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Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

Private Members' Business

Among the measures not included in the budget which are included in Bill C-9, there is the liberalization of one of Canada Post's business lines. In the last session and previous ones, the government tried to pass Bill C-44 without much success in the House. With this bill now, it is trying to put something in place that the members of this House did not agree with.

To sum up the first part of my speech, I would say that the government did not listen to the various associations that support what I just said, associations like the Quebec Federation of Senior Citizens, also known as FADOQ. The government is also ignoring the motion passed unanimously by the Quebec National Assembly calling on the federal government to compensate those seniors who have been shortchanged. It was asking that seniors be refunded. Despite all this support, the federal government simply failed to act.

Allow me to pass on what the seniors with whom I met in February told me. They are asking that the public sign their petition. They are currently campaigning to raise public awareness of what is not in the budget.

• (1730)

I think that the government's message is pretty simple, and the campaign slogan pretty clear. I am mentioning it here because these people need the government to hear their slogan at least one. Their slogan is: "The alarm is sounding. React!" That is what seniors want the government to do.

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

SEEDS REGULATIONS ACT

The House resumed from March 17 consideration of the motion that Bill C-474, An Act respecting the Seeds Regulations (analysis of potential harm), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to Bill C-474. The intent of Bill C-474, an act to amend seeds regulations, is to "require that an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted". The intent of this bill is to require that the federal government amend the seeds regulations in order to require that that analysis be undertaken.

I will admit that I have mixed opinions on this bill, but I will say off the top of this debate that I am willing to allow the bill to go to committee. What in part prompted this legislation was the discovery, beginning in Europe in July 2009, that Canadian flax exports were contaminated with the genetically modified flax, Triffid. The presence of the GM flax was found first in Germany in cereal and bakery products.

Let us be clear. The GM flax in question had not been approved for use in Canada since 2001 and this bill would not necessarily have

prevented the Triffid issue from happening. As the Flax Council of Canada confirmed to its members in October 2009, "No varieties of GM flaxseed have received regulatory approvals in the EU".

The consequences on our flax exporters has been severe. According to a *Globe and Mail* story on October 27, 2009, the lucrative \$320 million annual market for flax was threatened with prices declining from \$11 a bushel to \$2 a bushel. That is very serious.

It should be noted, though, that GM Triffid flax was developed in 1998 at the University of Saskatchewan. The Triffid seed is tolerant to soil residues and certain herbicides. In what I would call a smart and futuristic-thinking move, in 2001 Canadian flax producers, through the Flax Council of Canada, moved to have the CFIA, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, remove the variety registration for GM flax in order to protect their export markets. The EU accounts for approximately 70% of Canada's flax exports.

I make that point because the flax industry did everything it could to prevent genetically modified flax from affecting the European market. Yet it still did. Triffid got into the marketplace. This bill would not have prevented that from happening.

Let me turn to the issues that I believe need to be discussed in committee. There is a lot of debate around genetically modified and genetically engineered organisms and people have all kinds of wild and woolly stories. There is a lot of pressure from some in the farm community and some in the investment community not to allow this bill to go to committee.

We have to have the debate. We need to lay it on the table. I believe in a science-based system. I really do not know how the mover of the bill intends to measure market harm, but I am certainly willing to send it to committee to find out how the mover of the bill intends to do that. I am certainly willing to have a discussion with witnesses on both sides of the issue in a transparent way and deal with this proposal in a very constructive way.

The bill does not question the legitimacy of GMOs as an agricultural tool. The debate based upon the provisions of the bill need not become one which focuses on support for or opposition to the use of GM organisms.

• (1735)

Bill C-474 is seeking to propose the establishment of a means by which, prior to export of Canadian products, there can be developed a process by which "potential harm" of exporting GM products into markets which have not accepted their presence can be determined.

In a background note prepared for the agriculture committee on November 26, 2009, it was indicated that soya growers and exporters have taken an innovative approach by introducing a segregation system that allows them to supply their customers with different crops of soya with specific characteristics. However, this segregation system is not available to all varieties.

The economic harm test is established by the fact of a ban on certain GM content and the discovery of it in any shipment. However, the bill does not define how that economic harm would be determined. We will listen closely to witnesses to see if they can possibly put forward the method of defining that economic harm.

Private Members' Business

The wider issue remains the acceptability of GM organisms in the food system.

This is not the first time we have been faced with that kind of a decision. In 1994 Monsanto was pressing to have its product, Posilac, approved in Canada. Posilac, better known as rBST, is a synthetic growth hormone that increases milk production in dairy cattle. The Standing Committee on Agriculture, in its report of April 14, 1994, recommended a moratorium on the approval of rBST during which time there would be a review in greater detail of the impact of rBST on the costs and benefits for the Canadian dairy industry.

