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Estimates**

Ministry of Health

Ministry of Natural Resources
and Forestry

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Tuesday 25 May 2021

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budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de la Santé

Ministère des Richesses
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Mardi 25 mai 2021

Chair: Peter Tabuns
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Peter Tabuns
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Tuesday 25 May 2021

Mardi 25 mai 2021

The committee met at 0901 in room 151 and by video conference.

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Good morning, everyone. We are going to resume consideration of vote 1401 of the estimates of the Ministry of Health. There is now a total of two hours and 58 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates. Standing order 69(a.1) allots 15 minutes to the independent member of the committee. They will have the opportunity to use this time today, if they wish.

When the committee adjourned on May 19, the government had eight minutes and nine seconds remaining. To ensure that the remaining time is apportioned equally, it will be split—

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Oh, okay. We are now going to begin with the government side. Who would like to begin? MPP Pettapiece.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Chair, and good morning to you. I hope you had a relaxing weekend.

Minister, when we last met, you and your team were informing the committee about how the government is supporting hospitals to manage surgical backlogs. In the time we have remaining, can you please continue your remarks on this very important initiative?

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Hi, there. It's Melanie Fraser, associate deputy minister for health services. I am going to turn off my video this morning just because my signal is a little hesitant, but I would like to continue to talk to you about what we were speaking about the other day, the surgical backlog. I would say certainly the efforts that have gone into ensuring that despite the impacts of COVID—that we have been able to prevent harm for patients and perform as many surgeries and procedures across the province as possible.

Maybe I'll start talking about what happened in our hospitals. In the 2021 fiscal year, the ministry did provide hospitals with a COVID-19 surgical premium. This premium was designed to provide funding to assist the hospitals with the cost of extending hours and running overtime so that we could have as many surgeries happen into the evenings and weekends as possible. That was really necessary to address lost efficiencies and continue providing surgeries. Some of those lost efficiencies even

included the surgical teams having to change out PPE more often and use enhanced PPE as part of managing infection prevention and control while performing routine surgeries and procedures.

This premium basically involved a 20% top-up on existing funding rates and on over 140,000 priority service volume. Those would include things like cancer, cardiac, orthopedic and ophthalmic procedures and surgeries, among others.

Our surgical output data, as well as feedback that we received at the ministry from hospitals and/or Ontario Health regions, indicate that this strategy achieved its objective of supporting hospitals to maintain their surgical operations as they were able to continue delivering those key procedures even while facing constraints from the impact of COVID through the fall and winter.

Our surgical backlog funding also paid for incremental surgical volumes, so additional surgical volumes in Ontario Health regions that were able to exceed their annual allocation of surgical targets in key programs. I think we've all seen that COVID has had a differential impact across the province, and so where hospitals weren't feeling the same impacts, we funded them to be able to exceed what they would normally do.

Throughout the past year and moving forward, Ontario Health regions are working closely with their hospitals to continue to maximize the surgical resources in each region of the province, moving patients and surgeries locally where possible, to take best advantage of any capacity that exists in the system and to take advantage of new capacity that we're creating.

Just an example of that: In the Ontario Health west region, for instance, more than 5,000 surgeries were moved between hospitals last year in order to maximize the regional capacity and to get more surgeries done. And so, as a result of these types of collaborations, in this instance, Tillsonburg District Memorial Hospital increased their annual surgeries by 178%, completing an additional 611 surgeries in 2020-21 over the previous level in 2019-20.

While year-end hospital clinical data for the 2020-21 fiscal year has not yet all been finalized, we are aware that there are several other hospitals around the province that continue to surpass their annual surgical targets in key programs, so I can give you some more examples. Hospitals outside of COVID hot spots were able to increase surgical outputs, with data showing that a number of these

provided above 100% of their previous year's surgical capacity in November and December 2020. For example, Strathroy Middlesex General Hospital did 128% surgical capacity in December 2020. The north region, in total, operated at 121% in November and 112% in December. For instance, in Peterborough, at the regional health centre, they operated at 112% in November and 111% in December 2020.

So again, throughout our planning and throughout the fall preparedness plan, the ministry was really focused on how to minimize the impact of COVID on surgeries and procedures. We also provided separate one-time funding to our four specialty pediatric hospitals—so those would include SickKids in Toronto, Hamilton Health Sciences McMaster Children's Hospital, CHEO in Ottawa, of course, and London Health Sciences Centre Children's Hospital—to support them with resources to continue providing pediatric surgeries, including during evening and weekend hours.

Again, some examples: With these funds, SickKids in Toronto has been able to perform surgeries on weekends since the beginning of 2021, targeting services with the biggest backlog. As a result, they performed over 100% of their pre-pandemic numbers for January through April. Again, in Ottawa, the funding has supported CHEO to reduce their wait-list, which was at a high of 2,829 in June 2020, down to 1,686 in February 2021, so a reduction of 40%. These hospitals are making significant impacts against their backlogs.

Just a further note: Our pediatric specialty hospitals were exempt from the ramp-down of elective surgeries in our recently rescinded directive 2—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): One minute.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: —and low-risk surgeries have continued in our pediatric hospitals, to help ensure that children do not suffer delays in time-sensitive care that can affect their growth and development.

With just a minute left, maybe I'll just hit a few more high points. In terms of the fall preparedness plan, again, there was \$283 million invested through the fall preparedness plan; \$23 million of that went to the Cortellucci Vaughan Hospital as part of Mackenzie Health. That hospital opened its doors February 7, 2021, and became a COVID hospital, taking on COVID patients to support hospitals in the surrounding areas. But simultaneously, in March 2021, Mackenzie Health completed the highest number of surgeries it has since the beginning of the pandemic. So I think some of these examples, while I haven't gone through all of them, show us that truly the ministry, Ontario Health and the hospitals have really come together—

0910

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you. That is our time. We will now go to the opposition side. Who would like to ask a question? MPP Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to just clarify a question that I asked last week about Ontario's announcement in January 2020 to go from biologics to biosimilars. I saw that last week, Quebec announced that it's going to

do this right now. It is doing this right now with a deadline of March 2021. Since Quebec has made its announcement, a number of physicians have reached out to say that now would be a good time for Ontario to do this. Their surgical load and all of this is lower, and they have more time to work with their patients to do the switch to the biosimilar rather than the biologic.

I think it was ADM Dicerni who had answered that question. But whoever, minister or whoever wants, can you share a time frame with me as to when Ontario intends to start the switch to biosimilars?

Mr. Patrick Dicerni: Hello, MPP Gélinas. It's Patrick Dicerni, ADM of the OHIP division and the drugs and devices division at the Ministry of Health. Thank you for the question. I'm happy to carry on the discussion with respect to the biosimilar switch policy.

I'm happy to see Quebec move forward with their announcement. With respect to the timing of if and when Ontario would be following suit, that would be a policy decision for government to take. With respect to advising on when to take this step, we see different jurisdictions, perhaps in different phases of their pandemic, for reasons of their own calculation, deciding to move sooner or later, New Brunswick falling into that category as well, and as was the decision to keep our policies as is back at the first wave of the pandemic, watching to see when would be an appropriate point to revisit this discussion, not only with government but our partners, including the Ontario Medical Association, our specialist partners and manufacturers.

M^{me} France Gélinas: So it's a decision that would be made by the minister and the DM? Who makes that decision? Is it your portfolio, or is it the minister?

Mr. Patrick Dicerni: I provide advice to the minister and the government in my role as executive officer of the Ontario Public Drug Programs. Given the, I would say, multi-faceted and multiple impacts that this policy shift would represent for providers and for patients, it will be a decision of the government to move forward at a time when we are most confident that the health system can absorb that change in a good and planful way. This is a decision that's under consideration by government right now.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. Thank you. I just wanted to clarify because when Quebec made the announcement, all of a sudden this file became a whole lot more active than it had been.

My next question is something I have talked to the minister about. It has to do with the funding of oncologists, mainly oncologists who provide radiation. When I last talked to her, we had had an auditor's report. Basically, Cancer Care Ontario, now Ontario Health, funds 14 hospitals for radiation services. Thirteen of them are based on the number of radiation consultations, but Princess Margaret is funded based on radiation course delivery. I know that a report actually done by the ministry regarding this issue showed that Princess Margaret did not collect data the same way as all the other 13 hospitals who manage radiation therapy and their satellites. So my first question is, has this funding discrepancy issue been looked

at any further since the minister and I last talked? And I'm testing your memory, Minister.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Well, I do recall, MPP Gélinas, having that specific conversation with you in the Legislature and your concern that northern areas particularly were disproportionately impacted by some of the volumes that were being carried by Princess Margaret. I did forward that over through my team for an answer. I'm sorry that we haven't gotten back to you directly on that as yet, but I certainly do recall the issue.

I will turn it over at this point to the deputy who, I believe, has some further information for you.

Ms. Helen Angus: It's interesting. I remember this one from my time at Cancer Care Ontario as well, the courses versus volumes. At the time, I recall the courses—it was almost like a lifetime payment for a patient, some of whom, unfortunately, would have to come back for subsequent rounds of radiation and/or chemotherapy, and trying to accommodate that in a fair funding model. I probably left CCO just as that was landing.

I think I'll pass this on. Patrick, I'm not sure if it's you or if it's actually in the provincial programs. Maybe one of you could put your hand up. It is physician payment, but I think it's kind of tied up with how we pay for radiation therapy overall, if I'm not mistaken. Right?

Mr. Patrick Dicerni: Hi, Deputy. It is Patrick Dicerni, ADM of OHIP and drugs and devices. I believe you are correct. This would fall under how we fund cancer services writ large, and our provincial programs branch response.

Ms. Helen Angus: Yes. Thank you. Have we got somebody on the line from the provincial programs?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Heather is there, but muted.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Hi, there. It's Melanie Fraser, associate deputy minister. Yes, I have Heather MacDermid on the line for Kristin Taylor today who can speak to the details of the cancer program. I would invite Heather to join the conversation as this is a detailed question.

Ms. Heather MacDermid: Hi. Heather MacDermid, manager of the provincial programs branch. I am here on behalf of Kristin Taylor. I'm going to actually have to take this one back, if you don't mind, MPP Gélinas, as I'm not as familiar with this particular issue. So we will take this back and provide an answer as soon as possible.

M^{me} France Gélinas: In line with this, at the end of this all, what I'm interested in is a fair workload for all the radiation oncologists, which at the end of the day would mean more radiation oncologist positions would be funded for the north, versus the 12 positions funded at Princess Margaret.

Don't get me wrong, I love Princess Margaret; they do phenomenal work. Lots of people from the north end up going to Princess Margaret. But I still want a system that is fair. Some of the radiation oncologists carry workloads that are way beyond the expected and, I would say, safe.

As well, I don't know who could answer a question as to whether there are additional radiation oncologist positions being funded within the system. I had heard that

there were some being funded contingent on conditions. One of the conditions was that the data from Princess Margaret needed to be harmonized with the others. I'm interested in answers to those questions as well, at the end of the day, to see if we are making progress with those issues.

Ms. Heather MacDermid: Yes. Thank you so much. We will take those questions back and provide a response as soon as possible. Thank you.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. And my last one is: Is the government looking at—and I don't know if I'm going back to the government for this. Are we looking at quality-based procedures funding, QBP funding, for radiation oncology, or not?

Ms. Heather MacDermid: Yes, so that would be through Cancer Care Ontario's funding. I would need to confirm whether it's quality-based procedure funding or some other funding mechanism.

0920

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. Right now, it is not, but just wondering if this is something the government is looking at.

I take it that leg research is taking all of those questions down and I'll have answers soon?

Ms. Heather MacDermid: Yes.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. Thank you.

I'm jumping around a little bit, given that I'm getting closer to the end. My next questions have to do with NPs, nurse practitioners. The first one is: What happened to the legislation that was passed so that they were allowed to order MRIs and CTs and that kind of stuff? Is this thing moving ahead?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you for the question. I think that is something that would be referred to Michael Hillmer. Michael Hillmer, if he's on the line, could probably provide you a specific answer.

Mr. Michael Hillmer: It is Michael Hillmer here, assistant deputy minister of capacity planning and analytics. I will respectfully pass it along to my colleague Sean Court, who has the oversight for the regulated health professions and the legislation. Chair, perhaps you could unmute my colleague Sean Court.

Mr. Sean Court: Wonderful. Thank you. Sean Court. I'm the ADM of strategic policy, planning and French-language services division. One of my branches is the health workforce regulatory oversight branch.

That's something that has been, I would say, delayed a little bit by COVID. Obviously, there's been lots of other scope-of-practice-related work, but it is something that we're still bringing forward for government decision-making. There's no definitive timeline yet, but it is still something that we are tracking as a previous commitment—something that was enabled through legislation, but that we have to enable regulation changes to allow it to happen.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. I guess I'm back to the minister, then. Minister, is this something that the government still supports, and it's just a question of workload for

you to handle this? Or is this something that is not supported anymore?

Hon. Christine Elliott: It's something that we would still support and we're still considering. Things have been slowed down a bit because of the attention that has been focused on COVID for the past year, almost a year and a half. But it is something that hopefully we will be able to get back to sooner than later as the process of vaccinations continues and many people now going for their second shots as well. But there are a number of issues that we still have to deal with, that we're looking forward to getting back to a more, I guess, normal state, whatever that is now, as a ministry. I'm not sure if the deputy would have anything further to add on that. But that is essentially where we are.

Ms. Helen Angus: We are looking forward to getting back to a normal state and getting on with many of the pieces of work that I think have taken longer than one would have hoped under regular circumstances.

Mme France G  linas: So it really has to do with workload and COVID, not with a change of heart?

Ms. Helen Angus: Correct.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Yes.

Mme France G  linas: Okay. Again, with the nurse practitioners, the RNAO is the one that holds the contract through the government to provide liability insurance for nurse practitioners, as opposed to the Nurse Practitioners' Association of Ontario. It creates a bit of friction between those two organizations. The first is: How can I find out how many nurse practitioners actually get personal liability through RNAO?

Hon. Christine Elliott: That is a good question. I'm not sure if you're able to go directly, would RNAO tell you?

Ms. Helen Angus: Well, I think if we have an accountability agreement with them around the provision of that liability insurance, I'm sure we can find out—unless one of my staff has that ready at hand?

Mme France G  linas: I see Michael popped up.

Ms. Helen Angus: Fantastic. There you go. Michael, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Hillmer: Hi, it's Michael Hillmer, assistant deputy minister, capacity planning and analytics. I am just checking with some of my team members right now, MPP G  linas, to see if we can find that for you, and I'll flag it for you as soon as I hear back. If not, that is something that we might have to get back to you on, as it's not a number I have just at my fingertips. My apologies for not having it at the ready.

Mme France G  linas: No worries. What I'm interested in is, how much money does the government give to RNAO for this program? As well, how many nurse practitioners are included, take part in the PLP? As well—and I don't know who would answer this—why wasn't it a competitive process to decide who was going to provide liability insurance, liability protection to nurse practitioners, knowing that the nurse practitioner associations are really not happy that it is RNAO who has—because RNAO has made it that you have to be a member of RNAO

to gain access to this program that is financed by the government? Do you see where I'm going?

Mr. Michael Hillmer: It is a requirement, of course, that all nurses have some form of liability insurance. We try to look at organizations that have the capacity and the wherewithal to be able to offer services such as insurance coverage that you're mentioning. As to the original policy intent and some of the decision-making around why this organization versus that, unfortunately, at this moment, I'm not able to speak to that, just because I was not around when some of those decisions were made.

But I think, as far as the insurance coverage goes, for us, it's important that it's in place and that it's offered in a way that has sound controllership and meets all the provisions of our various directives around flowing funds to organizations and offering those services.

Mme France G  linas: Okay. Thank you. I wouldn't mind if you could get back to me with the amount of money that the government invests and the number of nurses that are covered by that investment.

My next question sort of has to do with nurse practitioners again, but in a different direction. With the passage of Bill C-7 at the federal level, that will have an impact on the number of—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Mme France G  linas: Two minutes? Oh, my—about medical assistance in dying. Nurse practitioners can provide the service but have no way to be reimbursed for providing this service. I was wondering: How could that happen? Is there somebody within the ministry looking at—and I see Mr. Sean Court seems to have an answer for me. How do we pay nurse practitioners who are willing to provide medical assistance in dying?

Mr. Sean Court: Wonderful. Thank you, MPP G  linas. Sean Court, ADM, strategic policy planning and French-language services division. Medical assistance in dying is something that the ministry has been working to respond to since the day after the Carter decision. A decision had been made at the time when assisted dying became legal in Canada and, by extension, Ontario to maintain the status quo with respect to compensation. So there have been no specific fee codes that have been put in place for physicians. They continue to bill palliative care codes. Nurse practitioners in the province have historically been compensated through employment, through contracts, and the decision was made to maintain the status quo with respect to NPs continuing to receive compensation through their employment.

We have become aware over time of a small number of NPs who operate independently and/or who face barriers with respect to their employer—where they're employed day to day as NPs—not being supportive of the provision of assisted dying or them providing assisted dying either as part of their role or in the off hours. This has resulted in a situation where, again, a small number of NPs have been faced with not having a compensation model.

0930

What we've done in the face of that is that we've worked with NP-related associations, including the NPAO, in an attempt to connect—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's all the time we have right now.

We're going to move over to the government side. MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Minister. As you know, Peel is a hot spot and was hardest hit during COVID-19. Minister, in your response to COVID-19, our government has made a commitment to prioritize at-risk populations. We know that there are many factors to consider when identifying the hot spot communities that are hardest hit by COVID-19. Can you please tell us more about the approach your ministry took in identifying hot spot communities across Ontario? It would also be great to hear what supports your ministry is providing to these communities as well.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Yes, thank you very much for your question, MPP Cuzzetto. I can advise that as part of the province's three-phase vaccine distribution plan, phase 2 is focused on age as the most significant predictor of death or hospitalization and risk, with adjustments for COVID-19 hot spots, specific health conditions, congregate living settings, essential caregivers and workers who cannot work from home.

Once we began to receive a steady supply of vaccines from the federal government, we were able to move into phase 2, where we targeted COVID-19 hot spot communities across 13 public health unit regions. These communities have historic and ongoing high rates of death and hospitalization due to COVID-19 and also include socio-demographic factors that place them at higher risk. That's why we allocated additional vaccine dosages to these communities and provided support for pop-up and mobile vaccine clinics to increase access for members of these communities.

We have seen great success over the past few weeks, with vaccinations in these hot spot areas surpassing the Ontario average. As of the morning of Friday, May 21, 65% of adults in hot spot communities have received a first dose, compared to the Ontario average of 59%. We are very pleased with the success rate in these areas.

I'll now turn it over to the deputy minister to provide a few more comments on the hot spot areas.

Ms. Helen Angus: Thank you, Minister Elliott. I'm Helen Angus, Deputy Minister of Health. Thank you for the question.

As you may know, Ontario took a data-based approach to identifying communities that had been hardest hit by COVID-19 to make sure that they are prioritized for vaccine distribution. As the minister mentioned, we identified 114 from—I'll call those FSAs—which are the first three digits of a postal code. We identified those as hot spots based on historic and ongoing high COVID-19 burdens, including high rates of COVID-19 deaths and hospitalizations.

As part of the commitment to prioritize at-risk populations for phase 2 of the vaccine rollout program, we also considered some other vulnerability factors—those would include ethnic concentration, material deprivation—in prioritizing those hot spot communities.

I would just say, parenthetically, that we're grateful to our partners across government and in the health sector, as well as to the Ontario science advisory table for their input and advice as we worked through the challenging task of vaccine prioritization.

In terms of the chronology, on April 9, we announced that all adults 50 and over in those hot spot communities would be eligible to book their vaccine through the provincial booking system. On May 3, all adults 18 and over in those communities were also made eligible to book through the provincial booking system. For the weeks of May 3 and May 10, as you may know as well, we allocated 50%, or half, of our vaccines to those hot spot communities. As the minister mentioned, the targeted approach really helped increase vaccine uptake significantly.

In addition to increased vaccine allocations, we've also provided support largely but not exclusively in Peel and Toronto to set up pop-up clinics. Those have been operating in faith-based centres and other community locations, and they've been critical to increasing the vaccine uptake in those communities.

We also launched mobile vaccine units in Peel, Toronto and York for small and medium-sized workplaces to offer vaccines to workers who cannot work from home. It's a pretty comprehensive program with really demonstrated results.

With that, I'll ask assistant deputy minister Rhonda McMichael to give you some more details on how the hot spot communities were selected and more details than I've been able to provide on how we've been supporting them. Rhonda?

Ms. Rhonda McMichael: Thanks very much, Minister Elliott, Deputy Minister Angus and for the question, MPP Cuzzetto.

My name is Rhonda McMichael, assistant deputy minister of population health initiatives. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about hot spot communities. I'll begin by summarizing the ethical framework for vaccine distribution that informed our work in identifying hot spot communities. The government released an ethical framework for COVID-19 vaccine distribution, which was developed in partnership with the COVID-19 vaccine distribution task force to guide vaccine prioritization and distribution across the province.

The ethical framework includes a number of principles that have worked to guide vaccine distribution. The first principle is minimizing harms and maximizing benefits: obviously, the goal to reduce overall illness and death related to COVID-19; protect those at greatest risk of serious illness and death due to biological, social, geographical, and occupational factors; protect critical infrastructure; and also promote social and economic well-being.

The second principle is equity: equity in the distribution of vaccines without bias or discrimination to reduce disparities in illness and death related to COVID-19 and ensuring benefits for groups experiencing greater burdens from the COVID-19 pandemic. I'll talk in detail about that in a moment.

The third principle is fairness: to ensure that every individual within equally prioritized groups has the same opportunity to be vaccinated and to ensure inclusive, consistent processes that are tailored to the unique needs of Ontario's many and varied communities when making decisions about vaccine prioritization.

Transparency: to ensure the principles and the rationale of decision-making processes and plans for prioritization are clear, understandable and communicated to the public.

Legitimacy: making decisions based on the best available scientific evidence, shared values and input from affected parties, including those historically underrepresented, to ensure decisions have the intended impact and to include participation of affected parties in the creation and review of decisions and decision-making processes.

And lastly, public trust: to ensure that decisions and decision-making processes are informed by these principles to advance confidence and trust in Ontario's immunization program.

In alignment with the ethical framework, in early January, the provincial government published the populations that would be prioritized as part of phase 2 vaccinations. The population identified for this phase were older adults, beginning with those 80 years of age and older, individuals living and working in high-risk congregate settings, front-line essential workers—for example, first responders, those who work in education and food processing—individuals with high-risk chronic conditions and their caregivers.

And, lastly, my focus for today: other populations and communities facing barriers related to the determinants of health across Ontario who are at greater COVID-19 risk. The last priority group was included to target populations in communities who have experienced a greater burden of COVID or who are at greater risk of severe outcomes from COVID, either due to geography, socio-economic status or other determinants of health. In particular, this priority group includes Black and racialized communities among other populations and communities which evidence shows are at greater risk.

0940

Ontario's COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Task Force then established a communities-at-risk sub-working group to develop an approach to prioritize more vulnerable communities that was data driven and community informed. This group was under the leadership of the Deputy Solicitor General and former deputy minister of the Ontario Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, Deborah Richardson; Assistant Deputy Minister Nosa Ero-Brown in the Anti-Racism Directorate; and Dr. Upton Allen, the division head of infectious diseases at SickKids hospital. The sub-working group also included a number of community partners and health sector experts and stakeholders.

The sub-working group had a mandate to develop a strategic implementation plan to support the vaccine rollout for populations in communities that may be more disproportionately impacted and those at risk, such as racialized populations, through our community-informed and cross-sectoral approach. To achieve the objective, the

communities-at-risk sub-working group developed an approach that identified communities hardest hit by COVID-19 and that were high in vulnerability indicators, namely material deprivation and ethnic concentration, as measured by Public Health Ontario's Ontario marginalization index.

Material deprivation is closely connected to poverty, and it refers to the inability of individuals and communities to access and attain basic material needs. The indicators included in this dimension measure income, quality of housing, educational attainment and family structure characteristics.

Ethnic concentration refers to high area-level concentrations of people who are recent immigrants and/or people belonging to a visible minority group. This is defined by Stats Canada as persons other than Aboriginal peoples who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.

Specifically, this sub-working group used data from Public Health Ontario that identified the top 20% of FSAs—which, as the deputy indicated, are the first three numbers and letters of your postal code—in the province in terms of COVID-19 burden, which includes death and hospitalization. This included 74 FSAs. The vast majority of these FSAs were also high in vulnerability indicators, specifically material deprivation and/or ethnic concentration, given the impact of these determinants of health on COVID-19 risk.

The sub-working group then identified FSAs in the next tier, the top 30% of COVID-19 burden, that were also high in material deprivation or ethnic concentration. So we took the top out of that next tier, the ones that were highest in material deprivation or ethnic concentration, and that added an additional 32 FSAs to the list. Given the greater risk of negative outcomes from COVID-19 due to these vulnerability factors, they were also prioritized.

Lastly, communities that had previously been identified under the High Priority Communities Strategy, which I spoke about last week, were also captured in the list of prioritized FSAs, if they hadn't already been captured in the previous two categories. This added eight FSAs. In those high-priority communities, those eight were selected based on COVID-19 prevalence, persistently low testing rates, vulnerability and input from local public health units.

In summary, the final list of 114 hot spot communities identified represent those that have historically experienced higher burdens of hospitalization and death, and are at risk due to material deprivation and determinants of health disproportionately impacting Black and racialized populations. This list and the approach to prioritization closely approximated the strategy for prioritizing neighbourhoods for vaccination proposed by the Ontario science advisory table in its February 26 policy brief and used the same ranking of FSAs by COVID-19 burden to identify hot spot communities. The policy brief that they prepared, titled A Strategy for the Mass Distribution of COVID-19 Vaccines in Ontario Based on Age and Neighbourhood, noted that prioritizing and implementing vaccine distribution for Ontarians based on both age and

neighbourhood of residence could ensure that those at the highest risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection and hospitalization, ICU admission or death from COVID-19 will be among the first to receive vaccines.

Using the data from Public Health Ontario and the recommendations of the Ontario science advisory table was in line with the objectives of the province's prioritization plan to, first and foremost, prevent overall deaths, to prevent illness, hospitalizations and ICU admissions and to reduce transmission in alignment with the province's ethical framework that I outlined earlier. Ontario's approach also incorporated measures of vulnerability consistent with our commitment to an equitable approach to vaccine distribution and to prioritize vulnerable communities.

While the provincial government has not made any modifications to the list of 114 FSAs identified, it has provided flexibility to public health units to identify additional priority areas based on local context and trends. Specifically, when the province opened up vaccine booking to adults aged 50 and over in hot spot communities on April 9, public health units had the flexibility to target adults in other priority communities through mobile and pop-up clinics.

As the deputy minister mentioned, we followed advice from the Ontario science advisory table and provided additional doses of vaccine to hot spot communities for two weeks, earlier this month—so a government decision that was supported by the science advisory table. This meant that, during the week of May 3, approximately 370,000 doses were dedicated to hot spot communities, and during the week of May 10, over 500,000 doses were dedicated to these communities.

The province has also been working closely with some of the hardest-hit public health units to provide additional supports for mobile and pop-up clinics. I wanted to take a moment to highlight some of the community clinics that the province has supported over the past several weeks.

In partnership with BAPS Charities and William Osler Health System, the province supported a pop-up clinic that was held at the Hindu temple complex that was open between April 14 and May 7, where over 21,000 vaccines were administered.

The province has also worked closely with the region of Peel to open several community pop-ups at locations such as the Brampton Islamic Centre in Brampton; the Muslim Association of Canada Islamic Community Centre of Ontario in Mississauga; and the Bramalea Civic Centre in Bramalea, with a clinic focused on the Black, Caribbean and African communities. These clinics were opened in partnership with many local community agencies that have helped with clinic operations, as well as promotion and communication within their communities. Over 40,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been administered across these community clinics, and that is in addition to all the community clinics that public health units are running across other parts of the province. We are grateful to all the partners that have made community-based pop-up clinics a success all across the province.

This is not the only way to ensure individuals in hot spot communities can access vaccines. At the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the Ministry of the Solicitor General, we have worked with public health units, business groups and large employers to open employer-operated on-site vaccination clinics, with a focus on hot spot communities at greatest risk. Employer-operated clinics must have support from local public health units and hospitals, as the clinics need to be consistent with local plans.

Employers that have hosted these clinics met the following criteria: The workplace is located within an identified hot spot community and had had a previous COVID-19 outbreak, or is at risk of an outbreak; the clinic will also vaccinate employees that cannot work at home, many of whom reside in hot spot areas; and the employer will take on the responsibility of setting up, operating and funding the on-site vaccination clinic, as well as to support community vaccinations.

Employers like Maple Leaf Foods, Maple Lodge Farms, Loblaw Companies, HelloFresh, the Ontario Food Terminal, Amazon Canada, Walmart Canada, Purolator and Air Canada have participated in this program. Across these employer-led clinics, over 15,000 vaccine doses have been administered, and we are grateful to all the employers that have participated and continue to participate in the program.

As an additional support to hot spot communities, the province further expanded the vaccine distribution plan on May 17 by launching mobile vaccine clinics for small and medium-sized businesses in hot spots. Each mobile unit is equipped with staff, vaccines and resources to immunize all employees at the selected workplace hubs.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Ms. Rhonda McMichael: These mobile units started to offer vaccines in Toronto, York and Peel regions at select businesses that have employees who cannot work from home and have a history or risk of outbreaks. The new program has already seen significant success, with over 6,000 vaccine doses administered since its launch on May 7. The province continues to deploy the mobile vaccine units for the community—and school-aged clinics now that vaccines have opened up to 12-plus—to best meet the goals of the vaccine distribution plan.

As I mentioned earlier, many of the hot spots identified for vaccine prioritization were also identified as priority communities under the High Priority Communities Strategy. They have been supported with additional funding to local agencies that are delivering targeted outreach and education, improved access to testing and vaccination and wraparound supports to individuals and families impacted by COVID-19.

A couple of examples of this great work: Lead agencies like Flemingdon and TAIBU community health centres in Toronto have helped to organize pop-up vaccine clinics. Other community agencies, like WellFort community health centre in Peel, have helped ensure vulnerable individuals can access pop-up clinics through transportation support and outreach activities.

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We've also worked very closely with Health Commons Solutions Lab out of Mount Sinai, who have been providing support across all the lead agencies. They have provided dedicated support for Rexdale Community Health Centre in Toronto as they launched their pop-up vaccination strategy. Health Commons has also developed a tool kit that is used across all communities, including recruitment and training of volunteers to support sites, as well as lessons learned for pop-up clinics. They've been instrumental in training over 1,300 community ambassadors who have been onboarded. They have a comprehensive package that provides information and training for testing, navigating people to supports, building trust and vaccine confidence, and providing support at vaccine clinics—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And that is our time.

We will now go back to the opposition side. MPP Gélinas?

M^{me} France Gélinas: At the time, I believe it was ADM Sean Court who was explaining to me the new funding model for nurse practitioners who do not have a salaried position, or their salaried positions do not allow them to provide MAID, and how the government had funded them.

Mr. Sean Court: Where we left off was that the ministry has become aware of a number of NPs who were participating in MAID effectively without compensation, including one NP who had participated in a large number of MAID cases.

The ministry's approach has been to work with NPAO and others to learn more about the specific circumstances of these individual NPs and, generally speaking, to attempt to connect them through employment with an inter-professional care or primary care home, so that they're not operating independently, just doing MAID cases; they are connected to a broader care team. Then, that team can help support them not only with compensation, but also other administrative and supportive expenses and things that would normally come from employment.

We are aware that there are additional NPs who have not yet been connected with an inter-professional care team, and we continue to work with NPAO and others to identify NPs and to connect them appropriately.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. So my train of thought is that there are a lot of, we'll say, nurse practitioner-led clinics that are at capacity. They have nurse practitioners who would like to come and work with them, they have a long wait-list of patients who would like to connect with them, but they have no money to hire more nurse practitioners. Is this a way to get more NPs to come in, if they agree to do MAID?

Mr. Sean Court: I would defer to my colleague Patrick Dicerri around the specifics of the nurse practitioner-led clinics and funding for them, but I would say, generally speaking, that one of the lines we're trying to balance around medical assistance in dying is to think about where it is unlike other health services—clearly it's very different, but where it isn't and where it is simply a health

service that is available to Ontarians. I would say, generally speaking, that there's nothing about this model in particular that's intended to incent assisted dying; this was about connecting NPs who were operating outside of their current compensation model, undertaking in some cases very high volumes of assisted death provision, and to make sure that they were appropriately connected to an inter-professional care team.

So I would defer to my colleague Patrick on the broader issue of funding and support for NPs.

