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IN-15

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IN-15

Standing Committee on the Interior

Estimates

Ministry of Northern Development

Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry

Comité permanent des affaires intérieures

Budget des dépenses

Ministère du Développement du Nord

Ministère des Richesses naturelles et des Forêts

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Monday 11 September 2023

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43^e législature

Lundi 11 septembre 2023

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE
ON THE INTERIOR**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES**

Monday 11 September 2023

Lundi 11 septembre 2023

The committee met at 0903 in committee room 1.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good morning, members and witnesses. The committee is about to begin consideration of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Development for a total of two hours.

Are there any questions from members before we start? MPP Yakabuski.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Chair, I would like to seek unanimous consent on a motion to have the Ministry of Northern Development estimates be continuous for two hours as opposed to being broken into two slots, so continuous from 9 o'clock, when we start, for two hours.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Any questions? Any debate on the motion? We all heard the motion—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Is this a motion or just consideration?

Mr. John Yakabuski: It's a motion, but I was hoping I would have unanimous consent.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay.

Interjections.

Mr. John Yakabuski: There's a change of plans, Chair. I've just been educated.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay, go ahead, MPP Yakabuski.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I seek unanimous consent to continue past 10:15.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Yakabuski is seeking unanimous consent to continue the session until we finish from the allotted time, which is past 10:15, for the Ministry of Northern Development. Is there unanimous consent? Yes? Okay, there is unanimous consent, so we will continue our meeting until we finish with the witnesses.

I am now required to call vote 2201, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Northern Development.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you, Chair and colleagues. I appreciate the indulgence for bringing both sessions together as one. I think it will give us a chance to

develop the conversation, rather than it being chopped in half. So thank you for that decision.

Colleagues, good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to address the Standing Committee on the Interior. I'm looking forward to the opportunity to talk about the important work and key initiatives of the Ministry of Northern Development and to answer questions from the committee about our operations.

I'd like to introduce ministry officials who are here with me today from the Ministry of Northern Development. To my left here is the deputy minister, Shawn Batisse. We work very closely together, and I appreciate his support and leadership. I'm also joined by assistant deputy ministers, each of whom leads a division within the ministry.

Is Helen here?

Interjection.

Hon. Greg Rickford: She may be on virtually?

Are those people on our committee, too?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): No, they are next door.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay. That was freaking me out. That big moustache just kind of jumped out at me on the screen.

Interjection.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Oh, there's Helen right there—virtually, colleagues—and of course Scott Mantle, our chief administrative officer and assistant deputy minister for the corporate management division, and David McLean, assistant deputy minister of the strategic policy division, and two of my besties over there, Curtis and Kelsey, who work with me every day and travel the highways and byways with me to spread the good news around northern Ontario of the work that we're doing.

Folks, as you know, my ministry is the regional ministry for northern Ontario. Its mandate is to advance economic and community development through collaborative partnerships and solutions that reflect the unique needs of the north. We lead and coordinate programs aimed at strengthening the northern economy, building strong northern communities and creating northern job opportunities, but more broadly, economic opportunities. Through a network of offices in strategic program and policy development, we ensure northerners have access to government programs and their services and a say in government decisions affecting northern Ontario. We also work across government to attract new investors to northern Ontario and help northern businesses explore

Canadian and international opportunities beyond. My ministry plays a key part in the government's plan to help people and businesses today, laying a strong, more durable fiscal foundation for future generations in our northern communities. We are committed to driving economic growth and creating jobs. Today, I'm excited to highlight some of those and our recent achievements and actions we're taking to spur growth and unleash opportunities across northern Ontario, a region, of course, like no other in our province and, for that matter, our country.

I'd like to remind folks that the boundaries of northern Ontario proper are some 801,000 square kilometres. One of my colleagues had a chance to drive across that region, and I appreciated his updates.

I want to start by talking about the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. Nowhere perhaps is the business of economic development more evident in my ministry than in the work that the heritage fund does. When it comes to building a stronger, more competitive northern economy, the heritage fund remains one of the government's key tools. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund has invested more than \$685 million in 5,656 projects in northern Ontario. It's leveraged more than \$2.3 billion in investment and has created over 9,000 jobs since 2018. That's a lot of good work, colleagues, in a short five years.

0910

Our ministry has taken every opportunity to engage with northern municipal leaders, Indigenous leaders, partners, not-for-profits and businesses to seek feedback on how we could continue to improve and modernize the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. We heard from people who wanted Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. programs to better address the unique needs of a modernizing northern Ontario. As a result, back in 2021, we launched the new and improved Northern Ontario Heritage Fund programming.

Now, this is the second chapter of my political career. I've been involved in round tables and consultations of just about every size and shape you can imagine. I have never, ever been involved in a consultation this fast. It was not partisan. It involved people in business, municipal leaders, First Nations leaders. Over 1,000 people took part in the conversations—and I see my former parliamentary assistant who was involved in those, Dave Smith. As well, just about everyone who participated in the consultations showed up for the virtual announcement. These were back in the COVID days. It had been a long time since Teams had seen that many people on a government platform.

Let's break it down. The four Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. programs support more projects in northern and rural communities and Indigenous communities. It makes it easier for more people and businesses to apply, target existing and emerging markets, provide more work opportunities for Indigenous people and their communities, and address the skilled labour shortage in the north. Through these improved programs, we are building stronger, more resilient communities while supporting an environment where businesses can thrive, grow and create jobs.

Alongside these program changes, the 2023 Ontario budget allocated \$100 million per year to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp., starting in the 2023-24 fiscal year. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund funding will continue to support investments in infrastructure, culture and arts. I was in Sudbury the other day; they were crazy for the amount of investments that we're making in arts in Sudbury. While their local MPP had said that there were cuts, we were able to take it to the people in downtown Sudbury and let them know that, frankly, our investments in arts, culture and film have increased in northern Ontario, and in particular in that beautiful city of Sudbury. We straightened that narrative out, and a lot of folks at the YES Theatre were happy to hear that great news.

Some great projects, if I may, highlighted in 2022 included more than \$1.6 million for the city of Timmins to expand its stratospheric balloon launch base, the first and only facility of its kind in Canada; more than \$830,000 for the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs to improve snowmobile trails throughout northern Ontario; and \$380,000 for Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation to build an early years centre to provide land-based and cultural programming to children in the community.

Colleagues, I've had the opportunity to see, in person, the differences these investments make, and I feel privileged to have been welcomed in so many northern communities, big and small, who love what's going on in the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. It's awesome to see the ingenuity and the resilience of people, the resolve in northern Ontario and the great work they're doing to improve their communities for the families that are here today and the ones that will want to move there tomorrow. My ministry understands the essential role the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. plays in communities across northern Ontario, and we're proud of the work we have done to improve its programming. We'll continue to build on its great success.

I want to highlight the Northern Energy Advantage Program. Now, I was the Minister of Energy when we created this program, and I'm happy to report that on April 1, 2022, the former Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry launched the updated Northern Energy Advantage Program, which will operate for a five-year term, from April 1, 2022, to March 31, 2027. This program supports northern Ontario's largest industrial electricity consumers with competitive, stable and predictable electricity prices, and it makes us competitive globally. The program helps improve the ability to secure investments while continuing to create and sustain good, high-paying jobs in the north, helps companies better manage their electricity costs, provides more opportunities to invest in training, new equipment and job creation.

My ministry is expanding the Northern Energy Advantage Program from \$120 million per year to over \$176 million by 2025-26. Colleagues, particularly those in opposition, this is an opportunity for you to rally around it. Not only is this green energy that we're talking about—an advantage I know that the member of the Green Party appreciates—but this is the one that electrifies some pretty

big operations in some ridings in northeastern Ontario. Today I'm asking for your vote when it hits the Legislature floor in the budget. This is a rare opportunity to make sure that large electricity-consuming businesses have an opportunity to be competitive. Through this expanded program, new mining and forestry operations can come into production and be eligible for future assistance. A new investor class stream has also been created to encourage companies to undertake transformational investments such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to clean technologies. Colleagues, we're now talking about mines that are operating completely on clean electricity. Isn't that awesome? Doesn't that make you want to get up in the morning and talk about mining?

Currently, the updated program has 21 industrial companies located in northern Ontario, representing 28 facilities. They receive a rebate of \$20 per megawatt hour, with individual rebates capped at the 2017 to 2020 average consumption level, so everybody gets their share. The maximum rebate cap of \$20 million per company per year has been removed, allowing for rebates that more accurately reflect consumption levels for the north's largest industrial facilities.

Since its inception in 2010, the Northern Energy Advantage Program, which we rebranded and expanded—sounds like a rap song—has provided over \$1.49 billion in relief on electricity rates for our largest consumers. Our government's relief efforts are helping our largest industrial electricity consumers in the north become more resilient and prosperous, lowering the risk of these northern companies closing or relocating facilities.

I want to talk about northern highways. As you know, transportation in northern Ontario is complex. It is vital to keep people and goods moving safely, efficiently and sustainably in the province's vast north. The northern Ontario highway network makes up roughly 60% of the provincial highway system, including more than 10,775 kilometres. Through the northern highways program, my ministry makes strategic investments by expanding and improving critical infrastructure such as roads and bridges. The ministry establishes and manages the budget of the annual program and is responsible for setting out those priorities. For the 2022-23 fiscal year, Ontario committed \$623 million towards the northern highways program. This included \$479 million for rehabilitation projects and \$144 million for expansion projects. We've moved forward with projects, including phase 1 of the four-laning of Highway 17 from Kenora to the Manitoba border as well as four-laning sections of Highway 69, from Sudbury to Parry Sound. For the 2023-24 fiscal year, Ontario has committed nearly \$592 million towards the northern Ontario highways program. It includes the \$479 million for rehabilitation projects and the \$113 million for expansion projects. These investments are seeing reduced congestion, keeping our roads reliable and safe and creating good-paying jobs.

My ministry is making long-term investments in northern highways to build the road infrastructure we need to ensure a prosperous future for northern Ontario.

0920

I'd like to talk about winter roads, if I could. How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Five minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: My ministry has invested more than \$6 million in the 2022-23 fiscal year to support the construction and operation of an approximately 3,200-kilometre long temporary winter road system that links 32 First Nations. For this fiscal year, 2023-24, my ministry is investing another \$6 million in the winter programs. These investments are part of a three-year funding commitment to promote economic stability, but, most importantly, to ensure that communities are able to bring vital goods and services such as food, medical and construction supplies as long as the winter road season provides it.

I'm happy to announce we invested an additional \$5 million for a new bridges and culverts stream, so nobody can go in there and take from that other program. If it's got to do with bridges and culverts up there, there's an additional resource. This stream will provide funding for projects involving the installation of water-crossing infrastructure and repair to those.

I've spoken before about the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund to help offset some of the impacts of the resource sector on our towns and cities and First Nations communities across the north. It provides \$15 million annually over five years. All 144 municipalities in northern Ontario are eligible to receive the funding. In 2022, I can highlight a couple of examples: Kapuskasing received \$393,000 to complete the Highway 11 and government road connecting link; Dryden, \$350,000 to complete the asphalt rehabilitation project right on the Trans-Canada Highway. So, colleagues, these are pragmatic investments through NORDS. They're stackable, and they're working really well.

In conclusion, these initiatives I spoke of today demonstrate how, together with our northern partners, we are building strong and vibrant communities and businesses. Together, we're keeping the north competitive and current, improving the quality of life for its inhabitants and creating real opportunities for people who live, work and play and do business in our vast and varied region, and who want to come and make northern Ontario their home.

I want to thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Chair, and that concludes my formal remarks. I'm happy to take questions or comments at this time.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister.

We now begin the question-and-answer section in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 10 minutes for the independent members of the committee and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee for the remainder of the allotted time.

We start with the opposition. MPP Bourgouin, go ahead.

M. Guy Bourgouin: Merci, monsieur le Ministre. Je sais que ton français est excellent. Je vais commencer avec une question en français, parce que j'aime toujours la chance de parler en français, comme tu le sais.

Premièrement, on est souvent en désaccord, mais, moi, je suis un fervent croyant que—je sais que vous avez fait des investissements dans mon comté. Je veux vous remercier, parce que je n'étais pas tout le temps là—soit que les passages n'arrivaient pas. Mais je pense que mes commettants l'apprécient. Moi, quand les ministères font des investissements, je crois que c'est important de dire merci de la part de mes commettants.

My first question: In 2020, the northern development operation budget was \$198 million, estimated to be close to \$211 million. This year it's estimated to be \$5 million less. What explains the \$5 million less being spent this year?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'll have to get back to you on that. It doesn't reflect any cuts to the ministry. Some of the resources, Guy—are we calling each other by first names? Whatever; MPP—are a reflection of how the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund actually works within the Ministry of Northern Development. It's a rolling fund, so sometimes there will be a surplus or what have you, and it can affect the balance. But we will back-channel with you on reconciling that. I can tell you that there were no cuts in that ministry for the past fiscal years.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: So there shouldn't be any cuts?

Hon. Greg Rickford: No.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: How much of this northern development spending of the heritage fund was done last year and this year? How much are we talking?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The allocation is \$100 million. We rarely fall short, where it doesn't get used. But if it doesn't get used up, that amount transfers to the following year. That's why I'm telling you that there may be some small reconciliation in that.

The important message, for the purposes of your question, is the amount of money that supports the activities that I highlighted in the program, the fact that we make best efforts to adhere to notional allocations, so that we can stay committed to the four streams that are within the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund—they're broken down further—but, importantly, to make sure that we have an ability, each business quarter, as a board, to sign off on projects in a rolling fashion that's as quick or, certainly, faster than it used to be.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: You mentioned the north and the First Nations. We know how some of these First Nations communities are struggling and the conditions they live in. And I know you have worked in these communities—you've mentioned that many times in the House. How much money has been allocated to promote the NOHFC programs to increase First Nation and Indigenous participation?

Hon. Greg Rickford: There's a two-part answer to that question. It isn't a function of just a specific notional allocation to Indigenous communities; it's unpacking the structural barriers that have prevented them from taking or accessing the programs and the resources that are in it.

Let me unpack that for you. For the first year or two, while we were watching the Northern Ontario Heritage

Fund closely, we saw that a number of First Nations communities and a number of very small municipalities and townships were having a lot of difficulty accessing this program. We're talking 1% to 2% per year, okay? On an average business quarter, it's sometimes less than 1%.

I'm pleased to report to you that in a business quarter earlier this year, the allocation in that business quarter alone for First Nations communities—wait for it, Guy—was 19%. That has never been done before. The reason that it's been doing that and the reason that it's climbing up, slowly but surely, is because we have been able to make this a friendlier program for more communities, particularly First Nations communities and smaller townships.

How? First of all, in some instances, we're quite literally, with my amazing team, holding the pen with them as they write their applications—working with them at every turn. We meet directly with First Nations leaders and we send SWAT teams in there. We just met with Chris Moonias in Neskantaga last week to help organize the profile of projects that qualify under it.

Here's the kicker—and this is where you're going to hear from your smaller communities when you vote against these things, Guy, with all due respect—any community under 1,000 people is getting 90 cents on the dollar for these communities. If it's under 5,000, it's 75%, because we know there's either no tax base or a very small one in some of the largest municipalities per square kilometre. I think that's exciting news, and the great thing is that it's barely compromised those big city slickers in northern Ontario like the folks from Sudbury, who are still averaging every business quarter anywhere from 15% to 20%.

This is about fairness, and I've ensured and sent clear direction to our directors that in the modernization of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, small communities—particularly our isolated and remote First Nations communities and our small municipalities and townships—have got to be in this program. We can show you the percentages—they vary a little bit; I'm happy to share that information with you—but they'll tell an amazing story, and I think you should get on board and start voting for those investments that we're making in those communities.

0930

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Well, I'm happy that you are addressing that particular—because, these small organizations and First Nations, that was one of the big issues they were saying, because of the problem of writing these forms or asking for the funding. It was very difficult for them, and there were always hurdles and hurdles. So it's nice to hear that this is being addressed.

How much has the ministry spent on this year just to promote even more for these communities? How much money are we talking about?

Hon. Greg Rickford: There's an administrative component of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund—the machinery, if you will—that is located in most towns and

cities. They do extraordinary outreach to the isolated communities. From time to time, we have brought folks down here—I'm thinking even of Chris Moonias; he was here on other business—to meet with our officials and my political team to ensure—and look what this has translated into: in 2022-23, Mushkegowuk–James Bay, almost \$5 million in projects; Sol Mamakwa, in Kiiwetinoong, \$7.6 million. You better tell him to stand down. His communities are getting real good at this, because we're spending so much time and energy ensuring that these communities get their fair share of the annual \$100 million that we're committing to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I have written to you, Minister, about the Moosonee docks, and I did get an answer: It was one-time funding. But as you know, this municipality has to take the docks in and out every winter, and there's damage and everything. But everybody uses them. It's not just for Moosonee taxpayers. You have the water taxis. You have, of course, Moose Factory that uses that. The municipality has reached out to you on many occasions. They want to have the funding because, unfortunately, their taxpayers are already having to pay a heavy tax burden. So is there any chance that you can assist them? Because this is ongoing—every thaw, every fall, every spring, they have to bring them in and out, and it costs the municipality quite a lot of money.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, of course, we're talking about estimates, and so specific examples that are happening here and now don't necessarily fall in that. But when you talk about Moosonee, you warm the frozen cockles of my heart. I'm happy to tell you that we've put a SWAT team in place that's working with Moosonee to try to understand what elements of this critical infrastructure could qualify for the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, and we'll make best efforts to be there for them with any other program funding we have in the ministry or other ministries to ensure that they have that important piece of critical infrastructure.

And then I'll tell them—when the job is done, I'm hopeful that I can tell them that their MPP stood in his place in the Legislature, colleagues, saw that item in the budget and stood up and voted in support of it.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Minister, *[inaudible]* there's more than just one issue in the budget.