I bring this up because we are seeing the same kind of concern raised by researchers and some of the big companies right now. The response at that time from the industry to the work of the committee was to question why the committee would even do that work. I received a letter from the president of Ag-West Biotech Inc., a very successful biotech company in Saskatoon, in April 1994. He said:

I am writing to you with respect to agriculture biotechnology and my concerns regarding the recent actions of the Standing Committee on agriculture. The method they used to deal with BST has given me some real concerns for the future of the biotechnology industry in Canada.

He went on in the letter to say:

Their recommendations [meaning the committee] could have serious negative impacts on the future of Canadian agriculture. I trust that their recommendations won't proceed further, as they presently stand.

Another company that was very concerned was Monsanto, which wrote a letter on May 3, 1994. Monsanto said:

Since 1985 Monsanto has followed the current process for BST approval through Health Canada. We support a transparent and science based regulatory system. As developers, we believe this is essential to reassure the public on issues such as food safety...

Monsanto goes on to argue that, should the committee even study the issue, there would be loss of investment in Canada.

The point is that neither claim can be borne out. We made the decision as a committee. We debated the issue. As I understand it, rBST is still not approved for use in Canada. Monsanto and other research companies have continued to invest heavily.

Sending this bill to committee should not impact on investment in Canada. We should study the issue at committee and lay the facts on the table. I hear a government member laughing. I know the government hates to discuss issues. It likes to operate in secrecy. This issue should go to committee. It should be debated there. Proper witnesses should be brought in and then decisions made on the future.

• (1740)

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to speak to Bill C-474, a bill that would regulate seeds, and in particular, genetically engineered seeds.

This is an important bill we have before us. I think it is an important part of a policy on genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, that Canada should adopt. I will explain that and go into more detail later.

We must pass this bill. We are in favour of this bill because we must take into account the market losses that could be directly associated with some decisions made by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. We must consider the economic impact that the approval of genetically engineered products and substances could have.

We need to do more. Canada must agree to ratify the Cartagena protocol on biosafety. The purpose of this protocol is to govern and regulate genetically modified products. This protocol would also give substance to a declaration signed in Rio and to a fundamental approach, the precautionary principle, which is mentioned directly in the Cartagena protocol.

The Food and Drugs Act must be amended because genetically modified foods are not the same as conventional foods. Risk assessments should not and must not be the same for both categories. We have to go even further than that. We have to make sure that Canada has a policy and regulations for labelling products that contain GMOs so that people who go to grocery stores know what is in these foods. People have the right to choose. Canada's legislation has to recognize that right.

We have to pass this bill because there have been precedents. We have seen what happens. The case with China and Canada is an excellent example. A few years ago, in 2001 to be exact, China decided to ban imports of certain products made from genetically modified crops, such as canola, soy and rapeseed. These products were banned from China because they were genetically modified.

What was the effect of that ban on economic activity in the United States, where 70% of the soy crop is genetically modified? It was an absolute disaster for many producers.

That is why we have to be aware of the effect that approving genetically modified seed can have on our producers' economic security. The same applies to Europe. Asia and Europe are two markets that tend to ban imports of products containing GMOs. A Canadian Food Inspection Agency decision to approve a genetically modified product can have significant economic consequences for our producers.

Another example is genetically modified wheat. When Monsanto sought approval from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to market genetically modified Roundup Ready wheat, the Canadian Wheat Board immediately conducted an economic impact study.

• (1745)

The wheat board told the government to be careful, because if it approves genetically modified wheat, we could lose some of our market share. This bill would make the Canadian Wheat Board's measures mandatory, in order to protect our producers.

Private Members' Business

This bill needs to pass, but in my opinion, we need to go even further. We need to amend the Food and Drugs Act. At present, under that legislation, a genetically modified food, or a food item produced using genetically modified ingredients, is considered to be exactly the same product as a conventional food item. This is unacceptable. So we need to amend the Food and Drugs Act, to stipulate that a genetically modified product cannot be considered a conventional product, even though the two products may be very similar.

Nor is it true that once the Canadian Food Inspection Agency authorizes and approves a product, and there is a request from a developer to authorize another, that the study and risk assessment of a number of other products are automatically taken into account.

We have to change the Food and Drugs Act and make the distinction between a transgenic or genetically modified food product and a conventional food. What is more, we have to ratify the Cartagena protocol on biosafety. It has to be done. We cannot be the fifth largest global producer of GMOs and refuse to ratify an international protocol that simply establishes a framework for genetic modifications, the transportation of products and the creation of registries. It is our environmental and social responsibility.

