

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[English]

CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD

STEPS TO IMPROVE SHIPMENT OF GRAIN

Mr. Don Mazankowski (Vegreville): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Minister of Transport who is in charge of the Canadian Wheat Board. Because the Canadian Wheat Board has now confirmed there will be a 350 million bushel carryover at the end of the current crop year, which is in the order of 200 million bushels in excess of what could be considered an ideal target, there will be a negative impact on the economy of approximately \$800 million.

Given the fact that the board is now some 35 million bushels behind in its shipping targets, that demurrage costs are likely to exceed the \$17 million which was accumulated in 1973, that there are now some 20 ships waiting in the port of Vancouver and our best customers are going to the United States for grain, may I ask the minister what new initiatives he is taking or contemplating to correct this disgraceful situation which has not only an impact upon the economy but, more importantly, an impact upon Canada's reliability as a supplier of grain in the international market?

Hon. Otto E. Lang (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, first of all, to put the matter into perspective, it should be pointed out that exports this year may well total in the order of 850 million bushels of grain which, if that happens, will be an all-time record. That can only be accomplished by shipping and disposing of all the 1977 crop, plus perhaps as much as 100 million or 150 million bushels out of the reserves so that our stocks at the end of the year will be significantly lower than they were last year and not particularly high from a long-term point of view. I think that is a necessary perspective to recognize.

When there is such a record volume for shipment, naturally there will be ships waiting more frequently even when things are going well. When things go a little badly, as they did with delays in ships arriving in December and then, just as we were trying to catch up, the problems of heavy snows and the problems with the rail lines of CP particularly, we are going to get behind. There is no doubt about that. It is part of setting a record. What is being done about it is that the railways are being urged to put as many cars as possible into the movement of grain and to do everything they can to get the turnaround which will allow the number of unloads to increase. We are still not completely happy with the performance and are working on it regularly.

Mr. Mazankowski: Mr. Speaker, my supplementary question is directed to the Minister of Transport. Since it is quite clear that Canada will not meet its maximum potential in terms of grain sales this year as a result of the bottlenecks, can I ask the minister if he has met with the officials of the Canadian Wheat Board, the railways and all parties concerned with the movement of grain in the last week or ten days in an

Oral Questions

effort to establish an all-out strategy and an all-out effort to ease the bottlenecks, to unplug the elevators and to get some needed cash into the hands of farmers and thereby into the hands of the economy?

● (1417)

Mr. Lang: Again, Mr. Speaker, the fact that we are apt to be exporting a record volume of grain puts the lie somewhat to the suggestion that deliveries are slow or that farmers are not able to move grain. They will be delivering more grain than they have ever delivered before, I believe, by the time this crop year is over. I am constantly in touch with the Canadian Wheat Board. I met with the commissioners again this morning, as a matter of fact, and I am prepared to do anything they think is necessary on my part to assist them in their efforts to get maximum performance from the railways. I do from time to time intervene to try to make sure that everything that can be done is being done.

Mr. Mazankowski: Mr. Speaker, it is obvious from the answer of the minister that no new initiatives are being taken and no leadership is being provided by this government. Given the fact that we have before us a very important and relevant document, the Hall report on grain handling and transportation, and since there seems to be a major conflict between the author, Mr. Justice Emmett Hall, and the Minister of Transport in terms of the recommendations of the Hall report, the speed at which some of these recommendations are being implemented, the refusal of the government to implement others, and the total impact of the Hall recommendation, might I ask the minister whether he will give serious consideration to referring this important document to the Standing Committee on Transport and Communications in order that we may call Mr. Justice Hall before the committee and other interested parties who may wish to comment upon the recommendations or the impact of the implementation of these recommendations?

Mr. Lang: Mr. Speaker, in the process of implementing these various recommendations in the Hall commission report, which we have acted upon with great speed, I have had constant discussions with the really important agricultural organizations of the prairies, and generally speaking there has been expressed agreement with the way in which we are proceeding.

The hon. member wants me to consider a committee of parliament which obviously would simply be a partisan occasion, which is demonstrated by the fact that in asking his question he says, "What are we doing about this problem? What are we doing about moving grain," and ignores the fact that we have spent \$255 million in building 8,000 hopper cars which are vital to the grain movement, ignores the fact that we put \$100 million of new money into rebuilding the rail lines on the prairies, and have committed ourselves to an eight-year program to complete the rebuilding of those lines. How he can