



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Environment and Parks
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 15, 2021
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 30-2-16

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Hanson, David B., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC), Chair
Ceci, Joe, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP), Deputy Chair
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Also in Attendance

Schmidt, Marlin, Edmonton-Gold Bar (NDP)

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Participants

Ministry of Environment and Parks
Hon. Jason Nixon, Minister
Bev Yee, Deputy Minister

7 p.m.

Monday, March 15, 2021

[Mr. Hanson in the chair]

**Ministry of Environment and Parks
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Good evening, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Environment and Parks for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. I'm David Hanson, the MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul and the chair of this committee. We will begin, starting to my right.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Good evening, everyone. Searle Turton, MLA for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Singh: Good evening, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA for Calgary-East.

Mr. Guthrie: Hi. I'm Peter Guthrie, MLA for Airdrie-Cochrane.

Mr. Eggen: Good evening. My name is David Eggen, and I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West, and I think I'm the deputy chair as well. It's an honour.

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Dach: Lorne Dach, MLA for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Huffman: Good evening. Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to the members participating virtually. When I call your name, please introduce yourself for the record.

Mr. Getson. Mr. Getson, can you hear us?

Okay. We'll move along to Mr. Loewen.

Mr. Loewen: MLA Todd Loewen, Central Peace-Notley.

The Chair: Mr. Yaseen.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Chair. Muhammad Yaseen, MLA, Calgary-North.

The Chair: Member Issik.

Ms Issik: Good evening. Whitney Issik, MLA for Calgary-Glenmore.

The Chair: Okay. We'll try one more time for Mr. Getson.

Thank you, Whitney.

Well, Mr. Getson, is there a . . .

Mr. Getson: There we go, Mr. Chair. Yeah. As par for the course with COVID and everything else, my computer froze. It just locked up. I was about ready to call IT. Looks we got her working again.

The Chair: Okay. Could you introduce yourself, please?

Mr. Getson: Sure. Shane Getson, MLA for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

The Chair: Thank you.

Due to the current landscape we are in, all ministry staff will be participating in the estimates debate virtually. Minister, please

introduce yourself and any of your staff that may be speaking for the record.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. First of all, good evening and thank you for having us here today. I have with me my deputy minister, Bev Yee, who's the Deputy Minister of Environment and Parks. I have Tom Davis here, who's the ADM of strategy and governance. I have Ronda Goulden, who's ADM for the policy division; ADM Sadownik, who is the ADM for public lands; Stacey Smythe, who is the ADM for regulatory; and then Shane Schreiber, who is the assistant deputy minister for parks.

The Chair: Well, thank you, sir. We all know who you are, but just for the record if you'd identify yourself, that'd be great.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Are you talking to me there, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Absolutely, sir.

Mr. Jason Nixon: I couldn't hear you, Dave. I don't know what you said.

The Chair: Just for the record if you could introduce yourself. You introduced all your folks.

Mr. Jason Nixon: That's a good point, Mr. Chair. I'm Jason Nixon, Minister of Environment and Parks and the MLA for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you very much, sir.

I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. David Eggen for Joe Ceci as deputy chair.

Before we begin, I would note that in accordance with the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health attendees at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants.

In addition, as indicated in the February 25, 2021, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper, I would remind everyone of committee room protocols in line with health guidelines, which require members to wear masks in committee rooms and while seated except when speaking, at which time they may choose not to wear a face covering.

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 being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating virtually are asked to turn on their camera while speaking and to please mute their microphone when not speaking. Members participating virtually who wish to be placed on a speakers list are asked to e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please signal the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of three hours have been scheduled for consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Environment and Parks. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of his comments a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the

government caucus. Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but time may be combined between the member and the minister. The rotation of speaking time will then follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and the government caucus, with individual speaking times set to five minutes for both the member and the ministry. These times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block. One final note. Please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking times are combined. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send an e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee, I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. However, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anybody oppose having a break? Seeing none, we will announce that shortly.

Ministry officials, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee. Ministry officials are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit, appropriately distanced, at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the speaking block 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.

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 17, 2021. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk, and as a courtesy an electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to committee members.

I now invite the Minister of Environment and Parks to begin with his opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. Good evening to you and through you to all members of your committee. I appreciate your time. It's a privilege to be here today to present the budget estimates for Alberta Environment and Parks.

Budget 2021 provides funding for Alberta Environment and Parks at \$556 million. Similar to other departments, we're taking a careful spending approach to protect Alberta's financial health and keep programs sustainable. By finding efficiencies and curbing costs, we're maintaining responsible spending, all while we focus on improving important environmental oversight. Our commitment to Albertans as stewards of the land, air, water, and wildlife is evident in the careful financial decisions that we've made. By being strategic with our investments and ensuring that we're delivering the services and facilities Albertans want to see, we can continue to focus on protecting our environment and the livelihoods of Albertans.

Budget 2021 maintains this government's commitment to the technology innovation and emissions reduction, or TIER, fund, which will get Albertans back to work, cut emissions, and keep businesses competitive. TIER is funded by heavy emitters, not by Alberta families and small businesses. These funds are supporting job-creating technology that reduces emissions and helps our province meet our environmental goals. Alberta is investing up to

\$750 million over three years from the TIER fund for a suite of programs that will lower industry emissions. When other industry and federal funding sources are leveraged, this investment will support nearly 9,000 jobs province-wide. We will continue empowering our industries with support from the TIER fund.

Mr. Chair, I'd also like to highlight the work that is taking place to support parks and public lands in Alberta. As evidenced by the strong popularity when camping reservations opened earlier this month, AEP is expecting another very busy spring and summer. Albertans love the great outdoors, and many people are making exploring our beautiful backyard a priority. This increase in visitors puts a strain on our parks, requiring increased enforcement and protection.

That is why we're committed to addressing those challenges. Budget 2021 adds more boots on the ground, which will directly help us better protect and manage our beautiful parks and public lands. Alberta Environment and Parks will receive an additional 50 on-the-ground FTE positions. Mr. Chair, of the 50 new FTEs in Budget 2021, 20 will be new conservation officers, 20 positions will go to public lands, and 10 will go to parks. These positions will be critical to enhancing conservation and supporting safe, sustainable recreation in Alberta.

7:10

As I've said many times, parks will continue to be open for Albertans to enjoy. All parks will remain publicly owned and publicly accessible. No sites have been or will be delisted or sold.

Partnerships have been an essential part of Alberta's parks system for decades. As of this year, Alberta's government has secured or maintained partnerships for 170 parks and recreation areas across the province, providing important services for recreation and conservation for their dedicated sites. Additionally, funding has been allocated to parks to allow Albertans to continue to access our great natural recreation assets.

We've got some great partners, Mr. Chair, who are working on the landscape, and we are grateful for their hard work and their passion. There are several great examples of active partnerships in our province. Friends of Fish Creek Provincial Park Society, for example, works with the community to raise awareness of a truly unique urban park. Last year I was pleased to announce a grant of almost \$500,000 over three years to support the society's important education and conservation work. In central Alberta the Eagle Point-Blue Rapids Parks Council is made up of municipalities, recreation and service organizations, and industry. Together they help manage Eagle Point provincial park and Blue Rapids provincial recreation area for visitors to enjoy.

Partnerships also support conservation activities all across our landscape. Alberta's government is committed to environmental conservation funding partnerships such as Cows and Fish, which works on habitat throughout our province. We know these partnerships work, and we're committed to maintaining them. Albertans have told us that they want well-maintained parks facilities, new and improved trails, conservation work in sensitive areas, and more conservation officers on the landscape, and, Mr. Chair, Budget 2021 delivers.

In November I had the pleasure of launching Alberta's Crown land vision. The vision guides our work towards a common-sense approach to management of Crown land that recognizes that conservation, recreation, and economic uses can and do support each other. The vision is also helping to anchor long-term future Crown land management discussions and supports an understanding of Alberta's government's common-sense conservation plan. We are continuing to look at different ways to make sure that the demands on our public lands are managed

effectively and sustainably, and that's why as part of Budget 2021 Alberta Environment and Parks is maintaining responsible spending.

We also have some significant capital funding increases, which I'd like to highlight. Budget 2021 is providing spending for several exciting projects that are important to Albertans. The budget dedicates \$18 million over three years for the watercourse crossing program. The program focuses on 50 high-priority crossings in our province where fish populations are in decline. I look forward to announcing more details about this exciting program soon.

The watershed resilience and restoration program will also see a boost of \$10.5 million through Budget 2021. This program will support natural watershed functions and better support communities from floods and droughts.

Many community members will be familiar with the beautiful vistas along the David Thompson corridor. Through Budget 2021 AEP is taking steps to improve and invest in this iconic region. With an investment of \$8.4 million, AEP will improve and renew 12 tourism and recreation support sites along the David Thompson highway. Improvements will translate into more investment and attractions for this iconic destination.

Beyond recreation and conservation, Budget 2021 is funding initiatives to improve the regulatory approval system, to speed up the processes and reduce administrative red tape. The regulatory system will get a modern makeover with a \$13 million increase this year. A digital regulatory assurance system will transform the application for nonenergy development activities and move them more efficiently through the regulatory process. This means applications for fertilizer, rock and cement, sand and gravel, water use, livestock grazing will now go through an online system. The new system will be rolled out in stages and will make reviewing applications more transparent and efficient, all while maintaining high environmental standards.

As part of Budget 2021, my department has worked to find efficiencies. One of these changes was through an administrative change to funding models for some programs such as caribou habitat recovery. We're simplifying our processes and removing government as the middle man with regard to the funding. This will not change the amount of funding, nor will it eliminate or reduce government oversight. The only changes will be in the administration of the funding. Since 2018 more than \$25 million has been invested in caribou habitat recovery programs. Industry will still contribute the same amount, and AEP still remains responsible for approving priorities and ensuring that our strong environmental standards are being met. It's a funding model that has worked in other programs and has shown to be a more efficient way to administer funds through time.

Mr. Chair, as Budget '21 shows, AEP is continuing to provide important environmental oversight. I'm proud to work with my department and so many Albertans to maintain our land, air, water, and wildlife. AEP, along with Alberta's government, is paving the way for growth in Alberta's postpandemic economy, supporting job growth and sustainable spending on key priorities. I'm pleased to present to you today the Alberta Environment and Parks estimates, and with that, I'm very happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. The timer will be set for 20-minute intervals, just so that you're aware of the time. Would you like to combine your time with the minister's?

Mr. Schmidt: Yes, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Back and forth.

Back and forth is fine with you, Minister? Okay. Thank you. Go ahead, Mr. Schmidt.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you. I want to start off on page 95 of the government estimates. Line 2 estimates that almost \$38 million will be collected in parks operations fees. Can you provide a detailed breakdown of what fees are increasing?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yeah, we can. Mr. Chair, I'm not seeing it on page 95, so is the hon. member referring to a different page? I just want to make sure I'm on the same page as him.

Mr. Schmidt: Parks operations – I assume parks operations, line 2, collections in parks operations fees, and, as well, the fiscal plan refers to various fees increasing in the parks, but it doesn't provide any other detail than that. I'm wondering if the minister can provide us an explicit list of the parks fees that will be increasing in the 2021 budget year.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, we will pull that out. There's a lot of stuff within the line item for fees within the department's budget, Mr. Chair, and I do have some officials pulling out more of a breakdown of that, which I'll refer to in a minute. Just so the member is aware, there's more than just campground fees within that line item.

Some of the increases that we've seen this year will come from, first of all, the fact that we are seeing increased camping all across the system. The member, Mr. Chair, will be aware that last year was a record season, where we saw more people attend our campgrounds than at any other time in our history. In fact, a million more people visited Kananaskis and Banff national park last year, and this year is shaping up to be the same. We're seeing already, my understanding was, double the bookings on opening day for our provincial parks system. So some of that is anticipated growth within the parks system.

As the member is aware, we have also increased camping fees anywhere from about a dollar to \$3 a site across the system. We are also fulfilling within this budget two very important platform commitments that we promised during the last election, the first being around random camping, a situation that takes place all across the eastern slopes inside our province. The former government's approach to random camping was to try to shut random camping down or access to those areas, but we pledged to bring forward a random camping fee, that would provide increases to this line item as well, and that fee in the platform was \$30 a night to be able to camp, random camping. That number is within that number.

In addition to that, there was a commitment within our budget to bring forward ATV or off-highway vehicle access fees, which will come into place this year. You can anticipate to see some legislation on that in the fall sitting, which has been added to this line as well.

In addition to that, Mr. Chair, I also would like to point out the Nordiq pilot programming on parking within K Country in a partnership with the Alberta government, another great partnership that we see with the Alberta parks system that is creating revenue to help deal with the cross-country ski trails that are within that area, and on and on. I don't know if the member wants me to continue to go through all of that.

Mr. Schmidt: Thanks to the minister.

The minister mentioned a \$1 to \$3 increase at campsites. Would he be willing to commit to tabling that list of fee increases by campsite to the Legislature?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yeah. We'd be happy to table that document as long as the officials have it. Mr. Chair, I'm just looking at my ADM,

but I don't think that we have a concern with that. We should be able to access that document pretty easily.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

Are there going to be – you talked about new fees for trail permits and random camping. Are there going to be any new day fees introduced to the parks system?

7:20

Mr. Jason Nixon: At this point our focus will be, one, as you can see within the budget, Mr. Chair, to fully fund the provincial parks system. We went through a process this year with wide consultation with Albertans, in addition to the platform commitments about new user fees for accessing random camping and for off-highway vehicles. One thing we heard back very clearly from Albertans and from users of the parks system is that they are willing to pay fees in moderation if they go back to being able to manage the parks system. So we are going to continue to look at ways where we can make sure that we can shore up the funding for the parks system. Right now those fees, that I just went through in great detail, are where we've headed to in the beginning, but we will do what we need to do to be able to make sure that the parks system is fully operated. We've inherited a parks system that's grown by 400 per cent since 1990, and the reality is that we're also seeing, as the member knows, significant . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister. You provided the answer to the question that I was looking for.

Is it fair to say that in line 2 on page 95 there are no new day-use fees being contemplated to be collected and being represented in this year's budget? Is that an accurate statement?