Just to get back to the Northlander train: I know it's an economic development for them, and we know how Moosonee is being developed right now. There are a lot of things happening. They've been asking for the Sunday train. I know you might say, "Well, it's a different ministry," but I know it also falls within your purview to look at it, because it is a huge thing for economic development. The Sunday train right now is running, but they want it permanently. Is there any chance of you helping with that for this municipality?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Again, we're using specific examples outside of the context not just of my ministry but of what estimates serve. I don't know; I guess you're just

making my knees weak with these questions about communities that I care deeply for, Guy. So I'll say to you in response that we work as a team. I can't do it alone in northern Ontario—80,000 square kilometres of land? We have to use a cross-ministry approach. That's why we sit down regularly to look at these projects. We've identified a number of railway opportunities, or issues that we've turned into opportunities, the Huron Central Railway being one of them and the Northlander and the like. So the short answer is, yes, we'll continue to make responsible decisions about scheduling. We understand the importance of moving people and, as importantly, goods on rail to our most northerly communities.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: You touched on roads, Minister, and we also know how important it is for northern highways—Highway 11 or 17. I had a chance to speak to Mario Villeneuve, who is the president, as you know, of the road builders, and he was saying to me that right now, with all the development that is going to happen in the north, our road infrastructure—and you did mention some is being done, but that some of our infrastructure is not up to par when we get more and more development up north. We've seen many accidents on these roads, as you are aware, because you live it on your end and I live it on my end, and we've seen that.

I'd like to hear from you: How do we address that? Because the infrastructure is not up to par according to these experts that build roads and we're seeing too many accidents and our roads need to be improved. I've heard you talk about the four lanes and that is long overdue, but there's a big section that is not done. I'd like to hear your perspective on this.

Mr. Dave Smith: Just a point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Go ahead, MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: We're in estimates right now. It's discussing how the money has been spent in the past based on what we are doing, not about future projects that are coming up. I would ask that the member stay within scope and ask about how the money has been spent in the past, not about what we might do in the future.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

MPP Bourgouin, you can continue, but let's focus on the estimates of the current fiscal year.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: So my question, I guess: What has been done this year to make sure all our infrastructure on our roads is safer and we have less accidents? Because we live it on a continuous basis and people are losing lives.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that. For this fiscal year, we've committed \$623 million towards the northern Ontario highways program. It's made up of, Guy, \$479 million that's allocated for rehabilitation and then \$144 million for expansion projects. The ministry, as I highlighted in my remarks, has advanced its commitment to certain twinning projects and they include, as I mentioned, Highway 69 and then 11/17 from Thunder Bay to Nipigon. As well, NORDS has proved to be a program that provides support for a lot of those roads that are not necessarily highways but are connected to them as they

come off major primary and secondary highway routes and into our towns and cities—obviously, ones that are already on the Trans-Canada. This funding can cover those expenses.

Look, I appreciate the intervention. This discussion will always be about three things. What wasn't done in the past: In my respectful view, post-World War II Canada ought to have done the same thing the United States did, and that was twin its highways from east to west and north to south. In our case, we had one job—the collective “we”—and that was to twin the highway from St. John's to Vancouver. It didn't get done, but it's my hope—and certainly under the incredible leadership of Premier Ford, he sees that opportunity. The largest swath of untwinned highway is in northern Ontario and I have a dream that one day we would be able to see construction projects start to link all of those together. Historically, they have been very political, and we've put an end to that. Now we're building it out; we're seeing First Nations-owned-and-operated road construction companies evolve as a result of it. We think that that's a good thing.

Secondly, what we've spent here now; and thirdly, how we can commit to a program that not only deals with the existing highways but the harsh reality that is the result of climate change and other factors. The winter roads have become more of a topic of conversation around making segments of it more permanent. I think that's a discussion that has got to occur and drive innovation around some of the things that we can do to make some communities in the not-too-distant future road-accessible for safety, for health, social, economic benefits. I think they're pretty obvious.

0940

Sorry, Dave. I talked about the future.

He gets me all emotional. I don't know what happens. It just comes over me, and the next thing I know, I'm in too deep.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Usually, it's a different emotion that he has constantly.

You mentioned the help that these big mining companies are getting, which is fine. But the municipal partnership fund remains frozen despite small rural communities struggling to maintain basic services and infrastructure across the north. What is the ministry proposing to do to rectify this situation?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, first of all, again, here we go off into another ministry.

Let me make it perfectly clear, as I said in my remarks—and you're going to give me another golden opportunity to highlight the transformation of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, and that was that for the first time in a very long time—and of course, the spirit of Leo Bernier presides over us on this one, and that is that municipalities had a far more broad and accessible opportunity within the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund to build their infrastructure. Most of this is focused on recreational infrastructure that goes to quality of life. I didn't see those pickleballers coming, but boy, they're quite the group in these communities.

I was in Blind River the other day; they're building their own court system with stands and cover—they don't even want the tennis folks in the same fenced-in area. We're replacing roof membranes in arenas that would otherwise be shut down. These are things that we saw first-hand as the Blind River Beavers played their opening game the other night. I had a chance to be there and announce that investment. That game would not have gone on had the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund not been there for that investment. Folks were so happy. Even when I told them that their MPP, independent Mike Mantha, had voted against it, their enthusiasm could not be dampened. The 300 or 400 people who were at that game let out a cheer when they recognized that, together, the municipality and the province of Ontario were going to not just fix the roof, but for the purposes of being at that game, I had my jersey on, and we were there to raise the roof, Yak.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I have just one more question before we're done.

With climate change, we know how it's going to affect going forward. What has your ministry done so that—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Bourgouin. Your time is up. Save it for the next round.

MPP Schreiner, you have 10 minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I appreciate the minister taking the time to be with us today to discuss the estimates.

I believe the minister and I—probably all of us, actually—were at the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association meetings earlier this year, and a hot topic of discussion was road safety and road maintenance, snow removal etc. I think there was a lot of applause for the fact that clearing standards had moved from 16 to 12 hours, which is a good thing—I think we can all agree on that—but a lot of concern around whether or not the government had a clear plan around how it was going to meet that 12-hour standard and whether sufficient money had been allocated to meet it. I'm curious if you have an answer for those municipal leaders.

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's a great question. It was probably the top issue—opportunity to address when we meet with our FONOM and NOMA municipality associations.

I can say a couple of things. First of all, in addition to the innovation that we just made from 16 to 12 hours, we have also been working through, over the past couple of years, different technologies and different approaches to road clearing, and they're under review now. For example, in some instances, Mike, we've actually shut down fairly large sections of highway, closed them temporarily, for the bigger snowplows that do both lanes at the same time to come out and clear the roads so traffic can flow more safely and efficiently—and other policy changes on the ground around safety to protect the interests of the actual people who plow the road and technologies around the plow truck. I can get you a summary of some of those innovations.

The other component is the task force. From what I understand, their work is nearly complete, and they'll issue a formal report. This is a reflection of a number of

different people who have a stake in road safety and the 10,000-plus-kilometre network that traverses all parts of northern Ontario. I think once we've had a chance to review that, there are going to be some additional consultations. I suspect they'll not take very long, and I'll take the opportunity to discuss them with you, Mike, because you've made some good observations and contributions—and be in a position to understand fiscally, moving forward, the scope of resources to support those potential changes.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I appreciate that. Let's hope the resources are there.

MPP Bourgouin got cut off when he was starting to talk about the climate crisis a bit. We know from the Financial Accountability Officer that we're going to see additional infrastructure damage—probably around \$26.2 billion over the next seven years; \$14 billion of that to transportation infrastructure alone. A disproportionate amount of that is going to be in the north, which is feeling the effects of climate more profoundly than other parts of the province.

We spent \$479 million, I believe, last year on rehabilitating northern roads. I didn't see any mention in the estimates whether this rehabilitation was being done to standards of the changing climate versus our past climate. Does the ministry have standards to ensure that we're spending that money in a fiscally responsible way to meet the standards of a changing climate?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I can tell you that, in part, the rehabilitation particularly around flooding has occurred with a view to understand that that flood which we had last year was in the mix of a couple of historical floods—so high-water marks over the past 100 years; two of them have occurred within the last 10 or 11 years, give or take, and so the rehabilitation is set at that expectation. Of course, you can't necessarily predict that it won't be higher some other year, but a specific policy that outlines that might be a useful thing to consider.

I would only say to you that of the \$479 million that was allocated, a good portion of it was spent dealing with the impacts of unforeseen events. I can certainly say that in northwestern Ontario. I don't know what the exact allocation was to deal with significant events, but it will continue to increase, no doubt.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Well, my suggestion to the ministry, if I can talk about moving forward for a second—why we're looking back—is that we have those standards in place, because obviously we don't want to spend \$479 million rehabilitating roads for a climate that used to exist; not one that's going to exist in the future.

I want to ask the same question for the, I believe, \$144 million for new construction. Is that new construction happening at standards for a future climate versus a past climate?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Whether there's a technical standard or not, I can't answer that. We'd be happy to confirm either way with you.

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I can tell you again, on specific projects, they are done with a view towards the impact of significant events that have happened, particularly two within the last 10 years. And I can tell you, Mike, that in one instance there between Dryden and Kenora, there was a washout of the Trans-Canada Highway for a fair amount of time, and those upgrades have reflected the need to do that beyond any standard that we had seen before. I'd have to double-check on the Trans-Canada twinning that's going on from the Manitoba border forward, but that is high ground anyway, so it doesn't have the same exposure to risk.

That said, there have been sections of highway that have fallen away, and the efforts there have been to dramatically improve the culverts that support those. That's why some of the additional funding that I mentioned earlier has been designated just towards that, because it deals with unanticipated higher flows of water post-winter.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: The reason why I ask these questions is, in the winter roads section, you did reference climate specifically—I certainly appreciate that. We understand the challenge with winter roads. But I didn't see climate mentioned on any of the other road sections, and so, given the increasing frequency, severity and cost, I think that would be appropriate.

You alluded to the fact that we've seen significant flooding in northwestern Ontario. We've also seen evacuations for forest fires as well—

Mr. Ric Bresee: Chair, a point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Point of order?

Mr. Ric Bresee: Road standards are an MTO issue, not a northern development issue. I understand that northern development is involved in the funding, but I would ask that the member stick to things that are within northern development's purview.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I appreciate that, Chair. Northern development is allocating the funds, and I just want to make sure that, when those funds are allocated, it's done in a fiscally responsible way, and I certainly appreciate the fact that the minister acknowledged that in his response.

I'm curious, just with the increasing evacuations—especially in northwestern Ontario, your neck of the woods—what type of infrastructure investments are you making to address the increasing evacuations that we're seeing, particularly in northwestern Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Again, only because I'm on the emergency management cabinet committee, I can speak to some of that—not within the confines, but as a friendly guy, I'm willing to share with you that we've had to take a look at a couple of different things.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Red Lake had a little easier go of it this year, but in the previous two years, whether it was flooding and a washout or a forest fire, it might be the case that more than just one route in and out of Ear Falls and Red Lake is something that is the reality of those natural disasters. Preliminarily, we are working with the First Nations communities, the town of Ear Falls and Red Lake

on a prospective conversion of what would otherwise have been a forestry road as an alternative to get out there. That doesn't just address the concerns you're advancing but might also be a more effective way to work on some of the resource development projects that are going on up there. That's just one example of a couple that are going to have to be—for the washed-out road between Dryden and Kenora, we may have to look, obviously, at alternative routes—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister. The time is up.

We move now to the government side. You have 20 minutes. MPP Yakabuski.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you, Minister Rickford, for joining us this morning.

I know we've talked a lot about the northern highways program, but I want to have questions for you a little bit more based on my own observations. As you and I had discussed, I drove through northern Ontario this summer with my wife, Vicky, heading to the Northwest Territories. Things didn't go so well once we got there; that's another story, with the fires and everything. But the drive through northern Ontario—and I'd never driven through there before, because if I had been up there in my time as a minister or when I was an MPP, we had always flown and went to the events from wherever we were.

But, you know, I listened to times in committee and times in the House when the opposition would have you—they're speaking to the people in southern Ontario and everywhere else who have never been to northern Ontario. You would think we're doing nothing in northern Ontario when it comes to building highways. I have to tell you, I was astounded. I was astounded at the amount of work being done. We took Highway 17 because we wanted to have that beautiful scenic trip—what a magnificent trip—around Lake Superior. I was absolutely astounded through the north on the amount of construction going on. The numbers of big equipment—the excavators, the scrapers, the dozers. It's just a massive amount of moving material. The challenge of building roads—in Renfrew county, it's a challenge to build roads, any place where it's part of the Canadian Shield. But that trip around Lake Superior just absolutely blew us away.

I almost found myself praising and cursing you at the same time, because for the amount of work that—I know you've been so active on this northern highways program and so persistent, because I was there at the table when you were there as well and driving that issue all the time. One minute, I'd be saying, "Wow, I'm telling you, the amount of work," but then I'd be swearing at you because our trip was taking so much more time because every time we turned around we were stopped because of construction. Then, of course, we got into Manitoba and Saskatchewan. My only real memory of Saskatchewan, other than that we stayed there one night, was getting a fairly substantial speeding ticket, because you're driving down those straight highways and—well, you know what happens, eh. I paid the ticket, by the way; it's already paid.

Interjections.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Yes, I wasn't going back to Saskatchewan to go to court or anything.

The other observation: Because of the immense challenge of building highways here in Ontario and particularly in northern Ontario—you know northern Ontario better than me or any of us here. I made the observation to Vicky. I said, "Look at what we went through and then here in Saskatchewan"—no offence to Saskatchewan. God bless them, they're fortunate to have that part, but I'd rather live here. All you need is a bulldozer and a paving machine to build highways in Saskatchewan. Really, it's a pretty simple matter: move the dirt, put blacktop on top of it, and away you go.

If I could ask you just to expand a little bit on what we have done, because I was literally outside—I couldn't believe what I saw, the work being done in northern Ontario, and it's all happening as we speak. Thank you for that.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Colleagues, I'll tell you, it was a weird phone call that I got from John: a thank you and a curse all in one fell swoop.

Look, I have three constituency offices in my riding. One is 215 kilometres away from one of them, and the other one is 145 kilometres. I allocate a lot of time to get between those three. It's sort of the Kenora–Rainy River triangle. I've had to slap an extra hour on, up it to three hours, to get down to the Fort and an extra 45 minutes just to get to Dryden because of the projects.

Let's be very serious for a moment. These rehabilitation projects are much needed and building a safer transportation network for the future. I take the member's earlier intervention about how that measures up in specific and technical policies, but these rehabilitation projects, to the tune of \$479 million of the \$592 million, bring many aspects of this up to today's standards and the future beyond. One day I'd like to see more of that allocation to expansion projects, but there's a lot of work to be done and there's a lot of work being done now. This is translated into hundreds, if not thousands, of projects across the north. Whether it's rehabilitation or expansion, I think the central significance of it is that our northern communities are preparing for the kind of future—especially around critical minerals and certainly a forestry sector that's going through some difficult times in different parts right now. Your mega pulp mills and your larger stud mills are going to be calling on the kind of traffic that begs those roads to be in the best condition possible.

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We are seeing an increase in truck transportation across northern Ontario, as opposed to alternative options through the United States, so that corridor is under constant rehabilitation, but also expansion. I apologize for the delays.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Leardi, go ahead.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I have questions about the Northern Energy Advantage Program. I have two questions. There's this thing called the new investor class and I

would like to know: How does this encourage companies to transition to new clean energy? And secondly, why is this important for northern Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Let me start with the second question. This program has two primary objectives: one, to make them competitive, to ensure they're competitive on a global scale; and two, to ensure that they are as environmentally friendly as any operation can be.

And so, through this program, Algoma Steel is able to say, "Wait a second, maybe we should go electric arc. Why not? We've got the Northern Energy Advantage Program sitting there right in front of us." It gives the Borden mine an opportunity to say, "Hey, wait a second. Let's electrify our entire operation—no gas." It gives the forest sector—these guys are operating on razor-thin margins on their best days an opportunity to be competitive.

But as I said moments ago, what motivates us in all of this is that the draw is from clean, green energy. And so, this duality of purpose that is embedded in the Northern Energy Advantage Program is fundamentally designed to increase our competitiveness on a global scale, but also to ensure that the decisions current participants and future ones are making signal a commitment to this government and to the future of northern Ontario that our resources in any industries that derive from them—so, processing capacity for things like lithium, cobalt and any other critical minerals—are done in an environmentally responsible way and that electricity-intensive industries can be competitive and environmentally friendly at the same time.

Does that answer your tough but fair question?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Yes, thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bresee.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Minister, thank you again for attending today and speaking to us. At the AMO conference, as the representative for MNRF, I received a number of delegations from small municipalities in the north. They're concerned about the challenge of a lack of roadways for commerce and for industry—certainly the forestry industry itself—but also, quite importantly, for the emergency evacuations. And you made mention of that a little earlier.

Being a former mayor myself, I certainly understand the small municipalities just simply do not have the tax base and do not have the ability to shoulder these very large infrastructure projects. I'm actually very appreciative of what northern development is doing with the municipalities to provide that funding and access those roads.

But alongside the traditional road system, the winter road system is essential, and it's something that I don't think many of us in southern Ontario are really very aware of—how they work, how important they are and when they're available. Could you explain in a little more detail your ministry's work to support and expand a more reliable winter roads network?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for that question. Maybe I should just start out by saying what the Winter Roads Program actually supports. We're talking about 3,200 kilometres of temporary winter road systems. They link 32 First Nations communities and the town of

Moosonee to the provincial highway network. These roads, in the winter, are considered, for all intents and purposes, to be provincial roadways. For anybody who has had to spend any amount of time driving into those communities, as I have in a number of different provinces and territories, they are an essential link. That window where the people in those communities get a chance to drive their own vehicles out—we want that to be safe. We also want those roads to be strong enough to endure the capacity required for transport trucks to traverse them. Increasingly, as I discussed earlier, we find ourselves fixing, repairing, rehabilitating or simply, I like to think, upgrading, which is why we had an additional allocation for things like culverts and bridges on those systems so that we can prepare for the reality that some parts of these winter road networks will become permanent roads.

