

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



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**Official Report  
of Debates  
(Hansard)**

IN-29

**Journal  
des débats  
(Hansard)**

IN-29

**Standing Committee  
on the Interior**

**Comité permanent  
des affaires intérieures**

**Estimates**

**Budget des dépenses**

Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry

Ministère des Richesses naturelles et des Forêts

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament

Monday 10 June 2024

1<sup>re</sup> session  
43<sup>e</sup> législature

Lundi 10 juin 2024

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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 10 June 2024

Lundi 10 juin 2024

*The committee met at 1301 in committee room 1.*

ESTIMATES  
MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES  
AND FORESTRY

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Good afternoon. The interior committee is about to begin consideration of the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry for a total of two hours. Are there any questions from the members before we start?

Seeing none, I'm 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 the Associate Minister of Forestry.

Ministers, the floor is yours.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you very much, Chair. It's great to be here today. I'm very pleased to be here in my role as Minister of Natural Resources and, of course, the Associate Minister of Forestry, Nolan Quinn, joins me today. And it's great to see my parliamentary assistant Dawn Gallagher Murphy as well, so thank you.

I'll give a few moments for the associate minister to speak, maybe closer to the end of my remarks, but I am pleased to be here to have the opportunity to address the Standing Committee on the Interior to discuss the 2024-25 estimates for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. Today is an opportunity to share what the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry has accomplished so far and the milestones that lie ahead.

I want to thank the staff from the ministry for their hard work in preparing for today. I'd like to welcome my deputy minister, Drew Vanderduim, who is to my left, and I'm also joined by assistant deputy ministers, as well: Craig Brown from the policy division, Tracey Mill from the provincial services division, Jennifer Barton from the regional operations division, Sean Maguire from the forest industry division and Amanda Holmes from the corporate management and information division. Together, we'll respond to the committee's questions and present the ministry's work.

Ontario's natural resources have benefited Ontarians for generations, supporting prosperity, ensuring access to nature and providing habitats for fish and wildlife. To preserve and protect our natural resources and promote

community prosperity, our government is taking action on many fronts:

—protecting public safety from natural disasters like floods and wildland fires and ensuring safe management of abandoned oil and gas wells;

—protecting wildlife habitats and ecosystems from invasive species;

—advancing the sustainable management of Ontario's forests;

—reducing burdens for businesses and investing in innovation to drive regional success and growth; and

—modernizing the province's aggregates program to enhance compliance and support our growing communities.

This work benefits workers, families, businesses and communities across our province. It is all united by a common goal: ensuring Ontario's natural resources continue to make this province the best place in the world to call home. Our government is delivering on that goal for the people in the province of Ontario.

Ontario's wildland fire season officially began on April 1. Our province is an internationally recognized leader in wildland fire management. Our resources include hundreds of highly trained and skilled staff, and a fleet of specialized aircraft used to suppress fires and transport personnel.

We have invested over \$20 million to modernize the ministry's natural hazard emergency management programs, starting with wildland fire. Through that work, we are studying the science of wildland fires, modernizing how we fight fires and seeking new ways to prevent those fires before they begin.

We are addressing workforce challenges in wildland firefighting, investing over \$5 million to attract, retain and recognize wildland firefighting staff. We are providing an incentive payment to over 1,000 employees on the front line of fire aviation and critical support positions to support the 2024 fire season response. We have also supported wildland firefighting staff by expanding eligibility for standby and on-call pay, reimbursing training expenses and providing up to \$500 annually towards the cost of specialty equipment.

We are creating more than 100 permanent positions to build leadership and experience, and support career development in the wildland fire program. By attracting and recognizing these critical employees, we are upholding public safety, protecting communities and infrastructure, and ensuring the safety of all our emergency responders. And we will continue to explore longer-term strategies and

solutions to support the attraction and retention of these critical public safety roles for future years.

Each season, Ontario's firefighting staff work tirelessly to keep people, communities and properties safe. Ontario's fire rangers not only respond to fires at home, they are prepared to serve alongside other wildland firefighters, through our mutual aid resource-sharing agreements, to assist our partners in other jurisdictions.

Our government recognizes the physical and psychological stresses wildland firefighters face every season, and especially during escalated ones like last year. We are proud to support legislative and regulatory changes that, if passed, will give wildland firefighters the same health protections as municipal firefighters. These include presumptive WSIB coverage for many illnesses, making it easier for wildland firefighters to access the benefits and the services they need. Our government recognizes our responsibility for the health and safety of our front-line heroes, and we will continue to work across government to uphold that responsibility.

Our government is also protecting public safety by addressing old and inactive oil and gas wells. In June of last year, we announced our three-year, \$23-million investment to develop a province-wide strategy that includes research to better understand the risks these wells can pose. It includes \$7.5 million to directly support municipalities in reducing risks and enhancing emergency preparedness.

Over the last year, the legacy oil and gas wells municipal transfer payment program has provided close to \$2 million in funding to nine municipalities to purchase emergency response equipment, enhance health and safety training, and increase public education and awareness. Under this plan, we've increased funding for the Abandoned Works Program to support the plugging of these wells. To date, the province has invested over \$33 million to plug 440 wells across Ontario.

We are working with municipalities, stakeholders, landowners, Indigenous communities and the public to ensure we are taking the right steps to help keep Ontarians safe.

Our government is protecting our natural resources and environment from the threat of invasive species, working with partners across jurisdictions to ensure the best science and research is brought to bear. Guided by our Invasive Species Act and the Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan, we're working to deter new invasive species and minimize their harms. We are developing new approaches to pest detection and management, and raising awareness of the threats posed by invasive species. We have provided funding to organizations at the forefront of detecting, preventing and managing invasive species, including through our invasive species action fund and funding for the Green Shovels Invasive Phragmites Control Fund.

### 1310

We have identified and regulated new species of concern to ensure we are ahead of emerging threats, and we're developing a renewed Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan that will set our path forward.

Ontario's forest sector is an essential driver of economic opportunity and growth, generating close to \$23 billion in revenue in 2022 and supporting over 137,000 jobs last year.

Forestry supports thriving families and builds regional prosperity across our province, particularly in northern, rural and Indigenous communities. Five years ago, my ministry introduced Sustainable Growth: Ontario's Forest Sector Strategy, our 10-year road map to support forest sector modernization, burden reduction and sustainability. Today, it continues to guide our actions to build Ontario's resilient forestry sector.

Guided by the forest sector strategy, our government is reducing red tape and burdens for industry while upholding our sustainable forest management practices. We are bringing the latest technology to forest management planning, including hundreds of thousands of kilometres of light detection and ranging data. We plan to use this technology to measure forest growth so businesses can verify forest regeneration more quickly.

We are updating our forest planning manuals to make it easier to create and carry out plans so workers and businesses can get to work. We are streamlining wood measurement processes, reducing costs and improving industry competitiveness. We are helping Ontarians in the Far North by making it easier for local communities to participate in forest management planning, and we continue to improve the natural resources information portal so crucial information is easy to find and access.

We now have eight resource revenue-sharing agreements with Indigenous organizations, six agreements representing 41 First Nation communities and two agreements with organizations representing Métis communities, and Ontario has shared approximately \$250 million in resource revenues from mining, forestry and aggregates with Indigenous partners through these agreements. Our government is committed to sharing resource revenue with Indigenous communities so they directly benefit from economic activity on their traditional territories.

We are also supporting Indigenous participation in forestry and working with the forest industry and Indigenous partners on the sustainable forestry initiative to engage Indigenous youth in forestry careers.

And we are investing in Indigenous-led projects that will build capacity, create opportunity and grow prosperity through our forest biomass program. Last May, we launched the forest biomass program to encourage greater use of forest biomass. Underutilized wood and mill by-products like bark, shavings and sawdust are widely used in everything from soil improvements and landscaping products to building materials and as fuel for generating electricity. This forest biomass has many new and emerging uses as a source of alternative products and fuels that can lower emissions and support sustainability. The forest biomass program funds projects to expand Ontario's wood harvest, support forest sector growth and explore innovative uses for wood.

The program has four unique funding streams to capture the full potential of Ontario's forest biomass opportunity,

helping facilities use more biomass, engaging Indigenous communities and businesses in forest sector development, investing in new technologies and bringing them to market. In its first year, the forest biomass program has committed over \$19 million to 41 forest sector research, innovation and modernization initiatives, and our government is investing an additional \$60 million in the program over the next three years.

Applications for this year's allocation of \$20 million in funding just recently closed.

This program complements investments through our Forest Sector Investment and Innovation Program, which has committed \$46 million to 16 businesses. This program funds projects to equip businesses with the latest technology, expand markets and strengthen Ontario's regional economies and supply chains, adding resiliency and creating new opportunities. These programs are advancing research and innovation and empowering businesses to turn forest sector strengths into forest sector successes.

Our government is supporting regional economic growth by building Ontario and modernizing Ontario's aggregate program. This industry provides sources like stones, sand and gravel that are critical to connecting our communities through roads and public transit and are used in the construction of schools, hospitals and other buildings. To support the success of this critical industry, we have implemented regulatory changes under the Aggregate Resources Act and continue to review this regulatory framework for more potential changes.

