

Supply—Agriculture

spent. This addition of \$2 million would bring the amount up to \$19 million, yet the estimate for this year has been reduced to \$15,500,000. Does the minister suggest that is the amount to be dropped, \$3.5 million for this coming year? Why the huge drop in this freight assistance?

Mr. Harris: I am sure that is a good question to ask on the main estimates when the item of \$15,500,000 is before the committee.

Mr. Thatcher: I hesitate to speak on this item, yet I have had some views on it for quite a few years and I should like to lay them before the minister today. I want to emphasize that they are only my own views. The hon. member for Kootenay West expressed very ably a moment ago the views of this party.

This item of \$2 million is going to mean that in the current fiscal year the government will have paid out \$19 million on feed grain subsidies. This will bring the total amount which the taxpayer has been assessed for this subsidy, since its inception, to \$222 million. Now, that is a good deal of money. I hope before this item passes the Minister of Finance will express an opinion as to whether or not it is actually of great value to the farmer. I ask the house to remember for a moment the original purpose of this particular legislation. Hon. members will recall that it was introduced during the war years to encourage farmers to grow more hogs and beef, in order to make meat available to Great Britain at a time when she could not get enough meat from Holland, Denmark and her other customary sources of supply.

I feel that the original purpose of the legislation has long since been achieved. Once you get a subsidy on the books, it is very difficult to remove it. I know there would be howls of anguish if it were removed. Nevertheless I should like the minister to state whether or not some emergency still exists which would justify this subsidy. The hon. member for Kootenay West has said that certain chicken farmers in his riding might go bankrupt if the subsidy were removed. If that is the case, of course it should be taken into consideration. Yet I am still not convinced in my own mind that this huge expenditure is a sound one. I have never been able to find evidence to prove that the payment of this subsidy meant western farmers were better off. Some people may argue that we could not sell our feed grains in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec if we did not have the subsidy. If anyone can prove such a fact, I might have to change my opinion. But to date I have found no such evidence.

As a matter of fact, I feel that if the subsidy were not there the prairie farmer would

[Mr. Charlton.]

be much more likely to feed his grain on the farm in the west, and might in the long run be better off for having done that. If we must have a subsidy on feed grain to British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec, why do we not also have some kind of subsidy on the prairies? Actually, this measure is discriminatory against the prairies. If a Saskatchewan farmer in the south is shipping feed grain to the north where there might happen to be a shortage, there is no subsidy on that shipment at all. Actually, the freight rate is higher than it would be on a shipment all the way down to eastern Canada. I am only speaking for myself, but I do find myself most unenthusiastic about this expenditure. I am not convinced it is doing anyone very much good, except some of the feed dealers.

Mr. Brooks: I just wanted to say a few words in reply to what the hon. member has said. He spoke about assistance to Ontario and Quebec, but I might point out to him that it is of great assistance to the dairy farmer and meat producer in the maritime provinces. As a matter of fact, Mr. Chairman, I do not know just what the maritime farmers would do if it were not for this freight assistance on feed grain.

Mr. Gillis: Fold up.

Mr. Brooks: They would not fold up altogether, but they would come close to it, as the hon. member for Cape Breton South has said. The hon. member mentioned subsidies to the maritime provinces, Ontario and Quebec but I should like to ask him about the Prairie Farm Assistance Act. What help do the maritime provinces get from the Prairie Farm Assistance Act? We have never objected to it. If you make an estimate of what has been paid under that legislation, you will find it runs into \$100 million or \$150 million.

Mr. Thatcher: It is \$75 million since the act was passed.

Mr. Brooks: Yes, and it is growing all the time.

Mr. Weir: Do the maritimes not get something for the marshlands?

Mr. Brooks: We get a few million dollars, but there is no comparison between the two. The marshland payments have been compared a good many times in this house with the Prairie Farm Assistance Act. There is another act, the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, under which many millions of dollars collected from the public all across Canada have been contributed to the west. I am indeed astonished that the hon. member for Moose Jaw-Lake Centre would speak in this house about subsidies going to Ontario, Quebec and