

Food ?critical to Canada?s plan to manage COVID-19,? says Minister Monsef



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To better understand how the government of Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic will help people and businesses in communities like those found in North Hastings, last week The Bancroft Times reached out to the federal Minister of Rural Economic Development Maryam Monsef. Although the minister's usual focus tends to hone in on the economic prosperity of rural communities across Canada, in light of the current situation with COVID-19, Monsef said the ?government's top priority is the health and safety of all Canadians, no matter where they live.? Highlighting the evolving nature of the pandemic, she indicated that the Public Health Agency of Canada is actively monitoring the situation, planning for all possible scenarios based on scientific evidence as it emerges from the ongoing study of COVID-19. In order to prepare for the possibility of the situation escalating, Monsef said the federal government is working collaboratively with partners at all levels of government to develop a plan. Acknowledging that the public plays a crucial role in preventing the spread of COVID-19, the minister stressed the importance of people remembering to wash their hands, cover their mouth when they cough, and stay home ? especially when they are feeling sick. In addition, she urged people living in larger urban centres to heed the recommendation of Canada's chief public health officer and avoid heading to rural properties, because rural communities have less capacity to manage COVID-19 cases. She also advised Canadians to contact provincial and territorial governments for more details regarding ?regionally-focused recommendations.? To help all Canadians facing hardships resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak, Monsef said the federal government is ?taking immediate, significant and decisive action.? One way the federal government is supporting Canadians in both rural and urban communities, she said is through the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy. ?This includes the Canada Emergency Response Benefit to provide income support to those who have stopped working because of COVID-19,? explained Monsef. ?The fund, which will begin accepting applications on April 6, 2020 will provide \$500 a week for up to 16 weeks.? She continued ?Businesses of all sizes, including the small businesses that fuel rural communities, that have been significantly impacted by COVID-19's impact on the economy are eligible for a 75 per cent wage subsidy to help them keep workers on the payroll.? Another major component of the government's strategy to protect the health and safety of all Canadians, Monsef said, is through providing support for agriculture and agri-food industries. She describes the continued movement of agri-food products and inputs, both at home and abroad; as well as the ongoing administration of essential food-delivery services, as being ?critical to Canada's plan to manage COVID-19.? Underlining the fundamental importance of this support, Monsef drew attention to how on April 2, Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Bill Blair identified food as ?one of the 10 critical infrastructure sectors.? To help ensure that farmers and food processing facilities have the workers they need to operate, she said the government has announced that as of March 26, temporary foreign workers, including those who work in agriculture, agri-food, seafood processing and other key industries, are allowed to travel to Canada under exemptions from air travel restrictions developed in response to Covid-19. As part of the federal government's commitment to support the sector during this difficult time, Monsef said they recently announced new federal support for Farm Credit Canada through an additional \$5 billion in lending capacity. According to the Minister, this support will offer

increased flexibility to farmers who face cash flow issues and to processors impacted by lost sales, helping them remain financially strong. In addition, she said the government has also established a Business Credit Availability Program to provide \$65 billion of additional support through the Business Development Bank of Canada, and Export Development Canada. Monsef added that all Canadian businesses, including agri-businesses, will also be able to defer their income tax payments until after Aug. 31. Furthermore, she said the government will provide additional support for agricultural and agri-food businesses by helping employers cover payroll costs through a 75 per cent wage subsidy for the employees of qualifying businesses for up to three months, retroactive to March 15. Monsef said this measure will help businesses to keep and return workers to the payroll. These supports build on work the government has undertaken to better support our agriculture sector, declared Monsef. The Food Policy for Canada is Canada's roadmap for a healthier and more sustainable food system. It takes a coordinated and whole of government approach to addressing food issues in Canada to achieve positive social, health, environmental and economic outcomes. The vision for the Food Policy is that all people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious and culturally diverse food. Canada's food system is resilient and innovative, sustains our environment, and supports our economy. Under the federal government's Food Policy for Canada, Monsef said the Local Food Infrastructure Fund is investing \$50 million over five years to help small community-based organizations purchase equipment that increases accessibility of healthy, local foods within their community, such as urban gardens, community kitchens, food banks, and greenhouses. She indicated that projects supported under the first call for applications, which took place between Aug. 15 and Nov. 8, 2019, included activities such as the construction of greenhouses and garden boxes, the purchase of equipment for the preparation, refrigeration, distribution and storage of food, and vehicle and transport equipment. While so far 362 projects have received a total of \$6.6 million in funding through this initiative, Monsef said they are planning to put out a future call for proposals under the program in the coming months. Reiterating that the government's top priority is the health and safety of all Canadians, Monsef said this includes providing support for First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. To ensure pandemic/emergency plans are in place and updated; and, to support communities with establishing and/or revising these plans where necessary, she said Indigenous Services Canada is continuing to work with First Nations communities. Furthermore, Monsef said there is an additional \$305 million in funding to address immediate needs in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, and help prevent, prepare for and respond to COVID-19. First Nation, Inuit and Métis leaders have a critical role to play, said Monsef. They are the figures their community members will turn to ask their questions and share their concerns. To respond to COVID-19 and its potential effects on Indigenous peoples, an integrated and collaborative approach will be essential. Monsef added that there is also a federal/provincial/territorial Special Advisory Committee to address COVID-19, which reports to the Conference of Deputy Ministers of Health. By focusing on the coordination of federal, provincial and territorial preparedness and response across Canada's health sector, she said this committee is working for the benefit of all Canadians, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit. For a full list of actions taken by the federal government to help protect and support Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic, Monsef encourages people to visit the government of Canada's website at: www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/economic-response-plan.html.