it's wonderful. In the goat industry, we have a lot of Amish and Mennonite farmers. There's about 120 of them, which I believe produce about 50% of the milk. They're all quite small, but they do produce quite a lot of milk.

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

Mr. Willem Vendrig: There's lots of possibilities in the goats, and especially for the future.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Okay. I know we have one minute. I had three questions for you, so I'm just going to hit you with one more.

Mr. Willem Vendrig: Sure.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: How important is it for you that food safety and dairy regulation in Ontario reflects the needs of the smaller and specialized livestock sectors, not just the largest commodities?

Mr. Willem Vendrig: Food safety is always a top priority. At the end of the day, if it's milk or beef or meat or vegetables—it doesn't matter what it is. At the end of the day, consumers have to have a safe product delivered to them.

Right now, ours is all done by OMAFRA. I believe the system works fantastic. OMAFRA does the milk processing plants, the meat slaughterhouses, stuff like that. I'm not sure on chickens; I believe the CFO does that. Those powers are delegated from OMAFRA to those organizations. However, our industry is still so small that it's still personally handled by OMAFRA.

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

We'll move on to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: Bill 109 is one of the few bills that is universally supported by all three parties. There's no poison pills in it. It perhaps needs a few tweaks, and that's why the committee is here.

The working title is the Farmland Security Act. We're all in agreement that we don't want farmland eaten up to be line items in foreign companies. But, actually, there are no measures in this to make the disappearance of farmland any more secure—there isn't.

So we've proposed—the official opposition—that when a piece of farmland is sold, it should actually go through an agricultural impact assessment with teeth. It should be a two-stage process.

The first question that should be asked is, "Is there a better use for this land than growing food?" There might be. An example would be a vegetable processing facility in the Holland Marsh. That would take a few acres out of the Holland Marsh, but it would actually strengthen agriculture. So that would be a yes, and then you'd go to the further approvals. But a subdivision in the Holland Marsh—maybe not.

This is to all three of you: Would you be in favour of some type of process that actually put some kind of hold on agricultural land to make sure that it was being used for its best purpose, which is growing? I'll start with Mark.

Mr. Mark Hamel: Okay. I'll quickly answer you, John. And I neglected to say, to the last question about education, that we do have over 30 dairy educators that do present at our schools for that program.

We have a residency piece associated with gaining a licence for a dairy, dairy production, a dairy facility. We are very strong on doing everything we can to supply the domestic market and food sovereignty. So I guess I could say we encourage anything that improves or supports that concept of food sovereignty and production in Ontario.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay, thank you.

Chris?

Mr. Chris Cossitt: Thank you for the question. The thought is that, yes, we need to be responsible to ensure that that farmland is going to return into a farm production rather than a development, something that may be used for non-farm businesses. We want that land to remain, especially class 1, class 2, class 3. It needs to be identified that the purpose of that land is going to remain what it's for.

You know, we all know that municipalities have their different zoning in their bylaws, for their zoning, but they can deal with it, get it changed and then, the next thing you know, within a few years, that land is no longer an agricultural-purpose property. And that's something that we support: that there is some more information coming out, that it remains as an agricultural-purpose property.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

Willem?

Mr. Willem Vendrig: Yes, we would definitely support that—100%, we do.

You see that a lot now with just the price of farmland in all of Ontario, not just western Ontario. There is a lot of money that's coming out of, say, the stock markets or other industries, because land has been such a solid and good investment over the years that they're investing in buying land. Now, that could be Canadians reinvesting in the land or foreign money.

That does make it difficult for the next generation or even young people. Don't even talk about getting started on your own; even getting started with help is almost undoable anymore. So it definitely has put a burden on the whole agriculture world. There's a lot more equity all of a sudden involved, because your land is worth more. However, to try to cashflow that land to make a profit—it doesn't matter if it's strictly with a cash crop or with some kind of a livestock facility—is very, very difficult. So anything that gets us back to our roots in agriculture—100%.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

A previous presenter used a term—because we do need investment in agriculture; it's very capital-intensive. Let's not kid ourselves. But the term that was used was "unaccountable," and it's unaccountable foreign investment, but it could also be unaccountable Bay Street investment. There's a difference between farming and just being a line item in a Bay Street firm.