Mr. Jason Nixon: What an accurate statement is is that there are new fees within this year's budget, that the Alberta parks budget will be fully funded to be able to operate. Depending on user access and what the numbers are, the Alberta government will continue to look at user fees, including new user fees that I haven't identified today, to be able to make sure that our parks system can operate fully.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister.

What is the system going to be to collect the new fees that are being contemplated here?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, right now we have a system in place, obviously, that collects campground fees all across the system. That's worked very well, so there's no anticipated change as a result of that \$1 to \$3 a night campground increase. When it comes to the random camping program, the department is still in consultation with Albertans to determine the final version of that, but we do have mechanisms within the department where we already charge fees for fish and wildlife, hunting tags, fishing licences, and those types of situations. I suspect that, in the end, that's likely where we'll look, but we're taking some time to be able to make sure that we got that right.

When it comes to the ATV question, we haven't finalized any decisions on that. Again, we're still consulting on what the final version of that will look like, spending some time evaluating the existing registration fees when it comes to off-highway vehicles in the province and how those connect with government. After broad consultation over the summer we'll come forward with a fee mechanism that will work for the people using off-highway vehicles on Crown land.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you.

A lot of the fees are collected on an honour system, right? There aren't people patrolling every park every day to make sure that people who would normally be required to pay a fee are in fact paying the fee. Of course, we know that Albertans are very honest, but of course with increased enforcement, fee payments will go up. Will the department be setting a quota on how much in parks fees will be collected this year?

Mr. Jason Nixon: There have been no discussions about a quota system. It's about creating a system where we can make sure that we are collecting enough user fees from Albertans who are enjoying our parks, to find balance between taxpayer contributions to maintain our parks system and those users who are actually utilizing the parks system, to be able to make sure that we can maintain it. No, we have not talked about a quota system.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister.

Can the minister commit that the amount spent on parks this year will not decrease from the \$81,431,000 that is budgeted on page 91 of the estimates in case the revenue projections for fees aren't met this year?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, yeah, we can commit. That's the number that we've put in the budget to operate the parks system. That's the number that I anticipate that the Legislature will pass, and if that is the number that the Legislature passes, that will be the number that the department will pursue. In any given year budget numbers come in with variants, as can you see in any budget document. So, no, I will not commit that that will be the exact spending, but what I can do is commit that it is our intention to spend in that range, which is why we put it within our budget. And it is our intention to make sure that we fully fund the program.

Mr. Schmidt: It's on that point, Mr. Chair, that I'm going to press the minister. If the parks operation budget is not fully funded by fees, will the parks budget see a decrease?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, the parks operation budget is not fully funded by fees, and it will not be fully funded by fees.

Last year I believe that the range – and I'm just looking to my deputy minister or to my ADM of parks to see if I have that correct. I believe that last year the system was subsidized to the tune of about 40 per cent, where about 60 per cent of it came from taxpayers. Yeah. There you go. I got that correct, Mr. Chair.

So, no, the parks systems will not be fully funded by fees. There would be no intention for that ever to take place. But, again, we've heard clearly from Albertans that they want to make sure that the parks system is fully funded. The fact is that there's significant demand . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate the answer to that question. I'd like to move on if I could.

I want to go now to get a little bit more information on the trail permit fee that you intend to introduce. Is this a privatization initiative? Will this money be turned over to private entities for the trail maintenance, stewardship, and community response that's indicated in line 9 there on page 95?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, just going back quickly, Mr. Chair, to the park fees, to be clear, no, there is no intention for fees to fully subsidize the parks system. But we will always continue to pursue moderate and appropriate fees for those who use our parks system. That's something we've heard clearly from Albertans. As long as that money going back to the parks system is dedicated to conservation and helping protect our parks system, we're able to

provide the services within our parks system and that they are comfortable, moderate fees. We don't see the need for all Albertans to pay for every site when you go camping. That's a great opportunity within our province, and every Albertan I talked to is quite comfortable paying for that opportunity.

In regard to the question of ATVs, this is being based on a platform commitment that was spelled out very clearly in the 2019 election, when it came to what would take place for camping trailers on Crown land that were not within campsites, or most commonly referred to as random camping, and for off-highway vehicles, that the money would go into a dedicated revenue stream, meaning, Mr. Chair, that it could not go to general revenue. It had to go back towards where the resource was being impacted by those user groups. That commitment is that it would have to go towards three things, and that was clearly spelled out within the platform. One is to increase enforcement. I'm very proud to be able to say that we are adding, as I said in my opening remarks, 20 new conservation officers in this budget to fulfill that platform commitment as well as 30 more front-line staff to be able to fulfill our boots-on-the-ground commitment.

The second aspect of that dedicated revenue stream was to go towards trail maintenance and conservation work, to be able to either restore landscapes where random camping was taking place or to build infrastructure to allow off-highway vehicles to cross river streams and fish habitat in safe ways. And, yes, our commitment to that is to do that in partnership with nonprofit organizations. The quad squad in the Crowsnest Pass is a great example of that. The previous government worked with them, and we intend to continue to work with them when it comes to that.

Then the third was to be able to help with things like search and rescue or communities, communities like I represent, Rocky Mountain House and Sundre, who have a tremendous amount of burden at certain times of the year of having so many people camping outside of their communities. My hometown has about 3,500 people, and at times there are, well, I guess, close to about 100,000 people camped out there. That has an impact on the volunteer firefighter services, search and rescue, which is volunteer but supported by municipalities. That was the third commitment, to help shore that up, when it came to that platform commitment.

Mr. Schmidt: So on that piece of emergency response, is that what is meant by the phrase "community response" in line 9? Is that funding for local search and rescue operations, that kind of thing?

Mr. Jason Nixon: That was one of the three things that was committed to within the platform commitment, and that's how I would interpret that word, yeah.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. How will the minister report to Albertans, you know, the money that is collected from this trail and off-highway vehicle fee and how that money is spent? How will they be able to see that transparency?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, it's going to be a dedicated revenue source. That's the commitment to that process. How it's going to be spelled out in upcoming budgets, I don't know. I may give my deputy minister an opportunity here to address that in more detail if you like, hon. member. But the intention – again, just to make sure it's clear that it's dedicated revenue. The grants that would go out to organizations that help with maintenance would be clear. You'd see the officers that are spelled out within the document. The other thing I would point out is that we'll be coming forward with the regulatory process that will have to go in place to be able to structure that, and I suspect that some of those answers will have

more flesh on them as that happens. The deputy minister will add something to that.

7:30

Ms Yee: Thank you for the question. In response, I think that we are held accountable. Certainly, we report out through our annual report, and then through Public Accounts we would also be reporting on how we spend the money that we derive out of those fees.

Mr. Schmidt: I look forward to the department appearing before Public Accounts sometime before the next provincial election should government members choose to allow that to happen.

However, will the annual report contain information about this dedicated revenue fund? Will that be a separate item in the annual report?

Mr. Jason Nixon: There's no intention at this time to create a dedicated revenue fund. The intention would be to fund the revenue that comes in from this process in the given year as dedicated revenue. Treasury Board and Finance has moved away from too many dedicated funds, as you're probably aware of, so at this stage that would be where we're headed. Quite frankly, we already spent a significant amount across public lands and parks. I gave you just the parks ratio, Mr. Chair, which shows that we have a long way to go before we'd be banking any money in a fund.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you for that. My next question is related to outcome 3 on page 44 of the Environment and Parks business plan for 2021, stating that "Albertans and visitors have enjoyable and safe experiences where they live, work and play in Alberta's outdoors." Now, Budget 2020, as the minister knows, released a plan to optimize parks. I know that the minister has walked back that statement in previous press releases, and in his opening remarks he said that no sites will be delisted or sold. Can the minister confirm that none of the sites on the list that were slated for closure will be closed?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, we are happy to pull out some information when it comes to park partnerships. First, let me be clear: we haven't walked back anything. We're very proud of the fact that we have 170 partnerships inside this province, which is what we committed to doing a year ago, partnerships like the Friends of Fish Creek, that I talked about in my opening statement. I certainly hope that the Official Opposition is not trying to shut down the great work that those partnerships do across the province. We appreciate those nonprofit organizations and their dedication to conservation activities.

Again, we have been working on park partnerships within the system long before this government. It goes back to when that hon. member was in government and to governments before that. Park partnerships are an essential way that helps us be able to maintain these landscapes, and I'm proud of a great park partnership that takes place right in my own constituency, the Friends of the Eastern Slopes, who are . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Mr. Chair, if I could just clarify for the minister. I'm not referring right now to parks partnerships. I'm referring to partial or full site closures that were listed in the government's 2020 optimizing parks list. That included places like the Barrier Lake Visitor Information Centre, Bow Valley provincial park, Kehiwin provincial recreation area, the Dinosaur provincial park comfort camping, Stoney Lake provincial recreation area, these kinds of areas. Are any of those sites that were listed for partial or full site closures last year – will any of them be closed?

Mr. Jason Nixon: The answer to that is no; none of them will be closed. All sites will continue to have their current park designation, and they weren't listed to be closed, Mr. Chair. In fact, the hon. member just referred to Dinosaur provincial park. Dinosaur provincial park certainly at no time was listed to be closed . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister, for clarifying that.

Now, the minister did talk about partnerships. Now, will the minister commit to providing a list of all of the partnerships that have been struck or will be struck with the parks that were listed for potential partnerships on the optimized Alberta parks list that was released on February 29, 2020?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, back again to Dinosaur provincial park, Mr. Chair, just to be clear. Comfort camping was shut down within Dinosaur provincial park, and some of the other decisions that the former NDP government made around flying firewood and stuff to remote campgrounds, costing taxpayers a significant amount of money, has stopped, but to be very clear, no park at all was ever scheduled to be delisted or sold, and all parks will still remain open.

As for partnerships, there are a variety of partnerships across the system. They've existed for a significant period of time. You are welcome, hon. member, to contact the department if you would like to learn more about how to create a partnership or if you have anybody who is interested in partnerships, but we respect our partnerships and the organizations that we work with. Different partnerships have different requirements, and it's not as simple as just providing a list. What I can tell you, though, is that there are 170 of them right now, and we're pretty proud of them.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Minister, and I can tell you that people who are interested in the future of the parks program are extremely frustrated that the minister announced on December 22, 2020, that all of these parks on the list that was published on February 29, 2020, have partnerships, yet the information around those partnerships is nowhere to be found. We filed information requests. A number of journalists have filed information requests. A number of environmental stakeholders have filed information requests. Is the minister's intent for us to wait for the results of those information requests, or can he commit to submitting a list of parks partnerships specific to the list that was released in 2020 of last year? The sites that were slated to have partnerships: can he provide a list of who those partnerships are with and the conditions under which those partnerships will operate?

Mr. Jason Nixon: What I can commit to is that I will instruct the assistant deputy minister of parks to follow the rules that are in place when it comes to communicating about partnerships in regard to privacy or different things that may be impacted by those individual partnerships and go from there. Again, I'll refer you to the department. The minister's office will not be releasing that. Instead, we'll trust the department to figure out what is appropriate to be released and what is not.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, that's incredibly frustrating, Minister, but, you know, yes, I guess that speaks to commitment to transparency.

I want to switch now to the business plan. The business plan has been significantly reduced from last year. Specifically, the business plan from '20-23 had the following key objective: "Leverage traditional and other effective conservation measures in collaboration with non-government partners to develop and advance conservation projects and programs." This objective has been entirely dropped from the '21-24 business plan. Is the ministry no longer interested in developing and advancing conservation projects?

Mr. Jason Nixon: No, Mr. Chair. In fact, we are very proud of the work that we're doing when it comes to conservation projects. We have lots that we would like to talk about when it comes to conservation. What I will point out is that Treasury Board and Finance has made some changes as to how business plans are presented across government, which has created a situation where the business plan will be different than in years previous. That's to deal with, it's my understanding, Treasury Board and Finance's commitment to continuously improve business planning or reporting through better integration of financial and nonfinancial results. As far as commitment to conservation, no, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, we are overly committed to conservation. I shouldn't say overly; we are just proud of how much we are committed to conservation.

We've seen right now, for example – and I know that you, Mr. Chair, were part of all that hard work to do the regional caribou task force. We've been able to come forward with a historic section 11 agreement, something that the previous government failed to do when it came to a species at risk, the woodland caribou. We have been able to come forward with millions of dollars . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister, for providing an answer to the question. I guess a follow-up, then. If you're still committed to developing and advancing conservation projects, how will you report that to Albertans? It used to appear as a specific performance measure in the annual report. It's been taken out, so how will Albertans know what conservation projects the ministry is developing and advancing?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, there are other spots besides the ministry's business plan where we talk about what work is taking place within the department. The ministry's business plan, just like all other ministries' business plans, should be taken into consideration with the fiscal plan, the government's strategic plan, the overall estimates, and we will continue to present to Albertans the money that we are spending when it comes to conservation.

Again, I'll go to another example right now, Mr. Chair; the Moose Lake access plan, which . . .

7:40

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that answer. I want to talk about, now, another performance measure that was dropped from the '20-23 business plan: a target of 17 per cent of recognized, protected, and conserved areas. The performance metric has been removed from the '21-24 business plan. Has the ministry abandoned protecting and conserving areas of the province?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, just to finish that last question, Mr. Chair, of course we've been able to get the Moose Lake access management plan, something the previous government failed to get across the line and we've been able to do when it comes to working with our partners, Fort McKay and the Fort McKay Métis. A big part of that is conservation of landscapes when it comes to caribou and other species. We've got \$8.5 million going directly towards conservation within that area when it comes to caribou, including significant seismic line restoration. That's just one of many examples of the hard work the department is doing.

Another special one that I think is worth talking about – and I wish the hon. member would ask a little bit more about that. That's the work that our partners – again, another partnership. I know it seems to the opposition that they don't like partnerships, but our partnership with Cows and Fish, who work tirelessly to be able to deal with the water crisis for endangered trout . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister. We're wandering a bit off topic. It's a little bit disturbing that you don't want to answer a question as to why the target of 17 per cent of recognized, protected, and conserved areas has been removed. I guess Albertans can draw their own conclusions because you certainly didn't provide an answer.

Now I want to talk about another item from the business plan. The '20-23 plan had the following key objective, 3.2:

Local and issue-based land use planning ensures all Albertans can enjoy and appreciate parks and public lands, including through creation of the capital region Big Island Provincial Park and development of public lands backcountry outdoor recreation, education and management plan.