In a recent report, the Auditor General offered several recommendations around compliance and enforcement, priorities that are at the centre of our modernization efforts. We are improving the rigour of our oversight of aggregate operations with updated training for over 100 ministry staff to support an increased presence in the field, and we continue to collaborate with industry to enhance compliance and manage community impacts consistent with our strong environmental protections. And we will continue to work with industry, municipalities, Indigenous communities and the public to ensure that our oversight of aggregate extraction meets our province's high standards.

Our government is responding to climate change by embracing the economic and environmental potential of carbon storage, which captures carbon dioxide and stores it permanently underground. We are continuing to develop a framework for commercial scale geologic carbon storage projects in Ontario, which will regulate and enable projects to reduce the province's emissions. This framework will ensure that carbon storage is done responsibly with measures in place to safeguard the public and the environment. We're examining approaches used in other Canadian jurisdictions, and we continue to work with industry experts and stakeholders.

We've recently committed to amendments to the Oil, Gas and Salt Resources Act that will enable special projects to test and demonstrate the potential of carbon storage on private land. We're now focusing on enabling large commercial carbon storage projects in Ontario and aim to have full implementation of a framework by July 2025. This

important work will advance innovation and attract business investment in Ontario, while building a more sustainable future for our province.

Our natural resources have long supported the prosperity and well-being of its residents, providing economic benefits, recreational opportunities and wildlife habitats. To preserve these resources, the government is taking comprehensive actions. This includes safeguarding public safety from natural disasters, protecting ecosystems from invasive species and promoting sustainable natural resource management.

Our government is also focused on reducing business burdens, enhancing innovation, modernizing programs and supporting community prosperity. During my visits across the province from Pembroke to Thunder Bay, I have observed first-hand the significant investments made to achieve these goals: investments in emergency management, investments in public safety, our investments in our various partners to employ cutting-edge strategies to combat invasive species and investments to support our forestry sector.

Again, as mentioned at the beginning, I'm looking forward to working with our Associate Minister of Forestry, Nolan Quinn. He's a strong advocate for his community. Minister Quinn brings fresh perspectives to the forestry sector. This sector is innovating and full of opportunity for Ontario. It's an exciting time to be part of the sector, and they could not have a better representative in government.

In conclusion, our government is guided by our responsibility to Ontarians and Ontario as a whole. We are responsible for protecting our province's habitats and ecosystems. We are responsible for stewarding our natural resources to deliver economic opportunity to current and future generations and we are responsible for promoting access to nature for recreation, including world-class hunting and fishing that attracts visitors from around the globe.

Our government and my ministry are committed to progress and prosperity. As the Minister of Natural Resources, I will continue to uphold that commitment, advancing the growth and development of our natural resources and forestry sectors, keeping Ontarians safe from natural disasters and protecting our ecosystem and habitats.

I now turn it over to Minister Quinn for any comments he wishes to make.

**Hon. Nolan Quinn:** Thank you, Minister Smith. Hearing all the investments we are doing in the forestry sector, I know I do have my work cut out for me. I'm looking forward to it—the sustainability. It's an exciting time, as you mentioned, to jump into the file. So I'm looking forward to bringing a business perspective into the file, knowing that I do have a business background. But I know that you've done some really great work on the file, and I'm looking to just expand the work that you've done.

**1320**

Again, I'm honoured to be part of your ministry and to work closely with the forestry sector. We did have a Domtar mill in my riding for over 100 years, and when it left the community, I understood the devastating effects that it had in the Cornwall region. Ultimately, I was just up at

Timmins just recently for a health care announcement, and flying over the vast north regions and understanding how much forestry is up there—I do know it's a significant aspect and part of our economy, so I'm really looking forward to jumping in with both feet. Thank you.

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

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** I want to again thank the members for the opportunity to speak today. I'm inspired by the progress we've made so far, and I look forward to the accomplishments that lie ahead.

It has truly been an honour to be in this role for the last two years. It is a province that has unlimited potential. Northern Ontario and our rural areas that help support so many different industries, including forestry, have unlimited potential. And the work that we do through the Ministry of Natural Resources is key in unlocking that potential.

Again, to you, Chair, and to members of the committee, we are pleased to be here today. We look forward to answering questions. Thank you very much for the opportunity to make an opening comment.

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

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 speaking. All questions and comments will need to go through the Chair.

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

I will now start with the official opposition. MPP Shaw, go ahead.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Good afternoon, Minister—nice to see you. And also, congratulations, Minister Nolan. I was also pretty pleased to hear that we have a really close connection, so that was interesting information that we're going to follow up on.

Minister, our time is short here, so I'm going to apologize in advance if I cut you off. I'm really looking for concise answers this afternoon so that we can cover so much of the questions that we have in such a short time.

I'm going to start by turning my attention to conservation authorities. As you will know, your government has made significant legislative and regulatory changes that are affecting conservation authorities across Ontario. For example, last year, the government prohibited conservation authorities from providing comment or service to municipalities with respect to the Aggregate Resources Act, the Environmental Protection Act, the Environmental Assessment Act and the Planning Act. These are significant acts that impact municipalities. So even if municipalities wanted to access the expertise of conservation authorities—for example, on aggregate pits or landfill proposals—your government won't let municipalities access that expertise.

We all know that conservation authorities are the province's experts on watersheds. For example, the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority has significant concerns about a proposed landfill application in Dresden, but the conservation authority there can't comment publicly on these concerns that both the municipality and residents have.

So my question would be, what do you say to the people living in Dresden, or actually, any rural community across Ontario, when they are concerned about healthy watersheds and groundwater and when they are wondering, really—perfectly frank, Minister—why they should trust decisions concerning landfills or aggregates when this government has essentially muzzled the conservation authorities' ability to weigh in? The province's watershed experts have been essentially kneecapped by your government.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you very much for the question. Through you, Chair, I would say that conservation authorities in this province have been excellent partners. We've asked them to play the role they were born to play, specifically around watershed management.

I think there's an opportunity to continue to work with conservation authorities, and we take that opportunity as often as we can to hear from them. Recently I had a round table with a number of the conservation authorities and their representatives, board chairs and CEOs all throughout the province and we had an excellent dialogue. One of the notions, that the status quo is a barrier to innovation, was one that I think the room very, very much agreed with.

So we continue to work with conservation authorities all throughout the province. It's important to note that not every area in the province has a conservation authority, but for those areas that do, we have excellent dialogue with them. That conversation that I referenced was an excellent meeting of over 90 minutes where we talked about a lot of things. I'd refer to the deputy minister if he wishes to say more.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** It's okay, Minister. I just want to follow up on your comment, which is, very specifically, you've prohibited municipalities that do have conservation authorities—you've prevented the conservation authorities from providing comment or services to municipalities with respect to these significant things like aggregate and environment planning. That's really what I want to hear about.

As you've admitted, the conservation authorities are the watershed experts in the province. Many small and rural municipalities don't have on board, on staff, the kind of experts that they need to make good planning decisions. And so my question directly to you is, why are you not allowing conservation authorities to weigh in on these significant watershed impacts?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Again, I think conservation authorities have been excellent partners in facilitating a number of positive things in their community, including the safety of residents around water and natural hazards. We have made some changes recently to the regulatory framework in Ontario. We had heard from many people about concerns that it was being applied inconsistently by



conservation authorities across the province, that having multiple different regulations led to different approaches that were inconsistent throughout Ontario, and that's why we consulted on, and have implemented, a new regulation with clear and consistent rules—

*Interjection.*

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Minister, there is a point of order from MPP Gallagher Murphy.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** I just want to make a point of order that we're not talking about policy; we are talking about estimates. If the member can focus on estimates, that would be great. Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Okay. Continue, Minister.

MPP, you have to make your point of order during the question period. Now the minister is answering, so I will allow the minister to answer and after that, we will focus on your point of order.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you again, Mr. Chair. I was just noting that we had done a significant amount of consultation and have implemented a new regulatory framework with clear and consistent rules for conservation authorities to provide, again, that consistency across Ontario to ensure responsibility-building around natural hazards.

I turn it over to the deputy minister for further comment.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** No, that's okay, Minister. I'm good. With all due respect, I'll get through these questions. Because time is short, I'm going to move on to my next question.

With regard to the estimates, the future of conservation authorities clearly is in flux with this government, and estimates would reflect that. Really, your answer raises a concern that I have and that others have expressed, which is that this government is moving towards a centralized authority when it comes to conservation authorities in the province. And so the likely purpose of centralization—and it rings in my ears what you have just described to me—is that it would make it easier for the government to issue permits and approvals that conservation authorities might not otherwise give—

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Point of order.

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

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** I'm sorry, Chair. I don't know if we're going to work on MPP Gallagher Murphy's point of order, but again, the member of the opposition is drifting into a policy area which is not about estimates. If she wants to focus on something that has to do with the spending estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources, then that's quite all right and we understand that. But if you're going to drift into other items of policy, this is not the place where we deal with that. This is not the place where we deal with items of policy. It is the estimates.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Shaw, we will preserve your time, don't worry about it, but please focus on the estimate aspect of today's hearing.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Certainly, Chair, and I would add that my questions are about how the government intends to spend their money as reflected in the estimates. So every

question that I have is reflective of the estimates, which is the resources, the taxpayers' money, that this government is spending. I am asking questions about how they're intending to spend this money. As we will know, it is very difficult to get any level of detail from the estimates. As we learn from the FAO, the estimates are just that: They're often a piece of fiction, because we see at the end of the spending that many times the spending doesn't reflect what the estimates put forward. So my questions are very specifically about the estimates of this ministry in relation to spending that has to do with conservation authorities in the province.