Do you think this bill could be strengthened if it actually looked at all unaccountable investment as opposed to—again, none of us want to have China buying big blocks of agriculture land, but do we really want Bay Street controlling the neighbourhood?

Mr. Willem Vendrig: As a young farmer, of course not; it's competition. But as a business owner, it doesn't matter. If you make money—and all business owners are the same; they want to put that money somewhere that's secure and not pay tax on it.

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

Mr. Willem Vendrig: So I understand both sides. You do. It's business.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes. And my last—I think I'm going to use up my own minute. I farm in the northern Clay Belt, and everybody is talking about the Clay Belt now. One thing we have to consider is, as we open land up, there is lots of potential. But it's who ends up with that land, whether it's farmers or whether it's this institutional investment, because they're pushing very hard, because the land prices in the Clay Belt are going to go up.

My last point is: There is a program to help fund tile drainage in northern Ontario. It's a good program. That program used to fund clearing, and clearing didn't work, because tile drainage is installed by licensed people who know what they're doing, and clearing was anybody who could run a D8 was filling up gullies. That didn't work.

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The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Thank you to all the presenters for the effort you've put into presentations and for being here today.

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF VETERINARY TECHNICIANS

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): We'll move on to our next round. From the Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians: Jen Cote, president and chair.

Come on up, Ms. Cote. Just take a seat, right opposite myself. You'll have seven minutes for your presentation. When you begin, please state your name for Hansard. The floor is yours when you're ready.

Ms. Jen Cote: Good afternoon, Chair and members for the committee. My name is Jen Cote, and I am president of the Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians. I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of our board of directors, our staff and our more than 5,000 registered veterinary technicians represented by our association across Ontario.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on Bill 109, Protecting Ontario's Food Independence Act. My remarks will focus on schedule 9 of the bill and its proposed amendments to the Veterinary Professionals Act of 2024.

At the outset, I would like to acknowledge the government of Ontario, Minister Jones and ministry officials for their ongoing engagement throughout this process. The Veterinary Professionals Act represents the most significant modernization of veterinary regulation in Ontario in more than a decade. The OAVT has long advocated for many of the reforms contained within the act, particularly the recognition of a modern, collaborative model of veterinary care that acknowledges both veterinarians and registered veterinary technicians as regulated professionals, contributing to the delivery of safe and effective animal care.

We are pleased to see that the amendments before the committee today reflect key feedback from stakeholders and support the effective implementation of Ontario's modernized veterinary regulatory framework. For these reasons, the OAVT supports the amendments proposed in schedule 9.

First, Bill 109 addresses a significant implementation issue identified during consultation by creating flexibility for care to be delivered outside traditional veterinary clinics. The OAVT supports this change, which will help preserve access to care, particularly in northern, rural and remote communities, while also maintaining appropriate regulatory oversight. We also encourage consideration of extending professional corporation ownership to RVTs, which would further support innovation and align with the act's "one profession, two professionals" model.

Second, Bill 109 would expand the college's authorities related to investigations and quality-assurance activities by recognizing that veterinary services may be delivered in a broader range of settings beyond traditional facilities. The OAVT supports this proposal and recognizes its importance as veterinary care continues to evolve. Effective regulatory oversight must be capable of adapting alongside emerging service delivery models, particularly where licensed professionals may provide veterinary-related services in a community, mobile or other non-traditional environment.

As implementation proceeds, we encourage the development of clear and transparent guidance regarding when inspections or assessments may occur and how quality assurance requirements will apply to non-facility-based practice. We also encourage consultation with RVTs and the OAVT as regulatory definitions—including those related to ancillary services—are developed. These measures will help ensure consistent expectations from members while preserving the public-interest objectives of the legislation.

Third, Bill 109 would provide the college with authority to respond to situations involving false or misleading information in licensing applications. The OAVT supports this amendment. Public confidence in a professional regulation depends on the integrity of the licensing process, and the college should have appropriate tools available to address circumstances where that integrity has been compromised.

At the same time, fairness must remain a core part of the process. As the regulations are developed, members should have a fair chance to respond to concerns, understand the evidence being considered and access, review or appeal processes when needed. These protections will help ensure decisions are fairly made, consistently and transparently.

