

Oral Questions

that the farm income on the prairies is about one-quarter of the national poverty rate?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, we had an opposition day in the House last Thursday and we had a very good discussion. It was basically a non-partisan approach to the problem. We all recognize that the problem is there. If you look at the track record of this government, it has been very substantial in supporting agriculture through a very difficult time.

We have absolutely no intention of abandoning our farmers in a problem which they are not making themselves. We have just harvested one of the best crops on record with very high quality. Food is in demand around the world. We intend to see that our farmers get through this so that they can take advantage of better prices when things turn around.

I say again what I have been saying to farmers, and I was at both rallies in Manitoba with some very frustrated and concerned farmers, as well as business people who rely on farmers. We intend to do everything we can to support our farmers to get them through this very difficult situation.

Mr. John Harvard (Winnipeg St. James): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister knows that the prairie wheat pools have been asking for \$1 billion in emergency assistance to farmers to cover the losses in the 1990 crop year. The Prime Minister knows that the situation on the farm is critical. The Prime Minister should also realize that the government's efforts to help so far have fallen short of the mark. In fact, one of his own colleagues, the member for Brandon—Souris, has said on the public record and I quote: "Government efforts to support farmers have not been good enough".

When will the Prime Minister announce emergency assistance to farmers?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Without repeating what I said in reply to the previous two questions, Mr. Speaker, we have a process in place to deal with some of these problems.

The member will know that we had a major meeting in Winnipeg about a month ago. There is a meeting again next week to deal with this so-called third line of defence. We have yet to hear the recommendations of that committee.

We understand the problem. I believe very much that we understand the problem. I say again, we are going to do the very best we can to address a problem that needs to be addressed because the farmers are not putting themselves in the kind of situation they are in.

Mr. Maurice Foster (Algoma): Mr. Speaker, I have a supplementary question. The minister knows that mass rallies are springing up right across the country: Lucknow, Ontario, Miami and Russel, Manitoba. There are others planned across the prairies. Farmers are rallying to protest because the government has not provided the emergency transitional assistance which it promised last spring when the farm safety network system was being put in place, and because they face the worst financial crisis in a generation.

Since the minister has attended some of these rallies, I ask him how many more farmers have to rally the way they have in these communities? How many more have to lose their farms? How many farmers' families have to be destroyed before this government will act?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): The hon. member does not need to get rhetorical and get emotional to make the point.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Mayer: Mr. Speaker, to listen to the hon. member, you would think that the whole problem is the result of this government's policies. Let me point out that there has been a substantial amount of support in the past for this industry.

I happened to attend both rallies that the member is talking about. There is another major one planned for Saskatchewan in Rosetown on Monday. Our members will be there in support of the agriculture industry. To say it again, we are waiting to see what is going to come out of the third line of defence meeting next week in Winnipeg and see what the farmers themselves have to say.