M^{me} France Gélinas: That's okay. ADM Dicerri has already answered that question before.

I will go to my colleague Judith Monteith-Farrell, who would like to ask a question.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to ask a question that's really important to the constituents across northern Ontario, but I would say also in rural Ontario. It's the lack of primary health care providers, whether that be a physician—and ideally people would have a family physician—but also the long wait-lists that my colleague France has addressed in the nurse practitioner clinics. That has been an issue that is really making people's health deteriorate even further, because they're not getting that ongoing care. So I'm just wondering what the ministry's plan is to actually address that shortage of physicians across Ontario?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much for the question, MPP Monteith-Farrell. It's an issue that I know is important to many people across the province. I hear about it quite regularly. We know that there are parts of Ontario that are still having problems with attracting primary care physicians, and the nurse practitioner-led clinics are extremely helpful. We have put additional money into the nurse practitioner-led clinics to expand them, in some situations, in terms of numbers of people working at them.

But we want to make sure that everybody in Ontario receives excellent, quality health care regardless of where you live. Ultimately, the Ontario health teams, which are being set up across the province, will help fill in many of those gaps, because there will be primary care practitioners working with nurses, nurse practitioners, nurses with clinics, with some of the social service agencies as well, because we know that the social determinants of health also play a major part in determining people's both physical and mental health. So this is an important connection to make.

We've already established, I believe, 42 Ontario health teams across the province. We are expanding them. We are still working on them now, even though it's been slowed down a bit because of COVID, of course. But this is really important for everyone across Ontario, and this will help to fill in some of the gaps, including in primary care, and make sure that people receive the—not exactly the same treatment, because it depends on where you live in Ontario. Care in northern Ontario sometimes, because of geography, has to be delivered somewhat differently than in southern Ontario. But we want to make sure that excellent health care is available to everyone in Ontario, northern and remote areas, obviously, included in that.

But I think at this point, I will turn it over to the deputy minister. She probably has something more specific to say on this particular issue.

Ms. Helen Angus: Thank you. It's Helen Angus, deputy minister of health. Thank you, Minister, and thank you for the question. I will ask ADM Patrick Dicerni to provide you with some more information, but it is multifaceted, right? We've had a program, the HealthForceOntario Northern and Rural Recruitment and Retention Initiative, which does provide family and specialist incentive funding to establish full-time practice in a range of communities across the province. Some of those are indeed northern. Some of them are rural. Some of them are remote.

But I think it's a more complex issue than just the availability of additional stipends for physicians. I think, as the minister suggested, it's often practising in a community and feeling supported that makes a difference for physicians. I think the Ontario health teams that are being established across the province will provide that additional support. Of course, training in northern Ontario and training in rural communities, as well, increases the likelihood that physicians will establish their practices there.

As I say, it is multifaceted. I think there are a range of initiatives that we are putting into place. But I'm optimistic about the Ontario health team concept as being, certainly, a retention supporter for physicians.

I don't know, Patrick, if you have anything specific to add beyond that.

Mr. Patrick Dicerni: Thank you, Deputy, and thank you for the question. Assistant deputy minister Patrick Dicerni in the OHIP division and our drugs and devices division.

MPP Gélinas, just weaving a couple of the threads of responses together and adding a little bit more in some areas—and I apologize, it was MPP Monteith-Farrell who asked the question. My apologies.

So just bringing a couple of those themes together and even going back to our discussion around NPLCs, given—we all know well—the important role that NPLCs and nurse practitioners play in this area: As mentioned to MPP Gélinas last week, while we have no base budgetary increases with respect to NPLCs, we would always consider areas of need or higher need when we are going through our annual budget-planning process. NPLCs and LHINs have the ability to make those requests to us just more than anything so we can assess where there is more acute need etc.

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With respect to how we use Health Care Connect—and I appreciate that Health Care Connect does not address the supply issue but more addresses the demand side of the equation. But we do prioritize—patients with high needs are given top priority for referral through the Health Care Connect program, and we do find that that is helpful in individual cases.

Going back to a discussion topic from perhaps two weeks ago, from the supply side of the equation, we do bring in 20 additional physicians per month into the FHO model. That is something we do look at as addressing or

being part of the solution with respect to the issue that you raised, MPP Monteith-Farrell, around overall access levels, which is something we are always looking to address.

I'd say we do work closely with LHINs to address unique circumstances, review factors to determine high needs, including patient-physician ratios, rurality and other factors that LHINs help us identify, which points to where we have a need for physician services, and specific languages would be a good example. I will pause there.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I think that this has been an ongoing problem for a long time. Our populations are increasing, and the health in northern Ontario—many people are aging and have increased health needs, so it is something that we've been talking about. I know the Northern Ontario School of Medicine has asked to double their complement of intake for students because it has been proven that if they're trained in the north and practise their residency in the north, they're more likely to stay here and even in other rural communities. But this problem has been ongoing.

When I spoke with the OMA, they were saying, "Well, there is no shortage, and you should just get a locum in." Well, that's not an answer to that primary health care. We have significant—and I know our nurse practitioner clinics have asked for more money and have asked for increased capacity. I know that's not just unique to Thunder Bay, but across. They have significant wait-lists. I've been very creative with the LHIN to try to get some health care to people, like foot care if they're diabetic or those kinds of things, taking people on who have a cancer diagnosis who are on wait-lists. So I really would encourage the ministry to look at some kind of significant different plan, a more aggressive plan to address these needs.

Mr. Patrick Dicerni: MPP Monteith-Farrell, if I could—hearing some of your response, I'm wondering if my colleague Michael Hillmer might want to layer in some additional information, particularly about NOSM. Michael?

Mr. Michael Hillmer: Thank you so much, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for that question. It's Michael Hillmer here, assistant deputy minister for the capacity planning and analytics division.

I thought I would make a few remarks about the Northern Ontario School of Medicine. First of all, we ministry officials have a routine standing meeting with all the deans of medicine, including Dean Sarita Verma from the Northern Ontario School of Medicine. That's one of the mechanisms through which we hear her telling about the kinds of programs and needs that she sees in the north. I think she certainly echoes some of the things that you're saying. We do a lot of good planning there around how we can shape the investments that we have in post-graduate medical education, because I think you're exactly right that the school in its relatively short existence has proven to be extremely effective in having the students take up residency there and then start their practices in the north. Of course, we plan the number of seats in close collaboration with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. The

seats allocation is under their purview. We really do work closely with them, though, to ensure that there's a tight connection between the number of seats and the health system need. And then the Ministry of Health oversees the post-graduate medical education, so just to say that we do fund 189 post-graduate residents. These are medical residents to be affiliated with the Northern Ontario School of Medicine.

Of course, the school is going through—the legislation is tabled right now that would see the Northern Ontario School of Medicine become a fully independent degree-granting institution. This is legislation being led by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. I think that will also provide some additional flexibility and stature to the university to be able to do effective planning for the north.

Perhaps the final thing I would say is that we continue to specifically fund the remote First Nations family medicine stream, which is a dedicated set of seats so that family medicine residents can get experience right in remote and rural First Nations and gain the experience and the cultural sensitivity required to be able to provide effective medical care to those populations there.

I'd end my remarks there. Thank you so much.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I think my colleague MPP Gélinas wants to take over.

M^{me} France Gélinas: No, a question from Teresa Armstrong.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you so much. I have a question surrounding mental health. In London specifically, and I know throughout the province, there has really been a dysfunction around how people are able to access mental health. In London, we had horrible, horrible numbers of people flocking to the emergency rooms in order to access mental health. Pre-pandemic, it was a huge issue that was boiling, and now during the pandemic, we have all acknowledged that there are mental health and well-being stressors on people at home and all the changes that are happening during COVID. But especially the most vulnerable populations or precarious populations—racialized, marginalized populations—are also suffering even extreme mental health issues.

So going forward, during and then post-pandemic, I'd like to ask the minister what the increase in spending has been in the mental health file—and I'll include mental health and addictions as well—and then specifically, of that increase, how is that allocated and what amount of that increase is coming to London? I mean, I get calls from people looking for mental health who don't know where to turn. I get calls from family members trying to get help for their loved ones and they don't know how to get there. And then I also get calls from my constituents asking about people who are homeless and have mental health and addictions. How are they getting that help? Where are they getting that access?

Minister, I know that we've raised many issues and concerns around other files, but this one has been so long-standing, and with all the changes that were made under successive governments, we need community access to mental health—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: —and I need assurances that London is going to get their fair share of the allocation and that people seeking mental health will get the help that they need.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much for your question, MPP Armstrong. It is an extremely important issue. Mental health and addiction issues have been sort of left aside by our health system for many, many years. I was very pleased to have served on the Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions with MPP Gélinas over 10 years ago now. We reached certain conclusions that we considered very important then, and I think they're still important now.

When our government was elected, we promised the people of Ontario that we would spend \$3.8 billion more on mental health and addictions over the next 10 years, and we have started with that. One of the first things we did was to put together a mental health and addictions plan for the province of Ontario, the Roadmap to Wellness, which was started just about three weeks before the pandemic struck. One of the centerpieces of that plan was to create a Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence to be able to act in the same way that Cancer Care Ontario had in the past to make sure that all parts of Ontario had access to high-quality mental health and addictions services and to have that core basket of services available to people, regardless of where in the province they lived.

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The Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence was agreed upon by all parties. It was something that the select committee recommended many years ago. I'm very pleased that it's been set up to do that work and also to—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's our time, Minister. Thank you.

We're now going to go to the government side for 20 minutes. Who would like to begin questioning from the government side? Is there anyone from the government side who would like to ask questions? MPP Barrett.

Mr. Toby Barrett: I wanted to raise the issue of Public Health Ontario for discussion. We know Minister Elliott and staff have, over the last few days, provided briefings on Ontario Health, Ontario health teams, our hospitals. Certainly, everybody in our ridings—if they didn't know it before, they now know that they have a local public health unit. They may not be that clear on just what Public Health Ontario does. I know there's involvement with laboratory testing.

I wondered if we could get a bit of a briefing on the role and the support of Public Health Ontario with respect to the virus.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much for your question, MPP Barrett. It is an issue that is extremely important right now to all Ontarians. We would be pleased to speak about the role and support that Public Health Ontario has played from the ministry's perspective, as well as to outline the nature of our partnership with them.

We do acknowledge the extraordinary and continuing efforts of Public Health Ontario to monitor, detect and

contain COVID-19 in the province. Our public health system has demonstrated remarkable responsiveness to the COVID-19 pandemic as it has evolved both locally and globally.

Ontario's board-governed agencies are vital partners in ensuring the delivery of high-quality services to Ontarians. Public Health Ontario's mandate and work continues to directly support government priorities through its focus on improving health protection and promotion within the public health system and providing practical advice and support to those working at the front line of health care delivery.

Public Health Ontario provides scientific and technical advice to the provincial government and Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. The agency performs public health laboratory testing services for the provincial health system, and that's a role that is, of course, fundamental to the overall health system.

With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, Public Health Ontario continues to play a key role, including COVID-19 laboratory testing and scientific support. Public Health Ontario's laboratory currently accounts for approximately 30% of the provincial laboratory testing volume, providing scientific and technical advice and guidance to Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health, more broadly within the Ministry of Health and government response, public health units and other parts of our public health care system.

Despite the changing landscape surrounding the third wave, variants of concern and vaccine supply, the Ministry of Health continues to work very closely with Public Health Ontario and other key partners to build upon and improve the testing strategy and to improve associated infrastructure and systems, such as viral sequencing, to continue to monitor COVID-19 as it evolves and to prepare the province for the emergency of a future novel pathogen—which we hope we don't see, ever, but we need to be prepared for it.

That's why our government has made significant investments in a comprehensive testing strategy totalling \$3.7 billion over the last two years, including \$2.3 billion in 2021-22. These investments include additional funding to offset extraordinary costs incurred by Public Health Ontario as a result of managing COVID-19.

We are confident that Public Health Ontario will continue to meet increased demands for critical and timely laboratory testing for COVID-19 and lead genomic surveillance of variants, in accordance with legislative requirements of the Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion Act, direction provided by the Ministry of Health, and in collaboration with the provincial diagnostic network.

We look forward to continuing to work with Public Health Ontario as we respond to this global pandemic, while ensuring the public health and safety of all Ontarians.

At this point, I will turn it over to Deputy Minister Angus to provide several further remarks on this subject.

Ms. Helen Angus: Thank you very much for the question. Thank you, Minister Elliott. My name is Helen Angus. I'm the Deputy Minister of Health.

As the minister mentioned, Public Health Ontario is a board-governed agency. Its primary responsibility is to provide scientific and technical advice for those working to protect and promote the health of Ontarians—so that's the job—but they also operate 11 public health laboratories across the province that process about five million clinical and environmental tests on over 2.5 million specimens each year.

I would echo the minister's remarks in thanking Public Health Ontario for their extraordinary efforts over the course of the pandemic, as they've helped us prevent, monitor, detect and contain COVID-19 in the province. Public Health Ontario and the scientists and doctors who work there have been valued partners throughout. They've been represented on the Health Coordination Table, and I've had the pleasure of actually co-chairing a rapid response table with Dr. Jessica Hopkins from Public Health Ontario. We've benefited immensely from the advice and counsel of their leadership, who have helped release some of the initial modelling work done. They have helped develop our case and contact management plan. They've contributed to the provisioning and reviewing of public health measures and reopening plans. They've also played a key role in guiding Ontario's testing strategy.

I would say, overall, that the public health system in Ontario has demonstrated a remarkable responsiveness to COVID-19 as the outbreak has evolved locally and globally, and they have helped us keep our eye on what's happening around the world.

In recognition of these unique circumstances, the government has committed increased investments for the public health sector that include coverage of the extraordinary costs that Public Health Ontario has incurred as a result of helping to manage COVID-19.

Our action plan responding to COVID-19 included additional funding to the public health sector, including Public Health Ontario, that would support their role in monitoring and testing, and case and contact management. The fall preparedness plan also included increased investment to maintain public health measures, enhance testing capacity, sustain testing volumes, and maintain assessment centres along with COVID-19 testing sites. These investments have ensured that Public Health Ontario has the capacity we need to meet the increasing demands for critical and timely laboratory testing for COVID-19, as well as provide the technical and scientific advice and support that we need and Ontarians need to stay safe.

We certainly value the work Public Health Ontario has provided, and we will continue to work with them throughout the course of the pandemic and obviously through the recovery period. Perhaps the closest relationship to Public Health Ontario is between the Chief Medical Officer of Health, given his unique role, and Public Health Ontario, so I'll ask David to give us his perspective on PHO.

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Dr. David Williams: I think I'm off mute. Can you hear me okay? I don't know if my video is working, but I'll try my best.

For the sake of the Clerk, I'm Dr. David Williams, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. I would like to

thank Minister Elliott and Deputy Minister Angus for their comments on that.

Public Health Ontario, as you know, is one of the things I've been involved with right from its inception, and during the times before that, with Walkerton and SARS, we realized we had the need for an agency—Operation Health Protection. We had endeavoured to create the agency, at least, by 2006-07. In 2007, the Ontario Health Protection and Promotion Act was passed, and work was starting to form. The agency had begun and created what is now known as—instead of the full name, OHPP—Public Health Ontario.

So, in accordance with the act, let's say the mandate includes both scientific and technical advice and support to the health and public health systems in areas of infection prevention control, communicable diseases as well as chronic disease prevention.

Public health also carries out and supports activities such as public health research, surveillance, epidemiology, planning and evaluation, and operates Ontario's public health laboratory services and the public health laboratory centres.

In 2011, the ministry made a decision to move the epidemiological functions from the division at that time over into the agency. That is an important step because that maintains a very strong relationship between ourselves within the division that I have here in the ministry and working and [inaudible] advice in my office directly on surveillance matters related to many diseases, and including, as the deputy and the minister have already alluded to, on COVID-19.

As well, it's been a critical part when we integrated in the public health laboratory system into that, and now we have 11 sites across the province located in Toronto, London, Ottawa, Kingston, Thunder Bay, Hamilton, Orillia, Peterborough, Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury. They conduct more than five million tests annually on behalf of hospitals, community laboratories, long-term-care homes, clinicians in private practice, private citizens, and Ontario's 34 public health units.

For the past years, public health has received approximately \$155 million in provincial funding for its base operations and legislative mandate. Funding is provided by the province on a global basis, meaning Public Health Ontario has the ability and flexibility to allocate funding to meet their legislative mandate activities, including increased demands associated with public health laboratory testing. The Ministry of Health has several accountability mechanisms in place with Public Health Ontario to ensure the prudent use of public funds.

Reporting requirements for Public Health Ontario are defined and outlined in the act, namely, the Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion Act.

The existing memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Health and Public Health Ontario ensures that ministry deliverables are met where the value for money is achieved. One important piece to note in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic is that the existing memorandum of understanding between the

Ministry of Health and Public Health Ontario includes a requirement that, should Public Health Ontario not be able to find an offset for unplanned emergency outbreak costs, the Ministry of Health and Public Health Ontario shall work together to take necessary steps to meet this financial requirement. The evergreen transfer payment funding agreement signed between Public Health Ontario and the Ministry of Health builds on the requirements and provides for enhanced reporting mechanisms.

The agencies and appointments director sets out the rules and accountability framework for provincial agencies as well as the remuneration guidance for government appointments.

As with other publicly funded organizations in Ontario, the Ministry of Health continues to work directly with Public Health Ontario to identify operational and administrative efficiencies associated with non-direct programs and services while ensuring the ongoing provision of front-line services, including those that provide or support direct patient care or critical information and knowledge, to myself as the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

A key part in the whole overall development was public health laboratory modernization. As part of the 2019 Ontario budget, which was released in April 2019, the Ontario government committed to streamline Public Health Ontario to align with a new modernized public health system. Part of this streamlining involved modernizing Ontario's public health laboratory system by developing a regional strategy to create greater efficiencies across the system. Implementation of the public health laboratory modernization was put on hold for many reasons. COVID-19 laboratory activities currently under way and the increased capacity required by all the public units that run public health laboratories was the main reason for putting on pause any further modernization at this time.

Public health modernization consultations, which were being looked at in the wider context of Public Health Ontario in a modernized public health system, also are currently on hold. Once the COVID-19 outbreak is contained and risks are mitigated for the people of Ontario, the Ministry of Health will consider how to improve and move forward with the modernization process in order to make the important changes needed to strengthen our public health services.

What about COVID-19 support? I know the deputy minister has outlined a number of factors already and noted there's the extraordinary role that they have undertaken during this pandemic. It was for such a moment as this that we had created the agency that had the capacity not only to do the regular testing mandate but also to rise to the occasion during times of extraordinary need such as COVID-19. This means they have a role in contributing to public health measures, reopening planning and COVID-19 laboratory testing and scientific support, including test development and validation and inputting the testing strategy. We've already noted how we were one of the leading ones to develop the PCR testing as well as the method of screening for some of the variants, and we're getting more updates on more testing as they deal with the new variants such as the B1617.

COVID-19 data collection, monitoring, analysis and reporting: This is a huge task undertaken that we're getting daily thousands and thousands of tests reporting and reports put out that have all the analytics involved. It's not an easy or small undertaking, and Ontario has one of the most robust and largest testing mechanisms in Canada and in North America, with very much up-to-the-day reporting and analytics.

We also have COVID-19 case and contact management guidance, including resources to support the public health units. They developed the COVID-19 vaccine program, working with the task force and dealing with the important role of the safety of vaccines through their adverse events following immunization and vaccine coverage and reporting—another valuable task that we have that gives us great input and analytics towards all the vaccines, and giving reports up to the federal government.

We also have development of evidence-informed products to inform government policy and also provide scientific and technical advice and guidance to the public health units, the health care system and other sectors, including working with the Ministry of Education regarding school policies, infection prevention and control for congregate living and policy and outbreak response for correctional facilities.

In addition to that, Public Health has played a real, strong role, as I noted, in variant identification, with a whole genome sequencing network that they're involved in coordinating in the province of Ontario. This is another initiative developed in response to COVID-19. They test 10% of all samples submitted, and are working on now how to test and make a new technology around the so-called Indian variant, or the B1617.

Public Health Ontario has provided the Ministry of Health with valuable advice in many key areas: laboratory activity; working with groups and expert panels under Dr. Vanessa Allen, our lead medical microbiologist; surveillance planning; and working and advising my office. As well, Public Health Ontario is giving advice and working in partnership with Ontario Health. Testing strategy and expert panels were led by public health, and as the deputy already noted, working on a rapid response team, co-chairing with their lead, Dr. Jessica Hopkins.

Epidemiology is these analytics that take place day in and day out that look for new trends and directions and inform my office accordingly of what needs to be done. The new changes in case contact management that have—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Dr. David Williams: Thank you—so the public health laboratories take on approximately 30% of all the testing in the province of Ontario. During the response, they have put in extra hours and time to advise my office accordingly on all the changes that are there, including their 11 laboratory sites. In these circumstances, the Ministry of Health has provided approximately \$196 million in additional one-time funding to Public Health Ontario to support COVID-19 extraordinary costs: in 2019-20, \$4 million; and in 2020-21, \$192 million associated with increasing demands for timely laboratory viral testing. So

we have a strong relationship between Public Health Ontario and Ontario Health, scientific expert advice and regular business.

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In conclusion, I want to thank Public Health Ontario for doing a fantastic and amazing job over this last year and a half—a lot of work by people who put in many hours, day in and day out, and on weekends, 24/7, to keep us informed. The timelines have seemed impossible and have been high, but they have risen to the occasion. I know that in those times earlier, after Walkerton and SARS, we've seen the benefit again and again of having an agency here in Ontario, whereas before, only BC and Quebec had agencies, named the BCDC and INSPQ. Now we have one of the strongest agencies here in Canada, but we'd want more input from them as we go through this next phase of dealing with COVID-19.

Thank you for this time and for me to be able to speak to the issue of Public Health Ontario.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): There are 20 seconds left.

We will now go to the opposition side. Who would like to—MPP Gélinas?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you, Dr. Williams, for this. It was very interesting. I, too, applaud the hard work that Public Health Ontario has put in.

I'm going to go back on some of the answers that were given to MPP Judith Monteith-Farrell about human resources management. When ADM Hillmer was talking about his conversations with all of the deans and all this, the last time I asked, we had a ratio of about one physician to 358 residents in southern Ontario, and a ratio of about one physician to 5,000 residents in northern Ontario. I was wondering, ADM Michael Hillmer, are you still looking at this? What are the health human resource plans to bring equity of distribution of our very important physician manpower?

Mr. Michael Hillmer: Thanks for the question. It's Michael Hillmer, assistant deputy minister, capacity planning and analytics division. I just wanted to double-check if the minister or deputy wanted to make any comments before I launched in.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I'm open.

Ms. Helen Angus: I think Michael should just go ahead. You've got the greatest facility with the numbers and the strategies, so please, answer the MPP's question.

Mr. Michael Hillmer: Great. Thank you so much, Deputy. I'll probably go back and hit on a few of the comments I made before and also pick up on some of the comments that my colleague Patrick Dicerni made during his response to MPP Monteith-Farrell's question.

The short answer to your question is, absolutely, this is of utmost interest in our planning work. I'll also talk a little bit about this in some remarks that I'll make later on.

Throughout the pandemic, we were very seized with the immediate issues that we saw arise; in particular, some of the issues around personal support workers, which, as I say, I'll talk a little bit about later on. But in terms of physicians and the longer-standing numbers that you talk

about in terms of equity, our ongoing investments in the Northern Ontario School of Medicine are one of our primary ways that we hope to address that over time, because I think the evidence is really clear that you can't train in a southern city and then expect that person to uproot all their connections and move. So the ongoing investment in the 256 undergraduate seats in the Northern Ontario School of Medicine and then the post-graduate medical education programs are extremely important, and we'll continue to invest in those. And in those ongoing conversations I spoke about with the deans of medicine, and in particular starting out with Dean Roger Strasser, who is the founding dean of the Northern Ontario School of Medicine—he was a real champion for northern and remote practice and ensuring there's a vibrant residency program with good mentors.

So we'll continue to look at ways to strengthen—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Go ahead. It's just that I really want to focus on human resources: physician human resources management. I know Dr. Strasser very well. I have nothing but good things to say about him. I know the Northern Ontario School of Medicine. But I'm interested in the government's plan for human resources management of physicians. I fully agree with you that NOSM has been excellent at bringing us more physicians to the north. Are there other areas of government that focus on a plan for equity of access to physician manpower? Physicians are paid for by the provincial government. The government has a responsibility to assure equity of that service that is paid for by the government, and this is what my question is.

Mr. Michael Hillmer: Right. Thank you for the follow-up question. We do add about 600 physicians to the province every year. I think it's the distribution of those physicians that are sort of the key issue that you're asking about. I think there are a couple of main mechanisms, and not to reiterate what I was saying about the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, but I do think that that model is one that we'll continue to invest in, and then of course there's the Northern and Rural Recruitment and Retention Initiative which offers different financial incentives to physicians to set up practice in the north.

We do know that more needs to be done, and there are these issues that you raise around the coverage per population. We will continue to evaluate and redesign the physician distribution programs as an ongoing exercise, because I think we put programs in place like the rural retention initiative, and then we evaluate its impact, and then we look to improve upon it. So I think that ongoing review of physician services and distribution is critical.

I'll end there.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. When you do this review, do you look at models like community health centres? They work really well in the north, because when physicians leave and—my eyes are open; I know that some of them will come to the north and it's not for them so they leave. But the community health centre stays. The chart stays there; the continuity of care stays there. Yet we've had communities in the north wanting the community

health centres for decades and not getting them. So when I hear that, "We look at what can be done," and yet the north tells you what can be done, but there doesn't seem to be a match—I need to move on because I have many other questions.

I'm moving on to something that probably doesn't interest you that much. I'll go to the minister. The different regulatory colleges: This morning I asked about scope of practice for nurse practitioners, but there were six professions that were notified by the minister in May 2019 of changes for their scope of practice. We're now May 2021 and none of them have moved forward. So I'm wondering: How come? When can those six professions—they were physiotherapist, midwife, nurse practitioner, podiatrist—I'm sure you know them. They were notified by your ministry, but nothing has happened. When can we expect movement?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much for the question. I would say, really, the lack of movement is predominantly because of COVID, that everyone's time, attention and resources have been drawn to that. Generally speaking, I believe it's important that people work up to their highest scope of practice, because there's no question that we're going to need many, many more health professionals in our system.

Once the worst of COVID is over, I think there's going to be some more need for mental health specialists, addiction specialists, more nurses—we've always needed more nurses, but I think especially after COVID there will be some nurses who may choose to retire because they've been through an extremely difficult time. We need more personal support workers; we need more therapists; we need more midwives—we know that we need more of that.

I would say that once we get to the point where everyone who wants to have their second vaccination has received one, then we will be able to move back more full-time into all of the other issues that are important to the Ministry of Health, including looking at scopes of practice and consideration of whether certain health professionals can be moved forward in that process.

But for more specific details on the issue that you've raised, I will turn it over to the deputy minister for further comment.

Ms. Helen Angus: And I'll ask Sean Court to join the conversation.

It's Helen Angus, Deputy Minister of Health. Thank you, Minister. There's a process of working on the scopes of practice where there's a ministry role and, as you know, there's a college role, as well, in terms of their own review about what can be done and what the education and other requirements might be for some of the acts that are contemplated as part of a revised scope of practice regime. Sean, maybe you want to talk about the process, and—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Before you go, Deputy—

Ms. Helen Angus: Yes?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Professions like the podiatrists submitted their draft regulations in 2014. We are in 2021, and there hasn't been any movement forward.

Ms. Helen Angus: Fair enough.

M^{me} France Gélinas: My question is, why is it so slow? Minister Elliott was there; I was there when we passed Bill 176. We made changes. We allowed for changes to the scope of practice of a series of health professionals. Minister Elliott contacted six of those professions in 2019—that is like a full year before we even knew what coronavirus was about—and yet here we sit. Just tell me, why is it so hard? Why does it take so long to do that kind of stuff?

Ms. Helen Angus: I don't sit inside the—Sean, why don't you jump in and answer MPP Gélinas's question?

Mr. Sean Court: I think there are two answers to your question, MPP Gélinas. One is a process thing; I think the deputy has done a good job of outlining that. But there is a relationship between the college having to bring forward regulations—they have a process that is often quite time-consuming in terms of the need to do consultations and bring things, oftentimes multiple times, to their councils for council ratification, and then those pieces come to the ministry and we have our own processes, including sometimes having to do our own reg registry postings as well, which can really stretch the timelines out quite long. Sometimes it's up to 18 months long.

I would say there has been a further complication with COVID, where we've lost some of the momentum and focus that we would have otherwise been applying to some of the pieces that were in the hopper before COVID. I think it's fair to point out that there have been bandwidth challenges with the ministry with respect to having to help support the administration of vaccines and other scope changes that, at different times, have been very time-consuming.

I think the bigger question you've raised is, why are there so many process steps? I think the answer there is that it's important because we have a system of self-regulating, almost fully arm's-length colleges; it's really important that they have their own processes. Unfortunately, that's compounded by the fact that the government has its own processes, and the structure of the RHPA makes it such that it's ultimately the government that passes regulations on behalf of the college, so you do end up in this very frustrating feedback loop: That hasn't been referred to the college; it goes to the college; the college process can take a very significant amount of time; and then you are basically starting from scratch in terms of government decision-making, which can move quickly on certain topics but, generally speaking, takes an appropriate amount of time. So I fully acknowledge the frustration with how long it can take.

M^{me} France Gélinas: So the Health Professions Regulatory Advisory Council, are they gone now or are they on their way out? Are they completely gone?

Mr. Sean Court: HPRAC currently exists under the Regulated Health Professions Act. They were created in 1991, when the act was created. The government's red tape reduction bill is currently moving through the Legislature, and I think we're potentially in third reading at this point. There was a review of government agencies, boards and commissions, and there were decisions made

to wind down some of the committees that no longer existed and/or had sort of a valid function moving forward.

HPRAC hasn't provided the ministry with advice since 2018 and they became unconstituted in 2019. So while they exist in legislation through the RHPA, they are effectively defunct. We don't currently have sufficient members for them to provide us with advice. Moving forward, if the government were to seek advice on scope changes, we would typically go to our regulatory colleges in the short term. But the minister and the government also have the ability to appoint a short-term advisory body if there were a specific topic or theme that needed more expert advice beyond just the advice we received from the college and our own due diligence.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Do you remember when was the last time that HPRAC looked at whether PSWs should have a college? Do you remember when was the last time this advice was given? I'm just picking your memory.

Mr. Sean Court: I don't recall that. I know that the last advice came in 2018, and it was related to ABA, which the government is moving forward on through the current bill that just came through standing committee.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. No problem. It was an unrelated question.

Still with the colleges: Some colleges have put forward the idea that complaints and investigation and discipline regarding sexual abuse by health care professionals be put in one single body rather than across all of the colleges. Is this something that the government is open to, is considering, or is it not on the radar right now?

Mr. Sean Court: Minister Elliott and Deputy, I'm happy to answer that.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Yes. Thank you, Sean.

Mr. Sean Court: Okay. Wonderful. Sean Court, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy planning and French-language services division—longest acronym in the Ministry of Health.

The current structure under the Regulated Health Professions Act is that we have 26 colleges, as you know. As you know, those 26 colleges act independently of each other. They do have an association that represents them, but there is no construct for them to partner administratively. I think through the new proposed oversight authority, which is currently at third reading and is moving forward, there is an opportunity for lower-risk professions and health services to be regulated under an umbrella organization. That umbrella organization is not anticipated that it would eventually include all the regulatory colleges.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Mr. Sean Court: Its focus is really on health professions and services that are lower risk. So that's not necessarily an avenue to move forward. We have been focused, I would say, over the last several years in terms of bringing consistency in terms of practice and process to the 26 colleges. To my knowledge, there's no current thinking around the creation of a single body that would handle a specific kind of complaint that would otherwise be handled by the regulatory colleges.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay, so just to recap: For a profession like podiatrists, where the college has done the work, they have submitted their draft regulation, it's been sitting at the ministry since 2014, the ministry has to do their work—which you said could take up to 18 months—but yet we're seven years forward and they're still not allowed to use their full scope of practice. It hasn't been approved by the government.

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How much longer, if you were to take a guess, before physiotherapy, nurse practitioners, podiatrists, midwives could see changes to their scope of practice, as supported by their college and as agreed to by legislation?

Mr. Sean Court: That's a great question. I can't presuppose or pre-judge the decision-making and timelines of the cabinet and the government. I think it's something that we're actively working on to bring to the government for decision-making, but at the end of the day, the role of the civil service is to provide our best advice. It would be in the hands of the government when and if a decision was made.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Is your best advice to move forward with expansion of the scope of practice for the four that I've just mentioned?