Now, this objective has been entirely dropped from the '21-24 business plan. Can the minister explain what impact this will have on the proposed Big Island provincial park?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, we are still committed to Big Island provincial park. Again, the business plans have changed under the Treasury Board and Finance format to be streamlined, and that is the format that they have done. To read into that that somehow . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate you confirming, then, that you're committed to Big Island provincial park. However, Big Island provincial park planning was allocated \$3.5 million over three years in the 2020-23 capital plan, but it doesn't appear at all in the '21-24 capital plan. What's going on with capital spending related to Big Island provincial park?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Just as we're pulling the information on capital spending, I do want to quickly go back to the 17 per cent question, Mr. Chair. I know the hon. member doesn't want to hear the answer, but, again, to be clear, protected areas: there's more than one way to protect landscapes besides just doing protected areas. Our province is 60 per cent public land. We work in partnerships with everybody from grazing leases to those who work with provincial parks to be able to conserve some of the most beautiful landscapes within the province. Again, to be clear, that commitment remains in place despite the fact that Treasury Board and Finance has a different way of being able to report on business plans.

When it comes to Big Island provincial park, again, we still remain committed to Big Island provincial park. Your question is: how much capital would go in this year?

Mr. Schmidt: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Jason Nixon: So \$1.4 million.

Mr. Schmidt: One point four million dollars this year? Which line item does that correspond to in the government estimates? Also, can you confirm where in the capital plan, in the fiscal plan that appears?

Mr. Jason Nixon: You bet. Line 7.5 is where it is in the budget, and that's on page 92, Mr. Chair, under capital grants.

Mr. Schmidt: Capital grants. Why is this a capital grant and not a capital investment?

Mr. Jason Nixon: For Big Island provincial park, we are working with partners, including First Nations communities in the area and the city of Edmonton.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you very much for that.

I want to go back now to the business plan. The '20-23 business plan had key objective 3.3: "Engagement and consultations with stakeholders and the public maintains or improves operations and visitor enjoyment of Alberta parks and public lands." That objective is not in the '21-24 business plan. Does this mean that the department will no longer be consulting with the public when it comes to future changes to parks?

Mr. Jason Nixon: No, that's not what it means. Again, Mr. Chair, as I've been very clear on, Treasury Board and Finance has changed the way that the business plan format has gone into place in this year's budget. That does not mean that work does not continue to take place. Again, I would be happy to talk about lots of the consultations taking place. But what I can tell you also is that public consultation remains a priority of the department and is taking place all the time. In fact, right now we're out consulting on climate all across the province. That's going very well. There are lots of different examples like that. But just because Treasury Board and Finance changes the format of their budget does not mean that the department stops doing the work.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you.

The business plan from '20-23 had a performance measure on the number of Albertans who are satisfied with the quality of services in parks and protected areas. That's also been taken out of the business plan. Is that no longer important to the department?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, Mr. Chair, we are in a spot where Treasury Board and Finance has switched the format for the budget. If the hon. member wants to read into that that somehow that means the department has stopped their work on that important issue, that is completely and utterly ridiculous. Have a look at the line item when it comes to provincial parks, which is fully funded, including an increase from last year. We have 20 new conservation officers, 10 new FTE park employees, we continue to invest in capital within our provincial parks system, and we continue to see record numbers of users inside our provincial parks. We will continue to fund it.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you.

The business plan, of course, also has removed tracking the metric of the number of people who have visited provincial parks. Why would you remove tracking this metric? Isn't it important to know how many people visit provincial parks on a year-to-year basis? Isn't this something where we should be investing more money in data collection? I know that the optimized parks plan that was advanced by the department last year claimed that that was a data-driven exercise. However, when pushed on the matter, there wasn't enough data to support that information. Shouldn't it be important to the department to improve its data collection systems when it comes to visitors to our parks?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, first of all, Mr. Chair, all ministries will continue to track the previously reported measures internally to assess whether the government is achieving those desired outcomes, so they still are tracked. Like I said, Kananaskis, for example, has seen a million more visitors than Banff last year alone. But, again, Treasury Board and Finance has streamlined their approach to the business plans to ensure a greater emphasis on performance measures, which also helps to drive change and continuous improvement in program performance. But that does not mean that the departments have stopped doing work that is not within the business plan performance objectives.

Mr. Schmidt: No, but it does mean that you won't be reporting to Albertans on that, which I think is rightly concerning to many Albertans.

My next question is related to line 7.1 on page 91 of the government estimates. Parks operations are being cut by \$3 million from last year's actuals as well as from the '19-20 actuals. As the minister has rightly noted, we saw a record number of visitors to parks last year. We expect that again this year. Why isn't the minister responding to this demand by significantly increasing this particular line item?

7:50

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, line 7.1, according to my documents, is \$3.7 million higher than the 2020-21 budget, which, broken down, is a \$5 million increase to Parks' dedicated revenue for various increased camping fees and a \$1.3 million decrease for reduction in salary, wages, and benefits, which is how you come to that total.

Mr. Schmidt: In the minister's opening statements he mentioned that Parks was getting 10 full-time equivalents. Which line item will those be paid for out of?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Line 7.1.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Just to be clear, then, you are spending \$3 million less this year than you actually spent last year, yet you're going to increase the number of FTEs by 10?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, the '21-22 estimates are \$3.7 million higher than the '20-21 budget due to a \$5 million increase to Parks' dedicated revenue, and, yes, there's a \$1.3 million decrease for reductions in salary, wages, and benefits, as identified by our labour mandate.

Mr. Schmidt: Sorry. Did you have an answer that made more sense there, Minister, or were you sticking with that first attempt?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yeah. Mr. Chair, again, we are increasing, over top of what we budgeted last year, our estimates for park operations, line item 7.1, by \$3.7 million, which is significant, over top of what we budgeted the year previously, and we are adding Parks employees, 10 FTEs. The reality is that when it comes to the Parks budget, we do see an increase from fees and other issues that take place through the year. Last year there were unprecedented numbers from COVID. We may see that again. We think that we're pretty close with our estimates again, but if we are over the top of those estimates . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Mr. Chair, I got the answer that I needed from the minister. Thank you.

Now, line 7.4, parks and public safety, is increasing by \$2 million. In his opening statement the minister said that he's going to hire 20 FTEs. But I have heard concerns from people that this money is going to be spent primarily on enforcement officers who are cracking down on people to pay the increased and newly introduced user fees. Is that true?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, I've provided a breakdown of the 50 FTEs in my opening statement. I'm happy to do it again. There will be 20 conservation officers, 20 new public lands employees, and 10 park employees that are front line. Again, I reject the premise of the question, Mr. Chair, that the hon. member would refer to our conservation officers in that way. They work tirelessly on the landscape. Something that I have heard for years was the need to be able to increase conservation officers on the landscapes. Our

conservation officers do everything from help with bears, direct people to the places that they want to go, help people that get lost, go out when people have lost their lives on the landscape, help be able to return bodies. They do significant work on the landscape beyond enforcement.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister, for that answer.

I want to move on now. Can the minister provide in writing a list of the work that was completed last year and the outstanding items that are scheduled to be completed this year in the South Saskatchewan and lower Athabasca regional plans' parks implementation budget? Can the minister provide that in writing to the Legislature?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, I need more details on what the hon. member is referring to. It's a pretty general comment.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, in the capital plan there is a specific line item for parks implementation in the South Saskatchewan and the lower Athabasca regional plans. Sorry. That was in last year's capital plan. I'm just wondering if he can provide an update on the projects that were completed and the projects that were intended to be completed as those things move forward, because there was still money in the budget for those.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, Mr. Chair, is it last year's capital plan or this year's capital plan? We'll need a little bit more information than just randomly going through the documents. What are you looking for, hon. member? We're happy to help.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I would refer the minister to page 142 of the capital plan. The Parks' lower Athabasca regional plan implementation has \$6 million estimated for this year. The South Saskatchewan regional plan has \$14 million budgeted for this year. This has been an ongoing project. I'm wondering if the minister can provide a detailed list of the projects that were completed as a result of last year's budget and the projects that are slated to be completed that are funded through this year's budget.

Mr. Chair, if he could provide that list of projects that have been completed and are slated to be completed in the Legislature. That's what I'm asking for.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, we're in estimates right now, so that'll help us to be able to make sure that we're talking about what the hon. member wants to talk about. My understanding of the breakdown, if I have this right, of that capital program was \$12 million in capital funding for the parks operation division implementation of the South Saskatchewan regional plan, supporting delivery on the commitment for major upgrades, expansion, and new park developments within the South Saskatchewan region. I don't have \$14 million right in front of me, so I'm not sure if we're talking about the same thing.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, it's listed as \$14 million on page 142 of the government's capital plan.

Mr. Jason Nixon: This year's capital plan or last year's capital plan?

Mr. Schmidt: This year's capital plan.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Sorry; I couldn't hear the hon. member.

Mr. Schmidt: This year's capital plan.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Okay. So it's this year's capital plan. Just a moment ago it was last year's capital plan.

Yes. We have the list right here, Mr. Chair, now that we're on the same year: the Ed Gregory stewardship days land division project, the Great Divide Trail build improvement land division project, the off-highway trail improvement land division project, the Peppers Creek trail remediation and reroute land division project, the snowmobile trail improvement land division project, the public land SSRP projects land division project, the Beaver Mines campground revitalization project, the highway 774 livestock fencing program, the main access improvement, the grazing infrastructure improvement, the marina refurbishing project in Cypress Hills-Medicine Hat, the replacement of the wastewater lift stations in Elkwater, the trail system construction phases 3 and 4 in Cypress Hills provincial park, the Castle equestrian campground, the Cypress Hills mountain bike trails, the Hoodoo Trail refurbishment, the playground and trail refurbishment in Writing-on-Stone provincial park as well as development, planning, and assessment for the Elbow Valley wastewater treatment system replacement, the Chinook Lake PRA main access road improvement, the Dinosaur provincial park concession building renovation phase 1, and lastly, the Castle program staff capitalization within the South Saskatchewan regional plan.

I'd be happy to provide you what constituencies those are all in, too, if the hon. member would like.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister, for that answer.

Now, one park in the South Saskatchewan region, Big Hill Springs provincial park, is currently under threat from potential sand and gravel pit developments. I have a copy of a letter from the Parks department urging the local municipal government to not proceed with these projects and to in fact create a buffer zone around the park to protect it from these projects. The county refused to do so. Can the minister commit to creating a buffer zone around Big Hill Springs provincial park to save it from the negative impact of sand and gravel pit development?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, Mr. Chair, if the hon. member is referring to something in the budget, I'd be happy to talk about it.

In regard to Big Hill Springs provincial park, what I can confirm is that there's been no application provided to Alberta Environment and Parks at this stage. If a project like that was to apply, it would have to go through the environmental enhancement act as well as the Water Act. Again, there's been no application that has been submitted to Alberta Environment and Parks.

There are two regulatory processes for the type of project that the hon. member is referring to. One is through municipalities. We certainly respect municipalities' ability to do their own land-use planning and their bylaws, but that does not mean that they can override our process when it comes to water safety and other issues on the environment. If there is to be an application on those projects, it'll go through our vigorous regulatory process, and we'll see what the merits are of that project. If there are concerns about that project, where it does not meet the law or causes environmental concerns, it will not receive approval.

8:00

Mr. Schmidt: You won't be following, then, the suggestion from your own staff to create a buffer zone of no development around the park. Thank you for confirming that, Mr. Chair, to the minister through you.

Now, last year in the capital plan . . .

Mr. Guthrie: Point of order.

The Chair: Point of order noted.

Mr. Guthrie: Under 23(h), (i), and (j). The member has a tendency here to do the insult hit and run, where we use some sort of insulting language and then move on. The minister here on many occasions is having to go back to correct the member, and the member doesn't like that. I think that perhaps if we would just exhibit a certain amount of professionalism, stop with the insults and imputing the unavowed motives that continue to come from the member – I don't think there's a question that's been asked in the last 30 minutes that hasn't had that. If the member would go through the chair and make corrective actions, I think that would be appreciated by every member here tonight.

The Chair: Thank you.

Anybody from the opposition?

Mr. Eggen: By definition, the member I don't think has a point of order around the suggestion that he did make. I know that it's important for us to be careful with our time. We have a lot of questions that we want to get through, but we have to make sure that we're getting what's best for Albertans. You know, betwixt those two things I think that we can find a way to move forward and continue with what I think has been a very rigorous and productive estimates so far.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

I am prepared to rule on this. I was almost prepared to step in and caution the member on a couple of occasions. At one point you made a comment that the minister has not shown a commitment to transparency, things like that, just little jabs. You're kind of walking a fine line on it. I'm not going to agree with a point of order at this point, but if we continue down this path, I will call you to order.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for your guidance.

I want to move on now. The William Watson Lodge was allocated \$500,000 in last year's capital plan. Now, it's not specifically broken out as a separate line item in the capital plan this year. What's happening with that project?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, again, just to go back to Big Hill Springs, to be extremely clear, the regulatory system with Alberta Environment and Parks would make determinations when it would come to a project like that on public lands. Mr. Chair, you may not be aware that the provincial park that the member was referring to: there is no and – I want to stress this – there has been no gravel pit project being proposed when it comes to that parkland, and there would not be a gravel pit allowed in that area. With that said, though, Alberta Environment and Parks has a significant regulatory process. Nobody has applied to build a pit inside that area, but I do trust the hard-working people within the regulatory department of Alberta Environment and Parks to be able to go through that process and follow the law to the T.

In regard to William Watson Lodge, Mr. Chair, where the question was looking for – was the hon. member looking for a breakdown of the project or just the total number?

Mr. Schmidt: No. Just an update on the project. It was specifically listed in the capital plan last year; it's not specifically listed as a separate line item in the capital plan this year. If the minister could just please provide an update on what's going on with that project.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, it is inside the capital plan. Oh, actually, two seconds. I have good news for the hon. member. The reason it's not in the capital plan for the following year is because the project is complete.

Mr. Schmidt: Excellent. Thank you very much to the minister, through you, Mr. Chair, for that update.