For a number of years, in two chapters of my political career, I've talked about the corridor to prosperity into the north-central part of Ontario. It's not merely for the opportunities to develop resources. It is because many of those isolated communities are still operating on diesel. I'm not sure how the Chair feels about that, but I know how I feel. I know how unreliable it is, as somebody who spent eight years of my life living and working in there. I'm probably going to be reminded by the NDP that I mentioned again that I lived in those communities. But it matters, right? They're brittle, fragile and they're not good for the environment. These communities are saying this road access is important for health, social and economic benefits, the ability to bring more modern broadband infrastructure in, because of the reality that everybody is using computers these days and iPhones and all those other pieces. So these kinds of networks are essential.

We saw in Watay Power when we mounted up to the tune of a couple of billion dollars to electrify those communities how transformational it is. Moving forward, it's my belief that in view of some of the impacts of climate change, but also in view of the fact that many of these communities will ultimately want permanent roads and are saying this, our commitment to winter road upgrades are increasingly becoming part of a planning exercise for some permanency to some corridors moving forward.

Mr. Ric Bresee: So it's more transitional at this point, some of them?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Some born out of necessity, and some born out of opportunity.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Excellent. Thank you.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Four and a half minutes. MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Going back to the—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Leardi, can you turn the mike towards you, please? Yes, thank you.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Going back to the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund, can you please give us an idea of what progress is being made in this program and an idea of some of the program initiatives being undertaken in northern Ontario?

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Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, so this program—the genesis of it, of course, was born out of a campaign promise going back to 2018. We recognize the important contributions of towns, cities and municipalities, far and wide, across northern Ontario that are involved substantially in the to-and-fros of the resource economy—so forestry and mining, principally, some aggregate and some granite operations—and that these would bear pressures on certain roadways coming in and out of cities and towns. I think of my own, for example, up until the closure of Kenora Forest Products—likely to be relocated outside of Kenora on an industrial road that has the capacity for it, as opposed to being 130 years old and in the heart of a little town that I live in called Keewatin. But when it was operational, you could see those big logging trucks running up and down that road and the toll that it took on it. I think of a couple of different entry points in and out of Sudbury where the roads break down very quickly despite efforts of at least two, sometimes three levels of government—when the federal government decides arbitrarily to participate in a road infrastructure program—to keep those roads in good shape. So NORDS was born out of that, understanding that they contribute significantly to the resource sector and also bear the brunt of the impact on their infrastructure. That’s what the genesis of NORDS is really all about. Every single municipality in northern Ontario has access to it, and I think in my opening remarks, I gave a few different examples. We’ve done work in and around Cochrane, in and around North Bay, in and around Sudbury, in and around Dryden, just to name a few—that they wouldn’t otherwise have what I call top-up funding. We’ve made this program stackable onto anything that the province offers through other ministries, including in my own ministry, and any potential federal programs—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Boy, this is a tough Chair here; sorry—that can enhance and, ultimately, Anthony, minimize or keep as small a possible a contribution out of pocket by the municipality on that road.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You have 37 seconds.

Mr. Dave Smith: We’ll take it next round.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Before we move to the second round of questioning, I would like to remind the members of the committee that, as Chair, I will allow members to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee to ensure they are confident the ministry will spend those dollars appropriately. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make the questions relevant to the estimates under consideration.

We will move now to the second round of questioning. We will start with MPP West, from the opposition.

MPP Jamie West: Thank you to the minister and his supportive staff for bringing all this together. I really do appreciate Minister Rickford bringing a northern perspective.

I once said that—I think it was MPP Miller who said something about being in the north, and I said, “You’re not from the north,” and I think he said, “Neither are you.”

Minister Rickford—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I’m a Sudbury guy. There’s no dispute that you’re in northern Ontario. I won’t touch the other one. But Sudbury is one of my favourites.

MPP Jamie West: It is important.

Our colleague MPP Yakabuski talked about going to the north. A lot of people from the south don’t go to the north. They don’t truly understand it and have an appreciation. I can say the same thing about areas of southern Ontario as well. So I do appreciate that lived experience that you bring to the role as well.

The Chair reminded us that we have to stay close to estimates. I wanted to ask you about your L. May miners lunch pail, but I am not able to now. But I think that is a good reflection—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I bought it out of my own money in this fiscal year, so it might have some relevance.

Laughter.

Hon. Greg Rickford: We actually are working with them to support their operations and are hopeful that more people in the world could show up to work with this. It reminds us of our roots here in Canada, whether you work in mining, forestry, construction or what have you. It’s humbling to have watched your dad fill his own lunch pail and for me to do the same thing, even though I wear a suit and tie to work. Thank you for your indulgence.

MPP Jamie West: No, I think it’s great. For anyone looking—

Hon. Greg Rickford: But it is made in Sudbury—full credit where credit’s due. Sorry, Jamie.

MPP Jamie West: No, it’s okay. My dad’s best friend lived across the street from Leo, and I used to feed the fire while they were hammering those out growing up, so it’s a special thing to me. If you’re looking to save money, that thing is indestructible. We have all kinds of games where we threw them in the air and kicked them along.

I know that this is going to be a future project, but you had talked about the four-laning of Sudbury to Parry Sound and talking about being non-partisan and supportive. I know that you have tragedies on the highways, just like we do around my area. Do you have any details about upcoming dates or length of project about that? I know it’s not specific to estimates, but is there anything you could share?

Hon. Greg Rickford: As you’ve recognized, this is about the future, not the present, but we have moved forward with the projects that I identified in my opening remarks, which include four-laning sections of Highway 69 from Sudbury—Jamie, I had just driven up there three or four times, I think, in the last calendar year alone in different seasons. This is transformative for Sudbury. It maintains its place as the centre of gravity for a lot of the major mining activities. There will be other ones farther out across northern Ontario, as time wears on, and you will be increasingly invaded by Torontonians as the cottage country there, which used to be out of reach in most

people's minds—at some point, Sudbury becomes a three-hour drive, so look out. So be careful what you ask for, but we always welcome the good folks of Toronto to come up and see our region.

But making it more safe, of course, is the most important thing. I think you've heard me wax on, hopefully eloquently, about the opportunity to move forward with a plan to twin the major corridors, which would include 69 and 11 and 17—11/17, as it stands, during its stretch as one—as a key determinant for how much more safe northern highways will be. That said, it's never lost on me that the secondary highways—obviously, we have to stay vigilant in terms of their rehabilitation, repairs and upgrades as well.

MPP Jamie West: I'll continue to ask questions about 69—not today, but just the importance of it. I was very happy to hear the news that it is coming, because I know it has been delayed and also because MPP Gélinas drives with me and reminds me every time we drive through that it is 68 kilometres—she gets me to set the odometer every single time to make sure. But the safety of the people is the most important thing. I'm sure, in your area as well, you've gone to too many funerals over unsafe highways. So I really do appreciate, very sincerely—I know I'm using up time, but I want to get that across.

Similarly, you talked the investments into road works. In Sudbury, several years ago—I can't remember if it was just after I was elected or just before—the province, the feds and the city put in the Maley extension, which took those mining trucks off the LaSalle highway. Basically every year, you redid LaSalle highway and it caused all kinds of delays. So I appreciate all the small work that happens. I don't always get to say that kind of stuff to you and your ministry, so I do want to say that—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I don't know if you know this or not, Jamie, but during my federal portfolio, that was a key program that we had moved forward with the administration of Sudbury at the time, and I wish to send a signal out to our federal government: I think we have a real opportunity to have those good old-fashioned one-third/one-third/one-third stackable programs that brought those kinds of initiatives. I'm taking up your time now, so I'm sorry, but it's a call to the federal government to revisit them.

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I would just say subsequent to that that we had to make further upgrades to that corridor through NORDS in an effort to keep that particular road you're talking about a great diversion of the heavier resource traffic out of Sudbury proper.

MPP Jamie West: Okay. Now, I think you have a background in health care—I believe, from memory—and so I'm just wondering, what role does your ministry play in rectifying the huge shortage of northern doctors? Is there any connection to that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's not, per se. We are proceeding cautiously through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund to take a look at certain infrastructure that may be

public in nature that supports the delivery of health services and programs—not the services and programs themselves, but plazas that may be in whole or in part medical clinics or pharmacy kind of events. We are starting to consider those because we understand that that's a key feature to the recruitment and retention of physicians and other health care providers. But, gosh, I probably am not going to go much further than that in my portfolio.

MPP Jamie West: Okay. And similarly, another issue that's very large in the north—everywhere, but in the north has been—I speak to my colleagues from Thunder Bay, and depending on when the stats come out, we're either in first or second place with Thunder Bay about the number of opioid overdose deaths that we have per capita. And so, what steps is the minister proposing to do to increase access to safe injection sites in the north?

Hon. Greg Rickford: This is not anything that's contemplated in my ministry at all.

MPP Jamie West: It's not? Okay. All right. I know it's a big issue, because the municipality has been carrying the \$100,000 that was committed from the province, and so I'm just trying to get access to that. I'll continue to work with the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions on that.

One of the things that was mentioned in your opening statements was about funding for the arts. I know it's off-topic, but just for the clarity of my colleagues who heard that, the Up Here Festival had lost about \$100,000. They found out about three weeks before the event, and so that was the comment I was speaking about. Just like the minister, I would fight for my community just like he would.

I do have a question—

Hon. Greg Rickford: To the tune of \$17,810,000 in NOHFC investments in fiscal year 2022-23, I can tell you—and we'll be happy to provide the numbers that supported a significant amount of that for Sudbury—was allocated to arts, culture and recreation.

MPP Jamie West: I am always happy when you come to cut a cheque in my riding. I will never complain about that. But just like you, whenever someone finds out that they were expecting money to come in and it doesn't happen, I'm going to be vocal about that as well, because it's our role—all of us—to echo and amplify the voices of our constituents.

My pages are out of order. I apologize for this, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's okay.

MPP Jamie West: The budget committed \$136 million to provide new trains for the Northlander, but there's no timeline for when the service will resume. Is there any information about that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: We can provide technical information through other ministries on that. I have some oversight into it. I can tell you that some of this is supply chain, the sheer ability to build or upgrade existing cars for establishing those lines. That's all I can really comment on right now.

MPP Jamie West: Okay. It relates to questions I have about the Northern Health Travel Grant, because people in

the past would use those trains, especially in the winter, because of safety issues or mobility issues, especially for seniors and people travelling with young children. In the budget, there was no commitment to increase the Northern Health Travel Grant or to improve the timeline for reimbursement for northerners who need the help. I know it's a major issue in Sudbury. I'm sure it's a major issue across the north. Any thoughts on that or what should be done to improve this underfunded program?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Again, I have thoughts on it, Jamie, as somebody in Kenora. We don't even have an MRI at our hospital, so you can appreciate that that means going to Thunder Bay increasingly, especially as Manitoba scales back its level of co-operation and participation with us. But this is not a program that is delivered from my ministry, and I can't speak to it today.

MPP Jamie West: Okay. I know that feeling about the MRI. We had to work for about 12 years to get a PET scanner, under the Liberal government. It was an interesting dance the community had to do on that.

I feel like I have a lot of questions that are not going to be in your purview.

Guy, is there anything that you wanted to ask? My pages are all messed up.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Would you like me to just walk you through all the projects that we've funded in Sudbury over the past—

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bourgouin.

Interjections.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, except that I would say you voted against them each and every time. It might test his resolve; I don't know.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bourgouin, the floor is yours.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: The climate change—I was going to ask you a question the last time, before I ran out of time. You spoke about the winter roads and how important it is for these communities that live up north that are isolated. It's a lifeline for them to bring in all the goods that they need and to be able to do what they do throughout the year. Has your ministry invested money—or I should say, how much money has been put to do research on that? How much is it going to affect, and how much will it cost in the future—because I know that we're going back in the future, but it is something that's happening now that will hurt your ministry. I'd like to hear your perspective on it because it is very important. As we've seen even this year, the roads shut even earlier, and it started later, and we might see this going forward on a continuous basis. So, definitely, I'd like to hear, because this will definitely impact, as you know, because you know the communities as much as I do, how much this will impact—because these trucks that have to bring all this material to build homes and everything that goes with these communities. How much money has been invested for the future from your ministry?

Hon. Greg Rickford: There's that F-word again: "future." I can only speak in the friendly confines of this

year's estimates—and maybe just a quick peek at what's to come.

The current allocation is \$6 million to support the construction and operation of the 3,200-kilometre system that constitutes the winter roads. We are also providing \$2 million through the Winter Roads Program to Windigo First Nations Council to replace ice bridges and pre-engineered portable bridges and culverts.

You mentioned research. That research is often baked into the project itself, in the planning of it, to try to understand how this is not just a rehabilitation or an upgrade but also reflects the different kinds of pressures it's facing as a result of things like climate change.

And then in this fiscal year, an additional \$5 million for the Winter Roads Program, but specifically to bridges and culvert streams—that is primarily focused on installation of water-crossing infrastructure, so pre-engineered bridges and culverts, as well as other repairs for the existing structures along the winter roads network. So the emphasis is really on their durability now—but in the future, should some of them in whole or in part become parts of more permanent corridors or roads.

1030

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Coming from my neck of the woods, forest industry, you did mention—and I may have missed it, so I apologize if you answered this question before—but the roads, because of all these trucks that you mentioned. You mentioned that in your community where you live you used to see all these trucks going back and forth. In my riding, I see that also, and we see the roads deteriorate and deteriorate. You talked about the three structures—federal, provincial and municipal—but I guess what I'm asking is, how much money has been spent from your ministry this year just on that particular issue of road deterioration because of industry from forestry, mining and other industry?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Again, there were two tranches that we discussed. There's obviously the principal program to the tune of \$439 million, I think it was, which is intensely involved in rehabilitation and repair. And then, of course, there's the NORDS program, which I would say almost exclusively, by all accounts, is dealing with road repairs that are a little closer to or in and around municipalities. You can do the math there fairly easily, but we're talking close to half a billion dollars when it's all said and done.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay. That concludes my questions.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP West, go ahead.

MPP Jamie West: Thank you, Minister. In terms of the \$5 million that was for culverts and bridges and delivery and installation, do you feel like it's enough for what we have ongoing? I know nothing is ever enough, especially when the opposition is asking you questions, but is it an estimate that recommends or reflects the reality of what we see?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think the short answer is yes, on the basis that this is a process of, in some cases, discovery. It's also a function of known deterioration of an

asset, so we can predict, working with the ministry of transport, what culverts and/or ice bridges or what have you are in need of repair and potentially, in the future, replacement, or a new one for a new opportunity. Should that occur, our allocations would be reflected in that. I would make submissions to the Treasury Board. So that \$5 million reflects that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute left.

Hon. Greg Rickford: It says, okay, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, the bridge going to their community, we've got to replace that, and that's part of it. There are some other areas that lead into in and around Fort Hope and Eabametoong and the like where some critical work needs to be done. We plan, and then I make my submissions accordingly.

MPP Jamie West: Okay. And it's protected from other—you can't borrow into it for anything else?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I mentioned earlier—I think I was a little more animated—about mission creep, that it was specifically allocated to it. And it's been very well appreciated. I've got a couple of First Nations chiefs who have reached out and said, "It was really nice to be able to go to that program and be clear about what we're replacing or repairing, and not competing with other applications that would be not similar."

MPP Jamie West: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. Now we move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, go ahead. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that.

Minister, this may begin to sound like mission creep into another ministry, but it is going to wind its way, I believe, to your ministry. I met with the tourism association at AMO and also at NOMA. Both had talked about how tourism in the north was first to close, last to reopen, and was particularly hard hit by border closures because northwestern Ontario, in particular, relies so much on tourists from Michigan and Minnesota. We were talking about what the tourism industry needed. One of the things they talked about—maybe they brought it up with me because of the party affiliation I have with the Green Party—was that they need more EV charging infrastructure, particularly because they're seeing more tourists from the US driving electric vehicles.

Given how important US tourism is, especially to the northwest, I'm curious if there are funds allocated in the Northern Energy Advantage Program, in particular, for EV charging?

Hon. Greg Rickford: There's not, Mike. It would not qualify as a threshold test for the enormous amount of uptake in electricity from an electricity-intensive exercise. That's not to suggest that the sum total of every charger across that vast region would not amount to that. If I may—feel free to, if I take my answer in another direction—but you were at the meeting when I addressed this question at NOMA, appreciably and objectively, that this was a function of industry, as well, and a responsibility too. I understand that since that meeting

some progress has been made, working with another ministry—not mine—on a transition to a more user-friendly adapter so that we don't have different kinds of electricity charging stations. It's actually not just a shortage of those; it's a shortage of the different kinds, right?

I liken it to going to France. I've only been there a couple of times, but I'm comfortable in my own skin, so I carry a little hairdryer to coil up my hair all nice when I'm there in France. I can't plug it in; I've got to use another adapter. Well, we're going to be in the same situation with adapters.

I don't want to take that too much further. I think you're very well versed in how that's problematic, but there's no question that there is an industry issue there that we have to sort out, in addition to accounting for the fact that the pressures on an electric vehicle and its battery are much greater, as well, for a variety of reasons, including weather.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Yes, I know; you're absolutely right. I live it every day.

Are there any programs within your ministry to assist with electrification infrastructure? I ask that certainly supporting the work that's being done on the EV mining and manufacturing, but I'm thinking of EVs actually being used in northern Ontario, because that's a concern I hear all the time from people.