Mr. Sean Court: We currently have recommendations from the colleges—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's our time.

We will now go back to the government side for 20 minutes. MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister: Good morning, Minister. There's no doubt that health care workers are the backbone of our health system. That's become even more apparent during COVID-19. We thank them for the critical roles they're playing and the sacrifices they're making during the pandemic.

Can you please tell the committee, Minister, about some of the initiatives you have put in place to support these front-line health care heroes? Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much for your question, MPP Coe. I'd be delighted to speak about this issue. But first, before I do that, I would like to start by recognizing and offering my thanks to the really heroic front-line health care heroes who have been at work on the front lines, taking care of people with COVID and other issues for the last almost 15, 16 months. I really want to share our commitment to helping them as we move forward as well, because they've been providing care to Ontarians, very, very ill Ontarians, during the most challenging of times. I think we're all amazed that they continue to do this great work on behalf of all Ontarians.

I can certainly tell you that from the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, the Ministry of Health has taken deliberate action to ensure that Ontario has the health human resources required to meet the health needs of all Ontarians. I can certainly assure you that as the pandemic has evolved, we have worked tirelessly to make sure that Ontario continues to have a health workforce that is supported, equipped and able to respond to the needs of patients and the health system.

I'd like to now turn it over to Deputy Minister Angus to outline actions our government has taken to ensure that our health human resources have been available throughout our response to COVID-19.

Ms. Helen Angus: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you very much for the question. I think health human resources was always top of mind for us as we looked at what we needed to do to respond to the pandemic. As I might have said here before, it was really through quick and thoughtful action that the government readied the health system to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have increased the number of providers in the health care system. We've worked with health sector partners to ensure that the workforce has the tools it needs and the protection that they deserved over the last 16 months.

If I go back to April 2020, it was really during the earliest days of the crisis that one of our very first actions actually related to procuring the health resources we needed, and that was the launch of the Ontario matching portal. I'll talk a little bit about that, because I think it's been incredibly helpful to us.

The portal matches job seekers with those with available capacity to support the provincial response to the pandemic. Basically, it matches people to organizations most in need of support, and it really was a vital first step to mobilizing health human resources across the province against COVID-19.

Shortly thereafter, the government introduced temporary pandemic pay as a measure to recognize the dedication, long hours and increased risk associated with working to contain COVID-19 outbreaks. I can report that over 375,000 of Ontario's front-line workers received pandemic pay, and the vast majority of those were in the health sector. Ontario's pandemic pay program was one of the largest of its kind in the country and unprecedented in the history of the province.

In the summer of 2020, as part of the fall preparedness plan, we invested \$52.5 million to recruit, retain and support over 3,700 health care workers and caregivers to ensure the continuity of safe care for patients and long-term-care residents in the province. In October 2020, the government announced a \$461-million investment to provide temporary wage increases to personal support workers and direct support workers in the home and community care sector, the long-term-care sector, public hospitals and in social services. It's these kinds of investments that are helping the province attract and retain the workforce that we need to care for patients, clients and residents in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In January 2021, the province announced up to \$125 million in additional funding to add over 500 critical care and high-intensity medicine beds in hospitals to build capacity and respond to the evolving COVID-19 situations. Again, additional health human resources supports were made available to hospitals to support the implementation of these beds.

These are just some of the actions and the investments that we've been making to ensure that Ontario has the health human resources that we need.

You've just heard from Michael Hillmer, but I'll ask him to step up again and talk about the evolving health human resources challenges that we face during the pandemic and some of the actions that the government has taken in response. Michael.

Mr. Michael Hillmer: Thank you so much, Minister Elliott and Deputy Minister Angus. It's Michael Hillmer, assistant deputy minister, capacity planning and analytics division of the Ministry of Health.

In the early days of the pandemic, over a year ago, health human resources were certainly top of mind for the ministry and the government. I can assure you that this continues today. I'll touch and expand upon some of the themes that the minister and deputy minister talked about, starting with the Ontario matching portal.

As noted, at the onset of the pandemic, we quickly created the Ontario matching portal in the spring of 2020. The portal matches professionals and volunteers based on geographic area and skill set. In the short term that the portal has been functional, it has achieved significant results. Over 30,600 individuals and over 1,500 health care employers have signed up on the portal, and there have been over 2,000 employer requests for staff, leading to over 1,000 approved staffing matches.

Over time, the portal has evolved to support changing needs during the pandemic. For example, the portal has been instrumental in supporting public health units, recruiting human resources to help deliver the COVID vaccine program and matching under the Ontario Workforce Reserve for Senior Support program, which recruits, trains and deploys resident support aides to help increase workforce capacity in long-term-care homes. I'll talk about this program a little further along in my remarks.

Moving on to pandemic pay: Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, many employers were reporting issues with fatigue, low morale and difficulties in retaining staff, particularly among those lower paid. Recognizing that front-line health care workers faced a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19, temporary wage increases were implemented last summer to stabilize Ontario's health care workforce. The temporary pandemic pay program, implemented by the government, provided eligible front line public sector workers in health care and other sectors with a wage top-up of \$4 per hour and a \$250 lump sum payment each month to those working 100 hours or more per month for a 16-week period from towards the end of April through August 13, 2020. Over 230,000 of Ontario's front-line health care workers received pandemic pay, stabilizing the system during a period of crisis. Of the eligible workers, the most significant occupations represented were nurses at about 41% of the 230,000 and personal support workers at about 21%.

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You've heard a little bit about the fall preparedness plan. In the summer of 2020, the ministry's fall preparedness plan invested—this is an amount the deputy remarked on—\$52.5 million to recruit, retain and support over 3,700 health care workers and caregivers to support continuity of safe care for patients and long-term-care

residents. Amongst other things, this investment supported Ontario's Nursing Graduate Guarantee program, which provides new graduate registered nurses and registered practical nurses in Ontario with temporary full-time employment above staffing complements to support their successful transition to practice in full-time employment. The program provides 20 weeks of funding for each new nurse approved to participate in the program. That includes 12 weeks of funding for the nurse's transition-to-practice period and eight weeks of funding to reinvest in existing front-line nurses and their professional development. During the pandemic, the Nursing Graduate Guarantee program supported full-time salary and benefits for over 500 nurses.

Our fall preparedness plan also supported the ministry's community commitment for nurses program, which offers registered nurses, registered practical nurses or nurse practitioners a \$10,000 incentive in return for a one-year commitment to practise in a hospital, long-term-care home or home and community care agency in an area of high need. Launched earlier this year, it has already placed 94 nurses with health care employers in need in the province.

The fall preparedness plan also invested in the Personal Support Worker Return of Service Initiative, which offered a \$5,000 incentive to PSWs in return for a six-month commitment to work in a high-need Ontario long-term-care home or home and community care agency. This program placed over 600 personal support workers in long-term-care homes and with home and community care service providers. Importantly, the program matched these personal support workers with the health care providers that needed them the most.

While COVID-19 has been a testing time for the system and for us all, the personal support worker return of service program is an example of the type of program that could well be instrumental to us in the future as we continue to work to distribute the workforce effectively, placing our precious health human resources where the system gaps appear or where service demands are the greatest.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the Ontario Workforce Reserve for Senior Support program. In November 2020, we launched the Ontario Workforce Reserve for Senior Support program. As I noted earlier, the program recruits, trains and deploys non-health care professionals as resident support aides to support long-term-care homes that need additional health human resources supports. I recently heard a member of the Ontario Association of Residents' Councils refer to these individuals not as resident support aides but as resident support ambassadors, and really advocate for their ongoing deployment and utilization within the long-term-care-home sector.

To date, the Ontario Workforce Reserve for Senior Support program has fully trained over 300 resident support aides, and so far, almost 200 have been deployed into a long-term-care home. The workforce is also being made available to support hospitals and the vaccination effort.

Another example of a new program that was launched in the midst of the pandemic is the extern program. In addition to the program I just described which sought the

support of volunteers, we also heard the call from all of our health care providers in training: those who aspire to join our health workforce and who wanted to help as they learned. That's why, in January 2021, when we started to see our first spike in the number of patients in critical care as part of the second wave, the government invested \$12.1 million in the extern program to add an immediate influx of nursing students to provide over 430,000 hours of extern care to up to 12 hospitals with critical COVID-19-related health human resources gaps.

On April 16, 2021, the program was extended to paramedic, respiratory therapist and medical undergraduate students and to an additional 26 hospitals, bringing the total number of hospitals eligible to participate in the program to 38. We now have over 1,100 of our learners working as externs in these hospitals. By the end of the year, we intend to see this number rise to over 4,100. I have seen testimony from different hospitals who really laud the ability of these learners to get right into practical work experiences and augment their classroom learning with practical experiences. Interestingly, you can see many of these hospitals are currently actively recruiting for more externs to come into their hospital systems.

I'll now talk a little bit about critical care beds. Of course, it is the sector itself that is the employer of our health workforce, and we must acknowledge their resourcefulness and the critical role that they have played in ensuring that we had the workforce always deployed where they were needed most to support our response to the pandemic. The Ministry of Health also saw the need to support those employers by ensuring we had the programs in place to support the recruitment effort.

Over the course of the last few months—in particular, January to April—to support the implementation of critical care beds and to support intensive care unit capacity, we introduced a suite of initiatives to increase nursing and other health human resource capacity in hospitals, including relocation and accommodation reimbursement, which reimburses commuting and accommodation costs to support the redeployment of staff in non-hot spot regions to facilities in greater need; critical care staff training to enhance the critical care education of existing health care staff in order to facilitate their reassignment to intensive care units and critical care units; reactivation of the retired or unemployed nurses' incentive, which provides signing bonuses to nurses who are immediately reactivated for general practice or critical care practice; and the medical residents redeployment program, which allows all medical residents without a restricted registration licence to be redeployed under appropriate and applicable supervision within a hospital setting in support of the hospital's COVID-19 response, at the rate of \$50 per hour. This will support employment of a potential 4,500 extra providers in our hospitals. The recruitment efforts have been critical not only to increasing and supporting critical care capacity but in supporting the ramp-up in surgical capacity across the province and system recovery in hospitals as a whole.

Now I'll talk a little bit about the deployment of out-of-province health human resources to Ontario. While Ontario has worked to develop so many programs to support

the recruitment and the retention of the health workforce required to respond to the pandemic, there have been times when even more action was required—action to protect our patients, action to support our brave workforce. One such period has been the last couple of months. We realized that we needed to go the extra mile to supplement the number of health care providers in support of critical care capacity. Therefore, we worked with our federal, provincial and territorial partners to obtain health human resources, including physicians, nurses and respiratory therapists.

Emergency orders were put in place to allow health care providers registered in other provinces and territories to practise in Ontario hospitals without having to be registered here. The first team of providers, including six nurses and three physicians, was deployed from Newfoundland to Toronto on April 27. I had the pleasure of being there at the airport when the military transport plane delivered these brave health care workers, and PA Martin was there to greet them as well. It was quite the moment, watching them walk off the plane and come into Ontario to help. The second team, of four nurses and three physicians, was deployed to Brampton on May 4.

We've also worked with federal partners in response to our requests. On April 30, Canadian Armed Forces personnel were deployed to the mobile health unit at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. Additional Canadian Armed Forces personnel were also assisting at the mobile health unit at Hamilton Health Sciences as well.

We continue to work with the federal government to deploy additional Canadian Armed Forces personnel and other health care providers from federal departments and the Canadian Red Cross to hospitals in need.

I'll now make some comments about personal support workers. Of course, the health care system stretches far and wide beyond hospitals and works every day with every community and Ontarians who need care in their homes and in other kinds of congregate settings in addition to long-term care.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Mr. Michael Hillmer: Two minutes, Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Michael Hillmer: Okay, thank you. Well, then I'll just touch briefly upon a few points.

In October 2020, the government announced a \$461-million investment to provide a temporary wage increase for personal support workers and direct support workers in home and community care, long-term care, public hospitals and social services, including—there are a range of wage enhancements for these individuals.

In March 2021, the government invested an additional \$239 million to extend this temporary wage enhancement for personal support workers until June 30, 2021. The government has indicated that it will continue to review the temporary wage enhancement to inform next steps after June 30, 2021.

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We're also looking to build the supply of personal support workers. To move the needle, we must ensure that you

are providing as many opportunities for Ontarians to choose personal support worker as a career. It is why the government is also making an unprecedented investment in personal support worker education in the province. In January 2021, the government announced the tuition-free support worker pilot program at Willis College. This 30-week program will support 300 PSW students.

In February 2021, the government announced the accelerated personal support worker program to train over 8,000 personal support workers. This will be delivered at the 24 publicly assisted colleges in the province—a six-month tuition-free program including critical placement stipends. This was followed in April 2021 with another announcement for personal support worker training—a bursary program this time—along with tuition grants and clinical placement stipends that can train as many as 4,000 personal support workers at district school boards and 4,000 personal support worker students at private career colleges.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And that is our time. Thank you.

To ensure that the remaining time is apportioned equally, it will be split as such: 17 minutes and 30 seconds to the official opposition and 17 minutes and 30 seconds to the government.

We will now go to the opposition side: MPP Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I will try to use my 17 minutes and 30 seconds wisely.

Just to start, this section on “health care workers are heroes”—there are some basic flaws here. We all know that nurses worked really hard during the pandemic. A number of them—once the pandemic is done, they’re out of there. They can’t take it anymore. And yet, the government passed a law that says they cannot get more than a 1% wage increase. They can’t help but look at why it is that physicians got \$1.3 billion more added to their OHIP pot, and yet nurses cannot negotiate a more-than-1% increase. You cannot say that they’re heroes and at the same time pass laws that say, “But we don’t trust you enough to let you bargain freely. We will limit what you can do.”

Same thing with the PSWs: You can train all the PSWs you want. I’m all for free tuition. I think this is the way to go. I love it. But if you don’t give them good jobs, at the end of the day—the Auditor General put it in black and white: After the first year, 40% of them don’t work in the field anymore, and after two years, 60% of them don’t work in the field anymore. Why? Because PSW jobs are not good jobs. PSWs want full-time work. They want decent pay. They want benefits. They want sick days just like everybody else, a pension plan, and a workload that a human being can handle. None of that is feasible.

In Sudbury, when Health Sciences North, our hospital, advertises for one PSW position, they get 500 applicants. Those are 500 PSWs in Sudbury who are good at what they do, who love what they do but who cannot make ends meet working part-time in long-term care or part-time in home care. When a position opens in the hospital, they all apply, because they love what they do and they want to do it. But right now, the jobs in Ontario don’t pay the rent and

don’t feed your kids. So we can continue to invest in quick learning and pay the tuition; at the end of the day, 40% of them won’t be in the field after a year, and 60% of them won’t be working as PSWs after two years. Things have to change.

The same thing with the nurses: How can you pay a physician 225 bucks to give vaccines when you pay the nurse who has done that all of her life 35 bucks? You have to look at that kind of thing. It is so, so demoralizing for health care workers; I cannot tell you.

I do have one question, though, about working as an extern: Why were—I call them international medical graduates, but really, they are physicians who have passed all of their exams, who have been passed by CPSO, who need experience. Why is it that they were not allowed to work as externs when pretty much everybody else was? Physicians who were in their first year of training were allowed to work as externs, but full physicians who had passed their CPSO exam, and with colours, were not allowed to apply for those jobs. I guess my question is to Michael. And broadcast, if you could leave my microphone on, because I have a ton of questions and 17 minutes to get them answered.

Is anybody going to answer that?

Mr. Michael Hillmer: I see that my colleague associate deputy Melanie Fraser has her hand up, so I will pass to her for some comments.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Okay, great. I think you can hear me now. Sorry about that. I was raising my hand, but maybe you didn’t see me.

I think it’s a really important question, MPP Gélinas. What I would say is, throughout the pandemic and throughout the waves, as we were looking at staffing, whether it would be assessment centres, ICU beds, wherever the critical shortage was, it was really about finding the right staffing mix. I would say, for the province and in most areas, the physicians that we were most in need of were highly trained nurses. When we were looking at the extern program, while it did pull in some medical students, we were largely focused on bringing in nursing students to be supported and mentored by more senior nurses, to allow for nursing capacity to be augmented and, really, to allow the more trained and the more seasoned nurses to ladder up to serve in areas like ICUs and post-operative beds and to have externs supervise to help in other places, such as assessment centres and in general wards. So, while there were physicians brought in to help with the pandemic response, I would say, largely, the bulk of the need related to nurses, certainly within the hospital sector, and then PSWs and other supports within the long-term-care sector.

I just wanted to add that into context, and then I will ask Michael to speak to you about your specific question about the foreign-trained physicians. Michael can also comment on the foreign-trained nurses as well.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Before you go, I’m just curious: What you told me makes sense, but then I look at what happened on the ground. The nurses from Canadore

College in North Bay were not allowed in to do their placement in the hospitals. Therefore, none of them are graduating. You are talking about nurses trained four years in North Bay, who want to come and help in northern Ontario, where we need them, and they were not allowed into the hospitals during COVID. Therefore, they're not allowed to graduate and they are all in limbo. The university won't give them their degree, and therefore, they're not allowed to graduate. I listen to what you tell me—that we wanted to bring nurses in, we wanted them—and yet you have four-year North Bay graduates not allowed into our hospitals.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: I don't know that I can speak to the specifics of that college, but I certainly will look into it for you, because what we did see across the system and working with several of the hospitals in hot spot areas—we know that there were over 1,000 nursing externs brought in to support the COVID response, but I'm certainly happy to understand what happened in that situation. It may be that they didn't have the ability because of other staffing shortages to supervise, but I don't want to speculate, and I will look into that for you.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you.

And quickly, because I only have a few minutes left, how come IMGs—fully-graduated, passed the CPSO exam, passed the Canadian medical exam—were not allowed to apply as externs?

Ms. Melanie Fraser: I will defer to my colleague Michael Hillmer on that one, and his daughter, who's making an appearance at estimates this morning.

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Mr. Michael Hillmer: Thank you so much, MPP Gélinas. I think I'll echo associate deputy minister Melanie Fraser's comments in that we certainly were prioritizing nursing as a profession.

The extern program, first and foremost, was designed to advance the needs of those students and learners in Ontario and ensure that they had both the opportunity to contribute to the COVID-19 response and play a very meaningful role. That being said, we've seen the value of this program, and I think there's actually quite a huge interest across government in this sector to have these much more immersive teaching experiences in clinical settings. So I think we're actively looking at the possibility of how to use this program going forward—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Would you be open to the idea that the IMGs who pass their exams, who are in positions to work—would they be allowed to apply for those extern positions?

Mr. Michael Hillmer: We are looking at the best way to use this program going forward, and I think we would be open to considering the ways it could be expanded and changed to meet the evolving [inaudible] the pandemic, and then as it [inaudible] of the system, potentially. So, yes, we're definitely willing to consider that possibility.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I'm short of time, and I have to ask about myalgic encephalomyelitis, chronic fatigue, multiple chemical sensitivity, all of those diseases—they had their annual general meeting two weeks ago. Minister

Elliott submitted a video in which she talked about how the report is coming and will be available soon.

Minister, I would like to ask you: When do you think the report that was done by public health on those diseases would be available publicly, and when can we see movement? They especially want a centre of excellence some place in Ontario. Is there anything you can share on that?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much for the question.

I have had several conversations with the group, and I know this is very, very important to them. We have tried to move along—in fact, we were moving along relatively well before COVID-19, but of course, Public Health Ontario has been working very hard on the COVID-19 response.

I can't give you an exact date, but I can let you know that this is something that we want to get back on track as soon as Public Health Ontario has gone through, first of all, the vaccination process. I know there is more work that they will have to do afterwards in order to make sure that we review what was done, what was needed, what's good, what we need to keep, what we need to deal with more. I know this is a group that has waited for a very long time for a response and they need help, so we will turn our attention to it as quickly as we can.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Is it the plan that, when the report is tabled with you, it will be made public to all—they call themselves MEAO. Will they have access to it also?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Yes, absolutely.

M^{me} France Gélinas: A change of direction again, using my seven minutes wisely: I hear rumours of the privatization of some of the components of the Assistive Devices Program. I was wondering if there's any truth to that and what components you're looking at privatizing.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you for the question.

This is also a very important issue. I know that there have been many challenges that people have faced with assistive devices and receiving them in a timely manner. There has been some concern about it from a number of individuals and groups, so it is something that we have spent some time looking at. But I will turn this over to the deputy minister to provide you with more specific information.

Ms. Helen Angus: I would say that we're actually spending more time looking at the value-for-money audit that was done by the Auditor General and implementing the recommendations within the current program. So those improvements are being made under the current construct of program delivery, and those would include audit functions and digital review processes and looking at how we look at pricing and other things you might be familiar with.

M^{me} France Gélinas: So if there are to be changes to the Assistive Devices Program, it would be in line with the recommendations made by the Auditor General—not necessarily contracting out part of the work? Or could both of those be done simultaneously?

Ms. Helen Angus: Well, I've not seen, from my perch, a contracting-out proposal. I have seen proposals that actually look at the way that we deliver now, but making

improvements consistent with the Auditor General's report.

In theory, of course, those things could coexist. The Trillium Drug Program has had some contracted-out call centres. But my understanding is that we're proceeding to implement the Auditor General's report.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Who has the lead on implementing the Auditor General's report on the Assistive Devices Program?

Ms. Helen Angus: That would be ADM Dicerni.

M^{me} France Gélinas: ADM Dicerni, could you reassure—my fear is that as you're implementing the Auditor General's report, part of the—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. Never mind.

I know that the demand for plasma continues to rise. There is a brand new plasma centre opening in Sudbury. I still get a lot of people who are worried that Ontario continues to be open to allowing paid plasma clinics, where people would be paid for their donations. Minister, if you could put on the record that this is not it, it would reassure a whole lot of people.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you for your question.

I have no knowledge of any paid donations happening in Ontario. We had that discussion a number of years ago, and the people were not in favour of that, so that is not something that I would be prepared to bring forward.

M^{me} France Gélinas: We know that the plasma collected in Ontario is not sufficient for the needs of Ontario; the demand for plasma in Ontario outweighs what is being collected right now. This would not sway your decision to respect the wish of the people to not pay for plasma?

Hon. Christine Elliott: As you know, we still already receive a lot of these products from the US, and so that is something that—I know it's an unusual situation. However, that has been the way. People were very strong in their response, in saying that they did not want to have paid donations in Ontario.

I'm not sure if the deputy minister has anything further to add to that.

Ms. Helen Angus: I think the MPP gets to spend some quality time with us on Thursday at public accounts. I understand that we're coming to talk about the Auditor General's review of the blood system. I think we're up tomorrow on virtual care. So we'll look forward to answering some of your questions tomorrow and in the days afterwards, as well.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That is our time.

We will now move to the government side for 17 minutes and 30 seconds. MPP Parsa.

Mr. Michael Parsa: My question is about the transformation of Ontario Health.

Minister, our government made a commitment to build a modern, sustainable and integrated health care system that really starts and ends with the patients, and I've heard you mention this many, many times in the Legislature and outside, as well. To this end, our government reorganized 21 provincial health agencies and organizations under the single organization of Ontario Health. I'm hoping you can tell us a little bit about the transformation and how it's

providing better-connected care and ultimately improving the patient experience for all Ontarians.

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Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much, MPP Parsa, for your question. This is very important to all of us and to the people of Ontario. We've seen over the past number of months, particularly since COVID became part of our life, unfortunately, here in Ontario, how important our health care system is. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with very challenging and unprecedented challenges and situations.

During this difficult time, the incredible skill and commitment of the people who work in all aspects of our health care system has never been more clear, and we see how important it is for health care providers to work together as one team, to provide connected care for patients.

That's why, well before the COVID-19 pandemic started, our government had been taking a comprehensive approach to modernize our health care system. We have been focused on the patient experience, of course, centring our health care system around the patient, and on better-connected care, to build a modern, sustainable and integrated health care system, starting and ending with the patient.

When health care providers work and are funded together, care will become integrated, and the needs of the whole person will be considered. Patients would have someone to help them navigate the system, to answer questions and to understand their individual situation and the response to their situation. Health care providers would be accountable for the patients in their local communities and would provide care tailored to those needs.

One of the key initiatives to support the modernization of the health care system is the creation of Ontario Health. Ontario Health is overseeing key areas of the health care system, improving clinical guidance and providing support for providers to ensure better-quality care for patients. This is about coordinating and connecting the system from top to bottom to make it more efficient and, of course, more equitable. We are focusing on patient-centred care and on improving direct care delivery. We've taken great care in undertaking a phased reorganization of over 20 government agencies and health organizations under the single roof of Ontario Health.

As existing health organizations have transitioned into Ontario Health, a gradual approach has been implemented to ensure that patient care is not disrupted while work continues to create new ways to enhance the patient as well as the provider experience. I am pleased to note that, as of April 1 of this year, 21 agencies and health organizations have been brought together into Ontario Health. So not only has Ontario Health been integrating and overseeing the health care system, they have been a great partner working tirelessly, of course, to support the pandemic response and have been great partners to us in that.

I will now turn it over to the deputy minister, who has some additional remarks to make on this issue. Thank you.

Ms. Helen Angus: Thank you very much, Minister Elliott. Thank you, MPP Parsa. I'm Helen Angus, Deputy Minister of Health.

As the minister mentioned, Ontario Health is an agency created by the government of Ontario to connect and coordinate our province's health care system. I would say, sort of in parentheses, I spent a decade working at Cancer Care Ontario, and I'm aware of the leapfrog improvements in cancer outcomes that were achieved by virtue of having a strong provincial agency highly connected into the delivery system. I remain excited about what the work is of Ontario Health to support the modernization agenda, but also to do for mental health and some of the other areas of health care what we have done for cancer and, under my leadership at the time, for renal care in the province. This is a huge asset for the province, and I think it's critically important.

Ontario Health is and will continue to play a really important role in the establishment and oversight of Ontario health teams, which is really the anchor piece for delivering integrated care and organizing teams of providers working together in collaboration, meeting the needs of their communities. Ontario Health has supported the work of the ministry to modernize home and community care, again, to improve patient access to care, and enable the integration of home and community care services within the construct of an Ontario health team.

It has also been a key partner in another area of transformation that we've talked about in the last 14 and a half hours: the ministry's Digital First for Health Strategy, again, streamlining digital delivery of health care to increase system efficiency, to promote integration and, most importantly, to better meet the needs of patients and providers. As was mentioned last week, Ontario Health is working with the ministry and system partners to modernize the supply chain in the health care system to ensure that supplies and services can be sourced, procured and then delivered seamlessly to providers and patients. Certainly, they were critical in the early days in terms of our response in securing PPE and other necessary supplies to respond to the pandemic.

I think that one of the things we're trying to do through Ontario Health is simplify what is a very complex system for many people, to connect and coordinate many services in support of patients. Some of the ways that they've done it—again, these are leveraged from what they learned at cancer care, through the work of Cancer Care Ontario:

- improving clinical guidance in offering more effective support for providers so that they know what to do;

- ensuring that health care dollars are used more efficiently in removing some of the overlap in administration and infrastructure and pushing more of the dollar out to the front lines;

- advancing digital-first approaches to health care, and I've talked a little bit about virtual care and the integration efficiency of how the digital assets in the province are used for the benefit of patients;

- supporting the establishment of Ontario health teams, of which we now have 42 and more on the way; and

- building on the world-class model of expertise in cancer care and applying it to other chronic diseases and

conditions. We've talked about mental health. That could apply as well to diabetes as it has to renal care.

As the minister mentioned, Ontario Health has been a key partner in the pandemic response. Before the pandemic started, we were fortunate to have moved to an Ontario Health model, where a single agency could oversee parts of the health care system. I can't imagine having done what we've had to do in the last six months with a disparate group of agencies, maybe with the best of intentions tugging in their own directions. We didn't have to coordinate across a fragmented agency landscape, and I think it allowed us to work in collaboration and work more efficiently in terms of the pandemic response.

It has been a remarkable partnership with Ontario Health. The team has worked seamlessly, I think, with the ministry. Whether that's Matt Anderson as the CEO or some of the vice-presidents, the analytics team, it has been an exemplary response and partnership. I look forward to what we're going to be able to achieve going forward.

I also have to thank Matt Anderson in particular. He is the president and CEO of Ontario Health. His leadership over the last 18 months has been stellar. I certainly have joked in the past that he and I spend more time in meetings, phone calls and others dealing with the pandemic than we have with our own families. I am thankful for his support, his very good humour and his leadership. I think it is through Matt's drive that the system, for example, of coordinating the laboratories across the province into a testing network and building systems that we didn't have in response to the pandemic—that we will have going forward. They've accelerated what they were intended to do, and I think they've been highly effective. You can tell I have some passion for this one, because it's pretty exciting.

I will hand it over to Kyle MacIntyre, who has been leading much of the buildup of Ontario Health from the ministry's perspective.

1140

Mr. Kyle MacIntyre: Kyle MacIntyre, acting ADM of the health transformation division, Ministry of Health. Thank you, Deputy, and thanks to the member for the question. My division is responsible for, among other things, work related to the planning and implementation of Ontario Health.

In February 2019, the government announced the creation of Ontario Health to connect and coordinate the province's health care system to achieve better care for all Ontarians. To advance that work, the government enacted the Connecting Care Act, which is the legislation that enables the establishment of Ontario health teams and allows for the integration of multiple existing provincial agencies into Ontario Health.

At the time of the creation of Ontario Health, it was recognized that Ontario has had a large network of provincial and regional agencies, clinical oversight bodies and 1,800 health service provider organizations. As a result, health care access and delivery can be fragmented, creating confusion for both patients and providers trying to navigate the health care system. So, instead of having

multiple agencies providing different oversight and direction in the health care system, Ontario Health was created to integrate those disparate components that the deputy minister was talking about, providing a uniform approach to care and a centralized point of governance, accountability and oversight for a sustainable, responsive health care system that prioritized front-line care.

Some of the benefits of a single agency oversight model include:

- strengthen governance and leadership with a single, focused strategy and execution effort;
- a patient-focused culture;
- reduced silos and administrative costs of inter-agency efforts;
- acceleration of modernization efforts to improve health care;
- a single core set of data platforms, helping to reduce duplication of data collection and burden of reporting;
- a one-window approach, making it easier for stakeholders to partner with one entity and clinical; and
- clinical and digital health functions that are integrated.

Another key benefit of the transfers to and advancement of Ontario Health is that it will help maximize system value, reducing duplication and transforming care with the patient at the centre. For example, by establishing Ontario Health, the government expects to save over \$300 million annually as part of this work. This was submitted to the Standing Committee on Estimates last year, where the government had identified over \$215 million in savings by eliminating duplicative administration, which is being reinvested into patient care. These savings have been found by reducing duplication in the health care system without negatively impacting direct patient care. The phased reorganization of many government agencies within Ontario Health has helped to lower administrative and back office costs and allow for reinvestments of these savings into front-line care to support patient and provider experience.

Before I mention some of the key milestones in the creation of Ontario Health, it might be helpful to outline some of the key responsibilities that it has. It was created to, among other matters:

- oversee the delivery of health care, including virtual care;
- improve the quality of care;
- measure and manage how the system performs;
- ensure financial accountability with the health service providers;
- oversee highly specialized care, for example, cancer care or organ donation;
- manage provincial population programs;
- develop evidence-based advice for health service providers;
- assess and support planning to address local health needs;
- help to integrate and modernize the health care sector supply chain;

- support and provide services to the home and community care support services organizations; and
- hold accountability for the Ontario health teams in the future.

As the minister has mentioned, as of April 1 of this year, over 20 agencies and health organizations have transferred into Ontario Health either in whole or in part. It has been a journey to get to this point, for sure.

Prior to the establishment of Ontario Health, the government had consulted with patients, families, nurses, doctors and others who provide direct patient care. To ensure no negative impact to direct patient care, the ministry also undertook a phased approach to consolidation of those provincial agencies and organizations.

A priority and guiding principle for each phase of the Ontario implementation plan has been maintaining continuity of patient care and provider services, ensuring no disruption to the operations and functions of transferring agencies and organizations.

In phase 1, in April 2019, Ontario Health's board of directors was established and the board took on responsibility of being cross-appointed as the board of directors for over 20 other agencies to help start the process of integrated planning and decision-making in health system management.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Mr. Kyle MacIntyre: In December 2019, five provincial agencies were transferred into [inaudible] of Ontario Health. Additionally, 14 local health integration networks were clustered into five interim geographic regions, five LHIN CEOs were cross-appointed as transitional region leads, and the minister transferred in select, non-patient-care LHIN executives into Ontario Health to support the finalization of the full LHIN transition.