I want to turn now to line 3.1, land policy. Now, land policy is getting a \$100,000, approximately, reduction from last year's budget. We know that land policy is concerned with regulating and developing policy around coal mining in Alberta. We know that the government is seeking to massively expand coal mines in Alberta, and I'm wondering if the minister can tell us how the budget in line 3.1 will be spent in fulfilling Alberta Environment and Parks' obligations with respect to coal mining regulation in Alberta and whether or not Alberta Environment and Parks will be leading the land-use planning issues involved with coal mining in Alberta.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Just to go back to the previous question to provide a point of clarification, the project is being completed. There is a small portion remaining within this budget year of \$714,000, but it's expected to come online this year.

To the land-use planning, Mr. Chair, the ultimate responsibility for things like the 1976 coal policy or for regulating coal falls either to the Department of Energy or to the Alberta Energy Regulator. Alberta Environment and Parks does not regulate the coal industry; the Alberta Energy Regulator does. The Department of Energy makes policy when it comes to coal. If you're looking for something more specific in regard to the budget or activity that's taking place in the Department of Environment and Parks, I'm happy to answer, but both of those issues don't fall within the purview of this department.

Mr. Schmidt: Just to confirm, then, land policy won't be doing any work on coal mining. The Land Use Secretariat, which appears on line 8: none of the work conducted by that will be related to developing policy around coal mining. Integrated planning, lines 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3: none of that is going to be spent on developing policy related to coal mining in Alberta. Is that correct?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, the policy, when it comes to coal mining, within the government falls underneath the Department of Energy, and they are regulated by the Alberta Energy Regulator. Yes, Alberta Environment and Parks takes the lead when it comes to land-use planning on the landscape. If you have a specific question about an area of the province, I'm happy to try to answer that for you. But to be very, very clear, the Alberta Energy Regulator regulates the coal industry and the Department of Energy sets coal policy in the province of Alberta.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you.

Now, line 3.2, public land management, is receiving an \$11 million increase. I assume that's to pay for the 20 FTEs that are being added to the department. Is that correct?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Line 3.2: that's a combination of two things, Mr. Chair. The first is a \$6.5 million increase for the digital regulatory assurance system, the DRAS, as we refer to it, and a \$4.5 million increase for the trails act and camping fees.

Mr. Schmidt: The 20 FTEs in public lands that the minister referred to in his opening comments: which line item or line items will those be paid out of?

Mr. Jason Nixon: It would be paid out of that line item.

Mr. Schmidt: They are. Okay. Is the intent, then, to use those FTEs to primarily manage random camping and OHV use on public land? Is that the intent of those additional FTEs?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, that will be one of the roles that those FTEs would help with. So will the 20 conservation officers that are being added on for enforcement across our whole system. Those land officers would work on more things than just random camping, but random camping would certainly be one of their processes, being new boots on the ground to be able to help monitor that and to enforce issues around that.

Mr. Schmidt: I thank the minister for that.

Now, line 5.3, wildlife management, is being cut by approximately \$8 million. Now, how does this \$8 million cut support the need to protect threatened and endangered species, like whitebark pine, grizzly bear, cutthroat trout, and bull trout, that are being threatened by the massive expansion of coal mines that the government is planning?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, again, first off, Mr. Chair, let's deal with the accusation that the hon. member just made against the government. To be clear, there are not massive coal mines being planned by the government of Alberta and, certainly, nothing within the estimates that he could refer to that would show that. It's a completely and utterly ridiculous allegation from the hon. member.

8:10

To be clear, though, when it comes to that line item, 5.3, and the decrease that is in it, that has to do exactly with the issue that I discussed in my opening remarks, where we have decided to cut out the middleman when it comes to caribou restoration. A \$6.6 million net decrease in caribou management dedicated revenue is primarily a result of funding that will now flow directly from the industry, which is the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers in this case, to the Alberta caribou habitat recovery program, which is administered by the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta. Alberta Environment and Parks will still remain in charge of how that money will be spent on the landscape and to make sure that it is spent in an appropriate way and that the landscape restoration that takes place will meet our requirements, but we're cutting out the middleman for that funding and sending it directly to the restoration source. To be clear, there is no reduction, just a reduction of it flowing through Alberta Environment and Parks and going straight to caribou instead.

Mr. Schmidt: This new association that the minister referred to: will this be set up as a delegated administrative organization?

Mr. Jason Nixon: It's not a new association, Mr. Chair. Again, what's taken place in the past is that the money would come through industry into Alberta Environment and Parks, and then Alberta Environment and Parks would flow it to the organizations involved to be able to spend it on approved habitat projects. The Alberta caribou habitat restoration program is largely administered by the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta, addressing legacy footprints on the landscape, and it remains a government priority for us to continue to work in partnership with this organization as part of our section 11 agreement with the federal government when it comes to protecting woodland caribou inside our province. Again, there's no reduction in money going towards caribou, and there's no reduction elsewhere within the fish and wildlife line item except for that item, which means, again, that there's no reduction to fish and wildlife.

Mr. Schmidt: How will the department report on the spending related to caribou management, and how will Albertans be assured that the money is being spent appropriately?

Mr. Jason Nixon: I'm happy to have Deputy Minister Yee take you through that.

Ms Yee: Thank you for the question. FRIAA, the organization that does the work, produces an annual report, that they have to provide back to us. We provide the governance over the projects that need to be completed and administered, and all of that is reported back to us in terms of the money spent, the projects that were undertaken.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much for that.

I want to go now to integrated planning operating expenses. Overall, integrated planning is being cut by approximately \$400,000. What does the fact that fewer dollars are being planned to be spent on this function mean for land-use planning in Alberta, specifically the North Saskatchewan regional plan?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Not all land-use planning would be within this line item, first of all. I will point out subregional plans, that have taken place across the province, that you would find elsewhere within the budget process, including you, Mr. Chair, who has gracefully chaired one of the subregional planning processes that we've had taking place when it comes to caribou in northern Alberta. I thank you for your efforts. That's just one example of subregional planning that's taking place elsewhere in the province.

When it comes to line item – I assume, Mr. Chair, that the member is referring to the entire segment. Does he want 6.1, 6.2, or 6.3?

Mr. Schmidt: Rolled up. All of section 6 receives an overall reduction from last year's budget. How will that impact land-use planning? If it doesn't come out of that line item, can the minister please provide an update on the North Saskatchewan regional plan, when that will be completed, and what line items from the budget support the completion of that regional plan?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, the adjustments on that line item are about .3 for reductions in salaries, wages, and benefits for 6.1, and for 6.2, again, it's .3 lower for salaries, wages, and benefits identified within our labour mandate as our department works to find efficiencies.

Specifically on the North Saskatchewan regional plan, I have no update today for the estimates process. We continue to work on planning all across the province, and it takes years to be able to complete all of our plans. But we are currently working on furthering designated industrial zones with the North Saskatchewan regional plan – of course, before the hon. member decides to do a press release and say that that's in the eastern slopes, it's not; it's on the other side of the North Saskatchewan regional plan – as well as supporting stakeholders in effective land management such as the Edmonton metropolitan region growth plan, modernizing our land stewardship and Crown land management tools when it comes to the North Saskatchewan regional plan. We also talked about Big Island provincial park just recently, also within the North Saskatchewan regional area, which is requiring significant land-use planning to be able to implement. So there is lots taking place, not just on that.

Some of the other big key issues when it comes to regional planning at the moment that we need to turn attention to as a department is that the lower Athabasca regional plan is due for its review in this fiscal year, and that work will have to start as well as, again, as I said, work around habitat restoration projects. The significant work that's going in to start regional plans for caribou: we've been able to work through three task forces so far, but there are 15 herds within the province that require . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Sorry to interrupt.

We'll now move on to a 20-minute rotation for government caucus. Who is going to be leading off?

Ms Issik: I will be leading off.

The Chair: Member Issik, please go ahead.

Ms Issik: We'll go back and forth if that's all right.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Issik: Minister, thanks so much tonight for being here to answer our questions. First of all, I just want to talk about one of the recently announced plans, the Moose Lake access management plan. Minister, in the estimates on line 3.1 – the line item is land policy – it's my understanding that this line deals with policies related to rangeland management, land conservation, reclamation, and remediation, and we know that the Moose Lake access management plan has been an ongoing project for many years, that you've really worked hard, along with others, to make sure that it's come to fruition. I'm just wondering if the amount of money to reclaim – I believe there are 550 kilometres of seismic lines within this project that, again, are going to need to be reclaimed. Can you tell me if the funding for that is in line 3.1 of the business plan? I believe that's on page 1.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Chair, thanks to the hon. member for a great question. No, actually, line 3.1 does not involve activities associated with MLAMP. But you are correct. There are 550 kilometres of seismic line restoration that we are working towards as a result of that. The anticipated cost of that is approximately \$8.5 million, and we're committed to completing that work over the next four years. The portion of that funding which was already allocated, \$4 million, is part of the fiscal year and then concludes at the end of March 2020-21. The remaining funds, \$4.5 million, will be allocated over the next four years as the project progresses.

Ms Issik: Thanks so much for that, Minister. I appreciate it.

Minister, this is a follow-up again on Moose Lake. Can you tell me if this agreement requires adjustments to the regional land-use plans, and would those changes be covered by the – I believe there's an \$11 million increase on line 3.2 over the budgeted and forecasted in 2020-21. In this year's '21-22 budget there's an \$11 million increase. Can you tell me if that applies to adjustments for regional land use that would be associated with the Moose Lake access management plan?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yes, Mr. Chair, I can. That line item would include approximately \$470,000 in anticipated costs to support monitoring, footprint tracking, and operational expenses for the technical advisory committee associated with the Moose Lake action plan. As for whether or not it would have impact on regional planning, we would anticipate that as the review takes place when it comes to LARP, the lower Athabasca regional planning, as a whole, ultimately the Moose Lake plan would be adopted as part of the LARP regional plan.

8:20

Ms Issik: Thank you so much for that, Minister. I'm just going to turn from Moose Lake. It was really quite an accomplishment to complete that, so congratulations on that, and congratulations to all the partners that worked so hard with you on that.

I'm going to turn to something now that's a little closer to my home constituency. Fish Creek provincial park is contiguous to my constituency, along with many other Calgary constituencies. It's the

provincial park in the city of Calgary, as I'm sure most people know. Minister, I remember being at Fish Creek park in August, where we talked about a partnership funding agreement with the Friends of Fish Creek, and I believe it was for \$480,000 over three years. I just want to basically touch base to find out how that program is going, that the funding is in place for the next couple of years, and how the Friends of Fish Creek park is progressing.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yeah. Thank you again, Mr. Chair and to the hon. member, for the question. I enjoyed being at that announcement with her and several of our colleagues about what is really a great organization that's worked tirelessly to help protect and to educate people about what is kind of one of the most unique provincial parks within our system, completely within the city of Calgary, and I know is important to her constituents and to Albertans and particularly to Calgarians.

We did give the Friends of Fish Creek \$480,000 over four years, I believe. I'm just checking that. Yeah, \$480,000 over four years. It's towards education and trail maintenance. If you know the Friends of Fish Creek provincial park, they do a lot of education work. Hon. member, you and I got to see some of the work that they were doing there as well as the work that they're doing to upkeep trails within the provincial park.

This was a platform commitment, to be able to put more money towards volunteer and nonprofit organizations and park societies, and the only park society that was actually named within the platform commitment was the Friends of Fish Creek as an example of the type of organizations that we're trying to work with. That's just one of many. There are excellent organizations all across our provincial park system, but that's a great one and a great example of the 170 provincial park partnerships that we depend on to operate our system.

Ms Issik: Thanks so much for that, Minister.

I'm going to cede some of the rest of this time to another member, I believe Member Yaseen.

Mr. Yaseen: Well, thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for you and your staff's hard work to put together this amazing budget. I have a couple of questions, and I know you've kind of talked about it in your opening remarks as well. The first one is around FTEs, full-time equivalents, and I would refer to page 182 of the fiscal plan. I think the number is going up from 2,032 to 2,100, a total of 68. My question to you is: how has the tabled mandate affected the department's FTE allocation, and where will these additional FTEs be allocated?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, the overall FTE number will increase by 68 in 2020-21. Fifty of those FTEs will come straight from a projected increased revenue from things like random camping fees, off-highway vehicle fees, and increased campground fees. Of those 50 FTEs that will be front line – I should say that 50 FTEs of the 68 will be front-line employees, again keeping with a platform commitment of putting more boots on the ground – 20 will be conservation officers, and 30 will be recreation management in the field. The breakdown of those 30 is 20 for public lands and 10 for provincial parks.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Minister.

Also, looking at page 87 of the estimates – I see that this is kind of overall a budget estimate – I note that there is a downtrend in spending from \$598 million in 2019-2020 to \$588 million in 2020-2021 and a further reduction to \$556 million. There's a downtrend here. How has your ministry found the capacity for these

reductions, and has there been any effect? What I'm worried about is delivery of services for Albertans and our environment.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thanks for the question. The reduction from 2019-20 to 2020-21 was achieved through tightening of the belt with continued efforts to reduce discretionary spending and anticipated reductions in manpower through attrition. The reduction for 2021-22 will be achieved through adjustments of our funding models with industry in order to achieve better effectiveness and efficiency. Instead of industry paying government and government then paying to complete the work, we are simply taking government out as the middleman.

That is what I was referring to, Mr. Chair, with the hon. member in regard to caribou habitat restoration. That money would have normally flown from the industry into government coffers and then immediately went out to our partnership organizations who are doing the habitat restoration. Part of what we have done with this budget is cut out that middleman and that administrative process to get the money directly to those on the ground doing the habitat restoration.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Minister.

On the same page, page 87 of estimates, I see that the forecast for 2020-2021 is about \$129 million higher than the budget of \$588 million. Can you please share what the cause is of this additional spending?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Absolutely. The \$129 million increase in that budget is largely due to the approved spending to support Alberta's economic stimulus plan. Some of the approved projects include Emissions Reduction Alberta programs; the shovel-ready challenge; the partnership intake program; the energy savings for business program; the energy efficiency and carbon capture utilization and storage program; the methane emission reduction program; the methane technology implementation program; the methane emission management program; the climate resilience program; the Alberta community resilience program; the watershed resilience and restoration program; the adaptation resilience training program; the oil sands innovation fund program; Alberta Innovates TIER economic recovery programs; carbon capture and storage capital projects, including the Quest project and the Alberta carbon trunk project; \$5 million for the land trust grant program; \$5 million for the land purchase program to go towards habitat restoration; and \$27.6 million in capital to carry forward from 2019-20 for provincial parks capital maintenance, the South Saskatchewan regional plan implementation, the lower Athabasca regional plan implementation, the Castle provincial park, William Watson Lodge's upgrade, whirling disease management, fish culture capital maintenance and renewal, and the Raven Creek brood trout hatchery.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you very much, Minister, for that detailed list.

