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Chair

Mr. James Bezan

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•(0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC)): We have quorum, so we're going to get started.

Continuing on with our study on “Product of Canada” claims, this is meeting 27. I want to welcome all our witnesses today.

By video conference we have, from Local Food For Local People, Kim Jo Bliss.

Welcome, Kim.

From the Union des consommateurs, we have Charles Tanguay.

From Option consommateurs, we have Michel Arnold and Nalini Vaddapalli.

From Consumer Interest Alliance Inc., we have Jennifer Hillard.

I want to welcome all of you to committee. This has been a very interesting study that we've undertaken. We're getting lots of good ideas. We're looking forward to your comments. I ask that all opening comments be kept to ten minutes or less. I'll signal to you if you're pushing the ten minutes.

With that, I'll open it up to Mrs. Bliss. You have the floor.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss (Director, Local Food For Local People): Good morning, everyone.

I apologize for reading from my notes. I have been out of town so I'm going to read from my notes.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity. Most of the things I will speak about today were brought forward in the Next Generation of Agriculture and Agri-Food Policy's submission from Rainy River, which Ken is quite familiar with. During that process, we suggested as an alternative vision for agriculture a truly sustainable industry that focuses on delivering wholesome food and non-food products and services to local markets and to all Canadians before serving offshore markets. Guiding principles are fairness, environmental responsibility, and regional diversity and self-reliance.

Since I was asked to speak on behalf of the Rainy River Local Food for Local People committee, the CFIA definition of local food is a great place to start. CFIA states that goods must originate within 50 kilometres of where they are being sold in order to be labelled “local”. So within the Rainy River district, honey that is produced in the west end of our district cannot be labelled “local” if it is offered at the farmers' market in Fort Francis.

The most logical local market for Rainy River products is the rest of northwestern Ontario, which is not suited for food production—for example, Kenora, Dryden, Sioux Lookout. Even though we are the closest producers, we cannot be considered local under this flawed definition. A national definition of “local” must take into account the local realities.

With respect to issues with Canadian inspection, interprovincial borders hinder the sale and transport of beef, hog, poultry, and produce, making it hard for producers to compete at the national level. CFIA inspection fees are paid by producers and plants in Canada but are funded in the U.S. by the government, thus creating another competitive disadvantage for us.

National meat inspection legislation is called for that fits all Canadian meat. Currently, producers cannot direct market their product to other provinces or national retailers without federal inspection. One level of inspection would eliminate this. A national standard would help so that all provinces compete on one level playing field.

Another example, for instance, is Ontario, which is the only province to limit the flocks of laying hens to less than 100. Other provinces allow farmers to run hundreds of birds without a quota.

Imported foods. We realize this will continue, but to prevent unfair competition, imported foods must be required to meet the same safety and quality standards as domestic products. Imported food should have a sticker that states “imported”, or the country of origin.

Definitions should be made clearer. “Made in Canada”, “Product of Canada”, and our “Grown in Canada” are clearly misleading. Large companies continue to get around current labelling systems by bringing products into our country, making the minimal change and labelling it the product of Canada. This is clearly false and gives the consumer misinformation.

Labels need to send a clear message. They are clearly misrepresented when the product is imported, but because they have been packaged or advertising dollars were spent in Canada, it can read “Product of Canada”. It places no value on the product itself.

Greater value should be placed on Canadian products than on imported food. Regulations should accommodate small, local, and artisan food production. Producers should be allowed to supply local markets by selling vegetables, meat, eggs, and milk at the farm gate.

Local food systems will result in a safer food supply, fresher products, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, better environmental stewardship, increased farm incomes—with more jobs remaining in the area—and a healthy population.

Given the recent worries with tainted food, Canada must demand the same standards on the foreign products as it does on the domestic. Anything grown or caught in a country should state so on the label. Current rules are stopping us from making the changes we need.

When you factor in that we are losing the ability to feed ourselves as the food we eat is increasingly imported, it quickly becomes clear that we are at a crossroads in the history of our food production and distribution systems. We need widespread change and reform.

A food system that is suitable will be financially viable for all stakeholders, primarily local and regional, ecologically responsible in its operations, and socially responsible. Government assistance should go toward supporting and building infrastructure that will stabilize agriculture.

Developing new products is difficult because we now compete with highly subsidized imports and third world labour. A new rule by CFIA requiring nutrition labelling on all products at \$6,000 per analysis, so we've been told, will be prohibitive for small-scale local food processors. A small processor cannot afford these large costs. This puts local foods at a disadvantage and small processors out of business.

As we speak, Canada is losing its last canning factory. Costs have substantially increased to the point at which they can export the product and have it processed and brought back into the country with fewer costs attached. The latest SRM rules are very costly and are putting the small plants in a terrible predicament.

● (0910)

The local plants are key for local food, but the large expanse of SRM disposal is putting many out of business. Sadly, CFA allowed feed companies to include animal protein in the feed formulation made for ruminants. This is what triggered BSE. BSE was a costly incident, and the costs continue with the new SRM regulations. The large companies that triggered this problem should be held responsible for cost recovery of the BSE damage. The recent rule has played a role in the closure of the GenPar food plant, which is another letdown for the beef industry.

Currently, our system is not designed to give producers a fair shake. The value chain is not serving producers well. Producers, processors, retailers, and consumers should all be treated fairly. Regulation allows for dominance by big chains. Regulation eliminates production of local food, and everyone becomes a franchisee of big-label companies. Currently, a producer isn't getting what he needs to make money and value has to be added, but the system is currently helping only the food distributors and grocery stores. Profit is built into the cost of a product coming into a plant

instead of it being the cost of production plus the cost of materials. The focus needs to be on meeting local market needs in supplying Canadian people before serving our offshore markets. We need to promote local food, and we need a solution and a plan now.

As the cost of energy continues to rise, we need to develop a local food initiative so that we are not so energy dependent. If energy prices continue to increase, we will see a huge change. Food may then only migrate to the largely populated centres on the major highway routes. We need a plan to sustain food for the hinterland and become regionally more self-reliant. This will mean generating knowledge of how to grow our food and how to preserve it. We may also have to learn to accept a more seasonal diet. Luckily, in Rainy River we have plenty of beef.

Small-scale alternative energy production on farms should be encouraged. These would be less vulnerable than large-scale production and would ensure a more stable and diverse power supply.

In order to develop a system now, we need to eliminate laws and regulations that hold us back. The plan needs to include all ages, and especially our youth. Schools could start by growing their own healthy snacks for the classroom. Everyone must have access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity.

Currently, Clover Valley Farmers' Market in Fort Frances is about to launch a very exciting project. They're working with others to develop a regional local food box program. This program will increase local food production and is breaking ground toward a less centralized food supply.

Rainy River District feels that the local food movement is here to stay, and we would like all government levels to cooperate to make local food a reality. Local food production has the potential to affect every one of us. We will be looking for more farmers as this new movement grows. Canada may never produce all of what we will consume, but even a small shift toward eating Canadian will have a dramatic impact on the agriculture industry.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the need for national legislation for meat inspection, eliminating the provincial barriers. Changes need to be made to labels of imported food, and Canadian producers should not be burdened with regulations that won't allow them to compete. We need to create a workable solution for local food production and we need to develop and create partnerships to educate the needs for and benefits of local food.

Thank you.

• (0915)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Tanguay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Charles Tanguay (Communications Officer, Union des consommateurs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Lady and gentlemen, thank you for inviting us.

My name is Charles Tanguay and I am the Communications Officer for the Union des consommateurs. The Union des consommateurs is a federation of Quebec associations comprising 11 consumers' associations.

My presentation is going to go beyond the confines of the original subject of the labelling of food products so as to take into account, more generally, the concerns of consumers with regard to the labelling of food. This was the subject of a study done in 2007 by the Union des consommateurs and financed by the Office of Consumer Affairs at Industry Canada. Indeed it dealt with the new trends and needs of consumers concerning information about food and labelling. This study is available to you, should you wish to find out more.

The first finding is that information is one of the most important rights for consumers. It enables consumers to make choices. With respect to food, consumers' concerns are changing and information is becoming increasingly crucial in meeting consumers' needs.

I shall deal briefly with this broader aspect of consumers' concerns. In the 21st century, these concerns are no longer limited to health and convenience. The policies promoting international trade mean that the multinationals in the agri-food sector are constantly increasing their control over our food and increasingly are shaping our agricultural and food models by contributing notably to the impoverishment of our food culture and distancing us from the productive resources. The consequences of enforcing policies focused on export markets have also had an impact on food safety and are contributing to the broadening gap between the rich and the poor, between the countries of North and South, in addition to compromising our ability to exercise certain rights as consumers, including the right to information and the right to choose.