What is Canada doing? It is applying the same logic as it does with the Kyoto protocol. Since Canada is a major polluter, it refuses to ratify the Kyoto protocol. Since Canada is the fifth largest global producer of GMOs, it refuses to ratify the Cartagena protocol on biosafety.

We must ensure that responsible environmental standards are set for this type of product. We have to do so because that is what citizens are asking us to do. They are calling for information when they buy products in the grocery store or elsewhere. More than 90% of Quebecers want mandatory labelling for GMOs once and for all, but the government has been dragging its heels for years. Whether it is a Liberal government or a Conservative government, the policy is the same. The government refuses to accept its responsibilities and we cannot accept that.

We are going to vote in favour of this bill because in our opinion it is one of the important pieces of a broader policy on genetically modified organisms, a policy that should include mandatory labelling and provide for a review of the Food and Drugs Act, which should also reflect this bill. When we have all four of the items I just mentioned, then we will finally have a policy that is respectful of the consumer.

• (1750)

[English]

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Bill C-474, An Act respecting the Seeds Regulations (analysis of potential harm).

I thank my colleague from British Columbia Southern Interior, the NDP agriculture critic, for his work. It is fair to say that his intelligence in developing policies is exceeded only by his fairness with which he goes about his work in the House. I am also pleased to say that I seconded the bill.

The bill deals with the use of genetically engineered seeds. It would require the government to consider the harm to the export

value of a crop before permitting the sale of any new genetically engineered seed. The policy basis of the bill is quite clear. It is needed to protect the economic livelihood of farmers and the soundness of Canada's agricultural policy.

The bill is good for agriculture, good for farmers and good for Canada. It represents the kind of progressive policy that is needed to move Canada forward in the 21st century.

Before I get to the crux of the bill, I want to address some of the broader issues that the bill raises.

My colleague and I are both from British Columbia, where we have a very proud farming tradition. Some of the world's best produce and products are grown on some of the world's best farmland. Family farms in British Columbia have been hard hit, like many farms across the country, but thousands of British Columbians take pride in the work they do every day to feed our nation and to feed many people of the world.

In British Columbia the value of quality farmland and sound agricultural practices has long been recognized. In fact, it is built into provincial legislation, which I am proud to say my party, the New Democrats, pioneered.

I want to take one example called the Agricultural Land Reserve. The New Democrat government of Premier Dave Barrett brought in a piece of legislation in 1973 called the Agricultural Land Reserve that essentially protects valuable agricultural land from development. It encourages farming and it controls non-agricultural uses of farmland. In other words, it takes land out of the potential for industrial and commercial development and it preserves it forever as agricultural land, some of the best land, as I have said, in the world. The ALR crew could be incredibly forward thinking. It is an example of the kind of vision of an NDP government.

Let us fast-forward to today. This was 1972, over 35 years ago. Today, we face the 21st century local food movement where we have concerns over climate change. We are talking about 100-mile diets and the importance of locally grown food and sustainable practices around the production of that food.

I want to point out that back in 1972, New Democrats in the country were already anticipating the vital importance that some agricultural practices and good food production have to our country.

The bill before us today shows the same kind of vision. The bill exemplifies the same kind of sound policy that we in the House want to support. The bill protects farmers of the future.

Private Members' Business

In my community of Vancouver Kingsway, people recognize the importance of local food production. They know that locally produced food reduces carbon emissions from transportation. It is healthier. Fewer preservatives are needed to keep it fresh. We have thriving local food movements all over Vancouver and in my riding of Vancouver Kingsway. The Trout Lake Farmers Market, which started up not that long ago, will be opening for the season in May. The Riley Park farmers market has now moved to Main Street Station. It was organized by a wonderful community activist named Mel Lehan. It also brings together farmers and local produce providers from around the greater Vancouver area right to the tables of Canadian families living in my municipality.

We recognize that a healthy agricultural policy is based on healthy components. We need healthy soil. We need healthy plants. We need healthy fertilizer practices and we need healthy, sustainable farm practices.

• (1755)

Many community gardens exist in my riding. We have the Cedar Cottage Community Garden that is driven by one of my constituents, Faune Johnson. We have the Cedar Cottage Greenway, one of the earliest gardens of the Greenstreets program, a city of Vancouver program that gives residents the opportunity to become volunteer street gardeners in our neighbourhoods.

I was invited by Beth Brooks to a community potluck to celebrate the success of this garden last summer and it was wonderful to see people brought together to help celebrate what could happen when a community gets in touch with our food production and our gardening roots.

At Windermere Secondary School in my riding, Vagner Castillho is a teacher who has a leadership class. As part of his sustainability initiative, students started a food garden and greenhouses. Individual families all over Vancouver take advantage of the Vancouver climate to grow their own food in backyard gardens.