**1330**

Let me put my second question. And I would ask, Chair—you can rule on the point of order, but I don't want to be badgered through my time on points of order that you've already heard and ruled on. I would say that that's only fair. That's a point of privilege that my time isn't interrupted if the points of order are vexatious. So thank you for that.

My question to you is, essentially, there are concerns through the estimates and through the answers that you provided here that you are looking to centralize the authority of conservation authorities across the province. We know that centralizing the decision-making would put farms, wetland systems, soil, drinking water and anyone who depends on a healthy watershed at risk. So very specifically, my question is: Is it true that the government intends to establish a new public agency or centralized authority to take over functions that are or were, until recently, until you made changes, carried out by the conservation authorities?

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Chair, point of order.

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

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Chair, I fail to see how this question pertains to the estimates.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Well, that's your problem, isn't it?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Okay, let's focus on the estimates aspect of the hearings, please, and let's not waste the time—your time and the minister's time. So if you can focus on the estimates, I would appreciate that.

Minister, you can answer now. You have the floor to answer the question.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you very much again, Chair, and through you to the member: We are continuing to strive to make conservation authorities excellent operating entities in Ontario that facilitate keeping people safe, keeping them safe from natural hazards, keeping them safe from flooding. But they also play a critical role in terms of the development of their communities and the development of Ontario.

We have recently, as I mentioned, made some regulatory changes. We want to improve the service delivery and create common service standards for conservation authorities, and have done so, because we believe people should be able to get an answer back quickly when they make a permanent application. So we've created a 21-day time frame for CAs to confirm receipt of a complete application, and 90 days to review those applications. We've removed

low-risk activities from needing permitting, such as building sheds and removing docks or rebuilding your garage.

What we're trying to do is work with conservation authorities to, again, create consistency across Ontario, preserving the safety of all those that live near watersheds or natural hazard areas, and also have a level of accountability and transparency for conservation authorities to drive continuous improvement.

I turn to the deputy for more comment.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** That's okay, Minister. I want to ask very specifically: As reflected in the estimates—I mean, you just talked about consistency across the province. That speaks to me as talking about centralizing authority. Can you say to me, yes or no, are you planning to centralize conservation authorities? And is that in any place reflected in the estimates that you've put forward for the conservation authorities?

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Point of order.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Okay, I have to clarify to committee members the policy of the committee on the issue of points of order and addressing the issues of the day or on hand during the hearing.

In the past, members have asked questions about the delivery of similar programs in previous fiscal years, about the policy framework that supports a ministry approach to a problem or service delivery, or about the competence of a ministry to spend the money wisely and efficiently. 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. So please, from now on, take these policy directives under consideration.

Go ahead, MPP.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Yes, so I'll put my question to you again, which is about the policy framework of the conservation authorities, which falls under your ministry, and that that policy framework is then reflected in the spending that you're planning in the estimates. That's how this works.

Based on your answer—

*Interjection.*

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** —and I'm putting the question to you a second time, because I understand it's hard to follow the train of thought with the interruptions. Based on the policy framework, based on your answer that you're looking for consistency from conservation authorities across the province, is your ministry planning to centralize authority for conservation authorities across the province?

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Point of order.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Point of order, MPP Yakabuski.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** With respect, Chair, you just gave the instructions to the opposition. If they wanted to word the question, "If you're planning for X-Y-Z, what is this going to cost?" or "What money have you allocated to carry out this process?" or whatever, that's a legitimate question. But she's asking for whether we've made a policy decision when that's not part of the estimates whatsoever. It's not part of the estimates whatsoever. She's asking for the minister to divulge a policy that hasn't

even been articulated. If she wants to talk about what this might mean in money, that's a legitimate question.

And I would ask that the clock continue to run, because we shouldn't be losing time in this committee—which is scheduled from 1 to 3, not 1 to midnight—so that we can actually deal with this. But if they're not going to follow the rules as you have articulated, then we have a problem. Points of order are legitimate, and they must follow the rules in respect of what an estimates committee is all about.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Point of order, Chair?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Our process is that he puts his point of order and that you rule on it.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Shaw, I read the policy of the committee. In regard to your time, we are saving your time. We are stopping the watch when there is a point of order.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** But, please, focus on the estimates of the ministry. That is the issue at hand.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you, Chair.

If Hansard could read back my question, my question was very specifically the policy framework, which is in the messaging that you—I'm trying to understand. You said it's related to the policy framework as is reflected in the estimates. If Hansard wants to read back my question, that's specifically how I put the question.

At this point, I would just like it to be noted that I think that the people of the province of Ontario deserve to have these questions put. If the government wants to be vexatious and interrupt me, that's their choice.

But at this point, Chair, I'm going to cede my time to MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Chair, if I may?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Yakabuski, if you'll allow me to clarify the situation—because we cannot continue the hearing at this pace that we're going, in this manner we're going in. I will ask both sides to respect the policies, focus on the estimates of the ministry and make your questions directly related to the estimates. Thank you.

MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you, Ministers, for being here, and the staff. Before I do my first question, I'd just like to—it won't be a point of order—thank you as minister and thank the staff at the ministry for what you did at Nellie Lake last year. That was an exceptional situation, and we all worked together with the municipality of Iroquois Falls, with your ministry, with the people in the unorganized territory. Some people might not like this, but the fact that everybody is slightly unhappy, I think, means you landed at a pretty good place. Anyway, I'd just like to start with that, but I don't really need a comment for that.

What I would like: Regarding wild land, wildfire fighting, it's very near and dear to all hearts. I've already smelled the smoke. We've already had to fight fires very near to us. One fire was six or seven kilometres from my home. I'd like to shout out to all the firefighters who not

only fought that one, but are going to continually have to fight those fires.

In question period not too long ago, Minister Calandra, the House leader at the time, said in response to a question to us that there was a 92% increase in the amount that was funding for firefighting. Could you explain where you get the 92% figure from?

1340

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Absolutely. Thank you for the question. And I was pleased to be able to assist the folks in Nellie Lake, by the way, so I'm glad things have worked out.

Through you, Chair, when we took office in 2018, there was a base budget for wildland firefighting in Ontario; it was approximately \$69.8 million. Fast-forward to this fiscal year, and we're looking at a number that's significantly different than that: close to \$135 million. So we're looking at budget-to-budget numbers.

There has been some, let's say, discussion of numbers that compare actuals to budgets, but I think it is very important that we focus on a budget-to-budget number. Those are the base dollars that we spend to prepare for fire season every year. So it has been a 92% increase.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So 92%, basically, from the time you took office to now—on base budget, right?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Correct.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Just so everybody understands, so if you have a huge firefighting season, that budget will—an emergency budget; I don't know what the exact term is—but that's on top of the base budget, correct?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Yes. Thank you. And there are dollars spent—I wouldn't say every year, because some years are different than others in terms of the total amount of money that forest firefighting activities would require. So, using last year as an example, that was a year that exceeded the base budget amount, and those dollars were provided. Because once you're in an operational time, of course, the amount of hours, the amount of equipment, the amount of fuel, the amount of everything that is used to fight fires is a variable.

I would liken it to when I was a municipal mayor and snowplowing. You take some averages over a 10-year time span of what you spent and set that as a base, but you don't stop plowing the roads once the base runs out. You keep on plowing and spend what you need to spend.

That is our approach—to be very, very well prepared with a healthy base budget and, of course, looking at other means to support our wildland firefighters, and then spending what is required on top of that to ensure that people, communities and infrastructure all remain safe all throughout Ontario.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Regarding the base budget, how is the base budget determined each fiscal? Is it based on the average costs of the previous season, or inflation? Because I would assume as we are getting—it's hotter, it's drier. There are ups and downs, but I think we all recognize that there are going to be more wildfires to fight. How is that base budget determined?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you for the question. I'll turn it over to the deputy minister, please.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Thank you for the question. On average, we look back at the number of years and see where we think—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** My apologies. Can you introduce yourself, please?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Apologies. Drew Vanderduim, deputy minister at natural resources and forestry.

Yes, the minister is correct. We would look at updating that based on historical trends and we'd make the discussion with Treasury Board as part of the budget decisions.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So if I read the budget correctly, the emergency budget for this year was—there is a decrease for the emergency budget. And you can't plan ahead. Just like you said with snowplowing, you can't really plan ahead for snow, for how much you're going to get, but you're not going to plan for your minimum amount of snow because—especially where you're from, Minister. There's lots of snow. I know that.

Emergency firefighting was listed at \$216 million in 2023-24, and \$135 million in 2024-25. Can you clarify that for me, please?