The new technologies, for example, the genetic manipulation of vegetable crops and the use of pesticides, rations and chemical fertilizers, underlie modern agricultural production methods, which cause considerable stress to the environment. The current agri-food system is generating new problems for ecosystems and for society, and gives rise to new concerns among consumers. Consumers' worries, which were long limited to questions of food prices and safety, have broadened considerably and now increasingly include

questions of health, convenience, and environmental, social, ethical and political concerns. This commitment to responsible consumption in the food sector may be seen around the world.

The evolution of consumers' values and concerns about food closest to sustainable development may be seen now in the increasing demand for certain food products. For instance, more and more consumers are opting for organically grown food. During the 1980s and 1990s, the chief concerns motivating consumers to purchase organic food were based on protection of the environment, whereas today the surveys show more and more that these concerns are based on a range of other factors justifying their consumption of such products.

Consumers believe that organically grown food is safer and more nutritional, and tastes better, and that buying such food will provide support for small farming operations and local producers, a new relationship between people and agriculture, sustainable development and water conservation. In short, consumers who buy organic food do so in response to social, cultural and environmental concerns.

Organic farming is based on ecological principles that are respectful of the environment. Organic gardens avoid the use of pesticides and chemical herbicides, synthetic fertilizers and genetically modified seed, while the fertility of the soil is increased by means of established methods, such as crop rotation, spreading composted organic matter and the use of natural fertilizer.

As for livestock production, no growth hormones, no feed made with animal scraps or antibiotics, and also decent living conditions that regularly allow the animals to see the light of day and move around. Finally, organically produced food items do not contain dyes, chemical preservatives, artificial smells or synthetic additives and have not been irradiated.

• (0920)

So we can understand why the consumption of organic food has increased by more than 20% a year in Canada, and close to 40% of the Canadian population say they buy organic products. The same trend may be seen internationally.

For reasons of health and on social, cultural, environmental, economic and political grounds, increasingly, consumers are going organic. A similar trend may be noted in the purchase of locally produced food. Many initiatives show that food systems focused on the community prove to be beneficial for several reasons. Consumers can feed on fresh food produced in their region. In addition, eating locally limits the use of preservatives and minimizes the transportation of food over long distances, which reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, local foods help reduce problems related to chronic hunger and promote rural development by stimulating the regional economy.

In Canada, farmers' markets are extremely popular. Buying local is therefore one of the largest concerns of consumers that we were able to measure in a Web survey in which over 3,000 respondents took part. The majority of them were women, who were better educated than average and who had higher incomes than average. I will spare you the details about the questions and results of this survey, but you may consult it; it is very interesting.

To summarize, 71% of the respondents said they were quite well informed and 19% said they were very well informed about food and agri-food issues. The survey is therefore not representative of the Canadian population, but represents the opinion of people who, on account of their concerns and awareness of the issue, are a bit ahead of the Canadian population.

Judging by the general trend, consumers feel more concerned about this issue. The origin of products is important for 84% of them. Seventy-one percent of people seem to find it fairly easy to figure out the origin of products. However, I have the impression that many consumers read the information but do not understand it, since we know that the current rules allow misleading information on the origin of products on labels.

I think that this question is part of a whole set of very important concerns for consumers. Among the comments gathered from consumers, there is a general mistrust with regard to labelling rules and the claims found on labels. I think that consumers are more and more mistrustful of the information provided by the industry on consumer products.

Many tell us that the labels are hard to understand and several commented on the misleading aspects concerning the origin of products and demanded better traceability of food products.

In light of these findings, we have several recommendations to make in general on labelling. For example, we find it inconceivable that Canada has not always adopted the mandatory labelling of GMOs. We also recommend that labelling rules be better identified and that there be better guidelines with regard to organic products. Such rules could be based on the examples set in British Columbia and Quebec.

As for the origin of products, we recommend stricter rules so that we can find out much more about where products are from, where they are grown or raised, where they were processed and whether they have been imported.

We would also like the provincial governments, and also the Government of Canada, to invest in buy-local campaigns to promote the purchase of Canadian products. That seems important to us for a

number of reasons. Canadian consumers would like to buy Canadian products.

Thank you.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Arnold, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michel Arnold (Executive Director, Option consommateurs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Michel Arnold and I am the Executive Director of Option consommateurs. I am accompanied by Nalini Vaddapalli, who is an agri-food analyst and lawyer with Option consommateurs.

Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, I also wish to thank you for inviting us and for giving us an opportunity to share with you our thoughts on the main expectations and concerns of consumers with regard to agri-food product labelling. More specifically, we will look today at the terms "Made in Canada" and "Product of Canada," and we will formulate some recommendations with a view to ensuring the confidence of Canadian consumers.

Option consommateurs is a non-profit organization that arose from the Association coopératives d'économie familiale movement, and more specifically the Montreal ACEF, created in 1983. We are a non-profit association and our mission is to promote and defend consumers' interests and make sure their rights are protected. Option consommateurs has a team of some 30 professionals.

Over the years, we have developed our expertise in various areas, including budget and debt, financial services, health and agri-food, and energy, among many others. Each year, we have direct contact with between 7,000 and 10,000 consumers, give numerous interviews to the media and sit on many working committees and boards of directors. In fact, we were involved in the efforts to regulate organic products. We sit on the board of directors of the Canadian Organic Growers and in 2005 we produced a report on consumer awareness and educational campaign for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

With regard to consumer protection, the United Nations Guidelines provide the basis, reminding us, as Mr. Tanguay said, that consumers must be protected "from hazards to their health and safety," that they have a right to "adequate information to enable them to make informed choices" and that measures to encourage "consumer education, including education on the environmental, social and economic impacts of consumer choice" must be implemented.

With regard to labelling, this means simplicity, reliability and transparency. Information given to the consumer must be credible and verifiable.

As a result of the concerns raised about the safety of consumer products, including agri-food products, Canadian consumers are seeking more information than ever and they wish to be informed in order to make informed choices when they go shopping. We draw attention to the study conducted by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture on a Canadian-grown branding program and made public in June 2007. This study highlights the importance of balancing social and economic interests, and political choices in the agriculture and agri-food sector, because they have an impact on purchasing power and ongoing accessibility to food, and thus foster healthy eating for everyone.

To maintain consumer confidence, policies, laws and regulations must be clear and transparent.

The notion of transparency demands coherent actions that are consistent with the needs and expectations consumers have of the government and main players who provide us with our food.

Thus the abundance of logos, health claims and certifications only serves to undermine consumer confidence. Recent examples in the media have shown the importance of looking into the reliability of such information, because it has a great influence on consumers. If the purpose of the claims “Environmental Choice” and “Health Check” is to help consumers make responsible choices regarding the environment or their health, then they must also be sufficiently reliable to maintain consumer confidence in a product. As we have seen, however, this confidence has been sorely put to the test of late.

It must not be forgotten that consumers are not the only ones harmed; the other players in the food distribution chain are also affected, including those in the industry and those dedicated to protecting public health. In short, when the information conveyed to consumers does not meet their expectations, credibility and confidence are damaged. There will be negative fallout in all sectors, from field to table.

● (0930)

In short, when the information conveyed to consumers does not meet their expectations, credibility and confidence are damaged. There will be negative fallout in all sectors, from field to table.

[English]

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli (Lawyer, Agri-Food Analyst, Option consommateurs): *Merci.* I want to apologize. I finished the translation last night, so if there are any typos in your document, I apologize for that.

Offering local products, meaning “Product of Canada” or “Made in Canada”, to the Canadian consumer is for safety, but increasingly it is to encourage local producers and our national economy. Canadian consumers are adopting this tendency, and it raises the importance of correctly identifying products grown by our farmers.

We would also remind that if importation is an economic reality of the agrifood sector, no less than 95% of Canadian consumers will prefer local products when prices are competitive and their quality is equal or greater to imported products. The origin of agrifood products is an undisputed cornerstone of consumer habits.

Safety and quality of products must be guaranteed wherever consumers go to fill their shopping carts—supermarkets, local

markets, drugstores, and discount stores. It is a great challenge. The term “Canada” is an added value for agrifood products. Its usage must be permitted only if rigorous standards and criteria have been developed and the relevant authorities ensure they’re respected.

A food product clearly stating the term “Product of Canada” or “Made in Canada” must reflect its reality. In other words, the components of the products must be authentic. For example, a food product that will bear the “Canada Organic” logo will indicate to the consumer that it contains at least 95% of organic ingredients. This must be the rule for all Canadian agrifood products; they must be produced or made entirely, or almost entirely, in Canada. From this standpoint, a reflection is necessary for the framing of these terms to ensure that consumers can make informed choices.

If more than half of Canadians often read the information on food labels, on the other hand, nearly half of other Canadians do not have the minimal level of skills to respond to daily life demands. On the matter of agrifood products at this time, a simple and clear text is an utmost necessity to help numerous Canadians make informed choices.

We salute the opportunity that is given to us to communicate the following recommendations in light of the preoccupation and expectations of Canadian consumers.

We recommend that the feedstock of a product bearing the terms “Product of Canada” and “Made in Canada” be grown in Canada.

