

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

## **COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

**Tuesday, May 23, 2023**

**Committee Room**

**Challenges in the Agricultural Sector**

**Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services**

**NATURAL RESOURCES AND  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

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[Trevor Boudreau was replaced by John A. MacDonald.]  
[Chris Palmer was replaced by Melissa Sheehy-Richard.]  
[Gary Burrill was replaced by Kendra Coombes.]

In Attendance:

Tamer Nusseibeh  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

**WITNESSES**

Department of Agriculture

Loretta Robichaud, Deputy Minister  
Heather Hughes, Executive Director of Policy and Corporate Services

Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture

Carolyn Van Den Heuvel, Executive Director

Chicken Farmers of Nova Scotia

Amy Vanderheide, Chair  
Christine Bell, Executive Director



House of Assembly  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 23, 2023**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

**1:00 P.M.**

CHAIR

John White

VICE CHAIR

Dave Ritcey

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development. I'm John White. I'm the MLA for Glace Bay-Dominion and the Chair of this committee. Today, we're here to hear from presenters regarding challenges in the agriculture sector.

I ask you to please turn off your phones or put them on silent. In the case of an emergency, we would walk you out this back door here and go up to Grand Parade to wait, be accounted for there.

I will now ask committee members to introduce themselves, starting with my colleague here on the left, Dave Ritcey.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would also like to note the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb on my right, and Legislative Committee Clerk Tamer Nusseibeh on my left.

Now I'm going to ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, and I'm going to come back for opening remarks. We'll start over here with Ms. Hughes on the left, please.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Just for the committee members, I want to recognize that Allan Melvin, the President of the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture - we got word he was sick this week. I know you folks received an email.

The floor is open for questions, but before I do that - sorry, opening remarks. (Laughs) I said I was going to go in that order, right? Now I'm back to Ms. Hughes for opening remarks, please.

HEATHER HUGHES: Actually, Deputy Minister Robichaud will provide the opening remarks for the Department of Agriculture.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm always happy to have the opportunity to talk about our work in the department, and what we're doing to support Nova Scotia's agriculture sector.

As we all know, agriculture is vital. It's a vital part of life in Nova Scotia. The sector employs 5,000 people across the province. It literally puts food on our tables, and it drives our economy, especially in rural Nova Scotia and in our rural communities. Last year, Nova Scotia farms and agri-food operations produced \$752 million in farm cash receipts. I'm happy to say that was a 12 per cent increase over the year before. That's really good news.

Of course, the sector still has challenges. It's at the mercy of weather, pests, diseases, and global markets, but challenges aren't always a bad thing. They often lead to opportunities and for further innovation and advancement, and we're here to help farmers overcome challenges and seize opportunities. Some of the things farmers and producers are facing right now are rising costs, labour shortages, and adapting to climate change. They're still recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. They feel the repercussions of the war in Ukraine. Both of these events caused shifts in the global marketplace, leading to increased costs.

We've seen first-hand the threat posed by avian influenza to the poultry industry. Our producers have strong biosecurity practices in place, and they remain vigilant. We're on top of the latest developments, and working with producers to equip them with information to manage their flocks and prepare for potential future outbreaks.

Weather is also a factor in agriculture, and we're seeing more extreme weather events. Many were affected by Hurricane Fiona and the polar vortex. This year, dry conditions already have people concerned. Farmers are constantly adapting to changing conditions and we are helping them to do that. For example, last Fall, the Department of Agriculture created the new Season Extension Enhancement Program. The idea here is to extend the growing season, adapt to climate change, and open new market opportunities. Through this program, we've invested \$5 million to help farmers invest in innovation and labour-saving technologies.

Another key way that we support our farmers is through cost-shared funding agreements with our federal partners. Earlier this month, we announced the latest agreement. It's called the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, which I'll also refer to as S-CAP here today. It's injecting more than \$46 million in joint funding into our agricultural sector over the next five years. The money supports more than a dozen programs that help farmers and agrifood producers.

This agreement also funds our business-risk management programs. They provide protection against income and production losses due to natural events outside their control. These programs offer supports such as insurance, income stability, investment matching, and disaster relief. They help farmers manage risks, and remain productive through the ups and downs of business.

Sometimes, something happens that demands more support than these programs offer. That's when we kick in with other types of help. Hurricane Fiona did considerable damage to farms and other agricultural businesses, so we arranged \$19 million in provincial funding to support farmers through the Fiona Agriculture Disaster Assistance Program. This funding helped cover expenses not covered by other available programs.

In February, we had the polar vortex. The impact on some farmers' crops was severe, and although we won't know the full impact until Summer, we know growers will need our help to recover. So we announced \$15 million to help cover some of the costs they'll be facing over the next few years.

We can expect more weather extremes and other impacts of climate change. That means working differently. We're helping our sector adapt and make operations sustainable for the long haul. That's a key focus of the new federal-provincial agreement that I just mentioned. For example, the new Resilient Agriculture Landscape Program supports farmers as they build their commitment to environmental stewardship. They can do this by adapting farm practices that respond to climate change and decrease greenhouse gas emissions.

Ultimately, we want a healthy, sustainable agriculture sector. We want to see it succeeding in export markets, and we also want to see it providing more healthy local food

for Nova Scotians. That's why we're developing a food and beverage strategy to enhance awareness, to improve access, and increase local production of healthy local food.

We consulted with Nova Scotians in December. Their summary and their feedback is available now on our webpage in the *What We Heard* report. Now, we're working with multiple government departments to incorporate that feedback and actually develop the strategy. It's a win-win strategy. It'll support the sector, and it'll also help Nova Scotians access healthy local food.

One of the things we heard people want that we're already doing is getting more local food into public institutions. We've invested \$900,000 in pilot projects like the one we announced in Northwood to connect farmers with the province's largest kitchens.

There is a lot more I could say, but I will end with sharing my pride in this innovative sector and in our department's work to help it thrive. Together we're working on the challenges, and together we're always looking for new opportunities. I look forward today to expanding on that as you ask your questions.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Before I get started, I do want to share our president, Allan Melvin's, regrets for not being able to join us today. We're really happy to be here today, and we're very much encouraged by the mere fact that this was identified as a key topic for this committee.

The NSFA represents over 90 per cent of all primary agriculture production in Nova Scotia, which is just over 2,000 registered farm businesses, primarily run by Nova Scotian farm families. These members represent a diversity of farm operations across the province ranging in size and commodity type, from eggs to wild blueberries to flowers. Some farms specialize in direct-to-consumer marketing, while others focus on selling their products for further processing.

Our vision at the federation is a prosperous and sustainable future for Nova Scotia farms and farmers. Farming, along with other resource industries like fishing and forestry, is the backbone to our rural communities. Nova Scotia's agriculture industry supports environmental sustainability through the preservation of critical habitats, improving soil health and water quality, and supporting climate change efforts. There are many benefits to growing our agriculture industry, such as food security enhancements, reducing our carbon footprint, promoting environmental stewardship, providing jobs in rural communities, and bolstering economic growth.

While farming may be one of the province's oldest occupations, it's also an industry that has innovated and evolved at a rapid pace. Farms have improved their productivity and efficiencies through significant adoption of technology over the last generation. As

mentioned, farm cash receipts continue to grow, reaching just over \$752 million in 2022, yet our farm profitability continues to be challenged for about half a decade in this province. Our farmers are price takers, and they cannot recover all of their costs that they're having as their costs of inputs continue to rise.

This is beginning to take a toll on our farmers' mental health. Based on a 2021 national survey, 76 per cent of farms were classified as experiencing moderate or high perceived stress, 20 per cent of farmers experience moderate to severe anxiety disorders, 20 per cent of farmers experience depressive disorders, and suicide ideation is over two times higher in farmers than in the general population. Some of the stressors our farmers identify include finances, administrative burdens, weather, family disagreements, and long hours. These statistics make it clear; we need to support our farmers in overcoming the challenges they face, not only to protect their mental health and wellness, but to ensure the stability of our food system here in Nova Scotia.

The agriculture industry is influenced by various policy directives that span different levels of government and across departments. Changes such as the implementation of a higher minimum wage, carbon tax, or climate change targets can affect the industry. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the potential impact of policy decisions on agriculture, and to engage in constructive dialogue between policy makers and industry stakeholders to ensure a sustainable and resilient future.

I would like to highlight a few key priorities that would support a sustainable agriculture industry. We must view the industry as a whole ecosystem, recognizing there are input suppliers, food processors, distributors, consumers, et cetera. Farmers are only successful if the whole ecosystem is successful. Agricultural land is, of course, essential to our industry and efforts need to be focused on ensuring agricultural land is protected, healthy, and accessible - and that our people are our greatest assets. However, we're projecting a significant labour gap into 2029. Efforts are needed to recruit and retain our workforce and farm operators, and our farms must be profitable to be able to achieve this, and for new entrants to see a future here in the industry.