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

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Yes, I believe you're looking at the actuals from last year or the year before, which show a higher level of spend. The estimate or forecast that we have would be lower, and that's based on historical trend. So if next year we were in a different position, we might come back to the Treasury Board and ask for more funding. Or, as far as the budget process, we would seek to have that base increased if the option was there.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So just to get this clear in my head, and I believe this goes back to what the minister said about snow: If it gets really bad this year, like it could—and no one can really—I'm sure a climatologist can. I'm not a climatologist,

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** If fires shoot up, then you could very well go past that budgeted amount?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Yes, sir.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'll come back to this in my next round, but the difference between emergency funding and steady-state funding regarding preparedness: In your opinion, is the steady-state funding—and I see it's gone up—sufficient that Ontarians have a level of confidence that we can continue to fight fires successfully?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Absolutely.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Is my time up?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** You have 17 seconds.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Before we move to the government side, I want to make a point of clarification on the issue of the stopwatch. During the point of order, nowhere in the policy states that we have to stop the watch during points of order. So from now on, accordingly, please consider this fact. We're not going to stop the watch. That way, you can focus on your question, on the issue at hand

today so that you will be able to get the proper answers. Thank you very much.

Now we move to the government side. MPP Yakabuski.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Thank you so much, Chair. I appreciate that clarification as well. That's very, very helpful.

Minister, first of all, thank you very much for joining us today. Congratulations to you for the work that you've been doing. Also, congratulations to Associate Minister Quinn, your first day officially on the job here. We'll try to go easy on you.

Minister, I want to talk a little bit about biomass. You spoke about biomass in your speech, and I noticed that you mentioned Pembroke, which I greatly appreciate. You're no stranger to my riding. You're kind of a neighbour to us as well. But you've also been there many times. As you know, our forests—and forests are big in Renfrew county, in Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, including the part of Nipissing. Our forests are one of Ontario's most important natural resources and a key economic driver. Many of our northern, rural and Indigenous communities rely on the forest industry.

So I was pleased to hear that your ministry recently made an investment of \$20 million in 2023-24 and \$60 million committed over the next three years to the forest biomass program. That's certainly a historic investment. Could you please share with us now how the biomass program and these latest investments will create forest sector opportunities and strengthen regional economies—very important job creator and maintainer in places like where I live and other parts of the province. Can you explain how those might help?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Absolutely. Through you, Chair, to the member, I appreciate the question. It's an important question.

Of course, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, I'm very, very thankful to be in this position. When you look at the scope of what the ministry does, it's certainly broad and vast. When we talk about forestry in particular, as the associate minister will get to know very, very quickly, I think the opportunities that exist within a sector that, really, our province was built on—our province was built, in part, on forestry for those many years ago. You've got operators in your area, like the Shaws, that have been around for well over a century. So many great things happened throughout the forestry sector to get us to this point in time.

What I'm excited about is that we're really on the cusp of kind of a forestry 2.0—the fact that we can take all that has been learned and all that has been done to this point and move forward. The use of biomass is going to be one of the keys to doing that. As you mentioned, it was a key economic driver, it is a key economic driver and it will, I think, in the future, be even more of an economic driver in Ontario.

**1350**

For those of you that maybe don't really know what biomass is, biomass is pretty versatile. It's used in everything today from pulp and paper to electricity generation, food additives, building products, but it can be used—and

this is where I think it really kicks in—as a responsible alternative to carbon-intensive products like renewable natural gas or bioplastics or green hydrogen. So those are just a few of the examples of what can be done with biomass. There are certainly way more new and emerging uses on the horizon. I had an opportunity to visit the University of Toronto last year and take a look at the work that they're doing as they kind of break down biomass into cellulose and lignin and what can be done with it. The possibilities are really just endless.

So, about five years ago, as you know, when we started Ontario's Forest Sector Strategy, that was a road map to find the paths for economic growth in the forestry sector and make sure that we're maintaining and enhancing Ontario's reputation as a world leader in responsible forest management, and we certainly are that. Through that sector strategy, we wanted to help business. We wanted to help them harness the full potential of our forests.

In March 2022, we released the Forest Biomass Action Plan that outlined countless uses of forest biomass in the future. That plan supports the goals of our forest sector strategy and really incites the development and implementation of new and incremental uses for biomass in Ontario. The first year of the program—wildly successful, wildly successful. We supported not only forestry businesses but, more broadly, regional economies, rural economies throughout Ontario, First Nations as well. As you had mentioned, we made that initial investment of \$20 million. In the last fiscal year, we recently upped that to \$60 million in the coming years because it's just so very, very important.

I think what we saw through that first tranche of applications is the excitement, and the opportunity that we see in the use of biomass in the future was more than reflected in those different and disparate projects that came back, those 41 projects. So it really underlined, highlighted and bolded the opportunity for us to continue with the program, expand it out in the coming years and create more opportunity, create more innovation.

I mean, we talk a lot about innovation in Ontario. I think it's something that we're very, very proud of here in the province, that we are innovators. When you look at it through whatever sector lens you want to look at it through, we've always been that way. Forestry is part of that—again, that history that we have to draw on, and new companies and new technologies that have come to Ontario or, I think, will come to Ontario because we've positioned ourselves in such a way as to say, “We're very much open for business,” as we know, in broad form, but specifically through our forestry sector, through the use of biomass.

We've got an opportunity. We've got some of the very, very, very best fiber in the world—exists right here in Ontario, exists in the valley and exists elsewhere. So we can take that opportunity and harness that opportunity and find all these new uses. I think the sky is really the limit. We can see the forest through the trees, and it's a beautiful forest. It's a beautiful forest with all this opportunity within.

So I think as we continue to make these investments through the program, what we're going to see is not only opportunities that we know exist, but things that we kind of may not know yet that are just on the cusp, that are very cutting-edge, very emerging technologies that ultimately increase the use of what is ostensibly a waste product. It really was considered that forever.

So, yes, it's integral for pulp mills today, but there are so many more things that can be done with it, and that's where I see the excitement. That's where I know the associate minister will see the excitement, is just this opportunity to say, "There's a blank canvas out there. Let's paint a picture." There's probably going to be a tree in that picture, but let's paint a picture. I think it's going to be something really, really special. And it already is something special.

Again, I referenced that U of T visit. As you take a look at what they're doing, as you take a look jurisdictionally elsewhere and into Scandinavia, where they've taken similar steps in what they've done, there's a bit of a pathway for us. But, again, there's this new path that we're going to tread on our own here in Ontario to make really, really special things happen using biomass.

Just to expand on that, perhaps I'll turn it over to the deputy minister to talk a little bit more about the use of biomass and the program itself.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Thank you, Minister. To begin with, I will offer a bit of context for those who may not be aware of what exactly forest biomass is.

Forest biomass includes tree species or parts of trees that aren't suited for production of traditional forest products and by-products for manufacturing like bark, shavings and sawdust. Biomass is a common heat and power source, with uses as a sustainable alternative to single-use plastics, petroleum-based chemicals and fossil fuels. These innovative uses of forest biomass can drive economic growth, reduce waste and support healthy, resilient forests.

Continuing advancing those innovations, the ministry did receive a \$60-million investment over the next three years. Last year, we invested \$6.1 million towards projects in northeastern Ontario. The 12 projects are a diverse range of research, innovation and modernization initiatives that would help develop the potential of Ontario's biomass resources. They represent several of the program's funding streams, demonstrating the range in potential that the forest biomass program is bringing to life across the province. This includes more than \$500,000 for mills and forest industries, as an example.

This investment will provide new equipment to process wood residues and meet local demand for mulch and compost, supporting forest sector integration and providing an on-site source of heating for the facility's greenhouse. The forest biomass program will support their contribution and create opportunity across the province.

In total, over the last year, Ontario committed over \$19 million to 41 projects. The first intake of the renewed biomass program was open to applications from businesses, municipalities, Indigenous communities and not-for-profit

organizations that have a project to expand the use of biomass and enhance the forest biomass supply chain.

Through this program, we will see significant investment in technology, people and expertise that will lead our forest sector into the future, while putting more wood to work in unleashing its full potential. By doing this, we will create opportunities for the forest sector to strengthen regional economies.

I'll ask my deputy minister, Mr. Sean Maguire, for additional information on some of the projects. Sean?

**Mr. Sean Maguire:** Thank you, Deputy. This is Sean Maguire, the assistant deputy minister for the forest industry division, and I'd like to dig a bit deeper into the numbers so you can better understand how important the forestry sector is and to help contextualize the importance of the forest biomass program.

In 2022, the forest sector generated \$22.8 billion in revenue from the sale of manufactured goods and services, and in 2023, it supported more than 137,000 direct and indirect jobs. In addition, in 2022, it contributed \$5.5 billion to the provincial GDP. This represents 5.7% of Ontario's total manufacturing GDP.

Our forest biomass program is helping the forestry businesses to fully develop the economic and environmental potential of these resources, and the government has committed to keep investing in our forests for this and for future generations.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** How much time is left, Chair?

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

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Thank you very much, Minister, Deputy Minister and ADM Maguire, as well, for your input on that. That's very, very helpful. We talked so much about the importance of those investments. I've seen them in my riding, and I'll tell you, I've had an opportunity to speak to some of the recipients of some of your biomass funding—on a value-for-money basis, they said it couldn't have been put into a better program, so thank you for that.

I have another question on phragmites, and I hope we have time, but I'm understanding that this is a 20-minute rotation.