We recommend that the threshold allowing usage of the term “Product of Canada” and “Made in Canada” be revised on a higher scale to ensure integrity and authenticity of Canadian agrifood products. To achieve this, the decision must be the result of a multi-stakeholder consultation, where all sectors of the food distribution chain are represented.

We recommend that for each term, additional information be included on the label to ensure transparency of the inherent process linked to the term used—for example, *x* percentage of materials and labour are from Canada. We recommend that a maple leaf be included when these terms are used in order to facilitate and favour a Canadian agrifood product.

We recommend that information be available to consumers at point of sale. The information must be concerned with a detailed meaning of each term used and the place visited.

Finally, we recommend that an education campaign for the greater public be developed and disseminated in prominent newspapers, local newspapers, on the television, and through the Internet. This campaign must relate to the terms used in the agrifood sector in order to highlight products that are made in and are from Canada. As such, it will increase the trust of Canadian consumers and contribute to the expansion of our own agrifood product market.

We thank you for your time and attention.

● (0935)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Hillard, you have the floor.

Ms. Jennifer Hillard (Research Director, Consumer Interest Alliance Inc.): Good morning.

The Consumer Interest Alliance Inc. would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear today and make some suggestions regarding the “Product of Canada” label and in particular its use on food products.

CIAI is an emerging organization of experienced consumer volunteers who are concerned with consumer issues and interests. CIAI is an incorporated not-for-profit organization, and it has been established to provide national consumer representation and research. CIAI works through cooperation, discussion, and representation with other players in the Canadian economy.

Its major areas of interest and activity include food and agriculture, health and environment issues as related to food and agriculture, national and international standards, and financial services.

CIAI welcomes the overall intent of the new food and consumer safety action plan that was announced following the November 2007 throne speech. In particular, we're encouraged by the intent to provide better safety information for consumers, build safety into industry supply chains, and require mandatory product recalls. There are many aspects of the action plan on which we have comments, but today we're addressing the need to improve communication with consumers relating to their food choices by making the “Product of Canada” designation more meaningful and less misleading.

The United Nations consumer bill of rights provides access to accurate information that is needed for consumers to make decisions. The proposed safety plan document devotes just one paragraph to the issue of “Product of Canada” and “Made in Canada”. However, CIAI believes that these labels and declarations are a critical basis on which to build and move toward product claims that are not misleading and that enable informed decision-making by consumers.

The need to provide Canadian consumers with accurate information on the source of their food is increasingly important, as events repeatedly draw attention to problems with some imported products. The current rules are unclear. CIAI would like to draw the attention of this committee to two issues that we believe require far better consumer communication. These are the 51% rule and the term “Canada grade”.

The 51% rule is permitted under the present legislation, as can be seen on the Competition Bureau website. It allows manufacturers and food processors to aggregate the value of processing and packaging to calculate that 51% of the value was generated in Canada. They can then state that a product is Canadian, even though for a food product this may mean that little if any of the nutritive value was grown in Canada. We would like to take the example provided by the CFIA website. Olives imported from Spain in bulk and repackaged in Canada in new brine become a product of Canada or *produit du Canada*, assuming that the 51% rule is satisfied.

The 51% rule is the policy adopted by the Competition Bureau, and quoting from that same web page, two conditions must be met in order to consider the product as being Canadian:

the product was created in Canada, i.e. the last substantial transformation was carried out in Canada, thereby resulting in a recognizably new final product, that is a product significantly different in appearance from the individual ingredients; AND

the total cost of direct Canadian labour and/or additional Canadian ingredients represents at least 51% of the cost of production of the new product.

There are of course not many olive groves in Canada, and a consumer with reasonable geographic knowledge realizes that the “Product of Canada” term is hardly a description that will be understood or believed in either everyday official language.

Other examples are provided that are certainly less clear, even to a well-informed consumer. In reality, these guidelines address and drive economic added value and not food content value. Therefore, the value of processing and packaging in Canada has as much merit under the guidelines as the nutritive value of a Canadian-grown product. Under this guideline and its “Product of Canada” label, the Canadian food dollar is not about food but its role as an economic driver for the food processing and packaging industry.

To state our position, CIAI believes that when consumers purchase products that bear the Canadian name, they expect to purchase products that are actually grown or raised in Canada. The permitted identification of foods not grown here as “Product of Canada” is misleading to most consumers who, we believe, are more interested in the source of the ingredients than the manufacturing and processing.

Recent media coverage of fish products imported from Asia and processed on the east coast has raised consumer awareness of the fallibility of the 51% rule.

● (0940)

Such confusing and potentially misleading practices cause the consumer to lose faith in the relevance and accuracy of labels regarding Canadian origin. This lack of trust has unintended negative consequences, such as driving consumers to find other channels through which to find products that they believe are really Canadian —avenues such as farmers markets and direct purchase systems, which may bypass some of Canada's excellent food safety system. It also leads to encouraging the promotion of local food by provincial governments and/or agencies rather than creating a solid and reliable Canada brand, as was the intent of the first agricultural policy framework.

In addition, Canadian consumers are learning about food miles and the hundred-mile diet. Many want to purchase Canadian meat or produce wherever possible. The present practice of labelling products as Canadian may well drive consumers to purchase from sources not within the Canadian food safety regulatory system and thus take risks with their health, but even then, without getting the expected local product due to the 51% rule. Under the current system, a single-ingredient item that doesn't grow in Canada can be identified as a product of Canada and identified as being produced locally. For example, the "Buy Local" site provided by the Manitoba provincial government lists coffee as a local product.

CIAI therefore recommends that the 51% rule be allocated only to the value of the food content within the cost of production, as defined by the Competition Bureau, and also that the percentage be significantly increased.

We judge that exclusion of packaging from the transformation cost will have two principal benefits. First, it will connect the "Product of Canada" designation to the nutritive and food value of the purchase, and second, it will remove inducement to overpackage products.

In order to determine the appropriate percentage increase, the government needs to gather research data. One such source would be to determine what consumers understand by the term "Product of Canada" or "Made in Canada" and set appropriate guidelines to reflect this understanding.

In addition, the requirement of Canada's international trade agreements and the practices of its trade partners might provide guidance on transformation of products and values for import purposes.

In developing this requirement, CIAI would support the use of the national standard system to create a voluntary standard such as for organic production and then the referencing of the standard in legislation. This would not force producers and processors to identify Canadian product, but would ensure that if they do so, the identification would be accurate and not misleading. Such a standard could also be designed to ensure that any additional local identification, such as provincial, would be in the form of reliable consumer information. CIAI is not opposed to the concept of buying local, but an identification system must make it likely that consumers will indeed get local when the product is identified as such.

We support providing good information to consumers on the source of their food but do not support promoting the output of one province over another. We do not believe that to be in the best interest of Canada or Canadian consumers.

We would now like to turn to the concept of "Canada grade" and its potential for being misunderstood by the consumer. The recent concerns with honey imported from China and then blended into Canada grade honey and marketed as such has undermined the confidence of many consumers in products they believed to be Canadian. With the improvements in standards, increase in enforcement, and focus on consumer information that is being suggested in the food safety section of the action plan, we would recommend that one of the prime focuses of the communication effort be on explaining to consumers the real meaning of "Canada grade".

Recent research performed by our organization has revealed some significant gaps in the ability of the CFIA to enforce the existing regulations that relate to food labelling, food advertising, and food standards. The new action plan describes better enforcement of food regulations with more tracking and tracing, new administrative penalties, greater transparency, less flexibility for information identified as CBI, and more power for the regulators. CIAI applauds all these initiatives, and we believe they will move us towards greater compliance.

Because I'm late, I'm just going to jump to our final recommendations.

We recommend that the regulations be put in place for the use of "Product of Canada" or "Made in Canada" declarations and that these declarations be simple, avoid the need for qualifying statements, and be the same for all consumer products.

● (0945)

We recommend that for food products, the 51% rule be allocated to the value of the food system to create a voluntary standard, such as for organic production, and then reference the standard in legislation. We recommend that the prime focus of the communication efforts be to explain "Canada grade", and that it does not imply "Product of Canada".

In closing, we applaud a lot of the actions that are being taken, and we'd like to encourage you to move forward, particularly with the consumer communication piece.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank all of you for your opening comments. We are now going to open it up to questions from committee members, with seven-minute rounds to start off with. If anyone wants to get in on any of the questions asked by a committee member, just raise your hand to signal to me. That includes you as well, Ms. Bliss.

With that, Mr. Boshcoff, please kick us off.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you very much, and thanks to all the presenters.

If there are going to be local food initiatives developed such as what we saw in the video of production across the country—and we have every indication to believe it's happening, not quite spontaneously, but there's certainly a movement out there driven by consumer demand—the whole notion of how we're going to label these products...we know that Canada doesn't grow that many pomegranates and pineapples, yet we see those. Ms. Bliss identified the aspect that a lot of this labelling was actually setting back these kinds of local initiatives and making it difficult to compete.