In phase 2, the Ontario Telemedicine Network was transferred in as whole into Ontario Health on April 1, 2020, to support the expansion of virtual care across the province. The transfer of the OTN and the oversight of two additional digital funding agreements further enabled Ontario Health in delivering upon its virtual care mandate and supporting the government's Digital First for Health Strategy.

As part of phase 3, the ministry assigned a number of mental health and addictions and other transfer payment agreements to Ontario Health as of April 1, 2020, to support further system integration and capacity of the Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence at Ontario Health.

Further to the transferring of those assignments of the mental health and addiction transfer payment agreements, also part of phase 3, the minister recently issued transfer orders, transferring the Trillium Gift of Life Network and the health system planning and funding functions of the 14 LHINs to Ontario Health, and this transfer took effect on April 1. The ministry was working closely with Ontario Health and TGLN to develop a careful and thoughtful plan to ensure the transfer would not disrupt the province's organ and tissue donation and transplantation system. As a result of the transfer, Ontario Health is now delivering

and coordinating organ and tissue donation and transplantation services across the province. It's also responsible for planning, promoting and supporting all health care professionals, advocates and other Ontario public in fulfilling their shared responsibilities and saving lives for those Ontarians waiting for a transplant.

The transfer of the health system planning and funding functions of the LHINs into Ontario Health is a key component to support the government's plan to modernize home and community care.

On April 1, LHINs began operating under a new business name, Home and Community Care Support Services, to reflect the focus—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's our time. Thank you.

It looks like the time for the independent member will not be used. Therefore, the remaining time will be divided equally, with seven minutes and 30 seconds for the government and seven minutes and 30 seconds for the official opposition.

We're going to begin with the official opposition. MPP Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I had cut short a bit on my questions about the Assistive Devices Program and the changes that were coming. ADM Dicerni had appeared, so I take it that he had something to say about the changes going on at the Assistive Devices Program.

Mr. Patrick Dicerni: Thank you very much for the question.

Just building on both the minister's and Deputy Minister Angus's comments related to ADP: Myself and the ADP team are entirely focused on continuing to operate the program and implement the recommendations that we received from the OAGO's audit in 2018. While I frequently have independent businesses approach me in my role to discuss program modernizations or services they feel that they could bring to us, I'm not aware of or working on any current plans to privatize the delivery of ADP's operations or programs—and as I said, rather, focusing on ensuring how we continue to meet the needs of Ontarians through the program, while having pivoted our program to an at-home-based model of staff working at home virtually, over the span of about 10 days.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would also dig in a little bit more about working as externs. The ADM mentioned 1,000 nursing externs were hired. I'm just curious to see where can I find out how much money was used and how much an extern would be paid, and who paid them.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Thank you for the question.

I would say, throughout early in this year, 2021, we launched the extern program, and that resulted in 900 nursing externs being hired into those hot spot hospitals. As a result of the success of that program in helping to augment the response throughout wave 3, we expanded the program to allow additional externs to be hired into the program.

In terms of the funding for that, hospitals are allowed to expense the costs associated with the nursing externs as part of their COVID expenses. I don't think I have a full

reconciliation yet for the amount spent throughout the first part of this year versus into this fiscal year, but that's certainly something that we will be doing detailed expenditure management on as part of the COVID hospital expenses.

1150

M^{me} France Gélinas: All right. Okay. Sounds good.

My next question—I'm all over the place; sorry—has to do with how when we look at the FAO, he puts out that child and youth mental health saw a decrease of \$71 million, which represented a 14% decrease for their envelope. I was wondering if somebody could explain to me how, in the middle of a pandemic, when our kids are learning at school and so, so many of them are having mental health issues, they would be cutting \$71 million from child and youth mental health?

Ms. Melanie Fraser: I see that the host unmuted me. I would defer to the minister to make any comments she might like to make first, but we can certainly speak to you about the augmented investments that were actually made in mental health throughout the pandemic.

But, Minister Elliott, did you want to make any remarks first?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Well, thank you very much. I just really wanted to say that this is something that is very important, and that we know that there are increased wait times for children receiving care and services, and that we recognize that the need is going to be ongoing.

I would turn it back over to ADM Fraser or Melanie Kohn, or whoever you believe is best to answer MPP Gélinas's question.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: I will turn it over to Melanie Kohn, who can give you the detailed figures on the investments that were made specifically into mental health as part of the government's plans, but then augmented investments that were also made directly responsive to COVID, recognizing that we knew the impacts that COVID would have on mental health. Melanie, I know you'll have those numbers at your fingertips.

Ms. Melanie Kohn: Thank you so much for the question. It's Melanie Kohn, acting assistant deputy minister in mental health and addictions. Just to highlight that the seeming reduction from this year is due to the fact that the allocations have not been finalized. They're all put under one line and they get divided out. We're currently in the process of looking at the additional \$175 million for this year and the planning associated with that.

On an annual basis, we do have allocations for the child and youth mental health sector, in addition to the adult sector, and we work in planning through the lead agencies to determine what those allocations look like and focus in on the right areas. But for this year, those numbers are not finalized yet, and as a result of that, we do not have the specifics associated with it. So it looks like a decrease, but that's because that funding has not moved into the allocation for this year.

M^{me} France Gélinas: So does that mean that the new services that we saw in our schools, we can expect those to continue, or not? Have the decisions been made whether they will continue or not?

Ms. Melanie Kohn: For the COVID investments, those would be one-time. For last year's investments of over \$176 million of Roadmap to Wellness, those were base increases, and the \$175 million in additional funding for this year is also base funding.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That is our time.

We will now move to the government side for seven minutes and 30 seconds. MPP Pettapiece?

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Minister, first of all, I want to thank you for the investments you've made in my riding. It has certainly been welcome in the health care infrastructure. We've heard stories in all our local communities about the need for investments in infrastructure, in health infrastructure. I wonder if you could tell us more about how the government plans to improve in health infrastructure.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Yes. Thank you very much, MPP Pettapiece, for your question. This is an important issue in communities across Ontario. Investing in hospital infrastructure meets several critical areas of need related to growth and demand for services, critical infrastructure deficiencies and bringing care closer to home for patients. Our government plans to invest \$30 billion over the next 10 years in hospital infrastructure projects, of which \$22 billion are in capital grants.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed communities' expectations regarding health care infrastructure. The government continues to be committed to ending hallway health care and recognizes the importance of innovative solutions across the continuum of care to meet this commitment and build capacity in the system.

Given the fiscal realities facing the province of Ontario, investments made are fiscally responsible and efficiently address the most critical areas of need in the province. Investments made through the portfolio of approved capital projects over the next 10 years will result in capacity for approximately 3,000 new hospital beds, and several of the larger projects in the plan will address key areas of demand and growth across the province.

Hospital capacity creation is not the only solution for capacity challenges. All opportunities for creating capacity more efficiently or at lower costs will be explored to ensure that our investments are made where they are needed.

Deputy Minister, I wonder if you could provide some further information about these projects across the province.

Ms. Helen Angus: I'd be delighted. Thank you, Minister. As the minister indicated, the government plans to invest about \$30 billion over 10 years to build and strengthen hospital infrastructure, and \$22 billion of these investments will be put towards capital grants.

Our focus at the ministry is to expand and ensure that we've got the right mix of beds and service types in the system, whether that's urgent care, ambulatory services, mental health beds or primary care. Having the right mix of services enables local providers to develop local solutions to health care challenges.

We're working and planning to build new hospitals. As our existing hospitals continue to age and the quality of the physical infrastructure decreases, there will always be pressure to help maintain and repair existing facilities as well.

We are continuing to work with health care partners to help us make strategic investments so that we're investing where it is needed, both now and in the future. And we're working closely with all hospitals to make sure that the projects that are in our plan have the right scope of work, to make sure that they have value for money.

I'll ask Melanie Fraser, who you've just heard from recently, the associate deputy minister of health services, to talk more about the health system challenges we're facing and how we will address some of those through infrastructure investments, which is so important. Mel?

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Great, thank you. As both the minister and deputy have mentioned, effective capacity planning is absolutely critical to addressing our immediate system needs, but also supporting long-term sustainability of health transformation and ensuring that we have the care available where and when it's needed.

As has been mentioned, the government does plan to invest \$30 billion over the next 10 years in hospital infrastructure projects, of which \$22 billion is in capital grants. The intent there is to make the investments balance both growth—so new capital infrastructure to meet growing and increasing demand of the population—but also to balance that with renewal: maintaining our existing facilities in good repair and ensuring that aging infrastructure across the province is managed and brought up to full performance.

I think, as most will recognize, demand for major health capital investment remains at an all-time high. The population of Ontario continues to grow and to age, and our facilities continue to age and deteriorate. So there's a demonstrable need for capital investments, as I mentioned, for both new capital projects, as well as maintenance and repair of existing facilities. The ministry remains committed to making sure we make capital investments—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Ms. Melanie Fraser: Thank you—based on sound fiscal planning and ensuring that these investments are carried out efficiently. We have a whole planning process and tool kits that are provided to support this. These are used to help the sector understand what the capital planning and approval process is. We use a five-stage planning process, which is sort of the industry norm. This helps hospitals understand how to comply with ministry and government policies that maintain legislative and fiscal accountability. They provide direction on how to help navigate the capital submission process and, finally, facilitate the development of high-quality capital submissions that are focused on patient-centred care.

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Hospital capital projects, as I mentioned, follow a five-stage process. Those largely follow the cycle of identifying a need, developing a concept, creating a plan, implementing the plan, and then we close out the plan and

monitor ongoing operations. Success is generally measured by the extent to which the project is completed on time, on budget and within a predefined scope and is able to meet the intended health services delivery needs. It's an ongoing and vital component of the health care system, and as such, hospitals and regional planning bodies are responsible to continuously monitor the needs of their communities.

As part of this hospital capital process, hospitals are required to develop and refresh master programs or master plans, as they're called, which outline a hospital's comprehensive long-term plan—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That is our time. This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Health.

Standing order 69(b) requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 1401, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 1402, health policy and research program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. Carried.

Shall vote 1403, digital health and information management program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1405, Ontario health insurance program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1406, population and public health program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1412, provincial programs and stewardship, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1413, information systems, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1416, health services and programs, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Health carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Health to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hand. Carried.

Thank you. We will now recess until 1 p.m. Have a lovely lunch.

The committee recessed from 1207 to 1303.

MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND FORESTRY

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources and

Forestry, for a total of 15 hours. Are there any questions from members before we begin?

I see MPP Harris has joined us. MPP Harris, could you please confirm that you are MPP Harris and where you are joining us from?

Mr. Mike Harris: I am indeed MPP Harris, Madam Chair, and I am joining you from the beautiful province of Ontario.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you.

I'm required to call vote 2101, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 30 minutes from the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry, followed by a statement of up to 30 minutes by the official opposition. Then, the minister will have a further 30 minutes for a reply. The remaining time will be apportioned equally among the two parties, with 15 minutes allotted to the independent member of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours, and welcome.

Hon. John Yakubski: Thank you very much, Chair. It's an honour to address the Standing Committee on Estimates for the second time in less than a year. The standing committee is an important function of the Legislature, holding ministries to account for their actions and ensuring transparency for the people of Ontario. I'm looking forward to speaking about the good work done within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry and to answering questions from the committee about our operations.

As I begin today, I just want to thank the staff at my ministry for their exceptional work in preparing for our appearance at the estimates committee. I'm very happy to share the ministry's story, and it wouldn't be possible without the hard work and preparation from our staff. The work we do is a team sport, and I have an incredible team working with me.

I'd like to introduce the ministry officials who are here with me today and who will be answering questions about their divisions.

Joining me today is my deputy minister, Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark.

I'm also joined by my assistant deputy ministers, each of whom leads a division within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

Craig Brown is assistant deputy minister of policy division. This division leads the development and design of natural resources policy for the ministry and provides guidance in policy implementation and delivery.

Amanda Holmes is chief administrative officer and assistant deputy minister of corporate management and information division. This division is responsible for setting the ministry's annual budget and for developing and implementing our multi-year plan.

Also with me today is Sean Maguire, assistant deputy minister of forest industry division. This division is responsible for leading ministry initiatives that relate to the forest sector in Ontario.

Tracey Mill is assistant deputy minister of provincial services division. This division includes branches that

oversee enforcement, wildland firefighting, science and research, and fish and wildlife services.

Also joining me is Jennifer Barton, assistant deputy minister of regional operations division. Her division operates 25 district offices, three regional offices and two branches, and provides front-line client services, including permitting and crown land management.

I'm pleased to have with me Marty Blake, assistant deputy minister of the Recovery and Renewal Secretariat.

And finally, also here today is Rocco Passero, chief information officer.

I want to thank my senior officials for joining me today before the committee. We are happy to answer any questions that are asked in these proceedings.

In my remarks to the committee, I'll be speaking about the work my ministry does on behalf of the people of Ontario. I'll talk about some of our most important initiatives from the past several years and our efforts to uphold fiscal accountability for the taxpayers of Ontario. I'll speak about our forest sector strategy, including some recent progress we've made in implementing the many actions contained within it.

I'll begin today by giving an overview of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry's key responsibilities and the services we provide for the people and the businesses of Ontario.

The ministry is responsible for the protection and stewardship of Ontario's natural resources. These include crown lands, water, forests, fish, wildlife, and aggregate minerals like stone, sand and gravel. We're responsible for promoting sustainable resource development in different industry sectors, including commercial and recreational fishing, aggregate operations, petroleum and, of course, forestry. We're also responsible for protecting people and property from the natural hazards of wildland fires and flooding.

My ministry regulates outdoor recreation opportunities for Ontarians, including hunting and fishing. These are favourite pastimes here in the province and sources of significant employment and economic activity. This role, in particular, safeguarding outdoor recreation in Ontario, means that we have a strong focus on customer service. This aspect of our operations gives us a high degree of visibility to members of the public. Our client service standards are exceptionally strong, and they're something I'm very proud of as the minister. We provide client services to two million anglers and hunters each year in issuing licences and big game allocation services. These services can be assessed in a variety of ways, ranging from in-person purchases with us or with our private sector partners to online on our website and via an automated telephone line.

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We publish important information for hunters and anglers each year in our hunting and fishing regulation summaries and on our website, ensuring that Ontarians are easily able to access the information they need to follow provincial regulations safely and lawfully. We also reach thousands of people each year through our social media channels, sharing important updates and initiatives.

My ministry is committed to modernizing our services in support of the Ontario Onwards Action Plan. We are continuing to drive future state modernization to improve outcomes for Ontarians and to help meet the government's broader fiscal commitments. And we continue to do more with less. We're making investments in business improvements and modernization opportunities, which will enable us to continue the important process of improving customer service and investing resources where it matters most for Ontarians.

The Ministry of Natural Resources has a long history of protecting Ontario's natural resources, and it's an honour for me to advance this legacy as minister. One of my ministry's most important functions is the stewardship of Ontario's forests and promoting sustainable development in the forest sector.

Forestry is one of the industries that built Ontario. A lot of people don't understand that today, in the way the world has changed over the decades and, indeed, over the last 150 years, but forestry is one of those industries that, when Ontario first really became settled as a province, was absolutely vital to that settlement.

I come from the Ottawa Valley, as most of you would know, where forestry is primarily responsible for the settlement—the days of J.R. Booth and the lumber barons that opened up the Ottawa Valley. Well, I don't come from a family that's directly involved in forestry. Our history is certainly intertwined as retail merchants. My grandfather before my father and my father before me serviced the forest industry in so many ways.

It's interesting, I was just looking through some old catalogues the other day, and inside—I don't know why I was down in the bunkhouse, as we say, looking through all those things—I found some old catalogues from wholesalers and handwritten copies of letters from my grandfather ordering stuff in the 1940s for the forestry operations going on in and around Algonquin Park and Renfrew county, particularly at the western end, ordering cross-cut saws and the like, and axes.

When the chainsaw became part of forestry operations, which has practically disappeared for the harvesting side of things now itself, my father sold, I'm told—I was told by him; I can't verify it, but I was told by him that we sold the very first chainsaws in the Ottawa Valley at F. Yakabuski Ltd., as it was then. So we go back, I go back myself with a part of that history.

When you look at the families that populated the Ottawa Valley, the forest industry is never too far away from what brought them here and what sustained them, because there wasn't an auto industry then. There weren't a lot of the other things that spin-off jobs come from in manufacturing. It was forestry in my neck of the woods, and I'm very proud to have come from a part of the valley that is part of that infancy.

In fact, next year, 2022—if I'm not mistaken it's 2022 or 2023; I'll verify that—Shaw lumber will be celebrating its 175th anniversary as a private company in the same family, also one of the oldest companies in Ontario and certainly the oldest company in the forestry business that's

still active—Shaw Lumber, right in my riding of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke—175 years either next year or the year after. So it's quite a proud tradition in the Ottawa Valley.

Today, the forest industry supports almost \$18 billion in economic activity and employs more than 143,000 people directly or indirectly. It's a much-needed source of employment in rural and northern parts of the province, providing well-paying jobs in communities with few other industries. Our government is committed to promoting a better quality of life and a higher standard of living for every part of Ontario.

For many communities, the key to prosperity is the forest sector. These jobs offer opportunities for young people to remain close to home. They help families pay their bills and put food on the table. In other words, jobs in forestry are a lifeline for many communities in Ontario. Our government is committed to doing everything we can to help the forest sector reach its full potential, and to promote prosperity in these communities for generations to come.

In 2018, we committed to developing a strategy for the forest sector to engage economic growth and job creation in the industry. After two years after consultation and development, and some truly excellent work by officials in my ministry, the strategy was complete. In August 2020, we announced Sustainable Growth: Ontario's Forest Sector Strategy. It's a comprehensive strategy with a 10-year horizon and it will enable the forest sector in our province to realize its full potential. It's a plan supported by 10 other government ministries and it lays out dozens of actions intended to promote economic development and growth and to safeguard the sustainability of this renewable industry.

That focus on sustainability is a key consideration for us. We recognize that for Ontario's forest sector to remain strong and vibrant in the long term, we need to ensure our crown forests stay healthy, diverse and productive. Sustainable forest management is so important for the industry's success that the central pillar of the strategy is promoting stewardship and sustainability. The actions under this pillar are aimed at building our established strengths in sustainable forest management, adapting and modernizing our management practices and taking steps to address climate change.

Ontario's forest products are celebrated across the world because our forest management practices are held to some of the planet's most rigorous standards. This recognition is a source of pride for us and a key asset for our forest industry. The actions under this pillar build on these management practices and improve them where necessary, based on the best available science and research.

The forest industry will play an important role in meeting our growing consumer preference for renewable and more environmentally conscious products. Forest products can help mitigate climate change by reducing our reliance on non-renewable products such as single-use plastics.

The United Nations predicts that, by 2030, demand for forest products will rise by more than 30%. Our forest

sector strategy aims to capitalize on this demand and further establish Ontario as a global leader in this renewable industry.

Another pillar in the strategy is putting more wood to work. Currently, less than half the total sustainable volume of wood is harvested from crown forests each year. This represents a tremendous untapped potential, and the actions under this pillar are aimed at realizing that potential. We will be investing in new technologies that improve our understanding of the growth and management of our forests, an enhanced understanding that will enable forest companies to increase their harvest closer to the approved sustainable level. These technologies will greatly improve the way we estimate Ontario's total wood volume, which will in turn strengthen our forest management planning and decision-making capabilities.

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We are also partnering with the Centre for Research and Innovation in the Bio-Economy to develop an economic fibre supply model. This will give potential investors the market intelligence they need in considering an expansion of operations in Ontario. It will also help to attract new investment from companies looking to establish forestry operations in our province.

Another pillar in our forest sector strategy is improving our cost competitiveness. The actions under this pillar are aimed at reducing burden for businesses, making strategic investments in forestry infrastructure and promoting a business climate in Ontario's forest industry that attracts more than new investment.

One of the ways we reduce burden is streamlining forest management manuals, a process that forest companies undertake to get approval in developing their forest management plans. This streamlining will result in \$9 million in savings over the next decade for operators in the industry.

We're also improving our client services by developing the Natural Resources Information Portal to offer better support to forest companies during the planning process.

We've lowered taxes for industry operators, allowing them to write off capital investments for assets acquired after November 2018.

These efforts to reduce burden and improve cost competitiveness will drive growth in the forestry sector and attract investment in job creation, allowing the sector to reach that full potential we've talked about.

The final pillar in the forest sector strategy is fostering innovation, markets and talent. The actions under this strategy aim to address a labour shortage in the forest industry by promoting careers in forestry for young people. This is an important priority not just for overcoming the obstacle of labour scarcity, but for strengthening communities by offering opportunities close to home. This is one of the ways the forest sector strategy will promote prosperity in northern and rural regions of Ontario.

This pillar is also focused on fostering innovation. We're working to promote innovative new uses for Ontario wood products so that forest companies can tap into

growing international markets. Some key examples of innovation in forest products include the growing fields of mass timber construction and biofuels. Ontario is well positioned to establish itself as a global leader in both of these.

Under this pillar, we've also redesigned our business support program, offering funding to projects that have the potential for positive regional impacts and streamlining the process for applicants.

We're making great progress with implementing our forest sector strategy, and I am confident that it will transform the forest industry in our province. I'd like to highlight some of the recent developments that have taken place since our last appearance before the standing committee.

One of our commitments under the forest sector strategy was to create a committee drawn from key forestry stakeholders and experts in the field. I'm pleased to report that the first two meetings of the forest sector strategy committee were held earlier this month. The committee members are representatives from the forest industry, First Nations and municipalities. In other words, the committee has representation from the industry and communities that will most benefit from the forest sector strategy. In turn, the forest sector strategy itself will benefit from their expertise and their local perspective.

This commitment to stakeholder engagement has been an important guiding principle for my ministry in developing this strategy right from day one. Throughout the two-year development process, we've depended extensively on feedback from the industry and from municipalities, Indigenous communities and members of the general public. This feedback has been instrumental in shaping and refining the strategy from the idea stage onwards. I firmly believe that this approach has been the key to the successful development of the strategy, and it continues with the forest sector strategy committee.

The key purpose of the committee is to provide the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry with practical insight as we create our implementation plan. The committee will also serve as an accountability mechanism, monitoring our progress as we work towards achieving the goals laid out in the strategy. The forest sector strategy is a transformative undertaking for Ontario, bringing together my ministry and 10 other government ministries, and requiring participation from the industry and stakeholders. The forest sector strategy committee will guide our hand as we carry out this important task.

I had the privilege of welcoming the committee members at their first committee meeting. I've got to tell you, what a joy that was for me, not just to welcome them at the committee, but to be part of the conversations in choosing the members of that committee, listening to the recommendations from my ministry and also my minister's office. I think we have an absolutely blue-ribbon group of people from the industry, from Indigenous communities and from municipalities that will really, absolutely continue to have us laser-focused on the goals of our forest sector strategy. That is something that as a

minister—I don't think I can overemphasize the importance of having that second set of eyes, as they say, although we have many more than two sets of eyes on that committee; we have many sets of eyes on that committee. To have that additional perspective as we develop this strategy—because we're talking about something that we want to transform the industry, and this really has a 10-year life cycle, implementation cycle, the forest sector strategy. To be able to draw from general municipalities, Indigenous communities with their tremendous amount of institutional and historical knowledge and commitment to the resource, and then the forest industry itself, to be able to draw on them as well, I just consider myself very fortunate to be the minister in the chair when we were able to put that committee together. I really look forward to their recommendations on an ongoing basis as we implement the strategy.

As I mentioned, one of the pillars of the forest sector strategy is improving Ontario's cost competitiveness. Who doesn't want to be more competitive, right? The actions under this pillar are focused on reducing burden for businesses, making strategic investments in forestry infrastructure and promoting a business climate in Ontario that attracts new and larger investments.

One of our commitments under this pillar was to develop a Forest Biomass Action Plan. I'm pleased to report that our draft plan is available for public comment on the Environmental Registry. Sawmill operations in Ontario generate by-products, like bark, sawdust and wood shavings. These by-products, along with trees or above-ground tree parts that aren't used in conventional forest products, are collectively known as forest biomass. These by-products can be used to develop new and innovative value-added products, and that's what the Forest Biomass Action Plan aims to do.

The most common forest biomass in Ontario is for bio-energy, in the form of heat and power. This is a sustainable use of these products, providing renewable fuel sources to manufacture wood products, heat buildings or power electrical grids. Forest biomass can be harnessed to create a wide range of consumer products, including sustainable alternatives to single-use plastics I had mentioned earlier, petroleum-based chemicals and fossil fuels. Forest biomass is also used to manufacture wood pellets and wood chips for use in domestic, commercial and industrial heating systems.

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But these products offer far more opportunities for economic growth and sustainable resource use as well, and that's what our action plan aims to unlock. There's an incredible range of emerging uses for forest biomass that are currently being developed. This includes medicines and pharmaceuticals, plastics and polymers, textiles, 3D printing applications, battery energy storage filaments, green hydrogen, and even jet fuel, to name just a few.

To help develop this economic potential, the draft Forest Biomass Action Plan outlines five key objectives. The first objective is to identify pathways to markets for forest biomass. The second is to support demand for forest

bioenergy and bioproducts. The third objective is to improve the business and regulatory environments for forest biomass. The fourth is to support holistic, culturally relevant pathways for Indigenous community involvement in forest biomass value chains and to support reconciliation between Indigenous communities and the crown. The fifth objective is to communicate, collaborate and inform on forest biomass opportunities.

A working group of more than a dozen members from the forest biomass supply chain worked with my ministry to develop the draft action plan. Their work resulted in a plan that will help create jobs and promote sustainable development in the forest industry and drive the kind of economic prosperity that will sustain communities in our province for generations.

The public comment period for the draft Forest Biomass Action Plan will conclude on June 21, and we are holding further consultations with Indigenous communities and partners. These consultations will help us refine and implement the action plan and put us on a path to new markets, new jobs, and improve environmental stewardship. I look forward to announcing more on this important initiative in the coming months.

As I mentioned, the central pillar of our forest sector strategy is promoting stewardship and sustainability. Nothing is more important to the sector—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. John Yakabuski:—than ensuring the long-term viability of forestry activity. One of the action plans under this pillar is to conduct applied research and best science that will enable us to make policy decisions that are based on evidence.

To advance this commitment, my ministry recently signed two collaborative research agreements with leading Ontario universities to help promote healthy, resilient and sustainable forests and provide support to the forest industry.

One of the research agreements is with McMaster University in Hamilton, and it's valued at \$45,000 over three years. Researchers from McMaster will work with the ministry using a subset of artificial intelligence known as machine-based learning. This powerful technology uses computers to analyze large volumes of data to reveal patterns, trends and relationships that would be difficult to identify using traditional methods.

The other research agreement is with the University of Toronto, valued at \$56,000 over three years. The focus of this research will be to assess the effect of the eastern spruce budworm on Ontario's forests. The research will use remote-sensing satellite technology to analyze and model trees that have died because of the eastern spruce budworm. The spruce budworm is the most destructive pest of spruce and fir forests in North America. Millions of hectares can be severely defoliated in a spruce budworm outbreak, killing trees that would otherwise be harvested by the industry.

I know I'm running out of time.

I look forward to hearing from the members of the committee today and further discussing my ministry's

plans and our work on behalf of the people of Ontario. Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you, Minister.

We now have time to go to the opposition side for a statement and/or questions for the minister. MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Good afternoon, Minister and all the members of the committee, as well as all the ministerial officials and guests who might have joined us today. Thank you for your comments and the introduction you just gave, Minister. I always enjoy listening to your stories as well as your commentary.

I'd like to speak to some of the topics you've mentioned throughout the course of our discussions, and I'm sure more will likely be added to the list, but I'm sure you'll respond to them as well.

It was welcome news when I learned that I would have the chance to inquire into MNRF's planned expenses for two consecutive years. Our meetings in November 2020 covered a wide variety of issues of great importance to me, my northern constituents and all Ontarians who appreciate our wild spaces. The opportunity to follow up on many of the salient issues that were introduced at last year's estimates hearings is a welcome one. It also provides a chance to bring forward new and lingering concerns that we did not have a chance to address in our previous set of hearings. I look forward to hearing from the minister and the representatives of the ministry on a variety of issues of concern over the next few days—they're going to be long days, though.

Before proceeding, I would like to thank the ministry for securing answers to the outstanding questions from last year's hearings. These responses mean that more time can be spent on the ministry's work in the months ahead, instead of on past performance and outstanding business.

I deeply appreciate the chance these meetings give us to learn about past, present and proposed ministerial activities. Hearing from the ministry in consecutive years allows us to learn about their progress on issues they had recently announced in our last set of hearings. For example, I'm curious to learn about the return on the ministry's \$2-million investment in Oxford Pallet that was mentioned in our November meetings. With the economy preparing to reopen, it would be beneficial to know whether targeted investments such as this one are having the intended impact and meeting the hiring and production targets outlined by MNRF.

As summer approaches, many Ontarians, both within my constituency and across the province, are eager to get back outside, to enjoy recreational and tourist activities in our beautiful province. This eagerness has been compounded by a long winter of lockdowns and restrictions that have limited their ability to get out and enjoy nature. I know that there are many Ontarians looking forward to the day when it is safe to get back to enjoying their favourite outdoor pastimes. I'm also aware that many industries in the natural resources sector are anxious to resume business without the shadow of COVID-19 hanging over them.

With these people in mind, I'm eager to dive into the particulars of the ministry's updated estimated expenditures, to get a better sense of how they intend to protect Ontario's wild spaces and those who enjoy them recreationally, while also assisting in their sustainable development. The ministry needs to strike a balance between encouraging industry growth and protecting the recreational and public lands that make Ontario's wilderness a place where people want to spend time.

It is encouraging to read that these priorities appear to be top of mind for the ministry as well in the 2021-22 estimates briefing. The ministry has committed to increasing job opportunities in Ontario's resource sector, while also prioritizing the promotion of sustainable outdoor recreation. I'm glad to see that the ministry intends to respect the principles of sustainable development, while continuing to encourage the growth of the natural resources industry, as noted on page 7 of the briefing document.

It is also reassuring to see the ministry remains committed to its pledge in the forest sector strategy—FSS for short—to increase participation from and to engage with Indigenous communities in the development of Ontario's forest sector. During last year's hearings, questions were raised about what exactly deliverables looked like when it came to Indigenous peoples' participation in forest management. I'm interested to hear how the proposed forest sector strategy committee will speak to this important issue.

For my own part, I think increased participation for Indigenous communities and the integration of their knowledge practices into forest management will be of great benefit to our province's co-managed and Indigenous-governed protected lands. With this in mind, I would like to hear what the minister and his staff have to say about specific actions being taken to adjust the FSS to increase Indigenous participation. I would also like to know how the ministry intends to reconcile different approaches and practices of forest management used in Indigenous-governed plots and those governed by the province. The use of glyphosate as a pesticide within Ontario's forests is one potential area of disagreement between Indigenous leaders and the MNRF. The ministry has a responsibility to reconcile these frameworks, and I'm eager to hear what concrete steps they and their FSS committee will be doing to do so.

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The ministry's alignment with the province's Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan is also of great interest to me. Natural ecosystems are rarely segregated by provincial boundaries. I'm interested to hear how the ministry's adherence to this new environmental plan reconciles our responsibility to national and international environmental accords and how it will remain compatible across different jurisdictions. Sustainable environmental practices often require policy-makers to take a holistic view of the interconnectedness of natural world systems. I look forward to hearing how the minister intends to reconcile changes to conservation authorities' land use permits with a sustainable plan for Ontario's natural resources and protected lands.

There have been numerous proposed plans to zone some of Ontario's wetlands for development recently, including the now cancelled glass factory in Stratford. While the proposed factory would have brought several hundred jobs to the city, the environmental cost to groundwater would have been too great, and the potential environmental damage could have had long-term consequences for those living in the area. Concerns for health and safety of the environment should be considered as equal priorities alongside those of developers. As our conversation progresses during this hearing, I would like to hear how the ministry will be handling the zoning of ecologically sensitive areas going forward.

The Ontario NDP believes in a green new deal for Ontario that prioritizes government working in concert with both industry and the environment to ensure that the development of our natural resources is done equitably and with a mind towards the continued health of Ontario's ecosystems. I'm hopeful that some of the details the minister will share with us about the rollout of the Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan within the MNRF will speak to the environmental concerns held by myself and others in my caucus. I sincerely hope that our conversations over the next few days help alleviate the concerns of those who feel that not enough is being done to protect Ontario public lands.

Following the dismantling of the Environmental Commissioner's office, the Auditor General has taken on the responsibility for the oversight of the province's environmental issues. I think she has done a fine job filling the institutional hole left by the dissolution of the Environmental Commissioner's office. Her report from November of last year, *Conserving the Natural Environment with Protected Areas*, showcases the efforts that her office has made holding government's environment policy to account. I found many of the figures in her report distressing; for instance, that there is only one ecologist in each of Ontario's five regions, each of which comprised between 45 and 291 provincial parks and conservation authorities, with only two additional ecologists based out of the head office. This seems inadequate given the size and scope of these jurisdictions.

