

Oral Questions

round trips a year. It would seem that better utilization of the fleet is what is required. Producers are afraid that they will be tabbed for \$100 million to buy these additional cars and that, in addition, the Crow rate will be raised. Has the minister discussed this purchase with the farm groups of western Canada?

Mr. Lang: Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Wheat Board handles most of the discussions. But I would like to make it very clear, and I am sure hon. members will be interested to know, that the Wheat Board did discuss this matter with producers and, most particularly, with the elected advisory board which is elected by the 11 districts throughout the prairies and which is composed of those chosen by farmers to represent them. My information is that that advisory board, which includes some of the best known spokesmen for agriculture in the west, unanimously supported the decision by the Canadian Wheat Board to order the cars.

Mr. Hamilton (Swift Current-Maple Creek): Mr. Speaker, my impression is that this has come as a distinct shock to every farm organization in western Canada. There is now a 42-cent per bushel premium, Vancouver over Thunder Bay. We are getting off just over 500 cars a day there. We used to get off 750 cars a day. Has the minister considered appointing a transport controller to get us out of this tangle?

Mr. Lang: Mr. Speaker, we have appointed co-ordinators at terminals, which has been a very effective step in bringing about far more unloads than was common a few years ago. I am not satisfied that the system is working to its maximum and, as a result, over some of the objections of hon. members opposite we appointed a firm of outstanding management consultants to look at the question of interface between the various parts of the grain handling system. What each part does is important in relation to the turnaround of these cars. Hon. members should remember that in the three years between 1974 and 1977, a very significant increase of up to 34 per cent, in terms of effective carrying capacity of our car fleet, occurred as a result of improvements which were introduced into the system.

LEGAL OPINION ON BOARD'S PURCHASE OF HOPPER CARS

Mr. Doug Neil (Moose Jaw): Mr. Speaker, my question is also for the minister in charge of the Canadian Wheat Board. Is the minister satisfied that the Canadian Wheat Board has the power under the act to purchase hopper cars and to charge the cost to producers? Specifically, has he or the board received a legal opinion from the law officers of the Crown? If so, will he table that opinion? It seems, on the face of it, that the action of the board is neither within the spirit nor the letter of the law.

Hon. Otto E. Lang (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I understand that the Canadian Wheat Board did seek and obtain a legal opinion before it took this step. The hon. member may again be painting a false picture when he says that the charges for these cars will be levied against farmers.

[Mr. Hamilton (Swift Current-Maple Creek).]

The fact is that any such charging will be done only over a prolonged period of years in terms of the way in which the cost of these cars is incorporated into their ongoing operations.

Second, it should be apparent that any solution as recommended by Mr. Justice Hall and the Hall commission to the problem regarding how grain costs are paid could well include taking over the cost of these cars. As a result of my conversations with the Canadian Wheat Board, I know that the board has this aspect very much in mind. The Wheat Board may just assure that it has the cars, without any real or significant cost to farmers over any period of time.

Mr. Neil: Mr. Speaker, despite what the minister has said, the ultimate cost of these cars will be charged back to the producer. Is it the intention of the board, if it proceeds with this purchase, to charge the cost of these cars only to producers of on-board grains, or does it intend also to charge a proportionate share of the cost to those who produce off-board grains and oilseeds?

• (1422)

Mr. Lang: Mr. Speaker, I am sure the board will know that if any charges are made in any way to farmers, it is those farmers in relation to whom the charge is made who will have the advantage of the cars and it is their grain which will be hauled by these cars.

The hon. member ignored all too lightly my statement that as we move toward a solution of the Hall commission recommendation in relation to carrying grain, it seems obvious to me that the cost of these cars will be incorporated in that solution and, therefore, in the end will not be borne by farmers at all. I do not think the hon. member should run away from that very important statement at this time and try to frighten farmers, when the Canadian Wheat Board has made what I think is a very useful decision to ensure that necessary cars are made available to haul grain.

Mr. Neil: Until this time the minister has not paid much attention to the Hall recommendations.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Neil: Because of the unprecedented move by the Wheat Board, and because of the opposition that is building up among producers in the farm organizations, is the minister prepared to make himself and officials of his board available as witnesses before the Standing Committee on Agriculture?

Mr. Lang: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member knows the minister and the Wheat Board are always very happy to appear before the Standing Committee on Agriculture.