

Oral Questions

In addition to two of our ministers being in Geneva today to talk about article XI, they are also there talking about what we can do to reduce export subsidies, to finally get our farmers to be able to compete with other farmers in other parts of the world, as opposed to treasuries. We know in that kind of a competition we cannot win.

Mr. Rod Laporte (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre): Mr. Speaker, one of the problems is the fact that this government has failed to bring in policies that are going to deal adequately with the agriculture needs of farm families in this country.

My question is for the Prime Minister. Statistics Canada announced today that in 1990 farm debt in Canada was at \$24 billion, a dramatic rise over the year before. In Saskatchewan alone two farmers are forced off the farm every day.

Will the government call an immediate halt to farm foreclosures until the Minister of Agriculture does his job and introduces a farm finance package that has been promised since 1989 and that will deal with the farm debt and high interest rates that are cutting the heart out of rural Canada?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, there is no question but that there is a need out there. I understand that there are people who are having a difficult time just meeting family expenses. That is what is so ironic and makes me so furious about this situation because it is something that our farmers did not deserve. They are good at what they do.

I would be more than happy to take his representation to the Minister of Agriculture, who has responsibility for the Farm Credit Corporation, to see what we can do to alleviate the situation.

If he is talking about moratoriums, I am not so sure that that is the right way to proceed. We went through that in this House six or seven years ago. I should point out that we have in place farm debt review boards, and the Farm Credit Corporation has a mandate to work with farm debt review boards as well as other financial institutions to deal with this situation.

Let me say again that I understand and the government also understands the serious problem that farmers are facing as far as farm closures are concerned. We are going to do the very best we can to deal with it.

Mrs. Christine Stewart (Northumberland): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Prime Minister.

Poverty and its associated stress is a dreadful reality for hundreds of thousands of Canadians today and a terrifying prospect for many more. Among those suffering most acutely are our nation's farmers.

The average net income of a Saskatchewan farmer this year is only \$6,300—\$6,300 after working his or her own farm seven days a week to feed each one of us. Continued poverty financing of our farmers will lead us all to the food banks, but food banks with no food.

Will the government redress its priorities today and assure farmers and all Canadians food security for tomorrow?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, in one sense Canada is very much blessed with a relatively small population and an ability to produce food vastly superior to our needs. That is why we are so dependent on exports for farmers' incomes.

Let me speak as a farmer. The irony is that while we are good at what we do, it does not seem to count any more in the international marketplace where we earn our money.

We have been doing everything we can as a government to first, support reform internationally and second, to provide increasing amounts of support. This year we are spending \$3.8 billion. That sounds like a big number but when it gets to the individual farmer we know that, in many cases, it is not enough. Third, we must do what we can to assist farmers to sell into a very difficult market. We have not backed away from supporting the Canadian Wheat Board and producers elsewhere they export their grain.

Through those three measures, if we can have a settlement at GATT, and I think there is some considerable optimism that we will get through this difficult period and our farmers again will earn the income they deserve.