

Supply

in Ottawa is downsizing. In fact, a lot of its facilities have been transferred to the province of Quebec.

• (1235)

The member has an interest in lambs and sheep but I must confess that I am not competent to discuss this matter. I would suggest that there is possibly a degree of rationalizing. Clearly we cannot be competitive in all agricultural products; we must pick those areas in which we can excel.

I am not saying that is not true for lambs and sheep, but I suspect there are only so many industries within the agricultural sector in which we can effectively compete. This area has a lot of competition from Australia and New Zealand. I would have to study how efficient our industry is relative to theirs to answer the question properly.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to advise you right off that I will be splitting my speaking time with the hon. member for Shefford.

I am using this opportunity to speak on this agricultural day to draw attention to a highly questionable decision taken by the federal government in its recent budget.

On budget night, it was announced that the experimental farm at La Pocatière would be closing. As it is located in my riding, it is clear I find the closure unacceptable and will prevent it from happening. What surprised me most was the justification given for the closure in the Department of Agriculture's estimates. According to the estimates for the agriculture department, the facility is being closed because sheep and lamb are low priority products. I would like to prove otherwise to this House.

In my region, the agri-food development strategy was made a priority for the entire regional county municipality of Kamouraska. The lower St. Lawrence regional co-operation and development council incorporated it as one of its priorities as well. Up to this point, you might argue that this is normal, as it is a matter of regional interest. However, even the Canadian Sheep Federation together with the Fédération des producteurs d'agneau et de mouton du Québec feel that the Government of Canada is abandoning without justification a type of production that is in full development.

Why do we say this? Are these empty words, or are they based on some reality? My research indicates that, between 1976 and 1992, we increased our rate of self-sufficiency in Canada from 23 per cent to 45 per cent. In other words, during these years, sheep production took on a larger role in the economy and contributed to Canadians' wealth. More than that. Between 1971 and 1991, the herd increased by 8.7 per cent. In Quebec, between

1971 and 1991, the number of animals grew from 88,000 to 121,000—an increase of 37 per cent.

Therefore when the Minister of Agriculture says that this is a low priority product, I am hard pressed to find justification for his position, since both production and consumption have substantially increased. The market is expanding as a result of significant levels of immigration in Quebec and Canada. Indeed, for many cultural communities, lamb is part of their culture and part of their traditional food.

Then why cut in this area? We must understand how important research and development are for any industry. The dairy industry in Quebec, Ontario and Canada was not built on nothing. Research was done to make animals more productive, to improve milk quality and to manufacture better secondary products.

As for lamb and sheep, we were in the process of doing the same. I am going to give you some examples of research projects which were being carried out at the experimental farm in La Pocatière, so that you can understand that what is done there is not harebrained research, but something very concrete, which was going to help the industry.

For example, the farm is working on enriching the diet of ewes with three lambs instead of two, because this means an increase in productivity. This is very concrete. This is something which lowers production costs and would allow the industry to compete with New Zealand and Australia on world markets.

• (1240)

Then, there are studies on regulation of the reproductive cycle. Software for flock management is even being developed. Computers are now used in this agricultural sector, as well as in many others. It seems important to me that such research be carried out. Refusing an industry like sheep production the research advantages given to other sectors is like telling producers who invested in that area that they might as well quit.

Here is another example. The experimental farm was studying the use of canola oil-cake as a feed for sheep. For those who may not know it, canola oil-cake is what is left after the oil has been extracted from canola. This kind of research benefits westerners, because sheep farming is becoming more popular in western Canada, and also benefits eastern Canada because canola is produced there. It has nationwide applications and would cost less than some other feeds currently on the market.

These research projects are concrete examples. They are examples proving that that particular farm had a country-wide mandate to support sheep farmers. The federal government closed this facility because it considers sheep as a low-priority product. Was that decision reasonable in today's context where