

Mr. Eymard Corbin (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Fisheries and Forestry): Mr. Speaker, I wonder whether the member for Joliette (Mr. La Salle) would further specify the nature of the problem concerning the potato crop in his area in Quebec. I have not completely understood the essential point of his argument. I would like to know if the provincial government is refusing to include the potato crop in his insurance plan or if on the contrary, the potato producers do not want that insurance.

Mr. La Salle: No, it is the Quebec government which did not deem it advisable to make that insurance available to potato producers. I know for a fact that a great number of important potato producers in my area are demanding that insurance and since the provincial government is now refusing to take part in this plan, I have taken care not to blame the federal government but to invite it to make the Quebec government understand that its hesitation is disastrous for a certain number of potato producers. I hope that our appeals to the province of Quebec will enable our potato producers to take advantage of that insurance as other producers.

[English]

Mr. Gordon Ritchie (Dauphin): Mr. Speaker, in rising to speak on this amendment to the Crop Insurance Act dealing specifically with losses arising when the seeding or planting of a crop is prevented by excessive ground moisture, weather or other agricultural hazards, I can find no real issue with the measure and think it will be a useful addition to the crop insurance armoury. I assume that this will mean extended insurance coverage, and while it is a useful addition I think it may be somewhat difficult to administer. I note, also, that the term "agricultural hazards" is used. I would be interested to know what is meant by that term and under what circumstances the term "hazard" will be applicable.

Dealing with the situation in western Canada as applicable particularly to my own area, this program probably will have a limited application because I have only known of one or two years in which there has been an almost total failure or widespread loss of opportunity to plant crops. On the other hand, there have been numerous occasions when farmers have been unable to plant the crops they intended to sow because of excessive moisture. This has happened very often in respect of a piece of summerfallow a farmer intended to sow in wheat, but due to a wet spring he was forced to seed late and thought it would be better to put in another crop which was not as desirable, either because of the return per acre or because it did not fit in with his particular plans.

Another question I think might well be raised is this: When does a farmer apply to take out crop insurance? If he had the privilege of waiting for even part of the spring before applying for coverage, this could cause unusual losses. No doubt the minister and his departmental officials will have explanations and answers to these questions which will be raised during the committee's consideration of the bill.

Crop Insurance Act

I should like to speak briefly about the principle of crop insurance and how it effects western agriculture, particularly the farmers in my area. We are all aware that western farmers use two main vehicles to obtain compensation in respect of a disaster that has befallen them because of the elements. One is the PFAA and the other is crop insurance. Both these vehicles have been useful and have their proponents. Crop insurance seems to find favour with intensive farmers, those who perhaps may be credited with bringing considerable knowledge and acumen to their farming operations.

If the price of grain is fair and the grain is moving readily, there tends to be a larger acceptance of crop insurance. However, when farming profits are more tightly squeezed and the grain is not moving, crop insurance is not so attractive to the farmer because he may well be required to pay a premium on grain which will sit in the granaries for years before moving into the markets of the world. So this becomes a matter of value judgment of the farmer facing a grain situation such as has existed in western Canada for the past two years. A farmer may well be unable to market his grain and thus is faced with added expenses with no return. I think crop insurance should remain on a voluntary basis with as wide a range of options as possible, consistent with reasonable administrative costs. There has been a feeling that crop insurance should completely replace PFAA, but I am not in agreement with this concept.

In my opinion, the PFAA has been a great boon to western Canada. It has its faults and it is outdated in many ways, but it is a very useful tool to aid farmers in times of distress. Many farmers have told me that it was tailored for the time when a farmer had four horses and a gang-plow, and it has not kept up with modern needs. There is general agreement among the farmers to whom I have spoken that the PFAA could be a useful tool if it were upgraded. Although my riding is in an area where drought is a most infrequent cause of crop failure, and although the original PFAA was largely designed for widespread drought, I have been struck by how helpful it is to many recipients.

Crop insurance tends to be taken out by farmers who by virtue of their business ability would be able to survive in any case. Crop insurance, to them, is like life insurance or other forms of insurance to the prudent. There are a great many people involved in farming who have neither the ability nor the ingenuity to make such complete plans. Even the small PFAA payments have often been enough to turn what would be a disaster for many small and insecure farming operations into a situation with which the farmer can cope.

In my experience, most of these people would not have bought crop insurance in any event; they just never get around to it or are perhaps unaware of it in spite of the publicity it has been given. Perhaps they felt they could not afford the premium. These are very often the people the Liberal party has suggested should leave the farm. I do not know what they would do in the cities, in view of the mass unemployment we have now, which no doubt will be a recurring feature in our fast-changing society.