I'm wondering if the panel can relate some experiences they have had so that we as a standing committee can see what's happening in the field as people try to move from their initiatives into the realm of competition and find themselves stymied. That's my first question.

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: I think it's always a challenge when people want locally grown food but also to have a variety of food. For the consumer, when you're buying a product that's not grown in Canada but it's available in local markets.... From our point of view, local markets are also about accessibility. There are many places, many neighbourhoods, where accessibility to fresh food is a very big issue. So what I think you need to focus on is that safety was respected or safety was not undermined for these products that are made available in local markets.

If not being "Product of Canada" means they're not grown in Canada, that doesn't mean that safety was undermined. So I think you need to focus on that specific issue, because more and more consumers are looking for products where the safety aspect of the product has been guaranteed.

It's always a challenge. You buy Canadian, but there's also that trend where people want a variety of food. So you need to ensure that for that variety of food that is not grown in Quebec, the safety aspect of it hasn't been undermined.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Secondly, there was a point raised with regard to the difference between federal, provincial, and territorial standards for meat processing. I think that would really confuse a lot of people: how different could a federal standard be between any province in terms of meat inspection, if someone wanted to start an abattoir or some meat processing situation? We know in many regions of the country the centralization of meat processing has become a real issue of distance and getting product to someone to do that.

Maybe, Ms. Bliss, you can answer. What is the difference between a federally inspected product where a provincial person would say, "This is okay at this level, but federally we're going to inspect it a little bit more, and it's going to be safer, purer, cleaner"?

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: Thanks, Ken.

That's exactly what we're going through right now. As you know, we're trying to build an abattoir here in Rainy River. We are planning to build the building to federal specs, but financially we're unable to get a federally inspected plant here at this point. In order for us to access markets in Manitoba, which is three hours from us, we need to have a federal plant, but we're unable to do that.

The regulations are different, but it's a very unlevel and unfair playing field, because we need to be able to access the Manitoba markets, as well as Ontario. If we had one national standard of regulation so that we could do some interprovincial trade, it would only make sense, and the markets would be that much wider.

We're hoping that is one thing that can change. We can't compete with the Cargills, so we need to have some national regulations that will allow us to deal with the interprovincial trade barriers we have right now. It's very frustrating. If you look at a steak, whether it was federally inspected or provincially inspected, there are no differences.

● (0950)

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Maybe we could do a quick survey of all the panellists to find out their preference for labelling: "Grown in Canada", "Made in Canada", or "Product of Canada". What would you vote for, in terms of consumer understanding, awareness, and security?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: As long as it means what it says, I don't think consumers would differentiate between the three terms. The issue is whether it is exactly what it says it is, and "Product of Canada" right now is usually not what a consumer believes to be a product of Canada.

I agree with the harmonization of the standards and the levels all across the country, but I would hope that we would harmonize up to the federal standard so that everything's at the highest possible level. That really wouldn't help the people in Rainy River, because they'd still have to come up to meet the federal standard for meat inspection.

The Chair: Mr. Arnold, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: Actually I pretty much agree with Ms. Hillard. I think that it is important for the terms to be clearly defined and for information to be given to consumers. Regardless of the term used, whether it's "Made in Canada" or "Product of Canada," consumers must know precisely what the term means.

[English]

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: I think we need to be reminded that for the Canadian consumer, the word "Canada" still has a lot of meaning to it in the matter of safety issues. Consumers look for that as a safe product.

As my colleague said, it doesn't really matter if it's a grown product or made in Canada, it's just that more and more consumers are looking for that as a safe purchase, so it has to reflect that. It's really very important.

The Chair: Ms. Bliss, you have a comment?

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: I agree. What I'm trying to say is we just need one. If it's the federal level of inspection that we need, that's the level we'll take. We just need one level of inspection and not have two that we have to jump through hoops to meet.

[Translation]

Mr. Charles Tanguay: I am in agreement with the ideas defended by Ms. Hillard. Indeed considerations of the costs of processing the product or packaging should not be taken into account. Emphasis should be rather on what the food consists of, the raw material. I think that we must not limit ourselves to the labelling of Canadian products. Internationally, we also have to ensure that stricter rules are adopted by the Codex Alimentarius Commission so that, around the world, there are equally strict rules on the origin of products.

We also want to know whether the product comes from Chile, China or Australia. All this would make it possible to have more equitable rules for all countries and producers. Regardless of the term chosen, the information has to be accurate.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Bellavance, sept minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Thank you very much.

Thank you for your testimonies. I feel it is essential to hear the point of view of consumers' associations in such a file.

Obviously the primary concern of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food is to ensure that agricultural producers enjoy an economic advantage in producing food. To my mind, this economic advantage is directly linked to the fact that consumers will like the idea of being able to buy a home-grown product and, when I say home-grown, I am speaking very broadly. In other words, our producers must be allowed to make a profit from their products.

I heard the results of the survey. Is it still available on your Web site, Mr. Tanguay? It is interesting; I would like to see it. At first, I was surprised when you said that 71% of people find it easy to determine the origin of products. At the same time, they find that there are misleading aspects and they have difficulty understanding labels. In the end, after thinking it over, I say to myself that these people are just like me. With these misleading aspects and loose regulation, if you will pardon the expression, it is very easy; "Canada" appears somewhere all the time. There is always a way of getting it in there.

Are consumers being misled deliberately? I do not know, but the label is designed in such a way that consumers can easily be mistaken. Often, even the address of the importer in Longueuil or in London, Ontario, appears, for example. When we see the company's address, we think that this is a Canadian product, but actually the food product is not Canadian.

So I am not so surprised by these statistics. They show there is a real problem in this regard.

I would like to find this out from you, and here I am addressing all of you. Often, when standards are set or imposed, companies are quick to say this will cost more. Do you fear that the imposition of a standard that lays down how labels must be designed, for example, the obligation that a logo or whatever should appear, might have repercussions on the price consumers have to pay?

• (0955)

Mr. Charles Tanguay: I think that many Canadians are prepared to pay a little more. I do not think it costs that much more to write more accurate and more truthful information. The truth does not cost much more than a lie. If it is, consumers are prepared to pay a little more, just as they are prepared to pay more for organic food.

Mr. André Bellavance: In your opinion, Mr. Tanguay, would it be justified for processors and shopkeepers to claim that imposing a standard would cost more? That is what I am getting at.

Mr. Charles Tanguay: I do not know. On first thought, I do not think it is justified to think so. Normally, producers know where their products come from, and I do not see how asking them to write the truth can cost them more.

Furthermore, traceability requirements are based on many other reasons, including health and safety. Traceability is being implemented. Quebec is a bit ahead, in such areas as livestock. Still, we have not noted major repercussions from these requirements on prices.

Quality and accurate information come with a price, but that should not be justification for doing nothing.

Mr. André Bellavance: Does anyone else wish to comment? If not, I have some other questions.

Something has become clear from the testimonies we have heard. Even though we have not held a lot of meetings on this subject, we are beginning to hear some very interesting points of view concerning the term "Product of Canada." We know that a certain percentage should be set to determine what constitutes a Canadian product. We are still discussing it.

We are also told it would be important to have a label with the term "Prepared in Canada." As a consumer association, do you feel that people will still find a way to get around the rules by always adding the words "Canada" and "Prepared in?" At the same time it is true, for consumers to know what they are buying, a distinction will have to be made. What do you think about this?

Mr. Michel Arnold: As I said earlier in response to Mr. Boshcoff, it is very important that information be clear and precise. Consumers must have a clear idea of what the term on the label means, whether it is "Prepared in Canada," "Product of Canada" or "Grown in Canada."

Of course, as Nalini said, the safety of products is important to consumers. So it is important for them to see that processing took place in Canada. Still, we agree that it is a little odd, these days, to have the impression that oranges, for example, are grown in Canada.

It is important truly to put the right information on products and to inform people so that they know what "Prepared in Canada" means. We must be able to find out what sort of processing the food item has undergone. Has it simply been canned? Has something else been done to it? Has the safety of the product been ensured? This is important.

• (1000)

[English]

The Chair: Madame Vaddapalli.

[Translation]

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: Actually, I would like to see a logo, a maple leaf, and "Product of Canada." As I mentioned in my presentation, it would be enough to add at the bottom a little two- or three-word phrase that explains what this means and that can be changed. If 75% of the products have been prepared, let us say so: "75% of the products were prepared."

I am going to draw a parallel with another area. In the case of substances contained in consumer products, we have to negotiate. Indeed, substances known to be carcinogenic are put in products. It is not the consumer product that is carcinogenic, it is the substance it contains. It is the ingredient that is carcinogenic. The consumer is entitled to know that it is the ingredient that is carcinogenic. We negotiate with the industry to find out how to indicate that on the final product. So I would like to have a specific logo with a short terminology that can be changed to reflect what "Product of Canada" really means.