Ontario's biodiversity is a point of pride for our province, and I understand that the Ministry of Natural Resources is one of the leaders in its protection. Minister, as you are aware, invasive species pose a significant threat to Ontario's biodiversity—socially, economically and ecologically. Based on my understanding, Ontario has the highest number of invasive species in Canada. The unfortunate reality is that, once established, invasive species can harm the natural environment and are extremely difficult and costly to control or eradicate. I believe that in 2017 it was estimated that the economic costs and impacts of invasive species in Ontario are approximately \$3.6 billion per year. The adverse effects that these invasive species have on Ontario communities and their economy can be detrimental.

**1400**

I understand that the ministry is taking necessary and decisive action on this file. Can you please share with the committee how your ministry is actively responding to the

issue of invasive species? Any information that you and your ministry officials can provide the committee would be greatly appreciated. Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you very much for the question. Again, through you, Chair, to the member: I'm incredibly proud of Ontario, and the biodiversity that we have in Ontario. It's a very unique province, we know, with the size and geography and scope of this province. We've got Great Lakes lowlands, boreal forest, Hudson Bay tundra, tall grass prairies and, of course, the forests that we talked about earlier. And we love it all—really, an abundance of natural wealth here in Ontario—and we're very much dedicated to protecting it.

We've also got a quarter-million lakes and countless rivers and streams. When we add it all up, those different land types and water types that I talked about, it's about two thirds of our province—30,000 different species of plants and wildlife in our province. So certainly the notion that invasive species pose a significant threat is one that is absolutely correct. Anything that is not native to Ontario, either aquatic or terrestrial, threatens ecological habitats.

But it also threatens our economy, and I think sometimes there is a bit of a disconnect between what people think of when they think of invasive species or perhaps when they see some plant life that shouldn't be somewhere, that it's more of an annoyance or a pest. It is a threat to our economy as well, and we really need to underline and bold that, because the calculation around that threat is about \$3.6 billion—that's a B, not an M—a year. That is just simply an astounding number. Not only do we have this threat to our biodiversity, but we have this threat to our economy.

We've of course taken this very, very seriously. We invest more than \$5 million annually in addressing those threats, supporting partnerships, supporting research, supporting monitoring and the management of invasive species through a variety of programs. Those programs get implemented in a number of different ways. There is an Ontario-wide program specific to phragmites, which the member mentioned, led by the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Invasive Species Centre. We've also established the Invasive Species Action Fund and Invasive Phragmites Control Fund to enable on-the-ground control projects across the province. But, again, that's just about phragmites. When we think about the number of aquatic threats alone and we hear about them in the news from time to time, it certainly helps to scope the size of the challenge.

As a government, we're committed to making these investments—again, \$5 million annually. But also, there's an opportunity for the public to play the role of hero here and to call the invasive species tips line when they see something that they don't think is quite right, to make sure that they clean, drain and dry their boat when they take it out of the water and might be headed to another water system.

I had the opportunity last year, actually, in the little village where I grew up, to see a station that had been set up. It was one of our partner organizations, and it was just all around that fact: just to wipe down that boat, make sure

the livewells were empty. There is a wet vac there to be able to vacuum them all out and ultimately drive that boat off—so microscopic are some of those organisms almost that to go from one lake to another and introduce a species that formerly wasn't in a body of water—it can be so damaging so quickly, and it's just so easy to spread.

So whether it's our boating community, the fishing community, people when they're at their cottage and they see maybe a terrestrial growth that they don't think is right—all these collective actions, on top of the investments that we're making as government, are an opportunity to stop the spread of invasive species that are here. And then, of course, we want to be preventative in our approach and make sure that new species don't get introduced to an ecosystem that is not prepared to handle it and are negatively impactful to our biodiversity.

So I think the investments are important. We'll continue to make those investments and work with our strategic partners. Again, I want to highlight the Invasive Species Centre in Sault Ste. Marie. They've come down and done some member evenings here at the Legislature.

I don't know if any of you have had an opportunity to have a lamprey stuck to your hands like I have. It's mildly terrifying, but goes to show—

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** How big?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Too big. Any size is too big, member Shaw. It goes to show how they can attach themselves to the sides of our salmon and literally suck the life out of them. So lamprey control is just one of a myriad of things that are done through the partnerships and relationships that we have around invasive species control. We're very, very fortunate to have that.

I don't know, Chair, how much time is left, but I'd turn to the deputy minister for any further comment on invasive species control.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Unfortunately, the time is up. Maybe he can pick up in the next round.

We move to the opposition. MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'd like to follow up on a question from Mr. Yakabuski. He specifically mentioned phragmites. Phragmites are rapidly spreading across the province, rapidly. When I first got elected, I was told that the ministry was monitoring them. We're well past the point of monitoring them, so how much funding is the government investing in and actually controlling phragmites, or is it a lost cause? They are throughout the province.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** The thing with phragmites is, once you see it, you can't un-see it, for sure, and then you recognize the number of places where it is. Certainly near roadsides often can be a challenge. Maybe if there was a poster child for terrestrial invasive species, that would be it, because it is in a number of places.

But that said, we do have a number of great partnerships. The dollars that I talked about earlier—we do work with others on an Ontario-wide plan to fight phragmites. It's led by—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** But if I could, we've been repeatedly—we have to ask specific number questions. How

much is the government investing on the phragmites program?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** So we're \$5 million on invasive species, but in terms of that specific—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** That's \$5 million total?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** On invasives. But specifically—I'll get your answer here momentarily—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Seriously, do you think that you have the capacity to control even phragmites with that budget?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** So we work with partner organizations, and I think it's important to highlight that Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Invasive Species Centre—they all bring resources to the table as well, and then they leverage the resources that we provide. So you certainly get a multiplier impact on that.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So is the government's funding going up or down?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Our invasive species funding is going up in Ontario. I'll turn it over to the deputy to talk a little bit more about that.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Maybe I'll ask ADM Craig Brown to comment further on the funding.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** The base question is—and member Yakabuski brought it up—that phragmites is \$5 million. And there are many more invasive species, but phragmites is the one that we see all over. I've seen it along Highway 11. You see a few little spots get killed here and there. Somebody sprays them, but there are—it's growing all over. Are we monitoring? Are we going to control, or have we given up? On that—Mr. Yakabuski brought phragmites up, so I would like the answer to that please. Thank you.

1410

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** And that's why I'll turn it back, through the deputy, to perhaps somebody else, because I think it's important to note that when it comes to invasive species, obviously, the first line is prevention. If prevention hasn't happened, then you're into a management situation. So we can talk more about management.

I'll turn it over to the deputy.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** The numbers in the estimates for the commitment for the next three years is \$16 million for invasives.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I understand how you have to answer this, but considering the lack of success we've had controlling phragmites up till this point, do you expect any more success or signs of success than we've had in the last six years that you've been in power? That's more a political question—I appreciate that—but when I hear people talk about invasive species, either we're going to deal with them or we're just continuing to monitor them.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Point of order, Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Gallagher Murphy.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** I believe the DM has answered the question with the amount of spending. I think this is less of an estimate versus policy, and this is an estimates review.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Okay. Thank you very much.

Minister, do you have an answer to them, or we'll move to the next question?

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** I'll take the time now—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Just one second. Minister, do you want to answer the question?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** I'm not sure what your ruling is, Chair. If your ruling is that the question is in order, I'll happily answer.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** No. We heard the point of order, and we are moving to the next question.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** I'm going to return to my question around centralized authority over the conservation authorities and the potential that your government is looking to establish a new public agency. My question is related to the estimates: How much is being spent on centralizing a new public agency to take over functions of conservation authorities?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you again for the question.

I think I've been very clear in my answers today that we continue to work with conservation authorities to streamline processes. At no point have I talked about centralization, so I guess that's your hypothesis of the day.

But what we've done with the ministry is work with conservation authorities to ensure that they continue to fulfill their core mandate, which is about keeping people safe, ensuring that they are not building on flood plains, ensuring that they are not building in natural hazard areas. Ensuring that—and part of the core mandate of why they were created so many years ago, after a tragic situation—and I'm referring to Hurricane Hazel in part—doesn't happen again. I think our conservation authorities are doing a swell job at that.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you—

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** As I've said before, working with conservation authorities is—everything is and should be an iterative process that we continue to help refine and develop: What is the best for 2024 or 2025 going forward in terms of how they interact with the public, what they do, creating a consistent framework, and that's what we've been doing.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you, Minister. And you did say that. So I'm taking from your answer that you are ruling out that your government will be establishing a centralized agency for conservation authorities.

My question, really, to you, is: If everything is swell, as you said, with the conservation authorities, you're spending a lot of time and money and resources making significant changes to conservation authorities, particularly when it comes to significant things that impact the province, as you've just said. Aggregate resources, that's a big concern for communities that are not looking forward to having more and more gravel mines in their communities. The Environmental Protection Act, the Environmental Assessment Act or the Planning Act—these are significant roles that the conservation authority plays, so you cannot deny that you have made significant changes to, as you said, their mandate.