The impact of climate change is both positive and negative. While changes in growing seasons have allowed for crop diversification, extended growing seasons and extended production, extreme weather events have increased and have caused significant challenges. We are heavily dependent on weather and climate, and efforts need to be focused on improving climate change impacts.

Our farms continue to take on increased risk, whether it's related to climate, market, disease, or rising costs. Farms need effective risk management programs because it's not a matter of if the next weather event or market disruption occurs, but when. Like all rural industries, we're dependent on rural infrastructure. Without access to quality internet or cellular networks, businesses are challenged to use technology in the field, to update their

web presence, and market their products. Once products are marketed, the value of product is often affected by the rough rural roads it travels over before reaching its final destination.

Agriculture is a complex industry facing many challenges, but it's an industry that supports our rural communities, contributes to our economy, and enhances our ecosystem. Farming's a noble career, and it's a vital industry with tremendous opportunities for the future. I'm looking forward to today's discussion. Hopefully, we can tackle these challenges, and support our current and future generation of farmers.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Vanderheide, I understand yours is a PowerPoint presentation as well?

AMY VANDERHEIDE: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Ready to go when you are.

AMY VANDERHEIDE: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for having us here today. Chicken Farmers of Nova Scotia is a commodity board, which was created under the Natural Products Act. We administer the supply management system for chicken in the province. Our role is to ensure the supply of chicken meets demand, that farmers adhere to our national on-farm food safety and animal welfare program, and that farmers receive a fair price for their chicken.

Our farms are case studies in how sound policy can keep agriculture operations sustainable. The poultry and egg industries have been key drivers of Nova Scotia's rural economies for decades. We've grown steadily thanks to supply management. We still face challenges like every farmer. Labour is scarce, inflation is high, and weather is increasingly unpredictable. Unique to us are threats like avian influenza, and some of our challenges are too large for even a stable industry like ours to tackle alone.

The latest agricultural census says poultry and egg farms accounted for more than one-quarter of all farm revenues in Nova Scotia in 2020. Estimated farm gate receipts for broiler chickens in 2022 were almost \$130 million. That money flows through farmers and their employees to a wide range of services and suppliers in local business and community groups in rural Nova Scotia. Almost 85 per cent of operations are in the Annapolis Valley, and the others are in six counties across Nova Scotia.

Health-conscious consumers have made chicken their protein of choice, and the chicken industry is a good investment. Chicken was more than 40 per cent of all meat consumed in Canada in 2021. Production of Nova Scotia chicken farms has grown on an average of 2.4 per cent per year over the last decade.

The family farm is alive and well in Nova Scotia. Between 2005 and 2021, Saskatchewan lost 25 per cent of their producers and double their average farm size. Here,



the number of producers increased by 8 per cent and the average farm size grew at the same rate as total production. Roughly two-thirds of farms remain at or below the average today. Our industry is renewing itself as today's generation takes over from their parents and new farmers join the industry.

[1:15 p.m.]

That's the good news. Energy costs for heating our farms are the largest on-farm cost after feed, chicks, and labour. Energy fluctuates more than other costs, and when it soars like it has recently, it hurts. The July 1<sup>st</sup> carbon tax will only make it worse. We hear it said that supply management lets us pass that cost on to the processor. That may be true, but the processors' sustainability is very crucial to our success. We would like to see specific financial supports for livestock farmers to convert to lower-cost greener energy, and ask that you support all farming fuels exempt from the new carbon tax.

When COVID and AI threatened our industry, we noted gaps in our emergency response preparedness. We developed a new emergency response plan, and we appreciated your government's help with funding that project. Where we need your help now is in business risk management and laboratory capacity. Existing BRM programs offer limited help to poultry farmers in crisis. The Nova Scotia Poultry Insurance Program covers just one disease and total funds available are limited to whatever the industry has paid in. We would like to see a Poultry Insurance Program underwritten by the government that covers more perils and costs that are not covered by the current BRM program.

During the avian influenza outbreak last year, we had to rely on out-of-province labs to test for the disease. This would have been true for other highly contagious livestock diseases like African swine fever or BSE, mad cow disease. We would like to see a new lab in Nova Scotia. At minimum, we would like to have access to these key services in other labs in the region protected by formal agreements.

Technology is also critical to our ability to maintain animal welfare standards. Elaborate systems monitor and control all aspects of our barn environments. Alarms warn us if our birds and the economic return they represent are threatened. Reliable internet and cellular infrastructure are critical to our success.

The Internet for Nova Scotia Initiative is welcome, but has not yet reached all of our rural operations. Build Nova Scotia has yet to put forward a plan to address spotty cell service, and none of these services are low-cost in rural Nova Scotia. We would ask that the government prioritize the improvement of rural cell service and work with other jurisdictions in Canada to address issues of affordability.

Chicken farmers continue to invest their time and money into our farms. It's a legacy, it's a passion, and it's our lifestyle. It's also part of an industry that generates wealth

beyond our farms and supports local communities, and we think that's worth investing in for all Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: Now, as I will open the floor for questioning, a reminder to wait until I call your name so your microphone turns on red, as mine is, so that Legislative TV can record your statement and your sentences. I will maintain a speakers list, so I'll ask members just to give me a wave to let me know who's up.

MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to everyone for presenting.

You mentioned on the screen the lack of internet and cell service being a major challenge, especially amongst rural Nova Scotians in the industry. You've raised this today. I grew up on a farm and know several farmers, and represent a lot of farmers. They've raised it a number of times.

Fourteen months ago, I did raise it in the Legislature, and I did write a quote down from the Minister of Economic Development. This is concerning cell gaps: "this absolutely remains a barrier to economic and social development and a safety concern."

Not much has happened for several months. I think in this very committee, we brought up this same topic, and no information was provided. But three months after that, I did get a letter sent to me, not telling me much but acknowledging that cell is an issue for rural Nova Scotia.

All to say, were the deputy minister and her department consulted during the cell gap study that is currently taking place? If so, could she elaborate on those findings?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: I apologize. Could he repeat the question, please?

CARMAN KERR: Sure. Just discussing the times that we brought up the lack of cell service throughout the province. We know it's an issue for the agriculture industry. I've brought it up several times here in this committee as well. I'm wondering if the deputy minister and the Department of Agriculture have been consulted during this cell gap study that apparently is alive and well but not being shared.

THE CHAIR: MLA Robichaud. Sorry, Deputy Minister Robichaud. I'm all over the place today. Sorry.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: You might want to mention to my minister that I've been elevated to MLA today. (Laughter)

Thank you very much for the question. Yes, the coverage of cell service in rural Nova Scotia in particular is a critically important subject for us. We recognize that producers need that capacity to do their business, and not only in agriculture. We hear the same comments for seafood and aquaculture as well.

It is critically important. For our part, we were part of the consultation and were consulted to provide feedback when that analysis took place.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: Thank you for being here. It's really great to see everyone and get an update.

I also wanted to follow up on some of the discussion in agriculture. In Estimates, we talked about the development of the food and beverage strategy. I know the *What We Heard* document was there.

I think one of the other questions was around the baseline point. If the government has a goal of local food consumption, establishing a baseline - and some urgency around that, because we're almost two years into a mandate to do so. I'm wondering if you can talk about where we're at with establishing that baseline. If in the course of the consultations that you did for the food and beverage strategy, did stakeholders bring forward alternative numbers that they think it would be important to consider? What's the discussion been around that baseline number? When will that be established, and when will we know?

I think on the one hand, there's accountability for a major commitment, and then it also has very real impacts. We have heard from the Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, and they have seen cuts in their food coupon program. Partially that's been blamed on - I'm trying to think of a better word than that, but you know what I mean. The rationale for that is that it's until the food and beverage strategy is released.

I'm just wondering also how considerations around that program were brought into establishing the baseline for local food consumption.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Thank you very much for the question. There were several questions in there, so I'll try to take them in turn. If I miss one, I might have to ask for you to repeat it.

I will start with the baseline study and where we're at with that. As you know, there were references made to the baseline study in our Estimates, and that we were getting closer to having some information that the minister could share publicly.

Just to reiterate, we went through hiring a consultant to help us establish a baseline, knowing that we wanted 20 per cent of all monies spent on food in Nova Scotia spent on local food by 2030. That is the mandate item captured in our minister's letter. We engaged our consultant to actually begin the analysis on a methodology that we could reproduce, so that on an annual basis - or a frequency that we determine in the department - we could confidently and scientifically go back with a method that we would have confidence in in terms of that number that we would generate.