I want to briefly address another quick farming issue because it is current before the House right now and it also speaks to the need for long-term vision from the government.

I am the vice-chair of the public safety committee and right now the committee is studying the government's decision to close six farms operating at correctional institutions across this country. On Tuesday, our committee heard nine witnesses as part of that study, people from the National Farmers Union, ex-convicts and a dean of law from Queen's University. We heard from sisters from a nuns order. We heard from rural municipal officials, the president of the National Union of Solicitor General employees, agri-business instructors at various institutions and from corrections officials themselves. Grouped together they illustrated the diversity of support for prison farms.

These nine individuals and many other supporters came to oppose the inexplicable decision of the government to close down prison farms, a win-win-win situation for Canadians that provides valuable rehabilitation for prisoners as well as marketable skills to aid these prisoners in reintegration. It saves government money by growing our own food and it is of value to local communities as an economic

driver for agribusiness, providing healthy food for food banks and slaughtering services for local farmers.

I have spoken in broad terms about the importance of agriculture and local food. I want to now draw my colleagues' attention to the specific provisions of the bill. The purpose of the bill is to direct the government to amend the seeds regulations to require an analysis of the potential harm to export markets before approving the sale of any new genetically engineered seed.

Currently, GE seeds are approved for sale with no consideration for their impact on export. This is not a theoretical discussion. Already GE seeds have had a harmful impact on Canadian farmers. Last September, illegal GE flaxseed called the triffid was found to have contaminated our flax exports. The triffid flax was not approved for human consumption or environmental release outside of North America. In response, European countries pulled Canadian products from their shelves and Canadian flax shipments were quarantined. Some 60% of our Canadian flax exports currently go to Europe and Canadian flax farmers were harmed and harmed severely by this.

GE alfalfa has already been approved for release in Canada. Monsanto has relaunched research into GE wheat. This bill seeks to prevent an economic disaster for Canadian farmers and these other crops as well. The agronomic and environmental impact of GE seeds and GE crops is controversial. There is no scientific consensus at present and further research is most certainly needed.

The economic impact of GE seeds, however, is not in question and this is what Bill C-474 seeks to address. Other countries have taken clear positions about their domestic consumption of GE products. Many of these countries are major consumers of Canadian agricultural products. Canadian agricultural policy cannot exist in a vacuum. We cannot live in denial of the international market reality toward GE crops because Canadian farmers rely on these export markets for their livelihood. The government has a duty, we submit on this side of the House, to protect the livelihood of these farmers, and the government has a duty, we New Democrats say, to consider the impact of these livelihoods before approving the sale of GE seeds.

It is my understanding that the government spent \$1.9 million to deal with the contamination of the GE flaxseed. Passing this bill would help farmers and save taxpayers money from having to pay for the cleanup of any future contamination.

Private Members' Business

The bill has the support of numerous farming organizations and environmental groups. It has the support of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture which represents over 200,000 farmers and farm families. It is endorsed by the National Farmers Union and the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network.

● (1800)

I am pleased to support this bill and I urge my colleagues to vote to send it to committee for further study. I thank the hon. member for his work in this regard.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to speak today to this important legislation, Bill C-474, an amendment to the seeds regulations.

I will begin by saying what a relief it is to hear the member for Vancouver Kingsway talk about how important the livelihood of Canadian farmers is. I know that in his care for Canadian farmers, he will also take the time to listen to them and stand up to get things like the Colombia free trade agreement passed, as the Canadian Pork Council and other industry leaders have come to us at our ag committee begging for us to expedite it.

I would also like to mention one other thing concerning the member for Malpeque who was speaking earlier. While he often has good ideas, sometimes he comes to them before or after he decides to vote. I am reminiscing back to the product of Canada labelling. He was for it before he was against it. With the budget, he was for it before he was against it. As the Attorney General of Canada, he was for cutting the budget for prison farms and now he is against it. With respect to the long gun registry, he was for it and now he is against it.

It really is difficult to pin down the Liberal Party and some of those members on exactly what their positions are. I cannot help but to be a little saddened by the position they are taking on this. It is a fundamentally dishonest position when they say that they want to sit and talk about this and they want to pass it through to committee knowing all along that they will vote against this bill and try to kill it in committee.

That being said, I would like to commend member for British Columbia Southern Interior. He has been an excellent member of the agriculture standing committee. Although I may not agree with all of his positions, he certainly comes to those positions through well thought-out time and effort. I know it is generally his intent to put good public policy forward.

That is why I raise these questions of concern with respect to the member for Malpeque. We should have honest debate on this, as I am about to participate in. It should not be political gamesmanship when it comes to Canadian farmers.