Finally, Bill 109 would clarify that complainants are not parties to disciplinary proceedings before the college, and the OAVT supports this clarification. Establishing that disciplinary proceedings are matters between the regulator and the member aligns the Veterinary Professionals Act with established regulatory practice across Ontario's professional sectors. It preserves transparency and public access to proceedings while ensuring hearings remain focused and fair.

As Ontario modernizes its veterinary regulatory framework, clear procedural rights and responsibilities will strengthen public confidence in discipline processes and support effective regulation of veterinarians and RVTs.

In closing, the OAVT believes the amendments contained in schedule 9 represent thoughtful and practical improvements to the Veterinary Professionals Act. They strengthen the implementation of Ontario's modernized veterinary regulatory framework, support greater access to care and maintain the high standards of public and animal protection that Ontarians expect. We appreciate the committee's consideration of our comments and the government's continued collaboration throughout this process.

Again, on behalf of more than 5,000 registered veterinary technicians across Ontario, we respectfully encourage the committee to support these amendments and advance Bill 109 through the legislative process.

Thank you. I also want to note that I will be submitting a written consultation, but you have some printed here as well. Thank you, Chair.

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

Next round of questions, we'll start with the government. MPP Pinsonneault, the floor is yours.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thanks, Jen, for being here and for your presentation.

The Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians has expressed support for the proposed changes to the Veterinary Professionals Act under schedule 9 of Bill 109. As president, why does modernizing this legislation matter for the nearly 4,700 registered veterinary technicians OAVT represents?

Ms. Jen Cote: Thank you for the question. For the OAVT, this is the most positive in the sense that this will truly allow registered veterinary technicians to operate to the full scope of their practice abilities. So by developing those regulatory frameworks to make sure that we're doing that safely and transparently, it truly does bring that collaborative, team-based medicine approach that we've been advocating for for years now. And that's the single strongest thing, if you will, that this bill really does bring to us, so it's very, very important.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Pretty much everywhere we went across, doing these committee meetings, everybody has that same opinion on that.

The OAVT has advocated for a broader scope of practice for RVTs, as we spoke about, including the ability to own and operate independent businesses offering supportive care. Why is that flexibility important for the profession?

Ms. Jen Cote: If we come back to, really, the nature of what we're creating with the VPA, it's that easing or expanding access to care. So if we have, like I referenced, more than 5,000 RVTs across Ontario, there are more than 5,000 people that are veterinary professionals that could bring care to remote rural communities—those that maybe aren't serviced by a veterinarian in the traditional sense—and working alongside regulations to ensure they are working within that safety margin and working collaboratively alongside their colleagues and veterinarians in Ontario as well.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: On this tour, when we were in the north, they did say what a struggle it is to get veterinary staff up there. So in your opinion, this Bill 109 is really going to fit the bill for your organization?

Ms. Jen Cote: In the opinion of the OAVT, absolutely.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: All right. Thank you.

That's all I've got, Mr. Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Rae, the floor is yours.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thanks, Jen. Thanks for presenting, as well, and thanks for all the work your colleagues do. As a pet owner and animal lover, I appreciate the important work that the veterinary technicians do. And in my own personal experience, I've always been very happy with the service they provided my own family.

I'm just wondering, going off some of my colleague's questions around—obviously RVTs cover a wide range of skills and specialties. If Bill 109 is passed, how will a fuller use of the training help improve access to veterinary care, across Ontario but even in Perth county or Wellington county, where we currently are sitting? Obviously, there's a need for veterinary technicians, both for small and large animals, and something we hear a lot from the agriculture sector, so I'm just wondering if you could build upon that.

Ms. Jen Cote: That's a great question. The OAVT sees it, and I share the sentiment here, that when we have veterinarians as part of the veterinary professionals—two professionals, one profession—there are things that veterinarians exclusively can still only do, so that's prescribe, that's diagnose and that's perform major surgery.

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And so, if veterinary technicians are operating to the full scope of their practice and are able to free up time that DVMs may otherwise be spending on things that we can do, instantly there are—like I said earlier, I hate to use the word—extra bodies available to do that work. If we're able to do that outside of an accredited facility based on a prescribed member or prescribed person as per section 9, the collaboration, working alongside veterinarians, is truly able to be there and truly able to have that without even increasing a head count. It's actually increasing the amount of human availability for these patients that need us.

Mr. Matthew Rae: How much time left, Chair?