Hon. Greg Rickford: No, not out of this ministry. The Northern Energy Advantage Program, Mike, is, by design, for the larger electricity-intensive operations and that's resulted, as you know, in the conversion of the Borden mine operations to complete electrification and the motivation for Algoma to switch to an electric arc furnace, which is historic, frankly.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Yes, absolutely.

I wanted to switch over to the NORDS program for a second.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Sure.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I get it, man; the added pressure on northern roads from resource industries is huge, right? So I think the NORDS program is a good program. I'm curious if you have any sense of—we do have resource royalties from forestry, mining etc., and aggregates, as well. How much of that covers the additional pressure being put on roads? Do you have a sense of that in relation to the money allocated through NORDS?

Hon. Greg Rickford: If I understand you correctly, you're trying to establish some cost—

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Maybe I'll put it this way. In southern Ontario, a lot of municipalities are frustrated because they feel like their allocation of resource royalty rates from aggregates doesn't cover the additional cost they're experiencing in their roads. I'm curious how that works in the north in relation to the NORDS program.

1040

Hon. Greg Rickford: So far, I've had no complaints. I think everybody probably goes to a place where they say this could be an inelastic demand and you could never have enough. The \$15 million is a fair assessment so far, and I think I remember setting up the program clearly saying we don't want to get into the business of arbitrary

figures. We even had taken a look at—we didn't want to confuse it with resource revenue-sharing agreements that we have with our First Nations communities, so this was squarely for that.

I mentioned how stackable it is, Mike. Its key feature is that it can only be used for a demonstrable case of where a piece of infrastructure has been unfairly burdened or saddled with the pressures of a resource industry nearby, so it's very focused and disciplined in that. If underpinning this isn't enough, we're learning that right now. So far, our demands have been quite reasonable and fair, unlike the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, for which the demand is increasingly exceeding it. I think that's a good problem to have, because we're able to tell people that in future funding cycles they would have an opportunity to keep that application alive. That hasn't been the case with NORDS so far.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Okay. I wanted to switch gears: When I was in the Chair's seat, you talked about diesel generation in the north, which I agree is a huge issue from a human health, cost and climate perspective. I'm curious in how many communities you've been able to replace diesel generation with electrification at this point—well, maybe we'll stick with the past and not the future for now.

Hon. Greg Rickford: So Watay Power, Mike—we're talking about 17 communities, and they're onboarding one at a time as the line grows out. Fort Severn has significantly reduced their diesel requirements through an award-winning micro solar panel project that I was involved with extensively when I was the federal minister. As an honorary member of that band, we recognized our collective efforts to deal with Ontario's most remote community. I'd be happy to share some information on the success of that program. You might be aware that they received a national award in Ottawa this past year for that.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I remember that.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think that there's still some opportunity for that, except that obviously we're focused on how those pieces of infrastructure actually get transported to those communities.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Greg Rickford: That is a labour-intensive, cost-intensive exercise. It was unique to Fort Severn at the time, but I can tell you that the communities I'm most concerned about are the ones that are proximal to what we know as the Ring of Fire, but the central part of northern Ontario. We're hopeful that the corridor to prosperity there is as much about an energy corridor and a solution for those communities in the likeness of Watay Power than it is anything.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I know we're almost out of time, but the federal government says they're committed to funding an east-west grid as part of electrification. Are we going to be able to tap into any financial resources in that regard, to powering up the north?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, look, I should say in fairness to Jamie's earlier question on winter roads—or somebody's—the feds do match us there on that. But I think—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you; time is up.

We move to the government side. MPP Smith, go ahead.

Mr. Dave Smith: Minister, I know that there are a number of things that you get very passionate about, and this is one of those ones where I'm sure the passion is going to come out. I want to circle back to NOHFC. You made a comment that in the one fiscal term, Indigenous funding through NOHFC had gone from 1% to 19%. There were some significant changes that your ministry made to NOHFC and how the funding worked.

I want to touch on a couple of things before I actually ask the question on this, because you really have to appreciate what this funding can do for some of those communities. I'm going to hit two specific funding amounts. One was the Red Lake Regional Heritage Centre—\$1.8 million to that facility. It's a community of 4,100 people—\$1.8 million is almost \$5,000 per person that would have gone into that. That's something that a municipality of that size just cannot absorb. The second one is \$975,000 to Sioux Lookout, to take some of the municipal services down to the Bigwood Lake area. Sioux Lookout has a population of about 5,200. So these are significant investments that are being made that the municipalities simply would not have had the tax base to do that with. And yet, these are things that are base-level—if I can refer to that—infrastructure that's needed, and significant cultural investment in the case of the heritage centre at Red Lake. We know that Red Lake—although it's a population of, as I said, 4,100—really serves a greater community of close to 12,000 people from some more rural and remote areas, to get into it.

Your ministry made a significant change to how NOHFC is handled and how that funding is allocated—and with no disrespect to the metropolis of Sudbury. There was significant funding that had gone to Sudbury, to Thunder Bay, to some of the other larger northern Ontario centres—and I say “larger northern Ontario” because, compared to Toronto or Hamilton, they're significantly smaller. Funding was not going to those Indigenous communities, to those small, rural and remote communities. Could you speak to why the change was made and how this is having a positive impact, then, on some of the smaller communities?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Maybe living in Keewatin and understanding that there's a tradition of curling there that predates Confederation and understanding how the pressures on a foundation of a newer rink but one that's still aged enough has to be repaired—the ability of isolated and remote First Nations communities to upgrade their community and recreational infrastructure.

As I like to remind folks—I'm thinking of my announcement in Spanish the other day. Someone said, “Uh-oh. This is a slippery slope, Rickford. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund is making an announcement in front of the Legion.” Well, I think of that nice Legion down there at Long Branch. There may be a few dances and whatnot that go on unrelated to the central activities

of the NOHFC, but by and large, it's a Legion. The Legion in Spanish—for generations, there have been people who have been married there, who would have had a high school prom there, who may have attended a memorial service. These are the kinds of pieces of infrastructure that they needed.

I mentioned Blind River needing to upgrade.

There are countless examples of where—Greenstone, largest municipality in Ontario, smallest population, the tax base simply insufficient.

So the good-news part of this was making this the kind of program that would recognize the stretch goal of the smaller communities to actually do some of the most basic repairs and upgrades as priorities, rather than some of the icing-on-the-cake-type projects, maybe a splash pad or what have you.

1050

What we're also finding, Dave, is that a lot of those really small towns and First Nations communities are on the move. I mentioned the centre of gravity for mining in Sudbury, but a new one in the Greenstone area. There are four First Nations communities in the propinquity of that gold mine, which serves as the baseline for where the corridor to prosperity would have, who are now sizing up quality recreational infrastructure assets. They're leveraging the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund to do that, at anywhere from 50 cents to 75 cents to 90 cents, titrated up, depending on their population, and up to \$2 million. I think these are fair and reasonable ways to give a hand up to communities who, historically, maybe would have come to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund for a pretty desperate upgrade to a piece of recreational infrastructure.

Now we're in a much better position. As you pointed out, those numbers are moving. We were at 19% for one business quarter, and it slipped back down. What's more important to me is that, incrementally, over the course of time, we see these size of communities—municipalities, townships and First Nations communities, typically of smaller populations—taking up the opportunity that is the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund and, frankly, marginally impacting some of the pieces that, historically, the larger communities have gotten. They don't just do it because they can; they often have a small army of people who can write applications. Many of our communities that were trying to take part in this program had no ability whatsoever. I think the deputy minister can attest to the fact that the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund team is now in the business—some might say, rather oddly—of literally helping them hold the pen on and providing the resources to support the application process so that we can make sure they're going to be under review in a business quarter.

Is that fair to say, Shawn?

Mr. Shawn Batise: Yes, Minister, and I think there was another question—sorry?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Deputy Minister, please identify yourself for the record.

Mr. Shawn Batise: Sorry. Shawn Batise, Deputy Minister of Northern Development.

Just picking up on the minister's statement, we have NDAs across the north that work specifically in each—they all have a set allocation of communities to work with, and they work very closely, as the minister says, to go out there. We've been quite impressed with the amount of applications, as the minister said, that have come in and the ability to supplement—I know this isn't about Indigenous affairs—what we do, the minister and I and others, with the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs to address some of the priorities in this community.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I would say, as well, that the single biggest difference at northern development and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund is that we're not in our offices waiting for communities to come in. We've done the consultations. We've implemented a modern Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. Now our people are actually going out to the communities proactively, armed with assistance in helping fill out the applications, if necessary.

Even a higher order, like a political mobilization with certain chiefs who simply have not shown up, applied and failed because of capacity in the community, we've called back up and said, "Hey, do you want to revisit that? We've got some new terms here." "All right." They come down with their consultant, and the next thing you know, they're in my minister's office, working with us, helping to organize a couple of key projects. We're talking about communities here with populations of 300, 400 or 500 people, at best, who are now accessing the program.

I hope I did that answer justice.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you. I appreciate that. I'll turn it over to my colleague MPP Leardi.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Leardi, go ahead.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I wanted to follow up again on another question about the Northern Energy Advantage Program. I have some statistics in front of me. My understanding is that the program was at \$120 million per year, and then it's going to step up and it's going to be increased by about \$56 million, and then it's going to arrive at \$176 million per year by 2025-26. I hope I have those numbers correct. I'm looking to verify those numbers, number one; and number two, give me an idea of where that money is going to be going.

Hon. Greg Rickford: It is an important question in the sense that the Northern Energy Advantage Program has its set customers. These are big-time electricity-intensive operators. So we know who they are; we know where they are.

The second question is, what other potentially electricity-intensive operations are out there? Well, mining is onboarding. I mentioned the Borden mine. Others are taking a look at a segment of their operations becoming completely electrified, so we have to anticipate in present times for the expansion of new entrants. Then, of course, the unfinished business: That is, to anticipate who they might be.

One of the key areas that we're looking at now—and we've started discussions at the chamber of commerce level and with industrial stakeholders—is to work with, in

particular, the mining community on processing capacity. I mentioned cobalt, lithium—lithium, in particular—and other critical minerals. These have the potential to be electricity-intensive operations and we would sure like to be able to do more than just extract the critical mineral and send it somewhere else. We want a fully integrated supply chain in Ontario, to the extent that that's possible. It has to contemplate other electricity users who may be intensive, and processing capacity has been identified as one of those.

I don't want to break the rules and start talking about the future, but certainly this year's fiscal allocation and the ones that are anticipated are moving with the very positive reality and signal that we're getting that existing assets are using more electricity because they're expanding, and there will be new entrants on the horizon that we want to be able to support.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bresee.

Mr. Ric Bresee: How much time do we have left?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Seven minutes.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Okay. Minister, as we wrap this up, or are coming close to the end—you've talked about the eligibility parameters for the NORDS funding. I'm always really happy to hear that the very smallest municipalities are getting the funding they need in ways that they can approach projects that they literally never could otherwise. The 90% factors for the very smallest municipalities is incredibly exciting. So what I'm hoping is, as we come near the end here, you can provide us with some details, some names, some stories about the successes that we can celebrate for those very small municipalities.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, we have 144 of them, right? We're talking big country here.

Again, they have, by way of example, included the smallest of towns and some of the bigger cities. They have dealt with roads that have infrastructure that deteriorates very quickly—we're talking on an almost annual basis, some roads—so this has to be a nimble program. It has to be accessible to all municipalities and it has to be targeted at specific kinds of critical infrastructure, which is predominantly around road surfaces, and the infrastructure that's required to support it. So we pay particular attention to that.

On, as was asked earlier, whether this is a sufficient fund: Our pressures on that program right now are fair and reasonable. We continue to reassess—it was our intention that this would stay focused on what its primary function would be, and that is to look at a piece of quickly deteriorating infrastructure and give the municipality a chance to stack it on top of other levels of government, including other ministries from the province, and fix it so life can go on on a day-to-day basis. And then hopefully, obviously, dream of that day when Canada's Economic Action Plan, under the leadership of Prime Minister Harper and Minister Flaherty, as he was then, had envisioned all three levels of government providing support for the piece of infrastructure that Jamie mentioned earlier, which took us a long way down the road of diverting resource traffic and

all that goes with it outside of the towns or cities, so that there was less of a requirement for NORDS on some roads.

1100

Mr. Ric Bresee: One of the things that I was most impressed with in your statements earlier—you talked about working with some groups, and I believe the phrase you used was “literally pen in hand,” helping the very small groups, whether they be First Nations or whether they be the very small municipalities that, again, simply don't have the capacity to have the staff. We're talking about some municipalities that have three or four members of staff on their entire team. They don't have the capacity to be writing all of these applications, to be doing the engineering studies, to do all of that work, especially when there's a chance that they do all of that work, they spend all of that time and resource, and they throw it into the black hole of whichever ministry we're thinking about at the time and not have the success at the other end that they need and not always have an explanation as to why. So, again, I want to congratulate your ministry. And if you want to talk about it a little more—the idea of helping these small groups with the applications themselves is incredibly important.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I should say to you that the deputy minister involved some of the complementary work that we do in the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, and that would be a fundamental breach of discussion here, given how tight the Chair has rightly kept the parameters of this discussion. But there are complementary efforts around economic development officers and capacity for, especially, First Nations communities that are starting to move the goalposts on the quality of the applications.

As I said, squarely within my ministry, we are going through a more labour-intensive exercise of actually assisting communities with the completion of applications in the name of getting them to the heritage fund.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You still have two minutes.

Anyone from the government side? No? Okay.

We have five minutes left of the two hours' time allotted for this debate. We'll turn now to the opposition. It's up to you if you want to choose to use it or forgo.

MPP Jamie West: We will forgo, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Schreiner.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I'll yield my time.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Northern Development.

Standing order 69 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 2201, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour? All in opposition? Seeing none, the administration program vote carried.

Shall vote 2202, northern development program, carry? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, the vote carried.

Shall the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Development carry? All in favour? Any opposition? The vote carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Development to the House? All in favour? Any opposition? The vote carried.

Thank you, colleagues, for your co-operation. We will now recess until 1:55 p.m. We're coming back at 1:55.

The committee recessed from 1105 to 1355.

MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND FORESTRY

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good afternoon, members, Minister and guests. The committee is about to begin consideration of the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry for a total of two hours.

Are there any questions from the members of the committee? Seeing none, I am now required to call vote 2101, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry.

Minister, welcome. The floor is yours.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon to you and all the committee members. It's a real honour to be here to address the Standing Committee on the Interior to discuss the 2023-24 estimates for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. I am looking forward to speaking about the good work under way at MNRF that's making a real difference in the lives of all Ontarians, and to answering questions from committee about what we do.

As I begin, I want to take a moment to thank my staff at the ministry for their great work in preparing for our appearance here today. Since I became Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry, I've come to truly appreciate the support I have received, especially from my deputy minister, who joins me today, Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark. I also want to welcome Drew Vanderduim, who joins virtually today and will begin as my new deputy minister starting next week. I am also joined by our assistant deputy ministers: Craig Brown, from the policy division; Tracey Mill, from the provincial services division; Jennifer Barton, from the regional operations division; Sean Maguire, from the forestry industry division; Claudio De Rose, from the land and resources I&IT cluster; Marty Blake, from the modernization and business improvement office; and Amanda Holmes, from the corporate management and information division.

Our government truly understands the importance of natural resources and forestry in this province, not only the history of that but the future of it as well. Our province is home to stunning wilderness, bountiful natural resources, world-class fishing and hunting, and flourishing ecosystems, and it is our responsibility—our duty—to ensure that we continue to preserve and protect them, not just for now but for future generations. That's why we're safe-

guarding Ontario's biodiversity while promoting economic opportunities in the resource sector and supporting outdoor recreation opportunities. It is these principles that guide our work.

Simply put, we are sustainably managing Ontario's fish and wildlife resources, leading the management of Ontario's public lands, water, oil, gas, salt and aggregate resources, including making public land available for renewable energy projects, ensuring the sustainable management of Ontario's forests, protecting people, property and communities from forest fires, floods and droughts, and developing and applying geographic information to help manage the province's natural resources. It is through this work that we can continue to make Ontario the best place in the world to call home, and ensure future generations can continue to enjoy and appreciate the diversity of resources that we have.

We have a long history of sustainably managing its natural resources and forestry as a key part of life in our province, and our ministry continues to build on that proud heritage for this generation and for future generations to come. Whether it's protecting our precious biodiversity, safeguarding Ontarians from natural disasters or investing in the future of our natural resources sector, we are laser-focused on the job at hand and we will continue to deliver for the people of our great province.

When it comes to our fisheries, both commercial and recreational, and our aquaculture, we're continuing to build a more prosperous and sustainable future. Ontario is a vast province with over 250,000 lakes across Ontario, as well as residing along four of the five Great Lakes. Recreational fishing is an economic driver for the province, with \$1.75 billion per year spent by our 1.1 million anglers. And our commercial fishery is the largest inland freshwater fishery in North America, spanning our Great Lakes and Georgian Bay, but also many smaller inland lakes across the province. There are close to 650 active commercial fishing licences contributing more than \$200 million to the Ontario economy. Ontario also has a thriving aquaculture industry, contributing approximately \$126 million to our economy in 2021, and is one of the most diverse freshwater aquaculture sectors in the country. All this together brings great jobs to remote, northern and Indigenous communities, and increases our province's food security, something we all know is vitally important coming out of the pandemic.

1400

However, our fisheries face many challenges. Among them are habitat loss, pollution, population growth, urbanization and, of course, the uncertainty of climate change. Simply put, it is incumbent upon us to help lead the way when it comes to the future of this sector, while protecting our precious and vital aquatic ecosystems.

That's why earlier this summer I travelled to Ottawa to co-chair this year's meeting of the Canadian Council of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers and national Indigenous organizations. The annual meeting of federal, provincial and territorial ministers is a valuable opportunity to explore potential collaboration in the area of aquaculture

and fisheries. It is a platform to represent our province's interests as we work co-operatively towards important shared goals.