Bill C-474 would require the Governor in Council to amend the seeds regulations to require an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted.

Canada is a true leader in agriculture science and innovation. It is important to look at this bill and look at the idea of putting an economic impact on our trade. What we are basically proposing here is to allow other countries to affect our variety regulation and they will do this based on their own internal trade, therefore affecting our

own farmers and imposing a tariff on ourselves. That is basically what I see happening.

For generations, our farmers have practised selective breeding to improve the qualities and characteristics of their crops. In labs across the country, our researchers are working hard to develop new plant varieties and technologies that will continue to support a vibrant agriculture sector. New plant varieties offer a number of clear benefits, including more effective pest control, higher yields and reduced impacts on the environment.

Canada is proud to share our new technologies with the world. Canada's success in agriculture has long depended on the sector's ability to adapt to a changing marketplace by using new technologies to help lower production costs and to enhance the range of products available to meet new consumer demands.

I would like to spend a few moments highlighting one example of how Canadian innovation is helping farmers around the world, including farmers in poorer countries.

The Government of Canada has invested \$13 million to combat wheat stem rust known as Ug99, a fungus which poses a threat to wheat production. Canada is a leader in this kind of research. Our scientists are doing important work to develop new varieties of wheat resistant to this fungus. A greater understanding of the biology of this fungus will make a major contribution to international efforts to combat Ug99 worldwide.

The late Dr. Norman Borlaug, the Nobel Peace Prize winner plant scientist commended us on making this important investment in wheat rust research. He called it an important action to protect the wheat crop in North America and worldwide, and a major step forward in our efforts to stem the global threat of wheat rust. Recent predictions are that we will have to double global food production to feed the global population by 2050.

● (1805)

We must continue efforts to accelerate scientific research in order to feed the population of the planet. We must increase agriculture yields in a major way to meet the challenge of the future. Farmers are at the core of our efforts to meet this challenge.

We recognize that this bill raises important policy issues on how to manage the market impacts of genetically engineered products. We need to be very cautious of any move to introduce a subjective, non-scientific element to our oversight in the introduction of new technologies. I am referring to socio-economic considerations like consumers' attitudes in other countries to genetically engineered food. These matters are not science-based and can change overnight. The industry is divided on the prudence of introducing non-science criteria into the process.

I will quote a letter from Doug Robertson, a canola producer from my home province of Alberta, regarding this bill. Mr. Robertson writes that GM canola has helped him improve his yields and helped the environment despite the coldest and driest spring in recent memory. He states:

Canada has always used sound science to assess whether new ingredients, seeds and traits are safe for Canadian farmers to grow and consumers to eat. That policy makes us a leader in the world and is the only realistic way to assess risk, with clear, sound, scientific methods.

I want to emphasize that, “with clear, sound, scientific methods”.

Canada's food supply is safe already thanks to our sound science system we have in place. Over two decades of studies have proven that. We don't need non-science corrupting our approval system.

I know from round tables that I have done across my province and my riding that this is the overwhelming opinion of the producers in our area that rely on canola, wheats and barley.

In other parts of the world, we are also seeing changing attitudes vis-à-vis GE foods, particularly in a number of European markets. Canada has been a strong proponent of science-based trade, whether it is BSE hormones in cattle or genetically engineered foods. We understand that trade must be rooted in science. Our regulatory system works to ensure that the products we sell to the world are safe and of the highest quality.

It is an efficient system that has put Canada on the map for food safety and quality. Adding in trade and other issues unrelated to science could set a very dangerous precedent. We want to ensure we do not risk bogging things down in red tape. We want to ensure we can continue to bring new technologies, such as our research into wheat stem rust, to the world. Anything short of that would be a tragedy.

I am proud of the action Canada is taking to help its farmers. Canada is blessed with the best farmers in the world and some of the best land in the world. We are a fortunate nation and we are committed to sharing our resources with those around the world who desperately need it. We are committed to finding new and more efficient ways to grow crops. We understand the need to keep a strict and unwavering watch on the food we produce and sell to the world. We just want to ensure we can get new technologies to those who need them with as little delay as possible.

The future of Canadian agriculture depends on innovation and trade, and those important elements are cornerstones of growing forward, our new policy framework for agriculture. With growing forward, we are putting more investment in innovation, from idea to invention to consumer. We are building new opportunities that support innovation and competitiveness. In fact, we have invested \$158 million in the new growing Canadian agri-innovations program.

We want to help the sector to succeed, and a big part of that success depends upon being able to accelerate the development of new products, practices and processes for new and value-added markets.

Growing forward builds on our international trade success through industry-led marketing strategies, a Canada branding strategy, market intelligence and services for exporters and actions to maintain and improve market access.