I will now pass it on to my colleague MLA Guthrie for his questions.

Mr. Guthrie: Thank you. Through the chair, thank you, Minister. Just a couple of quick questions here on page 91 of the estimates. I guess first is kind of a general comment. I note there that, you know, operating expenditures, in most cases anyway, are estimated to be lower pretty much across the board, with a few exceptions. If we look at, say, line 1, ministry support services, it indicates there's a spending reduction of almost \$300,000. As a general comment, how are you going to manage all of these changes, I guess, across multiple expense categories, and then where specifically will these

savings be found under ministry supports, and what kind of effects do you expect this to have on the ministry operations?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, the reductions for ministry support services in these estimates we anticipate will come from the overall labour mandate in government. The best person to speak in greater detail about the overall labour mandate is, of course, the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board, but we do not anticipate that this labour mandate will impact our FTEs when it comes to front-line work or to the ministry's operations.

Of course, we as a department, just like all other departments in government, are committed to dealing with the unprecedented fiscal situation that we find ourselves in, but at the same time we've also recognized that there are key areas within the department of environment where we have to be able to make sure we have boots on the ground and front-line staff. That's what we ran on and promised Albertans we would do. We've talked a lot about those 50 FTEs, Mr. Chair, and getting new conservation officers out in the field. That was a key part of that platform. I think what you see with this number is Alberta Environment and Parks doing our role, just like all other departments, to help deal with the fiscal situation but also recognizing that there are some critical areas, particularly on the ground, outside our provincial park system, around public lands, where we have to be able to make sure that we're fully staffed to be able to help protect these important landscapes.

8:30

I think what you're seeing here, Mr. Chair, is the department walking that line very, very well and getting the boots on the ground in the right spot and then finding efficiencies elsewhere within our department, particularly on the administration side through the labour mandate, to make sure that we can fulfill all of our objectives and help balance the budget or help ultimately deal with the fiscal situation.

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. Great. Thank you.

Through the chair again, on the same page, line 6.3, under environmental emergency response, there's a very small difference there from last year's budget and forecast to this year's estimate. I mean, it's an important category. I'm just wondering if you could explain why there is a difference there. Are there some efficiencies, attrition? What's the reason for that?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yeah. The difference on line 6.3, I believe, is \$31,000, Mr. Chair, if I have this right. The hon. member is exactly correct. That's part of finding efficiencies and savings that we anticipate from the overall labour mandate of government, again, though, finding efficiencies in spots that we don't think take away the direct services that Albertans and/or the environment and/or wildlife, water, air, or conservation efforts need.

Mr. Guthrie: Well, thank you.

Chair, I'll cede the time to MLA Loewen.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister, for being here today. I just have a few questions here. In the estimates document, page 93, line 2.3 of the capital investment indicates a significant estimated expenditure of \$950,000 related to air quality management. Can you share what this expenditure is related to and why there were no funds allocated to that same line item in 2020-2021?

Mr. Jason Nixon: The line item itself was about replacing a number of existing systems that were outdated and incapable of meeting the air monitoring directive requirements. That would have

been done, if I have this right, in the previous fiscal year. The equipment has already been replaced and so would not be needed to do this year because it was done last year.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much.

Then, also, obviously air quality is very important to Albertans. I see on page 91 of the estimates document, at line 2, a \$360,000 reduction in spending on air policy, air partners and stewardship, and air quality management. How will these savings be found, and how will outcomes regarding air quality be affected by this reduced spending?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, the reduction in the air program, Mr. Chair, is an estimate of the savings anticipated from the labour mandate again. We don't believe, again, that it will affect FTEs and will not affect the air monitoring or the services that we provided Albertans.

I should go back to the original question he just asked once before. Mr. Chair, the hon. member just asked to provide a little bit more clarity to that. The department was able to fund the initial stages of the project for the existing systems that were outdated for air monitoring, but we did require support for future years to complete the project. That's how those line items line up.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much.

This reduction: will this be reduced spending with air partners, or how will that affect them?

Mr. Jason Nixon: We do not anticipate a reduction or that those reductions will have any impact on our partners when it comes to air.

Mr. Loewen: Perfect. Okay. Thank you very much, Minister.

I'll cede my time to MLA Turton.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Minister, for being here today.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: One and a half minutes.

Mr. Turton: Okay.

I guess this is my first question. I have a couple more in the next round, but to kind of kick-start us off here is on page 91 of the estimates document, line 3.2. It says that the estimated expenses for public land management are almost \$11 million over last year's forecast. Minister, I guess I'm wondering: can you please explain what the reason is for this increase and what problems or initiatives will be funded from this line item?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, \$6.5 million of that are for the new DRAS system. It would take me more than a minute to explain, so I hope the hon. member comes back to it because it's worth talking about. The other \$4.5 million in that item are associated with the new trail act fee and the new random camping fee, which we've been talking a little bit about this evening.

Again, that was a platform commitment that we ran on, to put in place a new system that would be able to help create revenue for much-needed maintenance and enforcement when it came to important sensitive areas like our eastern slopes, where large amounts of random camping and off-highway vehicle use are taking place. This was the difference between us and the former government, Mr. Chair, who wanted to proceed with large land closures to the public. We instead put together a platform and ran on it to say that we don't need to close this; Albertans should have

access to their backyards. But we do need to create a dedicated revenue stream to be able to help maintain these important lands.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Minister.

That concludes the government members' first block of questions.

We now move to five minutes of questions from the Official Opposition, followed by five minutes of response from the minister. I assume you wish to combine that time?

Mr. Schmidt: I would love to.

The Chair: Then we will take a very quick five-minute break following that.

Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. Performance measure 2(a) on page 44 of the business plan says that the percentage of provincially priced greenhouse gas emissions has been downgraded from 63 per cent in last year's business plan to 59 per cent in this year's business plan. Why has the target been lowered?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, the intent of the targets in the 2021-2024 business plan were to reflect the new information about which conventional oil and gas and smaller facilities have requested to be covered by TIER. The impact of the pricing coverage through the TIER program was previously estimated since program details were still under development and cabinet confidentiality. Targets will continue to be revised since the outcomes of the 2020 compliance year will not be known until after the June 30, 2021, compliance deadline.

Mr. Schmidt: Is it fair to say, Mr. Chair, that the target is actually what the government achieves, and then the target is developed based on what the government achieves? It's like throwing a dart and then drawing a ring around the dart to show that you hit it?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, the situation is that the TIER process involves the 167 large emitters that are in our province, but at the same time that we created the new technology innovation and emissions reduction program, we created a way for conventional oil and gas facilities to opt into Alberta's regulatory regime and not into the federal regime. Our regime was achieving the same results, which is why we have an equivalency agreement with the federal government. It actually is saving industry money, and we wanted to provide an opportunity for nonlarge emitters to have a choice between being regulated by the federal government or being regulated underneath the provincial regime. That takes time to be able to figure out because there's no way that the department could fully anticipate which conventional oil and gas facilities are going to choose to participate in TIER and which are not.

So they make an estimate, and as you can see, it's – I would say that 63 and 59 per cent: it doesn't look like they did too bad of a job. Then they'll see where it is when the end of the compliance period is here. To be clear, though, those facilities that choose not to go underneath the technology innovation and emissions reduction program would still remain underneath the federal backstop and still would be regulated.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you.

The '21-24 business plan has also removed four different performance measures related to greenhouse gas emissions. Now, I note that one of the key supporting initiatives in outcome 2 is spending \$107 million from the TIER fund to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. If greenhouse gas emissions are no longer a

performance metric, what performance metric will the government of Alberta use to demonstrate to Albertans that these TIER funds have been invested wisely?

8:40

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, as has been said lots this evening, Treasury Board and Finance has decided to put in a new business plan format. The fact that we are following that format as a department in no way reflects on what we consider a priority. I would submit to you, Mr. Chair, that the significant amount of investment that took place last year through the technology innovation and emissions reduction program and is going to take place yet again this year shows the significant commitment that we have to climate, to managing emissions inside our province. In fact, as you know, Alberta was the first jurisdiction that regulated emissions inside our country, and that's something that we should be significantly proud of.

Again, we have a system in place where you cannot know the full participation as a result of what's taking place because we are giving conventional oil and gas facilities an opportunity to participate within technology innovation and emissions reduction programming and our regulatory regime within the province of Alberta. At the same time, our 167 large emitters have to participate in our program inside this province. That changes differences within modelling for the department that you will not know till the end of the compliance year because we will not always know which conventional oil and gas facilities have chosen to go through the TIER regime and which conventional oil and gas facilities have chosen to go with the federal government.

Mr. Schmidt: Key objective 2.2 has added the terms "industrial zones" and "economic corridors/nodes" to the same key objective from the '20-23 business plan. Can the minister define those terms and explain how that will impact provincial policy related to greenhouse gas emissions?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Just to provide some clarity, just to make sure, Mr. Chair, that we are following the hon. member, I think he's referring to something that has nothing to do with GHG emissions, but I just want to make sure that we did not mishear him. You're referring to 2.2 within the business plan?

Mr. Schmidt: Yes. That's correct. If I was referring to greenhouse gas emissions and that was a mistake, I'm happy to be corrected. Provincial policy related to industrial zones and economic corridors and nodes: can you define those terms, how the department will define those terms, and what impact on policy, including those in the key objectives, that will have?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, dedicated industrial zones are a unique regulatory framework and efficiency approval process which we are working on. The previous government did some work on it as well; that is my understanding. It creates dedicated zones that go through the regulatory process in advance on many issues that then create an efficient process for environmental regulatory process to take place and provide certainty for investors not to have to do that individually each and every time. When it comes to conservation efforts, our government ran on a platform commitment to encourage and increase the use of development credits and conservation offsets in provincial policy. We want to support regulatory certainty with transparent and clear policy to enable the use of offsets to resolve land-use conflicts, and we're continuing as a department to do policy work on that. We'll have more to say as that progresses.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you to the minister for that answer.

Now, page 117 of the fiscal plan states that Alberta will invest \$1 million from the TIER fund on a series of programs promoting Alberta's strong environmental, social, and governance reputation. Now, I'm wondering if the department did any analysis to weigh the spending of \$1 million on these ESG promotions against actually holding industry accountable and assuring the public and the broader world that Albertans are living up to their environmental obligations with respect to greenhouse gas emissions and cleaning up industrial sites.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Our province and our country spend a significant amount of resources, rightly so, to be able to monitor and regulate the industry, including through the Department of Energy, Alberta Environment and Parks, and the Alberta Energy Regulator in addition to federal regulators. I reject the whole point of this question, Mr. Chair, that the hon. member in some way is saying that any government does not regulate or take seriously the need to be able to make sure that our energy industry is following all environmental rules. We continue to do that. There's lots of stuff within this provincial budget as well as within the Alberta Energy Regulator budget that makes clear that that is a top priority of the government.

With that said, the Alberta energy industry is the largest employer and the largest producer of GDP both within the province of Alberta and the country. It has unfortunately had significant things said about it world-wide that ends up impacting its ability to be able to get our product to market, which, in turn, impacts the men and women who work in the Alberta energy industry every day. Certainly, Alberta's government will continue to make sure that the facts are clear on what our energy industry does.

With that said, when it comes to this line item that you're referring to within the budget, this is about showing the tremendous amount of work that goes into making sure that our energy industry and other industries are well regulated and showing the great conservation work that is taking place by the government of Alberta and by Albertans, showing all of the significant environmental work that takes place . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your answer.

Will Environment and Parks be in any way involved in the public assurance on the spending of that million dollars? Will any reporting on the ESG reputation initiative be done to Alberta Environment and Parks? Are any conditions being set from the department on that money, or is it just being handed over to Executive Council to do with as they please?

Mr. Jason Nixon: To be clear, all money associated with the budget process falls underneath the budget process. It's transparent. We're debating it here. It will be debated in the Chamber. The budget itself falls underneath Auditor General requirements, and as you know, the government answers to . . .

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt, Minister.

We will take a quick, five-minute break. It will be the fastest five minutes this evening, so please pay attention.

[The committee adjourned from 8:46 p.m. to 8:52 p.m.]

The Chair: Thank you very much, everyone. We'll return with 10 minutes of questions from the government caucus. Go ahead, Mr. Turton.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you again, Minister, for coming out here. I have to say that I'm very excited to

know the rest of your answer, and just to kind of give a reference, we're talking a little bit about page 91 of the estimates document. You started explaining about the public land management. You said that there were a couple of items that you really wanted to tell me about, and I'm anxious and excited to hear about that, Minister, specifically about the increase over last year's forecast of \$11 million.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, I'm excited to tell you about it, hon. member. As I said, the breakdown of that line item is \$6.5 million towards DRAS, which is what I asked to talk to you about in this segment. Just a quick recap: the other \$4.5 million was around random camping and trail access fees. But when it comes DRAS, we've been working really hard within the Department of Environment and Parks to make sure that we can modernize our regulatory system. We see it as one of the main ways that we can help spur economic growth while still protecting the environment. Large portions of the department were still very much paper based. That's why we all saw situations like our constituents waiting three years sometimes for grazing leases or upwards, in extreme cases, of seven years for water licences.

We've been working through that process with the Alberta Energy Regulator and have been able to, by modernizing the computer systems, maintain the same regulatory requirements and the same environmental objectives but have been able to speed the process up to be able to create stability within the investment community and make sure that we can put people to work just by using modern technology. Within this budget we'll be upgrading our regulatory system to proper computer systems to be able to make sure that we can do our job as the regulator of many issues like sand and gravel, water, grazing, and many other issues within the department of environment.

Mr. Turton: Excellent. Well, thank you very much for the comprehensive answer, Minister.