I believe the achievements we've made over the past year speak to the value of this collaboration. We've made significant progress on a number of key topics that will help us build a more prosperous and sustainable future for fisheries and aquaculture in our country, including recommending ways to address business risk management for aquaculture, revitalizing A Canadian Action Plan to Address the Threat of Aquatic Invasive Species, providing input in the development of key policies and regulations for the Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program, and gathering insights and recommendations to support economic growth in the sector.

It's incumbent upon us to help lead the way when it comes to the future of this sector, while protecting our precious and vital aquatic ecosystems. Our government will continue working with our federal, provincial, territorial and Indigenous partners to work towards this goal.

We also know that fishing is the time-honoured tradition in communities across Ontario, bringing together friends and family and providing an excellent way to enjoy our great outdoors while enjoying quality time with loved ones. Our government wants to make it even easier for all Ontarians to get outdoors and enjoy one of our favourite provincial pastimes. That's why, again this year, we offered free fishing on four occasions: Family Day weekend, Mother's Day weekend, Father's Day weekend and during Ontario Family Fishing Week, running from July 1 to 9. During these times, countless Ontario families and friends enjoyed fishing anywhere in the province without having to purchase a licence or carry an outdoors card. There were tons of great family fishing events held across the province, introducing even more people to the joys of angling. It's yet another way we're making life easier and more affordable for Ontario families.

When it comes to the safety of our province's communities, there is no higher priority for our government. One of the areas where this is most evident is addressing the challenges and risks associated with legacy oil and gas wells in their communities. We know that Ontario has records for approximately 27,000 oil and gas wells, primarily on private land in southwestern Ontario.

My ministry administers the Abandoned Works Program, which supports the plugging of inactive oil and gas wells that are at heightened risk to public safety or the environment by providing financial assistance to eligible landowners. The program has spent \$24.6 million and plugged 415 wells across the province.

The explosion that occurred in Wheatley in August 2021 underscored the hazards that old oil and gas wells pose to Ontario. While that incident happened two years ago, I know it continues to be a difficult situation for residents and business owners in the area. We are taking action to prevent these types of events in the future. Since day one, we've been listening to residents, to municipal leaders, to emergency personnel and experts in the field, and we have heard a lot. We've heard about the need for

more education and awareness for the public around risks, requirements and issues with old oil and gas wells. We heard about the need to better identify existing wells for reliable data about those wells. The importance of decommissioning high-risk wells and the imperative to provide municipalities with better tools and supports to respond to petroleum emergencies were also key priorities that were shared with us.

We also heard from stakeholders that they would like to see better collaboration between all levels of government addressing the risks of old oil and gas wells, and we took bold action to do just that. In June, our government announced that we are investing \$23.6 million to develop a province-wide strategy that includes identifying and plugging old oil and gas wells to keep communities safe. To take immediate action, we're investing \$7.5 million over three years to directly support municipalities in their efforts to reduce risks and enhance emergency preparedness within their communities.

An additional \$11 million will be allocated to the municipality of Chatham-Kent to assist with the costs associated with emergency management from the 2021 explosion in the community of Wheatley. With this funding, Chatham-Kent and other affected municipalities will be able to keep their communities safe and prevent petroleum-related emergencies in the future.

These investments also build on our government's action plan to address the challenges and risks that old oil and gas wells pose to communities in Ontario. This action plan includes both short- and long-term deliverables and several opportunities for input. The plan will focus on three main principles: increasing our understanding of the risks municipalities and landowners face; taking actions to reduce and mitigate these risks; and implementing measures that are focused on keeping communities safe, while enhancing emergency preparedness.

When I met with local residents, municipal partners and stakeholders to announce this plan, I assured them that we are committed to ensuring our plan also aligns with their needs. We will continue to work to ensure that communities with old oil and gas infrastructure are safe places to live and raise a family. We will welcome input and insight from municipalities, industry, Indigenous partners and other key stakeholders and the general public as we work on this important plan. Identifying the longer-term actions of our comprehensive plan will require input from all stakeholder groups, and we look forward to hearing what they have to say. Together, we will make sure that we can help prevent future incidents and keep folks safe.

As far as protecting Ontarians, there's no better example of how our ministry has stepped up to the challenge than the wildland fire season. Each year, our brave fire crews and emergency management staff protect Ontarians, especially those in rural and remote communities, from the impact of forest fires. We are always ready to protect people and communities across the province from wildland fires. Our expert teams closely monitor weather conditions to detect fires early. When they do hit, Ontario's fire rangers, pilots and support staff

are prepared to battle these fires and protect Ontarians. And with an especially busy forest fire season impacting our province this year, our world-class fire ranger crews stepped up in a big way.

This year, we saw over 600 wildfires, with over 400,000 hectares burnt. The ensuing response was a collective, large-scale effort involving staff across our ministry. Whether it's fighting fires and responding to emergencies; helping to coordinate evacuations; putting emergency orders in place; securing access to emergency areas; working behind the scenes on logistics, information-sharing and communications; or working with municipalities and local Indigenous communities to support them during emergency situations, staff in divisions throughout MNRF have been working tirelessly to safeguard and support our communities when they need it most.

I've seen many notes and news articles and heard personally from those who have expressed their appreciation for the work that our teams do, and I can't express enough my appreciation and admiration for their commitment to protecting people and communities across Ontario. Ontarians can rest assured that the province has action plans in place to manage large, complex fires, especially if they occur near communities and critical infrastructure, and our goal is that we will always be there for those who need it most.

Another focus for our ministry is helping to empower and build up communities across this great province, especially in rural and remote areas. It's part of our government's work to build Ontario, and our government is bringing northern communities to the provincial table. We want to see all communities thrive, to be a place where businesses can flourish, where families can settle down and where communities can succeed together. In order to accommodate this growth, communities will need to build new homes, roads and bridges and support new economic opportunities.

But we've heard time and time again from our northern communities that they don't have enough land to build on to make these projects a reality. We recognize that certain public lands can be used to help these communities meet their social and economic development goals. These lands, historically called crown lands, make up 77% of the province's land mass, including the beds of most lakes and rivers. And, in August, I was proud to announce that my ministry would be creating a new dedicated task team of ministry staff to make public land disposition within these communities easier and more accessible. This team of specialists will provide direct support to northern municipalities and Indigenous communities who want to purchase public lands within municipal boundaries.

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The first pillar of the team's mandate will be to pre-screen available public lands that are within municipalities, and by doing so, identify the most suitable parcels of public land to be considered for purchase. We understand that each municipality, each community has its own unique needs, and this pre-screening process will connect

interested municipalities to ensure that the public lands identified align with those needs.

The second pillar is focused on supporting engagement between municipalities and Indigenous communities. We recognize the importance of public lands to the Indigenous communities in the province. That's why we want to build a strong process and partnerships which are founded in communication and collaboration and allow for the development of a public land sale in a manner that respects Indigenous rights, cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. We are acting now to continue setting the right conditions for growth and prosperity. Making it easier to purchase public lands will help our rural and remote communities build brighter futures and foster growth for generations to come.

Our government envisions a future where communities across the north can flourish, where new housing developments rise to meet the demands of a rapidly growing population and where local economies thrive with innovative industries and businesses. But this will only be possible if communities have the land they need to build on. We're excited about the possibilities that lie ahead, and we look forward to witnessing the remarkable growth that will unfold across the north in the decades ahead.

We're also focused on creating jobs, building local prosperity and enhancing the sustainable practices that are essential to our natural resources and forestry sectors, including the forest product operations. It's impossible to overstate the importance of the forestry industry. In fact, that sector alone generated nearly \$21 billion of revenue in 2021 and supports more than 142,000 jobs. That's why, this spring, our government announced that we're strengthening the economy and promoting innovation in the forest sector with the creation of a new \$19.6-million forest biomass program. This application-based program will help develop untapped economic potential and environmental benefits offered by new and emerging uses of underutilized wood and mill by-products known as forest biomass.

The forest biomass program will support projects to harvest more wood from Ontario's forests, increase forest sector job creation and regional economic growth and find new uses for wood in collaboration with stakeholders, industry and Indigenous communities. It includes four streams designed to position Ontario as a leader in innovative uses of forest biomass: Indigenous bioeconomy partnerships to increase Indigenous participation in forest biomass opportunities and their economic benefits; exploring biomass pathways to help the public and private sector research technical, financial and scientific aspects of using forest biomass; innovative bioproduct manufacturing to increase the use of forest biomass in manufacturing, infrastructure, energy services and resource extraction; and modernization to support forest sector transformation, competitiveness and participation through the use of forest biomass.

The forestry industry is a major driver of the economy in northwestern Ontario and plays a critical role in building Ontario. This program will enhance existing uses

of resources, promote research and increase Indigenous economic prosperity across the region, and it will help further our government's forest sector strategy and Forest Biomass Action Plan goals to build a strong forest sector via technological innovation and greater use of forest biomass.

Folks, our province is a special place, and we are blessed to call it home. From the rugged wilderness and tight-knit communities of the north to our world-class cities and the Great Lakes, there truly is nothing like Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Our ministry has a unique responsibility to make it even better for our children and our children's children. As Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry, I will never stop working to protect our precious biodiversity, safeguard Ontarians from natural disasters and invest in the future of our natural resources and forestry sectors. Ontario has a bright future, and our ministry will continue to play an important role in shaping it. I want to again thank the members for the opportunity to speak to you today, and welcome any questions that you may have.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister.

We will now begin questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 10 minutes for the independent member of the committee and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee, for the remainder of the allotted time. As always, please wait to be recognized by myself before you speak. All questions and comments will need to go through the Chair.

For the deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers and staff: When you are first called to speak, please state your name and your title so that we can accurately record who we have in Hansard.

I will now start the questioning with the official opposition. Mr. Bourgouin?

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Thank you, Minister, for that report. This year was a bad year for forest fires. There's no doubt about that. We've seen communities impacted. We've seen wildfires. Right now, how many forest fires do we have in the province?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I believe the number as of today is in the sixties. The total number is just north of 400 for the season.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: So right now we have 400 fires?

Hon. Graydon Smith: No, the current number would be in the sixties. I'd refer to the deputy minister to give an accurate number of what the number is today.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Just right now, the current ones. How many current forest fires do we have right now?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: It's Deputy Minister Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark. You'd like to know, right now, what's active? Or for the season?

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: What's active right now.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I'll ask Tracey Mill, our ADM, to give the precise number. I think

it's close to 60, as the minister said—around 57, I think, as of today.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay. And how many are, I guess, out of control?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Again, I'd refer to the deputy or the ADM for that number.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Certainly. I can have Tracey Mill, our ADM of the provincial services division, give you a summary of what the current status is of all those fires. Can I refer to Tracey Mill to give you that answer?

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay. Is Tracey on or is she—

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Yes, she should be there.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes, I am, thank you. It's Tracey Mill, assistant deputy minister for the provincial services division. I can confirm that we currently have 55 active wildland fires burning at this time. They are in different stages. I'm just looking up our most recent report for the total number that are currently not under control. We have had a total of 699 fires to date and, as the minister indicated, just over 420,000 hectares are burning.

I will have the number for those that are not under control just momentarily. I just need to go into our system for that.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay. Thank you for that. I think I heard right: 439 hectares burnt—is that what you said—so far?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: It's 439,000.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: It's 439,000? Thank you. That's not counting the actual fires now that will continue burning, of course, because some of them are in different stages. Some of them are under control. How many are not under control or at different stages? Could you explain the different stages? Because we'd like to hear what are these different stages.

Hon. Graydon Smith: I'll turn that to the deputy or the ADM.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Certainly. Thank you. Tracey, if you've got the report up and you can provide that update for MPP Bourgouin and, as well, give him an update of the different statuses that we provide for each fire, that would be great.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes, I can, thank you. In terms of the number of fires that we have had in the province to date, that's 699. Currently, 55 of them are active, so that means that the balance of them have been put out or completed by our fire rangers.

There are various stages in terms of wildland fires. "Not under control" means that the fire is sort of free-burning; we are working on it, but we do not have a perimeter places around the fire where we can identify that it is in a state of "under control."

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The second state is one that we would call "being held." This is where we have been able to establish a perimeter predominantly around the fire; we are not concerned about the fire spreading beyond that perimeter.

When a fire is “under control,” we have essentially a perimeter completely around it and our fire rangers and other fire support are working to move in toward the interior of the fire.

And then the fire is considered “put out,” and that stage is what the vast majority of the fires that we have experienced this year so far have now reached.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay, so, again: How many are free-burning then?

Ms. Tracey Mill: I’m just waiting for our report in terms of the number of that 55. I’m sorry, member. I’ll have it for you in just a moment.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: And while we’re waiting: With 699 fires so far, compared to last year, what was the number?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I’ll refer to the deputy for that as well.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you. Tracey, are you able to provide the number that was last year as well as the average so the member can see the comparison to this year?

Ms. Tracey Mill: Last year, the total number of fires that we had were 246. Usually we compare against a 10-year average. The 10-year average for fires at this point was 669. So essentially last year was considered a low season. This year we are tracking, in terms of the number of fires, around about the same number of fires as the 10-year average.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Okay. And when you know the numbers for free-burning, I’d appreciate the answer.

I don’t know if you know this answer, but I’m going to ask anyway: Do you know how much volume has been lost for different forest companies? Do you have that number, just based on the sheer volume of hectares that were burnt and how much companies will be impacted? Maybe it’s too early to know these numbers, but I’m just curious to know if there is a number that you can let us know.

Hon. Graydon Smith: I’m going to refer to the deputy, please.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay. Thank you, Minister. I will ask either Tracey Mill or Sean if they have those numbers. You could be correct; it might be a little bit too early, but I’ll see if they have an estimate at this point in time. Tracey? Shall I start with you?

Ms. Tracey Mill: Sure. I don’t have a number in terms of the number of forest-harvest areas that might have been affected. We can look into providing that number.

But I can provide you at this time with the number of fires that are currently listed as “not under control.” Of the 55 active fires, two are listed as “not under control;” one is in the northeast region, and one is in the northwest region.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: So there’s only two that are free-burning?

Ms. Tracey Mill: That are what we classify as “not under control.” That’s correct. Thank you.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: And this year, how many evacuations has the MNR faced?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you. I’ll refer to the deputy as well.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. Again, Tracey Mill, assistant deputy minister, provincial services division: If we could have you provide an overview of the number of evacuees from the season, that would be great.

Ms. Tracey Mill: In terms of wildland fire, with respect to wildland fire evacuations, we had evacuations from the following First Nation communities: about 2,700 people from Fort Albany First Nation—sorry, this is a combined number, so 2,700 from the communities of Fort Albany, Kashechewan and Attawapiskat. We also had a ground evacuation for Taykwa Tagamou First Nation. They evacuated themselves via ground, and evacuees were hosted in a number of different communities across the province, in the north and in the south. Thank you.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Can you give us the cost of your ministry to evacuate these people?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you for the question. I refer to the deputy.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Tracey, would you be able to provide an estimate of the costs at this point in time, or is it too early to provide that?

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes. Unfortunately, we are still in the fire season, so we don’t have a current number for total evacuations as well as the associated aerial procurements of airplanes for flying for evacuations at this time.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: And these evacuations, are they calculated the same as the 10-year averages, or do we just know by year? Are we facing more evacuations this year than the past year, or they’re pretty comparable to the last five years?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I’ll refer that question to the deputy, please.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Tracey, would you be able to provide a sense of whether we collect that information and we’re able to provide that comparison at some point?

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes, that information would be available. It is predominantly the responsibility of Emergency Management Ontario and Treasury Board Secretariat, who are responsible for evacuations. We would be able to provide that information.

I would say the evacuations are highly variable, so to your question, we don’t track them on a 10-year average like what we do with the number of fires. It is dependent upon where fires may occur in a given season, whether they occur close to communities or not.

I would say, from my experience over the last five years, we’ve had seasons that are about the same and the same number of evacuations as we experienced right now, and we have also had seasons where there have been larger communities that have been impacted, and so therefore, the number of evacuees have been greater than this year.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I guess, with what we’re seeing with global warming, would you say that global warming is a big contributor of these forest fires?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I think when we look at the impacts of climate change, we need to take a broad look at that over time. As we've discussed today in some of the questions you've asked around numbers, there's a great deal of variability from year to year in terms of what those numbers look like. So 2022 was a very soft wildland fire season; 2021 was certainly a busier season. We've seen in our jurisdiction that what started off as a very, very busy season has somewhat mitigated over the course of the summer as weather conditions have been more favourable.

I'll turn it over to the deputy or the ADM to talk about any long-term trends that they're seeing.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Tracey, from our provincial services division—I'll just refer this question over to her and see if there's anything further that we'd like to add in terms of information we could provide for that question.

Ms. Tracey Mill: The minister actually has provided a good response there in terms of the variability. I think the only thing that I would add is we do see that our fire seasons, both here in Ontario and nationally and even globally, sometimes start earlier in the season and go a little bit longer, so the length of time of the season may have changed, as has sometimes the intensity or frequency of fires. So you can see, in terms of what the minister said, some seasons with low fire reports and some seasons with higher, escalated fire reports.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Given the severity of the early start to the wildfire season each year, what steps has the ministry taken to mitigate these in upcoming years?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I don't know that there's a direct step than we can take to stop forest fires from happening. But I will say there are a number of measures that we have taken in acknowledgement of the fact that the base budget has increased significantly. So what you'll see in numbers that you were provided was about a \$35,000 step this year in the base budget for wildland fire prevention.