[English]

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: I agree with these comments. I just think exactly what the CIA has said there. The label needs to be clear and the 51% rule needs to be... The value needs to be placed on that product—the food—and not the label. Just because it was packaged in Canada should not mean it's a product. It should be something clear, a simple sticker that could say "imported". I agree that it needs to be a simple, short statement.

On your earlier question about paying more, we have been watching that in Rainy River when we have local products available. They're not willing to pay a huge increase, but they're definitely willing to pay a little more to have the local potatoes and to have the local eggs. It just comes to clear information to allow the consumer to know what they're buying and eating.

The Chair: Merci beaucoup.

Mr. Storseth is next.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank everybody who came today. They were excellent presentations. I'll try to make sure you can hear me.

Both Ms. Hillard and Mr. Arnold hit on something that I absolutely agree with: we need to simplify this. We don't need more labelling. We don't need more confusion out there for our consumers. What we need to do is simplify it. We need to take what we have and strengthen it and make it so that "Product of Canada" means what the consumer actually believes it means. I've often said that I don't want to get to the point of having to bring my lawyer to the grocery store with me; it would get a little costly.

With regard to your recommendations, though, to making "Product of Canada" what we want it to be, does anybody around the table have a costing on that? How much money and advertising would it be, once the policies were changed? What would it cost to get it there, or is it already basically there?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: Are you referring to the government communication strategy or to companies' advertising?

Mr. Brian Storseth: I mean either one.

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: The action plan has already talked about getting more accurate information out to consumers, so presumably Health Canada is supposed to be already moving in that direction.

There are ways of doing this cooperatively with the private sector. When they brought in new textile labelling in the U.S., which the manufacturers wanted, the Federal Trade Commission down there said, "You have to explain this to consumers. We'll give you a year to

explain it, and if you don't, you'll have to go back to the old labels." Well, that would have enforced a huge cost on them, to change the labels twice. So they were very effective there. They had tags hanging on clothes and calendars that explained it.

You can use persuasion and creative ways to work with the private sector to do a lot of this.

There's a system in the U.K. for labelling food, the little red tractor scheme. It's a privately administered scheme—the Union Jack and a little red tractor on all this product. The criteria are clearly available on the web. The stakeholders oversee the program. The grocery stores pay to get audited or certified, whatever. And then there are other layers that some companies want to go into. I foolishly forgot to bring it with me, but I brought back a potato bag from my last trip. It has the little red tractor and all that, but in addition to that, it goes all the way down to saying, "These are potatoes from Yorkshire, and here's a photo of the farmer, and this is where his farm is." It's not promoting those over potatoes from some other part of the country, but it's providing that information while promoting the British brand, which people in the U.K. love to buy just because they don't want to buy anything from France.

It's effective and people look for it. In some cases, they'll pay a premium, but in other cases, like at Morrisons, which is the cheapest chain in the U.K., they have a little red tractor on all their stuff. So it's not necessarily a price premium.

The grocery market over here is not very competitive; basically they can charge whatever they want to charge. I agree that consumers are prepared to pay more for some of these things, but they do want to know that if they're paying more, they're getting what they're paying for—and that it's going to the producer, not to the processor.

● (1005)

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you.

We've had some groups come before us suggesting new labels or more labels. I'll ask each one of you, do you disagree with adding another label? Do you think we should simplify and strengthen the labels that we have before us currently?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: If you want me to jump in again, yes.

Consumers can't read the label now. We just did a research project and found that people can't read the labels. And the U.S. researchers found that the more qualifying statements you put in a claim, people don't understand that this is a more questionable claim; it makes them think it's better because it's saying more.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Could I get each one of you to address that?
[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: I think that we must also take into consideration the fact that close to half of the Canadian population has illiteracy problems. We must not complicate things any more. We must really tighten things up and explain what already exists.

[English]

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: I think, as Monsieur Tanguay was saying, it's not just reading; it's comprehension of what you're reading. You don't need new labels. I mean, the label "Product of Canada" has already done some work. We just need to strengthen it so that it reflects what it means.

So there's no need to do new stuff. It's just going to get confusing.

The Chair: Ms. Bliss.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: I totally agree. It needs to be simplified and clear. The message needs to be defined so that it's clear.

Mr. Charles Tanguay: I'd say the same thing.

Mr. Brian Storseth: I have a couple more questions.

When we talk about this, oftentimes we're talking about the fraud aspect of it and making sure the general public understands what's being presented out there. We talk about the economics of branding. It can be very successful. Alberta beef is an example. It's some of the best beef in the world; everybody knows that. That's a prime example of branding.

But you also talked about safety. One of the concerns that was brought up today when we were discussing this... It seems that everybody's saying that the packaging shouldn't be considered in there, and I agree with you. A very high level of content should be Canadian in order for it to be a product of Canada. But I don't necessarily have anything against packaging being from Canada as well. I think that's an important thing to make sure we bring up. That is a safety concern, and it's a safety concern that I think consumers would want to know is there as well. So maybe I'll just throw that out there.

For my final question—I'm sure I'm going to be cut off soon—what percentage of content would you like to see for it to be termed a product of Canada? We've heard 70%. Today I think we heard that 51% content would be fine. We've heard 80%.

I'd like your individual opinions on that as well, please.

The Chair: We'll start backwards.

Mr. Tanguay.

Mr. Charles Tanguay: I don't really know.

[Translation]

I do not know. In fact, when we write "Product of Canada," the percentage should be at least half, probably around 75%. My opinion is as good as anyone else's on this.

•(1010)

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Bliss, please.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: Again, I don't know if I can give you an exact number, but when it says "Product of Canada", I would hope that the product is "of Canada". The value needs to be placed on that particular product. If it's olives, and the olives were imported from Spain, but we canned them and processed them in Canada, we need to know it's an import.

You haven't had Rainy River beef yet. If you think Alberta's is great, you have to come and try our beef.

On the second part of your question, I feel in our community things can be rather simple. We just need to send the clear message that we're either eating Canadian or we're not eating Canadian. I don't know how complicated it is. It seems black and white to us here, but of course regulations don't make it quite that simple.

The Chair: Madame Vaddapalli.

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: Because we're speaking about food products, obviously food has to be grown in Canada. I just threw out the number 70%, but it would have to be higher than 50%—for sure, 51%.

I was talking about the "Canada Organic" logo, and 95% may not be realistic. I was shooting you a number today. I wouldn't have had the chance to speak to all the different stakeholders. I was just throwing that number in. But "Grown in Canada", that's the rule for me. More than 51%...then we need to discuss with other stakeholders to decide.

The Chair: Mr. Arnold.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: I think the same thing as Nalini. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Hillard.

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: We haven't done the research, but I think certainly for a single-ingredient product, such as coffee, olives, or potatoes, it would have to be very high. When you come to multi-ingredient, which is most of the products we buy, then I think the issue is that somebody needs to go out and do the consumer research and find out what consumers believe. What would consumers be satisfied with as being a product of Canada? Still we have to go through all of this, and then find we still haven't reached the level that the average consumer is comfortable with. So I think we all need to do some research with our constituents, and probably broader than that, and it will probably vary.

I have to say, in defence of the chairman's product, that Alberta beef is not the only good beef. The beef from Manitoba is okay too.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Mr. Atamanenko, you have the floor.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): On that subject, I just want to let Brian know that my brother, who is a cattle rancher in B.C., might take exception to what you said; anyway, we'll move on.

Thank you very much for being here. We have this movement in Canada, a movement for food sovereignty, food security. It's my understanding, and I assume, that the whole idea of having accurate labelling is a step in this direction. It supports the idea of food sovereignty. It then supports the idea of trying to buy local as much as possible and supporting local industry.

I'd like some comments on that.

First, Ms. Bliss, maybe you could comment. You mentioned that you would like to see provincial barriers eliminated, and I understand why, so in your case meat can be exported out of the province. It's only three hours away. We know that for meat to be exported out of provinces or out of the country now, meat has to be inspected by CFIA inspectors.

In British Columbia we've seen this push for standardization result in our meat inspection regulation, which basically has put a tremendous hardship on local, small producers, because they now are no longer able to kill on the farm and sell. In other words, someone who has a very small operation isn't able to kill meat and sell to another person. So there's the whole movement to try to somehow scramble and get some money available, whether it's mobile abattoirs or to try to localize other meat inspection slaughterhouses.

We know that in Nova Scotia they've somehow made an exception for this and they allow this.

So if we see this whole movement to standardization, do you see this maybe as a detriment to the small farmer and the producer, which can then be a detriment to the whole idea of trying to support local industry?

That's my first question.

Maybe, Ms. Bliss, you could start, please.

• (1015)

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: I am very passionate about this topic. I am a farmer, and I not only can't sell meat from my farm, but I can't even feed my family, because it is illegal. If I slaughter a steer this afternoon, I have to kill it at home, I have to hang it at home, and I have to cut it at home. So I can't even eat my own meat right now unless I want to put myself through those substandards of hanging the meat in the barn and then cutting it up on the kitchen table.