I guess my next question for this segment – I have to admit that this is something that I get actually very excited about – has to deal with recycling. As you know, Minister, I love talking about EPR and recycling and how to, you know, prevent or decrease diversion to landfills. My question specifically has to deal with page 43 of the business plan. It talks about recycling, especially packaging and plastics, and it talks about how it's an increasing problem facing municipalities and the environment. As you know, Minister, I have a long history in waste minimization on a municipal level. The questions I have are: what funding is dedicated to developing solutions to this problem, and can you confirm that these funds are allocated on page 45 under land?

Mr. Jason Nixon: We're committed to moving forward with EPR or a circular economy. That's something that I know, Mr. Chair, the hon. member has worked really hard at. I appreciate his help being able to reach out to stakeholders, particularly municipalities, as we've worked on this important file. You'll see within the natural gas strategy, that has been brought forward by Energy through the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity, that we committed to a circular economy. To be able to do that, we have to move forward within the department of environment to create a recycling program to accomplish that, and EPR is the way that we would go. Within that line item there is \$0.6 million that is dedicated to the important work of recycling in the lands program.

There is other work taking place with our partners, particularly with RMA and AUMA, and we're out right now consulting, as the hon. member knows. We intend to move forward with our commitment on a circular economy over the next several months. I

anticipate that you'll see some legislation that will bring the final version of that into play sometime within this fiscal year, likely within the fall. We'll have more to say in the coming days as we complete that consultation process.

Mr. Turton: Well, thank you for that, Minister. I will just say that on this note – and your enthusiasm for this is quite obvious – I can tell you, at least from my conversations with stakeholders, they're quite excited about the pragmatic solutions that you guys are talking about in your department.

That's all that I have for now. At this point I'd like to turn it over to MLA Singh. Thank you very much for your answers there, Minister.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, MLA Turton, and thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here tonight. I want to applaud the minister and all the officers and staff of the ministry for all their hard work in ensuring a balanced, helpful ecology and sustainable future in our parks. In the estimates document on page 91, line 4.1, water policy; line 9.1, environmental science, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting; and line 6.3, environmental emergency response, are all seeing slight decreases in funding. Ensuring safe water is of utmost importance to Albertans. How will water quality outcomes be affected by these slight reductions in spending?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the hon. member for the question. It's an important question. To be clear, it's like a few other issues that are within the budget. The anticipated savings with all those line items are about savings that we anticipate through the overall government labour mandate. I know that the Minister of Finance spoke about that at length during his estimates, but we do not anticipate any reduction within the overall objective when it comes to water monitoring or air monitoring as a result of that change, again, through efficiencies and making sure that our resources are going directly on the ground to be able to make sure that we're monitoring.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister.

Alberta has seen significant loss resulting from unprecedented flooding in the last decade. Can the minister discuss the plans related to capital spending on flood adaptation on line 4.4 of the estimates document, with spending anticipated at \$7.6 million?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, the \$7.6 million in capital investment for flood adaptation, which is in line 4.4, is for the Bow reservoir options project, which supports Environment and Parks' commitment to improving community flood resilience. When it comes to flood mitigation within the city of Calgary and within that region of our province, it requires mitigation projects like, of course, the Springbank project, which you're familiar with, but also it would require a project on the Bow River to be able to accomplish the full mitigation impacts for the city of Calgary. The department continues to evaluate project options on that particular river, and that's what that line item funds, the research and the work to be able to put together what option would be best for the province of Alberta when it comes to the Bow River.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for your response, ensuring safe water is being provided to Albertans while water quality outcomes are maintained. I appreciate the initiatives as funded for flood adaptation.

Mr. Chair, with that, I will turn it over to MLA Getson.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Getson.

9:00

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Chair and to my colleague from Calgary-East. Minister, thanks again for taking time out tonight to let us grill you on these items. You know, the work your department does is much appreciated.

I'd like to jump into fish and wildlife management if I may. Looking at the estimates on page 91, Minister, line 5.2 I believe, I notice that you're estimating that your spending on fisheries is going to be down by about \$200,000. Given the increases we've seen in Albertans fishing in the lakes and rivers, how is your department actually planning to spend less on fisheries management? I'm hoping it's through efficiencies and, you know, better utilization of resources, but I'm just guessing.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, Mr. Chair, the hon. member is correct. We don't anticipate an impact to front-line work or to fisheries. Again, the efficiencies are about \$200,000 on that line item, and they are being found through the overall labour mandate from the Department of Finance and Treasury. We know that it won't affect FTEs, and we're very proud of the work that we are doing when it comes to fisheries inside the province.

This government has invested in every hatchery across the province, the first time for many hatcheries in decades, and continues to do groundbreaking work to be able to make sure that we can protect important species like Westslope cutthroat down south while at the same time increasing harvest opportunities for Albertans who want to catch walleye. That, of course, is going to be significantly impacted by the upgrades to the Cold Lake hatchery that we announced last year, to be able to go back in and restock in areas where Albertans want to harvest walleye and be able to enjoy eating them, which is something that has not taken place much inside this province.

There's a lot of work going on when it comes to fisheries, something that I am very passionate about, as you know, and again we don't anticipate any significant decrease to FTEs or to the work that's taking place on the ground as a result of that \$200,000 worth of efficiencies.

Mr. Getson: I appreciate it, Minister.

Again, the next line item is 5.3 in the estimates document, page 91. As well, under wildlife management we see the decrease of about \$6.5 million. Will a large reduction like this impact the ability to protect our wildlife and manage our resources?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Not at all. In fact, this is not a reduction at all to wildlife. What that \$6.5 million is – and we've talked about it a few times tonight, Mr. Chair – is that that \$6.5 million is coming from industry, in this case CAPP and their investment in helping to restore . . .

The Chair: My apologies, Minister.

We'll now move on to, I assume, a 10-minute back-and-forth block with the Official Opposition.

Mr. Schmidt: Yes, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. Go ahead.

Mr. Schmidt: On page 118 of the fiscal plan there is a table that refers to TIER funds that shows that \$125 million of TIER funds will be allocated to deficit reduction and the Canadian Energy Centre jointly. Can the minister break down the amount allocated to deficit reduction and the specific amount allocated to the Canadian Energy Centre?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, Mr. Chair, actually, I don't know if we did talk about this yet this evening. The Canadian Energy Centre is not within the Department of Alberta Environment and Parks budget. Minister Savage's budget, through the Department of Energy, handles the Canadian Energy Centre. My understanding is that she'll be here for estimates tomorrow, and she will be able to discuss that with you in detail. The Canadian Energy Centre is not funded through the Alberta Environment and Parks budget.

Mr. Schmidt: So you have no control over the TIER funds whatsoever?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, I have a budget where I get portions of technology, innovation, and emissions reduction into my budget, as do several other departments within government, including Alberta Energy, who has carbon capture projects, the Canadian Energy Centre, and other things they use TIER funds for that meet the mandate of the TIER program. We also do work with Alberta Innovates, that is doing work with organizations on emissions reduction. But, again, I do not fund within the department of environment the Canadian Energy Centre. That is through the Department of Energy.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. On the same page, then, the amount available for future carbon capture projects cumulative is estimated to be \$73 million this year, escalating to \$227 million in '23-24. Why is that amount just sitting there unallocated over the next three years?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, our platform commitment when it came to the technology, innovation, and emission reduction program – I'll just remind the hon. member if I could, Mr. Chair – was that the first \$100 million plus 50 per cent of every other dollar thereafter would go towards technology and innovation through the TIER fund. Not all of it would go through the department of environment. It would be shared with other departments like Alberta Innovates and Alberta Energy.

One of the technologies that was identified was carbon capture, utilization, and storage. In recent days we've been doing significant work with the federal government and others on carbon capture. We do see it as a significant way forward when it comes to emission reductions and helping to be able to meet our environmental objectives in the province. Mr. Chair, you'll see that there was an announcement the other day celebrating a significant amount of emissions that have gone into the carbon trunk line here inside the province of Alberta, and we're going to continue to work towards that as a government. Lots of that will be done within the Department of Energy. As that is an approved technology, putting money aside to be able to help deal with our end of carbon capture, utilization, and storage is a priority of the government, and you see \$75 million there on the line item being dedicated to go towards projects like that in the future.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Just confirm my understanding, then, Mr. Chair, if the minister could, that you're essentially setting aside \$73 million a year to put towards carbon capture and storage projects. Is that essentially what you're saying?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Correct.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you for that.

Now, has the Ministry of Environment been involved with any projections related to how many greenhouse gas emission reductions will be achieved by those projects?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, the carbon capture utilization projects of the future are works-in-progress, so we wouldn't be able to give you solid numbers on those at the moment. We have done work where we can show you the emission reductions of projects that we've already funded. For example, the total of \$958 million – we would refer to it in row 53 – will be invested out of the TIER fund over the next three fiscal years and is anticipated to result in between five and eight megatonnes of greenhouse gas emission reductions per year for many years to come.

Mr. Schmidt: What are the ministry's estimates on the cost per tonne of greenhouse gas reduction from carbon capture and storage?

Mr. Jason Nixon: The work that is taking place when it comes to carbon capture, utilization, and storage is ongoing, including work with the federal government and with the industry. What we do know is this. We do need carbon capture, utilization, and storage for our industry to be successful when it comes to emission management. It's not the only solution, but it is going to be one of the solutions that is needed, and that's why our government is pursuing it. Again, I don't have hypothetical numbers for projects that are in the evaluation stage.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. But, I guess, help me understand why the department has set aside \$73 million allegedly for carbon capture, utilization, and storage when you have significant experience with a whole host of greenhouse gas emission reduction investments. What is the value that Albertans will see on reducing greenhouse gases with respect to carbon capture and storage compared to other investments in technologies that the government has already made?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, a typical carbon capture, utilization, and storage project, Mr. Chair, requires between \$80 and \$200 per tonne captured over the life of the project for it to be viable. Again, individual projects require different evaluations. If the hon. member is referring to a specific project, we'd be happy to answer questions on that. Having said that, there's no specific project for carbon capture, utilization, and storage being funded through the Alberta Environment and Parks budget, so I would encourage him to be here tomorrow for the Minister of Energy's estimates because her department is funding carbon capture, utilization, and storage projects.

Mr. Schmidt: The minister gave me the range, and I appreciate that. So how does that compare to the cost per tonne of other investments that have been made through Emissions Reduction Alberta, the things that the minister's department is investing in?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, I'd rather not rush that number. I'm not sure if I have that number in front of me, but I would be happy to provide the hon. member the range per tonne, just like we did for carbon capture, utilization, and storage, for projects that we have completed over the last fiscal year.

9:10

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Minister. I would appreciate that.

Now, with respect to job creation, because one of the stated goals of TIER, certainly in departmental announcements and those kinds of things, has been to create jobs, what's the range of jobs that are projected to be created from this carbon capture and storage, and how does that compare to the jobs that have been created from other greenhouse gas emission reduction investments that the department has made?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, over three years the TIER investments are estimated to support 5,400 jobs on their own and about 13,000 jobs when put together with industry partnerships when those funding sources are brought together. Specifically for individual carbon capture, utilization, and storage projects, again I refer you to the Minister of Energy.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you very much for that.

I want to turn now to section 11 of the estimates. The Surface Rights Board has no budget this year. Can you explain why that's the case?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yes, Mr. Chair. That's because the Surface Rights Board is underneath the Department of Municipal Affairs. This causes some confusion sometimes because the act is underneath the department of environment. The department of environment would pay for surface rights payments and oversee the act, but the board itself is underneath the Department of Municipal Affairs. I don't recall the year, but at some point it was merged with a Municipal Affairs board.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you for confirming that, Minister.

On page 97, then, related to amounts not required to be voted, quasi-judicial bodies are forecast to have spent almost \$45 million in fiscal 2020-2021. How much of that money was spent on Surface Rights Board payments?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, just to confirm that we're talking about the same thing again – I heard page 97 – what line item are you referring to? Are you referring to the anticipated cost of this year, of this budget, or are you asking about last fiscal year?

Mr. Schmidt: The budget 2020-2021 forecast for quasi-judicial bodies on page 97 is \$44.7 million. How much of that was paid out in Surface Rights Board payments?

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt. Perhaps we can catch the answer to that question in the next round.

We'll now move to 10 minutes for the government caucus members. I believe, Mr. Getson, you have the floor.

Mr. Getson: Yeah. I appreciate it, Mr. Chair. Minister, we got cut off there just a little bit. I was looking at line 5.3, a \$6.5 million reduction. The quick question I had was: was that going to impact the wildlife resources? Will it significantly impact or reduce the ability to enforce aspects of wildlife management?

Mr. Jason Nixon: No. It will have no impact on the work that the government does with wildlife. In fact, money being invested within wildlife does not go down at all within this budget. What happens is that \$6.5 million from that line item from the previous year was paid for by industry to go to restoration partners for the restoration of woodland caribou habitat. What we chose to do this year was to cut out the middleman, take that money and give it directly from the industry to our partners that do the restoration. Alberta Environment and Parks remains in charge and still has our say as far as the process in making sure that that habitat restoration is done the correct way, but we're skipping the administrative process of moving industry money through the government taxpayer books into industry, who are doing the restoration.

Mr. Getson: I appreciate that, Minister.

With that, I'll turn my time back over to my colleague from Calgary-East again.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, MLA Getson.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister. On page 91 of the estimates document line 7.1 deals with parks operations. I would be curious to know where you attribute finding nearly \$3 million in savings.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, on this line item there are anticipated savings throughout the overall labour mandate that's been brought forward by government. We do not anticipate any changes to the actual boots that are on the ground. In fact, when it comes to parks, we are increasing boots that are on the ground as far as FTEs and services that are on the ground. The reduction comes from the overall directive from the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance when it comes to overall labour efficiencies.

Mr. Singh: We know that now more than ever Albertans are spending time in our provincial parks and recreation areas. After last year's public outcry about potential closures of Alberta's parks, can you provide details about how this spending in the government estimates document, page 91, line 7, will be allocated across the province and how these funds will support visitor experience in Alberta's parks?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, thanks to the hon. member for a great question. You are correct. There was a lot of fear being spread across the province by certain individuals and certain groups that somehow our provincial parks were being shut down. Nothing could be further from the truth. No provincial park was shut last year outside of natural disasters, like floods, or safety maintenance that had to take place in certain provincial parks. We anticipate that our entire provincial parks system will be up and operating fully this year, again, outside of – sometimes there are different locations that need maintenance for safety purposes, or different types of events, particularly flooding, may take place, and the department has to shut them down briefly for safety purposes.