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I think it's really important to keep in mind as well that, as we go through the year, depending on the severity of the year, there may be additional funds that are required to supplement and support that; through contingency funds that are made available, those dollars are provided. I would say that we spend, on any given forest year, what we need to spend on the year to ensure that we are adequately fighting those fires. The base amount, again, has been adjusted upwards significantly, especially if you go back to 2018 when it was around \$70 million or just shy of that, then it was moved to \$100 million, and now it's closer to \$135 million—and again, contingency dollars brought forward on an as-needed basis for more resources, equipment and personnel.

I can turn to the deputy for any—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: No, I think I got part of the answer I was looking for.

But you touched on the fire crews, the rangers. They do an incredible job; we all recognize this. There was a report from Radio-Canada that came out saying there were 30

teams of rangers and there were 50 missing. Have you compensated for that? Has the ministry done anything to increase that? What have you done to respond to that?

My nephew was a forest ranger. In fact, he was doing more than that; he was like a leader of a crew. He left because of poor wage conditions and poor working conditions. He said, "Uncle, I would have stayed, but with Bill 124, we had no wage increases. Our wage conditions were terrible." He even questioned management—I'm not going into that.

What is your plan to address that? Because they're leaving. They're leaving and you're losing them, and we need to compensate by bringing people in from other countries. I would like to have your perspective, Minister, on that because it had to impact the crews on the ground. It had to—less people, so less hands to try to combat fire. I would like to have your perspective on this.

Hon. Graydon Smith: First of all, I would echo your comments that we value and cherish our wildland firefighters. Whether they're on the ground, whether it's the pilots, whether it's the people on the ops and logistics side, everyone involved in wildland firefighting simply does an amazing job in Ontario, and they are recognized internationally.

You'll know that our wildland firefighters are often shared to other jurisdictions because of that great reputation in the ability to assist others when we are outside our fire season. Because of that, I think the reputation of our firefighters is second to none.

The work that they do and the number of them: Specifically on a year-to-year basis, yes, there can be some variability, and I would turn it over to the deputy minister to talk about how the fire crews have been constructed for this season.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. We have been ensuring that we are continuing to strengthen our recruitment and retention within all of our firefighters and our crew leaders, and have been trying to make sure that we are creating a safe and rewarding work environment.

I'll ask Tracey Mill, our assistant deputy minister for the provincial services division, and she can explain in a little bit more detail around those crew numbers that you had referenced earlier.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Thank you very much. So, yes, we actually had about 660-some-odd fire rangers this season. They are broken down into about 142 crews. We hired as many fire rangers as we possibly could in terms of people who applied to the program and those who returned to our program. In some instances we didn't have as many of our returning senior crew leaders, which meant that the number of the actual crews, which are a composition of usually about four people—that's where you're seeing the reduction in the numbers. But the number of actual firefighters was still up over 660 rangers for this fire season.

What we did in order to ensure maximum availability of fire crews is move to some crews that had four members, some that had five and some that had six, to

ensure that we were able to provide as many opportunities as possible so that we also continue to develop the skills and experiences of our fire rangers for them to take on positions in subsequent seasons.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: In the last five years, what's the average number of crews that you had? Because we're under the impression there was a shortage of rangers. So my question to you—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I guess I'd like to know, what is the average number in the last three or five years of crews that you had? Because right now, you said 600 and something, right?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I'll turn that question to the deputy, please.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Tracey, can I ask you to provide some of the comparisons in terms of what our average size would be for our crews?

Ms. Tracey Mill: I'd have to get back to the member on the average number of actual crews per season. But as I said, the number of actual fire rangers was over 660. I won't say that that's an average number. We are definitely experiencing, like many other jurisdictions, a reduction in people who are applying to the program or returning to the program. But I believe that the number of crews that people have been referring to are the ones where we have fewer crews, composition of crews this year than we have had in the past, but the number of fire rangers, as I said, was still over—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. The time is up.

Now, we move to the independent member. Mr. Schreiner, the floor is yours.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you to the minister for taking the time to join us today. And to the deputy minister, I want to thank you and all your staff in the ministry. I know everyone works really hard, and the people of Ontario appreciate all of your good work. So thank you.

I want to pick up a bit on the line of questioning, just to keep it going a bit. So I had read media reports that last year, we were short 23 fire crews; this year, we're short 50 fire crews. Is that because of the composition of the crews, loss of crew leaders? Why is media reporting what seems to be a trend line of fewer and fewer fire crews in Ontario?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Yes. Thank you for the question. Recruitment and retention throughout all sectors of the labour force can be an interesting challenge and have some variability to it, as you know and as we've all seen. I would highlight that we have continued to work very diligently to ensure, both on the recruitment and retention side, that we are doing those things that make our people (a) want to come to the program, and (b) when they're there, want to stay. And that is not limited to any one activity.

There's been some engagement with some third parties to work on retention and attraction activities. To talk in a little more detail about that, I'll turn it to the deputy.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: So as the minister said, it's a highly competitive labour market, and due to that, we are finding that it's our crew leaders, as Tracey mentioned, that we were seeing not as many return. That's what created the change in the number of crews. I'm happy to have her speak a little further about that, as well as what the minister mentioned, which is our recruitment and retention strategy that we recently have been working on with a third party. I'm happy to speak to that too.

So, Tracey, if you could explain a little bit more detail around the crew size and what we did this year, that would be helpful.

Ms. Tracey Mill: The deputy has highlighted the reduction in our senior crew and crew boss positions. These are the positions that are integral to the supervision of the crews. Many of these staff have recall rights. That means that they can come back year after year for the fire seasons. We did see a more significant decline in those numbers. These are the individuals, obviously, that lead what would normally be a four-person crew.

Since we had fewer of those individuals this season, what we did try to do, as I mentioned in an earlier response, was to maximize the number of fire rangers who had applied to our program. So we moved to a structure of modified crews—so some crews had four persons, some had five and some had six—in order to ensure that we provided as many opportunities in our fire ranger program as possible and to maximize the number of resources that we had. So we didn't reduce the number of fire rangers to match the senior crew leaders; instead, we basically increased the number of fire rangers that were under each of those senior crew leaders to maximize resources this year. We—

Mr. Mike Schreiner: That's fine, thanks. You answered the question. I appreciate that.

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I just want to direct everyone's attention to page 92 of the estimates.

I know, Minister, when you did your opening remarks, you talked about protecting Ontarians—top priority for the ministry, and I absolutely agree. When you look at the increasing frequency and severity of forest fires, floods—you talked about the challenges around abandoned oil and gas wells. I've had many municipal leaders talk about soil erosion, particularly along the Great Lakes. So we're seeing more and more threats to people's lives, livelihood and property. And yet, I look at the public protection program funding, and in 2021-22 it's \$275,451,460, and in the 2022-23 estimates it's down to \$136,118,100, which is about a \$139-million decrease. I just don't understand why there's such a substantial decrease when it seems like the need to protect the public should be going up, if you follow the news.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much for the question.

I think one of the things to bear in mind is actuals versus the budgeted amount, and the variability that I spoke of earlier, specifically to fire season.

I'll turn this over to the deputy for a little bit more clarity on those specific numbers that you've referenced.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you, Minister. I can ask Amanda Holmes, our CAO, who can provide us with a little bit more detail on those numbers.

Ms. Amanda Holmes: Good afternoon. I'm Amanda Holmes. I'm the chief administrative officer for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

While it does look like a quite significant decrease when you're looking at actuals, it does go back to what the minister mentioned, which is, we spend the amount that is needed on fire for the season. So although that actual \$275 million looks a lot higher than our budget or our forecast, that is because we have the benefit of knowing what that year actually cost us, all said and done, and that amount is almost all attributable to fire and the severity of the fire season that year.

As we mentioned, we've increased our base allocation for our emergency firefighting, but we actually don't know the actuals for this year as of yet, and so our number is possible, again, to be higher than what our estimates will show for 2023-24, but it is attributable to that—so not a decrease in budget, but more of a sense of, once the books are finished for the year, we're able to calculate how much, and the government does provide us with that funding.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much. If I could just supplement that, Ms. Holmes, with an analogy from my municipal days—it's like plowing the streets of the town, let's say, that I used to be mayor of. We'll take an average and base a budget on that average. It might snow less and you don't reach it, and it might snow a lot more and you're going to spend more. But you're going to spend what you require to get the job done.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I appreciate that. So I'm curious: Where in the ministry's budget is money reallocated from? I understand it's like, "Hey, we're going to fires, floods, whatever—we're going to respond," but obviously that money comes from somewhere in the ministry's budget. So where is it reallocated from?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much for that question. I'll turn that technical question to the deputy, please.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you for that question.

Amanda, would you be able to provide that clarification of where that money comes from?

Ms. Amanda Holmes: Certainly. The money actually isn't reallocated from within our existing base budget. What it is is something that comes from the contingency fund that is part of the overall government's fiscal planning. We work very closely with our colleagues in the Treasury Board Secretariat starting from as early as Q1.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Amanda Holmes: We essentially outline the risks and, in-year, we go into the board and request the amount that's needed.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I know we're under a minute, so I won't shift to another topic but just ask if the ministry is

anticipating higher costs associated with public protection, given the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events.

Hon. Graydon Smith: I think what you've seen, MPP Schreiner, in that increased base budget number this year, is that we're trying to look forward, looking at what the actuals have been, looking at what the potential spend is and trying to put an accurate number in there that represents the number that could occur in any given year, but obviously there's going to be some variability to it. We're certainly very much looking forward when we put these numbers out.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Time is up. Thank you.

We move to the government side, and I see MPP Yakabuski wants to start the questioning. Go ahead.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, Minister, for joining us today—you and all your staff.

On the record, I would like to congratulate and wish Deputy Minister Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark all the best. We see today, officially it was announced that you're going to be moving to a new, exciting phase of your life. We want to wish you the very best and thank you for your service to the people of Ontario.

Applause.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I'm going to keep right on that same theme, if I may, for a moment, Minister. I appreciate your analogy of snowplowing. It's an excellent one because no matter where you live in Ontario, you can relate to that. Some people may not be able to relate to the money that is so variable in firefighting. I know that the first year we were in government, 2018-19, we spent well over \$200 million on firefighting because it was just that kind of a year. We've had years in the past where it's been high and then low, but I really appreciate your explanation to that. Hopefully it leads to fewer questions from the opposition as to what they would characterize as something related to being a cut in spending when all it is that you spend—whatever it needs to do the job, we'll be doing exactly that.

I want to talk a little bit about firefighting in general. You may or may not know, but my wife and I were gone to the Northwest Territories this year in the summertime, not that long ago. We were evacuated by air along with my most of my daughter's family. She couldn't leave because she was considered to be an essential part of the evacuation herself in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories.

The Wood Buffalo Complex has burned over 477,000 hectares already, which is more than the total—this is the fire that was most threatening Fort Smith this year. It's more than the entire hectares in the province of Ontario. Of course, the Northwest Territories doesn't have the population or the capacity or the resources that we have here. With the recent fires, they've had firefighters from many, many jurisdictions helping them, and I know they are so appreciative of the work that is being done by other professional firefighters and our fire rangers here from the province of Ontario. We've been part of that as well, as

well as contributing to fight the fires in British Columbia and Alberta this year.

As far as I understand, we don't currently have any imports from those jurisdictions because, as Assistant Deputy Minister Mill said, we have only two fires that are considered not under control in the province of Ontario. We have that shared, co-operative relationship with all jurisdictions. I remember when we sent firefighters to Australia. It's a tremendous agreement or collaborative partnership with so many.

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I was wondering if I could ask you, Minister, just to explain how that works and how important it is, so that when—because we've had firefighters from other jurisdictions here at times, and that of course adds to our costs of that particular fiscal year. If you wouldn't mind maybe giving us an explanation of how that works and how it can impact the spending in any fiscal year.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Absolutely. Thank you very much for the question. I'm glad that you're back and you're in one piece—

Mr. John Yakabuski: My truck is still up there, by the way.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Well, prayers to the truck.

It's really incredible how well all the different jurisdictions work together to share resources and ensure the safety of people and communities. As you referenced, it's not just a national thing; there is an international component to it. For example, earlier this year, when it was a very early and challenging fire season not only in other jurisdictions but in Ontario as well, we had the benefit of having about 100 crews from Mexico come and join our crews and integrate almost perfectly seamlessly with them, I would say, to fight fires in different parts of north-east and northwest Ontario. They just did an incredible job, and I would take this opportunity to say hats off to them and thank you very much for being able to come and support us.

And just as we have received support internationally, as you referenced, we have sent crews in the past to Australia and other jurisdictions, because when they have a fire season that's on, our fire season is off, so there is an opportunity to deploy resources and share on that international or worldwide level. Also, earlier in this season, we had an opportunity to have resources go to Alberta when things started there a little bit earlier and a little bit worse than in other jurisdictions. That isn't just limited to on-the-ground crews. That also includes equipment. That also includes incident management teams and logistics support. So there's a lot of different ways that support can be provided. Alberta was the benefactor of that at one point. BC has been the benefactor of that. Northwest Territories have been a benefactor of that.

It is incredibly important that we work in this collective and supportive manner throughout the country, for the most part, and internationally when necessary to support one another, because you can imagine, if we didn't have that support and that additional capacity available to us, how difficult it would be to plan and scale and ensure that

every single thing that happened within the borders of our jurisdiction we had to do it all in-house all the time. It really is a magical scenario where everyone has taken this challenge on together—full credit to the federal government, which plays an important role in this around a table that they organize. As I look back on my time in this role and the things that you had some idea of but maybe not as good an idea of as you can intimately garner when being a minister, that's one of the things that I was most impressed with and most thankful for: that we had this opportunity to work together, to know that if we need support from another jurisdiction, they've got your back. If we need to lend that support, we've got their back.

Deputy, I don't know if you have any further details to add on other examples to support what I've been talking about, but I'm sure the committee would love to hear them.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: As the minister said, lots of great exchanges between jurisdictions. I'm going to ask Tracey Mill to talk a little bit about how that works and some of the other recent examples lately in terms of how we've supported other jurisdictions.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes, as the minister mentioned, we do have a number of mutual aid resource agreements. They are coordinated via an organization known as the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, which all of the provinces and territories and Parks Canada are members of.

In addition to the mutual aid agreements referred to with other provinces and territories, Ontario was also a signatory to a number of international agreements. That includes Mexico, as the minister mentioned; we were able to rely on support from our partners in Mexico with the 100 personnel represented here in Ontario. We are also signatory to agreements with New Zealand and Australia.

As the minister mentioned, during the earlier part of our season, we did have a bit more of an escalated and did require support from our international partners. But as our season quieted a little bit, we were able to provide support to our partners across Canada. That included sending our personnel to Alberta, as the minister mentioned, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, Parks Canada, Quebec and Yukon, and we also did supply personnel to support the United States. We do have a compact with a number of states, those being Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin. When necessary, we can provide personnel or air suppression support to them, as well.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bresee.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation today.

This won't be about my question, but I do need to start echoing some of the comments here about our absolutely amazing fire rangers in the wildfire service. Many of you know that I grew up in the household of a career firefighter. I have a great appreciation for the work that they do every day. They're the ones who run in when the rest of us run out, and we can't thank them enough—and that includes all of the people, some of whom are in this room,

all the way up the chain, through the management and the administration.

I was just listening to that description of the mutual aid agreements. As a former municipal guy, I negotiated some mutual aid agreements among some small municipalities—half a dozen in my immediate area—and that wasn't easy. So the idea of sitting at a table with multiple provinces, with multiple states and multiple countries and trying to arrange all of that in a way that makes it as seamless as the minister spoke about—I have to express my appreciation to our senior staff for managing that.

My question, Minister, is regarding the oil and gas wells. We know that there is a tremendous need for more education and awareness around our gas wells. As the ministry, we need to be able to identify and decommission hazardous wells and to ensure the safety of the people of Ontario. You spoke about this in your comments, that this has come to a very significant point because of the tragedy two years ago. I know that this has been a personal effort on your behalf, to make sure that we do everything we can to continue the process around the orphaned wells etc. So will you please do us the honour of telling us what the ministry is doing to provide the people and the municipalities with better tools to support and address the old oil and gas wells across the province?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much for the question.

I think as, again, an ex-municipal person, as you are, it's easy to put oneself in the chair of the mayor of Chatham-Kent, when a call came in to say something terrible and dramatic had happened in the community.

So, yes, certainly before I arrived, the support was well under way—and plenty of it—to support the folks in Wheatley, and after I arrived, I made that community's well-being a priority of mine.

Beyond that, we know that there are a significant number of abandoned oil and gas wells, primarily in southwestern Ontario, numbering close to 27,000, and we want to ensure the safety of the public.

We have been extremely focused not only on providing direct support to the people in Wheatley and Chatham-Kent, but taking the opportunity to, I'd say, very much accelerate a program.

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I made an announcement back in the spring around our strategy going forward, to ensure that all communities can feel safe and all people can feel safe and be in a community and want to stay there. That's the place where you're going to have your greatest successes and raise your kids and all those good things. Everyone should be able to feel that way. So it has been very important to me and the ministry to make sure that we've done a significant amount of outreach—sessions that I attended personally in both Simcoe and Chatham-Kent, to speak with municipal leaders on kind of the state of the union in their communities, what they were concerned about, what they could benefit from in terms of supports, and how we could structure a program that would be beneficial to them. I'm certainly very, very glad that I had the opportunity to do

that and to have those direct conversations—and not only with them, but also with groups like the Association of Fire Chiefs here in Ontario, to get their take on it, because, of course, when things happen, as first responders, they are there doing just that and ensuring the protection and safety of people. So we've really, I think, taken the opportunity to move this forward in a very organized way, in a way that's responsive to communities.

We are actively plugging wells today through the abandoned wells program. We've doubled the funding for that. We've plugged hundreds of wells in Ontario.

At the ROMA conference last winter, I had the opportunity to sit with Mayor Martin from Norfolk county and talk with her about a project that we were assisting with in her community. She came with a simple message that day, and the message was thank you—thank you for this government and this ministry taking the care and the time and the interest in the matter. So we can take that time, care and interest and spread it across all of southwest Ontario, and we are, through the development of this program that I talked about earlier. It's a \$26-million program. There are different components to it. We want to make sure we keep people safe.