I know we're in a very similar situation to what they have in B.C. I've corresponded back and forth. Unfortunately, in Ontario, we're not allowed to have the mobile slaughter plants, so we're in the process of trying to secure funding to build an abattoir. The closest abattoir I can access right now is in Dryden, which is about three hours north of Rainy River. That means I'm paying for fuel; I'm taking my animals to Dryden, and then I'm hauling them back to be processed. After I do that, I can sell them to my neighbours and I can feed my family. It's silly, because if I don't take my meat to that abattoir, it's illegal for me to take a roast beef sandwich to work,

because the meat is supposed to stay on the farm. I can't take it to a potluck dinner or anything like that. It sounds crazy, but it's the truth.

It is a very big hindrance. The beef industry and all of our industries—other than the grain industry, which is doing well because of the biofuels—are hurting right now. The meat industries are in a bad way. We need to open up markets and local food. Consumers, if they can buy from you, especially in the districts and the communities that we're in—we're small and we're tightknit—want to be able to access products. An example about potatoes was given by the lady whose name I forget. People can go into a grocery store in Japan now and scan the bar codes with their cell phone and they will see a picture of the farmer who's raising that meat. They want to see that cow out chewing her cud, lying happily in the grass. People can come right to my farm and do that if they choose to. It's a huge hindrance.

We are hoping that an abattoir may begin this spring, but killing animals is not very profitable, so we're going to have to struggle and work really hard to keep that going. But it will open up some markets. And the farmers markets in the northwest have been crying for local product, but we're unable to meet them because of the regulations, because of the access to the abattoir and the regulations that go along with that.

[Translation]

Mr. Charles Tanguay: I think that, in concepts where there are increasingly marked differences, food sovereignty is increasingly being distinguished from food safety. Let me explain. In the rules on health safety, we granted a lot of importance to the health safety of food. This very healthy obsession favours the giants in the food industry to the detriment, very often, of smaller businesses. In food safety, however, there are not just the health aspects. There are more and more consumers who are afraid of cattle growth hormones, the widespread use of antibiotics, and all the industrial procedures that also cause health problems but that are less visible than problems of wholesomeness. These questions have longer-term repercussions on health. When we buy locally, when we know the producer, when we know that he does not use growth hormones, we have less reason to fear pure health problems.

The health question must not be a pretext for killing small farmers and alternative ways of doing things. A balance must always be sought in these issues.

[English]

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: I like to think about food sovereignty as a right to food. I think finding the *équilibre* between economics and social interests is always a big challenge, but we need to do that, because we're in a society that grows on economy. So not taking that into account is not realistic.

I meet consumers who have been in their neighbourhood for many years. There is not even one grocery store. So people buy their food in the corner stores and the *dépanneurs*, because it's not profitable for big industries to be there. And a lot of these neighbourhood people have very low income, so having local access to local foods in the city but also in more rural areas is very important.

I think that just being here today and the fact that you're asking questions about that means it's coming. That debate has been elevated to another level. Maybe, hopefully, public policies will help support local farmers so that access to food will be available for all consumers and so that the bigger industries will also be sensitized to this issue and their responsibility to acknowledge that.

• (1020)

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Monsieur Arnold.

Mr. Michel Arnold: No.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Ms. Hillard.

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: We have mentioned the north. Access to nutritious, health-fresh, Canadian food up north is a huge issue. Some research in native communities found that when they stopped eating so much fish because they were worried about the heavy metal build-up, what they switched to was chips and baloney, because it was all they had access to.

With the size of Canada and the distribution system, getting reasonably priced local, nutritious, safe food spread across the country is not easy. I completely agree with Nalini that we have a sort of balance between ethics and economics to try to work through, added to a really low level of consumer awareness about a lot of the issues around their food relating to where the food safety issues are—many of them are actually in the kitchen—and all of these things.

That has come from a general pulling back by the government from providing consumer information. As the world gets progressively more complicated for consumers, there's progressively less information coming from a government source. Most Canadians still believe they can put faith in information that comes from the government. It's getting a little weaker, but it's not to the level of just going on the Internet and seeing what you pull down, not quite knowing what the source is and how much credibility it has. It used to be really good; we used to have quite a lot of government information that was available. And even though we now have the Internet and it's cheaper to produce or to get the information to consumers, we seem to just keep pulling back on how much we provide.

That's another really important.... We've taken nutrition and home economics education basically out of the schools, and people out there—

The Chair: I'm going to have to cut you off. We're over time.

We're going to start our five-minute rounds. I ask all witnesses to keep your responses brief. You'll find that members are still going to ask just about as many questions as they did in the seven-minute rounds, but we're going to have to keep the responses as brief as possible so that they can get their questions answered.

With that, we'll kick it off with Mr. St. Amand.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thanks to all of you for coming this morning and presenting to us.

I don't know to what extent, and it's not our business to know to what extent, you're involved in this on a voluntary or a consumer rights basis, as opposed to a basis that provides remuneration, but however you're doing it, it's appreciated for sure by the committee, and I dare say by the citizenry at large. So thank you for your efforts.

In terms of—my phrasing—the “dumbing down” of the labelling, I don't necessarily agree that it may be simplified or streamlined more than it currently is. I heard you, Ms. Hillard, say that consumers, or a significant number of consumers—I think 50%—cannot read the labels. That may be, but answer me this—anybody, if you could. Labelling now has become pretty sophisticated, pretty detailed with respect to the components that make up the product, whether it's glucose, trans fats, fibre. My God, I'm casually interested, and, frankly, casually only, in reading the seven or eight items and the percentage of those items there are. I'm rather more interested, I'll tell you, in finding out where the product originated, where it was processed, and where it was packaged.

But I'm hearing all of you say that we need to dumb it down to three words or less, so that it's “Product of Canada” or “Made in Canada”, and we perhaps needn't or shouldn't go any further. I'm disagreeing; I think we need to be more descriptive.

Do you have any thoughts about that?

• (1025)

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: Let me just clarify. The reason people can't read the label is that the nutrition panel is the only thing on the Canadian food label that has typographical requirements. The reason people can't read it, apart from the fact that some have literacy issues, is that the print is not clear: the contrast is not clear, the size is not right, the spacing is not correct. That was the research we did. There's an area that really needs to be covered.

But we are putting so much stuff on the label now that I still contend we need to keep it as short and as clear and as simple as possible, and then let people go somewhere else for the definition.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: The important thing in what we are saying is not just the simplification, but also the clarification of the terms, what we mean by the terms put on the label.

[English]

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: Really quickly, I was saying, “Product of Canada”, but under it you need to state what it means. Was it that *matières premières*, the main ingredients, were grown in Canada? Was it processed? You need to add that, and then you have to make the more detailed information available, either at the point of sale or a link to somewhere else where consumers can get access to that information. I'm very adamant that half of the Canadian population... There are five levels in literacy; half of it is at level two. We're all educated, but we forget that most Canadians have a hard time reading and understanding what's on the label.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: So that's a blend of your recommendations two and three?

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: Yes.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: So you're suggesting that the information be elsewhere, on a website or something?

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: Point of sale is very good. For point of sale, I look at Quebec, where we're encouraging Quebec products. So now when you have a *comptoir* with a Quebec label, you have a little *étiquette*, which shows what is from Quebec. If it was processed, if it was grown... That helps the consumer right away when he's buying a product: “What is that on the side of the *comptoir*?” It tells more detailed information right at the point of sale.

The Chair: Mr. Tanguay, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Charles Tanguay: I do not think that clear, truthful, simple-to-understand information can prevent, as some have said, people who want more, from getting more detailed information. However, the origin of the product seems to me to be essential. It is still relatively simple to share this information in terms that mean something and are easy to understand.

[English]

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: So in terms of an actual example—the olives from Spain—how should they be described?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: They're definitely not products of Canada.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: I understand. Should it say, “Packaged and processed in Canada, with olives originating...”?

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: Actually, we should tell the truth. They were grown in Spain. If they were packaged in Canada, they were packaged in Canada. If they were processed differently, let us simply say so. We need the truth.

[English]

The Chair: Time has expired.

Moving right along to Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): I think you're—

The Chair: Oh, I thought I had Carol there. Okay.

Ms. Skelton, you have the floor.

Hon. Carol Skelton (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Ms. Hillard, would you be able to give us that research, just for our information? Is that possible?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: Do you mean the readability research?

Hon. Carol Skelton: Yes.

• (1030)

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: Absolutely. It was done for the office of consumer affairs under their funding program, so yes, we could easily get you a copy of the final report. We'll send it to the clerk.

Hon. Carol Skelton: That would be excellent, because I'd really like to see that.

From listening to all the testimony this morning, I really think what I'm hearing is that you would like us to simplify but enforce the regulations and what we're doing with packaging. Am I hearing wrong, or is that correct? Could somebody agree with me?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: Absolutely enforce it, yes.