Her report also brought to light how little of Ontario's land mass has actually been designated as protected land and how slow the process has been to move more of it under protection, either by the ministry or the MECP or our partners in Indigenous communities. I hope that in the course of these hearings, you will be able to provide details, Minister, for how you will begin the process of implementing the recommendations proposed by the Auditor General's report in the current fiscal year.

During last year's hearings, I noted that the words "climate change" were only mentioned in the 2020-21 estimates book three times. In the 2021-22 estimates book, the term is only used twice. Neither mention of the term includes specific actions, programs or policies that the ministry will pursue to address the impacts of climate change. The inclusion of the phrase reveals nothing about the MNRF's long-term vision to prevent further practices

that might damage our climate. I, like you, am deeply worried for my grandchildren and all our future generations born in this province. I wonder what the state of the natural world they inherit will be. If the government and its ministries charged with protecting Ontario's natural environment and public lands do not invest in direct actions to mitigate climate change and reverse its effects, then they will experience a far more unsustainable climate than the one we enjoyed in our youth.

Your ministry has noted in the 2021-22 estimates book that it intends to implement Ontario's Flooding Strategy in coordination with specific communities and affiliated ministries. Increased flooding events have been identified by climate scientists as symptoms of changing climate. This flooding mitigation strategy is aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change, though, as we discussed at last year's hearings, the funding for this initiative has been cut in half. Nonetheless, flood preparedness remains important for communities near rivers and streams. Erratic and extreme weather are symptoms of our changing climate and as a result, our communities need infrastructure that can stand up to rising flood waters and it remains critically important that the MNRF continue to help municipalities and Indigenous communities protect themselves against extreme flooding. I look forward to hearing about other initiatives the MNRF has planned to combat climate change and its effect on both Ontario's environment and its people.

We are also proud of our forest fire rangers, and I know the minister's time has been taken up largely with what's happening in our province as we speak. The work they do in Ontario and across the continent is tremendous and, in my opinion, these front-line heroes deserve our gratitude and higher pay. Investments in wildfire, safety and fire-fighting are one way in which Ontario should prepare itself to combat the effects of climate change. I worry that not enough is being done to ensure our province's fire response teams are properly equipped with the best tools for the job in light of the recent mechanical failure of water bomber 274 that led to a crash landing just a couple of months ago. Thankfully, no one was seriously injured, but I do hope that the minister will explain what actions his ministry will be taking to combat wildfires and keep communities safe. This issue will be especially important in the coming year as the fire season is off to a blazing start—sorry for the pun—with substantial fires already raging in northwestern Ontario and an evacuation order issued in northern Manitoba. It is critical that the ministry be prepared for an intense fire season here in Ontario, and I hope to hear more about the province's wildfire preparedness over the next coming days.

Another issue is the growing stockpile of nuclear waste in Ontario. There are now plans to develop deep geologic repositories at sites located within the province to store it. While the surveying and construction of these sites as well as the consultation process with local residents are being handled by the Nuclear Waste Management Organization, the impact that nuclear waste transportation, storage and potential leakage could have on public lands

and waters is subject to oversight by MNRF. With the Nuclear Waste Management Organization engaging consultations with communities in Teeswater and Ignace about potential deep geologic repositories in their communities, I'm interested to hear what the MNRF is doing in conjunction with the NWMO to study and assess the potential environmental impacts of nuclear waste storage. These repositories will need to house highly radioactive materials for more than 10,000 years. I look forward to hearing what the ministry has prepared for the safe containment and potential clean-up of radioactive waste in Ontario's natural ecosystems.

Biomass plants present a potential energy alternative for parts of Ontario, and as a northern MPP, I'm familiar with the biomass plants. In fact, there were two in my riding, one which my constituents have lobbied to try to save before it is potentially torn down in the very near future. The news that MNRF would begin consultations into the efficacy of using biomass plants for energy generation and as a means for being more efficient with Ontario's wood by-products is heartening to see. Renewable power generation that works for northern and rural Ontario is something I support, and I hope that you and I, Minister, have the chance to get into the specifics of what the team you have assigned to study this topic is planning and what they hope to achieve.

1350

I know many in my riding would support the reopening of the biomass plants, not just for job creation opportunities but also for the knock-on effects in our community.

Also of particular interest to me are the investments in the forestry sector that the ministry has committed to with its new fiscal estimates. There are tens of millions of dollars being contributed towards technological innovation and industry development in the estimates briefing. I'm curious to learn how investments in forest density-tracking equipment, like lidar, will effectively replace other aerial and ground-surveying methods in a cost-efficient way, given the high price tag of those tools.

This ministry has also committed to using some of its resources in the coming year to negotiating a better deal with regard to the tariffs on Canadian softwood lumber in the USA. As an MPP whose riding contains thousands of workers in the forestry sector, I hope the minister will be able to explain to me and them what specific negotiations or actions he plans to take to get more of our forest products exported south.

More immediately, I also look forward to hearing about how the ministry intends to allocate the additional \$3 million in unspent funds in the 2020 Forest Sector Investment and Innovation Program in this current fiscal year. As the economy looks forward to restarting, many small and medium-sized enterprises could use targeted relief, and the forest sector is no different. I will be asking the minister to provide a systematic explanation for where the \$13 million of the Forest Sector Investment and Innovation Program will be spent.

While the MECP handles the majority of conservation activities in Ontario, the MNRF has committed in its

estimates briefing to implement priority actions with regard to the Invasive Species Act and to work with external partners to achieve these actions. This commitment to protecting Ontario's native biodiversity is admirable, but I would like to hear more from the minister about what specific actions the MNRF is going to take to monitor and control invasive species in Ontario, including the 10 additional ones added to the list this year. Additionally, I will be curious to learn how these invasive species management programs will be coordinated between the jurisdictions of MNRF and MECP, as well as how funding for these projects will be jointly managed.

Research in invasive species goes hand in hand with gaining a better understanding of how healthy native terrestrial and aquatic species in Ontario are. There are many isolated and endangered species that live in pockets of Ontario's protected lands. Species like the woodland caribou, eastern grey wolf and black bears are all subject to disruptions by human activities. I'm glad to see that the MNRF is taking actions with the MECP to gather more data about the health of these potentially sensitive native species.

Given that the MNRF says that it is committed to working together with MECP for research projects, I hope that in our discussion the minister will be able to speak to how the ministry will continue monitoring biodiversity and how it plans to mitigate any human impact on many natural species in our province.

I would also like to use some of the time we have together over the next few days to bring to light some concerns Ontarians across the province have brought to my attention regarding the lack of transparency in their dealings with MNRF. Folks in my riding have been dissatisfied with the ministry's handling of numerous information requests for natural development projects and environmental assessments conducted near their homes. Many feel that the ministry has been purposely ignoring them in favour of developers or industry representatives. I hope the minister can speak to how some of the \$5.1 million of additional funds that have been allocated for service modernization might be used to improve communication and transparency with Ontarians who feel cut off from their government. This transparency extends to the kinds of reports being published by the MNRF for public and academic awareness. Annual reports like the fish and wildlife account from 2016 remain unpublished, leading to a substantial gap in data from this area.

The lack of available data has not stopped the ministry from making spending and policy decisions with regard to fish and wildlife-related projects, including the digital game tag requisition program and the recently announced smelt observation and study program.

Open and transparent data is the key to keeping the government accountable with the public purse. Having access to spending breakdowns from key ministerial portfolios helps Ontarians and elected members make sense of the policy decisions being made. During our conversation, I hope that the minister and his staff will be able to explain why these reports have gone unpublished.

There are so many different subjects that I hope we can have a productive and informative discussion about, and I look forward to the insights the minister and the staff will be sharing with us this week.

I'd like to personally thank the minister for being here today. It's a pleasure to get to speak with you again about a subject we clearly both care a great deal about. I also would like to thank all of our guests and everyone in the committee today. Thank you very much.

Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): You have eight minutes left.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right, so I have some time to get into some questions, then. So, that was a lot, and it's amazing how many areas the MNRF does, for a small ministry, or one that isn't financed very well, in my belief. But it really does touch on a lot of areas that are near and dear to my heart but also very important for our province, both industry-wide and in the natural environment.

One thing that is being talked a lot about in my community, in northern Ontario, is the oversight of the deep geological site, the potential. People are very opposed, in many instances, but in some ways not really reassured that anyone is really watching out for their interests. I'm going to ask a few questions about what is being done about that and what role that the MNRF is playing in that.

My first question is general: How much oversight is the MNRF providing over the proposed Ignace deep geological site?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Do you want to ask the questions and then we'll do them all at once, or do you want to do them one at a time? One at a time?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Yes, we'll do them one at a time.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Okay. Thank you very much, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question. I'm going to turn this over to the deputy minister, but I'll say just in general that the NWMO is under federal administration. Our role as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry is with regard to the crown land and any land that may be impacted by it. We're basically the landlord of the land, but all of the standards and that are really dictated through the NWMO and the federal government.

I will turn this over to my deputy minister, because she will give you a much more complete answer than what I can give you.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Good afternoon. It's Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark, deputy minister, Ministry of Natural Resources. I will pass this over to Jennifer Barton who is our assistant deputy minister of our regional operations division, who has been overseeing, as part of our regional operations division, the work with the Nuclear Waste Management Organization. I will pass that over to Jennifer.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Thank you, Deputy, and thank you, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question. Regulation of nuclear fuel waste falls under the authority of the

government of Canada, which established the Nuclear Waste Management Organization, the NWMO, to address the long-term management of Canada's nuclear fuel waste. The NWMO is seeking willing communities to build an underground storage facility for Canada's nuclear waste. As you mentioned, a few communities in Ontario have expressed interest in working with the NWMO. The Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission is also responsible for licensing the entire life cycle of the project, so they're also involved in the process, and MNRF stays engaged with them.

1400

The ministry is helping to facilitate the work being undertaken by the NWMO, while ensuring that Ontario's natural resources on crown lands are considered during the site investigation process. The NWMO has undertaken significant consultation in both the areas in the province, including Ignace, where some borehole work has been completed and other borehole drilling plans are being considered. As I understand it, the communities in the Ignace area have expressed some support for this stage of the NWMO project and are working quite closely through their mayor on the work with the NWMO.

I also understand that the Nuclear Waste Management Organization is no longer considering some of the other locations in the province that they had been looking into, and they've really zoned in on the two Ontario communities that have expressed interest in working with them.

Hopefully that gives you a little bit of background. As the deputy said, my division, the regional operation division, continues to work with the NWMO, and we'll work with them throughout the life cycle of the project as they move forward to make some decisions.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Jennifer, could I stop you for one moment? Would you please state your full name and position within the ministry? Moving forward, if anyone is about to speak, please state your name if you're on the government side in the ministry and your position within the ministry.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: My apologies—the risk of being the first responder. It's Jennifer Barton here, and I am the assistant deputy minister with the regional operations division in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): You can go ahead.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: So you're working with the—I'm familiar with the organization and how it's constructed in its governance. I think, because the repository will be built on crown land and it's a large area, and Ignace is a very small community, people that live in the surrounding areas and some people who live in Ignace are also very concerned about this going forward. How many studies have been conducted on this project independently from the Nuclear Waste Management Organization?

Hon. John Yakabuski: I will pass that to [*inaudible*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Is somebody's mike open?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark, deputy minister, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

As Jennifer mentioned, this is handled by the federal agency, and so their studies are carried out by their organization. I will pass this over to Jennifer to see if there's anything further she has in terms of information related to any of the studies and work that they've done. We can also provide contact information from NWMO if you'd like some further information.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): One minute.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Jennifer, I'll pass this back over to you to see if there's anything further you have on potential studies. Otherwise, we can provide some contact information.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Thanks, Deputy, and thanks again, MPP Monteith-Farrell. I don't necessarily have the full extent of all the studies that have been conducted by the NWMO at my fingertips. I do know that their efforts are currently focused on conducting preliminary studies in the form of borehole drilling in the two communities in Ontario that expressed interest, including Ignace. That's the most significant interaction between the ministry and the NWMO at this point. I don't have the full extent of those studies on hand, unfortunately.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That is our time for the opposition. We can now go back to the minister for 30 minutes.

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Sorry, before we do that, there's just a procedural issue to address.

I'd like to seek unanimous consent from the committee to stand down consideration of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry to consider a missed line item in the Ministry of Health estimates. Do I have unanimous consent from members? Thank you.

Shall vote 1407, health capital program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hand. Carried.

We will now resume consideration of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Minister, you have 30 minutes to respond.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, Chair. I don't get to vote on these things, do I? Because I was going to put a couple of motions myself in—just kidding.

Thank you again. I've spoken at length about forestry in my opening remarks, but I would like to focus now on some other areas of operations from my ministry on some of our preventive expenditures and some of the work we've done to offset the impact of COVID-19.

I do want to thank MPP Monteith-Farrell for her opening remarks as well. It's certainly appreciated where she has been positive about the work that we've done, and we also are quite aware that we're here to be accountable for things that we may not have satisfied the opposition as well. So that's what we're here for, but we do appreciate compliments because the people in my ministry who work so hard deserve those as well, so thank you very much for those.

One of my ministry's important functions is ensuring the protection of Ontario's natural resources and making sure that those resources are there for future generations. Ontario is very fortunate to have world-class hunting and fishing opportunities and forests that support a multi-billion-dollar industry. We have tremendous natural heritage, stretching over nearly one million square kilometres.

Since 1892, conservation officers have served on the front lines, protecting our resources and upholding public safety in the vast wilderness of Ontario. This proud tradition continues today, more than a century later. There are currently 184 conservation officers in the ministry working out of more than 50 locations in every region of Ontario. These positions include field officers, canine handlers and specialist positions in training, intelligence and investigations. They provide year-round delivery of enforcement services, working in all weather conditions and amid our province's legendary black flies and mosquitoes.

Conservation officers protect our natural resources by patrolling Ontario's lakes, rivers, trails, urban centres, back roads and hard-to-reach wilderness areas. To get where they're needed in the backcountry, they operate a wide variety of vehicles, including snowmobiles, boats, all-terrain vehicles and helicopters.

Their work touches on a variety of activities, including the enforcement of hunting and fishing regulations, promotion of hunting safety, investigation of illegal activity against fish and wildlife, and combatting the spread of invasive species.

Public outreach and education are also important parts of the job, and our conservation officers are well known in the communities they serve. Each year, conservation officers connect with more than 200,000 natural resource users in every part of the province. Officers live and work in many of the remote or rural communities where they serve. This local perspective helps them support sustainable resource use across Ontario and it helps them better understand our clients, the traditions of hunting and fishing, and Indigenous people's close connection to the land.

Assistance from members of the public is vital for ensuring, for example, that occurrences of poaching are addressed. Conservation officers respond to tips from concerned citizens and investigate reports of actions that affect our resources.

A lot has changed over the many years they've been serving our province and today conservation officers use cutting edge tactics and technology to carry out their work. This includes DNA analysis, GPS tracking, data analysis, aerial and canine patrols, and wildlife decoys. They are also now exploring the use of remotely piloted aircraft systems—what you and I would call drones.

1410

I'm very pleased to say that our ministry is actively recruiting 25 additional conservation officers to the ranks. That's right: actively recruiting 25 new conservation officers to the ranks. This was a key commitment our government made to ensure that our world-class natural

resources stay world-class. The new conservation officers will help us increase our focus on sustainable resource management and further the advancements of our public safety goals.

In my time on this earth, which has been quite substantial by some people's standards but maybe not that much by others—Lorne, don't you be looking at me like that—we've all had an opportunity, I'm sure, anybody who has enjoyed the great outdoors, to interact and come across conservation officers and the work that they do. I, as the minister, have had a tremendous opportunity.

It's interesting; I received a note from a retired conservation officer not that long ago, speaking about interactions that he had with my father as the MPP at the time. He was a new conservation officer then, and my father was the MPP and the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Natural Resources at the time. I knew the man by name and to say hello to him, but not in the kind of way that my dad would have. It's just another story about the real people doing the great work for the people of Ontario, occupying those jobs and those endeavours as conservation officers.

So we're very proud of the group that we have. As I say, as minister, I've had a chance to work more closely with them than probably most. I'm very proud of the work that they do, and I'm very proud of our ministry and the support that we give them.

One thing that I have to point out about our conservation officers is that they've been there on the front lines throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We've seen countless examples of heroism from front-line workers, and Ontario's conservation officers have been there to support these efforts. While many of us in the Ontario government have been working from home, our conservation officers have continued their important front-line task of protecting Ontario's natural resources and keeping Ontarians safe. This has included taking on some new roles to support their colleagues across the government in educating, raising awareness and, where necessary, enforcing the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act and the reopening Ontario act. I couldn't be any prouder of them for shouldering this challenge during the pandemic. They're a credit to the ministry. It's another highlight in a long legacy of public service on behalf of Ontarians—and you may have seen our public service announcement on the hiring of new conservation officers.

In speaking about my dad having served as the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Natural Resources, I do want to thank my parliamentary assistant—and I know he's on the Zoom here today—MPP Mike Harris of Kitchener—Conestoga, for the tremendous work that he has done as parliamentary assistant, not only in working with me but also taking on issues on his own and leading the charge on them. I'm sure we'll have a chance to talk about some of those throughout these 15 hours of hearings in estimates.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on many of the sectors my ministry is responsible for. We have taken a number of measures to offset the impacts on operators in the forest sector.

Ontario's forest sector truly demonstrated its value during the early days of the pandemic. Raw materials from Ontario forests were used to manufacture products for hygiene, food and medical supplies, personal protective equipment, and packaging and shipping products. Our government was one of the first jurisdictions in Canada to declare the forest sector an essential industry.

Despite us being able to continue operating amid widespread economic shutdowns, the pandemic did have an impact on business in the sector. To offset the financial impact of COVID-19, my ministry implemented a number of relief measures. We deferred payments for six months and we expedited the flow of funding under the \$54-million Provincial Forest Access Roads Funding Program.

We also partnered with the federal government to launch the Forest Sector Safety Measures Fund, a \$5.3-million program that will help small and medium-sized forestry companies implement health and safety measures in their workplaces. Just to give you an idea of the numbers, there are more than 1,900 small and medium-sized businesses in Ontario's forest sector, and they employ close to 35 million—that was an exaggeration—35,000 people directly. These businesses will use this funding to set up sanitizing stations, provide enhanced cleaning services, offer additional worker training, invest in personal protective equipment and implement physical distancing measures. Financial assistance for workplace measures will help these businesses keep their doors open, while protecting the workers and the communities where they live.

We also provided \$3.5 million in funding for COVID-related safety measures for tree planters in 2020. We are extending this COVID-19 incremental silviculture cost program for the 2021 tree planting season as well, with up to \$3 million in funding being made available through the Forestry Futures Trust. By enabling the 2021 tree plant to proceed safely, we are advancing our commitment to sustainability, while protecting workers and communities from COVID-19.

We have been seeing strong demand for wood products, especially for lumber and composite materials. With increased safety measures in place, Ontario's sawmills are operating at capacity, and they're well placed to meet this increased demand. Lumber prices have also stayed high through the winter months, when we would normally see a decrease. It's been difficult to forecast lumber prices during these unprecedented times, and we're monitoring these trends closely.

Hunting, fishing and resource-based tourism have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is big business in Ontario, with hunters and anglers spending more than \$560 million and \$1.75 billion, respectively, each year. Hunting and fishing support jobs in many rural and northern communities all across that part of the province. With land borders to the south closed, stay-at-home orders for Ontarians and quarantine measures implemented for all international visitors, seasonal hunting and fishing operations have experienced a devastating blow to their annual revenues.

We are continuing to provide relief to resource-based tourism businesses by waiving the costs for certain licences, and refunding revenues collected from a range of fees. These include fees for licences to provide bear-hunting services, bear management area fees, baitfish harvester and dealer licence fees, baitfish harvest area fees and land use fees for outpost camp permits or leases. Operators in the hunting, fishing and resource-based tourism sector have built a world-class industry in Ontario, and we recognize how hard-hit they have been by this pandemic. We continue to do everything we can to support them during these challenging circumstances.

My ministry has implemented similar COVID-19 relief measures for the aggregate, petroleum and commercial fishing sectors. We declared the aggregate sector an essential service, which allowed some aggregate operations to proceed without support programs. We also deferred royalties for up to six months of petroleum production for Ontario's largest natural gas producers, and we've implemented operational changes to improve communications between our offices and oil and gas operators on the status of applications.

1420

We've provided relief to commercial fishers in Ontario by suspending the payment of commercial fishing royalties for 2020 and refunding royalties already received for fish harvested in 2020. And of course, throughout the pandemic, we've been meeting with stakeholders from all of these industries to listen to their concerns and get a better understanding of how the pandemic is affecting their operations and to identify other ways of supporting them through this crisis.

Some of the expenditures we undertake as a ministry are preventive measures aimed at increasing our resiliency and our responsiveness to emergencies. A key example of this is our investments in wildland fire management preparedness. Our province is recognized globally as a leader in this field, and my ministry has significant resources and personnel that are dedicated to predicting, detecting and fighting wildland fires. Having well-equipped and well-resourced firefighting capabilities is very important for protecting our communities and forests from wildland fires.

Each year, my ministry receives a year-start allocation of funding for emergency firefighting. This level of funding isn't intended to be the ministry's total annual budget for emergency firefighting, but rather a base amount to start out with. Every fire season is different. Some years, there's a relatively low level of wildland fire activity, and in other years, like the memorable fire season of 2018, there's an exceptional number of fires to contend with.

The year-start allocation funds firefighting activity until a point in the season where we can accurately predict the total costs, at which time my ministry requests the remaining balance of firefighting requirements from the contingency fund. This approach recognizes the variable nature of emergency firefighting in a given year and it ensures we will get the funding we need to cope with whatever the fire season holds.

Last year, in recognition of the true fixed costs to operate a modern, world-class wildfire management program, we increased our base funding for emergency forest firefighting by \$30 million. The ministry receives a total of \$100 million at the start of the year to protect people and property from wildland fires. This increase enabled us to strengthen our preparedness at the year's start, and it meant that the annual request from the contingency fund will more accurately reflect the true cost of firefighting based on the severity of the season each year.

Our staff, who are recognized all over the world for their skills and professionalism, have been planning and preparing for the wildland fire season within the context of the COVID-19 situation in the province. The ministry continues to hire highly trained firefighters, pilots and support staff; provide health and safety and specialized training; and ensure equipment is maintained so that we are ready to respond to wildland fires and other natural resource emergencies. My ministry's COVID operational plan will continue to evolve, to maintain direction from the Ministry of Health and to ensure our ability to respond to wildfires.

Another good example of preventive spending is the investments we make in protecting people and property from flooding. Our role in managing flooding focuses on mitigation, reduction of risks and early warning activities. My ministry operates the Surface Water Monitoring Centre, which gathers and analyzes weather data and forecasts water levels. This is part of an early warning system that ensures our communities have the information they need to protect themselves from flooding. The Surface Water Monitoring Centre also provides resources to the public to better inform them of flooding risks. These resources include detailed maps that provide frequently updated information on Ontario's watersheds.

Our annual expenditures on flooding protection are best understood as preventive spending, investments in making sure that Ontario is prepared for these frequently occurring natural hazards.

On the subject of flooding, I'd like to mention one of our signature initiatives, the development and release of our province's flooding strategy. This was developed in response to the devastating flooding from the spring of 2019, an event that caused catastrophic damage and displaced thousands of people in eastern Ontario.

My area in eastern Ontario was as hard hit as anywhere across the province in 2019. The majestic Ottawa River, which I'm sure many of you, if not all of you, have had the opportunity to be on sometime in your travels and in your life, reached heights that had never been seen before—historic levels. The devastation of that flooding on water courses as broad—the expanse of the watershed of the Ottawa River is just unbelievable: the amount of area that it covers, the number of tributaries that flow into it. It was not something that anyone wants to experience.

We did have a report from Doug McNeil that clearly talked about our flooding advisory—and I'll talk about that in these remarks. He did provide us with a report on

the floods in Ontario in 2019, and he touched on some of the stuff that took place earlier than that in 2017 as well, because those were two bad years within a three-year period. But if you were a part of that, if you lived in any of those areas—in my area, I've got the Ottawa River that borders my riding because I border the province of Quebec. I also have the mighty Madawaska and the Bonnechere River watersheds as well. So we were flooded on all three.

It was quite an experience to be out there, boots on the ground. I'll tell you, I don't know how it would have been manageable if COVID-19 had hit in the spring of 2019 as opposed to late 2019 elsewhere in the world, and then we got it in 2020, because it would have been absolutely devastating, being unable to bring in—our fire crews from MNR were a big part of the flooding response in my riding and indeed in the Ottawa area as well. We had the Armed Forces on top of that. It was massive. But also, the number of people who volunteered to go out and place sandbags, fill sandbags, deliver sandbags—it was a volunteer effort that we could not have had if COVID-19 had been at its peak at that time as well. So we're thankful that COVID-19 and the flood didn't coincide, because that would have been even more devastating.

In response to these floods, our government recognized that we needed a plan in place to address these naturally occurring events, because while 2019 was an exceptional year, floods can and do happen in any year, and we need to be prepared for them. The development process began with a series of consultations across the province and the appointment, as I said, of a special adviser on flooding, the first ever. The special adviser, Doug McNeil, compiled a report on ways we can better prepare for flooding and how we can help our communities recover more quickly from flooding when it happens. The report contained dozens of recommendations for improving flood management in Ontario, and the recommendations fed directly into the development of our flooding strategy.

I had the honour of releasing the flooding strategy to the public in the spring of 2020. In fact, it was still winter; I think it was March 9, so I think it was still the winter season. But it was a spring-like day up in Minden when Minister Scott and I were there for the announcement. It's a long-term plan to make Ontario better prepared for flooding, better equipped to respond to floods and more capable of mounting a rapid recovery.

The strategy prescribes a series of new and enhanced actions aimed at improving our collective understanding of flood risks and helping us make appropriate land use planning decisions. The measures in the strategy are grouped into five priorities.

1430

The first priority is to understand flood risks. This involves improving our scientific understanding of flooding risks and making sure the public and the governments and agencies that represent them are aware of the risks related to flooding. Under this priority, we are also ramping up our public awareness and education efforts.

The second priority is to strengthen the government around flood risks. The management of flooding is

complex and involves all levels of governments and other partners as well. The strategy clarifies the roles and responsibilities of each group involved in flood management in Ontario. This clarification makes sure we're all working together to put in place sound policies that help keep people out of harm's way.

The third priority in the flooding strategy is enhancing flood preparedness. Floods are a fact of life in Ontario, but we can be better equipped to handle them by knowing when and where flooding is more likely to occur. The actions under this priority will see us invest in state-of-the-art science and technology to enhance our preparedness.

The fourth priority is enhancing flood response and recovery. Under this priority, we're putting measures in place to improve how we receive and respond to requests for assistance. We're doing this by making our assistance programs more coordinated, more effective and better connected.

Finally, the fifth priority is to invest in flood risk reduction. The aim of this priority is to promote strategic financial investments and to work with the federal government to increase investment in critical areas like mapping and infrastructure. There's nothing we can do to prevent flooding; we can only become more resilient to it. Increasing resiliency is a shared responsibility, one that requires the participation of all levels of governments, agencies and property owners. We all have an important role to play in preparing for flooding and extreme weather events. Our flooding strategy is our concrete plan to increase our resiliency and to work more closely with our partners in protecting people and property from these frequent events.

Another important focus for my ministry is our role regulating and supporting the aggregate industry here in Ontario. "Aggregates" is the collective term for stone, sand and gravel. These are humble, everyday materials, but they play a hugely important role in the lives of Ontarians. These materials are essential for construction. They are, quite literally, the foundation of civic life. Without aggregates, there will be no roads, no hospitals and no schools.

The aggregate sector supplies raw materials to the construction industry, but it's an important part of the—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Minister, that's all the time we have.

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Sorry, I lied. You have two minutes.

Hon. John Yakabuski: I was hoping I would get a little bit of a warning—it's an important part of the Ontario economy in its own right as well. It's a \$1.6-billion industry that employs close to 30,000 people in communities around Ontario. It's a vital industry now and it will remain so long into the future, because we know major growth is on the horizon.

By 2041—just one generation from now—the greater Golden Horseshoe region is expected to grow by a staggering four million people. Growing communities in the region will need roads to connect them, schools for their children, hospitals, condos, office buildings and

subdivisions, and all of this vital industry will require aggregates.

The growth in the greater Golden Horseshoe region was predicted before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the province, but now aggregates will be needed more than ever as our province shifts towards recovery. One of the avenues for recovery will be strategic investments in infrastructure, supported by both the provincial and federal governments. Again, all of this infrastructure will require aggregates.

There are a number of things that I'm going to touch on probably during the question-and-answer session, but I am grateful for the opportunity to address the committee on estimates. I look forward to the questions over the next three days—part of this day and two more—and wish you very well. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you, Minister. We now go to the opposition side. You have 20 minutes. Who will be asking the questions? MPP Monteith-Farrell. Sorry about that. Thank you.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: No worries. All right, I'm going to continue with—my understanding from Assistant Deputy Minister Barton is that there are no studies that were undertaken independently of the Nuclear Waste Management Organization; like, from the MNRF, you didn't get any kind of study to look at the impact of the storage in Ignace or Teeswater.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Do I have to go first? You've already said, MPP Monteith-Farrell, but I guess I will direct the question to my deputy minister.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you for the additional question. I'll hand that over to ADM Jennifer Barton, and she can provide any further information that she may have.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: In response to MPP Monteith-Farrell's question, just a few more details that maybe I can provide: As I said earlier, regulation of nuclear fuel waste falls under the authority of the government of Canada, which established the NWMO to address the long-term management of Canada's nuclear fuel waste. The Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission is responsible for the licensing of the entire life cycle of the project.

So from an MNRF perspective, the answer is no, we haven't done any specific studies in response to the project. For facilities on crown land, the ministry will work directly with NWMO to obtain permission and to comply with conditions as we move forward, and for facilities on private land, the ministry provides guidance and advice based on best practices in our work with the NWMO. But the study specifically would be the responsibility of the NWMO. If it's helpful, MPP Monteith-Farrell, I'm happy to provide contact information for our contact with that organization.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you for that. So that answers that part. The MNRF is not involved. They're allowing the Nuclear Waste Management Organization to sort of oversee that.

There was the use of the word "landlord." Are they paying you to use that crown land, or will they be paying the province of Ontario?

Ms. Jennifer Barton: We're not that far along in the project yet. We do have an MOU with the NWMO which will guide our relationship as we work with them going forward, but actually, much of the operations and our relationship with them has been a little bit on hold due to COVID. They've sort of slowed down the project. I think they realize they're not able to consult with some of the communities they need to consult with and some of the stakeholders they need to consult with.

So at this point, things have really slowed down. They're starting to slowly get back to business, and we expect to see them come back and start working with us around field operations, but we're not at the point yet where we've discussed what the relationship would be with the province in terms of the use of the crown land.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Then, is it my understanding that the Nuclear Management Waste Organization would be the one to calculate the cost to the local environment if there was a spill or a breach? Would that be something that the MNRF would be thinking about?

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Ms. Jennifer Barton: My apologies, MPP Monteith-Farrell; I missed your question. Could you repeat it for me?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: It's my understanding that what you're saying is that you're leaving that up to the Nuclear Waste Management Organization. And the other part is, because MNRF has a responsibility to take care of natural resources and lands in Ontario, was it ever part of the process to look at the cost of cleaning up a spill or a breach in these facilities? Is that something you'd consider?

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Thank you for repeating it.

Again, we're just not at that stage yet with the organization in terms of how the project will move forward. Once we get to that stage, that would obviously need to be subject to negotiations with the NWMO, to consider how we move forward. Obviously, we would be interested in making sure that we discussed the remediation of any spills or any issues that would come up.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Has the MNRF done any consultation with the Treaty 3 leadership? Those are the lands that would be affected.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: One of the reasons the project has slowed down a little bit is because many of the Indigenous communities have not been available for consultation during COVID-19.

We did delegate much of the responsibility for Indigenous consultation to the NWMO, but we will, obviously, work closely with them and ensure that the consultation process they undertake is thorough and appropriate for the size and scale of the project.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: A big part of the concern about the Ignace site is the transportation of that waste from southern Ontario, some 1,500-plus kilometres to the area. Has the MNRF done any kind of calculation on the safety or the cost of cleaning up something if an accident occurs along the way?

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Thanks for the question.

