Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 18, 2026
7 p.m.

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Second Session

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP), Deputy Chair

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* substitution for Glenn van Dijken

Also in Attendance

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Tejada, Lizette, Calgary-Klein (NDP)
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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Participants

Ministry of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration
Hon. Joseph Schow, Minister
Christopher McPherson, Deputy Minister

7 p.m. Wednesday, March 18, 2026
Title: Wednesday, March 18, 2026 ef
[Mr. Wiebe in the chair]

Ministry of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration Consideration of Main Estimates

The Chair: Well, good evening, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2027.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Ron Wiebe. I'm the MLA for Grande Prairie-Wapiti and the chair of this committee, and we will start at my right.

Mr. Stephan: Good evening. Jason Stephan, MLA for Red Deer-South.

Mr. Bouchard: Hello, everyone. Eric Bouchard, Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms Pitt: Angela Pitt, Airdrie-East.

Ms de Jonge: Hello, everyone. Chantelle de Jonge, MLA for Chestermere-Strathmore.

Mr. Schow: Good evening, everyone. Joseph Schow, Minister of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration. I'm joined at the table to my left by my deputy minister, Christopher McPherson, and to his left André Rivest, assistant deputy minister and senior financial officer. To my right I have Gosia Cichy-Weclaw, assistant deputy minister, and also Noelle Becker, executive director of training and employment services.

Member Tejada: Hello. Lizette Tejada, MLA for Calgary-Klein, shadow minister of immigration and multiculturalism.

Ms Wright: Good evening, everybody. Peggy Wright, MLA, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview and shadow minister of labour.

Member Hoyle: Good evening, everyone. I'm Rhiannon Hoyle of Edmonton-South, and I'm shadow minister of jobs, economy, and trade.

Mr. Shepherd: Good evening. David Shepherd, MLA for Edmonton-City Centre.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now go to the members participating remotely. When I call your name, please introduce yourselves for the record.

Joe Ceci.

Member Ceci: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Joe Ceci, MLA for Calgary-Buffalo. Good evening.

The Chair: Good evening.

Justin Wright is here.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Chair. MLA Justin Wright.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd now like to note the following substitution for the record: Ms Pitt for Mr. van Dijken.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn on your camera while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on the speakers list are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should signal the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration shall be considered for three hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table.

For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about this process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call for a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. However, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anybody have any opposition to having a break? Seeing none.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphones in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting.

Pages are available to deliver notes and other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, however, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members. However, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. However, the block of speaking time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both the question and the answer without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and a minister.

I would now like to invite the Minister of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Schow: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to be here this evening. My name is Joseph Schow, and I am the Minister of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration and the proud MLA for Cardston.

Budget 2026 focuses on what matters most to Albertans, and Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration's budget aligns with that principle. A prosperous economy matters to Albertans because it provides opportunities for people and businesses to thrive and reach their full potential. It matters that Alberta has a skilled and resilient labour force that helps grow and diversify the province's economy. In addition to attracting workers, it matters that they work in healthy and safe workplaces and are treated fairly. It matters that immigrants come to

Alberta and when they're here, they remain a key part of Alberta's growth strategy. And it matters that multicultural communities contribute to Alberta's prosperity and to the sense of belonging and connection they help build.

For Canada as a whole economic growth has flatlined, while Alberta has resisted that trend and continues to be an economic engine. Our province outpaces other jurisdictions in job growth, particularly private-sector job growth. This is thanks to our province's investment from the environment, low taxes, and overall affordability, but Alberta is facing some challenges. While the United States remains our key international trade partner, the current administration is embracing protectionist policies and ever-changing tariff regimes. This means that we must expand access to new markets so we are less reliant on any single trading partner.

Managing immigration is a challenge, as the federal government has recklessly allowed immigration to balloon beyond sustainable levels. This has put pressure on provinces to provide most of the supports that newcomers need, such as health care, schools, and housing. Young people across the province are struggling to find work. Unemployment rates for people aged 15 to 24 have been twice that of the provincial average for the past two years.

I am optimistic that Budget 2026 will support the ministry's efforts to address these challenges and maintain Alberta's economic advantage. For the upcoming fiscal year the ministry will employ roughly 1,200 staff to undertake our activities. These activities will be financially supported by $422 million in consolidated expense and $5 million in capital investment.

As I mentioned a moment ago, the United States is Alberta's largest international trading partner, but there are challenges with that relationship. This is why it's more important than ever to promote trade opportunities and to build access to new markets. One way we do this is by showcasing our province to the world through trade missions. We will continue to build on the success of recent trade missions to Asia, Europe, South America, and the Middle East. Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration will also continue to work with the federal government to make sure Alberta's interests are promoted and protected in international trade agreements.

There is potential for new markets closer to home, and our province will continue to be a leader in reducing trade barriers between other provinces and territories. By promoting freer movement of people, goods, and services between all parts of Canada, we can help foster a strong, growing, and diverse economy. Along with expanding markets, attracting investment and supporting regional economic development ensures that Alberta's economy continues to prosper.

The ministry will invest $120 million to support these activities in '26-27, which includes an increase of $27.5 million for the investment and growth fund. The fund is a deal-closing program. Since its launch in 2021 it has encouraged capital investment of $1 billion and supported approximately 1,400 permanent jobs. This has been accomplished by leveraging approximately $29 in private investment for every $1 in funding. In addition, as of April 1 the Invest Alberta Corporation, or IAC, will move to the ministry with $15 million to support efforts to bring more investment into the province. Since 2020 companies involved with regional economic developers and IAC have made 79 investments in the province valued at more than $28 billion, which are expected to create nearly 39,000 jobs.

7:10

The ministry will also continue to support regional economic development and small businesses through a variety of programs and initiatives. This includes supporting communities, regions, and economic development organizations with grant programs. It also includes providing small businesses with pathfinding, coaching, and training services along with the site selector tool, labour market information, and economic dashboards.

A skilled and resilient labour force also helps businesses grow and succeed, which in turn creates job opportunities for Albertans. The ministry will invest $112 million in the coming fiscal year for skills and training support programs, workforce development, and labour market information. It's important that we keep our young people engaged in the economy and give them hope for their futures. That is why our government will invest $20 million during the next three years to focus on youth employment. In '26-27 the ministry has an allocation of $25 million from the federal government to support workers adversely affected by U.S. tariffs.

In addition, to help workers find jobs, the ministry helps ensure they are working in healthy and safe workplaces and are being treated fairly. Budget 2026 provides $81 million for education and enforcement of occupational health and safety laws, or OHS; employment standard laws; and providing mediation services to help employers and unions with contract negotiations. OHS education and enforcement programs are off-set by revenue from the Workers' Compensation Board, or WCB, which is funded through employer premiums and investment income rather than taxpayers. Budget 2026 also supports the ministry's work to efficiently respond to employment standards complaints, effectively enforce the rules, and protect vulnerable workers from being exploited.

The ministry, through transfers from WCB, is allocating $23 million to support the Appeals Commission for Alberta's worker compensation. The Appeals Commission helps ensure injured and ill workers are being treated fairly by the workers' compensation system and receiving the benefits they are entitled to. To further support fairness, $6 million will be provided to the Alberta Labour Relations Board in '26-27 to support its work of ensuring the fair and equitable application of Alberta's labour relation laws.

As I mentioned earlier, Alberta's government supports immigrants and believes immigration is a key component to the province's economic growth. Unfortunately, for the past decade the federal government has recklessly allowed unsustainable levels of immigration and has paid little attention to provincial or regional needs. That is why Alberta's government is seeking more control over immigration. This helps ensure that immigration is a net benefit to our province and does not put intense pressure on provincial services such as health care and education. We'll have much more to say on that in the weeks ahead.

The ministry will continue to implement the Alberta advantage immigration program to attract economic immigrants in occupations that are in demand or entrepreneurs who can start new businesses and create jobs. In addition, the ministry will continue its work to recognize foreign professional credentials and streamline registration processes for professionals from outside Alberta so they can practise here as soon as possible.

It's vital that newcomers feel welcome in Alberta and are valued and respected. The ministry does this by working with the Premier's Council on Multiculturalism and providing ethnocultural grants to support and promote various communities and multiculturalism throughout Alberta. Racism has no place in any society, let alone one like Alberta that embraces and promotes multiculturalism. The ministry continues to implement Alberta's antiracism action plan to remove systemic barriers to government programs and services and protect vulnerable groups from hate and discrimination. In '26-27 the ministry will invest $36 million to support immigration and multiculturalism, and I wish to acknowledge the efforts of my colleague the Associate Minister Muhammad Yaseen on the multiculturalism file.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge the outstanding work in support of two other colleagues, Tany Yao, parliamentary secretary for small business and northern development, and as well Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, parliamentary secretary for settlement services and Ukrainian evacuees, as an advocate for nearly 65,000 people who have fled the Russian invasion and settled here into our province. Budget 2026 focuses on what matters most to Albertans, and I believe the ministry's budget aligns with that principle.

Thank you, and I will now take the committee's questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now begin with the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Question to the member who will speak first: Member Hoyle, would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Member Hoyle: I would prefer to do block time, please.

The Chair: Okay.

Minister, block time is good?

Mr. Schow: You know, I was going to look for a combined time, but let's live dangerously and we'll do block time then.

The Chair: Block time it is.

Member, you may start.

Member Hoyle: Well, thank you, Minister and Chair and all staff and committee members for being here today, for the immense amount of work that has been put forward here into preparing this budget.

You know, Albertans are facing real challenges right now, and we need to come together to protect good-paying jobs and keep people working and maintain a strong quality of life here in Alberta and build a more prosperous province for us all because better is possible.

On page 24 of the fiscal plan it notes that 2026 is already proving to be another volatile year globally, shaped by a fragmented trade environment and ongoing geopolitical instability. This uncertainty matters for Alberta. The U.S. is our largest trading partner, with roughly $188 billion in annual trade, and when disruptions occur, Alberta exporters, workers, and supply chains feel it first. Albertans need confidence in their government and that the government is prepared. Through the chair, can the minister share what is the clear and comprehensive strategy to protect Alberta businesses and jobs from potential U.S. tariff disruptions? What specific funding programs or market-diversification initiatives are in the budget, and are they designed to help Alberta exporters manage the risk and expand into alternative global markets? Given the scale of Alberta's trade exposure to the U.S., what measurable outcomes has the ministry set to strengthen Alberta's trade resilience so that businesses and workers are less vulnerable to future tariff shocks?

Alberta's economy succeeds when we plan ahead and when we protect conditions that allow businesses to grow and workers to succeed. On page 9 of the strategic plan it states that the government is "securing Alberta's place as a key partner for international trade." Through the chair, can the minister share the plan to ease the pressures that the U.S. tariffs have inevitably placed on small and medium-sized business owners in the province, and how will the ministry support local businesses and entrepreneurs in its procurement plans specifically?

On page 105 of the business plan it states that "$149 million is allocated to economic development and trade," yet I'm unable to find any regulatory changes related to the reduction of interprovincial trade barriers in the budget. Stats Canada states that barriers to interprovincial trade added about 7 per cent to many costs. Alberta's internal trade grade fell to a B in CFIB's internal trade report card because other jurisdictions advanced reforms while Alberta stalled on introducing mutual recognition legislation. Through the chair, is the minister considering breaking down barriers this year to reduce costs for Albertans? How much of the $149 million, if any, is going to the reduction of interprovincial trade barriers and to what programs or supports? How does this ministry plan to measure the success of these initiatives?

I also have not seen in the budget any mention of strengthening our internal economy by further getting rid of trade barriers, buying local, plans of working directly with other provinces, and increasing Canadian procurement specifically. Through the chair, can the minister share what the plan is and why this is the case? Alberta previously had the lowest number of Canada free trade agreement exceptions, but now Ontario and the federal government have eliminated all of theirs. What exceptions is Alberta still maintaining, and why does this government believe they are necessary?

7:20

On pages 21 and 28 of the fiscal plan, the government is projecting $3.2 billion in resource revenue based on an oil price consumption of about approximately $60 U.S. Budget 2026 also says that the government's goal is economic diversification. At the same time, the business plan does not appear to track indicators like new business formation, entrepreneur participation, and start-up survival rates. If diversification is the goal, through the chair, can the minister explain why there are no KPIs on whether Alberta is producing more entrepreneurs and new businesses, and if the ministry does track this, where are those KPIs in the budget so that Alberta workers and businesses are better protected from future price swings?

On page 29 of the fiscal plan it highlights that there's a downshift in the expectation for oil prices, and that will dampen corporate profits and overall incomes in Alberta. In 2022 60 per cent of U.S. crude oil imports were sourced from Canada, and while this is lower than tariffs on other Canadian goods, the 10 per cent energy tariff will still have a negative impact on Alberta. Through the chair, what is the minister's plan to continue getting our energy products to market other than the U.S., and how will this ministry effectively engage the private sector to do this?

On page 33 of the fiscal plan it shows that the government is anticipating that tariffs will result in a continued drag on investment with a gradual increase eventually leading to about $44 billion in nominal investment outside of the oil and gas sector. Through the chair, how does the ministry plan to off-set these job losses in oil and gas, is there a plan for workers who will lose their jobs as a result of these losses, and what transferable jobs will be available if oil and gas jobs decline? Also, what alternative industries can rural Alberta focus on, industries that do not deplete their valuable land and water resources to respond to the decline of the oil and gas industry?

We need a plan to protect small businesses and workers' jobs and families from the impact of tariffs. On page 106 of the business plan it allocates $94 million to skills and training supports to help individuals get back to work, including initiatives under the Alberta jobs strategy. Through the chair, can the minister share how many clients the program saw? Considering that the ministry made overall cuts to skills and training support by more than 30 per cent in last year's budget, how many Albertans were able to gain employment through this program and what percentage of Albertans were still employed 12 months after they were hired?

We know that small and medium-sized businesses take up a little over 95 per cent of businesses in Alberta and employ hundreds of thousands of Albertans. If you look at page 11 on the fiscal plan, it states that the provincial contingency is back down to $2 billion after it was raised to $4 billion in Budget 2025. Albertans deserve to know how the government will be responsibly handling the ongoing uncertainty that will affect our economy. Through the chair, can the minister share how much of the $2 billion contingency is specifically planned to support Alberta's small and medium-sized businesses if tariff or trade disruptions worsen, and which industries does the minister expect will need support first? How much funding in this budget is set aside through the ministry for additional skills training or workforce support, especially when some training investments appear reduced in this Budget 2026?

