

Drought Conditions

the issue of the drought in western Canada is now, as it were, on the agenda of the House of Commons. I hope there will be the further reports that the minister has alluded to and that the hon. member for Medicine Hat has requested.

When this subject has come up there has been the usual banter and a certain amount of humour. Whenever the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) speaks—and that is what he does even when he reads a prepared statement—he puts in a lot that is not on the paper and we tend to pick on him for indulging in words. But I have to say there are some specifics in the statement today which we warmly welcome. We are particularly glad that there is the clear intention to continue close co-operation with the provincial governments. They are on the spot and are intimately involved. This promise of co-operation is a good sign. It is also good to learn of the extensive monitoring that this government is doing. As the previous speaker suggested, we feel that the information available about weather and conditions of rainfall, moisture, and so on, should be made freely and regularly available.

We welcome the three specific proposals contained in the body of the report although each of them is given the prefix that something will be done if necessary. As the hon. member for Medicine Hat pointed out, we should treat the drought as though it is already here. Far better to prepare for it and have it disappear than not prepare for it and have it descend upon us in all its fury and disaster.

● (1250)

We welcome the proposal for deep-well drilling. I do not see why that project should not be started right away. We welcome the proposals for looking after livestock, particularly getting water to them or getting the livestock to where the water is. We hope that will be acted on before a crisis arises, not when it is too late. The suggestion for close co-operation if fire-fighting becomes necessary is also welcome.

The cabinet committee sounded impressive when all those names were read off. Certainly, they represent the areas concerned. It is good to have the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) on there, not just because he comes from northwestern Ontario but because of the influence of a minister in that position. We hope that committee will not just be something that has been named so that it is on the record, but that it will be a committee that will meet. I repeat the contention of the hon. member for Medicine Hat that this subject should be brought before the House of Commons every week, not on a partisan basis but because the concern is one that all of us share.

It is a good idea to establish an action centre in Regina which is in the centre of things. All told, I am prepared to say that the statement today is welcome, as I say, mainly because it is a statement and mainly because the issue is now before us. However, there are also specifics in it that we welcome.

I have two or three questions or suggestions I should like to make. Throughout most of my lifetime references to rain-making have been greeted with laughter. However, science has accomplished a great many things in the lifetime of those of us

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

here. Maybe something could be done by way of seeding clouds and helping to produce rain. I am sorry there was not some reference to that in the statement. If the hon. member for Timiskaming (Mr. Peters) were here and making this response, he would have a good deal to say about that matter.

I should also like to put in a plea that consideration be given to the plight of small towns and small businesses in western Canada if the drought does develop. It will not only be the farmers who will suffer. In turn, the small towns will suffer and the cities as well. There may be things like financial problems for small businesses in the small towns which will come to the fore. There may be the necessity of deferring interest payments and things like that. I hope the committee that has been set up will give consideration to this.

Since it is a program that is being put together to be ready for an emergency, let us be ready for everything. If it becomes necessary to transport water from where it is to small communities—I think not only of the farming operations but of the people in the small towns—I hope the government will mobilize the tank cars that can do this job.

I have just one other comment to make. Here I join in the suggestion that this is not a partisan subject. It is good that over the years we have had enough discussion about crop insurance that there is now in place a system of crop insurance. It will be put to a pretty severe test if there is a drought, but at least it is good that it is there. Even so, the government and the cabinet committee should take a look at crop insurance and other programs to see whether they are adequate and whether anything needs to be done to improve or expand them in case the drought that is now with us becomes serious.

Like all members of this House, I join in welcoming the blessing of the rains we have had in various parts of western Canada this week. It does make a difference in our outlook. However, we would be foolish indeed if we thought that the crisis was over. On behalf of my party, I welcome the minister's statement. We look forward to other statements as this session proceeds.

[*Translation*]

Mr. C. A. Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful to the minister for having sent me copy of his statement in French. We feel it is very wise for his department to take all possible precautions to counter the effects of a drought in the prairies. Were this ever to happen, such a disaster would have a direct impact on all provinces. Everyone still recalls the memorable 30s, but nowadays we could cope with such a situation a lot more easily than at the time.

As everybody here knows, the province of Quebec is a large customer for the prairies, and a crisis in the prairies would necessarily have a disastrous impact on its economy. Of course we have an Emergency Measures Act, but I think we have to go farther, we have to prevent. The federal government proposes to spend all the money needed to help the prairies, and Quebec will also contribute indirectly through its taxes, and we are very happy to do so.