Again, I would say, MPP Monteith-Farrell, we're just not quite at that stage of the project yet—until they start to narrow down which site they're interested in. There will be, obviously, some more work between the MNRF and the organization, but to date, we haven't undertaken anything like that at this point.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Well, considering their deadline is coming up within a couple of years, I think it's probably time that we look at the cost of this and what it looks like and the involvement that the province would have.

I guess the same goes for the Teeswater site—there hasn't been any kind of study by the MNRF on that; it's too early. That's the other site that's being considered. Okay. I take the head-nodding as a yes on that. Thank you.

Like I said, the transportation piece of this is of great concern. At this point, there have been no studies, is what I consider.

So I guess that's where it's at: It's with NWMO, and MNRF hasn't done anything other than some partnership agreements so far. Is that a good estimation of what's happening? Or is there something else that MNRF is doing, as far as studying any aspect of this project and this repository being built in Ontario?

Ms. Jennifer Barton: I would say, yes, your assessment is correct. We're still in the exploratory phase with the NWMO. It is priority work for our Dryden district office, so they are working closely with them. But, as mentioned previously, we were having biweekly meetings pre-COVID. The project really has slowed down significantly since COVID. I'm not even certain that their timeline will continue to be what it originally was planned as. Once they get back up and fully operational and re-engage with the ministry again, I think we'll be back into the sorts of discussions that you're talking about. Obviously, a number of other provincial ministries will be quite interested, and we'll work closely with them around not only the transportation question but some of the other things that you've mentioned as well.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: How transparent will that be to the public?

Ms. Jennifer Barton: It's a great question. Some of these questions are getting a little bit outside of the scope of detail or my knowledge of the project, but I would say that some of that responsibility in terms of what you're asking in this question will really be up to the NWMO and some of their practices in terms of what they would share publicly. So we'll follow our guidelines in terms of both consultation and public engagement for the pieces of the project that are under provincial responsibility but we'll also be looking for the NWMO to also share information as they move forward with the project as well.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you for those answers.

I'm going to move on to another area that was brought to our attention, and I'm sure the minister will have heard of this as well. How did the proposed changes to the Professional Foresters Act, which require arborists to become members of the OPFA or be accompanied by a certified

forester, contribute to the ministry's commitment to reduce red tape and promote job creation?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question. [*Inaudible*] my screen here; I've got to put on my glasses. Okay. Oh, I see. I'm not on the video. That's why. Okay, sorry.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: That's okay.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you again, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question. I'm going to pass it over, but I will just begin by saying that we've received no proposal from the Ontario professional foresters on changes to the act. They've had discussions, but we've received no proposal from them at this time. But I will pass it on to the deputy minister, and she can give you a more complete explanation, perhaps, to the question that you have there.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: As the minister mentioned, these are some considerations that the association is looking at and they have done some consultation, but as you mentioned, they haven't formally submitted what their proposed changes are at this point in time, and so we are waiting to hear further from them. I will see if Craig Brown, our assistant deputy minister for our policy division—I'll just quickly check with him and see if there's anything further he may want to add on this one.

Mr. Craig Brown: Hi. I'm Craig Brown, the policy assistant deputy minister at the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. As both the minister and the deputy minister have indicated, we would evaluate the proposal and we would also consider and determine if there was any impact on other professionals with what's being proposed by the OPFA, and that includes any impacts on arborists. That would be a consideration.

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Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I'm sure that the minister has been lobbied the same as I have been by both groups, so it's obviously something that's in the works.

Does the government have a position, or are you still going to just consider what you're going to do about this when they finally get their proposal in to you?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: In answer to your question, we are waiting to hear the details of their proposal. They have been doing some consultation, and we are looking to see how they've addressed some of the concerns that they've heard—obviously, they will be bringing forward to us for further consideration at that time.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Well, I guess we'll wait and see on that one. Maybe we'll be in estimates next year again and I'll ask my question again.

I'm going to switch to some questions on the forestry sector.

How much revenue has the forestry sector lost due to the tariffs from the USA? And have export revenues dipped below what they were prior to the introduction of those duties?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thanks for the question, MPP Monteith-Farrell.

I'm not sure it's a question of revenues as much as expenditures go up when you're talking about tariffs—I guess it's six of one or half a dozen of the other. But there's no question it has been impacted. I don't have the exact numbers off the top of my head, but one of our assistant deputy ministers or the deputy herself may have those numbers. There's no question about the impacts that it has had on the industry, not just here in Ontario but all across Canada.

Recently, just late last week, there was another position taken about increases to the tariffs, so we'll have to see how that impacts as well.

We've been fighting to have those tariffs removed, as has the federal government. Trade is a federal government issue; it's not something that the provinces negotiate individually, but it is one that has certainly been a bone of contention for the forestry industry in Canada.

We actually hoped, with the huge increase in the cost of—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. John Yakabuski:—lumber, that there would be some action from the Americans in reducing these tariffs or maybe eliminating them altogether. For the first time throughout any of these disputes, the home builders in the United States have actually gotten involved directly in encouraging the federal government in the United States to actually do something about these tariffs, because they're hurting the industry in the United States. You've got to remember that that's adding to the cost of the product that is used south of the border as well.

I don't have the exact numbers that you asked for, so before the time is up maybe I'll pass that on to the deputy minister and she can deal with it.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I'm going to pass this along to Sean Maguire, who is our assistant deputy minister in the forestry industry division. He can add to what the minister has already described in terms of duties and tariffs.

Over to you, Sean.

Mr. Sean Maguire: Hello. I'm Sean Maguire, assistant deputy minister of the forestry industry division.

As far as lost revenue or lost income related to tariffs, I don't have an exact number because it's a matter of perspective. But I think the answer is, there is no lost revenue. There is revenue being generated that's being held at the border, but from the crown's perspective we're collecting our stumpage, and the industry is currently selling as much as they can possibly sell and can't actually make enough to sell, so effectively there is no lost revenue at this time related to tariffs.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: There is that shortage of lumber, or the high prices that people aren't willing to pay. Maybe I'll ask you about your efforts to lobby and the money—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's the time we have. We're going to be moving now to the government side, beginning with MPP Harris.

Mr. Mike Harris: Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. It's great to see you. I'm

really excited to have the Ministry of Natural Resources here again, for the second time in a calendar year; I think that's unprecedented.

The government, and certainly the committee, I think, is lucky to have the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry here, because I think this really sheds a lot of light on what this ministry—as the oldest ministry, obviously, here in the province of Ontario—actually does. Often we're kind of a little bit forgotten. Certainly it's something that I know you're looking to change, and really everybody here at the estimates committee from the ministry today is looking to change as well, so I just wanted to give a big thank you to everybody who has put in a lot of hard work to get all the facts and figures and everything ready for us here today.

And of course, thank you to all the committee members. There have been some great, poignant questions so far from MPP Monteith-Farrell, and hopefully we'll get an opportunity to hear from a couple of her colleagues a little bit later on over the next few days.

Minister, I wanted to ask you a little bit about the bait management strategy. I know that MPP Barrett is here on the call as well with us today, and he, as your previous parliamentary assistant before I took over, almost two years ago now, put a lot of work into this before it got handed over to me and we were able to get this across the finish line, if you will. Back almost a year ago—it will be July 2020—was when the government approved said bait management strategy, and I wanted to ask you for some thoughts on this, and how this is really going to protect our lakes and rivers from invasive species and fish diseases.

This is something that really, over the last decade—and maybe even more recently, in the last five years or so—has become something that has really been pushed to the forefront, especially when we see what's happening to our neighbours south of the border with some of the different invasive carp species: silver carp, bighead carp, grass carp and some of the different stuff that we're obviously seeing here in Ontario. Gobies are a big concern. There's lots of aquatic vegetation, as well, that can be caught up in bait nets and then transferred into tanks, and certainly we don't want to see these types of species get moved around the province.

So I'm hoping maybe you could elaborate a little bit on what the ministry is planning to do with the bait management strategy and how it's looking to implement it.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, PA Harris, and thank you for recognizing former PA Barrett, who I see on the screen as well. He was the initiator, if you call it that, for developing a new baitfish strategy, and Mike, you did take that one and run with it and bring it across the finish line. I do want to say to both of you how much I appreciate the efforts you made, because this is not an easy subject, nor was it an easy subject, when you take it on. A lot of people have views on these subjects, and old habits die hard as well—not just here, but anywhere, right? So to implement a new baitfish strategy was a challenge.

You know that there are some jurisdictions that don't even allow the use of live bait. We didn't want to go down

that road in Ontario, but we wanted to make sure that we were, as you said, protecting water bodies from species that shouldn't be there and encouraging people to work with us to do just that, because, quite frankly, what can happen to a lake is that if something that has not ever been there before becomes part of that ecosystem, it doesn't necessarily adjust, because the fish that are there aren't expecting it, and it's just not part of their food chain, either.

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I was certainly pleased to be part of bringing forward the strategy, but I do want to give you, MPP Barrett, and the department the credit for putting all of the ducks in a row, so to speak, and managing to come up with a coherent system across the province.

I'm going to turn it over to Deputy Rolf von den Baumen-Clark to elaborate on the strategy; it's quite extensive, and I'm going to ask the deputy minister to do so.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. I will ask Craig Brown, our ADM for policy division, who can explain a little bit more about the baitfish strategy.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you for the question. I'm happy to explain the ministry's work in developing and implementing a baitfish strategy and to talk about it in a bit more detail.

As a bit of background, the harvest and use of live bait in Ontario has been an important part of the fishing industry for well over a century. Some of Ontario's popular fisheries—think of walleye, perch and lake trout—rely heavily on live bait. The majority of recreational anglers in the province—and we estimate somewhere between 60% to 80%—use live bait at least some of the time. It's also quite prevalent during ice fishing season.

The province is committed to supporting recreational fishing in Ontario. It's a big sector. Anglers spend approximately \$1.7 billion a year in the province. We've put a lot of effort into protecting our natural resources and our aquatic systems. As the minister had said, we also try to find that balance with the needs of Ontario's commercial bait industry.

The commercial bait industry in Ontario also has a very lengthy history. There are approximately 1,100 commercial bait licences that are issued annually here in Ontario. The retail value of the bait industry is around \$23 million; those are the most recent numbers that we have. And as I've mentioned, it does support a multi-million-dollar fishing industry and our tourism sector.

As the minister said, the management of bait resources is very challenging. We know that bait can be a vector for the potential spread of fish-based disease, like viral hemorrhagic septicemia, which is also known as VHS, and invasive species, like the round goby in Ontario; PA Harris referenced that. The use of live bait could also result in the movement of native species like yellow perch and bass to waters where they do not occur naturally. This can disrupt fish community dynamics in the receiving water body, and that can result in a loss of important species, such as brook trout.

We also know that the spread of invasive non-targeted species diseases could be facilitated through the [inaudible] of bait. For instance, live bait may be harvested in one area of the province. It is often shipped, sold and later used in another region.

Another factor is dumping: when anglers dump the contents of bait buckets in or within 30 metres of a water course. This is illegal, as doing so risks spreading non-target species and disease, just with emptying a bait bucket.

Many anglers harvest their own bait. Surveys have shown that 30% to 50% of Ontario anglers who fish with live bait have harvested their own bait at some time. It's also been shown that in general, anglers in Ontario experience a great difficulty distinguishing between legal bait-fish species—it's hard to distinguish between a legal and an invasive species. Consequently, personally harvested bait brings an increased risk of moving invasive and other non-target species across the landscape.

There are an estimated 4.2 million angling trips involving live bait in Ontario every year, and about a quarter of these trips occur over distances greater than 400 kilometres. A large portion of Ontario anglers live in and purchase bait in the southern part of the province, where invasive species and diseases are most prevalent. Of course, this large-scale movement of bait across the landscape does increase the risk of spreading species and diseases to new parts of the province. So as you can see, controlling the movement of bait from the point of harvest to where it is used is critically important to managing ecological risks.

That's why, in July 2020, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry released Ontario's Sustainable Bait Management Strategy. This is our final bait management strategy to protect the province's lakes and rivers from the threat of invasive species and fish diseases. This strategy will also increase business certainty for the commercial bait industry and increase protection for Ontario's fisheries.

As part of the new strategy, the government has committed to establishing four bait management zones to limit the movement of bait across the province. We are working now on the regulatory mechanisms to establish these bait management zones. The four are in the northwest, northeast, central Ontario and southern Ontario. With this strategy, we will restrict the movement of commercially purchased bait to the zone where anglers are fishing. Anglers that wish to use live bait outside of the zone where they reside will be required to purchase their bait from a licensed commercial bait operator in that zone, use the bait within two weeks of purchase, and keep the sales receipt as proof that the bait originated from that particular zone.

Also outlined in the strategy is that we have 34 species that are eligible as bait, and we are restricting the use and storage of bait in brook trout lakes. We're also committed to working with industry on many topics related to commercial baitfish licences, such as working with industry to develop a compliance framework and extending licence terms up to three years.

This strategy is the result of extensive consultation with industry, with stakeholders and with the public, as well as Indigenous communities. The province did listen carefully to all stakeholders and their feedback and their concerns related to the proposed policy. All input was considered in drafting the final policy. It was a long process. It was a complex process. We did post proposals on the environmental registry to gather feedback on various options and various drafts. We did that six times, and that also involved engagement sessions with the public, with industry and with Indigenous communities across Ontario. The government held listening sessions to hear various perspectives on bait management in the province, in addition to numerous meetings with the bait industry and conservation organizations to inform the final strategy.

In response to some of the feedback on the draft strategy that was posted on the environmental registry back in September 2019, just to give an example of some of the changes that were made, the final bait management strategy was revised to enable tested Lake Simcoe shiners to move outside of the southern bait management zone, as far north as North Bay, by an approved bait harvester, and this change was done to ensure that there was adequate bait supply for the winter fishery in that part of the province.

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We believe that our policy for managing bait will help protect fish populations from invasive species and disease while minimizing the impact on businesses that rely on bait. And we are, of course, concerned with businesses affected by these changes. There would be no direct additional costs to the sector, and there will be no changes to licence types and fees or the administrative components of commercial bait licences. There would be some administrative changes to commercial-based licences under the policy.

Mr. Mike Harris: Madam Chair, how much time left?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Four minutes and 45 seconds.

Mr. Mike Harris: Maybe back to you, Craig, or to the deputy: You had mentioned that \$1.7-billion figure, when we talk about the economic impact of fishing here in the province.

This is, I think, the first time that bait management has been looked at in close to a decade. You can correct me if I'm wrong; I'm always open to that.

When we see some of the things that happened to Lake Simcoe or the Great Lakes, say, 20-plus years ago, what would those type of events—if we were to see invasive species, any aquatic invasive species get into some of our more pristine lakes in northern Ontario, what's your opinion on what would happen to that \$1.7 billion in economic activity? Could we expect to see that decrease drastically?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: That is exactly the concern we have. As Assistant Deputy Minister Craig Brown mentioned, this has huge substantial impacts on the fishing industry, when you have some of the disease situations or invasive species coming into

those fisheries—so all the more reason of having an important management protocol in place.

Over to you, Craig, if there's anything further you want to add to that.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thanks for the question.

Yes, there could potentially be a significant impact on those ecosystems in those water bodies, and that could have a significant impact on recreational fishing in those parts of the province.

I think we've also got to be cognizant that we do have commercial fishing on some of our lakes as well, and that is a significant regional economic driver in several communities, and that could also put some of those operations at risk. So we're very cognizant of the potential impact on ecosystems, and we also want to ensure that we aren't disrupting the economies that do rely on those ecosystems in those parts of the province.

Mr. Mike Harris: I think that's going to put us pretty close to our time, Madam Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): We will now go to the opposition side for 20 minutes. MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I always love talking about fishing. It makes me want to go fishing. So thanks for that information about the bait program. That was very interesting.

I'd like to go in another direction. I want to talk about aggregates for my next couple of questions.

One thing that came to light which I found very interesting came from an area in my constituency called Fowler township. They were trying to get some answers about the use of their roads—which is in an unorganized township. There are several aggregate operations going on. There was an application for a new aggregate operation, and they were going to be using Gilbride Road. So there was a lot of back and forth with the ministry. There's actually a large group of campers who have their cottages in that area, so it's highly recreational. Some people have year-round homes there and then there's all these aggregate operations that go on there.

What they were doing was trying to tease out who they give their concerns to about the excess traffic of heavy trucks on their roads from a safety kind of perspective. They weren't trying to stop the operation. So then they were in with MTO, and then it was MNR and "No, it's not MTO, because the MTO doesn't do the unorganized townships and the unorganized roads." Then they went to the roads board and the roads board says, "No, we're just about maintenance of those roads. It's not the safety analysis of those roads."

Why are the members of the public having such difficulty getting straight answers about the accessibility and safety of public crown roads when we're looking at an aggregate operation in their area?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I think the minister would like to be unmuted.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much. Could we, as the practice, at the start when the questions are over, they go directly to me? Then I can determine whether it's

going to be passed to the deputy, and she will determine which ministry official is best suited to answer the question. But if they go to me first, at least I have the opportunity to address it.

Thank you very much again, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question. You and I had this discussion probably a year ago or more, when you brought up the issue of Gilbride Road and the traffic. It's fair to ask, what is the motivation? Is it because you haven't maybe had success in reducing the aggregate operation through the Aggregate Resources Act and the issues or the validity of the permits or whatever? There is another issue, but certainly the traffic on a road does not come under our ministry. We can be part of it if it's because of dust and accumulations and things like that. It's all part of our permitting process, but from a safety perspective—it's a challenge.

I can't remember the conversation completely that you and I had, but I'm not sure that there have been accidents on that road as a result of the aggregate operation, only fears of potential. But that also exists on every road that exists in the province of Ontario. There's potential every day of something going wrong.

On that particular piece of property on the Gilbride Road and that particular operation, for more complete information or some other information, I will pass it over to the deputy shortly. But I did just want to say that it's not just a simple matter that someone says, "Well, the road is not going to be safe if you allow this." Quite frankly, it would have to be shown that it's not safe and I don't think that that's actually been done, but I may be corrected by my own ministry. I know that you and I had this conversation some time ago. The aggregate operation is permitted and following their requirements under the ARA.

I will now pass it over to my deputy minister. Thank you.

1520

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister.

Jennifer Barton, our ADM of regional operations division, has oversight of all of our local district offices and many of our operational matters. All aggregate operations are under her division. So I will pass this over to Jennifer to provide further information. I think she has some familiarity with the situation that you've described.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Thanks, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question.

As the minister said, aggregates are essential to the economic development of the province, but we do take the concerns of the public quite seriously and always work with aggregate applicants to address them.

MNRF has received a couple of permitted applications on crown land in the unorganized Fowler township, and we're working through those applications at this time with the applicants. In any aggregate application process, the applicant is always responsible to address concerns raised during consultations, including any concerns with roads. It's my understanding that the applicants are currently working to resolve these concerns. This may include corresponding directly with concerned parties, carrying

out additional studies, and modifying the proposal to mitigate any potential impacts. If my memory serves me correctly on this file in particular, I believe the applicants have actually undertaken a traffic study based on feedback that they've heard from local citizens. That's in progress right now.

At the conclusion of any part of the process where the applicant hears from concerned residents and other stakeholders, the next step of the process is that the applicant will work with the ministry to identify the concerns that have been submitted through the consultation process—what has been resolved, what concerns are still outstanding, and what attempts have been made to resolve the list of unresolved concerns.

In making a decision to approve an application under the aggregates act, MNRF will consider the extent to which the applicant has worked with individuals to seek resolution to the concerns raised, and any unresolved concerns that have not been fully addressed are mitigated by the applicant.

Gilbride Road is, I believe, the file you're referring to, and it is maintained by the Fowler local roads board, pursuant to the Local Roads Boards Act. The ministry has been engaged with the local roads board and, as I said earlier, is working directly with the applicant to mitigate the concerns that that group has brought forward. The ministry will consider the safety concerns that are raised with respect to the roads in the context of the aggregate permit application, when we get to that stage of the process—so still to come. Again, the applicants are still working through the process and not quite at the stage yet where it has come for final decision to the ministry.

Hopefully, MPP Monteith-Farrell, that's helpful.

I've seen some of the letters coming in from some of the concerned residents in the area, and I know my team that works on our aggregate files has been working quite closely with some of the local citizens to hear their concerns and to direct them over to the aggregate applicants and make sure they're being heard as part of the aggregate process.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thanks for that response and update on where that sits.

The next question is more specific. Will the changes to the Aggregate Resources Act retroactively apply to operations—in particular, those individuals who have launched complaints or requests for information on or prior to the changes being implemented?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Just to be clear, on supplementaries, we can go directly back to the ADM, when a question begins.

Clearly, I have to get an update on the Fowler application, but I'm going to go directly to Deputy Rolf von den Baumen-Clark for this one.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. This one is more of a policy question, so I will let Jennifer have a bit of a break here and ask Craig Brown, who is our ADM of policy division and who has been instrumental in working with the minister on our ARA changes. I believe your question was about whether they apply retroactively.

So, Craig Brown, could you please advise if you can give a response to that question?

Mr. Craig Brown: Hi. I would love to be able to respond. Obviously, I need a couple of minutes to get a response back to you on that particular question. I just don't want to get it wrong in Hansard for all time. I'd be happy to follow up with you on that particular question.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. I guess that's—will it be a long period of time that it will take to get that response?

Interjection.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Great. Anxious minds want to know.

The next question, I guess: Why has the MNRF invested money and time into prosecuting moose hunters, such as those who appealed directly to the deputy minister with a PowerPoint presentation last year? There's a group that—there was a very unusual situation with people, and it went on, and they feel very strongly that they were wrongly charged and went to great lengths to try to prove it. But wouldn't it be better to just try to educate hunters in a better way rather than prosecuting people who—it seemed, with the case that they applied and the PowerPoint they provided, many people, me included and ministry staff—why was that undertaken that way? What is the policy with regard to when people have a strong case and feel strongly they shouldn't have been charged?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: To the minister. You're off-camera.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you. I guess we ought to clarify: Any new question—but supplementary on the same issue can go directly to the deputy.

This is an enforcement issue, and I don't think it would be proper for me to comment on it at all, MPP Monteith-Farrell. It's an enforcement issue. But I will, on how we deal with those, pass it to Deputy Minister Rolf von den Baumen-Clark.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you very much, Minister. I will pass this over to Tracey Mill, who is our ADM of provincial services division and has responsibility for our enforcement branch.

Tracey, are you able to respond, please?

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes, thank you. It's Tracey Mill, assistant deputy minister for the provincial services division in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Thank you for your question. I'll speak maybe, first, generally about the process if somebody does have a complaint about how we may have handled a particular investigation. We do have a process known as the compliments and complaints process within the ministry. In the case in point that you're referring to, the parties did avail themselves of that process by letting us know what their concerns were regarding the investigation and some of the outcomes of that particular process. That system leads to an internal review within the ministry.

I will say that, in this particular case, given the complaints and the allegations that were raised, I took an additional step, which was to bring in an outside reviewer to look at the matters to ensure that there was additional

scrutiny and an objective perspective on how we handled that investigation. I will say to you that we have had a fairly detailed work effort made in terms of reviewing the concerns that were expressed by the complainants, as we do with any complaint that is made regarding our enforcement actions or our service delivery in the ministry, and we have ensured that the individuals are aware of that process.

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There are a number of ongoing reviews that these parties have undertaken, which is one of the reasons why we have to respect a part of that process and not unnecessarily talk specifically about the complaints and the potential outcomes in that process. But certainly, we continue to go through those, either with the privacy commissioner—or if the complainants proceed with the next step beyond the ministry compliments and complaints to the Ombudsman, we will fully participate in any of the inquiries from the Ombudsman on that as well.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Generally speaking, is the first order of business that people should go to the compliments and complaints process, and I should advise anyone who is feeling that they've been hard done by that they should start out there? Is that the first step? Do I have that correctly?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Thank you. Yes, the first process is through the compliments and complaints, and the information for any of your constituents or for others who are approaching you is on our website.

I will also refer you to what's known as the responsive feedback mechanism. This is a new initiative introduced recently by the government. An individual can also respond to a 1-800 number. I can get you that number; I don't have it off the top of my head right now, but we can provide that to you. That is another mechanism that was introduced in order to support customer service by the government. That information goes to a central bank in ServiceOntario, and then it is referred out to the appropriate ministry. We will treat it as we do our compliments and complaints that are received as well and do a review of those.

And then I will also mention to you, MPP Monteith-Farrell, that we do produce an annual report each year on the number of complaints or compliments, actually, that we receive from the public, and that is made available on our website as well.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you. I respect the privacy of this situation, and I thank you for letting me know about those avenues.

I think we're probably at time.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): We're almost out of time. We have 30 seconds.

We can go now to the government side. MPP Coe, you have 20 minutes.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you very much, Chair. Through you, welcome, Minister, to the committee this afternoon. It's a pleasure to have you here. The focus of my question is on reducing burdens for industries here in our province.

Minister, could you speak of the work under way in the ministry to create efficiencies and improve certainty for businesses all while maintaining protections for the environment?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Well, thank you very much, MPP Coe, and thank you for your work on so many of these files, particularly burden reduction, as part of our government's commitment all across government to reduce burdens for businesses to give people more opportunities to bring more prosperity to the province of Ontario and reduce unnecessary regulations and red tape. We've been doing a lot of work in that regard in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, now almost three full years into our mandate. It's a hugely important issue for us, because we know that red tape costs everybody, and it costs productivity as well. As I said, we've done a number of things in the ministry, and I am going to let Deputy Minister Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark—I'm going to pass that on to her and she will give you all kinds of details on some of the steps that we've taken in this regard.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister.

Craig Brown, our ADM of policy division, will be able to provide you with a very thorough overview of a number of burden reduction initiatives that we have under way. I will pass it over to Craig and he will be happy to share that information.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you, Deputy, and thank you MPP Lorne Coe for the question. I'm going to provide a few examples of what the ministry has done to reduce burden for several resource-based industries that are important to the province.

The first I'm going to talk about is Ontario's aquaculture industry. Just to give you a sense of scale, the aquaculture industry contributes around \$126 million to Ontario's economy every year. We have worked to reduce burden, to create efficiencies and improve certainty for this sector, at the same time maintaining protections for the environment and for native fish populations.

We have modernized the way we regulate aquaculture to create a more flexible regulatory framework for the industry while ensuring that ecological risks are minimized, and that aquaculture facilities are developed and operated in an environmentally sustainable manner. A few examples in the aquaculture sector: We've made it easier and more cost-effective for educational institutions and facilities to undertake aquaculture research by exempting certain land-based, low-risk facilities culturing fish for research purposes from requiring an aquaculture licence. We've also enabled greater flexibility to respond to the changing needs of aquaculture operators by creating the ability to amend licences and authorizations that are issued under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, including their conditions.

We've also reduced approval timelines for industry and support facilities that want to diversify and grow their operations more quickly, by streamlining the process to authorize the species of fish that may be cultured in

Ontario, again, while maintaining that balance and while maintaining the required ecological risk assessments to support decision-making. The exemption that we provided for research activities—it does apply to land-based, low-risk educational institutions and facilities—and these facilities are required to meet criteria intended to maintain environmental protections and to protect native fish populations. Risk assessments are still required for new or expanding facilities. Our licensing process—this is paramount—focuses on ensuring that aquaculture in Ontario is developed and conducted in an ecologically sustainable manner.

Another example I can talk about: wood storage lots. You've heard the minister talk about Ontario's forest industry, how it's critical to the province's economy and to many Indigenous, northern and rural communities. It generates over \$18 billion in revenue and supports over 147,000 direct and indirect jobs in regions across the province, particularly in regions where there are few other industries. Wood storage yards are areas in crown land where the forest industry temporarily places harvested wood during operations. They're often located adjacent to the site of active operations. Currently, forest companies would need to acquire a Public Lands Act land use permit to authorize the storage yards, and they pay a fee for those sites.

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Our proposal would amend the Public Lands Act regulation to make it easier for the forest industry to plan and obtain approval for wood storage yards on crown land. With these amendments, we're proposing that the government prescribe wood storage yards as a free occupational use of crown lands. This amendment is estimated to save industry around \$90,000 a year. Forest companies would be able to plan for and they would receive approval of wood storage yards through the forest management planning process. They're already actively engaged in forest management planning. They would no longer need to acquire a separate permit and pay another fee.

This amendment is part of Ontario's forest sector strategy, which is intended to reduce burden for the forest industry, create jobs, improve economic growth, while continuing to ensure the sustainability of Ontario's crown forests. By including wood storage yards in forest management planning processes, we are eliminating duplicative approval processes and making it easier for forest companies to do business in Ontario. Of course, the forest management planning process will still require forest management plans to meet comprehensive operation standards, which mitigate potential negative effects on the environment in their operations.

Another example I could describe is burden reduction on low-risk dams. In the past, all dam owners in Ontario were required to seek MNRF's approval to alter, improve or repair their dam through our traditional application and review process. This process, we heard from stakeholders—and we found it too—was unnecessarily onerous and costly. Wetland dam operators like Ducks Unlimited have been asking for changes for some time to make the process simpler, faster and more cost-effective.

In February 2020, the ministry amended regulations to provide an alternate regulatory approval requirement for repairs to existing low-hazard wetland dams under the Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act. Dam owners will be required to satisfy certain requirements if they wish to be relieved from obtaining individual project-specific ministry approval under that act. With these changes, they reduce the need for most wetland dam owners to come to the ministry for approval. These changes will save time and reduce project planning costs for these low-risk wetland dam owners by approximately \$40,000 a year. The approach would require a licensed engineer to confirm that the dam has a low-hazard potential classification—that means very low risk to people and property—and that any potential impacts associated with the failure of the dam would be documented that it would be absolutely minimal. The scope of work to low-hazard wetland dams that could be undertaken without approval would be limited to repairs, alteration and improvements. It would not include works that are more likely to have environmental impacts, such as decommissioning dams or constructing new dams. The amendment reduces regulatory burden to owners of low-hazard wetland dams, such as Ducks Unlimited Canada, while supporting the continued management of Ontario's wetlands.

We are working with dam owners to streamline approvals of low-risk alterations, improvements and repairs to dams, to reduce the burden to the water power industry while enhancing dam safety.

I do want to be sensitive to time. I could also discuss some of the changes that we made to reduce the burden on the aggregate industry, if you would like, MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: That's fine. Thank you very much for that answer. I appreciate it. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): MPP Coe, would you like him to continue with the answer?

Mr. Lorne Coe: That's fine. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Are there any other questions? We have eight minutes left. MPP Harris.

Mr. Mike Harris: ADM Brown, if you wanted to go ahead and elaborate a little bit on that, I think that would be fine.

Mr. Craig Brown: The aggregate industry: There have been some questions related to aggregates already this afternoon. In early 2020, the ministry consulted with industry, Indigenous communities, our municipal partners and the public regarding proposed regulatory changes under the Aggregate Resources Act. We received over 200 comments from the public during that consultation period. Following the consultations, regulations and the aggregate resources of Ontario provincial standards were amended to support the growth of communities and reduce burdens to the aggregate industry, while managing community impacts and maintaining strong environmental protections. Among other things, the regulations and standards outline requirements for new pit and quarry applications, and specify operating and reporting requirements that apply to all sites authorized under legislation.

A phased approach to implementing the changes has been taken. Some changes came into effect on September 1, 2020, while others came into effect on April 1, 2021. Additional changes will be effective on January 1, 2022. These changes will modernize the way that aggregate resources are managed, and I'll run through some detail here. Some of the changes include new and updated technical reports and information requirements for applications to establish a new pit or quarry, including enhanced water study requirements. We've also updated site plan requirements for new pit and quarry applications. We've enhanced notification and consultation requirements for new pit and quarry applications, and updated conditions that will apply to newly issued licences and permits. There are new application requirements for existing pit or quarry operators wishing to make an amendment to extract below the water table or to expand into an adjacent road allowance. We've also introduced new rules regarding custom plans that would be prepared for applications seeking to extract from land that is under water.

We've provided exemptions from needing a licence for some small excavations on private land, if rules that are set in regulation are followed. We've also introduced new rules to allow self-filing of some minor routine site plan amendments; for example, if an operator is relocating some structures or fencing, as long as the setbacks provided in the regulations are respected. We've updated operating requirements that apply to all pits and quarries authorized under the Aggregate Resources Act, and we've also updated annual compliance reporting requirements, including a streamlined report for inactive sites.

The regulatory changes move Ontario's aggregate resource policy framework toward using a more modern and streamlined approach. This is by removing unnecessary regulatory burden. We believe the changes will result in cost savings of approximately \$95,000 annually for industry.

I hope that helps answer your question. If you'd like another example, I can provide one.

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Mr. Mike Harris: How much time left, Madam Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): You have three and a half minutes left.

Mr. Mike Harris: If there's anything else that you wanted to cover off quickly—I know there are quite a few of them when we look at the grand scheme of things, but if there's something you think you can fit in within that three minutes, absolutely.