On pages 103 to 105 of the business plan it states that performance measures focus on investment attraction, export growth, and labour market indicators, yet they don't seem to include measures for entrepreneurship ecosystem development such as founder training, mentorship workshops, and new business formation. Through the chair, can the minister identify the specific program or line item in this budget that provides sustained funding for entrepreneurship ecosystem development across Alberta communities?

On page 105 of the business plan under performance measures framework, if entrepreneurship is the key pathway to economic resilience, Albertans should be able to see measurable outcomes. However, the business plan does not report any indicators such as new business formation rates, entrepreneurship mentorship participation, or business survival rates. Through the chair, can the minister explain why the ministry does not track these core indicators, and how will Albertans know whether Budget '26 is actually producing more entrepreneurs, or SMEs?

Page 105 of the business plan shows that the ministry plans to connect entrepreneurs to resources that help them start businesses and grow and succeed. Through the chair: can the minister go into further detail about what resources fall under that $149 million allocation listed as supporting initiative for this key objective and what steps is the ministry taking to collaborate with the ministry of service Alberta to lessen red tape and bureaucratic barriers for new and emerging businesses?

On page 105 of the business plan, key objective 1.5, to promote Alberta's trade on the global stage. I know Alberta has key offices in the U.S., Europe, Middle East, and Africa regions. Can the minister through the chair explain: how consistently have these offices been able to make connections between small and medium-sized Alberta businesses and international markets?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

We will now go to the minister for his block of answers. Go ahead, Minister.

Mr. Schow: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Member Hoyle, for those questions. These are the kinds of questions that I get on a daily basis as the Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration minister. Albertans are watching. They're keeping track, and they want to know: what are we doing as a government to support businesses – small, medium, and large – in this province, and how are those supports going to benefit Albertans when it comes to job-creation opportunities both now and in the future? I've been taking robust notes as I went through. I suspect I won't have enough time to get through all of them, but that's why we have a three-hour block time this evening.

Before I begin, I do want to acknowledge that I'm sitting here today with a number of my officials. All this has come together and the work that I do cannot be done without the team that I have. I have a tremendous department who work tirelessly on behalf of Albertans. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention them by name, very quickly: Mike Jenkinson, executive director, executive operations; Tim Haysom, executive director, employer and program services; Ryan Reichl, executive director, evidence, policy, and governance; Patrick Humeniuk, executive director, financial services; Myles Morris, assistant deputy minister; Sylvia Lepki, assistant deputy minister; Brian Doyle, assistant deputy minister; Jennifer Jabs, assistant deputy minister; Lisa Ross-Rodriguez, assistant deputy minister; Rob Williams, director; and Keith Bradley, acting chief executive officer. That's my team. It's an A-team. I'm grateful for their support. Everything we're going to talk about tonight couldn't happen without them as well as my ministerial office.

We'll start, Mr. Chair and through you to the member, when it comes to the talk about protecting Alberta jobs, particularly as we become more exposed to a strained trade relationship with the United States, that this has taken a number of us off guard. But we're also prepared because Alberta is used to dealing with adversity, understanding that this province came basically out of difficult circumstances. People came here for the opportunity – they didn't come here for the weather – and they made the most of it. Whether it's now or 1905 or somewhere in between, we have always faced hardships, and we've come out on top. In fact, we've come out stronger.

When it comes to jobs and protections, Mr. Chair, it's important to understand that the largest trading partner we have is the United States. Last year over $170 billion of goods was exported out of the province; 90 per cent of that went to the United States. That is not going to change in the immediate future. With that said, it's important to recognize that even before the new administration took control of the White House, we have always been trying to diversify our trade relationships around the world, understanding that while we are a subnational jurisdiction here in the province of Alberta, we play a big role on the international stage, and that includes trade missions. Building trade relationships in other jurisdictions is something that I do on a regular basis. It's something that my colleagues do regardless of ministry because it's important for people to know that Alberta is open for business.

Now, we all have departments. Departments often go ahead of us. In my own department we do about 30 or 40 trade missions a year. That's a lot of trade missions, Mr. Chair. I can say that I cannot go on all those trade missions. At some point I need to get home. I prefer to stay married. That's an important thing for me to do and to make sure that my kids don't start referring to me by my first name.

But what I can say is that on these trade missions we take along businesses from Alberta. A perfect example is that recently we went to the Mobile World Conference in Barcelona, Spain. Now, this is one of the biggest tech conferences in the world. At that conference we brought 20 businesses with us from Alberta. All who went there: it was either their first time or their 10th or 11th time, all with the intent of building those relationships and expanding new opportunities for them. We saw tremendous success with those, and I'm sure we can talk about them in a moment.

7:30

Another example, Mr. Chair. Last year I went to Abu Dhabi for ADIPEC, and "I was impressed" would be an understatement. When I sat in the opening ceremonies, Doug Bergum, who is the Secretary of the Interior, stood up in the opening ceremonies and spoke about the presence of the United States and how they brought 200 businesses from the entire U.S. to that conference. Alberta, as a subnational jurisdiction, brought 75 businesses. As I mentioned earlier, we are a big player on the international stage. People know where Alberta is located on the map.

Now, we talked a little bit about these trade relationships and getting into internal trade. It's also important to note that a lot of talk is going on about removing internal trade barriers. It is essential, something Alberta has been talking about for a very long time, at least since we became government in 2019. We took a lead on this. In fact, most provinces are really just playing catch up. I was disappointed to hear the CFIB's grade not take into account that much of what the other provinces had done recently we had already done years ahead of that. Again, another proof point that Alberta is a leader when it comes to removing trade barriers.

The overarching message here, though, is that breaking down these trade barriers is important for Alberta because we must help businesses move goods and services across provincial lines. But that will not fix the strained relationship with the United States. We still need export dollars coming into Canada from the United States. It's important. We will continue to work on breaking down these trade barriers. Without breaking privilege here, what I can say is that there is legislation coming forward this spring with regard to the mutual recognition agreement that we have with the other provinces to put us in line, with the expectation of meeting those in June.

Now, I'll just go over some of these notes. It's also important to talk about economic diversification, and I can turn the mic over to my deputy minister in just a moment to talk about some of the key performance indicators. Economic diversification is at the heart of my ministry. It's why I have so many assistant deputy ministers who are all working on this to help make sure that we are meeting that goal of finding new markets. We have a rich history, Mr. Chair, one that has served us well for a very long time, particularly in the oil and gas sector. As I see other jurisdictions around the world that are petroleum-based economies, we also need to use that success to leverage future success.

Economic diversification, I believe, starts – it's in my mandate letter – with becoming the lead on defence, Mr. Chair. This is an exciting time for Alberta because we understand that we have an economic regime and we have a tax system and we have a regulatory environment that is conducive to building and advancing the industries of Canada's defence right here in Alberta. I'm sure I'll have more time to talk about that.

Then there was a question specifically about getting those products to market, going back to the conversation about oil and gas. Now, I know that I am the JETI minister. I'm not the Minister of Energy and Minerals. I will leave that deeper conversation to him, and I know he's been through his committee already. What I can say is that thanks to the diligent work of the Premier and staff and many members of our government, we have been able to sign a historic memorandum of understanding with the federal government to help us get our products to market. We are on the cusp, Mr. Chair, of one of the biggest oil booms in the history of our country, and Alberta is leading the way.

The money that we generate from royalties and those resources is going to continue to help pay for social services, things that we enjoy in this province, but not just ours. Mr. Chair, we pay Canada's bills. That is an important point for this committee to understand. We pay the bills of many of our neighbours to the east and to the west. The reality is that we must continue to support our conventional energy sector and the jobs that are created there. These are mortgage-paying, grocery-buying, sports-fee-paying jobs. There is dignity in that work. I understand that there may be an interest of some members of the Assembly to move away from traditional energy, but that is a backwards way of thinking.

I have a minute and 17 seconds left of my time. What I can say is that when it comes to promoting trade – they asked about the trade offices, and there'll be more time to discuss this – the international trade offices do fall under the Premier and IIR. With that said, we work very closely with the trade offices because they are the ones on the ground who understand the landscape. When we go into those markets, we're able to have those connections, those meetings, and those relationships already started. So it's not a cold call, Mr. Chair.

We've done a great job and continue to do a great job fostering those relationships, which allows us to find totally new markets that maybe we had not considered 10 years ago. You know, one would be the brand new office that we opened up in Abu Dhabi. Though that area of the world right now is experiencing turmoil as a result of the war in Iran, it is a place that we see as a tremendous trading partner in the future. As a result of that relationship, in a very short period of time we were able to turn that relationship into a direct flight from Calgary to Abu Dhabi that is going to service Albertans and members from the U.A.E. for a long time to come.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now turn to Member Tejada for the next block of questions. Would you like to block or share time with the minister?

Member Tejada: I'd prefer block.

The Chair: Block time. Minister, is that okay with you?

Mr. Schow: Sure.

The Chair: Go ahead, Member.

Member Tejada: Wonderful. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the minister and to all of his staff for the work that you're doing and for answering our questions today. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to work with all of my colleagues here as well.

I'll be focusing all my questions on issues of immigration and multiculturalism. As we often say in this place, we're all treaty people, and that includes immigrants, whether they arrived six generations ago or yesterday. Newcomers are our neighbours, are contributors to our economy, and are excited about joining in our prosperity. It is my hope that we recognize our responsibility as well to newcomers and to all Albertans as they integrate and make Alberta their home, as many of our ancestors already have.

On page 35 of the fiscal plan the government notes that we will see a net decrease in population growth due to drastically reduced numbers of temporary residents. That was a federal decision. They have made quite significant caps on temporary foreign workers and other temporary residents. This is also reflected in chart 12. Given the federal changes, industries like tourism, which rely on temporary foreign workers, are likely to face a potential lull in the labour force. Industries like food supply – I think of places like Brooks-Medicine Hat. Meat-packing plants, restaurants, hospitality, and hotels in smaller centres all depend on temporary foreign workers to keep their businesses open. I can think of a constituent of mine who has a mechanic shop who is quite desperate to have his nomination application processed for an employee.

My question is this. With the caps on temporary foreign workers, what support will this government provide to small businesses should they not be able to fill the positions? How will the government ensure that these positions are not left unfulfilled? How is this ministry encouraging Albertans to work in tourism industries as well as retail and all the other industries that I've mentioned, to take on these jobs?

My second question is around tourist-based regions like Banff, Jasper, Canmore. They like to welcome folks from all over. I think it's a tradition. Having lived in Alberta all of my life – I don't know how many of us have met Australians in our trips to Banff and Canmore. They like to welcome sort of broadly folks to work on holiday visas, and I'm interested in the numbers comparatively between temporary workers in Alberta and how many would be working on holiday visas. If the minister could provide those numbers between what the number of temporary workers is that we have here versus the working holiday.

Further to this question, the federal government has reduced contract terms for temporary foreign workers to one year from two years. Many of the small businesses rely on these workers for business continuity. I would say that in the smaller centres and the larger centres the workers themselves have become part of their community fabric. I would say through the various renewals that happen within any one family, you can have a mixed-status family as well. My question to the minister is: what proportion of the nominations in the AAIP have gone to existing workers who are in that process of renewals who wish to stay? What will the approach be going forward in terms of renewing folks who have already been here, have been contributing, paying taxes? Temporary foreign workers do pay taxes and contribute to our communities.

7:40

One of my other questions here is under outcome 2 in the business plan, relating to ensuring that Alberta has a skilled and resilient workforce. In performance measure 2(b) it appears that this government is forecasting a modest increase this year to the AAIP certificates for 2026, but what I'm seeing is a number that is more than double for the coming years. Now, can the minister tell us how they arrived at this much larger number of nominations for the province when the Premier's request for 20,000 nominations, I would say last year sometime or maybe the year before, for permanent residents was actually rejected by the federal government? It was in fact reduced by half, to 5,000.

What we're seeing for this year is about 6,500, I believe, if I look at the charts, so I'm just wondering how they came to that number. I know that there were changes to federal programs. They've just recently announced the temporary resident to permanent resident program, although the information I've received is that AAIP would not be included in those numbers.

My next question would be that there's been much said by this government about the use of services by temporary residents or people waiting for confirmation of their status. Those are all folks that are legally resident here. Can the minister give us a breakdown of how newcomer resident populations break down by segment for the coming year or what they are currently? I'll just list the segments for the temporary folks. That would be temporary foreign workers as defined by IRCC, international students, asylum seekers and protected persons awaiting decisions, and family members of permit holders as well as permanent immigrants. Of the aforementioned groups, can the minister give us a breakdown of what federal monies are received in support for each segment? I realize that's a lot of information to get, lots of data, so I am wondering if the minister can provide those answers in writing.

I'll go on to page 103 of the business plan. The UCP government wants to have more control over what kind of immigrants are welcomed. Now, we've heard repeatedly that it wishes to have only economic immigrants after proposing that Red Deer have a population of 1 million and that provincial nomination spots be doubled – as I mentioned previously, it was 2024 – to 20,000 and, of course, running a multimillion-dollar, five-year-long campaign, Alberta Is Calling, to bring more people to Alberta. My question around that is: can the minister tell us what criteria they will use to gauge whether someone who wants to move to Alberta is or isn't permitted?

Additionally, can this minister tell us what supports and programs this government has provided for newcomers who have landed within the last five years? Again, it would be great to have that information by segment. Does he have a dollar value by program and how it's distributed? I'd also like to know how much of the supports distributed by this government are actually delivered through federal transfers and how this would impact revenues received should those federal transfers cease to exist.

Also on the business plan, page 106, under key objective 2.2 the stated aim is to "enable the province to exercise greater control over economic immigration to Alberta." I would like the minister to define for us how that greater control is defined in this budget, as we're looking at a 2026 budget. If it's not in this ministry budget, where else would I be able to see the mechanism whereby Alberta exercises greater control over immigration? I'd like the minister to confirm for us today if admission of newcomers is still under federal jurisdiction and, if so, what mechanisms they would use.

Under key objective 2.3 the government states that it will "address gaps in Alberta's labour market through targeted economic immigration, recognition of international credentials and supports for the retention of international talent." Given recent legislative challenges on the recommendation from the credential advisory council, moved proudly by the Member for Edmonton-Decore, and given the higher than average unemployment rate for recent immigrants, how will the success of this particular measure be tracked?