I would turn it over to the deputy for some details on the mechanics of that program and how it's rolling out.

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

We have the opportunity to have here in the room, as well, Jennifer Barton, assistant deputy minister for our regional operations division. She was instrumental in helping—not only to be there at the beginning in terms of responding and helping, as the minister said, the community of Wheatley, but also instrumental in working together with us and the minister on developing the strategy moving forward. So I'll ask Jennifer to come up and speak a little bit on that topic.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Thank you, Deputy. Thank you, Minister.

I'm Jennifer Barton. I am the assistant deputy minister of the regional operations division. It's my pleasure to have more details on this topic.

As the minister mentioned, the ministry is leading the development and implementation of a multi-year, comprehensive action plan to address the risk from legacy oil and gas wells and gas migration hazards, in coordination with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing; the Ministry of the Solicitor General; our colleagues at Treasury Board Secretariat; the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks; and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

The minister also mentioned that we've engaged many people. We've engaged with municipalities, the Ontario Association of Fire Chiefs. We are engaging across the petroleum industry, the agriculture sector, the real estate sector and the business community to ensure that any proposed action plans are aligned with current and future needs of all those different sectors.

The ministry's action plan focuses on understanding legacy oil and gas well risks, measures to reduce risks, and

plans to enhance emergency preparedness. Implementation of the action plan has begun, and early actions include a number of different things.

First of all, the ministry is providing about \$7.5 million towards a transfer payment program that will assist eligible municipalities to take action to address risks from legacy oil and gas wells. In the program's first year, \$2 million of that funding is available to nine prioritized municipalities in southwestern Ontario, to assist them in completing activities like developing and delivering training for staff and communications for residents, environmental safety monitoring plans, and updating their municipal emergency response plans to include planning for petroleum emergencies.

The ministry has also doubled the funding for the ministry's Abandoned Works Program over three years to \$6 million, to support additional plugging of oil and gas wells.

The ministry is also dedicating \$5.8 million to scientific studies and research to inform our understanding and inform our risk mitigation efforts.

On August 26, 2021, as the minister mentioned, the explosion in the town of Wheatley has meant that we've done a lot of work with Chatham-Kent. We've recently announced an additional \$11 million worth of funding to the municipality of Chatham-Kent to help them with their ongoing emergency management costs. They continue to investigate the cause and the effects of the explosion—and working really closely on community recovery expenses as they try to rebuild and re-establish the community of Wheatley. The new funding builds on more than \$27 million that the province had already invested to date to support the investigation, recovering—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: —and monitoring activities in Chatham-Kent.

We continue to be committed to working with Chatham-Kent and continue to engage with all the municipalities in that area, as well as the landowners and the sector stakeholders, as well as Indigenous communities and the public, as the work progresses. The ministry looks forward to sharing additional information with all partners and stakeholders as the action plan evolves. We're in the early stages today, but this is a long-term process, and we continue to work with all those stakeholders that I mentioned.

We're also engaging with the federal government to find opportunities to address issues associated with orphaned and inactive wells here in Ontario.

Thanks for the question.

Mr. Ric Bresee: In light of the fact that I've only got a few seconds, even though I've got several more questions, I will simply say thank you for all of your efforts with regard to the oil and gas wells and, like I said earlier, with regard to the wildfire rangers and the program there.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): That concludes the first round of questioning.

Now we will start the second round, and we will start with the opposition. MPP Bourgouin.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Minister, I just have a couple of questions, and then I'll hand it off to my colleague.

Attawapiskat—the community is landlocked. What has been done to address the issue of the extension of the reserve?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I appreciate the question. I think you had an opportunity to speak earlier today with my colleague Minister Rickford, who is obviously doing great work with Indigenous and First Nation communities throughout Ontario.

In terms of our role, through our ministry, to facilitate any future expansion, I'll turn it over to the deputy.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Your question was around being landlocked. Can I just have you—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: What has been done to address the landlocked situation in Attawapiskat? The community needs to expand, and there's nowhere to go.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I can have Jennifer Barton come up and speak a little bit about the work that we do, working with Indigenous affairs Ontario—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Well, I want it specific to Attawapiskat.

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Thanks, Deputy.

What I can say is that we are working closely with a number of Indigenous communities, and I know we are working with Attawapiskat. I don't have the details in terms of their specific file right here in front of me, but I can obviously commit to getting back to you if that's—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: This issue has been going on for many years. I've approached the minister on this. I know the chief has tried to address that, with no help from the province.

So I ask again: What will you do to address the landlock? It's either we move the airport—there's also that there's the dispute on the road because of De Beers—and to go to the docks. And then there's a chunk of land that they can go, which belongs to MNR—so it's not Indigenous affairs. Why aren't we allowing this community to be able to access—the easy one is, just say, “No, you can access the MNR land.” It's right beside the community. The road is right there. Why is it not being addressed?

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Yes, MPP Smith. Point of order?

Mr. Dave Smith: We're discussing estimates. We're not discussing policy. If the MPP would like to debate policy on what we're doing, then he has an opportunity to do that during question period, every day when the House is sitting. This is about the estimates of what the ministry has spent. If he'd like to reframe it in a way that he's talking about how much money the ministry has spent on something, that would be appropriate. But to attack the minister or the deputy minister on something that is not about the money that has been spent—this is not the appropriate place to do that.

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The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Well, Chair, it's not about attacking. It's not about—it's getting answers. Communities have been waiting. What I'm asking is, what has been done in this ministry on an outstanding issue? It's not one year, two years; we're talking multiple years here.

What has been done from your ministry to address Attawapiskat's landlocked situation?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bourgouin, let's focus on the estimates. I will give the opportunity to the minister, the deputy minister and the staff to address issues related to the estimates.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Deputy, if you have any supplemental information, I turn it to you.

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

Jennifer, is there anything more in details that we have that may provide some answers to the question posed by the member?

Ms. Jennifer Barton: Yes. And I apologize for not having—I cover the entire province and have a number of different files at my fingertips. In terms of Attawapiskat specifically, we have a local team there that's working directly with them. They have been to some recent meetings with the community. There was one that happened quite recently where Attawapiskat, with their consultant, was able to sit down and provide a really good overview of what their interests in the crown lands were and what required infrastructure they would need to be able to support some of the development that they're looking to do in the crown land in that area.

The province is working directly with the federal government as well and with the community to further identify what that addition to their reserve might look like. That's kind of a discussion that continues to be ongoing. I know there's a number of future meetings set up with the federal government and the community as well to try to finalize and to move forward with the request from that community.

That's all I have at this time.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I appreciate the answer. I would just suggest that the minister reach out to the chief, because this is not what I'm hearing. What I'm hearing is that the province is stalling the process. We need clarification on this, and the chief is asking for clarification on this also.

Thank you. I'll pass it on to my colleague.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP West, go ahead.

MPP Jamie West: Related to that, just as a thought, in terms of estimates, Neskantaga has had a boil-water advisory for 28 years. I'm just wondering, what portion of the budget goes towards addressing this issue for the First Nations that have boil-water advisories?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much for the question, and I appreciate that. Again I'll turn it over to the deputy minister for any specific clarification.

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

So your question was related to boil-water advisories in First Nations communities?

MPP Jamie West: Right.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Yes. That is not related to our mandate within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Usually those types of situations are dealt with between the federal government as well as Indigenous Affairs Ontario.

MPP Jamie West: Okay. It was a personal question that came up because I get asked this a lot, and I'm often told that there's this political football that's tossed back and forth.

Going back to earlier questions—this was a question I had while I was reading about it, actually—several times this has “fire season,” and I want to know, does it just mean how many fires there were that year? Is it like a fiscal year or a school year? When it says “fire season,” it doesn't mean that if there's a fire before June it doesn't count, and after, like, July. What does “fire season” mean?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I think we've determined kind of an official fire season, but for those that fall outside the margins, I'll turn it over to the deputy to talk about how we calculate those statistics.

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

I will make sure that Tracey corrects me if I've got this wrong, but usually we start counting on April 1—that's the beginning of our fire season—and our counting usually ends at the end of the fire season, which is usually around the end of October. Is that correct, Tracey? I'll hand it over to you to see if I've got that correct, or if there's anything else you'd like to elaborate on.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes. Just clarifying, the legislated fire season is from April 1 to October 31, but if we do have fires that start earlier or start later, we do include them into our counts, just for the purpose of statistical gathering. Thank you.

MPP Jamie West: Thank you. It's just for context. I'm from a city where we're hoping to have enough trees one day to have a fire. I say that jokingly, but we have done 50 years of reforestation, so that's my understanding of forest fires and forest rangers.

We've been looking at a lot of the size of crews, and honestly I don't understand all of this. But MPP Schreiner, for example, talked about shortages of 23 two years ago and 54 last year; I might be misquoting those, but I'm hearing anecdotally we're having shortages and difficulty attracting and retaining, which the minister has said and the deputy minister and associate ministers have said. Is Bill 124 affecting this? Because that's what I'm hearing from these workers: The 1% cap based on inflation and cost of living is really hurting attracting and retaining these workers.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much for the question. I was really honoured to have the opportunity to speak with many of the OPSEU leaders within our organization a number of weeks ago and talk to them about, really, what they wanted to talk about and have a great conversation with them. Certainly, I listened intently to what they had to say, but at the same time I would say it's never been less than clear to everyone that we take the

occupational health and safety and the broader health and safety of our fire crews very seriously.

We talked about the retention and recruitment piece earlier and the steps that we are taking to move forward on that and finding ways to make sure that those who come to being a fire ranger continue to be a fire ranger. The agreements that get negotiated between OPSEU and the employer are really something that happens through the Treasury Board Secretariat, and that agreement exists, I believe, through December 2024. But I can say wholeheartedly we are committed to working with OPSEU to review any concerns that get raised by its employees. We had that meeting, as I referenced, and talked about a number of things that are things that we are working on jointly and collectively. I think we've had some really—I would classify them as good moments between OPSEU and the ministry in terms of talking about those things that are important to our firefighters and important to OPSEU.

I would turn it over to the deputy for some more detail on where that's at right now.

MPP Jamie West: That's okay. I'm going to just say that they're telling me clearly that Bill 124 is affecting this. If they're not telling you, I'm just going to pass it along to you that it is one of the issues. When you see senior people not returning, sometimes it's due to age, but sometimes they're just not making ends meet, right?

You talked about OPSEU. OPSEU's conservation officers asked me to pass this along here. There is some frustration about trying to meet with you. They had met with you in October and want to talk to you about fair pay, and they haven't been able to meet with you, even though they've reached out several times. They really want to talk to you about the important work they do. I'll just read a section here: "The government has gone through great efforts to hire over 100 conservation officers in the last 10 years"—very positive, basically replacing half of the workforce. "Ontario's conservation officers are incredibly well-trained and experienced officers. However, they are leaving the ministry for better-paying jobs elsewhere. Conservation officers are leaving out of frustration from various issues. Mr. Minister, please deliver on your commitment that your door is always open for OPSEU conservation officers and please forthwith establish a plan to retain these officers who are on the doorstep leaving before the knowledge and experience is lost."

They had asked me if I could ask about the status of the Ontario conservation officers' long-standing wage disparity issue compared to other inspectors in the Ontario public service.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much for the question. I did meet with the conservation officers, because I certainly value what they have to say and value what they do for Ontario. We've got over 200 conservation officers that every day are doing absolutely fantastic work in protecting our natural resources and our wildlife and all of that that needs protecting, and I thank them for that. I took that original meeting because I wanted to hear from them and wanted to hear what they had to say.

Similar to the conversation with our firefighters, I think we had a great meeting that was a productive meeting.

When it comes to specific contract negotiation, of course that also happens through the Treasury Board Secretariat. One of the other things that we had talked about was classification and that there is some ongoing review work around classification within the OPS. I believe that work continues, but I'll turn it over to the deputy minister for more specific detail on where that process and other processes may be at.

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

As the minister mentioned, yes, the compensation is negotiated through that collective bargaining process between OPSEU and the Treasury Board Secretariat. As part of a joint employer and OPSEU unified pay equity and job classification project, we have a multi-ministry executive committee who is reviewing the CO job description, so that is one initiative.

I will ask Tracey Mill, assistant deputy minister, if there's anything further she'd like to add in addition to what the minister and I have commented on.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Thank you.

Just elaborating on the committee that you referred to, Deputy, we do have our enforcement branch director who participates as an executive representative on that job family evaluation committee. His role is to ensure that the roles, the working conditions, the scope of responsibility for conservation officers is better understood and is part of the conversation about all or comparable enforcement and compliance officers across the OPS so that there is a more uniform and consistent occupational framework or classification system—just knowing that there is a senior representative from our ministry in enforcement that is participating in those conversations. Thank you.

MPP Jamie West: Okay. I didn't really hear much of an answer aside from that it's a work in progress, and that is the frustration. We are losing conservation officers. It takes years and years to train these officers and a lot of expenses. I'm sure all of us met with them when they were here. I was so impressed with how much training they had, and they told me that trainers are walking out the door. This is important. I know you're talking about Treasury Board being responsible for it, but it directly affects your ministry and the effectiveness of what they do. That's why it's a concern to me.

Like the deputy minister said, there are 200 conservation officers doing similar duties to other inspectors and police. They have very complex, dangerous jobs with the same use-of-force options as police officers, such as sidearms, carbine rifles, bulletproof vests, batons. They can use deadly force if necessary. From the conversation I had with them, they also talked about the fact that when there is a situation that happens in their area, they're almost like a one-person police force investigating.

We need to move this forward. I know the answer is going to be a non-answer. I don't mean that in a negative way, just that it's not going to be something you can

comment on. I'm just urging you to continue to have these conversations and move this thing forward before we lose more of these officers. Frankly, that's all they're asking for, is just have an endgame so that people don't leave. I know we want officers everywhere, but I want to keep the good ones that we have here as well.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Could I just make one point, and then I'll pass it back to you?

MPP Jamie West: Yes, go ahead.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bourgouin.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Because he brought it up, I just want to add something. How long has this consultation been going on?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I'll turn that to the deputy minister, please.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Point of order.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Once again we are off the topic of estimates and we are into policy and employee negotiation, which, as has been clearly stated, is Treasury Board. The estimates for MNRF are the topic of the conversation here. The question is not relevant here.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Let's come back to the estimates and address our issues and focus on the estimates.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Excuse me, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Yes?

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I'm just responding to what the deputy minister said. She said there was a committee reviewing this. All my question is: "How long has this review been going on? For how long?" That's my question. How is it negotiating when it's been ongoing? I think it's a relevant question.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): I understand, but if there is a committee going on at the ministry and they are working on it, we will leave it to them until they come back. They finish their negotiation, whatever they are doing with their team, and they come back and give us an answer. They will not be able to give you an answer right now because it is still an ongoing process.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Jamie?

MPP Jamie West: I can continue.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP West.

MPP Jamie West: We can move on. I have a feeling that it probably wasn't a positive response anyway if we could get that answer. Hopefully it's not. Hopefully it's short and it comes to an end.

Earlier we were talking about sharing resources. Can you help me better understand how that works? So 100 crews came from Mexico; in the past we had extra crews who could go somewhere else when it wasn't as intense a fire season. I don't want the super long version, but do we pay when Mexico comes, or does it all go into a federal pool and divide out of there? In general, how does the sharing agreement work?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Just to reiterate some of what we talked about earlier, depending on the fire season, you may see some resource-sharing. It's not a definite, but it is a potential, and that's why we have these agreements with

other jurisdictions. So in any given year, as we talked about this year, where we have sent crews and resources and equipment, in some cases, to other jurisdictions, again, that may be something that comes back to us. But in terms of the details of how the dollars and cents work behind that and the mechanics of the agreement, I'll turn it over to the deputy.

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

As the minister said, in that mutual aid agreement, when resources come to us, we pay for those, and likewise when they go there. I'm just going to have Tracey Mill give you the details of exactly how that works. Go ahead, Tracey.

Ms. Tracey Mill: Yes, thank you, Deputy and Minister.

The mutual aid agreements that we have both with our national and our international partners set out what we call daily predetermined fees. When we import crews from other jurisdictions, we will then pay—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Ms. Tracey Mill: —the daily fees that are associated and outlined in the agreement. Similarly, when we export our personnel crews to other jurisdictions, the receiving jurisdiction then pays us. It may be of interest to note that historically—

MPP Jamie West: Chair—

Ms. Tracey Mill: —I would say at least since 2019—we have, in Ontario, been a net exporter in terms of sending more staff and personnel to other jurisdictions to support them than we have been an importer of resources.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay, MPP West wants to—

MPP Jamie West: I don't know if there's time. I was just wondering, with the one minute left, about tourism in the north when it comes to your file. Is it starting to bounce back after COVID?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I think it depends on the outfitter that you talk to but, obviously, with the opportunities with the border open again, it is slowly coming back. I have—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. Time is up.

Hon. Graydon Smith: —met with the tourism association on multiple occasions to talk.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Schreiner.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, just given our conversation we've been having about firefighters, I just want to put on the record that I have heard from groups representing firefighters that Bill 124 is affecting recruitment and retention strategies. I know we've talked a lot about that today, so I'm going to move on.

My next question is going to be probably ultimately referencing page 54 of the estimates. In 2019, the provincial government cut the provincial transfer payment for flooding initiatives to conservation authorities in half. In 2020, Bill 229 reduced the ability of conservation authorities to protect Ontarians from flooding, particularly

around development permits. Then, last year, Bill 23 further eroded the ability of conservation authorities to protect Ontarians from flooding, leading to conservation authority officials raising serious concerns about flood risk to Ontarians because the severity and frequency of flooding is increasing. I was just at AMO; municipal leaders were raising the exact same concerns about increased flood risk and reduced ability for the province to respond because of conservation authorities.