Phase 1 was completed. I'm happy to say that Phase 2 is under way as I speak. Phase 2, to replicate the first-round methodology, to determine if there were any outliers or adjustments that needed to be made in the median of that analysis, is under way now. Once that's available, we'll fully brief our minister. In the coming months after that, we should be in a position to release that number, and feel confident that it can be replicated. I am happy to say that the consultant firm that was hired to do that is also doing a peer-reviewed paper that they will also be launching in a peer-reviewed journal, because it's the first time that Nova Scotia has actually engaged in confirmation methodology to determine local spending on food.

How that ties into the food strategy, I think, was your next question. The food and beverage strategy, as you know, was a 14-department, horizontal collaboration - a wonderful collaboration across many ministries to generate the food and beverage strategy. The first piece of that, in December of 2022, was to go out publicly on a consultation. We received 1,900 respondents through that survey, providing us critical feedback on several elements around local food, and what would be required in a local food and beverage strategy.

The committee then prepared the *What We Heard* report from all of that feedback. It is available now. They are turning their attention now to what they heard in that report, and are moving forward with development of the strategy, which we hope will be available in the coming months.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: As mentioned in the opening statements, a report has recently stated that by 2029 the province would have a shortage of 2,600 farm workers, I think it was. My question is: What are the measures the department is taking or considering to address this issue?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Labour is clearly one of the more significant issues and challenges facing Nova Scotia agriculture as a whole. We have an aging workforce. We heard from the minister and the federation's co-hosted round table last week that the average age of a producer is 58 years old. Obviously, there is a need for some youth within

agriculture. There are low wages, there's the physical nature of the job, and there are seasonal requirements for workers - all presenting challenges around labour. So yes, obviously a very significant topic.

Our minister brings up this issue, I would suggest, every time he has the ear of Minister Bibeau at the federal level to reiterate his concern on the labour challenge, and how they might support through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, and any adjustments that might be made to that program to help.

We bring in 1,400 temporary foreign workers on an annual basis in Nova Scotia to try to help the labour gap that we have here. The Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture is leading the way on their Farm and Workforce Development strategy. As a department, we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the federation in helping them with that strategy. We also participate in their Farm and Workforce Development advisory committee to help on the subject of labour.

We also spend a considerable amount of time in the Department of Agriculture considering careers. As I alluded to, you want to attract youth into agriculture. We look at initiatives around scholarships and internships to help students enter into this field - not only students in high school, but we're also targeting post-secondary students as well.

We also have diversity initiatives around African Nova Scotians and Mi'kmaw students. We have our On-farm Student Bursary Program. It provides high school and university students who spend a specific number of hours on a farm with a bursary. So that's helping to encourage them and hopefully, through time, will lend some relief as individuals identify career in agriculture through these initiatives.

We also have a very active Agriculture in the Classroom group within the Department of Agriculture through industry development. This is a group of three. They spend a large amount of their time looking at career development for students. They work with teachers on curriculum development. We actually chair the Agriculture in the Classroom nationally right now, through the Department of Agriculture representative at that table.

I also want to indicate that the minister had assembled his youth council, and he's met with them several times in the last 12 months. They are providing guidance on recommendations for the minister to consider in terms of programming that might help to alleviate pressures in the labour gap that we have in agriculture.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes, I understand you have a follow-up.

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, I do. Temporary workers, you mentioned, are playing a significant role in the industry due to the increasing work shortage. The issue of MSI coverage for these workers remains significant, as does permanent residency. We've asked

the minister about this in the Spring. We were told, with regard to MSI, that the issue would be passed along to the Department of Health and Wellness.

[1:30 p.m.]

I'm just wondering: Is the Department of Agriculture involved in ongoing discussions with the Department of Health and Wellness on MSI coverage for temporary foreign workers? Have there been discussions with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration on permanent residency?

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Yes, the minister has a keen interest in advocating on behalf of addressing the labour pressures in Nova Scotia. He's certainly had dialogue with his colleagues at both the Department of Health and Wellness, and the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. Those conversations have also been directed to the deputy minister level where we continue to look at options and possibilities around addressing that.

I also want to indicate that the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture, through their workforce, labour, and strategy initiatives are a leading voice for that. For us, we like to support them in their advocacy work to have that recognized as part of the Temporary Foreign Worker initiative.

THE CHAIR: Before I go on to the next question, I want to recognize that MLA Taggart has replaced MLA Ritcey.

MLA Smith with the next question.

KENT SMITH: Thank you to our panel of witnesses for being here today. I always find it really informative to sit on committees and learn about things that we might not otherwise learn about regularly.

My question is going to be about technology and advancements in technology. I think it's going to go to Ms. Van Den Heuvel or Ms. Vanderheide. Before I get into my question on technology, though, in your opening remarks, you - Ms. Vanderheide - talked about some of the challenges with technology, with internet and cell service.

Of course, we all know that living in rural cell service is troubling sometimes and makes it harder to do business. But I hope your members know on the internet side of things that last Fall we put out the Satellite Internet Rebate Program. There is assistance out there for folks who don't otherwise have reliable internet to get subsidized to buy a Starlink. If you don't have that information, we'd be happy to share it with you after the meeting, so you can disseminate it amongst your members.

The technology as it relates more specific to farming - I'm being told that in the 1990s, automated milkers were new. Now, all of a sudden, they're the standard in the industry. I'm curious, using that example, are there other advancements in technologies that are starting up right now that you think eventually will become the norm? How is that rolling out in Nova Scotia?

AMY VANDERHEIDE: It's every day. I mean, even if you look at S-CAP, the programs are all toward green technology or an increase of use of technology to help with labour gaps. On poultry farms, we are using it. We, as I mentioned, monitor our environments in the barn for everything from our water consumption, our heat, our ventilation, the weight and overall health of our birds. That is becoming fairly normal on poultry farms. However, because of some of the interruptions, it's not necessarily a reliable way.

There are other things. I'm sure Carolyn can speak more to it as well. Things like GPS on tractors, autosteer and precision agriculture that help us in several ways to really reduce and limit the amount of our inputs that we're putting on - so that it's not too much or too little, and we're not overlapping in areas - and to really just be more efficient with our practices. Definitely as we are using technology to address the labour gaps, but also to help our farmers be more efficient, it is becoming a norm on our farm to have more technology than even 10 years ago.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel, did you have something to add to that?

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: I think it's really exciting to see the technology that we're seeing on farm. You're right - the last generation saw excessive advancements in technology.

To Amy's point, we're looking at technology for a number of reasons. We know that our profitability is challenged, so there are ways to find efficiencies and increase our productivity through use of technology. It's helping fill our labour gap in certain areas, and then also in our environmental sustainability, and enhancing our environmental practices. Technology plays a critical role in so many aspects of the sustainability of our industry.

Amy mentioned the GPS and precision agriculture, and we're seeing those across commodities, but a lot of the technology we're seeing may be commodity-specific. Another example that we would see as well: In the apple industry, we're seeing the use of apple-picking platforms instead of having ladders used. That also provides opportunities to provide and improve health and safety for our workers.

As we continue to look at opportunities to adopt technology, I think we'll see that increasing throughout the industry. We need to ensure that the investment's there so that we can make the investment.

We also need to ensure that when we're bringing in technology from other countries, the regulatory burden that's related to having equipment come in from Europe, for example - where they may have an equivalent standard to us - doesn't deter us from being able to use that technology on our farms.

I think we'll continue to see adoption. Really, we need to see our industry be sustainable.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith, I understand you have a follow-up.

KENT SMITH: I do. Thank you, Chair.

That is all great information. Thank you. I'm curious to know how the advancements in technology are being welcomed by some of the more seasoned farmers, I will say. (Interruption) Veteran farmers - thank you. I know I have a mom who is in her seventies. I won't say the exact number, but I often have to help her with her email password just to help get her back online.

I'm just curious, are those farmers welcoming the technology, and are there things out there to help them become more educated in the technology?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Vanderheide.

AMY VANDERHEIDE: I would say that like any change, it can be scary. An example on our farm is that my husband and I do the technology. His father is very much "I don't know what to do. You do it, and I'm happy." But saying that, I think a lot of people, no matter what the age, are seeing the benefits to that technology, especially for things like work/life balance as well. We're seeing them maybe more slowly than the younger generation, but they are tagging on. It's around the coffee-shop table where they're trying something new and then someone else tries it and it catches on.

