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Canadian Minister of Agriculture Testifies at Ag Committee

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Approved By:

Teresa McKeivier

Prepared By:

Darlene Dessureault

Report Highlights:

On March 21, 2016, Canada's Minister of Agriculture attended the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture to present Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's planned spending for the coming year. The Minister answered questions on the government's intended course of actions with regards to milk protein imports, programs to support the supply managed industries during the implementation of the CETA and the TPP, as well as questions on the federal temporary foreign workers program, the consumer confidence in the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), and the grain transportation system.

Canadian Minister of Agriculture Testifies at Ag Committee

On March 21, 2016, Canada's Minister of Agriculture, Lawrence MacAulay, attended the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture to present Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's financial estimates (planned spending for the coming year). He also outlined the key priorities in his mandate letter from the Prime Minister. The minister answered questions on the government's intended course of actions with regard to milk protein imports, programs to support the supply managed industries through the implementation of the CETA and the TPP, as well as questions on the federal temporary foreign workers program, the resources and consumer confidence in the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the grain transportation system and federal support for maple syrup production. Below are some of the highlights of the meeting. The Minister of Agriculture and several senior staff members of Agriculture and Agri-food Canada presented and answered questions.

Highlights

Supply management and trade: The Minister stated that the government is committed to hearing from Canadians on TPP before determining whether Canada would ratify the agreement and has committed to a comprehensive debate on the TPP in the House of Commons. He also stated that the Government of Canada understands the importance of compensation of the supply managed sector should the TPP come into force.

Imports of Milk Protein: The minister received a number of questions on how he was going to address the concerns expressed by Canadian dairy farmers on unrestricted imports of milk protein. The Minister responded by stating that his department is looking at an approach that ensures that the cheese compositional standards are clear for everyone. He added that under the standards, diafiltered milk was never meant to be allowed to be used as milk. He made it clear that at this time, he does not want to interfere with negotiations that are on-going between the provincial milk marketing boards and the processing sector.

Possibility of delegating the monitoring of compositional cheese standards to the Canadian Dairy Commission (CDC): The Agriculture committee inquired a number of times on the possibility that the CDC would be a better agency to monitor the cheese compositional standards. The Minister of Agriculture responded that CFIA has the necessary manpower to enforce what they need to enforce. A senior government official later explained that the issue of monitoring of compliance with the cheese compositional standards comes under the responsibility of the CFIA and that Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada cannot comment on such matters.

The federal Temporary Foreign Workers Program: The Minister was asked a number of questions on the federal Foreign Temporary Workers Program. Reforms to the program under the previous government have made it more difficult to recruit for seasonal work in the agricultural sector. The Minister responded he understands the needs of the agricultural sector, that the program will be undergoing a review, and that the file is under Minister Mihychuk (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour).

Technical barriers relating to meat (CETA): The questions were answered by senior departmental officials who stated that there is a work plan in place with the European Union and that the process is ongoing.

Consumer Confidence in the CFIA: A senior official of the CFIA stated that the agency continues to place its focus on ensuring that front-line inspection continues to be protected and that will continue to be the agency's approach.

The development of a national food policy: The minister told the committee members that there will be a great deal of stakeholder engagement to ensure that whatever food policy is developed is a good one. It will involve the provinces, other ministries, and is not something that can be done very quickly.

The potential for the reinstatement of the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act (PACA): The Minister was unable to comment, stating that the question should be directed to the Minister of Finance.

Funding to help address transportation issues: A senior official from the department of Agriculture responded to question on projects in place to ensure producers can get their products to export markets. He directed the Committee to the Canada Transportation Act report submitted to the Minister of Transport and then its submission to Parliament. He explained that the government will be consulting the document extensively. He reminded the Committee that the Prime Minister had tasked the Minister of Agriculture to look at the grain supply chain in a fulsome way along with the Minister of Transport in the context of responding to the review.

The complete transcript to this Committee hearing can be found at the following URL:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=e&Mode=1&Parl=42&Ses=1&DocId=8163494>