Another important question that I have for you today is that your government has required conservation authorities to complete an inventory of land by December 2024, and part of that regulation is to determine whether these lands are suitable for housing and housing infrastructure development. My question is really simple, based on what's in your estimates: Can you tell me exactly how much you are budgeting and spending on collecting these inventories from conservation authorities across the province? How many have you received so far and how much is this costing the government?

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Point of order.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Gallagher Murphy?

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Yes, I'm wanting to understand the connection of the estimates as they're laid out on page 107, table D1?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** That's not a point of order, so we will move to the minister to answer the question.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you very much for the question. I appreciate the work that conservation authorities are doing on that issue.

For any specifics, I'll turn it over to the deputy minister.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** If I think I understand the member's question, I do not have at my fingertips how many we received, but the change does not require a conservation authority to dispose of any of its lands, nor does the minister have any authority under the conservation act or regulations to direct a CA to dispose of lands that it might own. So nothing has really changed in that regard.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** As you know, I've been really badgered quite a bit to point directly to the estimates and my question was very specific about how much the government is spending on collecting and analyzing the inventories that they're requiring conservation authorities to conduct—the audits of the inventory of lands in their possession. The requirement for your government is to determine whether these lands are suitable for housing and housing infrastructure development. That is your government's order.

And so my question is: How much, through the estimates, is this government spending overseeing them, collecting them and analyzing them?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Again, thank you for the question, and I'll turn it to the deputy minister.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** I don't have that information offhand, member. If we need to take it back, I would.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Okay, thank you.

Chair, is it possible for me to ask the deputy minister, when that information is available, to provide copies of that? Because that's why we're here, to find out how much, through the estimates, the government is spending.

The other thing I would like to know is how many inventories have been received so far?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** We will leave it with the deputy minister and the minister to respond to the question of the MPP later.

MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** When I finished my last round, the minister responded, if he's confident that we have the ability to fight fires, saying, "Absolutely," and I'm happy to hear that.

Further on that, how many water bombers do we operate in Ontario to fight fires?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you very much for the question. Again, through you, Mr. Chair, we have a variety of different types of aircraft, as you know, in Ontario. Some of them are large water bombers, some of them are small water bombers. We mostly use helicopters for assistance—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm talking the big water bombers. The ones that scoop.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** The big ones?

**Mr. John Vanthof:** The ones we're all so happy to see when we see smoke in the air.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** The number is nine of the big ones. The CL-415s, I think, is what you're referring to, and there's nine of them.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** And are they all operational right now?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** They are.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Good. I'm glad to hear that. I really am glad to hear that.

My information says that we have 143 fire crews in Ontario right now. Is that the case?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** I don't have the exact number in front of me, but I think, plus or minus—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** You said in your opening remarks that the government is taking steps to improve retention of fire crews—I'm paraphrasing here, but that's kind of what I got out of your remarks. That tells me that there is a problem with retention. So do we have enough firefighters available right now for a typical fire season? We're not talking the worst, but we're talking right now.

1420

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** We operate in a range, as you would say, of what we ideally would like to have as crews in any given year. Yes, we are in that range, so I don't have concerns that our capacity is anything but sufficient.

I think the other thing that is important to know—and I believe you do know, because of where you live and what you've been through—is that while we have our own firefighters here in Ontario, there is a coordinated mutual aid approach across the country and, frankly, extending internationally when the time is required to assist one another.

We have, fortunately, had a relatively mild start to the fire season in Ontario, and I certainly don't say that with anything other than looking at the past and not predicting the future. That has allowed us the opportunity to support others that have had a more aggressive start to their fire season in Canada this year, so we had crews in both Manitoba and Alberta, as well as some equipment to assist them through some of the difficult season. From time to time in the past, we have been the supplier of crews and the receptor of crews from other jurisdictions throughout Canada. It's coordinated at a federal level. We're very fortunate to be able to do that.



So it kind of goes back to part of our conversation earlier: You can't be prepared for every single occurrence or variance that could possibly happen. What you do is you use the knowledge that you have available to you to staff up and have equipment, according to the data and what it has told you to do, but then you work with others, and that happens at a municipal level for fire as well. There are mutual assistance agreements out there, so everyone works together.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I think we can all agree, Minister, that in general, the prevalence, the strength of forest fire season is increasing, and even under the mutual aid, we're all going to have to be more vigilant.

This actually isn't on my list of questions, but I'd like to know: How does mutual aid actually work financially? When we get firefighters—and sometimes from other countries—who pays the cost and how is that compared in cost to if we had a few more of our own firefighters? I'm trying to word this as simply as possible. When I saw firefighters come from, I believe, South Africa or something, I thought, "Okay, the cost to bring them here must be astronomical," right?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** To be clear, the mutual aid system isn't meant to be kind of an extension of your own force, as much as it is mutual aid for when the times come and occur, and that's the way it's viewed. In terms of the costs and how those are billed out and managed, I turn it over to the deputy.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Member, thank you for the question. It's a great question—a little complex, so I'd like to ask Tracey Mill, our ADM responsible for fire response, to come up and provide that context.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Please identify yourself before you make your statement.

**Ms. Tracey Mill:** Yes, thank you. It's Tracey Mill. I'm the assistant deputy minister for provincial services division. Thank you for the question.

As the minister indicated, we are glad to have partners in aid of our wildland firefighting. Presently, we have mutual aid agreements with all of the provinces and territories in Canada. We also have a number of agreements with the United States, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand. In terms of payments, the receiving organization pays the provider of the resources. So if we were receiving firefighters from Mexico, we would pay them in accordance with an agreement that we have with Mexico. It's a daily rate that's reconciled at the end of the year. Conversely, if we are providing our firefighters to other jurisdictions, we invoice them and they pay us for our services. Traditionally, our ministry has actually exported more firefighters to support others than what we have required here, having been able to provide our own response through the fire season.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you very much.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** How much time?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** A minute and a half.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** My last question, a very short one: It has come to our attention that there have been 40 firefighters laid off this season. Is that the case?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you. Through the Chair, thank you for the question. And I will turn it over to the deputy.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** For this one, I would like to ask Tracey Mill to speak to the current HR.

**Ms. Tracey Mill:** We are not aware of any firefighters that have been laid off this season. We have been actively recruiting and taking a number of activities to try to generate the applications to the program and have been successful in that regard. So no firefighters have been laid off this season.

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

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** We move to the government side. MPP Dowie.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Thank you, Minister, Associate Minister and Deputy Minister, for being here, as well as the other staff. I've got a question that's really important to my local area. Last year, I understand, Minister, you were here at the committee, joined by the executive management team for the ministry, and provided the committee with key information about what the ministry was doing to provide the people and municipalities in southern Ontario, particularly in southwestern Ontario, with better tools to support and address the old and inactive oil and gas wells, referred to as legacy wells.

In the year since you and ministry officials have appeared before the committee. I understand that the team before us today has taken additional steps to ensure that municipalities in southern Ontario are better supported to protect their communities when it comes to these legacy wells.

In proximity to my community, we've got Wheatley. Wheatley Provincial Park was a favourite spot of mine, so it's a reminder of the impact of these wells. Can you provide the committee with an update on the work that is being done to tackle the complex challenges related to legacy wells and the supports that the government has provided to our municipal partners to ensure that our communities remain safe?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you very much for the question. Through the Chair to you, you talked about Wheatley just in your question, and I just want to specifically talk about them for a little bit. That was a community that had a tragedy happen to it close to three years ago now. That was very difficult for them to deal with, and I am amazed and heartened by the resiliency of that community and how they continue to work together and support one another and bounce back.

But I'm also very proud of the help and really the all-of-government approach that was taken to assist Wheatley and get them back on their feet. We have made significant investments through this ministry not only of dollars and cents, but also of time and resources and human resources to ensure that we had an opportunity to work with that community, to ensure that—and it was a promise that I made to Chief Case, the first time that I met him, the fire chief in Chatham-Kent—this will be a learning experience,

and we will implement what we learned. That promise has not gone unfulfilled.

So just to the great folks in Wheatley, I am so glad to see that the community continues to get past what was a really challenging event for them. We have been there to help them, and we will continue to be there to help them.

**1430**

More broadly and to your question—and again, I appreciate the question—we know Ontario, as I said in my opening comments, is abundant in natural resources, and a lot of different types of natural resources, including oil and gas and salt resources, those resources that are under the ground. For a little bit of context, they're primarily, as you said, in your area, kind of in the southwest and through Niagara a little bit. But when we're talking about all the resources that are underground in Ontario, it can extend to a lot of different areas.

Ontario's natural gas, oil and salt resources have been extracted—not a surprise—by drilling wells, so we were pioneers a long time ago in the petroleum industry way back when—1858 to be exact. Since then, thousands of wells have been drilled, predominantly in the southwest.

When I was at estimates before, I had said that we have records of about 27,000 petroleum wells—again, primarily in southwestern Ontario. We know that there are potentially thousands more that are undocumented that predate any sort of regulation of oil and gas here in Ontario. Some of them can provide some real hazards, such as pressure and the flammability piece that can come with that. It can be released at high pressure around the wells. Of course, it's flammable and can cause some real challenges. Hydrogen sulfide is a poisonous gas; it's got that rotten egg smell to it that can be released from leaking wells.