Also - I'm sure Carolyn will mention this - the Federation does a lot of great things with webinars and workshops to introduce technologies, and really get what we have here out there, so that they have a little bit of education going into it.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Now I lost my train of thought of what I was going to say.

I think that, absolutely, there are some generational challenges at times. I also think we have what we would consider to be the older generation of farmers who continue to innovate. We actually see some of our most significant innovation in my parents' generation as well. I would say across generations, we do see early adopters - people who



are really eager to adopt technology and take that risk on - and some may not. Whether or not people are making the decision based on the risk element to including that technology - because something new means that you might have a breakdown. Are the proper technicians in place to fix that equipment? In some, it is because it's new and it's challenging.

Part of our role at the federation - we do our policy and advocacy work, but we also deliver programming through our farm and workforce development team. We're constantly looking for ways to support the industry and enhance those skills so they have what they need. I'd say that also we need to recognize the entire ecosystem. Our farm equipment dealers provide great support to our farmers when they're purchasing equipment to understand how to use that equipment.

I'd say we have the early adopters, the folks who are shortly behind, and then maybe some other folks who take a little bit longer to actually take that technology on their farm.

CARMAN KERR: I want to stay on the gaps in cell service. Several farmers can't call out from orchards because there is no cell service. Several farmers can't call for a part because there's no cell service. It's not just an economic development concern but a safety concern. It's one of the most dangerous professions. Unfortunately, several of my family members have been hurt on the farm. When you have no cell service, you're not sending an email to 911, you're trying to call.

I'm just concerned that there hasn't been a rapid development or an urgency to rolling out that cell service throughout rural Nova Scotia, affecting a lot of our farmers. Back to the deputy minister, who did confirm that the department was in discussions over that cell gap study. Was there an opportunity in the criteria or with the authors of that study or with government and other ministers to raise these concerns on behalf of agriculture? For example, you're on a farm, you've been seriously hurt. You may be given more points or more criteria, or more urgency given to someone else or another group or another location.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: With regard to the criteria, obviously there was a full slate of different criteria in filling out that survey. I'd have to really get that information for you, if it was weighted against the scenario that you described. In my recollection, there was no weighting on a scenario where you might get priority queue based on the situation that you found yourself in.

The way that we approached it was really providing the information around business continuity and the business itself. I'm not entirely sure that it segued into the safety concerns. I am assured that all concerns were provided, but we would have to go back, if you're looking for a level of detail of what was brought forward. Obviously, ministers always have an opportunity to follow up and provide additional information with their colleagues. These are important subjects. They require a lot of attention, but they are

led in other departments. We have to collaborate and provide critical information to ensure that the Department of Agriculture's concerns and support of producers in the province are appropriately reflected.

[1:45 p.m.]

CARMAN KERR: I want to thank the deputy minister, and I appreciate her offering that level of detail. I would appreciate being sent that level of detail.

THE CHAIR: MLA LeBlanc.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I'd like to go back to labour issues. I know, coming from a rural riding, how important the resource industries are: fisheries, forestry, and farming. From my experience, it doesn't matter where you go across the province or which sector, everybody is in desperate need of finding employees. Oftentimes that's through immigration or trying to recruit new people to the industry, but also trying to maybe encourage people from other businesses or industries to move to yours.

I know in the short term, it's critical, but I'm trying to get a sense of what the impact is long-term if these short-term labour shortages aren't addressed in a reasonable amount of time. What does it mean for the industry going forward? I don't know if - Executive Director Van Den Heuvel, maybe?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: I think one of the things I'd like to address is the reality that these labour challenges have been increasing over time. We know the short fixes are not necessarily where we need to be. We do need to start looking in some of those long-term strategies. With the research that was done by the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, whom we partner with, we actually see that currently it's estimated to be \$33 million in lost sales a year due to the labour gap that we see - and we know that labour gap is going to increase.

We are challenged. I think it's also important to realize that labour gap is also at the farm operator level - so within our workforce, but also that succession between our farm operators. I think we need to look at two different types of solutions, depending on what type of workers we're looking for: whether we're looking for workers to come into the seasonal roles, into maybe the more middle management roles, or into the farm operator pieces. We're looking at ways that we can provide the skills and training for folks to join the industry.

You're right - we're competing against our other industries. So whether we're competing against fishing or forestry or other groups, that is the reality - or even farms against farms. We're challenged as well. We know that we're challenged to provide strong

wages and compensation packages to our employees. We want to find ways that we can improve our benefits package so that we can work to actually retain those workers.

I'd say we don't actually have a silver bullet in terms of the solutions on how we think that we can address that. Some of the priorities we're looking at in our Farm and Workforce Development strategy are the opportunities to connect to farming for newcomers to Nova Scotia, for youth to join the industry - and really making sure people understand the opportunities that exist. We want to prepare farmers, so ensuring that we're providing skills training and education to those wanting to work on farms, supporting farms in their human resources and improving our human resource practices. That would be our third priority.

Innovate and automate: We see the technology piece, as previously asked, being key to supporting that labour, but again, not the full answer. Growing and diversity: There's an opportunity to increase the diversity. Those are really the five pillars we're working on. I can't sit here and tell you that I have a really great suggestion on how we can actually nail it, but it is getting to be concerning. So we need to make sure that we work together right now to see how we can recruit people to work in our industry.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Just a quick follow-up. I think in one of the opening remarks, it was mentioned that profitability is decreasing, which is quite concerning. Do you believe that part of that decline in profitability is the need to compete for labour and it's driving up wages at the same time - or are there other challenges that are creating it?

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: I would say labour is definitely one of the challenges. It's not necessarily about higher wages, but if we have constant turnover, that costs us money as well. We do have one of the lowest turnover rates in Canada in our industry, which is something we are proud of here as Nova Scotia farmers. But the rising costs of all input - we're looking at fertilizer, fuel, cost of labour, any cost of growth and development on operations - are really what are challenging the profitability to our farms right now.

I think that there are a number of elements that are playing into that. I think I'd welcome Amy - she may have some specific examples in her experience in her operation as well that she'd like to share.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Vanderheide.

AMY VANDERHEIDE: We see challenges for labour for everything from on-farm activities right up to our processing. We sell our chicken to our processor. Through COVID, their lack of employees meant that they weren't able to do necessarily all the cuts that they would normally make to fill their contracts and sell. That reduces their profitability, which then can feed down to our profitability.

I think that because we're in supply management, we are able to control our costs and our price a bit more, but then when you see the sticker at the grocery store, that's what hits for people. It's not that we're getting paid that much at the grocery store. Our prices stay the same, but the rising costs of our heat, our feed, our fertilizer, and all of our other inputs are still cutting into our profitability - and then any labour that we are hiring on our farms as well.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: You kind of segued into the question and the topic that I want to get into. The cost to operate farms has significantly grown and increased in recent years, and as you pointed out in your slide, the federal Liberal carbon tax that's coming right around the corner is certainly only going to amplify those costs.

I just want to know if we would talk a little bit about initiatives like, for example, the Local Food Advancer Program. It focuses on supporting farmers as they invest in innovation and technology, which we did talk about a bit too. Do you feel that modernization in these areas could have an impact on combatting the rising input costs that you were talking about?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: I'd be happy to take that question. Thank you very much.

It's been a very good discussion around the labour issue and how that segues into trying to keep the cost of production low so that at the end of the day, the producer is actually receiving a fair payment for the products that they're producing. I want to speak a little bit about how you come at that through your question and advances in technology.

I had just wanted to mention that under our S-CAP, which is the Sustainable CAP that I alluded to previously, the minister negotiated a 25 per cent increase in that funding envelope. Within that, there is a program dedicated specifically to adoption of technology on the farm. One of the streams comes at that with a lens to how we can support producers to tackle the labour issue through automation.

We have great conversations with tangible outcomes as we move forward with this dialogue with our colleagues at the Department of Economic Development who have an interest in this, in addition to Research Nova Scotia, Invest Nova Scotia, and Build Nova Scotia. Everyone recognizes that through automation there may be some solutions to tackle that issue and provide, if not at the processing level - picking up on what Amy said - at least on-farm, and then further up the value chain as we implement these initiatives. I just wanted to allude to that as one of the solutions.

Then if you think about both the Season Extension Enhancement Program and our investment in Season Extension to provide producers with technology that extends the season in both the Spring and the Fall so that they can generate a crop and have more income for an extended period of time, while at the same time tackling elements of climate change - because they could be further under glass, or another solution to extend that season.

That segues into your Local Food Advancer question. Really, there is significant opportunity through the investments that were recently made on large-scale processing operations for local food advancement to move to automation in terms of addressing not only the labour need, but more product and lower cost of production to go to market.