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

Mr. Matthew Rae: We'll give the time back to the Chair, unless any of my colleagues—I don't think so. Thanks, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): All right. Thanks very much.

We'll move over to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much, Jen, for being here. As you probably know, all the parties are supporting this bill, in large part because of the changes.

I farm in northern Ontario, and we get it. The idea that vet techs could start their own practices—I'm starting to think like nurse practitioner-led clinics. It's a different system, but something like that would be a huge benefit. But do you see any obstacles? It costs a lot of money to start something like that.

Having said this, this is good. You are very positive, and you should be. But is there something that we could do, specifically in northern Ontario, to help vet techs actually reach that goal of having clinics that could serve people in the north or in rural areas?

Ms. Jen Cote: That is a fantastic question and that is just a fever dream, absolutely.

Speaking of northern Ontario, I don't live there but I know that it comes with its own challenges. That's not lost upon myself, and you heard my colleague John Stevens earlier speaking about that today. Supporting programs that bring veterinary technicians and DVMs to those areas is going to make the most amount of difference in those types of things.

You talk about financials. Financials, certainly in northern Ontario, will have their own unique challenges, but it isn't lost upon—even in this area, opening a veterinary practice is very, very expensive. There's lots of overhead and lots of things that are required in terms of having a practice be operable, if that's the word.

And so, that challenge isn't lost on just northern Ontario. It does exist and that's probably a conversation outside of the vets and to have those—how do we fix that? How do we make it easy for access to care in those areas that truly need it, but in and around Ontario itself?

Mr. John Vanthof: I hear this a lot because one of my staff members is a vet tech.

Ms. Jen Cote: Oh. Okay.

Mr. John Vanthof: As we were following the process of this bill, she kept saying, "Yes, okay, but how do we afford to start these clinics?" We're looking at having more vet service across—and I focus on the north because I'm from the north. But having independent vet clinics in conjunction with vets would make a big difference—but if there was some way that we could help you finance that.

Ms. Jen Cote: Yes. If we look at that collaborative care model, and whether that's integrated medicine for our rural and remote communities, working in partnership with a veterinary technician who is willing to relocate to Timiskaming, if you will, to have that up there, where they could work collaboratively with—I'm going to use the reverse remote doctor who may be in the city or that sort of thing, and truly working in that team-based medicine of care where you're having your veterinary technician there, working to their full scope of ability in, like I said, true collaboration with the DVM.

Mr. John Vanthof: Just out of personal interest: I know with veterinarians, there are some vets that concentrate more on small animal companions. Is it the same with vet techs? Some vet techs go into small-animal, others into large-animal. Is there any barrier? What would help more vet techs go into large-animal?

Ms. Jen Cote: Great question. I think they should be working alongside getting the DVMs for large-animal as well. I know that's a problem to have—you had mentioned that earlier and I'm referencing your notes there. But, yes, you're right. Veterinary technicians do generally tend to go into small-animal practice. There's a certain subset of those technicians that go into large-animal. I know the colleges are having a little bit more focus on some of the large-animal. So supporting that would be great in terms of your large-animal commitment, and I think having more visibility to what that actually looks like.

I started wanting to be a large-animal technician; it just wasn't accessible to me to be able do that. I live north of Barrie. Finding a place that would take me as a student was hard. This was 20 years ago, so things could have changed. But those types of things, having that accessibility for these students will be of paramount importance to give them a little bit of insight as to what that looks like in the large-animal community.

Mr. John Vanthof: I have no more questions. I'd really like to thank you for coming. You were very succinct. We're also happy that this is changing. Thank you very much.

Ms. Jen Cote: Thank you for your support.

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

Third party: MPP Smyth, the floor is yours.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you for being here today. I was just wondering, for those who don't really quite know what a vet tech—what do you do with, say, large animal or small? I have an idea, but—some of the key things that you do to support the practice.

Ms. Jen Cote: Oh, my goodness. How much time do we have?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay—but that was an open-ended question. You've got six minutes.

Ms. Jen Cote: I'm only joking. It is a wide, wide variety. I guess I'll take this opportunity to really speak from my experience. I have been in multiple areas; if we're keeping this succinct, everything from nursing duties—of course, that's kind of the core if you think of a veterinary technician, those nursing duties—being one with the animal, so blood draws, radiographs, anaesthesia, catheterization, urine collection, lab collection samples, analyzing lab samples.