Mr. Craig Brown: Another example that I can talk about is trapping. We know that trapping is culturally significant for many people in central and northern Ontario, that it's been an important contributor to Ontario's economy, as well as the province's ecology, frankly, for centuries.

Ontario's trapping regulations continue to be amongst the strictest and most humane in the world. We have made changes to reduce regulatory and administrative burden related to trapping in Ontario. We've streamlined requirements for trappers so they can continue to make a living

while ensuring the necessary protections are in place so that trapping can be pursued humanely. These changes allow individuals to hold both a trapping and a fur dealer's licence, allow for the use of firearms at night for the humane dispatch of trapped fur-bearing animals by licensed trappers, and we simplified the process for removing deer and elk from airports for the protection of public safety, which is a role that trappers do play and that's particularly important too in some of the rural and northern airports. These changes, taken together, offer a potential administrative cost savings for business of up to approximately \$30,000 a year.

Some other changes: We streamlined requirements for licensed fur dealers by allowing records to be submitted once a year as opposed to on a monthly basis as was done previously. We've also enabled electronic submission of those records, too, and in all the changes that we've made, our top priority is the safety of the public. I talked about the airport example. These changes do support public safety. They do support humane trapping while reducing barriers for licensed trappers so they can continue to make a living and support their families.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): One minute. MPP Harris?

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you, Madam Chair. I think that probably covers off a pretty good rendition of a lot of things that certainly the ministry is trying to do from that red tape burden reduction. Obviously, a lot of those things are very important to try to get us through the pandemic.

I think that's it from the government side for questions for now. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you. Now we'll go to the opposition side. MPP Monteith-Farrell, you have 20 minutes.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you. I'm going to ask another question about hunting. Last year, the ministry offered the Ontario Hunter Education Program virtually. I'm interested in comparison to previous years: Were there more or less hunting code violations? And could the virtual delivery of this training have a good or positive impact?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question. I'm going to turn that over because I don't have that information as to the number of violations as to whether they were up or down or the number of participants.

But I can also provide an update on the Aggregate Resources Act changes onto the issue of retroactivity, if you want an answer on that as well.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Yes, that would be great.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Okay. I think they will be going to two different ADMs, because I think it's probably Tracey Mill on the hunting and Craig Brown on the ARA, but I will turn that over to Deputy Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark to direct those questions.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. Yes, as the minister said, these will go to two different ADMs, so for your question I will hand it

over to Tracey Mill, our ADM for enforcement, who has the enforcement branch within her division.

But before we send that over to her, as the minister said, we do have an answer for your other inquiry, and Craig Brown will be able to provide that response to you. Craig, are you able to do that now, before we send it over to Tracey, this last question?

Mr. Craig Brown: I am, Deputy, and I do apologize for not having an answer immediately.

You were asking about aggregate applications and retroactivity. Applications that are submitted after March 31, 2021, must follow all the new requirements. This includes resubmitting an application that would have previously been deemed incomplete by the ministry. The Aggregate Resources Act requires that the site plans and technical reports accompanying applications be prepared and submitted according to the regulations. Applicants are also required to notify and consult in accordance with the regulations, so if you submitted an application before April 1, 2021, that met the site plan or report standards that the ministry provides, you are not required to change these documents to meet the new requirements. I hope that addresses the question.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: So with the changing regulations, what if something was in the process—you referred to two timelines in your response about aggregates on the reduction of red tape in the previous answer. So let's say somebody had a complaint about an operation to do with aggregates. Which set of rules would apply? Would the rules that applied at that time apply to that complaint, or would it be the new rules?

Mr. Craig Brown: If you're talking about an active operation and an active aspect of that operation, my response was only with regard to applications that were submitted before and after March 31. There is some complexity in the regulations. I'd be reluctant to give a definitive answer. I think it depends on the nature of the complaint of the operation and what aspects of the regulations are being applied.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: So it may change, dependent on what the complaint was.

Mr. Craig Brown: Yes. If you have more information about the specific complaint, then we can review the regulations and determine what applies.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. Well, I don't at this time at my fingertips, but the answer is that sometimes it could be retroactively applied to a complaint.

Mr. Craig Brown: Perhaps.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Perhaps? Okay.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay. If that answer is helpful for you, then we will move over to your next question. I will ask first: If you'd like to know a little bit more about the course, we're happy to have Jennifer Barton, our ADM, regional operations division, speak about how we've been carrying out the course virtually, and Tracey Mill can speak to the stats we have collected so far and give you a sense of when we're likely to have those comparison numbers. Would you like to hear a little bit more about the course?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Yes.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Great. So, Jennifer, over to you first, and then we'll go to Tracey.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Thanks, Deputy. Thanks, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question about the online hunter education course. Just a little bit of background about the course: All new resident hunters must complete the mandatory Ontario hunter education course before purchasing their first outdoors card and hunting licence.

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We do have about 300 ministry-appointed instructors across Ontario, and full implementation of the online hunter course is targeted for late July. We see moving towards the online approach as reducing barriers for students and ensuring consistent education and training right across the province, providing an option for clients to learn and obtain their hunter accreditation through online training and testing. Especially during the pandemic, it has been really helpful to not have people congregating together, but to use the online approach. So it has been very safe and a very effective approach. A complete instructor-led course will be maintained for those clients who actually prefer to learn in person or who don't have access to the resources or the Internet needed to take the online approach. In terms of safety, obviously encouraging safe and responsible hunting will continue to be a key focus not only of the in-person course but also of the online course.

To your question about whether we've seen any change in stats, one of the things I do know is that we did compare and we did speak to many other jurisdictions across North America who have also implemented online hunter education, including testing, for the online Ontario Hunter Education Program. The result from other jurisdictions—although it only started for us last year in July 2020, so we may not be through a full year quite yet. But when looking at other jurisdictions across North America, the result has been an increase in participation in the course, while being able to maintain hunter safety across the board. So we're hopeful that that will be our experience here in Ontario as well.

I will turn it back to the deputy to turn it over to Tracey to talk about numbers she may have. But, as I said, because we just started last year, in July, we may not have a full year of numbers under our belt at this point.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you very much, Jennifer. Unless you have any further questions for Jennifer, MPP Monteith-Farrell, we can go over to Tracey and talk about stats.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Yes.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay, Tracey? Tracey Mill, our ADM, provincial services division, who has our enforcement branch in her division.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Thank you. Unfortunately, I don't have the numbers that you may want right now, MPP Monteith-Farrell, but I will—I'm just looking at my screen to see if my staff can get them to me before we conclude today.

As Jennifer was alluding to, with us only being sort of a month or so out of the last fiscal year, I won't have the

numbers immediately for last year's reported violations and infractions relating to hunter safety. I can certainly endeavour to get those to you at a later point, when they're available.

As Jennifer noted, being able to draw any inferences as to whether the online version or the hunter education and accreditation program that was developed for the most recent period—we'd have to look at that over time to determine whether we could attribute any changes in the offences to those changes in the education. However, I will say that hunter education is very important from the perspective of ensuring that individuals who are engaging in hunting are aware of the safe practices. Unsafe hunting is one of the key priorities that our enforcement branch has as an annual goal and priority, for very obvious reasons. I will be able to follow up with you on some of the past years in terms of some general information. As I say, going forward, we'll be able to monitor the trends with respect to the more recent hunter education course.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: The reason I asked those questions was, I had constituents and other people from around the province sort of complain about the online options of all the—applying for many things. And yet the people that are happy with it obviously aren't the voices that are coming to me and complaining. So I was just wondering about the comparative of how effective people thought it was, because I had some feedback from people who were saying, "That's too much of a hassle. I don't have a good Internet connection," or "I'm not going to bother doing the reporting," or there was a lot of sort of grumbling.

I think it makes sense. I'd say, probably for the vast majority of people, that they would find that—especially since COVID, I think people have become a lot more effective online. But it was interesting to see, that that change is really going to have an impact on compliance and knowledge and the educational aspect of it. I think that we can probably all agree that, in person, or getting to know the person, or getting a feel of if they're confused or not—I know I took the boating safety course, and it's pretty monotonous to do. Hopefully, it's more interactive; I'm hoping that that's the case.

I think that's all my questions on hunting, which is great. I guess I'm going to go to—how much time do we have left, Chair, so I know which questions to dive into?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Six minutes and 40 seconds.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. Well, we might have to get back to this one, but we'll start it anyway. Can the minister explain why changes to the MZO wetlands zoning guidelines, intended to offset development costs, are identical to the same practices that the Auditor General specifically critiqued in the Niagara Thundering Waters wetland in 2018?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Why changes will be made?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: To the MZO wetlands zoning guidelines.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for the question. There's a lot of stuff

here. I'm going to turn it over to Deputy Minister Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Sorry, could I get you to repeat your question? I just want to make sure I'm understanding the particulars.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. Can the minister explain why the changes to MZO wetlands zoning guidelines, intended to offset development costs, are identical to the same practices that the Auditor General specifically critiqued in the Niagara Thundering Waters wetland in 2018? So the Auditor General critiqued, and it then became part of the changes to the MZO wetlands zoning guidelines.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: The minister's zoning orders are tools that regulate use of land and can be used to expedite development. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing is the lead for these tools, so it is their responsibility for those implementations of ministerial zoning orders.

Is there anything further you want to add, Minister, to that?

Hon. John Yakabuski: No, that's it. It's a tool that we have in the tool box as government. The only time, as Minister Clark has said, that a minister's zoning order will be issued is at the request—specific and explicit request—of the municipality. It's a municipal zoning order—a minister's zoning order on behalf of municipalities. They are the ones who will make the request and then Minister Clark will make the determination based on their own analysis of the validity of the request.

I know there is a number of requests from municipalities right now sitting in the minister's office that they're deliberating on. It's not a simple process. The ministry goes through the process of making sure that it's valid and something that they can support. But this is initiated by the municipalities. It's the municipalities that are requesting that order so that they can expedite development or some other type of activity on lands that they are desperate to move that yardstick ahead at a faster rate on for the purpose of—many times, it may determine whether or not the proponent will, in fact, remain in that constituency or that municipality, or move the project somewhere else, move it right out of the country, move it right out of the province. We're faced with those all the time, but they do come under the auspices of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Honourable Steve Clark. If there is a specific one, we'd probably have to turn it over to his ministry as well—to get through the questions.

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There are functions that are tied to a municipal zoning order that do come under the Ministry of Natural Resources if that order has been issued, but only if that order has been issued.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Then it does activate some of the responsibilities that we have here in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, such as permitting—

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: So this is one of those instances where—

Hon. John Yakabuski:—activities or not. But the zoning order is explicitly in the purview of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Here, look at this: I've got some really good notes here now, and that's going to be more [*inaudible*]. Stay tuned, MPP Monteith-Farrell.

It's to expedite, as I said, development by promoting faster development approvals. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing is the lead for these tools. As part of changes to the Conservation Authorities Act in December 2020, conservation authorities are required to issue a permit under the Conservation Authorities Act where an MZO has been made outside of the greenbelt area and where any other requirements and regulations have been met. So the MZO has to happen first. Conservation authorities may include conditions on these permits to mitigate negative effects on public safety from natural hazards, such as flooding or erosion, that may result from the development authorized by the MZO. That's where we come in, on the permitting.

An ecological compensation agreement must also be entered into between the conservation authority and the proponent before the development can commence. If the proponent objects to the conditions placed on the permit by the conservation authority, they have the ability to request that the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry review the proposed conditions.

MZOs can be made on any land in Ontario, including lands that contain wetlands, regardless of their designation and/or other natural heritage features. Wetlands in Ontario are evaluated using the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System, OWES, which provides scientific criteria—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Minister, we are out of time at this point. Before we go to the government side, I would like to ask the ministry staff to please turn off all of your audio notifications. So for the ministry staff, please turn off your audio notifications.

Now we're going to be going to the government for 20 minutes. MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: My question will be on aggregates. Minister, can you explain how the recent changes under the Aggregate Resources Act will benefit Ontarians and the province?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, MPP Cuzzetto. I can be heard? Yes? Wave your hand there, Rudy. Okay, that's great—perfect.

Boy, where do I start? As I said in my opening address, the importance of aggregates is crucial to the development of anything. It's the foundation of civic society. If you look at anything—you can't step out of this building, you can't be in this building without aggregates being part of where you are, where you stand. You can't step out of the building without stepping onto aggregates. It's an absolutely integral component for society.

We've made changes to the act to try to reduce some of those unnecessary burdens, to make it more efficient, more effective. In some cases, we've actually increased the work that the aggregate industry has to go through to get approvals etc. We think we've met an absolutely tremen-

dous balance of ensuring that the resource is there, ensuring that the aggregate that is necessary for development is available. It has to be available and has to be within reasonable distance of developments as well. But we've also made sure that we're doing that without compromising the environment—the natural environment or otherwise—because that is paramount to any one of our government objectives: protection of the environment.

There are a number of changes that we've made. I don't know if we can get through them all in the allotted time, but I'm going to let Deputy Minister Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark take you through some of those changes, MPP Cuzzetto.

Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. As the minister said, there are quite a few changes to the Aggregate Resources Act, and ADM Craig Brown would be happy to take you through those details. I'll ask him to speak to some of those changes.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you for the question. I'm going to provide some numbers to back up the minister and the context he provided in his opening statement. The aggregate industry has an annual production revenue of about \$1.6 billion. This industry supports over 20,000 jobs in communities throughout Ontario. There are currently around 6,100 aggregate resource sites approved in Ontario. These are sites that are approved under the Aggregate Resources Act, roughly 3,600 on private land and another 2,500 on crown land. Collectively, they produce over 155 million tonnes of aggregate a year here in Ontario.

We also know the population in the greater Golden Horseshoe region is expected to grow significantly by about four million people over the next two decades. All this growth will require stone, sand and gravel.

A number of changes were made to the statute and the regulatory framework for aggregates. It did start with Bill 132—that was the Better for People, Smarter for Business Act—that amended the Aggregate Resources Act in 2019. It did several things; I'll give you a few examples. It did strengthen protection of water resources by requiring a more robust application process for requests from existing sites. These are requests to extract aggregates below the water table. We also improved access to aggregates within road allowances, and we also clarified jurisdiction on crown land and the depth of extraction. We also clarified how haul routes are considered under aggregate legislation. That was in 2019.

In 2020, we focused on regulations. We did update several standards, regulations: the aggregate resources of Ontario provincial standards. These standards outline application and operational requirements for pits and quarries. These standards hadn't been updated since they were first created in 1997. In reviewing the framework, we did know that the aggregate sector is one of the more heavily regulated industries in the province. It's also subject to many federal, provincial and municipal laws.

The proposed amendments to regulations under the Aggregate Resources Act were posted to the Environmental Registry for a 90-day public comment period back

in the spring of 2020. We received approximately 250 comments during the consultation period. After discussions with municipalities, industry, Indigenous communities, community groups and the public at large, we advanced a number of regulations and changes in 2020 to modernize the regulatory requirements for pits and quarries in Ontario.

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As the minister said, our approach does strike a balance between continuing supporting the continued supply of aggregate resources as well as protecting the environment and managing the impacts of aggregate operations on our communities.

Some of the key changes that were included in those regulatory changes—and the minister mentioned these already—include strengthening the protection of water resources, but we also improved consultation requirements for new sites, and ensured that the potential impacts to communities and the environment were addressed. We also simplified some administrative processes for industry, including allowing them to file certain minor changes to their site plans instead of waiting for approval.

There is complexity in regulating the aggregate sectors, and so these changes are being phased in over time.

On September 1, 2020, the changes that are phased in include exemptions for needing a licence for some small excavations on private land, if rules are followed—also, new rules take effect to allow some site plan amendments to be made without the minister's approval. So this is self-filing, and we've been able to address that in answering a previous question.

On April 1, 2021, this year, we introduced new and updated requirements for applications to establish a new pit or quarry, including enhanced water study requirements and new site plan requirements.

We've also updated the notification and consultation requirements for new pit and quarry applications. We're now requiring 60 days of consultation. New sites authorized to recycle aggregate will need to report annually on the amount of recycled material that is removed.

We've updated mandatory conditions for new approvals. This includes tracking and annual reporting on recycling aggregate materials that do leave the site—the application requirements for existing pit or quarry operators wishing to make an amendment to lower the depth of extraction from above to below the water table, or to expand into an adjacent road allowance.

We also phased in, on April 1, regulations updating the annual compliance reporting requirements, including a streamlined report for inactive sites.

Starting January 1, 2022, we will be phasing in updated operating requirements that apply to all pits and quarries authorized under the Aggregate Resources Act, including the storage of recyclable aggregate material and scrap, recycling activities—ensuring they cannot interfere with operational phasing or rehabilitation of the site when the site is ready for rehabilitation. We will also be introducing measures to prevent flyrock from leaving the site during blasting. Also, permit holders on crown land will be

required to post signs to restrict access, in accordance with the Trespass to Property Act.

An area that got quite a bit of attention during our consultation—and I think it's an important feature in our regulatory framework—is that we have included several changes to ensure water sources are protected during excavation activities. We've established new monitoring requirements to better define the elevation of the groundwater table, which must be completed by a qualified professional. We've clarified the requirements of the technical water report for applications for new sites proposing to extract below the groundwater table, including:

- identifying and addressing applicable policies if the proposed site is a municipal wellhead source protection area for water quantity;

- identifying if a proposed new site is in a wellhead protection area for municipal drinking water, and if so, how activities on the site will be managed to ensure adherence to applicable source water protection policies;

- exemptions for farm businesses and personal use, limited to pit location and extraction areas above the water table, so these sites must follow specified setback distances from water bodies and can't be located within specified wellhead protection areas for municipal drinking water; and

- additional operating requirements related to the storage of recyclable aggregate materials and scrap.

Also, with respect to source water protection, the regulations under the Clean Water Act identify activities that are threats. Aggregate extraction is not a threat to drinking water quality. The deregulations include requirements identifying any activities on the site that are threats in the local source water protection plan and following applicable source water protection policies. For sites that are proposing extraction below the water table, they must identify if they are in a wellhead protection area for quantity and follow applicable source water protection policies.

In addition, if an aggregate site is taking water, it may require a permit to take water from the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

We've also provided protections for communities from impacts. We've made a number of key changes that will better protect communities, including, as I've mentioned, enhanced water studies.

We've extended the time frame for public consultation to 60 days for applicants proposing new sites and if those sites are proposing a depth of extraction from above to below the water table.

Some of the other changes that we've made in response to concerns that we heard from our communities as well—I've mentioned a couple already: taking measures to prevent flyrock from leaving the site when an operator is blasting; also, additional storage requirements for scrap and recyclable aggregate material, as well as additional reporting on site rehabilitation.

I think it's important, as well, if you'd like me to continue, to talk about the impacts of COVID-19 on the sector. MPP Cuzzetto, I see you nodding.

This industry has had low-to-moderate impacts due to COVID-19. Early on, some companies did experience

layoffs and others didn't call back their entire workforce when COVID first broke, back in March and April 2020. The most significant support from the province was the decision to declare the sector an essential service, so that was done. This action has allowed some of these operators to continue working and not require support from government.

Other significant support included allowing the 24-hour delivery of goods without restrictions of municipal noise bylaws and extending the validity of drivers' licences, commercial vehicle operators' registration certificates and other products that would have expired on or after March 1, 2020.

Our ministry also extended the deadline for operators to submit the annual compliance assessment report. That deadline was extended—it was previously September 30 and that was extended out until the end of the calendar year, December 31.

Hopefully that provides some background and context to changes that were made to the legislative framework and the regulations under the Aggregate Resources Act.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Do you want to add anything else to that?

Mr. Craig Brown: I might pass it back to my deputy minister.

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Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: That's great, Craig.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): MPP Harris?

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. How much time do we have left?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Three minutes left.

Mr. Mike Harris: Three minutes left. I wonder if the deputy, perhaps the minister or anybody on the call might be able to elaborate a little bit more specifically on when we're talking about permits to go beneath the water table. I know that has been something that has come up numerous, numerous times through consultation. It's one of the big pieces of this legislation when we look at what's happening with it and how, in my opinion—and maybe someone else can give me a little more context to it. I think that it's something that has actually been strengthened considerably when you look at what the legislation looked like previously, before the changes were made, with having to apply for an actual new permit to go beneath the water table now, rather than just going ahead and doing it and kind of begging for forgiveness later.

I wondered if maybe we could take a couple of minutes, quickly, and just touch on that.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you, PA Harris, for that question. You're 100% right: We've strengthened the requirements around taking aggregate below the water table. I'll let the deputy elaborate on it, but you now have to have a separate environmental assessment, to my knowledge, in order to be able to take aggregate below the water table, which is really quite substantial. We have been taking aggregate below the water table. That's historically been a practice that has been quite frequently

undertaken. But under our changes, you'll now be required to have a separate assessment to determine whether—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): One minute.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Maybe if the deputy wants to elaborate on that?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: The minister is correct: There were some changes that were made. If there was a change from a permit that was already excavating and it wanted to go below the water table, now it is a separate application.

I will pass that over to Craig, just so he can clarify the details of what that involves.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): MPP Harris, we have 20 seconds.

Mr. Mike Harris: Yes, I was just going to say thank you, Minister, and thank you, Deputy, and thank you, ADM Brown, for regaling us with some of the changes that have been put forward, but I think that's going to do us for time at this point.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And that takes us to the opposition. Thank you, MPP Harris.

Now we will go to the opposition side. MPP Monteith-Farrell, you have 20 minutes, beginning now.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you very much. Yes, that was very enlightening about aggregate and all the different aspects of those new regulations, so thank you for that.

I'm going to go back to—I am aware of how the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing has the authority and issues the MZOs, but there is an aspect and still an involvement of MNRF and the conservation authorities when new zoning orders are being proposed. Also, the MNRF has under its mandate the protection of natural resources, which include water, in Ontario.

Numerous studies have found that Ontario's protected areas are worth billions of dollars in the ecosystem services that they provide to the rest of the natural environment. So wetlands filter poisons that go into waterways. They protect from flooding. So those things, if they're not done correctly, cost millions of dollars, and those services that those natural protected areas provide have a monetary value. I'm wondering, how does the MNRF factor in the loss of value when they allow for the destruction of an ecosystem or a sensitive area like a protected wetland?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, MPP Monteith-Farrell, for your question. We don't allow for destruction. First of all, we're the ones that have the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System in place, quite frankly, and MZOs are initiated at the request of a municipality.

So I think you may have a different view, from a political point of view, but we just don't issue MZOs to reclassify a wetland. In fact, I don't believe we even have that. We can't reclassify a wetland; we would require other legislation to reclassify wetlands.

But there will always be a debate on decisions that are made at the provincial level or any other level. Those are governmental decisions that are made to advance development at the request of a municipality. There will always be some people who say, "Oh, that shouldn't be done," and

there will be other people who will say that it's quite acceptable under these circumstances. We have that tool in the tool box, and, as we have said before, when it's appropriate, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing will issue that MZO provided it has been explicitly requested by the municipality in question. He doesn't go around issuing MZOs on his own; he responds to a request from the government at the municipal level in that jurisdiction, and that's—

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: You have to agree that it might—

Hon. John Yakabuski: Can I answer the question, or do you want to ask another one—

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I will ask another one, then. I will ask: When what your municipality is asking for is in conflict with the protection that the MNRF wants to provide to the natural environment—that's where I'm saying that's the involvement of the MNRF. How do you reconcile that? How do you measure that? That's what I'm asking.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Well, it's not a question of measuring. If we felt that the MZO was incongruent with good policy decisions, then I'm quite comfortable that the minister wouldn't be issuing that MZO. But your opinion and someone else's on what is acceptable could be completely different, and in a sense, that's the crux of the matter here. The subjective view of one side of an argument versus the other is something that has gone on since people have been on this world and will go as long as we are. That's what you're really assessing here. But we take our role in protecting the natural resources very, very seriously, and we'll continue to do so.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I get where you're coming from, but I'm asking something very specifically. In your response before, you said specifically that MZOs can be issued for wetlands and protected wetlands. And so then I would say that's where I see it's problematic that it's in two different ministries, because sometimes that doesn't work so well. We talk about the silos and working together, but sometimes that doesn't happen that specifically.

If there's an obvious protected wetland that's been protected for many years and the municipality has asked to develop that wetland, how does the MNRF protect that? How do they measure the value of that ecosystem?

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Hon. John Yakabuski: First of all, that would be, as I said, at the request of the municipality, and the MZO comes under the jurisdiction of municipal affairs and housing. But we certainly have that role to play, and the question is, what is the magnitude of what someone considers to be a wetland? Some people consider seasonal areas to be wetlands. But we take our responsibility of protecting the environment and protecting our natural resources very, very seriously and will continue to do so.

There will always be issues where—there are some people out there, as you know, MPP Monteith-Farrell, who don't believe that any development should ever take place anywhere. We couldn't manage to house the millions of

people who are coming to Ontario over the decade or the next couple of decades. They come here where—I know they talk about the cloud and everything today, but we can't have them living in clouds. We actually have to be able to build homes and condos and different facilities for them to live in. Those people also have to be serviced. If you have another 10 million people coming to Ontario, you're going to need more schools, you're going to need more hospitals, you're going to need more institutions of various types, transportation-related and otherwise.

It's the same thing that we have with our transportation builds, our subway builds and the transit-oriented communities. There will be people who will oppose every single one of those developments. That's their DNA. It's the responsibility of government, and that's what we take very, very seriously, to be able to advance society, to be able to provide what society requires to grow, at the same time protecting the environment.

The reality is that every time you put a shovel in the ground, you've affected the environment. The question is, can you manage to do those things and still protect the environment—not have no impact on the environment, but protect the environment? There is a difference, because everything we do has an impact on the environment, and it's our responsibility in government—and we take that very, very seriously, and I know the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing does as well. We have to make those choices.

When we have a request brought to us from a municipality, they will bring evidence to show that their development is not in conflict with protecting the environment. It's not that it has no impact on the environment, because every time somebody builds a home, even a little home that is somebody's personal home, that has an impact. They will come with information that says, "You know what? This can be done, and it still shows respect for the environment."

It has to be done. We couldn't go back to where we had no highways. We couldn't go back to where we had no buildings and no hospitals. If you want to look at what Ontario looked like 100 years ago, it looked vastly different. There was a whole lot more undeveloped area in this province. A lot of the places that have condominiums on them now had forests on them at one time.

The reality is, we do have to provide for the people who live here and who want to come here and live here. So being able to find that balance—it's easy sometimes when you're not in government to be able to look at everything and say, "Oh, what you're doing is wrong," but what are the alternatives to actually being able to produce something and build something if we're going to welcome another 10 million people into this province over the next 20 years or so? That question has to be considered as well, whenever you want to bring objections to something that this government—or any government; not just our government.

The reality is, the people are coming. Ontario is a great place to come to. People want to come here, and we should be just beaming, because all across the world, this is a

magnet. Our country and our province are a magnet for people who want to improve their quality of life. We have to be able to offer them something in the way of being able to have a place to live and a place to find the services.

If we have 10 million more people, do you know what? They're going to have to build more places to shop. They're going to have to build more places to buy their groceries. Ten million people is a lot of people. We can't just service those people and not do anything, not provide anything, because then what you have is a real mess. If you think you have congestion in places and dangerous situations today, you'd have them even worse if you hadn't provided for it.

What would it be like in our hospitals? We're challenged in our hospitals because of COVID-19 and in our ICUs. Put 10 million more people into the mix and ask yourself: If we didn't build and continue to expand, where we would be? Those are questions that people need to ask themselves as well. It's never as simple as to say, "Oh, don't you dare build that there because that's damaging the environment."

There's a lot that goes into the decision before it's made, and our government has that—we didn't invent MZOs, but that's a tool that's in the tool box. It expedites it, because sometimes you have to move quickly.

At the end of the day, if it's going to happen, does it matter if it takes two extra years or if it gets done in one year, if it was going to happen anyway? Do you know what changes? It gets done faster so it's there, it's ready, to serve the people that require it sooner. Lots of those are affordable housing developments. Those are some of the things that your party, for example, is always encouraging us to do more: "What about affordable housing developments and things like that?" Well, sometimes it requires governments to act very quickly and expeditiously.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. Thank you for that response. I would like to ask another environmental question. Despite claiming, in 2019, an environmental registry decision that a management strategy focused on the conservation and recovery of the caribou herds along Lake Superior was being drafted, there have been no updates provided. What measurable actions and financial commitments will the ministry take to protect caribou populations along the north shore of Lake Superior?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Well, I mean, protection of species—I think some of that comes under the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks as well. They're primarily the ones in conversations with the federal government.

We are constantly working on that balance. That's something in our ministry—and you come from the north. You know how important forestry is. It seems that there's this to-and-fro about protecting the jobs, the people and the communities that depend on forestry, or taking out massive amounts of crown land from production in order to protect caribou herds. We all want to see every species protected, but we also have to be reasonable in our approach. That's where the negotiations continue.

Of course there are people who don't believe that we should be harvesting trees; you know that. They're not the

people who live up in your neck of the woods, but there are some there, too, quite frankly—they're there, everywhere—that don't believe that we should actually be in the business of harvesting trees. They somehow think that you harvest the tree and there's never going to be another tree there in the future.

We also know for us, who have lived in the forest industry and know it, that forestry is essentially slow farming: We plant; they grow; we harvest; we plant again. Quite frankly, the most healthy forests are the ones that are harvested, because the forests that are left too long are far more susceptible, as you know, to fires, pestilence and pests. They're far more susceptible to die without us—society—accruing any value out of it. That's forest management at work.

There will always be this disagreement on the part of some who feel that, no, you have to leave all that land available for the caribou. But then how do we answer the question of how are we going to support the people who live in the north, those people who believe, rightfully so, that there aren't many better places to be living? But there aren't also very many ways for them to support themselves.

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In the north, you know that it's forestry, mining and tourism. After that, it starts to drop off pretty quickly into the impact that it has on the economy. So we have to be able to answer that question to the people, as you do. Those people are in your constituency, and you need to be able to look them in the eye and also be able to justify the positions you take on forestry and the protection of the caribou, and it's not one or the other. You have to be able to ensure that you're working to provide those opportunities for those people as well.

It's never a simple matter, as you know. We take the protection of species extremely—we place a tremendous amount of importance on it. In fact, now the Crown Forest Sustainability Act is the management plan that's approved for crown forests in protection of species. They continue to be addressed under the sustainable forestry framework.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Caribou are part of that. It is never our intention, nor will it be, to willingly endanger a species, but we also have to make sure that we are providing the means to earn and have a standard of living for those people who live in the north, including Indigenous First Nations. They're not going anywhere. They're not moving. Many of them rely on the forest industry to provide their livelihood as well.

I was speaking to a company today, and about 30% of the personnel who work at one of their operations and 20% of the personnel who work at another one of their operations are Indigenous. We've got to ensure that we provide the ability for them to earn that living as well and have a job and enjoy the prosperity that the rest of us enjoy, and working in the north in the forestry industry is a big part of that. We're going to continue to try to meet that balance. It's never an easy one, but we're going to continue to do it because that's our responsibility in government.

Thank you very much for the question, MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you for that response. I think that the balance between the species at risk and the forest industry is one that we will always be looking at, but with good data, I think we can manage it well. That's where the importance of these studies and having the data at hand—but you're saying that MECP has taken over that, even though it's mentioned in the forest strategy. So it's one of those cross-ministerial kinds of situations again, I guess, that we are dealing with—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's our time for this round.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): We're now going to move to the government side. MPP Parsa, you have 20 minutes.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Well, thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate it.

Good afternoon, Minister. Good to see you, as always. I want to thank you, your parliamentary assistant, the deputy minister and the entire team at MNRF for appearing before our committee once again to answer our questions. I think this is, if I'm not mistaken, twice in less than one year, so thank you very much to everyone.

Minister, I know I don't have to tell you the effect of COVID on many businesses in our province, including several industries that have been significantly impacted by COVID-19. I'm thinking, for example, of the fishing industry. Of course, these public health measures that have been placed to be able to protect everyone have also impacted as well.

Minister, some of these restrictions, such as travel and border closures, continue to impact their economic recovery. I'm wondering if you could share with the committee what your ministry has done to assist these sectors and to help create strong economic recovery and growth. Again, I'm thinking of, for example, the fishing industry. If you can give us some examples and just bring us up to speed, I would really appreciate it.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you, MPP Parsa, for joining us today and for asking that question on the impacts of COVID. Boy, you're bang on: There's nobody that wasn't affected by COVID—and still being affected. The resource-based tourism industries were some of the hardest-hit, because they depended completely on those borders being open and us being accessible for our neighbours to the south, because so much of their revenue comes from the United States.