Hon. Carol Skelton: So therefore the labels—and we're talking about people not being able to read. I find, becoming a senior, I have to dig through my purse to find my glasses to look at this little tiny writing on these labels, and I find that very hard at times. So the simpler it could be, the easier it is.

Ms. Bliss, I want to ask your organization, do you sell from the farm gate, or are you promoting that, or are you working through farmers markets? How do you label your products?

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: The committee, Local Food For Local People—just to give you a little history—was formed because we had what we are referring to now as a meat scandal. We were having someone butcher our animals on our farm and then they were taken into the processing plant to be processed, and we got stopped. The committee was formed to try to save our meat. They were going to take it to a rendering garbage dump, so we formed this committee.

Personally, I'm not selling any meat from the farm gate or in the farmers market because I don't have close access to an abattoir. The only meat I'm eating right now is just for my family, and it's actually illegal because I live by myself. I'm feeding my brother, who lives in Fort Frances, and I'm feeding my parents, and that's illegal too.

But yes, the people who are selling at the market right now are labelling it local. Where we have trouble is with the CFIA definition of local food; it means it's within 50 kilometres of the region, and our region is huge. I grow beef in Stratton, but when I drive it into Fort Frances, which is an hour, it's no longer local.

Hon. Carol Skelton: It's really interesting, and I thought your earlier comments were very good, because I grew up on the prairies, and we feed our families. We grow a garden and raise our own beef. My husband and I feed our kids bison, because we raise bison. And I use lentils from the farm. I've done all of that.

I find that every time we put more rules and regulations in place—and we're seeing that with interprovincial trade—we're hindering our farm families; we're hindering the people who are growing the good food and are trying to get it out to the consumer.

And I really like the idea of having a little red tractor on our products, because when I go into the grocery store, if I can see something from the local area, that's what I will buy.

I want to go again to the percentage thing. I've heard all of you say that we have to increase the percentage of the product grown in Canada, or whatever the terminology we come up with for "Product of Canada". Again, no one has suggested a number they would like to put out there. Would you like to see it at 100%?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: For single ingredients, yes. There's no reason why a single ingredient, whether olives or coffee or potatoes, shouldn't be 100%. Why would you want to bring some other potatoes in and mix them with Canadian ones? The 100% shouldn't be a problem.

Hon. Carol Skelton: Okay, good.

Are there other comments?

Do you think that advertising and promoting this on the Internet is all that is necessary?

I see you nodding your head, but what would you like to see us do?

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: I think the Internet is one way, but I'm really adamant about point of sale, because it just helps consumers to choose by increasing their confidence at different points of sale. Consumers go to supermarkets, to local markets, to drug stores, and to discount stores to buy their food. So if you have a simple label that explains it at the point of sale, you have the job done. Not everybody has access to the Internet.

Hon. Carol Skelton: No, I understand that.

The Chair: Madame Thi Lac.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Good morning. Thank you to everyone for being with us this morning.

Several of my questions have been raised by my colleagues this morning, but there are two that have not.

If we adopt a rule that is clearer than the one currently in effect, should its enforcement be a mandatory standard, as favoured by the Union des producteurs agricoles du Québec, the UPA, or a voluntary standard, as proposed by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture?

That is my first question and it is addressed to all the witnesses.

•(1035)

Mr. Michel Arnold: I know from experience that voluntary codes are very difficult to enforce. It requires a lot of commitment on

everyone's part. So it is a challenge to use a voluntary code, whereas mandatory regulation is always simpler.

Mr. Charles Tanguay: Among the sorry examples of voluntary standards is the one on GMO labelling, which has still not put a single GMO label on Canadian food products. We also think that mandatory standards are more effective and make it possible to balance and level the playing field so that everyone is subject to the same rules.

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: We're going to be a little bit different on this one.

We just see so many problems with monitoring the enforcement of the rules that we already have, but we could live with the voluntary standard, provided it were referenced in the legislation. That works for the building codes, and that's the direction that organic is going in. There are some advantages to that in terms of the way the stakeholders are involved in developing the base standard on which you operate, but I would agree that you have to reference it in the legislation so that you have the power to enforce it, if you have to.

That's our position on that one.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: Successive governments have always promoted the North-American livestock market. In other words, an animal may be born in Canada, be finished in the United States and processed in Mexico, without any barriers.

How do we reconcile the need of the North-American market with the need for a "Product of Canada" or "Made in Canada" indication that is clear for consumers?

Mr. Michel Arnold: I am not sure I understand the question. Can you repeat it?

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: If an animal is born in Canada, finished in the United States and processed in Mexico, how would the phrase "Product of Canada" or "Made in Canada" be applied? What would be the best label in such a case?

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: I am not necessarily an expert in this area. If the standards of the United States and Mexico are equivalent to those in Canada, given that the raw material came from Canada, I would not have a problem with "Product of Canada" being used. However, we have to make sure that the standards are equivalent and indicate this. The fact that the animal was finished or that some other stage occurred outside Canada is a question of transparency. Perhaps I am a bit out of my depth; I do not have the expertise concerning the example you gave.

Mr. Charles Tanguay: We could have some fun coming up with a label.

[*English*]

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: I'm not 100% sure if I clearly understand your question. Again, I'm sorry. You and I are having a hard time.

I think it needs to be indicated. You're using the example of beef. If it's grown or caught in another country, I think it should be clearly marked, because if the product is finished in the States or Mexico or another country, their finishing rations and techniques may not be of the same standard that we're using for our beef and finishing in Canada.

Again, I don't want to make the labelling any more complicated. I just think the labels need to state where the product was grown and caught or finished.

[Translation]

Mr. Charles Tanguay: We could indulge in a bit of irony here because we do not have a proper understanding. In economic terms, maybe that is justified, but in environmental terms, it is absolutely crazy that an animal could be born here in Canada, finished in the U. S., etc. We could invent a label that says "Dubious Origin" or "Uncertain Origin."

Basically, we have to tell the truth, once again. Only an animal that was born, raised and slaughtered in Canada should be able to be identified as being a Canadian product. Consumers no longer want this type of product, which seems to be made purposely to mislead them, to be able to go on bearing misleading information.

• (1040)

[English]

The Chair: The time has expired, but the question is that if you have, say, a sausage product and you say the pork is a product of Canada, but it also has beef trim from Uruguay and spices from Italy, how long do you make this list of country of origin—if that's the label you want for consumers? That's the difficulty you have to think about. Pretty easily, some of the comingled products used in making a good deli meat, for example, could have 20 different countries of origin listed down the label.

Anyway, we're going to Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think it's incumbent on me to stand up for my colleague, Mr. Miller, whom I think my colleagues are taking advantage of in his absence. So I must say that Ontario beef, as a matter of fact, is a superior beef.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Guy Lauzon: And Mr. Miller will be back soon to tell you that!

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: I wish to raise a point of order. We are the only ones who have not pushed our products. I can invite you to a barbecue where we will serve Quebec beef. Excuse me, Mr. Chair, I had to say it.

Excuse me, Mr. Chair, I had to say it.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Mr. Arnold, in your presentation, it is written:

With regard to labelling, this means simplicity, reliability and transparency. Information given to the consumer must be credible and verifiable.

I am happy to tell you that the Minister is in full agreement on that. He adds that it has to be honest – which is something else.

[English]

It's almost like a love-in here. Everybody seems to be on the same page, that something should be done about labelling. I think it was Ms. Hillard who mentioned that there should be accurate information on the sources of food, and I think we're all in agreement on that. If something comes from Canada, it should be labelled that it came from Canada. If it came from Argentina, that should be indicated as well. So we're all in agreement there. You can stop me if anybody disagrees with anything I'm saying here.

The other thing I think we all agree on, including all the members of the committee, is that it should be simple. You can have the most wonderful labelling in the world, but if the consumer can't read it—as you mentioned, Mrs. Vaddapalli—what use is it?

You mentioned, Mrs. Vaddapalli, that Canadian organics have at least 95% organic ingredients, so I guess that should be the floor. I think if we're going to have truth in labelling and good accurate labelling, if something comes from Canada, it should say at least 95%, if we use that as a guideline. Does anybody disagree with that so far?

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: I'd like to say that if it's a single ingredient, then it poses no challenge. But as with the example that was given with beef...I would love to sit with stakeholders from all the different beef producers to better understand what would be the challenge of determining a percentage. We have to be realistic too.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Although if it's a single ingredient, as Ms. Hillard said, it should 100%.

• (1045)

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: Absolutely! Yes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: So I guess what we're saying here is that it should be simple and simple. That's what the message is, because if we have this wonderful labelling—where did Mr. Tweed go? I forgot to mention that I was going to share some time with him.

This labelling has to be honest. It has to be simple, because it's no good to the consumer if the consumer doesn't know what it means.

If we came up, as per your recommendations, and said it was a minimum of 95%, it was honest and it was forthright, is that what you would like to see for your consumers?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: It gets very complicated when you get into multi-ingredient food. That's where we all have to talk to each other. We have to do some research. We have to talk with other stakeholders.