Private Members' Business

Growing forward takes action on the environment by supporting on-farm, sustainable agriculture practices.

Finally, growing forward builds on Canada's food safety systems with new traceability and bio-security programs so that Canada continues to deliver the safest, highest quality foods to Canadians and our global customers.

Science-based trade works and it brings real results for our farmers, the sector and our industry, and it is science-based trade that we must maintain in order to keep the stability that our industry so desperately needs in these very tough times.

● (1810)

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased today to speak to Bill C-474, An Act respecting the Seeds Regulations (analysis of potential harm). I want to particularly acknowledge the hard work that the member for British Columbia Southern Interior has done on the bill. It is a very important bill.

I know we have heard other discussions in the House. I want to emphasize that this bill is actually narrowly focused. We are not talking about the scientific approval of GE crops. We are not talking about mandatory labelling.

What we are talking about is that the bill requires an amendment to the Seeds Regulations Act to require that an analysis of potential harm to export markets can be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted.

Currently, approvals of genetically engineered crops for human consumption and environmental release are based on safety alone with no consideration given to any potential harm to export markets and the resultant economic harm to farmers. I think that is a very important statement.

I know that in my own riding of Nanaimo—Cowichan we have a very active food security community. I want to acknowledge the work that the Cowichan Green Community does around the development of a food charter, engaging the community in conversations and practices that not only look toward protecting our farmers and making sure that our local farmers have an adequate living but also ensuring that people have access to quality, affordable nutritious food.

We have many bakeries and in Nanaimo—Cowichan there is a famous wine region. Therefore, we are very conscious of the importance of farmers making an adequate living. That is part of what the bill is addressing. It is protecting farmers' incomes.

Private Members' Business

In the work that the member for British Columbia Southern Interior has done on the bill, he has identified a number of problems which the bill attempts to address. He said that a GE crop that is not approved in our export markets has little value to farmers. GE contamination is already hurting Canadian farmers and if a contamination incident similar to the current flax contamination crisis were to happen with wheat and alfalfa, the economic consequences to farmers would be devastating.

Currently, Bill C-474 is meant to provide a mechanism missing in the regulations that can protect farmers from economic hardship caused by the commercialization or contamination of their crops by GE seeds in the face of widespread market rejection.

I have had so many letters, e-mails and phone calls from constituents. I just want to read one because I think it captures some of the concerns that people have been talking about. This is an e-mail we received from Heide Brown. She said:

The Bill would support Canadian farmers by requiring that "an analysis of potential harm to export markets be conducted before the sale of any new genetically engineered seed is permitted".

This Bill is really important because, as we know from experience, the introduction of new genetically engineered (GE) crops can cause economic hardship to farmers.

Farmers are at risk when GE crops are commercialized in Canada without also being first approved in our major export markets.

Flax farmers in Canada are now paying the price for this exact problem.

Late last year, Canadian flax exports were discovered contaminated with a GE flax that is not approved in Europe or any of our other export markets.

Flax farmers actually foresaw that GE contamination or even the threat of contamination would close their export markets. That is why they took steps in 2001 to remove GE flax from the market. Despite this measure, flax farmers were not protected.

The GE flax contamination has created market uncertainty and depressed prices. Farmers are also paying for testing and cleanup and may be required to abandon their own farm-saved flax seed and buy certified seed instead.

These costs are an unnecessary and preventable burden.

We cannot allow our export markets to close like this again. It is the government's responsibility to protect Canadian farmers from predictable problems caused by the introduction of new GE crops that have not yet been regulated in our export markets.

—please support Bill C-474 and protect Canada's farmers and our markets.

That is fairly typical of a number of e-mails that I have received in the riding. I think one can tell from that letter that people are well informed about what the issues are that are facing farmers, about the impacts on the economies of farming, about their concerns around GE contamination, and how it impacts on our export markets.

● (1815)

It is important that we listen to the people who have written about this.

Some of the argument is that it is not doable. I want to point to the precedent of Argentina. Argentina is well aware that it is not just growing crops for domestic consumption, so it has a process lined out. The Government of Argentina's National Biosafety Framework, 2004 states:

In addition to the environmental biosafety assessment, a GMO release also requires a favourable food safety assessment...and the assessment of the absence of negative impacts on our exports.

Specifically, when it is looking at market impacts, it states:

A key part of the GMO regulatory process consists of verifying that the commercial approval will not have a negative impact on our foreign trade.

This specific assessment is carried out by the National Bureau of Agrifood Markets...and it includes an analysis of the current status of regulatory systems and public acceptance in the countries that buy our exports.