But I've answered the phone a million times. I've been reception. I've been an end-of-life caregiver for those that are at the end of their life.

I personally really love pet nutrition, so I kind of got into that in my own practice as well.

I did puppy classes at night. I worked the humane society over the weekends.

I'm speaking for me, but this is a subset of RVTs—like, this is what we do: I moved into industry. My love of pet nutrition actually brought me to a pet nutrition company, and I worked in sales. I then moved into operations, and then I became a scientific communications technician and joined an 18-doctor team with a pet food company as the first technician to join.

I now work in corporate veterinary medicine. I'm a program manager there as well. But we've got lab technicians. We've got technicians—RVTs—working in hospitals, in zoos, in large-animal—yes, all of that.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And when it comes to agriculture, what we're dealing with now is a shortage of large-animal veterinarians across the province, right?

Ms. Jen Cote: Yes, for sure.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So expanding your scope of care and practice alleviates some of the pressure for the large-animal practice.

Ms. Jen Cote: For sure.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So what do you think we can do to help alleviate that shortage? I know you're a vet tech, but the large-animal veterinarians—that you've learned in your scope of work to help open it up? It's hard enough to get family doctors for people, but for animals as well.

Ms. Jen Cote: Absolutely. I'll go back to the answer I had given to John, which is really increase that access at the student level. It really does start young.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Does that mean different programs like streaming—

Ms. Jen Cote: Not necessarily; just having the ability to access that. I think OVC does a great job, but northern communities may be open to welcoming a student to coming up to the area, spending some of their younger years, if you will, in that community, getting to really know that community and feeling that comfort there to be able to kind of stay there, remain there.

The likelihood of a veterinarian specifically—or an RVT, let's say—graduating, going into small-medicine and then moving to even large-animal and rural large-animal or remote large-animal is probably low. If we can kind of adopt them, grab them from the beginning, I think that's where our best chance is going to be.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: How do you see trying to attract people to this profession more? What would be a key thing there beyond accessibility, but just maybe knowledge of the practice, like agriculture in general, but with large animals?

Ms. Jen Cote: I think you said it best yourself: having knowledge of what that looks like. Having some visibility into what that is. Fair pay across the board—there's a disparity in that. What attracts new grads to these communities? What brings them there? Looking at maybe a similar process, as you mentioned, as doctors and nurses, that sort of thing—obviously, experiencing similar problems. Do we adopt a model similar to that? Maybe.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Right. And then, what I was talking about with the educational streams: Would it help to have a less academic stream going into veterinary care to help build up the people in the practice? Because when you've got to get 99% to be a vet, it's a small fraction of people that can get into the industry. Maybe 99% is overestimating, but you know what I'm saying.

Ms. Jen Cote: That's a hard one for me to comment on, not knowing the board's position on what that might look like. We can talk about personal stuff and how I feel about that all day. We talked about a magic answer earlier and having a magic answer for that would be fantastic. I just don't think we have that yet.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: What do you think about the state with this bill—which we support—of veterinary care going forward in the province, in the agriculture sector?

Ms. Jen Cote: I'll go back to the very beginning, just that access to care. Easing access to care without actually expanding the people, having more people available to do this—having everyone work at the scope of their skill can only better every sector, including agriculture.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

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

I'll turn to the government side. MPP Cuzzetto, the floor is yours.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: No further questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Moving to the official opposition: MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Once again, thanks very much for coming.

Ms. Jen Cote: Thank you, John.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): MPP Smyth, one last round?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you for the work you do.

Ms. Jen Cote: Thank you very much.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: That's it.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): Wonderful. Thank you very much for your presentation, your effort to be here today and the contribution you made to the committee.

Ms. Jen Cote: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie): This concludes public hearings on Bill 109, An Act to enact the Farmland Security Act, 2026 and to amend various Acts. Thank you to all the presenters today for your participation.

As a reminder, the deadline for written submissions is 5 p.m. on Friday, August 14.

Seeing as there is no further business, this committee now stands adjourned until 10 a.m. on Tuesday, September 29, 2026, when we will meet for the consideration of the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Energy and Mines.

The committee adjourned at 1422.

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