On page 150 of estimates we can see that $14.5 million is being allocated to line 5.3, and it refers to newcomer integration. Last year we saw Bow Valley College end their language instruction for newcomers program. That's the LINC program. I'm sure everyone is aware that a long-standing institution, Bow Valley College, offering those services has now shut down its language program. It's left thousands of newcomers, who we know want to work and contribute, but the roadblock is really a lack of access to language instruction.

Can the minister tell us how much of line 5.3 includes English language supports for newcomers? If he wants to specify which groups of newcomers would be able to receive those language supports, that would be great. I'm wondering if there's any conversations with the federal government to bring back federal funding for these programs? And does any of the crossministry work also involve partnerships with education? As we know, that has been a growing concern as well.

I'm seeing that many immigrant-serving organizations do job training or partner with postsecondary institutions to retrain newcomers, and I'm wondering what steps this ministry is taking to fund some of those programs so that people can be better able to work.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

We'll now turn it back to the minister for his response.

Mr. Schow: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Member Tejada, for those questions. Again, it's right on message with what I'm hearing from constituents around Alberta who are interested in what we are doing in the immigration space here in the province.

I think it's important to start by laying the foundation of why we're doing what we're doing and taking the approach that we've decided to take. Alberta has a rapidly expanding labour market. The demands for labour are changing almost by the day. This is a result of the tremendous work that we've done as a government to attract investment and make Alberta a conducive climate to expand a business or to start something new, be it for Albertans or entrepreneurs, that we discussed in the last segment.

With that said, we're finding many instances where the demands that we have right now cannot be met by the existing workforce, be it students coming out of postsecondaries or those who are already in the workforce. As a result, we have to go out of province to find those workers. Now, the member referenced the Alberta Is Calling program, which saw success in attracting people from around Canada, but Alberta is always calling around the world looking for individuals who will come here and help build the economy.

Now, it's also important to note, Mr. Chair, that when it comes to immigration, it must be done correctly and in moderation. People like to think "all things in moderation," and I would say the same thing, particularly when it comes to immigration. The Premier has tasked me with my mandate letter to use all legal means possible to take control of Alberta's immigration system, understanding that over the last several years we have seen Alberta's population grow at an unprecedented, historic rate that matches really only some developing nations and countries not within North America.

One example that I've said a number of times is that in 2024 Alberta's population grew by 4.4 per cent. Now, for all of those people watching at home, that may not seem like a lot, but it is huge. The only other jurisdiction around the world that actually had anything similar to that was South Sudan, which was about 4.6 per cent. My understanding is that that was a result of the civil war in Sudan. Now, not to get too deep into geopolitics, but what I can say, Mr. Chair, is that that kind of rate of population growth puts tremendous pressure on social services, things like education, health care, having enough roads, making sure that we have enough houses for people to live in.

I mean, could you imagine, Mr. Chair, coming to Alberta, this land of opportunity, and not having a place to live? That would go from being the Alberta dream to a nightmare. Now, that is why we are looking at taking more control and what we would consider a Quebec style of immigration, as they have a unique relationship with the federal government that allows them to have more control over immigration.

The other thing that I would say is that we want to make sure that Albertans have the first crack at Alberta jobs. This has been referenced a number of times, Alberta's employment rate. As we see, unemployment is going down in this province, and I believe it is directly correlated – in fact, I know that it is directly correlated to the work we've done in incentivizing businesses to hire youth but also with us creating an environment where more jobs can be created. In fact, the jobs numbers just came out recently, that Alberta year over year has created 85,000 jobs, Mr. Chair.

7:50

I have heard – I won't name names – from some people in the Assembly that Alberta is not doing its part in creating jobs, but I can tell you that without Alberta, Canada would have lost 35,000 jobs, Mr. Chair, over the same amount of time. That is a substantial number. We're talking about the growth of the economy in the entire country, and Alberta is clearly – clearly – leading the way.

What steps we're taking to make sure that there are opportunities for youth: first, I would say, is the youth hiring incentive. This is a program that I'm very proud of, and I, first, would love to give credit and should give credit to my predecessor Matt Jones, who started the work on the youth hiring incentive, understanding that we needed to find a way to derisk hiring youth in the province as businesses look at their balance sheet and wonder: "Okay. How am I going to make payroll? Who can I hire? What opportunities do I have for youth?" They have succeeded in this province because of the climate that we've created, because of the work they've done, and it's important on all of us to help train the next phase, the next generation of workers.

As a government we have a role to play in derisking that training, so we created the youth hiring incentive, that allows businesses to off-set some of the payroll. But after 200 hours for an employee, that employee is able to receive a badge that will go on their LinkedIn profile or their resumé, that says the skills and the credentials that they have, what they bring to the workforce. That also tells future employers that this person has the work experience that they need.

Now, I've referenced this before myself, but I'll say it again for the committee. I think about my own first job. I took a job at a hardware store in the small town that I grew up in, and I took a job because I wanted to learn more about the tools my grandfather and I were using to do these woodworking projects. I just loved working with my grandfather. But what I really learned at that job, Mr. Chair, was how to show up on time, how to dress clean, how to do my hair, how to communicate with people. Those are the soft skills that the youth today, if they don't get that first employment opportunity, are missing out on. That is critical. That's why we brought in the youth hiring incentive. This is to fill in some of those labour gaps and give that first employment opportunity.

Now, the question was raised about Banff with regard to employees there. As someone who loves the mountains and goes out there as often as occasion will permit, I have often come in contact with employees from New Zealand and Australia and all over the rest of the world, and it's great to hear their stories but also understand that they do play a critical role in supporting the tourism sector in the employment sector. I can say that, you know, we are going to continue to make sure that we're supporting the tourism sector and the employees that are working there.

The question was asked specifically about population and the number of people who are already here gaining access through the Alberta advantage immigration program, and I'm happy to provide the committee with the number, that 90 per cent of nominations were issued to temporary foreign workers already living and contributing to Alberta's economy. Of those 6,090 residing in Alberta, 71 per cent were residing within Calgary and Edmonton, and 29 per cent were residing in rural communities outside of these areas. Understanding that, Mr. Chair, looking to fill the labour gaps through temporary foreign workers is a path to citizenship for them, but also it doesn't hurt having experience working in Canada and living here and setting up roots.

There was a question, though, about the 14,000, and I must emphasize that this is a projection. The federal government sets the provincial nominee numbers. This is, again, why we want more control over provincial immigration, because we know what Alberta wants. Regardless of whatever minister you talk to, we know in our own respective ministries what the demands are on the stakeholders that we serve and the Albertans writ large that we serve. In 2027 we would love to have, say, over 14,000 provincial nominees. We will wait and see how that plays out for us, but what I can say is that in 2026 we expect 6,403 nominations, and those nominations will be spread across multiple sectors, Mr. Chair.

Looking at some of the notes that I took here, also, you know, focusing on talent that is here, understanding that we also have a role in Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration to augment the work being done by other ministries. When I talk to stakeholders in Alberta, people ask: what does your ministry entail, and what are some of the things that you do? It's hard to put it into one sentence because if you draw a Venn diagram, I overlap with a number of my colleagues.

One, of course, is Advanced Education, the hon. Myles McDougall, who's doing a tremendous job working with our postsecondaries. They're collaborating with industry to better understand what they need, what industry needs, from postsecondary graduates when they get out of university or get out of college or a trade program. We're collaborating with these universities and Minister McDougall so that we can augment the work that they are doing, so that when someone graduates a program, they can jump right into the workforce and begin meaningful contributions immediately.

We're worried about that delta of what people have when they come out versus what they need, and we're trying to close that gap. We're getting there, but it's a constant struggle. As technology and demands evolve, we need to be staying on top of that, communicate with industry and postsecondary so they have the curriculum, they have the class spaces, they have the teachers. Then, ultimately, they're doing the recruiting for these programs to fill the spots, and then, when they graduate, contribute to the economy.

I know that my time now has expired.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to the Official Opposition with their final set of questions in this segment. Member Wright, do you want block time or shared time with the minister?

Ms Wright: Thank you, Chair. I would prefer block time.

The Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Ms Wright: Thank you very much. Through the chair to the minister, ensuring that every worker who heads to their job in the morning returns home safely at the end of the day must remain paramount. This, indeed, is one of the most essential responsibilities of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration. The commitment requires more than intent. It demands a strong, well-resourced, and well-supported occupational health and safety system.

OHS officers must have the training, tools, and capacity they need to carry out their duties effectively, including the ability to collaborate with law enforcement when circumstances require it. Regulations exist for a reason. They are prescriptive in design. Employers are required to follow them so that the precautionary principle is always front and centre in every workplace decision. The choices government makes must err on the side of workers, all Albertans. The bar must be set high because nothing is more important than the safety and well-being of the people who keep our province running.

Regarding the business plan, page 110, expenses: safe, fair and healthy workplaces, along with pages 107 and 108, related to outcome 3, "Albertans are healthy and safe at work and treated fairly in the workplace," along with key objectives 3.1 and 3.2, and performance metric 3(b), occupational health and safety, on January 13 of this year there was a workplace fatality at a Suncor oil sands site, and this unfortunately was followed by a second fatality on January 29 along with an additional worker who was left with serious injuries at a Cenovus work site; two deaths and one serious injury in the first month of 2026.

In 2023 165 Albertans didn't make it home at the end of the day. In 2024 that number had increased to 203 workers. Of course, workplace fatality rates for 2025 are still in the preliminary stage, but what we do know based upon previous years is that the majority of these deaths are as a result of occupational disease, trauma, and motor vehicle collisions. Regardless of that final number for last year, though, even one death is a death too many.

The January 2026 Alberta overview for 2024 notes that the number of fatalities is increasing, which is, Chair, a disturbing trend. Illness and injury are experiencing a downward trend, and we know the government education and health services sectors combined experience higher claim rates than the provincial average, along with sectors, of course, including construction. I see the number of inspections, re-inspections, and OHS orders have all increased, and that most of those inspections continue to be active, so I have a few questions along these lines.

Is there a plan to move to ensure most inspections are proactive rather than reactive, and since the number of FTEs noted on page 160 of the fiscal plan doesn't allow for any increase, are there currently enough OHS inspectors with appropriate training to allow for an increase in proactive inspections? If the minister could explain what steps the ministry might be taking to ensure vulnerable workers currently are protected and that workplace injuries continue to decline. I'm wondering as well, Chair: what work is ongoing with other ministries to lessen that number of fatalities alongside injuries and illness? I'm thinking primarily of the four new health ministries and education. As I just mentioned, those are both areas where we know workers sustain a high injury and illness rate, of course, alongside first responders.

8:00

Similarly, while I don't see it noted in the annual report this year, Chair, I'm wondering if tickets continued to be issued last year or if other mechanisms have taken the place of that issuance, particularly in the event of those on-the-spot noncompliance issues that inspectors might note as they're visiting a work site. If that's the case, how will this work going forward? Are there overall trends that inspectors might have noticed and that might inform OHS work plans for the oncoming budget year? If there are trends they've noticed, how will that impact any work that follows; for instance, in the number of presentations, work with new businesses, the plan for proactive versus reactive inspections?

Continuing on OHS, key objective 3.1, and that $81 million figure that was referenced earlier, Chair. Page 46 of the annual report notes that investigations were initiated for 721 reportable incidents, and they call it a considerable increase from 2023-24. I certainly appreciate that this is a number that is partially attributed to an increase in reporting requirements. Charges were laid in 18 cases, convictions resulted in some monetary fines, and creative sentencing was initiated 10 times. I'm wondering: what trends are ministry OHS staff noticing in terms of reportable incidents? Are there perhaps some specific sectors that might require more attention than in past years? Does this align at all with WCB injury and illness statistics?

Further, while I recognize that not every workplace fatality is caused by employer negligence, given those cases where there were charges laid, was there consideration given to applying the Westray law MOU that was established in 2017 in any of those cases? Are there plans, should a police investigation occur and a determination that criminal prosecution be necessary in the case of negligence or fatality, for the Westray law to be utilized at all during the current budget year or subsequent years? If not, under what circumstances might that occur? Is this perhaps a case of needing additional training for OHS investigators?

Chair, I'm still referencing page 107 of the business plan, outcome 3, key objectives 3.1 and 3.2. In September 2025 a fatality inquiry report with recommendations was released in the death of Deborah Onwu. Four recommendations came out of that report, which was forwarded to the Minister of Justice. Three recommendations are directly related to the work of this ministry and the protections afforded workers through occupational health and safety. As a result, those recommendations, if they are implemented, may impact the 2026-27 budget.

The first recommendation involved making it obligatory for agencies engaged in transferring care of at-risk youth and/or young adults to share critical information. The second recommendation would make it obligatory for employers in such cases to implement procedures that would ensure workers are made aware of a client's history and changes in behaviour related to violence and/or harassment. The fourth recommendation having to do with the work of this ministry involves exploring the viability of developing such comprehensive OHS standards specific to this particular sector, which I believe will be Children and Family Services. All of the recommendations suggested by the judge who was running that inquiry would involve amendments to current OHS legislation.

The OHS code continues to be reviewed through 2026. What I'm wondering, Chair, is: are there additional plans to add the recommendations from that fatality inquiry to that review perhaps and then to begin consultation and engagement? Has work begun to separately address the recommendations coming out of that fatality report? If not, would there be a plan to do so? If yes, which stakeholders have been consulted so far? What's the plan going forward? What role might industry, unions, nonprofits, folks like the Workers' Resource Centre, the Workers' Health Centre, post-secondary institutions, and others such as the Institute for Work & Health play in terms of evidence-based decision-making in the addressing of those three recommendations? Would this possibly be something that occupational health and safety specialized professional services might be able to address?

I note that in the '24-25 annual report it says that this division can support OHS program delivery with technical and subject-matter expertise, in particular the complex investigations and inspections. I also see that they can also provide support for legislation development. Could there potentially be additional dollars assigned to OHS inspectors or safety, specialized professional services and their work in the absence of any changes to at the very least allow for additional proactive inspections for this particular sector?

Finally – I know it's a lot of questions; I apologize. How much of that $81 million noted earlier is likely to be apportioned specifically to occupational health and safety initiatives, including any application of fatality inquiry recommendations?