We're happy to say that in the coming months, we'll also be doing a small-scale food advancer program for the small- and medium-sized enterprises. We're about to launch that program in the coming weeks - as soon as our minister is satisfied with the content of it. It is a very significant investment both for large- and small- and medium-scale.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I've got a question that hopefully is good news. According to a Nova Scotia farms report, direct sales to consumers - almost a third of Nova Scotian farmers are selling directly to customers, while nationally it's like 15 per cent or under.

Given how important local sales are to the agricultural economy, how can programs like Nova Scotia Loyal positively support our growers and producers?

I will let the people decide who's going to respond, Mr. Chair. I'm not taking a shot at that.

THE CHAIR: I'll need a show of hands or not. (Laughter)

Ms. Van Den Heuvel, you've been nominated. (Interruption)

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Yes. That's very true.

I appreciate you highlighting that local piece. Again, it's something that we are proud of - that we do a lot of direct-to-consumer marketing here in Nova Scotia. There are a lot of different marketing and business models that we use, but we definitely see that we have the highest farmers markets per capita here as well - so another interesting statistic.

In terms of Nova Scotia Loyal, I think any opportunities that we have to actually increase awareness around local - so people can pick local in the grocery store and understand that's what they're purchasing, and understand where their food is coming

from. I think sometimes we get busy, and then we go into the store and forget that farm-to-fork path that our food travels. I know that the Nova Scotia Loyal program is still in development. We are looking forward to seeing what details will roll out and how that will integrate with our farmers who are direct to market, and those who aren't necessarily direct to market but also producing a local product. We're really hopeful that will actually encourage more Nova Scotians to buy local.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to go back a bit to the discussions around workforce development, but also farm succession planning. One of the challenges to entering into the industry is access to capital and access to land. There's a number of initiatives like the land banks and land trusts that are possible opportunities to make land available to folks who wouldn't otherwise be able to access it, or make the land available to folks to access more land. I think those are key - and we do have a less-consolidated agriculture industry in Nova Scotia. I think it's actually one of the great assets that we have.

I would invite comment in terms of priorities around access to land for farm succession, but I can't help but also ask questions around diversity. I think newcomers and youth have been mentioned, but essentially, Nova Scotia was built on the dispossession of Mi'kmaw field and farmland, and the restriction and lack of access to land by African Nova Scotian communities, and Acadians who were moved off farmland.

What sort of programs are in place specifically to work with the African Nova Scotian community and the Mi'kmaw community. I'm also wondering if you have any programs targeting 2SLGBTQ+ communities. I think there might be a question in there for both Carolyn and the deputy minister.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud, are you first?

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: I can go first, yes. Thank you very much for the question. Within the Department of Agriculture, we certainly have a variety of programs that are targeted toward diversity, both for African Nova Scotians and the Mi'kmaw - perhaps a little less specific for the 2SLGBTQ+ community. However, not remiss in our approach to looking at all diverse groups within the Department of Agriculture.

We have perhaps advanced a little further with our initiatives around the African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities. With our industry development and through our regional programming, we have staff who are specifically working on initiatives. I believe today - and I would have to confirm this for you, but I think it's today - is the diversity session for African Nova Scotians housed here in Halifax for programming under S-CAP. It's targeted specifically for that group, so that we can have a really good dialogue around the programming that's specifically available to them.

We've had several conversations lately around acquisition of land, and through the Farm Loan Board, how we can approach the customary requirements around assets to acquire loans and relax the eligibility so that individuals who do not come with the same portfolio of assets or capital, that they themselves can put into acquisition of land or projects - that we can approach that in a different way. I'm very happy to say that those dialogues are well under way. We have had some success on the seafood and aquaculture side with Indigenous groups with regard to the fishery. We're seeing some really positive movement there on new entrants with attraction of vessels, quota and different items.

[2:00 p.m.]

That's more on the land side. I also wanted to just mention we have several initiatives targeted at youth. We're running a Nova Scotia rural Black youth initiative out of Truro and Bible Hill, where we've attracted 13 students for this Summer who will have the experience to work across five government departments - and not only the Department of Agriculture. It speaks to the opportunity to have an experience and a connection with a potential career and wherever that might lead. Some of them obviously are in agriculture, but I'm very happy to say that there are students with the Department of Justice and the Department of Community Services, and the list goes on. We're very happy about that - and the uptake and realization that those initiatives need to spill out beyond HRM into rural Nova Scotia as well.

I'm not sure if I captured - you had a few questions in there. If you wanted to reiterate one, I could tackle that as well. I might have missed one.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: I think I'll tackle the land piece. You mentioned the land bank program. That's absolutely one of the recommendations that we have - that we'd like to see a land bank program here in Nova Scotia, capital investment for newcomers to farming. Also, a next generation within the families is significant. Our farm land values are increasing, but that also means that the cost to actually get into farming is increasing as well. We see the land bank as an opportunity to support the profitability and the growth of our operations, and also to help facilitate succession planning.

We did have a land bank program here back in the 1970s and 1980s. The farmers always say the old program, but that predates me. We're looking to see that land bank again, which would mean farmers would have access to rent and purchase land at an affordable rate, and also would help free up some cash flow.

Within that, we also look at agricultural easements and opportunities to place agricultural easements on land to ensure that it stays in agriculture production. The quality of our land is essential to our work, and soil health and water resources. We also want to ensure that we keep that land in agricultural production. There are a few policy

opportunities and programs that I think we could establish that would support both succession planning and the protection of agricultural land.

In terms of diversity, I think that session is happening today. We have one of our staff members attending as well to hear that feedback. Under our farm and workforce development work, that's where we have a priority of growing in diversity. We recognize that needs to be done by listening to communities and understanding what barriers exist, and how we can actually support folks in overcoming those barriers. Perhaps there's advocacy work that we can do to make sure that's a lens we're always applying to our work.

We have partnered on a few programs. The Bridge Into Agriculture program was a partnership between the Department of Agriculture, Dalhousie University, African Nova Scotian Affairs, and the Federation of Agriculture. We're running it for the second year now. That was an opportunity for African Nova Scotians to learn about gardening within their communities. It's horticulture-based, but definitely on a small scale so that they could help address some of the food security issues. We did farm tours with the hopes that they'd see opportunities to actually look at agriculture as a viable career.

This Summer, we're also working at profiling some of the diversity in our industry. We recognize our industry is not necessarily as diverse as it could be in terms of people. Finding those opportunities to do profiles, to tell the story about equity-deserving individuals who have joined the industry or who have been in the industry so that we can make those connections and folks will see opportunities. I think we have lots of work to do in this area, but we're really excited to find those opportunities.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm going to switch gears for a few minutes to the report on healthy foods that the Auditor General provided recently. Basically, what it boiled down to is that many of the schools were not following the healthy food standards, especially those that contracted out to companies such as Chartwells.

I understand that there's a program now in five schools that were chosen for the fresh food cart pilot program. I have a question and a follow-up. How were these five schools chosen, and are there current plans to extend this to other schools?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Early on we realized that we need to actually reach our targets and mandate to around 20 per cent of local food by 2030. That would include our own institutions and where food is consumed, so schools were a natural area to look at. That coupled with the fact that we want our children to have healthy local food, displacing



imports, tackling environmental issues, geographic footprints of transportation, and various things that led to this desire to have institutional procurement.

We struck a team and had a manager hired who has a very knowledgeable skill set in procurement. It's one thing to say we're going to go into schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, et cetera. You need a skill set to have the conversations around identification of the current import basket in the schools, for example, understanding the distribution system and the suppliers, and the footprint to get that product there.

That team very quickly engaged in that work. I would suggest that the school selections were based on conversations around readiness, and a realization by the schools that they were prepared to enter into a pilot with us in this particular area - with the full knowledge that there would be lessons learned and barriers identified - allowing us to then replicate that, and take that hopefully province-wide at the conclusion of the pilots and the analysis of the data.

We're doing two pilots right now in schools. One is the fresh food carts, which covers the five schools, as you mentioned. The impact on the students - and I might get my numbers reversed here, but I'll throw them out and we can go back and validate them. In one area, we're hitting nearly 5,000 students through the number of schools participating in that particular pilot.

Then we're running a second pilot with a bigger range - 7,800 to 8,000 students where we're doing fruit baskets. Those fruit baskets are available throughout the day for students. It's really a self-serve mechanism for a healthy food choice to displace what otherwise might be a bad food choice within a school environment.

I'm happy to indicate that in that particular pilot, it's geared up so that there is equal access to the food. It's a situation where perhaps a child who doesn't have the means to have a healthy food choice does not have to go and identify themselves as asking for something - rather, they can go and help themselves. It's a really good process by which they can self-serve in those areas as well.