I just want to talk a little bit about what we did for that sector. I don't want to miss anything. As I said, it was first to be hit and it's always the last to recover, because until we actually open those borders again—and we're not promoting the opening of the borders, because we know that lax and porous borders is where the variants of COVID-19 have come from. None of them have originated here in Canada and certainly not in Ontario. When the borders are porous, that's how they get in. Once they're in, of course, they spread amongst the population

that's already here, and it doesn't take long before you've got another crisis on your hands as a result of a variant.

We have approximately 1,600 resource-based tourism businesses across Ontario. Many of them—I said it in my opening address there—are small and medium-sized, family-owned, operating in central and northern Ontario on a seasonal basis. Tourism is a major source of jobs and economic benefits for many communities across the province. Hunters and anglers spend, as I said, between \$560 million and \$1.6 billion, respectively, in Ontario and support so many jobs in rural and northern communities. We provided relief to those resource-based tourism industries in the way that was most appropriate for them. They weren't going to be able to survive without some kind of assistance.

I also want to tip my hat to Minister MacLeod as well, because she's the lead ministry when it comes to heritage, tourism, culture and sport, and resource-based tourism is tourism. She has been tremendously active in speaking up for that sector, and, as I said, it's one of the first to be hit hardest, and it will be one of the last to recover because we depend on people from elsewhere. I know that she has brought in a program of staycations in Ontario that hopefully actually materializes this year—that we can get this pandemic behind us, get more people vaccinated. I know every day we're vaccinating more and more people, which is a tremendously positive sign.

Some of the things that we did, MPP Parsa: We either waived fees or refunded fees that were already paid for those licensed to provide bear-hunting service fees; bear management areas for land use associated with the licence to provide bear-hunting services, so the land use permits, we waived those fees; bait harvester and dealer licence fees; bait harvest area fees for use of harvesting areas associated with the harvesting licence; land use fees for outpost camps, so the land use permit fees for outpost camps or leases—these were massively important. If you talk to the NOTO people up north, they'll tell you that it was like a lifeline.

The help that we provided for them was absolutely critical, because when you're a one-trick pony and that's not happening—it was similar to the commercial fishing industry, if I may, where almost all of the business for the commercial industry in Ontario is exported to United States restaurants. When the borders closed and the restaurants shut down, their market dried up. Immediately, there was nobody going to restaurants in the early part of the pandemic. There was nobody going to those restaurants to eat the fish, so they needed help in the worst way as well.

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People don't realize sometimes how intertwined industries are. You've got your commercial fishing industry that, overnight, was done. Their whole market disappeared. I don't want to use the pun "dried up" because there was certainly enough water in the lakes, but, overnight, it was just gone. So you can imagine being in one of those businesses that depends on that export market. Yes,

there were some that could still be marketed in Ontario, but it was a very small portion of their market.

So, as a ministry, we have to look at every single sector. It began with forestry, as I said. Immediately, we did what we could. We had them designated as an essential industry, an essential service, which was hugely important for them because at least they knew they could continue operating. But at the front end, it still had an impact, because at the front end of the pandemic, there was so much uncertainty that a lot of activity just disappeared. People didn't know what was going to continue to be going on and what was not going to continue to be going on. So they were all impacted from the start.

They all had to concern themselves with the safety issues. You're in the forestry business; you employ a lot of people. PPE was a big issue. We helped them with that. The planting program last year, which was absolutely essential to continue—I can't talk about stewardship and sustainability and then not plant trees for the forest industry. You can't grow a garden without putting seeds in the ground, right? It's no different in the forest industry. So those were some of the things that we did for them.

The petroleum industry: We waived some fees and postponed, gave them an extra six months for royalties—so many different things that were done to get these businesses over the hardest part. We weren't sure. Nobody really knew. There's no blueprint for this COVID, that's for sure. We didn't know if it would continue into 2021 at the time. It certainly has. We're here almost half—well, we're through the month of May, five months into 2021, and we're still facing it. Thank goodness we have the vaccines, because that certainly has been a game-changer.

But some of those same supports we extended into this year as well, because if you're in resource-based tourism and you're looking at a fall hunting season, your clientele has made up their mind long before the fall whether they're coming or not. Certainty: They want certainty, and if you can't offer certainty, they're not going to make that commitment and pay thousands of dollars to come up here without being able to be sure that they're going to be able to come here. The borders may or may not be open. They don't know.

We know that so many of these supports have to be continued through this year, as well, and this season. We're going to continue to provide that kind of backing as long as those key industries in the parts of the province where they're so vital need that assistance, because there is no alternative for them. There's no other secondary market for the product and the services that they're providing. This is it. In order to be successful, they need to have those. In order to survive—we take on the role of helping them with that.

Our role in natural resources and forestry is much smaller than the big provincial role. There have been other supports through economic development, through the Ministry of Tourism directly and taxation changes that were made with the Ministry of Finance. There's a lot of help that has been provided, but ours is more specific to the areas that we are directly related with, which are fees and permitting and that kind of thing.

I don't know if that covers all of your thoughts on that, but it's a big help to all of those people who depend on it so much.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you very much, Minister. I really appreciate it. In your response, you mentioned the support that was provided, whether it was waiving fees and refunding fees and PPE support etc. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on your interaction with some of these industries and sectors as far as how you heard from them. How did you hear about their concerns? How were they reaching out to you? Did you have round tables? I just want to hear, if you don't mind, about how those who do have concerns—and you've acknowledged it. You know that COVID has hurt everybody and a lot of businesses have been hurting. I just want to know if you can elaborate on some of the initiatives that were undertaken by the ministry to hear their concerns and to perhaps address them.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, MPP Parsa. I'm glad you brought that up. We immediately initiated an advisory committee from each one of the sectors. We have one from forestry, one from commercial fisheries, one from aggregates, one from petroleum, one from resource-based tourism—I might be missing some here. We met regularly right through. We were having weekly or biweekly meetings with all of these sectors, and each one of those sectors would have had 10 to 12 members from their sector who were making sure that we were aware of what was happening in their world. You just can't assume you're going to read about everything in the newspaper; you really need to be talking to people who have boots on the ground and are right there in the thick of things every single day.

I'm going to tell you how valuable that was as a minister to be able to hear from them directly as to how this was impacting them. It's amazing, Michael. Sometimes you get this idea, "Oh, yes, I think I understand. I think I understand." They'll give you some kind of an esoteric characteristic of their business that unless you've actually walked the walk, you really didn't even know.

That was a tremendously valuable exercise for me, and I know from my staff and officials at the ministry who were at every one of those meetings—because I couldn't personally attend each one of them, but we had members of my minister's office and ministry officials on every one of those. From those advisory tables—and we had an acronym for them, and I can't even just think of it right now. But from every single one of those, after every meeting, there was not only sort of a recapitulation of what was happening but also some action items and suggestions and proposals to the ministry about what could be done today and what could be done into the future to make things easier for them and make the whole system operate more effectively.

Honestly, as a result of that—and I don't want to say that there's anything good that came out of COVID. I guess in some ways there's good comes out of everything, I suppose, but I don't want to say that we want it again or anything. But I think it has made us even more open-

minded about how each one of those sectors needs to be understood even better than they were before. There was certainly stuff as a minister—perhaps people in my ministry obviously would know the sectors better than I would personally, because they've been working with them throughout the years. But it was a very valuable experience for me to be able to sit down and listen—and listen and listen—to what was going on in those sectors and how we could be helpful.

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Something that we would take out of those meetings—while the meetings were with my ministry, much of that stuff could then be used as a template for how other ministries could be of assistance as well. Just because a business has a relationship with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry doesn't mean it doesn't have a relationship with municipal affairs, or doesn't have a relationship with infrastructure, or doesn't have a relationship with transportation, or doesn't have a relationship with economic development. Just like, as I say, when we did our forest sector strategy, there were 10 other ministries impacted and involved in the development of that strategy. When you're garnering all this information and absorbing it, it's helpful in the operations of other ministries as well. If there's a positive there, I think it actually improved our ability to communicate and our willingness to communicate with our sectors.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Thank you, Minister. Just a very quick one, then, Minister, if you don't mind; it should be fairly easy, but I just wanted to ask and make sure—and you're right: COVID, as bad as it has been, we've also learned a lot as a result of COVID. So that's always something we can take away.

On that note, will you continue with these engagements during the recovery? Because, look, you and I both know it's going to take a long time for us to be able to get back again. It's going to be a challenging period for a lot, and they're going to need support. All businesses are going to need that. Are you going to continue that dialogue through your officials, through your parliamentary assistant—I know you will, yourself; you're fairly active—to make sure that they have the support and their voices are heard during the recovery phase?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you, Michael, for that. There's no question. The round tables have not continued, because we've been able to determine many of the things that needed to be done immediately. But that engagement, that's an ongoing thing, and quite frankly, we've forged relationships that I think will be beneficial to both sides. As we recover and we move on to the next challenge of life in the world we live in, those lines of communication that have opened I think will be beneficial from both sides of the equation. They understand us better, understand what we can and cannot do. We understand better what they need us to do, which also helps us paint a road map of where the ministry should be going in relation to its working relationship with the sectors.

Yes, I think there's benefits to be garnered there as well. Thank you for that question.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): You have 20 seconds left. Is that enough?

Mr. Michael Parsa: It will just give me an opportunity to thank the minister. I know he's a big Leafs fan, so I wish his team all the best tonight and going forward as well, Minister. Thanks very much for answering.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you. Now it's time to go to the opposition. MPP Monteith-Farrell?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Hello. Well, Thunder Bay is living up to its name. I have a huge thunderstorm happening outside my window right now, so if you hear big booms or something falling, my tree falling in my yard, because it's really whipping through here—and my dogs might bark, because they don't really like thunder either; the joys of working from home.

I'm going to ask about an area that there's a lot of publicity about. It's the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan. It's supposed to be reviewed this fall. In that plan, it has a 40% high-quality natural cover target. To date, there's about 28% high quality, and only half of it is well protected.

What's the plan for increasing and achieving the targets in the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, MPP Monteith-Farrell. I hope that thunderstorm going through Thunder Bay brings rain but no forest fires, because we don't need any more of those. Although it's improved a little bit over the last number of days from where it was in the middle of last week, so I'm happy about that.

The Lake Simcoe Protection Plan comes under the auspices of the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, so I would think I would have to get you to direct questions to Minister Yurek. I don't know if he's coming to estimates or not.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Well, thank you. I wondered which, but I thought because it was water it would be under your area.

Hon. John Yakabuski: The plan is under his ministry.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. I'll write him a letter, then.

I'm going to move on. In the Auditor General's report on conserving the natural environment, she stated that no concrete plans to work with Indigenous peoples on protected land exist. Can you explain what steps the ministry is taking to rectify and address that recommendation?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much for that question, MPP Monteith-Farrell. I'm going to redirect to Deputy Minister Rolf von den Baumen-Clark.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. That audit was primarily focused, as you know, on the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, but we have a component from MNRF in that audit, so I can certainly pass it over to our two ADMs who were involved with that.

We can speak to some of the recommendations that were more relevant to us as MNRF, because we would have been separating out different recommendations depending on which ministry it was. I'm happy to pass that on and give you some information on what was in our role

relative to that audit. The rest of the audit would fall under MECP. Would you like me to do that?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Yes.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay, great. We had a science and monitoring piece that I can pass over to Tracey Mill.

Tracey, if you don't mind me putting you on the spot right now, if there are any pieces of that audit that you want to speak to that were MNRF roles and responsibilities that we provided a response back to the Auditor General on in terms of those recommendations, that would be great.

Ms. Tracey Mill: I think I'm going to actually ask my colleague Craig to speak with respect to the response on this particular report.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you, Tracey. On that specific question, unfortunately, I'm going to have to get back to you with a response. I apologize for that.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: We may not have that right on hand, all the recommendations from the Auditor General, but certainly we can pull them up and share with you some of those results. Maybe we can bring that back tomorrow, if that works?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Sure.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Great, thanks.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Now I have a money question. How will the \$5.1 million spent on service modernization initiatives in the upcoming ministerial budget help to monitor and consider public feedback on the usage and designation of crown land and protected areas, as is required by law?

Hon. John Yakubuski: MPP Monteith-Farrell, I was having a little struggle with my speaker there and only got the last part of the question. Would you mind, please, repeating it? I apologize.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: How will the \$5.1 million spent on service modernization initiatives in the upcoming ministerial budget help to monitor and consider public feedback on the usage and designation of crown land and protected areas, as required by law?

Hon. John Yakubuski: Thank you very much for that question. I'm going to redirect that to Deputy Minister Rolf von den Baumen-Clark.

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Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you for asking that question. We've taken on quite a strong interest in service modernization. A lot of it spurred on from the interest of the public and our clients who are looking for more digital access to information and the ability to do more services digitally. So we've put forward a very strong service modernization project plan which has been supported.

I'm going to ask Marty Blake, who is our ADM for our recovery and renewal secretariat, who will be leading a lot of our service modernization projects over the next couple of years to give a little bit more information related to your question.

Over to you, Marty.

Mr. Marty Blake: Great. Good afternoon. I'm Marty Blake. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the recovery and renewal secretariat with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. I am pleased to elaborate a bit more on what the minister and deputy have started to share.

In an increasingly digital-first world, we must adapt our service delivery to move at the speed of business and provide people with an improved client experience. Modernizing MNRF's services will reduce burdens, improve accessibility and make it easier to conduct business in the province, thereby contributing to Ontario's economy.

We are committed to ensuring Ontarians can enjoy reliable, timely and client-focused services. In order to achieve that, we are expanding our digital and online approval services for permits, licensing and authorizations, with the aim of bringing all approvals online by 2024. This digital and online service will make the approvals experience simpler, easier and more convenient for people and businesses responding to the increased need for digital accessibility created by the COVID-19 outbreak.

At present, nearly 88% of all applications that we have are paper-based. They require clients, both citizens and industry, to contact staff directly to receive and submit applications. By moving these services online, there will be several benefits experienced by the client. They will include:

- a client will be able to access both registration and application services in a single common platform, which will align with digital identity, reducing confusion and redundant processes;

- citizens and businesses will receive faster approvals at their own convenience; and

- businesses will be able to quickly pivot to respond to economic opportunities.

In addition, many of the client-facing online portals MNRF has right now are siloed and not always built with the end user in mind. They are built upon different types of technology with separate points of entry and, in many cases, for a specific business line. All of these siloed systems have created a complex work environment that requires users to collect and manage duplicate information.

To solve the problem, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry launched the Natural Resources Information Portal in 2019 to provide fast, accessible and secure online services to do business in Ontario's natural resource sector. Initial efforts focused on modernizing forestry management planning services that support the province's forest products industry. In April 2021, we're expanding on that application service for the aggregates and oil and gas industries. The Natural Resources Information Portal is working towards reducing the number of tools and simplifying the work environment to make doing that work easier, providing MNRF staff, industry and citizens with a modern, fast, accessible and secure natural resource management application and reporting service, enabling an exchange of natural resource activity information, and championing a user/client-centric, agile development

approach which has included the completion of user surveys and interviews. This will bring numerous benefits to industry, including:

- reducing the administrative burden for industry and lowering business operating costs through the delivery of efficient online services;

- elimination of complex and confusing paper forms; and

- through streamlined digital workflows that eliminate unnecessary steps, receiving more effective and timely responses to applications and inquiries, and making it easier and faster to submit applications and activity reports and tracking the status of those applications online.

In addition, the Natural Resource Information Portal will lower MNRF's administrative burden and focus on resources to meet client needs while meeting Ontario Digital Service standards. We are committed to expanding digital offerings, to make 100% of all applications available online. We will support clients in transitioning to the new digital channels. For clients who cannot complete the process online, MNRF will continue to provide the access to licences.

Enhancements will be made to information-sharing systems such as making natural heritage maps and pits and quarries online, among others. That will proactively make information available to proponents requesting approvals from our ministry. Proactively sharing information through digitizing paper records and making it available to clients who need it will streamline the approval process by increasing transparency, thereby ensuring the applications are comprehensive at time of submission and reducing the time it takes to review and issue permits, licences and authorization.

User research will determine which data and products will be made available through increased information sharing. The services will be available for all Ontarians, and all of that data will eventually be digitized and available there for them to review and look at and bring themselves up to date with the processes that we have to support those clients.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: That sounds like an ambitious plan. Just to clarify: For those people who can't use the online system, you're going to continue the licensing aspect in a different format, like a paper format or a phone-in format or something else?

Mr. Marty Blake: Yes. By working with the clients, we're going to understand what their needs are going to be. We know that not everybody is going to adapt to the digital technology right away. Part of what we'll do is educate people on how to use that and efficiencies they can find with it, but those who cannot will still have the ability for them to access individuals to help them with those processes, for sure.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: So that's even after 2024?

Mr. Marty Blake: Yes, absolutely.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Oh, okay, great. It's good to hear that. All right.

So I'm going to go on to the smelt collection project, which I think I'm kind of intrigued by. Will the MNRF

smelt collection project be expanded to identify the presence of polyfluoroalkyl substances—PFAS chemicals—in other fish caught in the Great Lakes?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much for that question, MPP Monteith-Farrell. That's definitely one I'm going to have to redirect to ministry officials, so I'll turn that over to Deputy Minister Rolf von den Baumen-Clark. 1730

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: The smelt project: I'll send this over to Tracey. Tracey is not only our provincial services division and deals with enforcement and fire, but she also looks after all of our lake units along the Great Lakes, and so a lot of the assessment work that's done on those Great Lakes.

Tracey, thank you. If you can speak to the question, that would be great.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Thank you for the question. In terms of the specific inquiry regarding the contaminant, I'm going to ask if I can get back to you on that particular point. This is a project that is predominantly led by MECP. We are, however, assisting and working with them through the collection of some of the samples of tissues of fish that we obtained through our fisheries assessment work. But with respect to that particular contaminant, I will have to check with my staff and provide you with a follow-up response on that one.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thank you. Now, on to another problem. Gypsy moths were responsible for over 600,000 hectares of defoliation in southern Ontario in 2020.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: How will the ministry's forestry management plan adapt to prevent the continued destruction of Ontario forests from this invasive species? And it's probably more than a two-minute answer.

Hon. John Yakabuski: I'm sure it would be. Thank you for the question, MPP Monteith-Farrell. Because it's a technical one, I think I'll turn it over to the deputy minister.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark, deputy minister, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Sorry, by saying my name, I've almost used up the whole two minutes.

Yes, it's quite a complicated one, and there's a lot we're doing on crown lands for spraying for gypsy moths. Obviously, it's important for the industry, but also for fire protection. We don't want to see a lot of dead standing timber.

We have quite a lot of information. I'm happy to pass it over or you can carry it forward to tomorrow. I can hand it over to Craig Brown from our policy division, and he can talk about some of the work we're doing.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thanks for that, Deputy. As you said, pest management is an important part of forest management planning in the province. It is imperative that our partners in forest management do have plans to address pests for a variety of reasons. The deputy talked about not just the impact on the ecology, but also trying to

mitigate the potential for fire in the forests in the area of the undertaking, which is where commercial forestry occurs—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's time for the opposition.

We'll now go back to the government side. MPP Harris, you have 20 minutes.

Mr. Mike Harris: I think we're getting close to the end of the day here, and I'm actually surprised, Minister, that this topic of conversation hasn't come up yet. I wanted to talk to you a little bit about conservation officers.

As you know, I'm a huge supporter of our conservation officers. I've had an opportunity just about anywhere we've gone over about the last three years now to try to meet with as many of them as possible and get some feedback. MPP Monteith-Farrell actually had the opportunity when I was in Thunder Bay to meet a few of the conservation officers up there, and they're doing a fantastic job.

Time and time again, we keep hearing, "We need more conservation officers." So I was very excited to see in the 2021 budget that was just released that there is going to be a hiring of new conservation officers, not just one or two, but I believe it's 25—very, very excited to see that. It's probably the largest hiring, I would suspect, that has been done in quite some time. I'd love to hear a little bit more about what that commitment looks like, when we're planning on having those officers hired, what some of the training aspects would look like. If you could elaborate a little bit more on that, I would appreciate it, Minister.

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, PA Harris. I'm not sure; we might get a little bit of another session after this one to wind up the afternoon. But, yes, that's a great subject to be close to ending the day on.

Before I start, I want to thank you for your commitment to conservation officers and your impact on and input into the implementation of our latest hiring plan for conservation officers in the province of Ontario, and also for your participation in the public—what do we call it? The ad we did together on letting people know that we're hiring 25 new conservation officers here in Ontario. As you said, out there could be their office—not stuck in here, where you are today, but out there can be their office.

We really do expect a large contingent of applicants to come forward. There are so many people who—not literally, obviously—would die for a job that has them outside most of the time, although it's not a lot of fun on the days when the weather's not good and you've still got to be out there. Everybody thinks the grass is always greener where the other guy's walking, but every role has its challenges. You've got to be the right person to be able to take on a job like that, and I have the utmost respect for our conservation officers and the work that they do.

It's interesting: I was talking earlier about getting an email from a long-retired conservation officer. I'm not even sure how old he'd be now, but he'd sure be getting up there. He's definitely older than me, a lot older than me. He was talking about having some interactions with my dad when he was the parliamentary assistant to natural resources for many, many years. I know your father was

the minister for a short period of time as one of the portfolios he held, so I know how he feels about conservation officers as well. So we were very, very pleased to be able to do this. It's in keeping with an election commitment that we made, that we would hire more conservation officers to protect our natural resources across the province of Ontario.

Now, as to the nuts and bolts of the mechanics of how we're doing this, I know the application is open for people now, but I think I would be better to turn this over to Deputy Minister Rolf von den Baumen-Clark to give more details on the ins and outs of how we're doing with the process and what we expect to accomplish and how we're going to mete those out and everything. I think I can see ADM Mill is getting ready to pounce on this one. Thank you.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. As the minister said, Tracey Mill, who we've heard from before, ADM for provincial services division, who has our enforcement branch, can provide a little bit more detail.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Thank you very much. I can start off by saying that, Minister and PA Harris, you did such a great job on your selling of our hiring process and opportunities that I learned today that we received 1,700 applications for the 25 positions. As you say, many people are very interested in throwing their hat into the ring for the role of the conservation officer, so we have our work ahead of us to go through all of those applications. My thanks again to you for supporting that recruitment effort on our behalf.

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I would like to start off just by talking a little bit about some of the main duties that our conservation officers are responsible for and that these new candidates for the role will be responsible for. As many of you know, their duties do include enforcing laws that protect our natural resources. They play a big role in trying to educate and do outreach to the public, not just anglers and hunters in Ontario who come to this province to partake in those activities but also the public more generally. They conduct regular audits and inspections of resource users, of licensed issuers, commercial operators, and of course, when all education and compliance efforts are not successful and in the right circumstances, they engage in investigations, the gathering of evidence and presenting that evidence in court where charges are laid.

One of the examples that I can provide in terms of some of the work is around the activities associated with moose hunting. Our conservation officers conduct numerous patrols and focused operation activities that might include things like setting up moose decoys to identify illegal hunting of moose. They partake in patrols across the province: sometimes multi-unit or multi-regional enforcement blitzes. They also engage in enforcement flights into remote areas.

Many of the additional conservation officers that will be provided through the hiring of 25 new conservation officers will allow us to increase the number of moose

patrols, one of the key priorities for the enforcement branch, and to continue to conduct these types of focused operations.

In addition, we talked earlier on a question regarding safe hunting practices. As I mentioned, that's another one of the key priorities for the enforcement branch: ensuring that we don't have unsafe hunting operations taking place. Again, similar types of activities focused on decoy operations to try to dissuade unsafe practices, like hunting across a roadway or night hunting in some circumstances; also focused patrols in high-use areas where we have significant numbers of violations being found. Once again, the addition of the 25 officers will allow us to patrol additional areas and to undertake additional measures to deal with unsafe hunting practices.

As you probably know, we also have a long-standing partnership with Crime Stoppers. Through this relationship, the public is encouraged to report violations related to the illegal trade and commercialization of all species of animals and plants through Crime Stoppers, and that phone line is connected to our TIPS hotline, which allows us to respond to inquiries and to tips provided by the public.

Each year, investigations related to illegal trade and commercialization are initiated in response also to Internet-based offences that are detected on a system called the CONet project: officers actively engaging in Internet searches to identify any illegal trade of plants or wildlife in the province. Again, with these additional conservation officers, the ministry will be able to increase its focus on these types of enforcement issues relating to illegal trade and commercialization.

In terms of the current program, as you probably know, we have 184 conservation officers in the ministry that, as the minister mentioned, are working in about 50 locations all across the province. These front-line positions include field officers, canine handlers, specialist positions to train for specialized investigation, our intelligence and our major investigations team as well.

In the process of recruiting these 25 new officers, we will also be hiring a provincial training specialist in order to increase our training capacity. This will ensure that our officers are kept up to date on the range of legislation that they're responsible for. Officers at the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry are responsible for about 27 pieces of legislation, so training and updated training is an important factor in their work. We will also be hiring an Indigenous liaison to strengthen our ability to engage with and build relationships with Indigenous communities.

We currently have about 265 positions in our enforcement branch, of which 80% are conservation officers. The additional 25 officers will mean that we will have 209 officers in the field. This will allow them to enhance public education about our natural resource laws and regulations. Just as a bit of information, each officer in the branch regularly attends about four outreach events every year. This would mean the additional 25 officers would allow us to conduct an additional 100 education opportunities across the province annually.

In addition, in terms of field patrols, officers regularly contact about 830 individuals on average each year. The addition of the 25 officers will allow us to increase those annual contacts by an estimated 21,000 more individuals, and this will help to assist and promote compliance with natural resource laws across the province.

In addition, the additional 25 officers will allow us to more efficiently respond to the about 6,500 tips that I mentioned come through as part of that Crime Stoppers program that we have.

In addition, just in terms of some timelines and an update on the recruitment process, we did do the posting and your public notification about the postings on May 3 of this year. The posting for the job ads for the 25 conservation officers also identified that we were hiring across the province. That allows us to strategically position additional officers where the need is greatest across the province. We have now concluded the posting and, as I mentioned, 1,700 applications have come in.

The plan right now is to complete that hiring process, so go through the screening and job interview process, over the summer and begin the initial training of the officers in the fall of this year. That training is fairly extensive. It combines elements that we would engage in with the police college in southwestern Ontario. This year, as a result of the pandemic, we are undertaking some additional and different training for our officers that will be predominantly led by the ministry, but this training is extensive and will continue through to the spring of 2022.

In the spring of 2022, the new officers will enter another phase of their training, which has them paired up and working with a coach officer, so a senior conservation officer. This is their opportunity to do a bit more of the hands-on, in-the-field training with a seasoned and senior officer. That will allow them, by the fall of 2022, to be ready to commence their work in the field on their own, undertaking their own patrols.

I'd be happy to answer any other questions relating to the officers.

Mr. Mike Harris: Madam Chair, how much time is left?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Four minutes and 45 seconds.

Mr. Mike Harris: Well, I'll tell you what. Why don't we—just to bring everybody's attention back to the room here for a minute, you talked about moose decoys. This is something that's very interesting, and I'm assuming that probably 90% of at least the members of the committee probably have no idea what we're talking about when we talk about moose decoys. If you don't mind, ADM Mill, if you want to give us a quick rundown of what—they're almost sting operations, essentially, that our conservation officers set up out in the field to try and essentially catch people that would be illegally poaching an animal.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes, thank you. You are right. I think it's known by some that we do have mechanical animals, if you will. They are quite lifelike-looking. They actually do move, and yes, if we have a particular problem, perhaps with poaching or illegal harvesting or, as I mentioned,

individuals who might be engaging in unsafe activities—again, night hunting and shooting across roadways or in the vicinity of residential structures—we first actually use the information that we receive from our intelligence officers. These are officers who not only may be monitoring tips that come in but are also engaged in Internet inquiries and other types of intelligence-gathering that can identify a particular area of the province that might be subject to more of these illegal types of activities.

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An operation is put together where a decoy is put out—as I said, very lifelike. The officers are in the area, and if a hunter or a group of hunters are practising any illegal activities with respect to the decoy, there are officers there. Safety is a key consideration to essentially catch people who are engaging in these illegal activities. But the mechanical animals are actually quite lifelike. They are quite successful as a way of identifying and—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Ms. Tracey Mill:—responding to those particular types of enforcement issues.

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you. I really appreciate you shedding some light on that. I think it's a little bit interesting; I don't know if any of you have ever seen that there are some TV shows out of the States—I think one is called North Woods Law, and I believe it follows what we would call conservation officers in Maine. They often run these types of operations, and it's really neat to see the people who perpetrate these activities and get brought to justice and some of the creative stories they come up with about why they shot the decoy animal or some of the other things. If you ever get a chance to check it out, certainly, have a look, because that's what our conservation officers are doing here every day in the province.

Minister, do you have something you'd like to add?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Well, I have watched North Woods Law, and actually, they do it out of New Hampshire as well. It is quite an interesting program. I was thinking while Tracey was talking about 1,700 applications, and I wonder how many of that 1,700 are people who have tuned in—I don't know if it's on the Discovery Channel or what channel it's on; I just know where it is, where to find it and when to find it. But how many people might have even been watching those programs and said, "You know what? I might apply"? It doesn't mean they're necessarily going to have all the qualifications, because watching a television show doesn't make you a surgeon, you know. But it is quite a good show. I think that we should maybe do one here, and Mike and I could do a ride-along.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): A ride-along on the moose?

Interjections.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's our time for that round, ending on that note, and we will now go back to the official opposition. MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Hello. Yes, it's always good to talk about conservation officers, and it is good to see that the numbers are increasing. We're very excited

about that, because you can have all the rules in the world, but this is a big country and a big province, and if you don't have people enforcing it, it's going to be chaos. So we're very excited up here in the northwest to see more to protect our resources.

I think we'll go back to the question on gypsy moths and other pests in the forest sector. I think Assistant Deputy Minister Brown was cut off there. He didn't really get a chance to finish his answer. I'd like to hear more about those.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Maybe I'll start off and I'll see who wants to jump in, because we do have a number of forest insects that we do monitor and more closely. You may recall, historically, gypsy moths were always a big problem in the past, and MNRF used to have big spray programs, quite extensive spray programs. There are certain forest insects that we see naturally cycle, and so we found some respond better to the spray programs. Others naturally cycle out. We try to evaluate based on monitoring and looking at what the impact is to the forest. As you heard earlier from both myself and ADM Craig Brown, we look at what the impact is to industry as well as to potential forest fire hazards. Right now, while there is high incidence of gypsy moths, we are continuing to monitor. We aren't, at this time, actively contemplating the spray programs. Most of it seems to be more in the south, on private land. Certainly, municipalities who are interested can get involved with private industry to do spray programs.

We mostly have been investing more of our funds on some of the insects in the northwest and the northeast. So you're probably familiar in the northwest that we have a budworm infestation up in that part of the geography. We have jack pine budworm in one side and spruce budworm on the other side, and we're monitoring both. We're actually actively looking at spray programs for the both of them. Again, from the interest of trying to help protect the forest because the cycles are getting so big and if we don't dampen it down, it continues to multiply, but also because of the extensive risk as a forest fire hazard. When some of those dead and standing trees alight, we have a really hard time trying to contain the forest fires, and it's a hazard both to communities and public health and safety.

So those are the two areas that we're mostly looking at from an insect management program: investing our funds into those two in the northwest and northeast, the budworm programs, more so than gypsy moths at this point in time. But if anyone wants to raise their hand, either Craig or Tracey, if there's anything else you want to add to that, then please do so. Tracey has got her hand up, so I'll pass it over to Tracey.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Thank you. Perhaps just adding to the information that the deputy has provided, I will note that we do continue to monitor defoliation as a result of gypsy moths. One of the particular items that we did both last year and then leading into this spring is to provide a fair number of educational materials, particularly for private landowners, regarding gypsy moths, reminding

them that they are free-feeding defoliators of hardwood trees. We talk a little bit about the cycle of the caterpillars and then the moths themselves. There are tips on there particularly for private landowners in terms of banding the trees, engaging with the private sector for both land-based spraying and aerial spraying.

I will say that there is a fairly large aerial spraying that is under way right now, as a matter of fact, for private lands in southern Ontario and up to some of the Parry Sound and Sudbury area. I know, because the helicopters had just gone over my property the other day, trying to deal with some of the gypsy moths that are now in the cycle of hatching and the caterpillars are on their way.

So we are continuing to monitor, through our science and research branch, the impact and effect of defoliation and, at this point in time, to provide educational materials to the private landowners so that they can take some management actions on their own properties.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): We have 30 seconds.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: My storm is over here, so thumbs up.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Okay. That's the time, then, folks, that we have available today. The committee is now adjourned until May 26 at 9 a.m.

The committee adjourned at 1800.

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