For the last minute: this is related to employment standards since there is an allocation there as well for this particular ministry. The Employment Standards Code, of course, sets out minimum employment rules, and the work that departmental staff does on behalf of Albertans is paramount. Having had family members who have accessed the services, I very much – very much – appreciate their work. But I'm wondering about that portion, that metric of timely complaint resolution, which talks to the issue of a fair workplace. We know that officers work to resolve complaints in a timely manner. They focus on voluntary resolution, high-quality administrative, fair investigations.

I'm wondering, first of all, what performance measures are used to ensure this, to ensure what is fair and what is balanced, if it's sort of that 50-50 employer-employee or if it's maybe 70-30 kind of a thing, employee-employer, that sort of thing. I'm also wondering: would that be the sole metric utilized for employment standards work? Since we also know complaint volumes have increased, are staff thinking that this is a result of increased prevalence of issues combined with simply a greater awareness? [Ms Wright's speaking time expired]

Almost got it in.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

We'll now go back to the minister for the answers.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think it's important to start off by telling the member to never apologize for asking so many questions. These are important questions to her constituents, important questions to Albertans, and I would never stand in the way or criticize anyone for trying to do their job. You know, certainly, never apologize for that. A lot of great questions here, and I hope to get to some of them. I know I won't be able to get to all of them. If possible, I can try to provide information later on.

The line of questioning began with an important statement, which is that everybody wants to go to work in the morning or whenever they go to work and come home safe. That's our objective both, you know, if you're an employer or us here in the elected or the department side, ensuring that we have safe and healthy work environments here in the province. That is why, as noted, we have committed among occupational health and safety an increase from $57 million in 2025-26 to $62,000,633. Employment standards has gone up as well. It's an increase from $13,779,000 to $15,795,000, understanding that this money is specifically geared towards making sure that we have strong employment standards and occupational health and safety.

Now, there is a lot to go over here, and I will ask some of my department staff to step in in a moment, but I'll read through some of the things because you touched on some points. First is that from April 1, 2025, to January 31, 2026, we had 15,775 orders written, so this is an increase of 38 per cent compared to the same period in the previous year. In that time frame also there were 406 tickets written: 126 to employers, 48 to supervisors, and 232 to workers. This is an increase of 1,169 per cent compared to the same period in the previous year. Also, there were 150 administrative penalties issued. This is an increase of 295 per cent compared to the same year. Investigations were initiated for 658 reportable incidents, including traumatic incidents and fatalities, and this is an increase of 11 per cent when compared to the same period in the previous fiscal year.

I would also say that the prevention initiative developed in 2018-2019 clarifies priorities for the OH and S system based on evidence and consultation with all employers in the system, and the goal of the prevention initiative is to work with employers and workers to create a means to better identify areas that require provincial OHS attention among all stakeholders. The initiative focuses on three priorities: injury and disease, including musculoskeletal disorders due to repetitive use, overexertion, and heavy-lifting; slips, trips, and falls; and psychological hazards, including workplace violence, harassment, and mental health.

8:10

Additionally, other jurisdictions have requested information on the initiative, and interactions on programs, outreach, engagement, and collaboration have occurred and are planned as regular meetings to continue for the foreseeable future, with such meetings already occurring on a regular basis with WorkSafeBC, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and New Brunswick.

Also, as part of the prevention initiative outreach activities and the focus on small and medium businesses as a priority audience, a small-business summer student program was developed and ran from May to August 2025. Approximately 330 small businesses in Edmonton and Calgary's downtown cores were visited to deliver prevention initiative and other OH and S information resources and assess the awareness of Alberta's OHS requirements. Mr. Chair, nearly 80 per cent of those small businesses approached the participation in engagements. Nearly half of all workers who engaged with the students did not have awareness of basic OHS requirements, and nearly all of those engaged expressed concern about violence and harassment and hazards.

The injury and illness statistics in the identified priority areas are reviewed yearly and are analyzed to assess the impacts and effectiveness of the initiative. The prevention initiative annual report outlines the activities and outcomes of the previous year and is posted publicly.

I know that there are some other questions, particularly about the Westray and Onwu cases, and I'm going to turn that over to my department to go into detail on those matters.

Mr. McPherson: Thank you, Minister. Through you, Chair, as the member noted, with the Westray law those are decisions that are made by the police of the relevant jurisdiction, so that's a decision that they make.

On the Onwu public fatality inquiry: this was a tragic incident. A fatality inquiry report for the incident was released on September 18, 2025, and contained recommendations that, as the committee heard, relate to occupational health and safety standards. The department has received the fatality inquiry report, and its recommendations are under review to see if changes are needed to occupational health and safety legislation.

Our plan is to engage with key stakeholders such as employers, unions, health and safety associations, and other government departments in the coming months to understand the current industry practices, potential gaps in OHS standards, and explore options to address them. The recommendations made by the fatality inquiry raise complexities that are under the responsibility of other departments and government parties, which is why we need some additional time. We've committed to update the Justice department on our progress no later than September 30, 2026.

As members of the committee may know, Mr. Chair, the inquiry made four recommendations, three of which may involve OHS changes to legislation or standards. One of those would be to add provisions to the code to require agencies caring for at-risk youth or young adults to share information about a client's history or threatened or committed acts of violence with the next agency when the client is transferred. The receiving agency would then inform workers of the associated hazard.

Another one would be to kind of add provisions to the OHS legislation to require employers to implement procedures, ensuring workers are aware of a client's violence and harassment-related history and changes in behaviour. This includes implementing a mandatory client behaviour reporting system to share information on violent and threatening behaviour with workers as soon as practicable after an incident.

There was also a recommendation to explore the development of a sector-specific OHS standard through recognized standard-setting organization involving balanced representation from all stakeholders and to incorporate the standard into the OHS code with clear timelines for compliance.

You know, as I mentioned earlier, the Department of Justice had sent a memorandum to me, which was subsequently posted online, asking us to advise whether we accept in principle as a department or do not accept or have a different response to the recommendations and rationale. As noted, we need some time to do that kind of complex consultation. I will note, Mr. Chair, that the OHS code is something that we review regularly. Alberta's OHS code is evergreened. Usually we take bites, kind of three sections at a time, but this is certainly a priority for us to consider for the coming year. As mentioned, I think all involved recognize that this incident was a real tragedy, and we will be taking it very, very seriously.

I will also note, you know, that they're a kind of priority that the government and the minister have placed on OHS and employment standards over the last few years, which is why the budget has increased consistently, as have the number of staff assigned to the OHS part of the safer and healthy workplace division.

The Chair: Well, thank you. That concludes the first portion of questions for the Official Opposition.

We will now move to 20 minutes for the government caucus members and the minister. Member Wright, you're the first up. Would you like to share your time with the minister or block time?

Mr. Wright: You know, seeing as the minister wanted to go shared time with the last block, I'll do shared if the minister is open to it.

Mr. Schow: Why, of course.

Mr. Wright: Excellent.

Mr. Stephan: Sharing is caring.

Mr. Wright: Sharing is caring.

The Chair: Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and through you to the minister. Minister, we're going to talk about, you know, if you're looking from the outside in, arguably one of the more boring topics, but I think it's arguably the best topic in your ministry to talk about, and that's the concierge and pathfinder services.

Now, in my riding we've used or at least pointed investors down these pathways multiple times, and to quote my colleague from Red Deer-South, I think these programs are super duper and important. I'm extremely proud of how they've had an impact on my riding. Over the last two years I've been able to work with you and your predecessor to help developers down the road of construction to make investments, whether it's in aerospace, aviation, and defence or just the newly minted announced project for my riding, which will see a brand new oil and gas project come back to Medicine Hat, creating over a hundred full-time jobs and over 300 construction jobs producing 18,000 barrels per day of gasoline with Interprovincial Fuel Solutions.

Now, Minister, as mentioned on page 105 of your ministry's business plan, key objective 1.4 highlights the importance of connecting entrepreneurs and small businesses with the support they need to start, grow, and succeed. The plan notes that the concierge and pathfinder services help businesses navigate government process, access programs, and reduce red tape, all while supporting the valuable impact that they will bring to the Alberta economy.

Alberta continues to attract new investors and expand active roles in development across our key sectors. These services complement the broader suite of economic development and business support initiatives outlined under objective 1, helping ensure that Alberta remains a competitive and business-friendly environment. So, Minister, what type of businesses most frequently use these concierge and pathfinder services, and are there particular sectors that rely on them more frequently than others?

Mr. Schow: Thank you very much for the question, MLA Wright, through the chair to you. As a small-business owner yourself I know you know the importance of a government that works and sees you and understands the contributions that you make to the province. In fact, I know that small businesses make up the vast majority of business in this province and contribute significantly to our economy as job creators and wealth creators. My objective and our objective as a government should always be to create an environment where wealth and jobs can be created. Governments don't create wealth. We don't do that. We're not in the business of creating wealth; we're in the business of making that environment that is conducive to job creators like yourself.

To start off with, I think it's important to outline the differences between the concierge service and the pathfinder services. The concierge services support select large, transformational businesses with complex, crossministry needs and significant industry or policy or intergovernmental implications to ensure a coordinated, focused, and tailored approach to overcoming barriers to a positive final investment decision.

8:20

On the other hand, the pathfinding services is really sourcing investment-related information. It's facilitating connections to resources and contacts, helping navigate Alberta's investment attraction ecosystem efficiently and seamlessly, and, of course, redirecting investment-related inquiries and issues to other government ministries with sector expertise to serve them as required. It's this idea that we are here to help. We're here to make sure that businesses have the supports that they need, and where necessary we can remove barriers or work with them.

With the concierge service there are a couple of examples that I will note. Well, there are a lot, but I will note a couple off the top. One is Lufthansa Technik. It wasn't that long ago that I was in Calgary with, actually, a couple of my federal colleagues as well because this was such a big announcement. WestJet and Lufthansa Technik announced a partnership for an engine manufacturing and repair facility right in Calgary. For those who don't know, this was an enormous announcement for us because it continues to advance our interests in the aerospace sector, but it also puts Alberta on the map as a place that companies can send their engines for repair as opposed to having to send it down across the border into the U.S. I can say that we had very stiff competition when attracting this investment, but we were able to land this investment, and in doing so, we're creating jobs, very high-skill jobs. In fact, I toured the facility not long ago, and I think it's a huge win for our province.

When I toured this facility, it really put into perspective how important it is to again have the crossministry supports and crossministry navigation services to help these companies land these projects. Companies need to know, if they bring a project here like Lufthansa Technik: do we have the workforce? Do we have the workforce that's needed to augment what's being done on the ground, or do we have to find it somewhere else? Do we have the landscape? Do we have the facilities, the infrastructure? Not all companies know that, so we have a lot of tools in concierge services that help that along the way.

Another one would be CAE and WestJet as they are creating the centre for excellence. This is something that, again, I announced, and I credit a lot to my predecessor Matt Jones as well, who worked diligently on this. I was at the announcement, and it was a fantastic opportunity to show that Alberta continues to leverage itself and position itself well as a jurisdiction that is favourable for aviation and aerospace investment.

Now, to be specific, in September of 2025 we made this announcement with Mount Royal University that this is an Alberta training centre of excellence in aviation and aerospace at the Calgary International Airport. This is creating 25 permanent jobs and 189 temporary jobs but leveraging Alberta's international airport – and this is Alberta's $11 million investment – into over $400 million in activity over the course of 15 years. What's also important to note is that this is going to train more than 6,000 aviation professionals annually and strengthen our position as a global aerospace hub.

I know there's a lot to unpack from that. Some might say that I'm bragging, but, Mr. Chair, to the member and to all members and all those watching: this is a big deal. This is a huge win for the province, and it's one of many that you're going to continue to see Alberta attract to our land.

Mr. Wright: Well, thank you, Minister.

You kind of set me up for a great topic that I'm extremely passionate about, and that's investment in aerospace, aviation, and defence. In my riding of Cypress-Medicine Hat and in the Medicine Hat region we have a very large, long-standing industry of defence, with CFB Suffield being in our backyard, but it's really evolved over the last, you know, 10 years into an unmanned space with drone technology, whether it is new research and development for countersurveillance or whether it is in the landscape of environmental drones that are being used, that can capture more sustained atmospheric pressure data. It's super important that we are continuing to build out the defence industry development in Alberta, and I'm thankful to see the continued investment going on in Medicine Hat.

As Albertans, you know, we're proud to contribute to Canadian security and prosperity. With the federal government's recent announcement of defence industry strategy our province is uniquely positioned to step forward to help strengthen the nation's defence capabilities. Alberta's competitive tax environment, skilled workforce, engineering expertise, and strategic geography give us a natural advantage at a time when Canada is seeking stronger domestic capacity and greater industrial readiness. The 2026 to 2029 ministry business plan recognizes this opportunity under key objective 1.2. Minister, what has the government done so far to position Alberta as the destination for defence-related investments? We have been selected as part of NATO's operation DIANA, which gives research and development capabilities to the U of A and SAIT. How is this especially aligning with key objective 1.2, and then what steps will the ministry be taking in this fiscal year to grow Alberta's defence industry collaboration?

Mr. Schow: Well, thank you, through you, Mr. Chair, to the member, again for that fantastic question. I get very excited about defence, as I do about lots of other topics in this file.

I kind of want to tell a bit of a short story. I often think about one of my first jobs sitting at a desk. It was at an ad agency, and I started right at the bottom. It was kind of the time when digital ads were coming out, and I didn't get to touch any of them until one day my boss came to me and said, "Hey, I want you to design an ad for this developer, a land developer, on a lake." And I thought, "Right." I got right to it, and I designed this ad. It was this beautiful picture of a guy sitting on a dock and looking out on the lake with the sun glistening off the lake, and the headline was There's No Traffic on the Lake. I thought: "That's it. That's the one right there, my first shot at it. It's a great win." Took it to my boss, and he thought, "You know, not a bad try, but not the best execution." And he explained to me that in real estate advertising, which is what we're doing, they position market. They talk about spec of homes. They talk about amenities, lot sizes, types of homes, et cetera, so I went back and rewrote the ad.

The point of the story is – I reflect on that because I ask myself often: what is Alberta's position? Like, what is our position within Canada, what is our position within North America, and how do we compete against other people in the same sectors? How are we attracting?