We're hitting a fair number of schools. You said five in the first one. Again, I want to confirm numbers for you, but there are 10 to 13 schools in the second fruit basket pilot. Each pilot is closing at a different point in time, and we have 10 pilots running currently. We will analyze that data, tackle the barriers that we're identifying, and look at how we then replicate those into any school in the province that wants to participate in that program. That would be a success story, and we're all about success in healthy food for our students.

I could speak at length about this, because I'm quite passionate about it. It's critically important and it's really good work. The team and those who are partnering with us on these initiatives are second to none. I have every confidence that we'll meet those targets. We'll start to see a shift on being able to acquire local food in our public institutions

as the right choice and the right thing to do to advance this agenda for Nova Scotia, and to hit the mandate items in our minister's requirement for that 20 per cent by 2030.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes, do you have a follow-up?

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, and some clarifications. First of all, with regard to how the schools are chosen - and you can answer all these at the end - are you assuming that's how they were chosen, or was there a particular criteria set that these schools met? I wasn't quite sure in how you answered the question - so could you clarify that? As well, you mentioned that you're reaching 5,000 students with the food cart pilot. Do we have data on how many students are actually participating in that program? How many students - 5,000 is the potential students we could reach, but what are the actuals? Will the department be releasing the results of the program and its evaluations, and do we have any timelines on this?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud, I think there are four or five questions there - whichever ones you can answer for one quick follow-up.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: You may need to reiterate some of those, because I'm not penning them as you say them, but we'll start with the criteria first. For the food cart pilot, there were several criteria that were looked at by the selection teams - so the team working on institutional procurement. I do know that one of the elements that was critical for the school that approached us is just their readiness with some of the equipment already acquired in the school system - so that they could hit the ground running, and have those carts in place in real time. That was one of them, but there are many others.

You can appreciate we have 10 pilots running, so criteria for each of those pilots were determined by the group in conversation with those who are participating in each pilot.

Your question around reporting- these are pilots that are running right to the end of this year, 2023. They're all on different contracts with us. They all have required deliverables within each contract. Once we've analyzed each of those, we're not adverse to sharing what we've learned, because I think it's how we move the agenda forward on being able to replicate pilots in other schools, hospitals, correctional facilities - and food hubs, which is the other big one. Distribution is key. We're running pilots with two food hubs now around clustering smaller producers' products so that we can have volume to then get into the institution - which is again a lesson learned around how you get volume to enter into a contract with a facility. Those are two of your questions. Do you want to repeat the third one?

THE CHAIR: I am going to move on, because I have four other speakers on here. MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I apologize for being late. I guess I need a course on time management maybe.

[2:15 p.m.]

I want to go back to foreign farm workers. Foreign farm workers are critical, certainly, to the horticulture industry. They're probably one of the most labour-intensive. If there are 1,400 foreign farm workers in Nova Scotia, close to 500 of them are probably in Colchester North. They play a significant role in the economy of our communities. They're certainly part of the communities now in that they come back year over year, and they're part of the communities in Colchester North. They do great work.

I just want to say that certainly in my time, I've seen - since they started to where they are today - a huge improvement has been made in the quality of life and living conditions. Farmers recognize more and more value.

I want to clarify a little bit. I'm not supposed to ask questions without knowing the answer, but I want to clarify this piece on MSI, which I certainly support and see the value of. The foreign farm workers who come to Nova Scotia, either the farmer or the government that they come from have to provide a medical insurance program before they get here. Am I correct in that, Ms. Van Den Heuvel?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Workers under the temporary foreign worker program are required to have access to medical insurance, and there is private insurance that is accessed. Cowan Insurance is a typical provider here.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart, do you have a follow-up?

TOM TAGGART: Well, I have a follow-up, but I need a little clarification as well. There are things that say that - written in - I won't go down that. That's fine.

The other piece that I want to be clear on here is the foreign farm workers - who are critical. We wouldn't have this horticulture industry, probably a lot of agriculture industries, without them. They're provided a flight here, and if for any reason their employment ends - whether they're not happy or unable to do the job or whatever - they automatically have a flight back home. It's not like they're restricted to living in Nova Scotia. Is that correct?

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Yes.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: Just a comment on the fresh food pilot. One of my concerns was there wasn't a school, as far as I know, in the Annapolis Valley or Annapolis that I represent that was included in that pilot. I find that concerning. There are also a couple of schools in Annapolis that have gone backwards: Local food has been removed from the school due to a local procurement policy at the Regional Education Centre. I brought it up with both the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, so that's extremely concerning.

The deputy minister, I believe, acknowledged the threat by the avian flu to the poultry industry. I believe that the Chicken Farmers of Nova Scotia also raised this concern. They even offered a suggestion, I believe: to plan for a new lab that meets the requirements for these highly infectious diseases or secure access to regional facilities with formal agreements/cost-sharing. I apologize for reading that quote.

I guess my question to the department and the deputy minister: Could she update us on the development and construction of an infectious disease lab in the province, and if not, why?

THE CHAIR: I'm going to rule the question out of order because the concern is at the federal level of government through the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. If the issue is brought by industry and CFIA, the Province will definitely take part in supporting it. For our topic here today, I think that's out of order. Do you have another question?

CARMAN KERR: Could you elaborate, Mr. Chair, on why it's ruled - there is a federal component, but there also is a provincial component and responsibility.

THE CHAIR: My understanding is that it is governed by the federal agency, not by the Province. The Province takes part in it and supports it here in Nova Scotia, but to have that topic here today, it's not a good use of our time.

LISA LACHANCE: Could I actually rise on a point of order?

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I don't know if it's a point of order, but I actually don't agree with you ruling that question out of order. Certainly, when I was elected and became the agriculture critic for the Nova Scotia NDP, one of the first things that was brought to my attention was a great concern about the lack of capacity to respond in emergency situations adequately in this province, and that there had been better provincial capacity actually - perhaps not the lab that's also being talked about with avian flu.

First of all, I think it's a completely relevant question because it's talked about all the time. I don't know how you can rule that out of order. Second, I think your ruling was quite inappropriate as Chair - to actually assert what the government would do. You said

if the industry and the federal government came forward, then the Province will step forward. I think with all due respect, in your role as Chair, that is not a statement that's appropriate to make.

THE CHAIR: First off, if you want to put in a topic for another future meeting, you're free to do that at an agenda-setting meeting, but for now, I'm going to rule that out of order. If you want to challenge the Chair, you can call for a vote.

MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: May I make a comment - or I'd like to rephrase the question. I agree with my colleague's concerns. As a farmer growing up amongst farmers, I've heard this issue being brought up as the topic of this meeting, as challenges in the agriculture sector. There is a provincial component. Can I rephrase my question to the deputy minister? Have there been any discussions about introducing the development and construction of a lab with the federal government?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: As alluded to, the testing for avian influenza is with CFIA, but certainly industry has raised the concern around testing capacity in Nova Scotia. In the last outbreak that we had, we had the fortunate circumstance of New Brunswick being able to do the preliminary screening testing for us on our behalf. Confirmatory testing is determined by CFIA, to which a sample then makes its way to Winnipeg. I will state that for Nova Scotia, we currently don't have biosecurity level clearance to do AI testing here. But it would be CFIA in conversation with the province and industry making it known to CFIA that there is a desire to have that capacity here.

I might make an additional note to that to say that our minister has a very collaborative working relationship with his Atlantic colleagues, as do deputies. This would perhaps be an item that if it was raised by industry with CFIA and supported by our minister as an agenda item, that the Atlantic ministers would like to pursue and have dialogue on. They may look at it from an Atlantic perspective for economies of scale and ability to maintain technical competency in a lab of this nature to do notifiable disease testing within the province.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: I know the industry has raised this as an issue. They have with me several times. I wonder if we could ask the deputy minister to raise this with the minister - this idea of bringing it together with other colleagues across Atlantic Canada, and then reporting back to the committee on that progress.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Are you asking a question or providing a direction?

CARMAN KERR: Potentially both, but I'll ask as a question first, and then depending on the response, maybe there's a direction in there.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr, can you clarify?

CARMAN KERR: Is the deputy minister able to speak to the minister and report back to this committee on progress on that action, as far as meeting with his Atlantic colleagues to further this issue?

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: With all due respect, I would not necessarily take back a request from this table to the minister, but rather defer to industry representatives to my left to raise that concern directly with myself and the minister, and we'd bring it forward in a more formal way. I'm just unaccustomed to taking direction here to take back to the minister.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I certainly don't feel like creating an antagonistic atmosphere at the table. But I am concerned that when the Chair of the committee provides input into the discussion - I think as the Chair of the committee, your role is to oversee the function and the rigour of this committee, unless in the case of a vote, you don't participate in the discussions. Again, I would challenge that that was inappropriate. I don't know what my recourse is in this, but maybe to ask you to withdraw the statement about what the government will do or won't do.