If Argentina can put in a system that examines the economic impact that could happen on its export market, surely Canada could do the same thing. As others have mentioned, a number of organizations are absolutely in support of this.

The CFA, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, in a news release of March 17, stated:

The varying levels of acceptance of GM-crops by key export markets is a reality Canadian farmers face...Ensuring that these markets are not closed to us because of the technology we adapt should be a government priority as they are work to develop more export opportunities for Canadian farmers.

It goes on in the news release to say:

Having a system in which GM-crops are authorized in one country and not in another means that the inadvertent commingling of crops and crop types while they are being transported to export markets will increase the potential for future market closures.

I want to turn, now, to a briefing that went to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food from the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network. It has a detailed briefing, but I want to touch on a couple of points.

It lays out its initial ask by saying there are two actions required:

Potential harm to markets needs to be considered before any new GE crop is field tested or commercially released in Canada.

The entire regulatory system for GE crops and foods needs to be reviewed and reformed.

The second point is outside the scope of this bill, but I want to touch on the negative economic impacts.

In its statement, it states:

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency...approves genetically engineered crops for environmental release without regard to the impacts on markets for Canadian farmers. Canadian regulatory agencies have no mechanisms by which to evaluate the economic risks, and approve or deny the introduction of GE crops based on this consideration.

In my closing minute or so, I will touch on a couple of items that are not in this bill but are very important to people in my riding. Again, I remind people the focus of this bill is on the potential economic damage for our farmers on export markets where we have countries that will not accept GE crops and are concerned about contamination.

However, in addition, CBAN, the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network, identified a couple of other areas of concern. It indicated that there is inadequate science and lack of transparency.

The Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel on the Future of Food Biotechnology stated:

The lack of transparency in the current approval process, leading as it does to an inability to evaluate the scientific rigor of the assessment process, seriously compromises the confidence that society can place in the current regulatory framework used to assess potential risks to human, animal and environmental safety posed by GEOs [genetically modified organisms].

It went on to highlight a number of other areas of concern, including incomplete environmental risk assessments and inadequate monitoring and surveillance.

In its conclusion, it stated:

The regulatory system for genetically engineered organisms in Canada is not built to include consideration of the potential negative market harm caused by the introduction of GE crops, and is not adequately constructed to assess the complex environmental and health risks of genetic engineering.

I urge all members of the House to support the member for British Columbia Southern Interior's very excellent bill, Bill C-474, and to protect those markets for our farmers.

• (1820)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Resuming debate. I recognize the hon. member for British Columbia Southern Interior for his five minute right of reply.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to first thank all of my colleagues who took part in the debate on Bill C-474. It is my hope that they will work hard to convince members of their respective parties to move this bill forward to committee.

It is vital that we have a thorough and democratic debate on the economic effect on farmers of any further introduction of GE organisms into the environment. At the end of the day, it is up to parliamentarians to do all we can to help our farmers.

Before I move on, I would like to clear up a misconception. It was mentioned a number of times that had this bill been in place, it would not have helped the flax farmers. That is not entirely true because in 1996 Triffid received feed and environmental release approval. In 1998 it received food safety authorization.

Had the bill been in place at that point in time, the economic impact study would have shown that it would have been unwise to continue releasing flax into the environment. It was not until 2001, because of the pressure by farmers, that flax, which already had been released into the environment, was taken out and cancelled. I wanted to clear up that misconception.

The other point that is often mentioned is that somehow this is science-based technology. Let us be clear. The yield increases in crops are due to traditional breeding. For example, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists, it is looking at methods now that are capable of increasing more of the crop yield, using a high tech genomic approach or marker-assisted selection. These are non-GE methods and they are the ones that actually increase the yield.

I do not have a great deal of time, so I will concentrate my remarks on the alfalfa industry. Mr. Paul Gregory of Interlake Forage Seeds in Manitoba states that most family-owned seed companies are against the further advancement of GM traits, especially in the forage seed business.

Mr. Kurt Shmon, president of Imperial Seed Ltd. also of Manitoba, writes:

—the users, producers and wholesalers/retailers of alfalfa seed and hay are opposed to the introduction of Roundup Ready alfalfa and yet we are at risk of the release of this product.

Private Members' Business

He also cites the case of a U.S. seed company, Cal/West, which lost its market due to GE contaminated seed. The key word here is “contamination”.

According to the Saskatchewan Organic Directorate, it will be impossible to prevent the spread of GE alfalfa beyond the fields it is planted in for the following reasons.

First, alfalfa is pollinated primarily by leafcutter bees, which often drift several miles in search of better bloom, and also by honey bees, which have a range of up to four miles. Actually, a U.S. study has shown a contamination radius of up to 1.7 miles already.