When it comes to defence, I think we compete very well, particularly on place. We have an incredible landscape that is conducive to advancements and development in aerospace technology. You know, you look at what we have. For example, we have one of the largest military footprints in Canada. Through you, Mr. Chair, to MLA Wright, you would know this, being down in your neck of the woods. We have CFB Cold Lake, we have CFB Suffield, CFB Wainwright, CFB Edmonton and their associated training areas, weapons ranges, and live-fire testing sites. In fact, as someone who spent a little bit of time in Medicine Hat, where my parents live, I remember driving by, and sometimes you could hear them training off in the distance. It was not a quiet exercise by any stretch of the imagination.

The other thing I think we have when it comes to where we position ourselves is proximity to the central Arctic and the significant operational expertise supporting industry and infrastructure in remote and harsh northern conditions. You know, we are a gateway to the north, and the federal government -knows that, and they look at us very seriously as a place to park money as we continue to drive towards meeting our NATO commitments of 5 per cent. It's all the talk, and in fact the federal government just released their defence industrialization strategy, which includes hundreds of billions of dollars in money they plan to spend both in direct and infrastructure upgrading to augment our footprint. This will be the largest military industrialization since the Second World War, and for us that creates tremendous opportunity not just to build on Alberta but also to build a workforce and to expand and create new opportunities in places that we otherwise wouldn't have had them, places like Cold Lake, new opportunities for infrastructure and health care and education and so on and so forth.

The other thing I would say is that my department just set up an internal portion that is geared specifically towards defence. I'll turn it over to my deputy minister in just a moment, but what we're focused on is immediately leveraging the federal dollars in defence to bring them here because, as you can imagine, once someone has set up a facility, infrastructure here in Alberta, it's not going anywhere, right? This is not something that just is going to move, so if we can attract that investment and work with defence partners, more companies like CAE Montreal and, you know, convince them that Alberta is a place to do more business as they've already started, build on that success, we win. Albertans win, and then it attracts a whole new sector, something that the members of the NDP caucus talked about in terms of economic diversification. This is right up that alley.

I will turn it to my deputy minister to expand more on that department.

8:30

Mr. McPherson: Thank you, Minister. To build on that, we've identified several defence subsectors where we think that Alberta has a comparative advantage to other Canadian jurisdictions kind of based on our existing capabilities, potential for future growth, all of which are aligned with the recently released federal defence industrial strategy. These include remote-piloted systems and autonomous platforms; energetics, which is a fancy word for explosives and then the propellants and munitions casings that kind of go along with them; testing, evaluation, and trials. You know, to kind of riff on the minister's comments about space, we have plenty of it. Lots of other jurisdictions do not, so we're able to leverage that particularly on the testing and evaluation side and particularly in the air. Then, also, Arctic and North American Aerospace Defence Command's, or NORAD's, statement: Alberta is in many respects, across multiple industries, the gateway to the north. We've all heard a lot from the federal government about the priority that they're placing on creating defence hubs in the north, and our thesis is that Alberta is the perfect jumping-off point for that.

To pick up on the minister's reference to how the department operationally is approaching the defence question, he's quite correct. Within our economic strategy and investment group, which is the group that does our major industrial concierge, so the same people who helped bring you Dow, et cetera, et cetera, there's been a subunit of that group that has been created with internal resources to focus on defence. There are five of these individuals, one of whom will be based in Ontario because that's where the federal money is and to keep us in constant contact with fast-moving events there.

In order of priority we're looking, first, to land significant infrastructure upgrades on Alberta's four bases. There are actually, weirdly, five. I learned recently that there's a naval base in Calgary. I was wondering where the ocean was, but it's true; it's there. The second is to insert ourselves into ongoing major procurements. I think all members, Mr. Chair, will have read about the submarine procurement that is currently under way with Canada. You know, again, Alberta: it's not like we have coastline, but we do have opportunities from an advanced manufacturing perspective and supply chain perspective to insert ourselves into supply chains, the military supply chains, now and going forward.

The third thing, again, is kind of greenfield opportunities. So this gets back to things like energetics, aerospace, drones, otherwise known as unmanned flight, et cetera, et cetera. We believe that we have, as the minister said, an opportunity to secure for Alberta the lion's share or a lion's share of federal industrial spending on defence in the coming years.

Thank you.

Mr. Wright: Well, wonderful news on the defence side of things.

I'm going to transition gears here a little bit and quickly cover off the workforce integration services for newcomers, Minister. You know, Albertans know that settlement and immigration services and integration services are essential to helping newcomers enter Alberta's workforce quickly and effectively. Seeing that there are only two minutes left in this block, on page 108 of the '26-29 ministerial budget there's a $15 million allocation to support workforce integration. Are there small and rural community services which you'd like to highlight that are helping newcomers transition successfully into the workforce outside of our major centres, and what indicators or performance measures does your department use to evaluate whether these settlement and integration services are effectively helping newcomers?

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank the member for that question. Love talking about rural Alberta. I'm a rural Alberta guy, and as such I understand and emphasize often that rural Alberta always punches well above its weight and is a huge supporter of Alberta and Canada's economy.

Now, the department administers several newcomer integration grants that support services for newcomers in rural Alberta. One example of a highly successful rural initiative is the enhanced settlement and community services program. From '22 to '25 the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society supported 4,553 newcomers across Calgary, the Banff and Bow Valley, Brooks, and Newell county by connecting them to information, referrals, housing, employment resources, mental health supports, and community services. Mr. Chair, these efforts helped newcomers overcome the barriers, build stability, and integrate successfully despite challenges such as high living costs, which you see across the country – this is something that no one is immune to – limited rural service, and complex immigration and employment. I can tell you that newcomers finding a home in rural Alberta enriches those communities. These are communities that have been around for a very long time. They love to have new opportunities to learn about other cultures and integrate newcomers into those communities.

I think a huge applaud should be going to my department and the work they've done with the settlement services, helping newcomers integrate not just in the major city centres but also in the rural parts of the province.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

That concludes the government members' first block. We will now take a five-minute break and then come back with the NDP caucus.

[The committee adjourned from 8:37 p.m. to 8:42 p.m.]

The Chair: Hello, everyone. We will now move to the second round of questions and responses. The caucus rotation going forward will be the same as the first round, starting with the Official Opposition followed by members of the government caucus; however, the speaking times are now reduced to five minutes for the duration of the meeting.

We will begin the rotation with members of the Official Opposition, who will have up to five minutes for questions and comments, followed by a response from the minister, who may speak up to five minutes. After both individuals have had an opportunity to speak once, we will then move to the next caucus in the rotation.

If the member and the minister agree to share time, we will proceed with a 10-minute segment, during which neither the member nor the minister may speak for more than five minutes at a time. Members are reminded that they may not share any unused portion of their five minutes with another member.

Member and Minister, do you wish to share your time? Member Hoyle.

Member Hoyle: I was just going to do block, please.

The Chair: Block time.

Mr. Schow: I'll leave it up to the discretion of the member asking the question, so block time it is.

The Chair: Okay.

Go ahead, Member Hoyle.

Member Hoyle: Thank you. The minister spoke earlier about the importance of antiracism work. We know that people who already face barriers to economic participation are often hit first and hardest, especially when it comes to affordability and job stability. The following questions that I'll be asking, I believe apply broadly to many underrepresented groups; however, I'll be focusing on one particular group as the section I'm about to reference of the business plan specifically references them alone.

On page 104 of the business plan under multicultural communities contribute to Alberta's prosperity it notes that the Alberta Anti-Racism Advisory Council "works to remove barriers and prevent racism, and the Alberta Black Advisory Council . . . addresses systemic challenges faced by Black Albertans." Through the chair, Minister, can you share what specific key performance indicators is the ministry using to measure whether those systemic barriers are being reduced and removed and where in Budget 2026 those KPIs are reported, especially since both of these councils have been around for quite a few years, since both 2023 and 2024? Given that the ministry states that it's addressing systemic challenges faced by Black Albertans, can the minister provide baseline data showing the current employment, wage, and business ownership gaps for Black Albertans in Alberta and explain what targets the ministry has set to close those gaps? If no targets exist, how will the ministry measure that success?

Given that Budget 2026 contains KPIs for labour force participation, trade growth, and economic development, through the chair: why does the ministry not include race-based economic indicators to measure whether Black Albertans are benefiting equally from economic growth in Alberta?

On page 90 of the fiscal plan, this budget sees a decrease in $38 million in expenses and $10 million of which can be attributed to the end of the Alberta Is Calling program that the government has run since 2022. The government initially launched this program to help reduce the labour shortage in the province. We continue to struggle with a labour shortage. Through the chair, can the minister tell us which industries saw the most job uptake because of the Alberta Is Calling program? How many people received the Alberta Is Calling bonus? How much did the government spend in total since the beginning of the program in 2022, both in advertising and on bonuses?

On page 105 of the business plan it notes a focus to increase trade, support businesses' ability to access new markets, and attract job-creating private investment. Alberta businesses want stability, investment, and a government focused on economic growth. The Edmonton Chamber's CEO states that Alberta does not need to leave Canada; Alberta needs to lead Canada by creating jobs, attracting investments, and building long-term prosperity. Both Alberta and Calgary chambers are hearing the same messages, where business leaders are saying they may delay expansion or reconsider investing in Alberta altogether because they do not know where this conversation may go. When businesses pause investment, jobs pause with them, and the shift in investor confidence could put, you know, the effectiveness of JETI investments at risk.

Through the chair, can the minister explain how the ministry will reconcile the government's spending on investment attraction with growing concerns from Alberta businesses of the ongoing pressures that are discouraging companies from expanding or potentially investing in Alberta? Is there a concrete strategy to protect investor confidence and business certainty?

On page 105 of the business plan, outcome 1 states that the ministry works with partners to drive economic growth, support Alberta job creators, and spur Alberta's economic competitiveness and productivity. However, since 2019 when this government came into power seven years ago, Alberta's had one of the slowest real wage growth nationally. Average hourly wages in Alberta only grew 2.5 per cent in 2025 compared to the national average of 3.6 per cent, and year over year Albertans paid 2 per cent more in January '26 for goods and services than in the same month a year ago.

Alberta's wage advantage is severely behind, and we're seeing the impacts of this because of wage growth impacting buying power. Through the chair, how is the ministry addressing long-term labour market challenges if Alberta wages are not competitive nationally or internationally, and what specific measures are being taken? Minister, what is the plan to ensure Alberta is a competitive place where workers choose to come and stay long term?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
To the minister for his answers.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Chair and to the member for those questions. Some really great stuff in there, and I hope to touch on as much as I can.

I think it's important to start off by saying that racism has no place in our society or any society for that matter. Discrimination of any kind is completely unacceptable, and there's always work to be done to ensure that we're a more welcoming province for newcomers or for those who are here but also making sure that we are removing barriers for all people to create and foster a thriving economy, where people feel comfortable setting up businesses; they don't feel like they've been targeted.

We've heard recent times, Mr. Chair – and I'll digress briefly, but we've seen recent times of discrimination against certain groups, particularly the Jewish community in Alberta. They have been targeted unnecessarily and mercilessly in many instances. Times where synagogues are being shot and members of the Jewish community are being targeted and harassed. That is unacceptable, and I call on all Albertans to refrain from any form of discrimination because it is unwelcome in this province, and I condemn it in all forms.

We're talking about trade growth and the opportunities that we have, Mr. Chair. There are a couple of programs that we offer that help us develop and expand our opportunities and show to trading partners that we're open for business. One would be the investment and growth fund. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we have $27 billion – or million, rather. Twenty-seven billion would be something else, I'll tell you what. What we could do with that kind of money. But $27 million will be used to help finalize and close deals with large companies and help others expand in the market here. We've seen great success with those, including things like De Havilland here in Alberta.

8:50

Now, I know MLA de Jonge would love to talk about this and maybe have some comments, but when we talk about De Havilland, this is a water bomber manufacturing facility happening in Wheatland county. That member, Member de Jonge, was instrumental in helping the government create relationships and make this happen. I want to give that member a lot of credit. What's happening in this facility is that they're going to build water bombers that can be sold around the world. The recent announcement is that we bought five ourselves. De Havilland has been a fantastic airplane manufacturer for years, and their water bombers are being used around the world for decades.

Also, CGC is opening up a new facility, a 220,000 square foot wallboard manufacturing facility in Wheatland county. This is another example of the investment attraction that we put forward through the investment and growth fund.

As I go through my notes here, forgive me as I fumble through all these things, but I want to get to as much as I can.

Uncertain times in business. I noted this earlier, but Alberta has seen difficult times in the past, and I would say that businesses that aren't run super well tend to fail in the face of adversity. Good businesses can survive through the difficult times and make it through, and great businesses thrive. History is replete with examples of fantastic businesses that were started in difficult circumstances but are now multinational companies. As a result of that, they are the ones who are able to continue to hire and expand and create employment opportunities, so as we talk about wage growth, as a government our job is to create the environment where jobs can be created and wages will be dictated by the free market. That is such an important point to make to all members of the Assembly and all members of this committee and the millions of people watching at home.

We understand that for us to play a role in the market, it's to get out of the way of businesses so they can thrive. That's why we have created the ministry of red tape reduction. Since its inception in 2019, we heard criticism from a number of members of the Assembly and the opposition benches about how this was a gimmick. Mr. Chair, the red tape reduction ministry, since 2019, has saved Albertans and Alberta businesses $3 billion. That is real money being reinvested into their companies, either into wages or into expansion or finding new markets. I'm very proud of the work this government has done to remove barriers and effectively get out of the way so businesses can do what they do best, which is create employment opportunities and support families. You know, it's just a small point and a much larger one that Alberta is leading the way when it comes to economic growth.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
We'll now go to the government caucus with Member de Jonge. Would you like to share your time with the minister?

Ms de Jonge: Minister, I'm good with shared or block, so your choice.

Mr. Schow: We can do shared time.

Ms de Jonge: Lovely. Well, I'm going to carry on with something that my colleague from Cypress-Medicine Hat was talking about, and that was the defence industry and just carrying on with that theme. Just referencing page 105 of the business plan, key objective 1.2. It's made very clear there that Alberta is working with partners to maximize investments, and that's both from the government of Canada and the private sector in defence-related infrastructure and the defence industry. That commitment – and, you know, you were just building on this in your previous answer – aligns well with the significant aviation and aerospace activity that we've seen across the province. We've been attracting major investments in areas such as pilot training, aircraft engine servicing, advanced manufacturing and maintenance facilities. These developments support the defence sector but also really position our province as this emerging hub in a very rapidly expanding global aviation industry. I think those investments really do complement Alberta's competitive strengths: our skilled workforce, our strong training institutions, our competitive tax environment, and our very strategic position geographically.