We do anticipate that the full system will be open. There'll be a mix of reservable sites and first-come, first-served, just like every year. Comfort camping will be offered for 2021 inside Dinosaur provincial park. There are going to be great opportunities for Albertans to come enjoy our provincial parks system from north to south, east to west. Through you, Mr. Chair, to the hon. member, I can assure you that Albertans are going to come and enjoy it. We've already seen double the amount of reservations on the opening reservation day for our provincial parks system. One of the benefits of COVID – and there ain't many – is that Albertans are seeking out their own backyard and finding out what a beautiful place we call home. Our department will be ready to do what we can to be able to make sure that they have a safe visit and to enjoy the beautiful backyard that belongs to them.

Mr. Singh: On page 91 of the estimates document, following up on that – the visitor experience is very important to Albertans when they visit parks – why is there a reduction on line 7.2 of \$128,000, and how will the visitor experience be affected by that reduced spending?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, like several other line items when it comes across the entire provincial budget, that \$128,000 comes from overall savings from the full anticipated labour mandate changes within all of government that comes from the department of Treasury. We don't anticipate a reduction in FTEs when it comes to the provincial parks system. In fact, we are increasing our FTEs this upcoming year.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for answering.

With that, Mr. Chair, I will turn it over to MLA Getson.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Member Singh.

Minister, again, it looks like page 91 is going to be getting a workout here. Estimates document, page 91, line item 7.4, parks public safety and security: Minister, can you please give us a brief outline of what that line item deals with and then what the rationale is for an increase on that line for just about \$2 million?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, the increase is for parks creditor recovery funding due to anticipated increases in campground occupancy rates and minor fee adjustments. The parks public safety and security program is responsible for the conservation and protection of Alberta's natural resources and Crown lands through the provisions of education, prevention, public safety, and conservation enforcement services. The program supports all elements related to conservation, protection, enjoyment, and use of Crown land, including the Alberta parks system, and conservation officers contribute to provincial enforcement activities by working closely with other compliance and law enforcement organizations, with the Department of Justice and Solicitor General, and with federal partners such as the RCMP.

I would also note, Mr. Chair, that the program includes a public safety component. The Kananaskis public safety program is a team of public safety specialists, which is conservation officers and the Kananaskis emergency services dispatch, who work closely together to perform a variety of prevention, education, backcountry search and rescue as well as avalanche forecasting functions within Alberta's eastern slopes.

Mr. Getson: I appreciate that, Minister.

You've already kind of mentioned that right now because of COVID and the limited distancing, et cetera, you know, a lot of folks are going to be hitting the parks. Page 91, line 7: the estimates see \$81 million in spending; there's an increase of \$5.4 million over last year's budget. Park operations, public safety: the raises are \$3.7 million and \$2.1 million respectively. What's the reason for these increases, sir?

9:20

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, the same reason as the last increases. They're anticipated from an increase in parks and recovery funding due to anticipated increases in camping as well as minor rate adjustments that we've talked about previously this evening.

Mr. Getson: I appreciate it, sir.

With that, I'll turn it over to the MLA for Calgary-North.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, MLA Getson, and thank you, Minister. My question is on page 92 of the estimates. This is line item 9 under operating expense. I see that overall this item is going up by \$600 K, from \$69,419,000 to \$70,019,000, so about \$600 K it went up. At the same time I also see, under 9.1, environmental science, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting being reduced by \$317,000. I am just wondering: what is the increased estimated spending intended for, and why will there be a reduction in spending on monitoring? What outcomes will be affected by the reduced operating on monitoring?

Mr. Jason Nixon: The oil sands monitoring program work plan will increase, actually, by \$1 million. This is because the program previously reprofiled \$1 million in operating budget to capital investments for an equipment purchase as part of the work plan. That was completed in 2020-21. That increase of \$1 million is offset by a small reduction, again, of savings that are anticipated from the overall labour mandate of government. Again, there's no anticipated reduction of FTEs when it comes to monitoring.

Mr. Yaseen: Thank you, Minister.

I will give my time to MLA Issik now.

The Chair: Go ahead, Member Issik. You have just under a minute.

Ms Issik: Thanks so much. I'm going to stick on page 92, just to draw your attention to 10.2, where we saw a \$93.4 million increase in 2020-21 in the forecast. Then again in this year's budget we see another \$93 million estimated. I'm hoping that you can just describe to us what the purpose of these forecasted funds was, what the extra spending was for the previous year. Why is there a significant fund increase in the 2021 budget?

The Chair: Sorry, Minister. Perhaps we can catch that answer in the next round.

We'll now move on to 10 minutes for the Official Opposition. Do you wish to continue with the back and forth?

Mr. Schmidt: Yes, please, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Schmidt: I'd like to give the minister the opportunity to answer my last question, about \$44.7 million spent on quasi-judicial bodies. How much of that was Surface Rights Board payments?

Mr. Jason Nixon: The surface rights compensation projected spending in 2021 is \$44.7 million, so all of it.

Mr. Schmidt: All of it was related to Surface Rights Board payments?

Mr. Jason Nixon: That's correct.

Mr. Schmidt: How much of that was related to delinquent lease payments?

Mr. Jason Nixon: I don't know if the breakdown is like that. I mean, the reality is that when you're dealing with surface rights payments, they're all section 36 payments, so I think there's no breakdown like that. The reason you see an increase like that, Chair, this year is because of the work Alberta Environment and Parks and Municipal Affairs did to be able to get the Surface Rights Board enough staff and resources, which is being funded through the Department of Municipal Affairs, to be able to allow landowners to have their time in front of the Surface Rights Board. Previous to that, it was taking upwards of three years for landowners to be able to get to the Surface Rights Board is my understanding, so the government prioritized being able to make sure that landowners could get in front of the Surface Rights Board, that the Surface Rights Board had enough resources to be able to accomplish their responsibility for Albertans. As a result, you're now seeing those surface rights payments be able to catch up for Albertans.

Mr. Schmidt: Some portion of that money is outstanding payments from oil and gas operators primarily is my understanding. What percentage of the money that was paid out in Surface Rights Board payments that is recoupable from oil and gas companies was recouped in the 2020-2021 budget year?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, Mr. Chair, to the hon. member, all of those payments are section 36 payments.

Mr. Schmidt: Yes. Perhaps the minister didn't – perhaps I didn't make myself clear. The Surface Rights Board makes payments to landowners when an oil and gas lessee has not made their payments. The idea behind section 36 for the Surface Rights Board is that the

government pays the landowner, and then the government is supposed to recoup those payments from the oil and gas company. How much of those payments has been recouped by the department?

Mr. Jason Nixon: I'm going to check with the deputy, Mr. Chair. I'm not sure if the recouping function is done by Alberta Environment and Parks or by Municipal Affairs or how that works. I'm not aware of that within our budget documents. It may be something we need to talk about with Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Schmidt: So is it fair to say that \$44.7 million walks out the Environment and Parks door but Environment and Parks isn't concerned about getting any of that money back when it's owed to the government?

Mr. Jason Nixon: No. That's not what I said, Mr. Chair. Again, the hon. member trying to put words inside my mouth is not appreciated. What I said is that the Surface Rights Board is managed by the Department of Municipal Affairs, and we pay the surface rights payments, which is \$44.7 million. At no time did I say that the Alberta government as a whole was not concerned with collecting the fees.

Mr. Schmidt: But it's coming out of the minister's budget. I guess I'm wondering: what role, if any, does the minister have in making sure that his budget is made whole by recouping that money from delinquent oil and gas companies?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, the Surface Rights Board is run by the Department of Municipal Affairs, not by the department of environment. The department of environment is responsible for making section 36 payments but not for the management of the Surface Rights Board, so your question would be better taken up with Minister McIver, who is the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Schmidt: Remarkable. Remarkable. You know, Albertans want to know when they're going to be paid the \$44.7 million back. Of course, the minister knows that the time for Transportation estimates has expired, so I guess Albertans will continue to have to wait.

I want to turn now to a performance indicator in the business plan, that the number of interprovincial and international transboundary river water quantity and outflow obligations will be met. That was removed from the budget. The department got into some hot water earlier, in 2020, when it arbitrarily and unilaterally disavowed an agreement with the Northwest Territories. What assurances will the people of Alberta have that Alberta Environment and Parks will meet all of its interprovincial, interboundary water obligations with our bordering jurisdictions?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Just quickly back to Minister McIver, who I would not ask that question, hon. member, at the Ministry of Transportation's estimates. Again, you should ask at Municipal Affairs or possibly at Treasury Board, Mr. Chair, who would deal with issues of that kind. Again to the hon. member, I understand your frustration. We're trying to help you, but I would suggest that being better prepared maybe for previous estimates might help you be able to get answers to the questions when you want to talk to previous departments.

In regard to your question about the monitoring arrangement with Alberta and Northwest Territories there was no agreement broken between us and our partners in the Northwest Territories. I know that it is something that you continue to say, but that's not factual.

Do you have a question actually about the budget, though?

Mr. Schmidt: Well, my question was: what assurances can the minister give to Albertans that we will fulfill all of our interboundary water obligations with our provincial neighbours, our territorial neighbours, and our American neighbours? That performance metric has been removed from the business plan. How will Albertans know that we're keeping our promises to our neighbours?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, Mr. Chair, we have not stopped keeping our promises to our neighbours. It's disappointing for the hon. member to say that we did when we did not. The department of environment did not shut down any monitoring. I've spoken to the minister of environment in the Northwest Territories, provided him assurances that, unfortunately, the fearmongering that was coming from the NDP at that time was not true. Again, Mr. Chair, if the hon. member has a question about the budget, feel free to ask it.

9:30

Mr. Schmidt: I want to go to line 9.1, environmental science, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting, on page 92 of the government estimates. That line item spent \$600,000 less than budgeted in '20-21. Was this related to the suspension of monitoring activities due to COVID?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, was the member asking for forecast or previous year?

Mr. Schmidt: I'm asking about the difference between the '20-21 budget amount of \$20,419,000 and the 2020-21 forecast amount of \$19,844,000. What was that reduction due to?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Again, that reduction is due to a decrease in forecasts for in-year savings to be achieved by vacancies and reduced discretionary spending and no anticipated reduction in services.

Mr. Schmidt: Was any of the reduction in discretionary spending related to the suspension of monitoring activities related to COVID?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, again, there was no suspension of monitoring activities in the department of environment, so the answer to that question is no; none of that is from that.

Mr. Schmidt: Line 9.2, then again comparing the '20-21 budget number of \$49 million to the '20-21 forecast of \$42,914,000. You mentioned reprofiling some of the money to capital spending. What were the other reductions related to?

Mr. Jason Nixon: On that line item the 2020-21 forecast is \$6.1 million lower than the 2020-21 budget due to a decrease in the 2020 OSM total work plan, which was projected to be \$43.9 million, with \$24.2 million funded from other revenue. Industry will be billed for that \$18.7 million. I will also add that we also did some increased monitoring for the feds, who did not suspend monitoring as well.

Mr. Schmidt: Can the minister provide a list of what projects were not completed, then, in the '20-21 budget year? Can he provide a list to the Legislature?

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt.

We will now move on to a 10-minute block for the government caucus members. I believe, Member Issik, you have the floor.

Ms Issik: Thank you so much. I'm just going to go back a little bit and repeat the beginning of my question. Minister, on page 92 of the estimates, section 10, in line 10.2, the TIER fund saw a \$93.4

million increase between the budget and the forecast for '20-21, and, well, it was increased to \$93.4 million. Then in the following year, for this year, the budget again is at \$93.4 million. I'm wondering if you can explain to us what the purpose for those additional forecasted funds was and why there's also a significant increase. This would be this year's budget compared to last year's budget, around \$42.2 million over – if you could just explain what that increase, what the purpose of those funds is.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Happy to, Mr. Chair. This is part of the overall Alberta economic stimulus fund taking money for the technology innovation and emissions reduction fund, which is paid for by large emitters, not by Alberta families, and bringing it into play to be able to meet environmental obligations and create emissions reduction while at the same time creating jobs in this unprecedented environment that our province finds itself in at the moment.

Approved projects under that line item include – and it's a very long list, hon. member – Emissions Reduction Alberta programs, which included the shovel-ready challenge, the partnership intake program, the energy saving for business program as well as industrial energy efficiency and carbon capture utilization and storage program; methane emissions reduction programs, which included the methane technology implementation program and the methane emissions management program; as well as climate resilience programs, which include the Alberta community resilience program, the watershed resilience and restoration program, the adaptation resilience training program, the oil sands innovation fund program, the Alberta Innovates TIER economic recovery program – Jobs, Economy and Innovation were partners on that – carbon capture and storage capital projects with Alberta Energy, which was the Quest project, and the Alberta carbon trunk line project. These were part of that overall TIER stimulus package that was brought forward across government.

Ms Issik: Thanks very much for that, Minister. That's quite a list.

TIER is intended for emissions reduction technology, and I'm just wondering, within that list, because you were going through it pretty quickly there: is there any funding that's flowing to programs that are not within the intended scope?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Yeah. Mr. Chair, all funds from TIER are required to flow to programs and grants that are within the allowable uses of the emissions reduction climate resilience act, that sets out the TIER fund, and the planned expending under line 10.2 fully complied with that act.

Ms Issik: Thanks so much for that answer, Minister. I really appreciate it.

I'm going to cede some time over to MLA Singh, please.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, MLA Issik, and thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister. On page 92 of the government estimates line 11.2 is the Surface Rights Board. This year there is no funding whatsoever. Please explain why that is.

Mr. Jason Nixon: As we were just talking about with the member from the Official Opposition, Mr. Chair, the administration of the Surface Rights Board and the Land Compensation Board is under the Municipal Affairs budget. It was an amalgamation process that took place before this government, I believe, even the last government. The funding that remained within Alberta Environment and Parks previous to this fiscal year was for the collection fees for the Crown debt collection process, which refers to the collection from industry for section 36, compensation payments made by Environment and Parks to landowners, and the

funding that remained was moved over to corporate services as part of Budget 2021.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for answering.