Then leaking water wells too—sometimes, there can be subsurface migration, and this gas gets into water wells. But there's oftentimes, from these leaking wells, some type of surface indication. You can get soil staining; vegetation will start to die off around it. Or sometimes, you see a subsidence where the ground sinks over past solution mining caverns.

So there's a lot of different ways that this issue can reveal itself, but all of them require a strategy and a path forward to make sure that the public is safe. That has really been the number one priority for the Ministry of Natural Resources. We want to keep people safe all over the province, no matter the circumstance that we deal with. Certainly, with this issue, it's absolutely no different.

We continue to work with all the stakeholders involved—a lot of municipal conversations, a lot of landowner conversations. When we kicked off the first conversations around developing the strategy, we went down to different areas in southwest Ontario, just got everybody in a room and said, "Let's talk."

I was in the room those days. We wanted to hear from different municipalities and what their experience had been; what their shared and common challenges were; what might be unique to certain communities. How can we work with them? How can we work with landowners to identify the wells, provide some support to ultimately decommission

these wells, and also do a little bit of work around the science and collective understanding of the risk profiles that are associated with these as well, because they're not all created the same—some have a higher risk profile than others.

In that year since I've been here, we've taken some pretty important steps, and steps that I'm proud of, to move forward on this issue. In fact, earlier in the year, I had an opportunity to go down to Norfolk county and meet with Mayor Amy Martin there and meet with local fire officials as well. We announced a \$280,000 investment in that community, and it was part of a broader investment that we made in communities throughout the southwest. It was \$2 million, and that was to help out nine different municipalities, to support emergency preparedness, to help mitigate the risks associated with these legacy oil and gas wells.

In each community, what was important to them in the deployment of those dollars was a little bit different. In some communities, it was purchasing gas monitoring or health and safety equipment to respond to potential emergencies. Others, it was more around training for municipal staff. In some others—and I'm not saying it was just all individual; it could have happened in multiple municipalities—an education campaign for residents, because a lot of residents don't really understand what the risk is.

That \$2 million was part of a broader investment of the \$23.6 million we committed to the legacy oil and gas wells action plan to tackle all the issues associated with these across Ontario. Funding, as part of that plan, will continue to support municipalities in southwest Ontario. It will also—through that \$23.6 million—support additional funding to the Abandoned Works Program and support the engagement of, again, key partners, stakeholders, on the development of further refining that action plan—so, scientific studies, taking a look at other program reviews. We want to support the risk reduction in communities. We want to enhance emergency preparedness and the response should the worst happen.

You mentioned it in your question, and you can tell from my answer: It's a complex file, because of the disparate nature of wells in one area or one piece of property having a different risk profile perhaps than one that's half a mile down the road. But one thing is certain: We want to tackle this—again, a commitment not only to that community in Wheatley that I spoke of off the top, but to all of the areas that have these abandoned wells, that have a legacy risk that is posed to their communities. We want to help. We want to make the investments. We want to make sure that we're putting the money in the right places that make a difference.

I alluded to not only the dollars that we'd spent thus far in Wheatley and through the program but to the human resources behind it as well. I really do want to thank a lot of hard-working ministry staff that have put a lot of time into this—not just in the office; this is out-of-the-office work, working with our different stakeholders and partners, making sure they identify where these challenging locations are, getting more wells plugged, talking to landowners, talking about voluntary compliance through the

Abandoned Works Program. The work they've done is exceptional. I don't want it to go unnoticed, so I really want to highlight it today.

I know they know in the communities where this work has gone on how much MNR has really engaged those communities and had these important conversations, whether it's speaking with Chief Case in Wheatley or with the mayor in Chatham-Kent, Mayor Canniff, or with Mayor Martin. I've always tried to take an opportunity to sit down with them and get the local flavour of what's going on, and they've done a great job in articulating that. But the other thing they've very clearly articulated is a huge amount of thanks—just a really significant amount of thanks—because this government has taken the issue very, very seriously. And we've made a commitment through that program to get more done, to work with the communities, to create some peace of mind for the people that live in these communities, to work on those high-risk situations that we know we can make a positive impact on, and continue to work at those.

It really has been an all-hands-on-deck effort. It really has been something that we needed to do a lot of listening on so we could respond in the best possible way. Again, those dollars that we put in the hands of the municipalities—where they knew the best program, the best deployment of those dollars in their communities—I think has been very, very successful and something that we'll continue to work at as we keep rolling this program out into the future.

Deputy, if you have anything to add, I'll turn it over to you.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Thank you to the member for the question. As the minister noted, the ministry has taken positive steps toward ensuring the continued public safety and protection of our communities.

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Before I speak to the investments, maybe it would be good to take a moment just to define the ministry's scope of responsibility. When it comes to legacy wells, municipalities have a legislated mandate under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act to have emergency response plans in place and coordinate municipal emergency response for legacy oil and gas wells in their municipality.

The province is the regulator of legacy wells and has the responsibility to act when they are known to be a threat to public health and safety. The province also works collaboratively with our municipal partners to provide support related to oil and gas well emergency planning, preparedness and response.

Our well operators or landowners have the responsibility of decommissioning petroleum wells. If issues are identified with a legacy oil or gas well, we will work with the landowner to address those issues through the Abandoned Works Program that the minister referenced. Through this program, the minister provides funding to support landowners in addressing abandoned petroleum wells that may have an impact on public and environmental safety. In other circumstances, it may involve remediation through

voluntary compliance. Landowners who are aware or discover a well on their property are encouraged to contact the ministry for support.

To expand a little bit more on the investments that have been made over this year, those announced in January are part of the legacy oil and gas wells action plan that was launched in the spring of 2023. As part of this action plan, the government approved \$7.5 million in funding dedicated to municipalities. This funding will empower them to prepare for emergencies associated with these legacy wells. This funding represents a commitment to the safety and well-being of our communities.

We've also bolstered the Abandoned Works Program with an additional \$6 million over three years, beginning in 2023-24. This brings our total allocation to \$15 million over three years. This will bring us another step forward in our mission to address and mitigate the risk posed by abandoned wells. Through this program, we will proactively plug eligible oil and gas wells that pose a hazard, ensuring they no longer pose a threat to communities or our environment.

We understand the importance of collaboration and consultation, which is why we are actively engaging key partners and stakeholders in the development of our plan. By harnessing the collective expertise and insights of all involved, we can formulate comprehensive strategies that are effective and sustainable.

As the minister mentioned, we are committed to evidence-based decision-making. That is why we have focused on scientific studies and programmatic reviews to inform our future actions. By staying informed and adaptive, we continuously enhance our emergency preparedness and response capabilities, ensuring that we are always one step ahead of potential risks.

To help inform the ministry's work, we will continue to engage with key partners and stakeholders to better understand their specific concerns. We are also engaging with municipalities, landowners, sector stakeholders, Indigenous communities and the public as work progresses.

It would be great if we could ask Jennifer Barton, who is our assistant deputy minister, regional operations division, to provide some additional details about the action plan and other supports the ministry has in place to support community safety. Jennifer?

**Ms. Jennifer Barton:** Good afternoon, everyone. Jennifer Barton, assistant deputy minister with the regional operations division. Thank you, Deputy.

I can confirm that over the past year, \$2 million was provided to nine prioritized municipalities through the legacy oil and gas wells municipal transfer payment program to assist municipalities in planning and preparing for emergencies.

To build on the announcement the minister and the deputy touched on—in early 2024, the ministry announced that in addition to Norfolk county, the following municipalities were also approved for funding in year 1: the municipality of Chatham-Kent; Lambton county; Oxford county; Brant county; Elgin county; Essex county; Haldimand county; and the regional municipality of Niagara. We also moved forward with investing another \$2.5 million in year

2 and \$3 million in year 3 of the length of the strategy that was referenced earlier, for a total of \$7.5 million for these municipalities.

In addition to the legacy oil and gas wells program, the ministry has also increased the funding allocated to support landowners to address abandoned oil and gas wells that may have an impact on public and environmental safety. Last fiscal, through the Abandoned Works Program, 26 wells were plugged.

Recently, requirements for the program have been updated to expand eligibility for more aging and complex situations related to legacy oil and gas wells, by removing specific requirements for qualifying wells, including wells drilled before 1963 and visible well infrastructure. Those were previously requirements, and now any oil and gas well may qualify if two conditions are met: (1) An active operator cannot be identified for the well except for the landowner, and (2) the landowner has not used, benefited from or intentionally tampered with the well. These investments are positive steps forward to reduce the risks associated with well infrastructure and subsurface gas migration.

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

**Ms. Jennifer Barton:** As the minister touched on previously, there are approximately 27,000 petroleum wells in Ontario, and we know that many of these wells were drilled and abandoned over a century ago, predating today's stringent standards and record-keeping requirements.

I do want to draw the committee's attention to our online gas well tracking tool. There is a GIS technology tool that Ontarians can use to check the status of nearby wells any time. The tool is updated frequently and denotes the location, type and status of the well, and the site can be found online.

We've continued work through investments, and the ministry is ensuring that we can help and prevent future incidents and continue to keep our communities in southwestern Ontario safe from any hazards related to legacy oil and gas wells.

