

Agricultural Drought

Celsius, with winds gusting to 50 miles per hour and the humidity around 20 per cent. That is not the kind of weather in which one could expect to grow crops.

The Alberta situation has changed rather dramatically over the past few weeks in terms of the grain crop, but in terms of the hay crop it is still very serious. The minister's statement does not really address the Alberta situation regarding hay. Rain early in the spring is required to produce a hay crop. I have talked with my colleagues in the House of Commons from Alberta and with farmers in that province. They have indicated that they will be faced with some real problems in terms of adequate hay to winter their cattle this coming year. The majority of cattle are produced in that province, so the minister may want to take another look at the situation pertaining to hay.

We on this side of the House criticized the government for its lack of urgency. That was documented on May 30 in the motion of the hon. member for Medicine Hat (Mr. Hargrave). Up to this point when the minister has finally made his statement, I think our feelings can be characterized by restating the motion of that day. It read as follows:

That this House deeply regrets the government's lack of response in the House of Commons to concern about the disastrous western agricultural drought and the related forest fire emergency and calls on the government to abandon its secretive approach and consult with MPs of all parties in an open and forthright manner.

Since that time we have had a number of discussions in the agriculture committee on this question. Now the minister has come forward with a statement, but certainly it is not too soon. At the present time some cattle are being sold in western Canada. There is grave concern among some small prairie towns about the fact that they may not have enough water to last through the summer if they do not receive any more rain than they have up to the present time.

I should like to make some suggestions which the minister might take under advisement. First, we should ensure that a backhaul of hay is installed from eastern to western Canada in terms of the cattle trucks and rail vehicles being used. In other words, if cattle are being brought from western to eastern Canada there should be a backhaul of hay. The tractor-trailers and trucks should be full of hay when they are heading back to the prairies. The government should ensure this happens, and I hope the suggestion is taken under advisement.

The next point I should like to mention was not touched upon in the minister's statement. I am referring to the fact that perhaps this is the first time since the feed grain policy was instituted that the policy may work in reverse to the intended method for which it was brought in. It was to supply the domestic market first, that domestic market being eastern Canada, Quebec, the maritimes and parts of British Columbia. This year that domestic market will be in western Canada. It is incumbent upon the government to ensure the Canadian Wheat Board has enough stock of barley on hand in the prairies. I know in southern Manitoba that that is not the case. One can talk to a number of elevator companies in southern Manitoba to find out that the stocks of barley just are not there. The track record of the Canadian Wheat Board respect-

ing the availability of supplies of barley must be a very, very top priority. The question of pelletizing grain screenings, especially at Thunder Bay and also Vancouver, to be brought back to the prairies should be looked into. This is a perfect source of cattle feed.

The minister should also consider the drilling of deep wells for water. Dug-outs certainly have been the primary source of water supply in western Canada, but they are almost empty. Unless water is trucked in, which of course is very expensive, the drilling of deep wells should be looked at very, very soon. Also the minister should look at the possible use of federal-provincial wildlife preserves for grazing cattle.

As I mentioned, the statement of the minister is welcome. In my opinion it is a bit too narrow in its scope, there is not enough detail as to what the government intends to do, but nevertheless it is better than nothing and will give farmers some assurance that the governments in effect are working together. Perhaps that is the most important point, that the governments are working together to try to solve this problem.

Mr. Vic Althouse (Humboldt-Lake Centre): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the statement of the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan). We expected this statement a little over a week ago, but I am pleased to see that it has finally come. I am not totally pleased with the contents of the message, but at least we see some action is beginning to take form.

I view the drought situation which is occurring as something that will require complete rethinking on the part of the Department of Agriculture. In a sense, we are no longer dealing with farms that we are trying to keep profitable. Profitable farming is not an alternative under conditions such as we are now faced with. We are forced to go back to a situation of simple survival. Less rain has fallen on the eastern part of Saskatchewan, approximately two-thirds or three-quarters of Saskatchewan, all of Manitoba and northwestern Ontario, than has ever been the case in the 80-some years that recorded meteorological data has been available. It is not just the worst drought since the thirties; it is the worst drought which has existed in that very large part of western Canada since man started keeping records. It is an emergency situation. There have been three months without any moisture in some areas. In a great many areas there has been about two-tenths to three-tenths of an inch spread over the area in the form of slight precipitation.

Under those conditions we are wise to give top priority to water supplies. Man must survive this drought first. There must be water supplies to the towns and villages and also the farms. We must ensure that the program of 1977, where all small water sources were pumped dry and piped into larger dug-outs so that there would be some storage to get us through the winter, is put in place, especially as we approach winter.

● (1250)

I think that this feed movement program recognizes the needs of dairy producers. Provincial programs in conjunction with the federal drought task force have properly given top