Minister, my question is how much funding has the provincial government provided to aviation-related investments to date, and how much private-sector investment has that support helped attract into Alberta's aviation and aerospace sector?

Mr. Schow: Thank you, through you, Mr. Chair, to Member de Jonge. Thank you for that question. I maybe prematurely gave you all that credit; because this is another great time to talk about all the work you've done in the aviation and aerospace sector and how you've been a tremendous champion for the people of your constituency. They're very lucky to have you.

The government has put nearly $11 million to drive over $400 million, Mr. Chair, of long-term activity and create 25 permanent jobs, another 189 temporary jobs, and train more than 6,000 aviation professionals annually at the Alberta training centre of excellence for aviation and aerospace that I talked about earlier at Calgary International Airport, which was announced by CAE and WestJet not that long ago.

This nearly $11 million investment includes over $3.7 million through the investment and growth fund to support CAE's job creation investment, and of course, there's $850,000 for the aerospace workforce development grant, which is designed to provide training and employment supports to ensure CAE has the skilled workers and the needs to support the centre of excellence. Furthermore, we have another $6 million for the aerospace innovation grant to ensure that, through Mount Royal University's partnership with CAE and WestJet, Alberta students can access the centre of excellence and build the skills they need for in-demand occupations in the aviation sector. If you drive just west of Calgary, kind of by the Springbank Airport, you can see very clearly labelled on the side of the airplane hangar, the MRU aviation facility there. It's quite spectacular.

What's important to note here, Mr. Chair, is that this continues to build on the position Alberta has. Now, I talked about where we position ourselves among other jurisdictions, and one of those is the land. It's the land we have. Right now, sitting in this room, you can get to the borders of our city here in Edmonton in some of the most difficult times within 45 minutes. Same thing within Calgary. You're in downtown Calgary and you can get to the border of the city of Calgary in, you know, 45 minutes tops. That speaks to how we developed our cities, but also how easy it is to navigate that.

Compare and contrast that with one of the other major cities around the country, and I won't name names. We'll just suffice it to say that they have an absolutely dreadful hockey team. To get from downtown to the borders of those cities, you're looking at two hours. In fact, the Ontario Road Builders Association released a report in 2024, and it said that the province of Ontario loses nearly $54 billion just in traffic delays. You look at Alberta and the way we positioned ourselves: the land. This land is perfect for innovation and advancements in aerospace. It's why companies like De Havilland, CAE, and Lufthansa Technik are picking us for places to set up their investment.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Minister. You know, I've got a question on long-term economic impacts, but now that you mentioned De Havilland and Lufthansa, I would love to chat a bit more about that. We're very excited in the constituency of Chestermere-Strathmore to be host to the De Havilland field and to see the water bombers that are being built to fight wildfires all across the world, but also right here at home, built in Wheatland county. We're very proud of that and thankful to the government, and to yourselves in particular, for all the great work there and the work that's going to continue.

You talked a bit about Lufthansa earlier and how, you know, there's great competition in attracting that investment to Alberta. I'm wondering what factors motivated global aviation companies such as De Havilland and Lufthansa to choose Alberta for these major investments and how those decisions reflect Alberta's strengths in the aviation and aerospace sector?

Mr. Schow: Well, great question, and there is so much to go over discussing that position. I talked about the land, but another piece is that we compete on price, right? I know that it's probably counter to some businesses – you don't compete on price; you compete on service, which we also do – but we do compete on price. We're a low-tax jurisdiction, and if I put myself in the shoes of a company like De Havilland, I would say that if I'm looking to expand operations and I need to have a facility that's going to be staffed and manned by skilled workers and however many there are, those workers have to want to come to Alberta. They have to want to come to that area where the facility is. Again, not to name names but, you know, there are other places that people may not want to work in across the country.

9:00

I know that when I played basketball in university, there were some cities, you know, I preferred to visit over others. Looking at Alberta, one is that we have a very low tax jurisdiction. The second is that we actively remove barriers. I talked about the ministry of red tape reduction and the work they've done, and credit to all the ministers of red tape reduction since 2019 and how they've saved billions of dollars for Alberta businesses, understanding that if we're engaging with businesses, proactively learning how we can better support them without having to create more boutique tax cuts or tax credits or what have you but compete on regulation, we can win. Those are making real, measurable differences here in the province.

Targeted government programs in addition to the red tape cuts and the tax cuts we have, investments like the investment growth fund, the Alberta petrochemicals incentive program, or APIP as it's more commonly known, and the workforce development grants: they help derisk major capital investments, and in these uncertain economic times businesses are looking for as much stability as they can find in an unstable world. We're providing that here in Alberta, and that's why they look at us as a place that they think: hey, if I'm going to expand, if I'm going to park my money somewhere, where's the safest place to do it? Alberta is the obvious answer.

Ms de Jonge: It certainly is. Just combining two last questions here with the time we've got left. First, Minister, through the chair: what are the long-term economic impacts that the government is anticipating if the aviation and aerospace sector continue to expand, in particular to job creation, skills development, and supply chain growth? Lastly, how, through the chair, does your ministry's work under key objective 1.2 ensure that the aviation and aerospace growth continue to support Alberta's broader defence sector goals and our long-term economic diversification?

Mr. Schow: Thank you for the question. Simply put, the long-term impacts of the work we're doing is going to be jobs and economic growth. That ends up being more revenue generated through taxation in the province. That means more money for things like schools and building more schools, in addition to the billions of dollars we're investing right now and the number of schools we're already building in the province. That also means being able to bring more doctors into the province. That means being able to hire more nurses and support our health care workers, those heroes on the front lines.

What I'd also say is that, you know, it's going to create more jobs with high salaries. You look at aerospace engineers. They earn an average salary of $93,000 to $121,000 a year in Alberta. You look at the number of jobs created: again, 6,000 trained every year at CE, centre of excellence. You know, I visited the De Havilland manufacturing plant in Calgary that's ultimately going to be moving to Wheatland county and saw the calibre of workers there. These are happy people because what makes them happy is the job security they have, going home at night feeling that they're secure in the work they have, looking their families in the eye and saying: "I'm going to continue to put food on this table. We're going to continue to pay our mortgage and our bills because we have stable work here in Alberta, and there will be lots of stable work for years and years to come."

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We'll now go back to the Official Opposition.

Member Tejada, would you like to share your time with the minister?

Member Tejada: I prefer block. Thanks.

The Chair: Block time it is.

Member, go ahead.

Member Tejada: All right. Thank you so much. I just wanted to circle back on a question that I don't believe I received an answer to, and that was the credential advisory council and the removal of a Canadian work experience requirement. How will the ministry measure the success, and will they take other recommendations from the council and if so, which ones?

Also, I wanted to circle back on language supports. We know we lost federal funding. I would like to get the answer from the minister if line 5.3 includes language supports for newcomers. That is critical for their success and ability to get jobs. The other question was around the feds and what conversations this ministry has engaged with the federal government on for that.

Just around antiracism, I'd like us to consider adding a metric to the business plan. It was one that existed in the previous budget, and that was around reports of discrimination and hate crimes. We know that the Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies released a document outlining safety concerns. I did table that if the minister would like to review it. In terms of retention we've talked a lot about economic immigration, and we have page 91 of the fiscal plan, $16 million for economic immigration programs. I would like the minister to specify what those programs are, how they're being allotted. I know that one of the members opposite asked about programming available in rural places. If we could get a breakdown of what that looks like across the province, that would be great, and also what targeted industries will be supported with these programs.

Performance metric 4(b) on page 109 of the business plan refers to an average five-year immigrant retention rate, but strangely only shows the years between 2014 and 2018. I understand that the data reflects the percentage of immigrants who continue to live and work in Alberta five years since they landed, and I would like to know why there is not a number for 2019 and 2020, and I would like to know what the retention average was for those years given that we're actually starting to hear that retention is falling. We know from the Institute of Canadian Citizenship that high-skilled immigrants are leaving at twice the rate of low-skilled workers, and if this government has endeavoured to attract more of the economic migrants, I would like to know what they are doing to retain that portion of the population.

I was actually going to go back to ASIP, so outcome 4: just asking a few questions here about the numbers remaining fairly flat. I know we've talked a lot about a spike in population. We know that happened in '23 and '24. The numbers around ASIP have remained fairly flat, and I'd like to understand where that 16,000 is coming from. Are they getting referrals from IRCC? How does that work?

In terms of the grants, we know that we have antiracism grants and ethnocultural communities. Previously we had seen that these were two different sets of grants, so we had ethnocultural community grants and we had antiracism grants. I'm wondering if those have now been combined. They were to address racism in the past but also other ethnocultural events and activities and to highlight pluralism and inclusivity. My question around that is: it's $2.5 million worth of grants. Have they been combined, and what metrics are being used to gauge the progress or success of that funding?

I had asked previously as well and have not gotten an answer on immigrant-serving organizations who do job training and how much of the retraining budget is going to the immigrant-serving organizations.

The minister also mentioned youth employment programs. I'm particularly interested in that as the mother of a youth. How is that being measured? While I appreciate the use of badges and any efforts that are put into youth employment, I'm wondering if there's ever going to be any progress made on the tiered minimum wage for youth, because I think that is increasingly important, and if the government has considered reinstating anything like the STEP program to promote youth employment.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Off to the minister for his answers.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I appreciate those questions. All very important issues, and I certainly appreciate the member's concern. As a parent myself with three kids, and one who will probably be entering the workforce in the coming years, I understand the importance of having those supports and the pressures that can come with being a young Albertan and trying to find a job, but I'll get to that in a moment.

What I would say is, going to the beginning when we talked about supports and settlement services: it is unfortunate to report that the federal government has announced significant reductions to its newcomer integration funding to settlement organizations across the country. This is a problem that all of us are dealing with, but I would suggest that Alberta is being disproportionately affected. Of the $401 million, the Canada-wide cuts over the next three years, Alberta's portion of that is $88.6 million, or 22.1 per cent. You know, not to put too fine a point on that.

9:10

In February of '26 the federal government announced the new settlement funding allocations to the provinces and territories, and previous federal government spending indicated that over the next three years – '26-27, '27-28, '28-29 – that $3 billion would be allocated to some organizations across the country. Of that amount $456 million was allocated to Alberta, or 15.1 per cent. The new settlement allocation for newcomers is $2.6 billion over the next three years and, of this, $370 million is allocated to Alberta.

Mr. Chair, you can see that, despite Alberta actually showing the fastest growth rates in the country and the need for settlement services and supports with the federal government, who ultimately make the decisions of who comes into the country and who does not, one could say that we're not getting a fair deal. That's putting it delicately.

What I also say, though, is that we do continue to engage with the federal government and my federal counterparts. Regularly we meet at the federal-provincial-territorial meetings, or FPTs, as we call them. I have a number of them as the JETI minister, a lot of tables that we sit at to discuss everything from immigration to labour to mutual recognition and so on and so forth. The point I continue to make about those tables is that if Alberta is going to continue to pay the rest of the country's bills and if we're going to continue to be the economic driver of Canada, we need to get more attention from the federal government when it comes to services, when it comes to supports. This is part of the fair deal, and I applaud the Premier as often as I can for her work with the new Prime Minister, Mark Carney, to get the attention that we think is needed.

Now, with the issue of attracting employment here into Alberta, we have what I think is an important piece, the Fair Registration Practices Act. Once that's in force, the amendments that we've made will prohibit regulatory bodies from requiring Canadian work experience as a condition of registration. It will require them to publicly share any work experience criteria used to assess candidates and provide regulation-making authority to set timelines for registration decisions. Together these measures enhance procedural fairness and support more timely registration outcomes for internationally trained applicants. In short, what this is doing is creating a more fair and transparent process for newcomers so they can better understand the job climate and the process climate they're walking into. That's all people are really asking for is a more consistent plan.

Lastly, with regard to minimum wage, we will continue to consult with businesses about this; but in these times that are uncertain, as you've addressed already in this committee on multiple occasions, I don't think it would be prudent for us to put on an increase in minimum wage to the degree or the proportion that the opposition party did when they were in government. It took businesses off guard. They were not prepared for that, and they were forced to make some significant, impactful business decisions based on what their bottom line would look like. A lot of businesses actually had to release employees because they couldn't continue to afford the wages. It requires continual communication with the business community, something we do on a regular basis.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go back to the government caucus with Member Bouchard. Would you like to combine your time with the minister, share your time, or . . .

Mr. Bouchard: I'd love to share my time with the minister.

Mr. Schow: I would love that myself. There's a lot of love in here.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead, Member Bouchard.

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thanks, Minister. It's an exciting time to be in Alberta, I think. One of the things that excites me is the topic of small business. On page 105 of the ministry's business plan, key objective 1.4 highlights the essential role that entrepreneurs and small businesses play in Alberta's economic success. Small businesses make up over 95 per cent of Alberta companies and employ one-third of the private-sector workforce, making them central to job creation, community vitality, and long-term economic growth. With Alberta attracting increasing investment across key sectors, the ministry's commitment to connecting entrepreneurs with resources, reducing red tape, and supporting business development is more important than ever to ensuring that small businesses can start, grow, and thrive in a competitive environment.

To the minister through the chair, what programs in this budget specifically support small businesses and entrepreneurs, particularly those aimed at helping them start, scale, and access the resources identified under key objective 1.4?

Mr. Schow: Through you, Mr. Chair, I want to thank the member for the question. I also know the member's background includes being a small-business owner. You know, on a smaller scale I myself was a small-business owner, and I know the pressures that come with being a small-business owner. Looking at your balance sheet, looking at your schedule, wondering: are my employees going to come to work tomorrow? Am I going to be able to make payroll? Am I going to be able to cover my costs? That is real pressure. That is real pressure that countless Albertans deal with on a daily basis. It goes back to the conversation that we had a bit earlier in this committee about consistency and predictability in the business environment. That is what we strive to create for businesses every day. To that member who was, you know, a small-business owner prior to coming here: I applaud that member for having the guts to put himself out there and create wealth and jobs for this province.

Mr. Chair, the programs we offer are – you know, Biz Connect is a pathfinding service. It provides support to Alberta small businesses and entrepreneurs, and it generally helps them grow, helps them expand, and look for new ways to export their products and diversify. It also serves as a direct line of communication between small businesses and entrepreneurs and the department, helping small businesses navigate services and programs available through over 300 small-business organizations.