The single ingredient stuff is fairly simple, but that's where people are becoming aware of how misleading it is. The fish example that both the CBC and CTV covered in the same week, I think, really threw people. Then the Canada grade honey; I can't believe how many educated agricultural people I communicate with on the prairies didn't know that Canada grade honey wasn't Canadian honey.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: I volunteer at a Habitat for Humanity Restore, and I don't know if you people are familiar with that. Anyway, there's a colleague of mine, another volunteer, who spent 35 years with Zellers. He's a merchandiser, so he knows how to sell the products at the Restore, and he says you have to give people the opportunity to buy. I think if we give Canadians the opportunity to buy and to know exactly what they're buying, they will make an informed choice, and I think we all agree....

[Translation]

Mr. Tanguay, you said that, if we had the chance to buy Canadian, we would pay a bit more for a Canadian product.

[English]

I think we have some good information from you here. The producers we had I think were basically in agreement. Maybe some of the processors might have some different opinions, but by and large, I think what we're here for is to protect our farmers, our agricultural people, and we're here to protect our consumers.

I really want to thank you for the information you brought forth. I think it's right on. And for your information, they're exactly the same words the minister is saying.

Thank you.

The Chair: Time has expired.

Mr. Steckle.

Mr. Paul Steckle (Huron—Bruce, Lib.): Very quickly, I just want to bring this heavier comment. We want to keep it simple, and I think there's only one way to do that. We may have to devise a new logo, and it may be "Canadian grown", with a maple leaf in the centre. When it says "Canadian grown", that leaves no doubt in anyone's mind that this is truly a Canadian product. If that is absent, then it may be anything but. I think if we give that kind of message, we're going to find that the public is going to buy into that.

I just quickly devised my little artwork here: "Canadian grown", with a maple leaf in the centre. It's very simple.

People know in Canada what our safety standards are. They know that CFA, Health, and Agriculture, all these organizations, have given us the safest standards in the world. Canadians need to know what they're buying, and this goes for organics. What you do in terms of labelling it from the province, a provincial label on the side, that's fine. That doesn't change anything because it's still Canadian.

I think we need to...and I'm just wondering, would you agree with that as a beginning? This 95%, 70%, that's going to be argued till the sun goes down a hundred years from now. Let's forget about that for the moment. "Product of Canada" can remain, and it will involve all those other ingredients and variances we currently have without changing anything. But put one more label on there and take some of the others away. "Canada Grade A1" doesn't mean one thing, but "Grown in Canada" or "Canadian grown"—I like that. "Canadian grown"—you grow peaches; you don't make peaches.

Could I have your comments quickly?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: I completely agree with that as a starting point. It doesn't get around the meat issue, because meat does move all over the place, and it doesn't get rid of the multi ingredients.

Mr. Paul Steckle: "Canadian grown" would be "Grown in Canada". It would have to meet all those things we talked about.

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: So it would be "Grown in Canada" and "Raised in Canada"; it wouldn't get shipped off somewhere for feeding? It would be finished in Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Arnold: Indeed, for a single product that has not been processed, that may be a good idea, provided it is specified that "Grown in Canada" does not necessarily mean "Product of Canada." That is why we have to provide clear information to the consumer on the meaning of "Grown in Canada" and "Product of Canada."

[English]

Mrs. Nalini Vaddapalli: I think "Grown in Canada" is an excellent suggestion, because consumers still have confidence in the word "Canada", but it's been undermined in recent years, so we need to find a way to get back that consumer confidence in Canada, because we have good standards.

• (1050)

The Chair: Mr. Tanguay.

[Translation]

Mr. Charles Tanguay: I agree with my colleagues in saying that this is a good beginning. However, the criteria must be high to make sure we are talking about the same thing.

[English]

The Chair: Madam Bliss.

Ms. Kim Jo Bliss: I agree. I think it's a great place to start, and I can picture the logo you've doodled.

The Chair: You have a few minutes if you want it, Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): There are a lot of other complications. To go to what Ms. Bliss said, and I agree, there's really no difference in the meat process in an Ontario abattoir versus one that meets federal inspection. However, the difficulty is that the standards you have to meet to be export compatible with other countries puts the costs of those local abattoirs so high you'll drive them out of business. We have to understand those complications. We would think it's dumb things, and sometimes I think it is, but it might have a nine or a ten-foot ceiling, or it might be no moisture allowed on the ceilings. And because we're so export oriented, that's why we run into some of those difficulties.

So I worry. We've got a lot of little local abattoirs in P.E.I. that are extremely important for custom kill. They don't do a lot of animals a week, but they're there, their meat is safe, and the meat isn't going into export. I just want to lay that out, that this is one of the difficulties. If we ever force everybody to go to one national standard on abattoirs, we won't have the little local abattoirs. We're seeing slaughter plants close all across this country. One just closed in Ontario, we lost one in P.E.I., and that's because the regulatory regime is so high in them. So we need to factor that in.

The question I had is to you, Ms. Hillard. You said, I think in your answer, "51% of the value of the food content". We're in basic agreement on this committee that there definitely needs to be a change, that "Product of Canada" means "Product of Canada", what's in the package. I think our viewpoint in general is, it has nothing to do with the value of that product in there, because we all know the value of that product around this table; the farmer's share is minimal. It should be a heck of a lot higher, but it isn't. So should we be looking at the value or the actual content, where it comes from?

Ms. Jennifer Hillard: It's the content. The reason they can make these misleading labels is that all they have to do is change the brine and they've added 51% of the value because of the labour and the processing. Take the label and the processing out and deal with the food, and then use some other way of driving the economic driver.

Obviously, the value-added of food processing and packaging is important to this country, and we don't want to minimize that. Certainly that's not what people are looking for on food products to identify that they are Canadian. It's the actual content. It's where the nutritive value comes from.

The Chair: Thank you. Time has expired. We do have some committee business we need to deal with.

I just want to thank all the witnesses for your testimony today. Your input is greatly valued. It's going to help us develop our policy and write our report to take back to the House, and of course to the ministers who are responsible for overseeing "Product of Canada" labels in this country. The testimony you gave today will definitely help direct us in providing those recommendations. With that, you're free to leave the table. Thank you very much.

We have a motion before the committee from Mr. Alex Atamanenko. Do you want to move that motion and read it into the record?

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Actually, before we do that, I've had a brief discussion with Brian. According to Brian, they're apparently working on this in the department, and something may come out in the next while that will address this issue. I don't mind giving the department the benefit of the doubt and deferring this until the next meeting. That will be when we get back.

•(1055)

The Chair: I'm okay with that, if you want to defer this and leave it on the table.

Go ahead, Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I'm in agreement with deferring it as well, if we can have a report fairly quickly.

The Chair: Do you have a point of order, Mr. Storseth?

Mr. Brian Storseth: I don't know why we're having a debate on whether a motion is going to be moved.

The Chair: We're not having a debate on the motion. Mr. Easter just asked for the floor and I gave him the floor.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Are we moving on to other business?

Hon. Wayne Easter: No.

The difficulty here is that we need a report fairly quickly on this, because this is the second or third time we've seen the minister come out with a policy position without the backup for it. It was the same thing with the Canadian Wheat Board. There's absolute confusion out there now because of the arbitrary deadlines the minister establishes. He did it on this one.

The cattle industry is quite happy with this. We would be happy with this position if the technology was there to do it on August 1. We find out that the technology is not there. What's happening is that the minister is setting these arbitrary deadlines that can't be met.

The Chair: On a point of order.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: If we can be a little patient here, I think Mr. Atamanenko has withdrawn his motion in good faith. And I think if Mr. Easter can be just a little patient, maybe when we come back from break we'll have some news that will change this.

The Chair: I'm going to rule in favour. This is debate. Just keep the powder dry. We'll use this. You can discuss this motion when we bring it forward. Mr. Atamanenko didn't withdraw the motion; he's just tabling the motion and leaving it on the table, and we'll move it at a later date.

Go ahead, Mr. Atamanenko.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: I just want to be sure that the next time we meet this motion will come up.

The Chair: It will be after the break. So when we get back from the break week, this will be on the agenda for the first Tuesday when we get back.

I'll entertain a question.

Hon. Wayne Easter: It really relates to a motion I put forward that relates to the appointment of Ian White, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, we have your motion on the table. We can't, as committee, deal with it until the order in council is received. We haven't received the order in council yet.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I know, but there is a problem here. We have a guy from Australia hired to manage the Canadian Wheat Board as CEO. He's appointed under order in council. He started work April 1, and this committee still doesn't have the order in council. This committee should have been able to hear from Ian White prior to that appointment taking effect. Where in blazes is the order in council? Now he's working. He's being paid by the Canadian Wheat Board. He's appointed by the Government of Canada, and this committee has not seen the order in council. Now where is it?

The Chair: I have no control over that, as you know, Mr. Easter. We just have to wait until we receive it.

With that, I'll entertain a motion to adjourn.

It is so moved.

The meeting is adjourned.

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