THE CHAIR: My statement was that this committee is a provincial committee, and that the question that was asked for the federal government. We do not have any jurisdiction there, so I want to keep us on topic as a Province. I don't feel I said anything wrong. MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: That's actually not the statement with which I am taking issue at all. Obviously, we're having this discussion without Hansard in front of us, but what I believe was then said by yourself was that you said: if industry and the federal government come together on this, then this government will respond. You made a statement of action on behalf of the government, which I don't think is appropriate with your role as Chair of this committee.

THE CHAIR: I will say it again. The Province would support industry and the CFIA. Do you have an issue with that? (Interruption) Then challenge it.

MLA Lachance, I don't know if we're having a disagreement with what the term "support" means, but I will not apologize or take it back. What I would simply say is that I'm speaking on behalf of myself, assuming that the Province will take part in industry and the federal agency. That is our job. I assume that's what we do. That's all I'm saying. We

don't have any action here. I don't think you're taking a point of order. I don't know what you're doing here. I really don't know where we're going from here. There's no other conversation to really have. I don't know what else we're going to say about this. You've raised your point.

MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I don't like your dismissive tone, so I would also, in fact, consider that a point of privilege. What I am doing is trying to ensure that committees run well, in that our committee structure is as strong as it can be for how it's constituted. Part of that is having a neutral Chair. That is my concern. It is actually nothing personal at all.

I will thus make a motion for the Chair to withdraw the statement about what the Province will and won't do as an inappropriate remark for the Chair.

THE CHAIR: You heard the motion.

MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I was just seeing if there was discussion on the motion because normally the Chair asks that. But I would just like to say that in all honesty, and with all due respect to the Chair, the Chair needs to be neutral. The Chair should not be speaking on behalf of government - of what government should and should not do. That is the crux of this - it is not against anybody, it's not personal - so that we can move on from this. That is the issue here - speaking on behalf of government while in the Chair. If the Chair has comments to make, the Chair can remove themselves, put somebody else in, and speak on this side. That's all I'm going to say on this. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Any other discussion?

In fairness, what I did was I suggested this is a provincial government and we should be dealing with provincial issues. Regardless, we have a motion on the floor.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

Moving on.

MLA LeBlanc, next question.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I'm going to go back to the question of labour shortages. I am quite concerned for labour shortages, especially in rural Nova Scotia. What I'm hearing

all the time is that there's quite a bit of economic growth there that could happen in rural areas if there was more certainty around labour.

[2:30 p.m.]

I guess what's happening - it might be a bit different in the agriculture industry than in the fishing industry, but businessowners have to be versed in immigration. They have to take on housing or sometimes become landlords. They have to look at transportation. And above all that, they have to create an environment where those who come to work in your business feel comfortable and have what they need.

The question I have is: How much of an impact is that having on individual farmers? Do you feel that the government, in this case provincially, is providing enough support around all those challenges that are outside what normally or typically would be farming? Maybe Executive Director Van Den Heuvel.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: We have lots of Dutch in our industry already, as can be seen sitting here today.

I thank you for that question. I think that the reality is there was a time where farming was farming, and we got to spend the majority of our time in the barns, in the fields and on tractors. But there is absolutely an increase in administration happening at the farm level right now. Our farmers are expected to be human resource experts, marketing experts, and crop experts as well. We are seeing increased pressures on our farmers to be able to keep up with that paperwork and administration.

I would say that I think there are always opportunities to provide additional supports to help farms in navigating those systems. I know there are programs in place. I think sometimes even knowing where to start is one of the challenges. I think we actually heard that last week in our discussions that we had at the round table - that navigating programs is a challenge for industry. I think there are opportunities there.

I also think that whenever we're looking at administration and administrative burden, any opportunity we have to apply that agriculture lens, that small rural business lens, to our policies will be a benefit. Maybe there are opportunities that we're able to make amendments to policies to decrease some of that administration as well, or what those processes are.

Absolutely, our farmers are expected to do more, and unfortunately, we're doing more with less sometimes. Having additional supports to navigate programs and policies would absolutely benefit the industry.



THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just wanted to talk a little bit about having Cogmagun Poultry and Oulton's Meats both in my constituency, the need for and importance of abattoirs. Could anyone shed any light on the recent investment of \$500,000 for the Abattoir Enrichment and Efficiency program to help grow our local meat industry by way of grants to improve equipment and other aspects of business - which maybe we were just talking about? Is there any real-time proof showing how this program has helped grow, in particular, the poultry industry locally? If I could maybe hear from you both, that would be great.

THE CHAIR: Sorry, who was the question to?

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Whoever wants to go first.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Vanderheide.

AMY VANDERHEIDE: In Nova Scotia, for poultry processing we have one federally inspected plant, which means that the meat processed there can cross borders. For smaller growers, our licensed small flock, they are required to book at a local abattoir.

Especially since COVID - with many people growing so much more of their own food - we have seen access to that definitely decline. It's now to a point where no matter what species of animal you are trying to process, you're basically booking your process or slaughter date the day you buy the animal, because there is a lack. More capacity is definitely needed to help meet the meat we have to process, if you want to put it that way, and get some of that food out - whether it's somebody who's growing for their own family or farmgate sales to help get that local food, but also food to rural places, and more affordability in those communities for that food.

I don't know if Loretta wants to take on the funding aspect.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Thank you for the question, and thank you for the comments, Amy. We ran another abattoir program recognizing the need for processing capacity for both red meat and white meat in the province. We have very limited federally registered plants here. We have several provincially registered plants. We recognize that there's a capacity issue, and we need to support them in terms of items that they might need to stay viable as businesses in the province of Nova Scotia.

We had run an abattoir program previously - we ran a second one. There was a lot of work under way through the Atlantic Deputy Ministers' Table around Food Self-sufficiency Modelling. The focus of that work currently is around red meat production and processing at the Atlantic level for our respective provinces. The second part of your question around are we seeing any impact from that - certainly increasing capacity to be

able to take on a slaughter and processing is enhanced with some of the investments that are being made. We are seeing that in terms of the outcome.

I'd also like to mention one of the significant impacts that coincides with the investments in the abattoirs was in January. The Department of Agriculture had the meat inspectors, animal welfare, and fur inspectors return to the Department of Agriculture. Along with that came a wealth of knowledge and experience around how you would approach the needs in abattoirs by having the workforce aligned with the legislation. We're very happy with that. Work continues on a daily basis around improvements and current needs, and they're constantly in dialogue. We're seeing a lot of positive feedback from that transition from the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Not necessarily a follow-up, but I do want to reiterate both of my facilities could work 24/7, seven days a week, and still not meet the demand. I mean, the more work that we can do to support the few that we do have is really important work, so I look forward to seeing more commitments in that.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald with just about two minutes left for questions.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Seriously? Okay, I just have a question. Ms. Van Den Heuvel - how bad did I butcher it? In your opening statement, you made a remark about regulatory issues with equipment coming from Europe. Can you explain to me what you meant?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: In terms of having equipment in Canada, there's various legislation that it would fall under. For example, in the Occupational Health and Safety legislation, we've referred to a number of standards, typically the CSA standards - Canadian standards. When we're bring in in equipment from other countries, they're potentially tested to a different standard. Depending on that country, it may be an equivalent standard to what we see here or maybe it's not. European standards, I think, we typically are pretty confident that those are to the same standard that Canadian standards are.

The challenges when bringing that equipment in, sometimes it's nuanced, depending on the equipment. There may be a requirement to have an engineer look at the equipment or have it reviewed for meeting standards. Sometimes that just provides an additional challenge for farms, having that equipment coming here, and it might sit for a while before they're able to review that. So looking at opportunities when we are comfortable and confident that the equipment is manufactured to the same safety specifications - that maybe there's opportunity for some reciprocity of sorts that could exist.

THE CHAIR: Exactly on the time - 2:40 p.m. - for questioning.

Deputy Minister Robichaud for closing remarks.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: I would like to thank everyone for their questions today. I always appreciate an opportunity to share what's happening in the Department of Agriculture - a department that means a great deal to me and my staff, who work diligently there every day. There are many challenges in this sector, to be sure, but there are also many opportunities. Some of them we had a chance to review today. We pursue these in step with industry and we're always pursuing them together.

I have great faith in the skills and the innovative spirit of our farmers and our agri-food producers. They know they have the support of the Department of Agriculture behind them.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel, did you have closing remarks?