One of the programs I'm very – well, I'm proud of all of them that we have because they're making a real difference, but there's one in particular that I would like to highlight. It's the Alberta export expansion program. I recently met with a number of chambers of commerce who were visiting the Legislature. One of them approached me, and they said: you know, I came with you on one of the trade missions, and I was so impressed with the service and the support I received from your department but also how much information there was available and connections that were available for me on the ground. What this program does is that it helps cover the cost for these businesses going out into new markets looking to expand their trade relationships. Again, this is derisking the relationship-making process. There are so many small businesses around Alberta that don't know about these programs, so it's incumbent upon me and my department to continue to spread the word.

We also work with chambers of commerce and we work with other onboarding partners to discuss the concierge services that we offer in the Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration ministry. Through the AEEP, or Alberta export expansion program, we've helped a number of businesses find business partners, trading partners in new markets they never would have thought possible. These are the kinds of supports that we offer small and medium and large-sized businesses as they look to expand their footprint within Alberta but also around the world. It's a big W.

Mr. Bouchard: Thanks, Minister.

With global tariffs and ongoing economic uncertainty creating pressures for business owners, small-business owners, of course, does this budget include measures designed to help Alberta's small businesses remain competitive and resilient?

Mr. Schow: Sorry. Can the member repeat the last part of that question?

Mr. Bouchard: Yeah. Are there measures in this budget designed to help Alberta's small businesses remain competitive and resilient?

Mr. Schow: Absolutely. You know, we continue to be one of the lowest tax jurisdictions in the country. We have no provincial sales tax, payroll tax. Alberta also continues to support small businesses, particularly through periods of economic uncertainty, by maintaining this low-tax environment. I know that we have heard from members of the Legislature saying: what are you doing for small businesses? What are you doing to help support them through these difficult times? What we are doing is maintaining a competitive tax regime in the province, letting them know that we are not going to increase their corporate taxes by, you know, 20 or 40 per cent as a result of the economic uncertainty. Alberta's small-business tax rate is even lower, 2 per cent on the first $500,000 for small businesses. That makes a real difference for those businesses, understanding that if you're just getting started in the market and you're taking that risk that I had mentioned the member has done himself, we're not going to go and try to ding you hard on your tax bill because you're just trying to get your feet off the ground, trying to establish yourself, maybe expand a little bit, have a good time.

Then, of course, Mr. Speaker, you know, we're also continuing to work with businesses and other industry partners to ensure the business climate supports grow in the future, so always connecting with businesses, talking to them about what are some of the barriers they're facing and how we can remove those barriers or make life easier for them. I know there's a lot more to say on this, and I'm sure the member has other questions, but Alberta is here for small businesses. We understand who creates the wealth and opportunity in this province, and most importantly we understand on the government benches that the tax dollars that small businesses pay pay our salaries. We are their employees. We work for them, and it is our responsibility to be receptive to their feedback and make changes where possible.

9:20

Mr. Bouchard: Excellent. Thank you, Minister.

On page 107 of the ministry's 2026 to 2029 business plan performance measure 2(b) highlights the number of nomination certificates issued through the Alberta advantage immigration program, AAIP. It notes that Alberta issued 6,741 nominations in 2025, demonstrating the essential role that economic immigration plays in meeting Alberta's labour market needs. In recent weeks government has emphasized the need for a stronger focus on economic migration, particularly as many communities, including smaller and rural ones, rely on AAIP streams such as rural renewal to address persistent labour shortages. However, Alberta has faced challenges due to reduced provincial nominee allocations from the federal government, which directly limits the number of workers Alberta can bring in to support local employers, community sustainability, and economic growth. Minister, through the chair, how does the number of AAIP nominees Alberta receives compare to the allocations provided to other provinces and territories across the country?

Mr. Schow: Mr. Chair, I'll be quick here as my time is limited. Historically Alberta's provincial nominee program allocations tend to be higher than other provinces and territories but lower than the largest provinces such as Ontario. Quebec is the only province that can make decisions on the levels of immigration they want to receive each year based on their labour market needs. That part of the Quebec piece is what we are trying to achieve here in Alberta. Understanding that in 2025 we have 6,741 nominees, we would like to have more control over those nominees and more allocations because we will set the kind of labour market or the kind of segments that we need to be fulfilled within those nominees.

At a very high level Alberta wants to attract economic migrants who will help build the economy. Our target number is 65 per cent, but if I want to take it up to, you know, 100,000 feet, figuratively speaking, we want producers. Like, there is no nation, there is no subnational jurisdiction, there is no business on the planet that ever thrived or got rich or did well or even survived as being a consumer. You must be a producer. Alberta has been a net producer for decades, and we will continue to be a net producer within Confederation because we understand that, again, the point I made before, Alberta pays Canada's bills. That is why we want more control over provincial immigration, because we know the producers that we need to attract here to keep Alberta as the most desirable jurisdiction in which to live and to work. At a high level it's about bringing in producers. That's who we want.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go back to the Official Opposition. Member Wright, would you like to share your time with the minister or block time?

Ms Wright: Block time, please. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Block time. Go ahead, Member.

Ms Wright: Thank you very much, Chair. Through you to the minister. I'm going to back up again and go back to kind of where I left off in employment standards: outcome 3, page 107 of the business plan, key objective 3.2, that idea that the Employment Standards Code sets out the minimum employment rules that apply to most workplaces in Alberta. They are designed to protect employees and promote fair treatment in the workplace, and of course they apply to the majority of employers and employees in the province. The standards that they deal with could include a minimum wage, overtime, vacation pay, general holiday pay.

Specifically in terms of the timely complaint resolution, which I noted was on page 48 of the annual report, it speaks to that issue of a fair workplace. That report tells us that "officers work to resolve complaints in a timely manner focusing on voluntary resolution through high-quality, administratively fair investigations." The annual report also notes that "complex investigations," Chair, "require additional time and resources" but that through it all "officers must ensure in all cases that investigations are thorough, of high quality and fair to all parties." A couple of questions here. I'm wondering what performance measures will be used to ensure this. Again, what's the balance between employee and employer?

Page 48 of that annual report included a chart based upon timely complaint resolutions, and I'm wondering if that is indeed the sole metric utilized for employment standards work. If indeed it is, is there any way at all to measure what high-quality administrative, fair investigations might be sort of in a more qualitative manner? We know that complaint volumes have increased year over year, so obviously something is happening on Alberta job sites with that increase in complaint volume. I'm wondering if employment standards staff are thinking it's a result of the increased prevalence of issues combined with a greater awareness of the complaint process. I'm wondering if there have been any surveys, engagement sessions, or consultations with staff to derive data on this particular topic.

Last year 5,008 complaints were received. Given this uptick in complaints received and changes made to completion of a complaint from start to finish, I'm wondering: is it possible that there might be almost a bit of an overfocus on timeline over complexity or individuality of a complaint? I note operational efficiencies is mentioned as one reason, Chair. I'm hoping that the minister could explain what's meant by that in terms of service to employees who are making those complaints.

We've been speaking to some external organizations, and they are noticing a trend of encouraging folks to accept lower amounts than they might otherwise be eligible for concerning issues, things like termination pay, for example. I'm wondering if this is occurring. Again, I cannot state enough that I do know, of course, that all the folks in the department work as hard as they can in service to Albertans, but could this perhaps be an unintended consequence of a focus on completion within specific timelines?

There was a marked decrease in the number of complaint-related inspections last year, 117 as compared to 311 in the year previous, and in the annual report it stated that "this . . . is representative of a program delivery focus on reactive complaint volume and not proactive inspection work, which has resulted in decreasing file inventory levels." I'm hoping the minister can really clarify for me what that means because it does seem as if there's been a bit of a change in approach there.

Moving on to the time I have left, still on outcome 3, page 107, of the business plan, but I'm moving the subject now to suspected human trafficking. We know that there are issues throughout the province both with those who might be temporary foreign workers as well as those who find themselves to be undocumented. They are working and living often in very unsafe conditions. They're working for folks who are involved in these illegal and unethical employment practices. I understand that this isn't always about undocumented workers, but it certainly almost always is about a place where it's about the bottom line and, unfortunately, the cheapest way forward. There are implications for workers, of course. There are implications in terms of their safety. There are also implications just in terms of how they're feeling, sort of that idea of psychological as well as physical, sometimes extraordinarily serious physical injuries that can indeed be life changing.

I'm wondering if there are plans to update OHS regulations to allow for some greater oversight and penalties. Does the ministry have plans to review procurement policies to ensure that the policies and procedures which presently exist are actually being followed? Are there plans to work with Infrastructure to ensure community benefits clauses, increased codes of conduct for procurement . . .

The Chair: Back to you, Minister.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the member for all those questions. I will do my earnest to touch on most of them, but I think I want to start, actually, with the end in mind, and that's talking about the potential of human trafficking within the Alberta workforce. We do a lot of work to monitor the companies that have workers here in this province who are coming from out of country. We are proactive in that. There are also organizations like NotInMyCity that do tremendous work to activate awareness about human trafficking in the province. One particular person who I think deserves a ton of credit is Paul Brandt. He's one heck of a musician, but he's an even better person for taking this on and using his platform for good to draw attention to this.

9:30

On another level Alberta needs to maintain a reputation as being a premier destination to work for those coming from out of country, so reputation management is important for us. If someone were to come to Alberta temporarily as a foreign worker or as a provincial nominee, we don't want them to come here only to land in a toxic work environment because that would rob them of dignity, both dignity of their work and dignity of lifestyle and their values. It's top of mind for me as the minister and of course for my department to proactively engage with businesses and to make sure that they are engaging in ethical hiring and labour practices.

I do want to turn to my department here to talk about the calibre of the investigations that they do, the employment standards staff that are employed, the operational experiences, and the oversight, and the penalties. There's limited time, so I will give it to them so they can give you some more specific answers, through you, Mr. Chair, to MLA Wright on that.

Mr. McPherson: Thank you, Minister. Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration is a member of a working group led by Public Safety and Emergency Services that supports implementing the recommendations submitted by the human trafficking task force. Our employment standards staff have received specific human trafficking training related to the identification of trends and victim support. Our special investigations and inspection unit and the temporary foreign worker advisory office, which the minister just mentioned, work with provincial labour trafficking groups that focus on collaboration, education, prevention, and response. We have an information-sharing agreement with employment standards development Canada, which kind of governs the TFW entry into Canada to enable exchange of temporary foreign worker-related information that's intended to strengthen protections for victims of human trafficking.

All human trafficking related situations employment standards has investigated have involved vulnerable foreign workers, and the temporary foreign worker advisory office assists vulnerable workers in accessing resources, which may include support specific to human trafficking.

I'll just jump to another of the member's questions. There were 4,632 complaints received and 4,154 complaints concluded. A complaint is completed when employment standards program delivery is finished their investigation into the complaint. The complaint may still be active at appeals or collections, and a complaint is considered concluded when the program delivery has collected money on behalf of the complainant or has exhausted all available options for resolving the complaint, whether it's through voluntary resolution, the issuance of an order or decision, the appeal process, or the conclusion of the collections process. Employment standards have resolved 95 per cent of complaints within 180 days, which is an improvement of 8 per cent over the 87 per cent in the prior year. The average time for complaints to be resolved was 77 days, a 33 per cent improvement from the previous year.

I will note, Mr. Chair, directly to the member's question regarding the kind of offers of settlement, if an employer makes an offer, you know, as an employment standards group we are duty bound to present it unless it's completely unconscionable. Now, at that point the decision-making shifts to the person involved. They may get a different result if they decide to follow through the entire process, but at that point that's how we come at it.

I'll try to jump to another question. Voluntary resolution we tend to find is a more efficient process and can lead to a fair arrangement that both parties agree to with minimal involvement of employment standards officers. Now, obviously not all situations lend themselves to voluntary resolution . . .

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go back to the government caucus. Member Wright, would you like to share your time with the minister?

Mr. Wright: I'd like to do shared time.

Mr. Schow: Giddy up.

Mr. Wright: Giddy up.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and through you to the minister. Minister, I had the opportunity to participate as part of Alberta's delegation to PNWER, which is the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region. It's an organization that was actually helped started by a former MLA from Medicine Hat and former deputy premier, Jim Horsman. You know, they look at all things economic in the region of the northwest, which is five U.S. jurisdictions, five Canadian jurisdictions. You know, when we take a look at defending Alberta's position in international trade negotiations, something that's come up pretty consistently that PNWER has been really advocating both sides of the border to get a resolution to is the USMCA negotiations that go on. They have the risk of being the single largest increase to cost of living and goods that are currently being negotiated by the federal governments on both sides of the border and, I should say, down to Mexico as well.

Key objective 1.6 commits the government to advancing Alberta's interests in negotiations and implementation and management of international trade agreements. Alberta's prosperity depends on reliable access to global markets for exports, for agriculture, and for our energy manufacturing and technology. As international trade tensions rise, it becomes more and more important for Alberta to advocate for tariff-free access, stable trade conditions, and strong protections for exporters who drive economic growth. This became really evident in Alaska. You know, they're very concerned with this because they're pretty isolated from the continental U.S., and any additional tariffs or fees could see a substantial increase to their total overall cost of living. How is Alberta defending its interests as agreements like the USMCA approach renewal or renegotiation? Then on top of that, beyond the CUSMA agreement, what other trade agreements or global markets are strategically important for Alberta to get our goods to market? What tools does the ministry use to ensure that Alberta's position is reflected in the federal-level trade discussions?

Then, you know, just further to that point, when we talk about economic growth and access between Alberta and key international destinations, how exactly does the investment and growth fund work? How will expanding direct international flights out of Alberta help drive job creation and get goods to market in an appropriate time? How will new direct international connections really showcase Alberta as a place for new export growth to foreign markets?

I'll turn it over to you, Minister, for those pieces.

Mr. Schow: Excellent. Well, Mr. Chair, through you to the member, thank you for those questions, all very important. We addressed this a bit earlier in the committee, but we are in uncertain times with our strained relationship or you could say new relationship with the United States. We have always advocated for and will continue to advocate for a tariff-free relationship with the United States. They are our biggest trading partner, and we understand that they're also Canada's top trading partner, so it's essential that we manage this relationship well.

