

*Drought Conditions*

Action taken to alleviate the effects of dry conditions will be shared by the federal and provincial governments. This government is working in close consultation with the provincial governments on details of federal-provincial co-operation and cost-sharing for existing programs and any new initiatives which might be necessary if the drought situation warrants. Details of federal action and cost-sharing will be announced if and when we must relieve the effects of continued drought.

In the meantime, I am certain that the hon. members of this House will be pleased to know in general terms the main points of the government's contingency plan which will be implemented as required, in co-operation with provincial governments. There will be assistance measures to keep up the quality and supply of water in streamflow. We plan to have a deep well-drilling program in the prairie provinces to help farms and rural communities in the event of serious water shortages. If required, there will be emergency help for livestock operations. We are particularly keeping an eye on water and forage supplies for livestock, because that has been the most threatening problem up to now, as well as the protection of forests. We are prepared to assist and strengthen forest fire prevention programs as well as fire-fighting services if dry conditions should lead to unusually serious problems in the forests.

As anyone with knowledge of government programs and activities will appreciate, it is by no means the first action to be taken by the federal government to combat drought. My department has, since possibilities of a drought were raised after dry weather last summer, fall and winter, been leading the way in planning, with other responsible federal departments, ways in which a dry situation could best be coped with. Since early last fall—September, to be precise—professionals at our research stations spread right across the prairies have been monitoring conditions. On a daily basis, our information has been updated to provide a totally accurate picture of what moisture reserves have been in prairie soil. To try to plan action without this data would have been impossible.

Our agricultural weather experts in Ottawa have been using computers to predict the way in which given moisture conditions would affect summer crops and livestock this summer. Computer maps showing these predictions allow us to see, in an instant, the main trouble areas and plan to help them. Telephones at our research stations have been swamped by farmers anxious to gather first-hand, accurate information and advice. They come to my department for good reason. Farmers know we have been leading the way for decades in dry land farming techniques. They know that our advice works. They look to our experts for precise advice—and they get it.

Back in April, my deputy minister met with the deputy ministers of the departments of agriculture of the prairie provinces and reviewed the entire drought situation as it existed at that time in the west. They went over the existing federal-provincial programs and operations that were already under way. They also discussed co-operation in the contingency plan that was being formulated by this government. The provincial deputies agreed that what we had in mind was most

[Mr. Whelan.]

useful and that they could say with confidence that we were well prepared to take immediate action if required. It was also agreed at that time that the details they discussed did not need to be applied back in April. As everyone knows, it was too early then, and it is too early now to react as if a severe drought is upon us. We still have to wait and see, but as I have made clear to this House, we are not sitting idle. We are prepared to tackle a serious drought if it should arrive.

A steering committee of senior officials from the federal Department of Agriculture, the Department of Regional Economic Expansion, the Department of Fisheries and the Environment, and Emergency Planning Canada will be responsible for the implementation of our contingency plan to the extent that it is required. A special task force will be stationed in Regina, Saskatchewan, to bring together officials of all the federal departments involved. This Regina group will make up our action and control centre. They will work closely with the provincial agencies on a day to day basis to implement any relief measures needed.

The committee of cabinet ministers which I have announced today will maintain an over-all direction and co-ordination of government action in this regard. The cabinet ministers on this committee, in addition to the Minister of Agriculture, are: the Minister of Transport and the minister responsible for the Wheat Board (Mr. Lang); the Minister of State (Multiculturalism); the Minister without Portfolio (Mr. Horner); the Minister of Regional Economic Expansion (Mr. Lessard); the Minister of Fisheries and the Environment (Mr. LeBlanc); the President of Treasury Board (Mr. Andras); and the Minister of State for Small Business (Mr. Marchand).

That is a preliminary report. There will be more detailed information for hon. members, if they should want it. We are prepared to outline what we propose to do from week to week if conditions warrant it, through discussions with the provinces. The provincial premiers of the western provinces have met and have made an announcement that they are willing and will work with the federal committee when it is set up to work out the necessary programs as they see them. Many comments were made yesterday that because of the rain their prayers have been answered, and so on. I am prepared to say that I think it is a good idea to continue praying.

**Mr. Bert Hargrave (Medicine Hat):** Mr. Speaker, I want to say, first of all, that I am pleased to respond on behalf of our party and, I hope, on behalf of western agriculture on this very important statement that the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) has just made on the drought situation. Last night during the adjournment debate the Minister of Agriculture, in response to my remarks, announced that he would be making the statement. I appreciate the fact that he has, indeed, made it now. Once again—and this happens so often in the House—statements such as this by ministers are deliberately delayed until the eleventh hour. I want to add that once again my copy of the remarks was only received at 11.30 today. On a matter as serious as this drought issue to all Canada, especially to western Canada, this is not good enough. The drought issue must be above party politics. It must be discussed openly and