Second, GE alfalfa for hay is often cut after the blooming starts and, therefore, the pollen is easily transferred to non-GM crops. Third, alfalfa seed crops produce a percentage of what is called “hard” seed that can germinate several years after the field has been plowed up.

Once contamination is discovered, countries that currently reject GMO crops, food and feed, will obviously then reject our alfalfa. Also, a large portion of our alfalfa pellet and cube market would be lost. Our organic livestock industry would also be hit hard if GE alfalfa contamination were to be found.

• (1825)

[*Translation*]

Consider Argentina for example. Before a GMO is approved for marketing, the government must have in hand the technical advice, including whether the market would accept the GMO, in the absence of potential negative impacts on Argentinian exports.

[*English*]

The government officials responsible for allowing this technology onto the market need a mandate to consider what the impact of doing so will have on our export markets. Bill C-474 will provide the mechanism to give them this mandate.

[*Translation*]

I urge my colleagues to send Bill C-474 to committee so that we can have a thorough and democratic debate.

[*English*]

Farmers are in difficult times. Let us not throw more obstacles in front of them by carelessly allowing the release of GE crops that can lead to economic harm.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

Adjournment Proceedings

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): In my opinion the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, April 14, 2010, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

Do I have agreement to see the clock at 6:30 p.m.?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*English*]

CHILD CARE

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in my question to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development with respect to child care the other day, she responded saying that parents had choices and that the government prefers to give parents choices. I want to point out that if there are no spaces, there are no choices.

The previous Liberal government had \$5 billion invested over five years. This would have expanded to \$10 billion to have a long-term investment in early education and child care. This is what it is about. It is about early education and child care. This was a long-term investment in partnership with the provinces. It was an agreement with all the provinces across Canada to deliver early education and child care to children.

The first act of the government when it came to power was to eliminate the \$5 billion, thereby eliminating spaces and giving parents essentially no choices. The waiting lists for the last couple of years have gone up tremendously and the spaces are much too expensive. Parents are having to pay \$1,200 to \$2,000 a month. It is far too expensive. That does not give parents a choice of any kind.

The Conservatives talk about providing millions of dollars in child care, offering a paltry \$250 million, which is then divided among 10 provinces and three territories. Under the \$5 billion Liberal government plan, \$254 million went to Ontario alone for that first year before the government cut it. Once that was cut, the Government of Ontario had to make that money last. Therefore, it divided it up to \$63.5 million a year for a number of years. The last of that federal funding dried up this year. The last of the small amount that they had divided dried up.

In the meantime, the Government of Canada has put no real money into child care. It has made no real investment. The \$1,200 it calls universal child care is not a child care program at all. Up until this year, it was only benefiting wealthy families and not low-income

families. This year, it is putting a little bit more into low-income families, making it look as if it is increasing. Essentially though, no matter which way we look at it, we are looking at \$50 to \$100 a month, in fact we are looking at \$1,200 a year. This amount does not even begin to pay for one day, never mind a whole month of child care.

It does not build spaces for child care, provide teachers or pay for all the costs that go into the infrastructure as well. Fees are rising for parents all across the country. There are waiting lists in Toronto that are very long, including in my own riding of Beaches—East York. With this \$63.5 million lost, there would have been 2,000 child care spaces at risk.

In any case, the province of Ontario picked that up, but that does not change the fact that the Government of Canada has a responsibility to partner with the provinces to deliver a national early learning and child care program, which the government has not done. It is a win-win. It creates jobs and helps parents re-enter the workforce. It gives every child the best start. It leads to a highly skilled labour force. The return on investment is huge. The government is pitting parents against parents and politics over policy in its short-term self-interest. That is not acceptable.

• (1830)

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our party and our government will not take the advice of the Liberal Party when we talk about parents and families. The Liberals are simply wrong, Mr. Speaker, and I will tell you why.

Our party and our government, this Conservative government, is the party for strong families. We are the party of choice in child care. We are the party that respects parents and families. We believe Canadian parents know what is best for their children and for their families. This is just common sense. Each family is different. Each family makes its own choices.

What we are interested in is providing Canadian parents with choices and with leaving more money in the pockets of those parents so that they are better able to make the choices they want to make for their children. The Liberals are not interested in any of those things.

Due to our government's actions, a typical Canadian family has \$3,000 more in its pocket than under the tax and spend Liberals. Under our government, we have achieved and will continue to make the largest investment in parents and families by a federal government in Canadian history.

Our policies for families are bringing tens of thousands of lower income families off the tax rolls completely, making sure that they have more money and more choices to take care of their children. Our policies for parents and children of more choices, more money in their pockets and less government lead to stronger families. Stronger families mean better communities, and that means a better Canada.