With that, Mr. Chair, I will turn it over to MLA Pete Guthrie.

Mr. Guthrie: Thank you. Through the chair, Minister, I've got just kind of three clarifications if I could get them. They're all on page 93, and I guess the first one would be line item 3.2, public land management. If you've got that there. We can see in the forecast there was \$900,000 spent; \$5.4 million was budgeted for. In the upcoming year there is a \$9.4 million spend there. I was just wondering if you could give a little bit of clarity around that line item.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Happy to, Mr. Chair. Five million dollars of that was funding for the land purchase program, that came forward as a result of supporting Alberta's economic stimulus plan. The funding returns to LPP, though, in 2021-22. The funding enables the government of Alberta to purchase privately owned, sensitive landscapes to help further our conservation and stewardship objectives. This has been taking place within our province for a long time. That's why this fund was created. A lot of significant work has been done to do major conservation work all across the province with land trust organizations, who would be associated with this process, and it's something that we're still committed to as a government.

There was also \$2.5 million that went for the watercourse crossing program to address the issue of poorly constructed and maintained watercourse crossings causing habitat issues, and then \$1.4 million for the David Thompson corridor project updates, which deal with an unprecedented year that was taking place along that highway 11 corridor going into the eastern slopes, to be able to get some infrastructure and some much-needed relief in that area to be able to help people that are recreating within that area.

9:40

Mr. Guthrie: Excellent. Thank you.

Through the chair again, line item 4.2, water partners and stewardship. Now, for this year that we're about to finish here, March 31, there was nothing in the budget. This upcoming year the estimate is showing a zero spend; however, the forecast, actually, for this year was \$1.5 million. Just wondering if you can give a little bit of clarity around what that spend was.

Mr. Jason Nixon: That \$1.5 million was funny. That was reprofiled in-year from the land purchase program for the watercourse crossing program. We have since determined that the program was a better fit under the public land management side of things, and the 2020-22 estimate for the program now resides under public land management.

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. Great.

And then the last clarification, please, Minister, is line 7.5, parks infrastructure management. We can see there that the department has allocated \$67.3 million. I was just wondering if this is pertaining to grants to support the 170 sites and partnerships out there, or is that something completely different? You know, could you just elaborate a little bit on this upcoming forecast, the change, and what that covers?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, that \$67.3 million is broken down as follows: \$45.1 million for capital maintenance and renewal of provincial parks, \$13.8 million for the South Saskatchewan regional plan implementation, \$6.4 million for the lower Athabasca

regional plan implementation, \$1.3 million for the development of Castle provincial park, and then \$0.7 million for the upgrade of William Watson Lodge.

Mr. Guthrie: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate the clarifications.

I will cede the remaining time over to MLA Loewen. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Loewen, you have about 50 seconds.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Sounds good. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Five zero.

Mr. Loewen: Pardon me?

The Chair: Five zero. Well, four zero now.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thanks very much. On page 95 of the government estimates, under the section called Expense Amounts Funded by Credit or Recovery, item 2, it deals with parks operations. The '21-22 estimates give a total of nearly \$38 million, which the explanation states is from various fees and other revenues that the park collects through the parks act, that are used to partially offset the costs of providing services. Minister, \$38 million is a lot of money. Could you tell me how much of the costs this amount actually covers in parks operations and what is the shortfall amount?

The Chair: Okay. We'll have to catch that answer on the next round here.

We'll be moving over to a 10-minute block for the Official Opposition. Just before you begin, Member Eggen made a statement about: in the best interest of Albertans, these questions. I think we're starting to drift off on to other ministries, and I think that in the best interest of Albertans let's stick to questions that the minister can actually answer.

Go ahead.

Mr. Schmidt: Again, thank you for your guidance, Chair.

Line 4.3, water management, on page 91 of the government estimates. Can the minister explain what the difference is between the \$41,682,000 that was budgeted for 2020-21 and the \$46,211,000 that is actually forecast to be spent?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, it's \$4.5 million higher, and it breaks down as follows: a \$4.8 million increase for certificate of variances for four mills, it looks like, and a \$0.3 million increase for water infrastructure dedicated revenue, which is partially offset by a \$0.5 million decrease for in-year savings to be achieved through vacancies and reduced discretionary spending and then a \$0.05 million decrease for water and waste-water certificate renewal fees.

Just quickly to go back to the surface rights question, simple answer: that process is done through Crown debt collection within Treasury Board and Finance, and that would be probably the best spot for you to reach out to. We'll also look into it ourselves to see if there's anything we can send over to you.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. I appreciate the minister committing to that undertaking.

Can the minister state how much is allocated to the watershed resiliency and restoration program in fiscal '21-22?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, that's \$3.5 million.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you for clarifying that.

Now turning to the business plan on page 45, the overall water line is projected to be reduced by some \$30 million in 2022-23 and '23-24. How does the minister expect to hit those targets?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Those are capital grants. We'll pull the list right now.

Mr. Schmidt: Just to be clear, Mr. Chair, I'm looking at expenses in water. They're estimated to be \$145 million, approximately, in '21-22, decreasing to \$115 million in '22-23, and then further decreasing to \$108 million in '23-24. Can the minister tell the committee how he anticipates hitting those targets?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, are you referring to the breakdown between \$145 million and \$115 million, or are you referring to a target that's within the business plan?

Mr. Schmidt: I'm referring to the target that's on page 45 of the business plan.

Mr. Jason Nixon: If we're on the same page, the 2023-2024 target is \$6.7 million lower than the 2022-2023 target. If that's what you're referring to, that's due to a decrease of \$6.7 million from the federally funded investment in Canada infrastructure program per the federal approval schedule.

Mr. Schmidt: No. The minister still hasn't heard me correctly. I'm referring to the line in the expenses under water. There's \$145 million in the '21-22 estimate that's expected to be spent this year. It's decreasing to \$115 million in '22-23 and then further to \$108 million in '23-24. Can the minister tell us how he anticipates to hit those targets?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Chair, it's a \$5.7 million decrease in the wetland replacement dedicated revenue, a \$0.3 million decrease for the additional reduction of salaries, wages, and benefits, as identified in the labour mandate, and a \$29.2 million decrease in capital grants as follows: \$19.1 million decrease for the federally funded investment in Canada infrastructure program per the federal approval schedule; a \$9.1 million decrease for the Bragg Creek flood mitigation project as the project is anticipated to be completed in 2021-2022; and a \$1 million decrease for the designated industrial zone pilot project as funded for the 2021-2022 year only; and a \$5.7 million increase in amortization to align with assets anticipated to be put into service.

Mr. Schmidt: I thank the minister for that answer to the question.

Now I'm referring back to the capital plan on pages 136 to 142 of the fiscal plan. In the 2020-23 capital plan a caribou rearing facility was allocated \$8.8 million over two years. That money is not specifically broken out in the '21-24 capital plan. Can the minister provide an update on the caribou rearing facility?

Mr. Jason Nixon: The caribou process continues within northern Alberta. I will happily pull the line specifically or have some officials do it in a moment. We are moving through our regional task force process that we committed to within the platform. Three of those task forces have completed their work. Those plans are now going through a consultation process and will ultimately move their way forward. We have committed to a section 11 agreement with the federal government to move forward on caribou protection as well as habitat restoration, and how the caribou rearing facility will fit those overall plans will be talked about as those plans are developed.

9:50

Mr. Schmidt: Is the facility under construction? Is there capital money allocated to it this year?

Mr. Jason Nixon: There is capital money allocated to it within the Alberta Environment and Parks budget. No, the facility is not under construction. We continue to complete the work on the caribou task forces first before we make investments to make sure that we have it done in accordance with those regional plans.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you to the minister for that answer.

Now, species at risk was specifically allocated \$1.8 million over three years in the 2020-23 capital plan. It's not specifically broken out in the '21-24 capital plan. How much money will be allocated to species at risk infrastructure investments in the '21-24 capital plan?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, we've listed some of the work that's already taking place on water crossings in particular, as we're pulling specific numbers, Mr. Chair, for the hon. member. But last year and this year we continue with significant investment into water crossings, which have to do with lots of species at risk, particularly the Westslope cutthroat. We continue our partnership with Cows and Fish, something that we ran on, a platform commitment of investing a million dollars a year with them into eastern slopes habitat protection, which are certainly for species at risk when it comes around to native trout recovery. The capital funding associated with the Canada nature funding will result in native trout habitat improvements. I'm just getting you the – specifically, it would be \$150,000.

Mr. Schmidt: A hundred and fifty thousand dollars dedicated this year?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Three hundred and fifty thousand.

Mr. Schmidt: Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars dedicated this year. Okay. Thank you. Thank you for that clarification. That money, then, just for my own clarification: is that being shown in the department capital acquisitions for fisheries management? Is that where that . . .

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, again, Mr. Chair, there's significantly more work than that line item going into species at risk. We've named a tremendous amount of water crossing work; other capital investments that are taking place all across the department when it comes to species at risk; the work that's taking place on caribou habitat, which happens elsewhere within the department, in the department of public lands, a significant investment in that issue. I point that out, an area where the previous government failed and this government was able to accomplish a historical section 11 agreement and move forward further than any government before us when it comes to the protection of woodland caribou. That takes significant investment. Elsewhere within the department, the work that's taking place on grizzly bear, for example. We just finished Dr. Gord Stenhouse's DNA work that's been taking place all across the province.

Species at risk happens within the fish and wildlife budget. It also happens within the public lands budget. It happens many places within the budget, and this government continues to invest historically in it.

One of the other special areas that is coming along . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I hesitate to interrupt.

We will now move on to the government caucus for the remaining just under six minutes. I believe that Mr. Loewen had the floor.

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Thank you very much. Minister, just before we were cut off the last time, when we ran out of time, I was asking about the \$38 million that comes in from various fees. I just wanted to know about if that covered the actual parks operations or if there was a shortfall amount.

Mr. Jason Nixon: It does not cover the operations of parks. It would cover about 50 per cent inside this current budget, fees would. So the Alberta taxpayer compensates the other 50 per cent of the Alberta parks operation. That, of course, does not include the significant work that takes place around conservation, wildlife management, land management, which does not happen within the provincial parks budget but would happen elsewhere within Alberta Environment and Parks.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister. Then just one more quick question here. In your business plan on page 43, under initiatives supporting key objectives, it states that the "operating and capital for caribou recovery planning and actions [have been] allocated \$34.8 million" this year. Can you explain what the breakdown is between capital and operating expenses? As a follow-up, what exactly is meant by capital expenses for caribou recovery?

Mr. Jason Nixon: First off, Mr. Chair, I would point out another species at risk line item that is within the provincial budget of \$34.8 million for caribou recovery; \$26.1 million of that is operating expenses, and \$8.7 million of that is a capital investment. The \$8.7 million in capital investment is for the construction of a large-scale fenced caribou rearing facility, as we were discussing earlier, as well as operating funds. That's in addition to the caribou seismic line restoration projects that will be taking place within the Moose Lake access management plan. Just another example of a significant amount of work that is taking place when it comes to species at risk.

I'd also point out the \$18 million that's being invested in watercourse crossings to help our species at risk in the fisheries area, particularly Westslope cutthroat and other endangered species, the work that I was just saying before we got cut off in the opposition's time, and the work that's taking place in the Raven brood trout hatchery just outside of Caroline, which is being set up in a way that it can help deal with a species at risk, that being Arctic grayling. There's lots going on with that. Hey, I'll throw out another one: \$5 million in the land purchase program to be able to buy habitat to be able to preserve it for species at risk. There's a lot of work taking place when it comes to species at risk inside the department. I know that's an important issue to the hon. member. I have to also thank him for his work chairing the species at risk committee.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Minister.

I will turn my time over to MLA Turton.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for coming out here tonight. I guess that for the last question I know this is an issue that you're very passionate about. On page 41 of the business plan, paragraph 3, Minister, you state that you are "working diligently to protect hardworking families and businesses from economic hardship caused by the punitive federal carbon tax by fighting for Alberta's right to make policy decisions that work for our province." Minister, in the last couple

of minutes we have here tonight, why exactly are you engaging in this fight, and why is it important to Albertans?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, first, because we promised Albertans that we would remove the consumer carbon tax and instead focus on investments with our largest industry on technology and focus on innovative ways to deal with emissions management. We're proud to have won that case at the Court of Appeal here in Alberta, and we're eagerly awaiting the results of what has taken place at the Supreme Court.

At the same time, we've also focused on regulating our largest industry here at home – that's something that we heard loud and clear from Albertans – and the industry that they wanted, so stuff like the technology innovation and emissions reduction program, which is getting the same results and has an equivalency agreement with the federal government but is saving our industry 90 per cent overtop of what would take place if they were underneath the federal carbon tax regime, or our methane equivalency agreement, which is saving hundreds of millions of dollars for industry inside of our province, again, seeing the same results in an equivalency agreement with the federal government but being able to do it in a creative way that works for Alberta's industry.

We're going to continue to stand up for our job creators in this province while making sure that they meet their environmental obligations, creating unique ways to be able to meet those regulatory requirements, and making sure that our environment is protected but also being able to make sure that those job creators can keep putting the hard-working men and women in this province to work throughout many industries.

I think I will close with this, Mr. Chair. It's not just the oil and gas industry that is impacted by the decisions of the federal government when it comes to their climate change policy; it's the fertilizer industry, the agriculture industry, the forestry industry, the

mining industry, and, of course, the oil and gas industry as well as, of course, moms and dads who are just trying to drive their kids to hockey practice. We're going to continue to find creative ways to be able to deal with the climate change file while protecting Alberta's interests against the federal government.

Mr. Turton: Excellent.

The Chair: You've got about 40 seconds.

Mr. Turton: I have about 40 seconds? Awesome.

Well, thank you very much again, Minister. I guess my question is: given all the other agreements and discussions that you're having with the federal government on various environmental issues, do you consider that the carbon tax discussion is overly antagonistic, or do you think it's separate from all the other discussions that your ministry is having with the federal government?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, we continue to have conversations, obviously, when it comes to the carbon tax, but our two governments have a different approach to this. We both believe in handling and managing our environmental obligations, but we think that the focus should be on technology and innovation.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 16, 2021, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Energy.

For health reasons, please remember to take your drinks and any other items with you as you leave.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