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Thank you very much for today's discussion. We are facing a lot of challenges in the agriculture industry, and I think we covered that today. We could probably stay here for a while longer, but I think having this dialogue is really constructive.

What I'd like to say is that, if we look as a province at investing in agriculture, it's a strategic move that will pay off in the long term. Sometimes we don't see that payoff immediately. It may not be immediately visible, but investing in agriculture means that we're investing in the health and sustainability of our province and our communities. We truly believe that agriculture can help support our province in achieving its goals of health care, environmental targets, population growth, and providing strong rural economies.

We need our farms to be sustainable. To be sustainable, we need to be profitable. I think the final message would be that we don't only owe it to our industry but to our communities to ensure that we have a strong agriculture industry, and that we have a prosperous and sustainable future for our farmers - because that's going to support the prosperity of our province.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Vanderheide, did you have closing remarks?

AMY VANDERHEIDE: Once again, thank you for having us today. We really appreciate having the focus on agriculture in this room this afternoon. Every time we get to join a session like this, we see how much farmers have in common with supply management. Sometimes it seems we're set apart a little bit, but the more conversations we have like this - and we're all facing the same challenges - it gives us a bigger voice and allows us to take part in these conversations.

We thank you again for having us today, and look forward to doing it again sometime.

THE CHAIR: As Chair, it's my honour to thank you guys for coming in. We appreciate you broadening our knowledge today, for sure. At this time, you're free to leave. We have some more business to take care of. Do you guys want a couple minutes' recess? Do you need a minute or two? We have a few pieces of business to do. We'll just wait two minutes.

[2:43 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[2:46 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. Under committee business, MLA Sheehy-Richard, do you have a motion?

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Yes, I do, Mr. Chair. At the April 25<sup>th</sup> topic selection meeting, it was brought forward by MLA Palmer - and I think supported by the Liberal caucus - to bring the topic of Safeguarding the Future of Tidal Energy in Nova Scotia forward to this committee as soon as possible.

With that, I move that the topic for the June 27<sup>th</sup> meeting be Safeguarding the Future of Tidal Energy in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Discussion?

MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I guess we haven't had a chance to consider this because I think, obviously, Nova Scotia's clean renewable energy sector is also important. Can we have a couple of minutes of recess to discuss, please?

THE CHAIR: You can take a few minutes to discuss it. Is one minute enough?

LISA LACHANCE: How about two?

THE CHAIR: We do have a few more motions.

LISA LACHANCE: Okay, well, none of them were provided ahead of time, so we probably are going to need . . .

THE CHAIR: You've got two minutes.

LISA LACHANCE: Thanks.

[2:47 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[2:49 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I call the meeting back to order. We are ahead of time. Thank you.

MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I think we just had a couple of questions about this. I think we supported the motion around tidal energy as well, and are greatly concerned. I guess I do wonder if there's actually going to be anything to update by the end of June, given the current state of review and discussion that's happening. That's a question for all of us to contemplate.

Also, we would just like to make sure that we don't lose this question around renewable energy sectors. Would that become then - if tidal energy comes in June, this comes at the next meeting likely in September?

THE CHAIR: I believe that's the idea.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Yes. Just to elaborate, we feel that safeguarding the future of tidal energy in Nova Scotia is probably more pressing at this stage. If we could have that topic be called for June, and then have this topic still not be missed, and then bring that back in September is the thought.

THE CHAIR: Any more discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: I'd like to make a motion. I'm holding the *Growing Nova Scotia Together* document. I think we maybe all received it this morning. I would like to make a motion that the committee endorse the recommendations in the document.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion?

MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I apologize. I didn't get it until just now, and that's my fault. Who produced this document?

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: The document was produced by the Federation of Agriculture that was just here.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: I appreciate the member's sentiment toward endorsing it. I'd like to suggest that we make sure the department is fully aware of this and maybe follow the same practice that we do in the Public Accounts Committee, which is endorsing the recommendations that have been endorsed by the department.

CARMAN KERR: I would like to continue and go for the motion that I originally proposed.

THE CHAIR: Any other discussion?

MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: Just to say that we can't support that without knowing the department's sentiments on this document.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: My understanding is that the department has seen and processed the document.

THE CHAIR: Any more discussion? MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I just have to say, it's probably very good, but I just can't support it. From what little I've seen in this, we have lots of challenges and lots of solutions, and we all want the solutions, but are they affordable and realistic? I don't know. I haven't had a chance to review it, so I have to vote against it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: I did have time to read it through a couple of times, and I would like to make a motion to have the recommendations or the solutions endorsed. If we can go to vote?

THE CHAIR: Still under discussion. MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Yes, I just scanned through very quickly, and I will tell you, one does concern me. It says: Amend government procurement policies to require a Nova Scotia-first preference to food.

Great idea, but until somebody in contracts is going to be able to tell me that we would get in trouble doing it - I would be a lot more comfortable if the mover would look at this for next month to put in. That gives everybody - the department to give a response to it. At this point, that one there just causes the point of - you're talking about trade agreements and whatever. It may not be able to do that.

I'd just like them to give a vetting. They may tell me, you're worried too much onto it, but they're the experts on that one clause more than I am. I just read this today, and I'm also sitting in for a member. I just give my comments to the member. That's my concern into it, and I just grabbed one that I was able to find.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: To MLA Kerr, who made the motion, I'm just wondering. This - us supporting this - is in principle of the matter of what was written in here, and it's not an in-the-weeds type of endorsement, but we are endorsing it in principle as is. (Interruption) In the spirit, yes. Is that correct?

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: I would agree. I mean, the thought behind this was in spirit, from reading this through a couple of times, understanding that the department has been in discussion with the Federation on this. It's not a new document, even though some members haven't had the chance to read it.

I would like to propose the original motion. If it's voted down, I could always propose it again. Otherwise, we've got other choices.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We still have a few more speakers.

MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to say that I've had the pleasure of attending NSFA meetings. I think all of this is very consistent with their policy proposals and with the motions that were made at the last two annual general meetings, and they have a policy committee. I think we will support the motion in principle because, as MLA Kerr said, there's actually probably nothing new in here, but obviously was consolidated to provide this overview.

I certainly understand that Deputy Minister Robichaud has made it very clear here, at Estimates, and in other forms that there is a commitment to getting Nova Scotia products into institutions, so I don't think that recommendation is in opposition to that.

TOM TAGGART: I'd like to think that there's - maybe MLA Kerr - probably nobody in this room as passionate about agriculture as I am. (Interruption) I mentioned you, okay? I said maybe with the exception. I don't miss many agriculture meetings of any kind. There's stuff in here that I just love, but I don't see it as being realistic.

Secondly, we talk about the deputy minister being involved in understanding it, but has anybody talked to the Minister of Transportation, or has anybody talked to the Minister of Labour, Skills, and Immigration with respect to foreign farm workers and that sort of thing? I believe, as much as I'd love to, I just don't think it's responsible for me to support this right at this time without a full debate and full understanding from all the different departments that this will have implications on. We can speak to, it's just - I forget what the word was there - it's just whatever.

I don't know how many times I've been told in this chair or in the chairs across the way, words matter. It doesn't matter how you frame them, it's what you say. In this case, endorse means endorse, and I can't go forward with it.

THE CHAIR: Any other discussion? MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: My apologies as well. I, too, around this table - probably not as much as you folks - but I do have a vested interest in agriculture. Just a couple of these topics that were brought forward, like when the Department of Public Works increased funds for Rural Impact Mitigation program and Gravel Road Capital, so it does, as my colleague says, encompass very many departments. Then the government procurement policy - we all know in existence is a procurement contract that's signed. So there are implications there that we may not be able - easily as we would like to amend the policy that quickly - I'm not comfortable that those sorts of things can be done until those particular contracts have ceased.

Just a few things that joint-led taskforce and systemized farmer centric. They're as great as you say. There are great solutions in here, which I think is a giant wish list, so in order to focus in on this - this is a lot to take in on such a short time for me. I'm not normally - although I am engaged in agriculture and that's why I wanted to be here today for this topic - I, too, don't feel that I can broad-stroke endorse this at this committee without further investigation into that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: Not to belabour the point, but we run into this countless times in the Public Accounts Committee where the Auditor General will submit a report and the



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Auditor General had endorsements in it, and then we're asked to endorse whatever the AG says. We ran into it last year where we were being asked to support something that the department had analyzed and they had not endorsed. So then PAC can't in good faith tell the department to do something. We can't make decisions on their behalf or endorse on their behalf.

THE CHAIR: Order. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 3:00 p.m.]