I emphasize the word "relationship." While I know that some may take the approach of a scorched earth with the new administration – I guess I shouldn't say "new" given that the President has been in office now for a year. But with the Trump administration the scorched-earth approach is one to just cut it off, but that's just not the way to do it. We need to have a relationship with our trading partners. It's why members of cabinet and members of the government caucus continue to attend conferences like PNWER conferences. We build relationships with state and federal legislators, better understanding how we can co-ordinate and collaborate on future trade agreements.

With regard to CUSMA, something that we have worked diligently and will continue to advocate for is that the federal government doesn't negotiate away our rights as a province, particularly when it comes to our largest export, which is energy. This idea that they'd be gambling with Alberta's money is not fair. We have made this point a number of times, the Premier has made this point, that if we're going to be going into CUSMA negotiations, which we are, we will be all over the federal government so that they don't make any mistake, they're not to speak for Alberta but rather to take the input that we give them and use that through the course of the negotiations.

I know that you referenced trade missions. I had talked about this earlier in the committee conversation. We do about 30 to 40 in Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration. Other ministries do a number of them as well. I know Minister Sigurdson will be leading trade efforts going to China, which is a market that in recent times has not been one that's been overly open to us and receptive but understanding that some of the largest economies and the largest populations around the world need Alberta, right? The world needs more Alberta, so we go into those markets both as a department but also as elected officials to send the message that we as a province are open for business. Grateful for all the work that our departments do to open those doors for us and keep those doors open as we look for new ways to get Alberta products to foreign markets and attract foreign investment into Alberta.

Hopefully that answers your question, to the hon. member through you, through the chair to you.

9:40

Mr. Wright: Absolutely. Thank you for that, Minister. Through the chair, you know, as I review the ministry's '26-29 business plan, I'm really encouraged to see Alberta continue to lead the way in the country's economic performance, job growth, you know, and strong growth projected in the years ahead as well.

Outcome 1 and key objective 1.3 point to the importance of ensuring growth is felt in all parts of the province. You know, in my area of the province we're about three hours from anywhere is one of the jokes we say because we're three hours to Calgary, we're three hours to, you know, Maple Creek – not Maple Creek; that's not right – into Swift Current and Regina and Moose Jaw area. We're two hours to the first major location in the States. Rural Alberta is really felt there, and there's great growth coming from the rural side of things. Minister, what targeted programs or initiatives within your ministry specifically support economic development and diversification in rural Alberta or smaller municipalities, and can you highlight any recent regional or rural economic development projects that your ministry has supported through the work with municipalities, Indigenous communities, or economic development organizations? How does the ministry's regional economic development work to ensure rural communities can participate fully in the job growth that we've continued to see in this province compared to the rest of Canada?

Mr. Schow: Thank you for the question. Really appreciate you pointing out Medicine Hat. It's a community that does a great job in looking for unique ways to build its economic footprint around the province. They also do, you know, a great job across the board. In fact, they even have some great sports teams on the weekend. The Medicine Hat Hawks finished second at the zone final, second, of course, only to Magrath high school, which is where I went to high school. Not like that's a shot or anything and not a competition; just huge kudos to both teams, who are doing so well this season, and look forward to watching the provincials.

That aside, Mr. Chair, through you, we have a number of tools that support economic development in Alberta. In rural Alberta the Alberta economic dashboard and the regional economic dashboard are hubs for information designed to promote investment and business development in Alberta by providing investors and businesses, economic developers, access to relevant economic data and industry insights. Furthermore, we have crossministry collaboration. I talked about where we compete. We also need to continue to compete on connectivity, be it digital connectivity or physical connectivity. Do we have the roads, the infrastructure to support transportation of goods and services throughout the province? The answer is yes, but we could always use more. We could always find other ways to develop that infrastructure.

Again, I go back to the investment and growth fund. It has incentives to incentivize new investments and also expand existing businesses not just in urban areas, Mr. Chair, but also in the rural parts of the province as we cannot forget about those areas. In 2025 the IGF expanded its designation intake of organizations from six to 13, including economic development agencies in Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Red Deer, and the Grande Prairie region. As you can see in Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, province-wide the benefits are being felt by the support of IGF.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to the Official Opposition's final segment, with Member Ceci on the line. Member, would you like to share your time or block time with the minister?

Member Ceci: Block, Mr. Chairman, would be fine. Can you hear me okay?

The Chair: We can hear you fine. Thank you. You may go ahead.

Member Ceci: Great. Thank you. Good evening, Minister. As the shadow minister for arts and culture I'm here because of the part of your ministry that deals with film and television tax credits and the Alberta media fund. On page 90 of the fiscal plan, JETI's budget narrative, there are 11 words there that have resulted in a significant amount of concern among those in the film industry and have been addressed by the president of IATSE 212 as well as *The Hollywood Reporter* trade paper. Those words are: "This includes $60 million for the Film and Television Tax Credit." Those 11 words have caused hundreds and hundreds of words to be written to try and examine and explain what was meant. Where is the government going with the FTTC, and how will the lives and livelihoods of film craftspeople, owners of studios, actors, and technicians all be affected? I'll give you a chance, Minister, shortly to address this, and perhaps you'll give some assurances to those in the film and television industry, but from my read, Alberta is not doing the amount of film and television business production volumewise it once did.

The numbers for FTTC payouts in 2023, '24, '25, and '26, booked for this budget, are $26.7 million, $103.3 million, $55.3 million, and $60 million respectively. The 2024 massive bump in FTTC payout was no doubt for *The Last of Us*. Season 1 shot here in 2023. The $60 million in this budget is only an 8 or 9 per cent increase from the last year, Minister. My question to you is: is this the best the government can do in what could be a significant sector to help diversify our economy?

Building on the previous question, page 9 of the strategic plan identifies "growing . . . cultural industries to diversify the economy, create jobs," et cetera. In short, growing the cultural sector is seen in the Alberta strategic plan as a key tool to attract investment. I'm certain both sides of the aisle want even higher production volumes from Alberta filmmakers and from foreign filmmakers and creators. Choosing Alberta to shoot in is directly tied to our tax incentive competitiveness. Will you make the FTTC competitive, specifically more than the 22 per cent tax incentive available today? Minister, I'm sure you're aware that at every studio you've got a bean-counter who has a binder on his desk, and it has every jurisdiction in the world and what their tax credit situation is, and on any given project it'll run three or four budgets and go wherever it is less expensive.

Carrying on, Minister, the JETI business plan notes that every $1 tax credit attracted $4.30 in spend in '24-25. There are no numbers for '25-26 yet, but what will your ministry do to attract even higher positive economic returns than the flat targets laid out in the performance measures on that page?

Again, regarding priority 1 in the strategic plan regarding attracting investment, Alberta has dropped to fifth place amongst provinces in the list of busiest provinces for motion picture production. Ontario, B.C., Manitoba, and probably Quebec are ahead of us in production volume last year despite Alberta having world-class crews, sets, incredible locations, and world-class infrastructure and facilities. Minister, what's holding back producers and movie scouts from choosing Alberta?

A comparative table of global and Canadian film production hub tax incentives shows that Alberta's FTTC is no longer competitive with other jurisdictions. Is your ministry aware of this, and what actions, if any, will be taken to get in the game incentivewise?

I understand that members of Alberta's screen industry have met with your department to request changes that would keep Alberta's film and tax credits competitive. What specific recommendations did they provide, and why aren't those recommendations reflected anywhere in this budget?

Your department's business plan performance measures target $238 million in production expenditure generated through the FTTC. Given that the reduction is an estimated uptake of the FTTC incentives, is this still an achievable target?

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Ceci.

We'll now go to the minister for his answers.

Mr. Schow: Well, thank you to the member for the question and for his diligent work on behalf of the arts community as the critic with the NDP caucus. I understand that we're going to have some differences of opinion, particularly on this line of questioning. Alberta has and will always be a premier destination to shoot films. That's a fact. Advancements in technology in the film sector and television continue to impress me by the day, for whatever my opinions are worth on that. But it is impossible, Mr. Chair, to replicate those beautiful Rocky Mountains or the rolling plains here in Alberta, and if you want to shoot a film that has those pieces in it, you cannot buy that kind of scenery in a production studio.

9:50

What I would say is that we will continue to work with the film and television sector to understand the needs that they have. With that said, I believe that the funding that we have put towards the film and television tax credit is in line with the demand that we will expect to see in years to come, in the future years. For example, in 2021-22 we had $16.4 million of payout. In '22-23 it was $26.7

million; '23-24 was over $100 million, of course, as mentioned. That was an anomaly given that that was the year that they filmed *The Last of Us*. It's a great production. In fact, they blew up the building not far, just a stone's throw, from here, where the Legislature is. Quite the episode. If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it. You know, through you, Mr. Chair, to Member Pitt: solid episode. Of course, in '24-25 we spent $55 million and in '25-26 an estimated $44 million to $68 million. I do believe that the money being allocated to the film and television tax credit is what's needed.

Now, the member said in his line of questioning that they'll go where it's less expensive. I would disagree with that. I know that the path of least resistance is sometimes followed, but going back to a point I made earlier, we do have things that you cannot buy or cannot build in a production studio. Having visited and been in film and television conventions, as they were, or award ceremonies and such, I've listened to the production companies and the directors and the producers about what it is that Alberta does well.

One of them was in Banff, and I said: "Tell me about it. Like, tell me what it is that we do well, why you come here." He didn't say a word. He just took his hand and pointed over to the mountains and the beautiful lakes and the scenery that was around him and the wildlife that occurs naturally.

Then, of course, to use a quote from Dylan Pearce, the Edmonton-based indie producer and board chair of the Alberta Media Production Industries Association, he said that the $35 million reduction in planned provincial support for the film and television tax credit should not impact local or foreign producers as it only impacts how much funding Alberta has set aside for its film tax credit program based on fluctuation in production levels and payouts for the FTTC in recent years. Quote, "There's no actual cut to funding; it's an estimated number," Pearce told the *THR*. Hopefully that brings some assurance to the film and television industry that Alberta is absolutely still open for business when it comes to shooting these world-renowned productions.

It's also a way for us to promote Alberta as a place to visit both as a tourist or as a place to look to invest. You know, people want to work in places where they want to visit or want to live. As the former tourism minister I can speak to a lot of the experiences I've had with tourists who are coming to Alberta and why they come. Usually they'll come on a business trip, or they come for a sporting event and ultimately end up staying for a couple of extra days and then returning with their families or others to experience more because their time was cut short.

To end on one of the questions from Mr. Ceci: is this the best the government can do? I would respond by simply saying: losers whine about their best. Mr. Chair, on the government side and in Alberta we succeed.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now head to the government side, with Member Stephan taking us home. Would you like shared or block time with the minister?

Mr. Stephan: You know, block is best, but sharing is caring. Let's go with sharing. Why not?

The Chair: You okay with that, Minister?

Mr. Schow: All about it.

Mr. Stephan: Sharing is so good.

The Chair: Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Stephan: Let's talk about outcome 1 right at the very top. Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration works with partners to drive economic growth, support Alberta job creators, and spur Alberta's economic competitiveness and productivity. I just love jobs and economy. There's a really great stat that just came out over the past year. Alberta added 85,000 jobs, more than nine times the next closest province, while the rest of Canada lost more than 33,000 jobs. Minister, I think it's really because there's too much NDP in the rest of Canada. Minister, my question is: why is Alberta the best jurisdiction in Canada to start and grow a business, in your opinion? We are the best. Why is it that we're so awesome in Alberta at creating jobs?

Mr. Schow: Well, Mr. Chair, the member just threw the pitch right down the pipe, and I'm about to knock it out of the park. You know, there's so much to talk about with Alberta being an exceptional place to do business. I only have four minutes and 10 seconds, but I will succeed in explaining why.

First, we're a low-tax jurisdiction. People want to keep more of their hard-earned money in their pockets, and you get to do that in Alberta. This is the place where when you get your paycheque, less of that money is going to the government and more of it is going into your pocket so you can spend that money how you see fit. As conservatives we believe that you are the best steward of your money, not the government.

What I'd also say is that we're a low-regulation regime province, Mr. Chair. We understand that removing barriers for businesses to succeed is a key part of what a government should do, which creates the environment for success. Now, I know the Member for Red Deer-South is a small-business owner himself, an accountant, a bean-counter, as some are known. He knows how to count beans. I can tell you what. I bet he's worked with a lot of clients who understand the pressures that overtaxation and overregulation can have on their business and the success and the downward effects it can have on the employees that they hire, creating that uncertainty of, "Am I going to have a job next month" or "is my company going to lay me off?" because of some other arbitrary regulation the government has put in place that doesn't actually have a measurable effect on the economy.

Now, Mr. Chair, I can also talk about ambition. This is a province of ambition. I'm a fifth-generation southern Albertan, and my ancestors came here for opportunity just like the first-generation or second-generation of those who came because they know that this is a province that gets after it. This province gets after the opportunities. We don't just sit on our hands waiting for opportunities to come to us. We seek them out, and we build on past successes. I've talked about the oil and gas sector and how important that is to Alberta, and it will continue to be a significant if not the most important economic driver of this province. But building on previous successes and creating economic clusters in the province around things like aerospace and defence, around tech and innovation: Alberta is ripe for another boom, and diversification is key. It is central as we as a province continue to expand and see new people coming here.

I would also say that we have a skilled workforce. All these projects that I've talked about over the last three hours require people, hands-on people to build these projects. We build in Alberta. I go to other jurisdictions, and I'm impressed because they don't let unnecessary regulation or overconsultation prohibit them from building railroads, from building airports, from building shipping yards. Mr. Chair, it is impressive, and in Canada we are limiting our opportunities. We are not reaching the magnitude of our potential because we are overregulating ourselves. In Alberta we will not do that. Where possible, we will set our terms for success, and Albertans and other businesses know that, and we will continue to build at a rate that you will not see in any other jurisdiction around the country.

Now, Mr. Chair, with the last 50 seconds that I have in this committee I will simply say to members of the committee, Members of the Legislative Assembly, and anyone watching at home that your government will continue to be focused on doing what's best for you, what builds the economy, what makes your life better. We will continue to attract investment. We will continue to listen and adjust where necessary because we know who we work for.

Under the leadership of Premier Danielle Smith, cabinet, and government caucus members you can count on that we wake up every morning and we go to bed every night and we ask ourselves a very important question: have we served the people of Alberta well; are they better off today than they were the day before? And I can confidently say to Albertans that the answer is yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, everybody, for your participation. I must advise the committee, however, that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. This concludes the Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future's consideration of the 2026-2027 main estimates.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

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