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

We move to the final round of questioning, and we will move to the opposition. MPP Shaw.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** I'd like to follow up on the minister's information on abandoned oil and gas wells because I will let you know that as the official opposition, we have been raising the alarm and are very concerned about the size, the scope and the potential impact of abandoned oil and gas wells across Ontario, primarily southwestern Ontario.

You identified that 27,000 wells are documented and untold numbers are undocumented, so it's a significant problem. You also identified the tragedy that happened in Wheatley, and honestly, we can all just be so grateful that no one actually died—despite the significant loss and the injuries, we didn't have any loss of life. I think it was just by the grace of God that we didn't lose any lives there.

The toll and the cost for the Wheatley explosion is somewhere around \$22 million and counting, so my question to you is: This amount that you've allocated of \$7.5 million for municipalities doesn't even come close to the

cost of Wheatley. So can you explain if this is really enough to address the significant risk that people are facing when it comes to abandoned oil and gas wells in Ontario?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you for the question. Through you, Mr. Chair: We have taken steps that are unprecedented in Ontario to address this issue. When you talk about the dollars and cents that have been spent in Wheatley, it's exactly why we've spent significantly more and created this program: It is to be preventative in nature and work with communities.

I think the one thing we would all agree on is that when we have programs that support our communities, such as the one that I referenced earlier, the \$2 million and the allocations to the nine communities, they know how to spend those dollars to best assist their residents. Concurrent with that, we are plugging more wells in Ontario than we have ever plugged before, and that work continues and the risk assessment guides us in that work.

I think the strategy is very important and the investments are important, not only to work on the problem areas and the wells that are the greatest problem right now, but to me, this piece of working with the municipalities and making sure that they have support to do what they feel they need to do in the communities is also extremely important. And so, we'll continue to support them and continue to have those conversations with them.

It's a little bit of a snowflake scenario insofar as no one municipality is like another municipality. Broadly, the situation is the same, but again, implementation can be different just due to the unique local circumstances.

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**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thanks, Minister.

I will reiterate, municipalities deserve and need the province's support, but given the scope of it—and particularly the fact that municipalities across Ontario are already struggling with infrastructure deficits, they're having a hard time dealing with housing and homelessness in all communities across Ontario.

Again, I will say to you, while I appreciate and I am grateful and I'm sure everyone is grateful that you're addressing this issue, finally—and it is a legacy issue, so I appreciate that—I'm just going to leave a comment here that the amount that you are putting towards this can't possibly come close.

I'm sure that there are some municipalities that don't even have the resources to come to you to look for that funding. So I would say, given the scale of the scope—and I'm grateful you're providing some funding, but that's not going to be enough for certain municipalities. As you identified, some are different than the others.

But my question really is, how much of this and how much help are private landowners getting to identify abandoned oil and gas wells on their land? Because when I first raised this issue of Wheatley—I went to Wheatley, also, and had many town halls on this issue, had people come from Alberta to talk about this because, often, people think this is an Alberta problem. As you identify, we have an older oil and gas industry than even Alberta.

I had many individual, private landowners come to say that they were frustrated trying to get the government's attention, that they were being stuck with phenomenally huge bills—like \$100,000 bills—for oil and gas wells that they didn't even know were on their properties, primarily rural. So how much are you prepared to spend per private landowner that finds one of these wells on their property?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** To your first part about the municipalities, we've done the initial \$2-million disbursement to them for the projects that they have identified. We are going to continue with support for that program over the next couple of years as well, continuing with \$2 million a year in both years 2 and 3, and then we've actually created some space for joint projects as well that they see as important.

So the municipal support—it's not going directly into plugging wells. It is there for them to take what is necessary in their community to, again, educate the public or provide, maybe, pieces of equipment or do training and work on all those issues.

Around the specific support for the plugging of wells, which we've talked about the increase in dollars in that, I think you've touched on an interesting subject, which is private landowners and their concern, the hesitance in the past to, maybe, necessarily, come forward and talk about the issues. So that is one of the other things that we've been addressing as well, is we don't want anyone to feel like they shouldn't come forward—

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Exactly, because they're afraid they're going to get stuck with the bill.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** What we're doing is profiling risk and making sure that there are solutions to the challenges out there. And specific to that, I'll maybe turn the detail piece over to the deputy minister.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** So if you have a dollar figure for me on how much you're prepared to spend to help private landowners that identify an oil and gas well on their property, I'm happy to hear your answer, but if not, I do want to turn to another subject.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** I don't have a specific number. I can defer to one of our ADMs if it would help you.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** And will they have a specific number on how much they will spend on a private landowner who identifies an oil and gas well on their property?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** I'll ask Jennifer Barton, if I could, to provide any context she might have specifically on that.

**Ms. Jennifer Barton:** I can clarify a few things in terms of numbers. So you mentioned the \$7.5 million—

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** No, I really want an answer to my question because my time is short, and I apologize if I seem rude. Private landowners: How much are you prepared to support them?

**Ms. Jennifer Barton:** So the Abandoned Works Program is what we use to support the private landowners in plugging wells. The allocation is \$6 million, which is increased as part of the oil and gas strategy that—

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** And that's for all people, private landowners, that find on their property—\$6 million?

**Ms. Jennifer Barton:** That's \$6 million annually and it does deal with all the wells that come up year over year—

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** On private land?

**Ms. Jennifer Barton:** Not every well is unsafe or needs to be plugged. It's to focus that \$6 million on the wells that actually require plugging.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Thank you very much.

I just want to turn back to the conservation authorities because the deputy ministers did say that you would provide an answer. My question is again: Your regulation requires conservation authorities to complete an inventory of all lands they own or control by December 31, 2024. Among other information, this inventory must indicate whether or not the parcel or portion of the parcel is suitable for the purposes of housing and housing infrastructure development.

You can understand that this is certainly raising concerns from people, that what you're talking about is potentially selling off environmentally sensitive land to developers for development. So my question is again: Can you provide information on how many of these inventories you have received so far; how much it's costing this ministry to collect, gather and analyze; and finally, have you set aside monies that you will spend on developers who are looking to sell or purchase these lands that we're talking about?

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Point of order, Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Go ahead, MPP Gallagher Murphy.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** We're talking about the estimates, as laid out, as on page 107, table D1. I don't see where this question pertains to this specific estimate.

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Can you rule on that, Chair, because it's—

*Interjection.*

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** It's not a valid point of order.

I have to ask the minister if he can respond to that question.

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

*Interjections.*

**Ms. Sandy Shaw:** Chair, you know what? I'm going to withdraw my question. That's fine.

I'm going to pass my time over to MPP Vanthof.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'd like to switch back to forestry. It's very important in Ontario—very important in my part of the world as well, my part of Ontario as well. And as you know better than anyone, forestry mills—they work together, right? You referred to it with biomass, right? Biomass is created by a saw mill.

There has recently been an announcement of a closure of RYAM in Témiscaming, Quebec—actually, right next to Thorne. A lot of the people who work at that mill live in Ontario. A lot of the chips that go to that mill come from

Ontario. Have you been in any discussions with the owners or the workers at RYAM regarding the closure of that mill?

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Thank you for the question. I have not spoken with them directly, but I certainly recognize the impact that it has on the Ontario forestry sector. As you mentioned, there is a lot of interconnectivity because it is located just over the border. In some ways, it functions kind of like an Ontario mill in terms of it being a receptor. So we've certainly paid very close attention. That's not to say—and I'll ask the deputy to comment—that there hasn't been any conversation, but eyes wide open in terms of how this impacts the sector in Ontario. When we look at the sector, we're always looking at it as a whole and how one thing may impact another.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Before we go to the ADM, I would assume—I don't know the northwestern Ontario area as well, but I would assume that the same thing happens in northwestern Ontario. So could you give us an update on if anything's happening at the Terrace Bay mill regarding the workers or regarding the—

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** Yes, I appreciate the question. We've been in very close contact with municipal leaders in Terrace Bay and had conversations with the labour leaders as well. Certainly, it's everybody's preference that the mill that has been idled is operating again. That would be what's best for the sector and everybody.

There are, again, ongoing conversations with those groups that I mentioned earlier. When we had an opportunity to get together at the NOMA conference, that was even expanded out further to include some First Nations communities and other labour sectors as well.

I think the point that I made to them at the time and would stress again here today is that it is a private sector business. They make decisions independent of what the government wishes or wants them to do—

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

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** —but at the same time, we are working very, very diligently to ensure that if there is an

opportunity to, again, restart with current ownership, or if there's an opportunity for current ownership to facilitate a sale, we will be there as part of those conversations to play the music to get the partners to dance and also are there at all times to support the workers at Terrace Bay and all throughout the forestry sector who may be impacted by this. It's certainly a challenge.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** And I can assure you that the official opposition will be there as well. Anything that we can do together to make that mill go, to support those workers.

**Hon. Graydon Smith:** That's great.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** 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? The vote carries.

Shall vote 2103, natural resource management program, carry? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, vote carried.

Shall vote 2104, public protection, carry? All in favour? Opposition? None? Vote carried.

Shall vote 2105, land and resources information and information technology cluster program, carry? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Shall the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry carry? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry to the House? All in favour? Any opposition? Vote carried.

Thank you. The committee is now adjourned.

*The committee adjourned at 1502.*



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