Page 54 talks about regulations that were brought in around Bill 23 and building homes faster, but I've also talked to municipal authorities at AMO saying that actually, issuing a building permit is likely going to slow down because of Bill 23 because they don't have the expertise to evaluate flood risk, and so a lot of them are either saying no to developments or significantly delaying developments. So I'm just wondering if the ministry, through this relationship with Bill 23, is taking any actions—

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

Mr. Mike Schreiner:—one, to ensure—I'm referring to page 54 in the estimates—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Point of order, MPP Schreiner. MPP Smith has a point of order.

Mr. Dave Smith: “The purpose of estimates is to present to Parliament information in support of budgetary and non-budgetary spending authorities that will be sought through” appropriate “bills.” How does this line of questioning fit with information in support of budgetary and non-budgetary authorities for appropriate bills?

1530

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Excuse me, Chair. I'm referring to page 54 of the estimates and I was just asking about funding before I was cut off, so I'm wondering if I can proceed with my question.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Let's rephrase the question to focus on the estimates, please.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Is the ministry providing any funding for municipalities to be able to provide support around mitigating flood risk when they issue development permits?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thanks very much for the question.

Let's bear in mind a couple of things. First of all, not all areas in Ontario are covered by conservation authorities. When I was the leader of a municipality for 12 years and a member of council for 16 years, I was, in fact, in an area that didn't have a conservation authority. We were able to get all that work done in-house.

Now, that's not to say that conservation authorities aren't playing a valuable role. Earlier last year, when we were speaking with municipalities, just like you, at AMO, we were talking with conservation authorities and with municipalities about the great job that conservation authorities continue to do in protecting people and keeping them safe from flooding and other hazards. We're committed and—

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Excuse me, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Schreiner.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I'm sorry to interrupt, Minister. My time is so limited. I just asked, is there any funding within the estimates that would help municipalities address this concern around their inability to have the staffing now to evaluate development permits and to ensure that they're protecting residents from flooding when they issue those permits?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I think municipalities continue to be in the same strong position that they were in before in terms of support from this government, in a myriad of different ways in terms of flooding, whether it's the flooding strategy—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Schreiner.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you, Minister. I think the answer was “no” there, but maybe in some other areas.

I need to just have some time to ask about—and this is the part of the estimates related to the Niagara Escarpment: The Auditor General, in a 2022 report, talked about the fact that possible contraventions of the act have climbed by 82% over the last five years. I'm just wondering: The estimates talk about the work the ministry has done in modernizing the protections around the Niagara Escarpment. In that process, has anything been done to address this particular concern that the Auditor General raised in 2022?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you for the question.

The Niagara Escarpment and, of course, the escarpment commission operate as an arm's-length piece from the government. With that said, I'll turn it over to the deputy to answer any more specific detail on that.

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

So you're wondering about how we've been modernizing it and if there's been any—

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Yes. The estimates talk about the work you've been doing, so we're spending taxpayer dollars to modernize the ministry's work on the Niagara Escarpment. The Auditor General raised significant concerns around the cumulative impact of development permit issuance, because so few have been refused; the fact that there's been a significant increase in contraventions of the act, and yet, it doesn't seem like there have been any penalties imposed. I'm just wondering if, as part of your modernization work, you will be addressing the concerns that were raised in last year's Auditor General's report.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay. I'll have Craig Brown speak to what we've done in terms of the modernization with the Niagara Escarpment Commission. We've done a lot in terms of the IT systems in order to create more efficiency in terms of how we're providing our oversight and our approvals.

Craig, can you speak to anything further in terms of the question from the member?

Mr. Craig Brown: Yes, thank you. Craig Brown, assistant deputy minister of policy at the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

For the Niagara Escarpment modernization, we have made some amendments to the Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act and its supporting regulations,

and the Niagara Escarpment Plan. The focus here is to modernize and streamline processes, including those related to development of permit applications. We're doing this in a manner that would ensure that the existing protections for the environment [*inaudible*] on the escarpment, focusing instead on improving service delivery for permitting, as well as reducing burdens on applicants, people who engage the Niagara Escarpment Commission.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Thank you. I appreciate that. Has any of this modernization work addressed the concerns around cumulative impacts that the Auditor General raised in her report last year?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you for the question. I'll turn it to the deputy.

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

Craig, I'll just ask if there's anything further you'd like to add in terms of the details with respect to that question.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you, Deputy. Our focus has been on service delivery, so cumulative impacts and concerns about impacts on the environment—we've stayed away from those. We're very much focused on service improvements. That includes everything from, for example, digitizing maps to ensuring that information is more readily available to members of the public and others who engage the commission.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Okay. I appreciate your honesty in that answer and hope that the ministry does, through the modernization effort, address the concerns that the Auditor General raised.

Pages 62 and 63 of the estimates talk about some of the possibilities in investments in mass timber fabrication for buildings. I know I've talked to a number of developers who are interested in mass timber buildings as a way to create more value added in our forestry sector and reduce carbon emissions in our building construction. I'm just wondering what type of investments the ministry has made to facilitate mass timber buildings.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much for the question. I agree: I think there's a lot of opportunity there. Through our FSIIP program—now I'm going to get stuck on an acronym and not be able to explain every letter within the acronym. But anyways, it's a program that obviously is supporting the forest industry.

We certainly have an opportunity to work with mass timber suppliers—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Graydon Smith: —to bring products to market. In fact, I had the opportunity just after the AMO conference to stop in to a company in St. Thomas that is doing some incredible work with mass timber and laminated timber. They're looking to expand. They see the opportunities not only in Ontario, but beyond the borders of this province, being a supplier. I think there is definitely an opportunity there to support our broader forest sector, and specifically those that are looking at mass timber opportunities, and I'm very excited about that as we look to continue to grow the forest sector in Ontario as a whole.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I think we share that desire.

We're probably running out of time, but could you just at some point, maybe outside of this meeting, point me to where in the estimates, in terms of the budget line item—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. Time is up.

We move to the government side. MPP Bresee.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and again, thank you, Minister, for your participation today. Minister, back in 2017, again in 2019, and in numerous years on either side of that, we've certainly seen a number of high-water and flooding issues around the province. In my own municipal work, from 2017 to 2019, they were rather extreme.

We know that natural hazards are something that we absolutely need to focus on. As we go through all of our efforts on the housing strategy to address the housing crisis, we know that we need to continue keeping development away from flood-prone areas. We also know that your ministry is committed to protecting people and property from natural hazards, specifically flooding, and that flood maps play an important role in making those planning decisions—again, just to reiterate: to help direct development away from flood-prone areas.

Can you tell us more about the Flood Hazard Identification and Mapping Program that MNRF launched last year, and what the funding for it would be?

1540

Hon. Graydon Smith: I hate to keep reflecting back on the days of yore when I was a municipal politician, but I'll do just that and say that, of course, in both 2013 and in 2019 in Bracebridge, where I happened to be mayor, we had the unfortunate incident of two significant floods, 2019 being more severe than 2013. Those were certainly challenging times for the community as a whole, and specifically for the residents who were impacted by that.

I'm not going to say that it gives me a completely unique perspective on flooding in Ontario, but it certainly gives me a perspective, and one of the things that I was able to do coming out of the 2019 flood was to participate in conversations with the gentleman, Mr. McNeil, who was hired to develop a flooding strategy and produce a report on that particularly difficult year and things that could be done going forward. Of course, in those conversations we talked about mapping and other things that could be done.

Obviously, on a province-wide level, protecting people from the hazards of flooding in flood-prone areas is a priority, and being able to have up-to-date maps to make better land-use decisions and planning decisions and keep people and development directed away from these flood-prone areas provides certainty not only for developers and property owners, but for communities as a whole.

We're leveraging about \$7.3 million in funding through next March for flood mapping under the federal Flood Hazard Identification and Mapping Program. This isn't, of course, limited only to municipalities; conservation authorities and Indigenous communities are able to apply for up to 50% funding for these activities.

I'm pleased to say that 35 local organizations have or will be receiving funding in support of 55 locally identified high-priority flood-mapping projects. Approximately \$6.1 million is being given to municipalities and conservation authorities to support local flood-mapping activities, and an additional \$1.2 million has been spent on acquiring elevation data in high-risk areas.

In November 2022, Natural Resources Canada announced a five-year extension of that program under the National Adaptation Strategy. MNRF hasn't yet received additional details with respect to provincial funding amounts or timing, but we're going to keep working very closely with and have many conversations with federal partners to make sure that we can assure and ensure additional investments for flood mapping in Ontario.

So that's the long answer. The short answer is that, obviously, we are happy to be able to help provide this assistance to municipalities, conservation authorities, and Indigenous and First Nations communities, and we'll continue that work. I know there's some more granular detail that perhaps the deputy can help share, as well.

Ms. Monique Rolf van den Baumen-Clark: I'll ask Craig Brown, our assistant deputy minister, policy division, if there are any further details he would like to add to the minister's remarks.

Mr. Craig Brown: As the minister had mentioned, the province is committed to enhancing flood preparedness through flood mapping. The minister referenced work that was done in 2019; that's when the ministry launched an independent review to identify ways to increase Ontario's resiliency to flooding. Shortly after that review was done, Ontario released its flooding strategy, and this was the first-ever provincial flooding strategy. It outlined the work that the province is doing to help protect people and property from flooding.

Flood mapping makes communities more resilient to flooding. It also reduces long-term disaster assistance costs to the province. All municipalities, conservation authorities and Indigenous communities across the province were eligible to apply to the Flood Hazard Identification and Mapping Program, and the application window was open from August 12 through to September 16, 2022. Of course, the application period is now closed. Funds are flowing to those recipients until March 2024.

The goal of the program is to increase the number and quality of publicly available flood maps, certainly across Canada and certainly in Ontario, by increasing the capacity of organizations to complete the work. The Flood Hazard Identification and Mapping Program is designed to help identify areas at risk of flooding and make this information available to decision-makers. The minister referenced the ministry, municipalities, conservation authorities and Indigenous communities, as well as the broader public.

The province prioritized and selected flood mapping projects to present to our partners in the federal government to receive funding based on a number of factors. Some of the things we took into consideration were the presence or absence of existing maps, the urgency or need

for new or updated maps, and the severity or frequency of recent flood experience. We're also looking at development pressures or planned development on the landscape as well as fiscal constraints for those communities.

The province is ensuring that the money is being invested where it is needed most, including small and rural municipalities, and in areas where, as I mentioned, mapping doesn't currently exist or where they've experienced severe flooding, or when redevelopment is expected to occur. The criteria it took into consideration: small municipalities and Indigenous communities with high needs and minimal existing resources.

The program is designed to help identify areas at risk of flooding and make this information available. Once available, accurate flood mapping, informed by the best available science and information, will be used to inform large-scale planning activities as well as site-specific development proposals and emergency planning. Again, we feel this investment and program will enhance flood preparedness and make communities more resilient to flooding, protect people and property, and provide a more certain environment for development and provide critical information to property owners.

I hope that helps address the question.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you very much. Continuing on the idea around flooding—but I'm actually very happy to see that we are focused on getting and implementing good flood mapping. It is certainly an important tool for both our municipalities and our conservation authorities. This will help them further their core mandate of flood-risk management on that watershed basis, so I'm very glad to hear that side of it.

You spoke of the flooding strategy that was released. Of course, we know that flooding is an issue that can impact communities all across the province, and unfortunately, we know that the frequent naturally occurring events can have some devastating effects. You already spoke to that. With this strategy in place, it contained many actions for our provincial government, for the municipalities and for the conservation authorities. Can you tell us about the progress that we've made in implementing these actions and what the ministry is doing to mitigate the impacts of flooding to keep Ontario safe?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Again, thank you very much for the question. I will take the opportunity to reflect again on my time as mayor during two significant and challenging floods. I think a lot of people don't get to experience flooding. Thankfully for them, they just see it on the news and oftentimes it might be from the plains states in the US or sometimes it's from places like the community where I used to be mayor where it made the news too.

There was some imagery that went along with it, but the imagery is always the same thing. The imagery is an area or buildings that have had some water penetration or infiltration, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. When it happens a little, when that water is only a foot deep, that's still a huge challenge in terms of personal property, and can be for safety as well.

1550

The other thing that happens in floods sometimes—and again, in a community like mine where there are significant elevation changes from one area to another—is that you might be in one part of town and have no idea that a flood is even occurring, but there are other people in other parts of town who might be completely cut off and have no access to get back into the community. We had that occur as well. I say all this to underline the importance of the development of the flood strategy. Because if you're that person on the other side of the line, so to speak, on that dead-end road that the swelled river has cut off and there is no way across it, first of all, it may have cut your communications off and you don't have any reasonable prospect of communication, but the other thing is, you can't get food, you can't get medicine and you can't get to the appointments that you may need to get to. Let's say you're a senior citizen. That's a very difficult and challenging situation, and that's often when you have to deploy a lot of emergency resources and use those resources for people to get out, get across in a boat, and start doing wellness checks with people and make sure that the challenges that they're facing are not insurmountable—or in some cases, get them out of there because it's a dangerous thing for them to be in.

Again, I say all that in the context of the flood strategy, which I think is very important for not only the community where I was formerly mayor but for all communities in Ontario that have faced flooding. That's happened in several communities, notably in eastern Ontario, at the same time that we were going through that.

We've really taken a whole-of-government approach to prepare for flooding events to protect the people of Ontario by reducing the impacts on communities and impacts on businesses. I haven't even talked about businesses but, of course, they are majorly impacted when you see flooding. It impacts on families.

The ministry is really proud to lead the charge on this work with dedicated stakeholders across the province, obviously working within our ministry and with local governments and with conservation authorities. I'm super proud of the work that's been done in relatively short order—it's only three years since the strategy has been out. The steps that we're taking I think will have a really, really positive impact and protect people and property and make our province a better place—better prepared, better equipped—to respond to these flood events when they do happen.

I'll ask the deputy to provide some more details on the strategy itself and the implementation of it.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I'll ask Craig Brown, again, the ADM of policy division, to provide a few more details on the strategy that the minister has referenced on implementing it.

Mr. Craig Brown: I'm happy to provide some more detail. Ontario's approach to managing risks associated with flooding does involve a series of acts of legislation, regulations, policies, as well as some detailed technical guides that are implemented in partnership with several

provincial ministries, municipalities and conservation authorities. The ministry's role in managing flooding focuses primarily on preparedness, mitigation and early-warning activities and working in close partnership with local conservation authorities, municipalities and Indigenous communities to minimize flood emergencies.

The ministry, for example, provides surface-water monitoring and flood messaging to conservation authorities, Indigenous communities and Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry districts. There are policies that are provided through the provincial policy statement and the Conservation Authorities Act. Those policies are designed to direct development away from flood plains and other hazardous areas.

The ministry also provides support to Indigenous communities in the north during spring flooding by conducting surveillance flights and arranging evacuation and return flights for communities facing flood risk.

As Minister Smith mentioned, Ontario's Flooding Strategy was introduced in 2020. It includes several priority areas and key actions. Again, the objective here is to ensure that the province becomes more resilient to flooding, and to demonstrate and inform incremental improvements to the province's existing policy and operational approach.

Over the past three years, the ministry has made progress in a number of areas to fight the effects of flooding and help communities that are dealing with flooding and the aftermath of flooding to recover from those events. The ministry continues to prioritize increasing public awareness and education of flooding and ensuring that Ontarians understand the risks posed by flooding and the steps they can take to mitigate those impacts.

I'll focus on a couple of highlights that are in the strategy. There are eight high-level action areas in the strategy:

- the first is enhancing flood mapping, and we've talked a bit about that in response to the earlier question;
- increasing public awareness and education;
- clarifying roles and responsibilities;
- promoting sound land use planning decisions;
- enhancing flood forecast and early warning;
- enhancing emergency response;
- reviewing disaster recovery assistance; and
- securing funding for flood risk reduction.

This is a long-term strategy, and activities vary in the amount of time they will take to complete. Some can be done within a year, and some of the more complex activities will take longer to complete.

On mapping, and we've talked a bit about this already, the ministry has established a multi-agency flood mapping technical team to update provincial guidance. This is to better identify flooding hazard areas. Recently, the ministry released a draft technical bulletin called Flooding Hazards: Data Survey and Mapping Specifications. That was released for consultation from July 4 to September 5 and posted on the Environmental Registry. These provincial standards for flood mapping will help municipalities and conservation authorities direct new development away

from high-risk areas and also identify where flood proofing or other mitigation measures may be required to manage risk to existing development.

A number of other steps that have been taken to respond to the impacts of flooding include working with our federal partners to invest \$200 million in municipal storm-water and waste water projects. The province has also committed over \$30 million to protect wetlands, which is one of the biggest wetland recovery investments in the province's history. The province has also invested over \$26 million in disaster recovery assistance to individuals, businesses and communities. The ministry is investing approximately \$7.3 million in flood mapping under the federal Flood Hazard Identification and Mapping Program.

There's also an investment of \$5.2 million to fund the Canada-Ontario agreement on hydrometric monitoring. This network supports all flood management activities in Ontario.

We do work on a number of different fronts with a number of different jurisdictions. We are working with the International Joint Commission. We do this via the federal government and governments overseeing the Ottawa River Regulation Planning Board, so the governments of Canada and Quebec—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you. Time is up.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Standing order 69 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 2101, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? I see none. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 2103, natural resources management program, carry? All in favour? All in opposition? I see none. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 2104, public protection, carry? All in favour? All in opposition? I see none. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 2105, land and resources information and information technology cluster program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? Seeing none, the vote is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2023-24 estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry to the House? All in favour? All in opposition? Seeing none, the Chair will report the estimates to the House.

Thank you, committee members and the minister and guests. Thank you for your participation and the meeting is over. I declare it adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1601.

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