

Oral Questions

We are presently printing forms that are going to distribute \$400 million of the \$800 million, and some of that money will go out before Christmas. We are presently distributing money under NISA. That program is just up and running and farmers are now, just as a result of the provincial governments sending out confirmations under GRIP, are getting money under GRIP as well.

In addition, with the extra grain sale of 4 million tonnes, a record amount of grain is going to move between now and the end of March. When we put all those things together, farmers are not going to have to wait very long to get the assistance they deserve from this government.

Mr. Vic Althouse (Mackenzie): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the same minister. He knows that farmers are not easily riled, they are generally a fairly long suffering group and very knowledgeable about what the government is doing.

In spite of all that, the minister surely knows about the large rallies and the delegation that has come out of those rallies here today, indicating that the farmers' analysis is that the government has not properly looked after their interests, has not guaranteed their net income and that the third line payment was not adequate, leaving Saskatchewan farm families, for example, with net incomes that will be less than \$6,500 per family or a third of the poverty level in this country.

Is the government going to provide a proper third line of defence payment and address the needs the farmers are presenting?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, there is absolutely no question that these are very disconcerting and in some cases desperate times, on behalf of Canadian grain and oilseeds producers.

I had a chance to attend four of those meetings on the prairies. I should also point out that this is not only a problem for the prairies. It is a problem for Ontario and other parts of the country that produce grain as well. It might be good for all of us to know that on average Ontario produces more grain than the province of Manitoba. Therefore it is very much a problem outside the prairies and we are doing our very best to address it.

No matter how much money we put out, it is not the real solution to the problem. The solution to the problem is some sanity in international trade. I disagree with the Leader of the Opposition when he says that GATT is going nowhere. Fortunately, I think he is wrong because for the first time in over five years of GATT meetings we have had genuine discussions as to how we can deal with agricultural subsidies. That is providing a hope for a settlement.

• (1430)

Second, the member should know, and he probably does know this as a farmer, that in the last little while we have seen an increase in grain prices. In fact, yesterday we raised the initial payment for malting barley and we are going to be looking at what we can do with initial payments on wheat before Christmas.

Mr. Vic Althouse (Mackenzie): Mr. Speaker, the Statistics Canada report that came out today states that not only have net farm incomes not been keeping up, but the farmers have had no choice except to offset the drop in incomes with increased debt.

How does he expect Canadian farmers to compete in a post-GATT world, for which we have been waiting five or six years now, when our debt levels are going up and virtually all of our competitor countries are seeing farm debt going down? What is he going to do to address the farm debt problem, since he has already indicated what little he has proposed to do on the income side?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, the opposition keeps talking about what little we have done. The government this year is going to provide \$3.8 billion in direct support. That is in addition to other programs that are ongoing. So while he may not think it is enough, at least he should give credit where credit is due: \$3.8 billion is a lot of money.

It is a very difficult situation out there internationally. Countries like Canada, Australia and Argentina, where a large percentage of their earnings depend on exports, are in a very vulnerable position. That is why we have been pursuing the GATT negotiations with such vigour. Everybody, including the Prime Minister and the rest of us, at every occasion have been raising this.