



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Forestry and Parks
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 19, 2024
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-7

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC), Chair
Schmidt, Marlin, Edmonton-Gold Bar (NDP), Deputy Chair

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Participants

Ministry of Forestry and Parks

Hon. Todd Loewen, Minister

Matt Grossman, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Services

Dan Lux, Assistant Deputy Minister, Forestry

Shannon Marchand, Deputy Minister

7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

[Mr. Rowswell in the chair]

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

The Chair: I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Forestry and Parks for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025. I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record.

Minister, please introduce your officials who are joining you at the table when it comes to be your turn.

My name is Garth Rowswell. I'm the MLA for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright and the chair of the committee. We will begin to my right.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, Taber-Warner.

Mr. McDougall: Myles McDougall, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Sinclair: Scott Sinclair, Lesser Slave Lake.

Mr. Dyck: Nolan Dyck, MLA for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Loewen: Todd Loewen, MLA, Central Peace-Notley and the Minister of Forestry and Parks. To my right I have Deputy Minister Shannon Marchand. To his right is Matt Grossman, senior financial officer and assistant deputy minister of financial services. To my left is Dan Lux, assistant deputy minister of forestry, and to his left is Shane Schreiber, acting assistant deputy minister of lands.

Ms Sweet: Good evening. Heather Sweet, MLA for Edmonton-Manning.

Dr. Elmeligi: Sarah Elmeligi, MLA for Banff-Kananaskis.

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

Member Kayande: Samir Kayande, Calgary-Elbow.

Mr. Huffman: Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: Okay. A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Forestry and Parks shall be considered for three hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of time shall be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have

any questions regarding speaking times or rotations, please e-mail or message 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 anyone oppose having a break? Okay.

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

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

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

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

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

I would now invite the Minister of Forestry and Parks to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to be here to share our ministry's plan to better the lives of both current and future generations of Albertans. I've introduced the ministry representatives at the table. There are some behind me in the gallery. I would like to thank you all for being here today.

To continue to grow Alberta's economy, enhance recreation opportunities, and achieve conservation goals, we must first ensure the health, resilience, and longevity of our province's forests. Budget 2024 directly responds to last year's wildfire season, ensuring we have the personnel, equipment, and resources required to protect Albertans and our communities. As everyone here knows, Alberta's 2023 wildfire season was record breaking, with about 1,100 wildfires burning over 2.2 million hectares of our province's forests. During the crisis more than 50 communities and 38,000 Albertans were forced to evacuate.

We understand the impacts last season had on Albertans and their communities, and Alberta's government is responding by investing more than \$450 million over the next three years in our province's wildfire management program, increasing funding by over 50 per cent to enhance prevention, preparedness, response, and mitigation efforts. We have also increased the contingency fund to account for potential impacts that may result from wildfire, drought, or other natural disasters. My department's base budget provides the fixed costs associated with wildfire management, essentially the staffing, operational, and contract costs that are fixed, and ensures we are prepared for fire season and to support community prevention and mitigation efforts.

The contingency budget supports the variable costs of prepositioning resources across the province to be ready to respond to local wildfire risk. The contingency fund also supports direct wildfire suppression costs; for example, aircraft, heavy equipment, drones, sprinklers, and imported resources if we need them. All of these costs vary depending on the severity of the wildfire season.

The 50 per cent increase in the base budget for wildfire management will allow my ministry to hire over 100 new government firefighters and secure five additional contract firefighter crews, increasing the duration of our operational capacity during the day and overnight. These investments will also allow us to extend the employment of our seasonal firefighters and the duration of contract crews, expanding operational capacity at the beginning and the end of our fire season.

In addition, we will be able to purchase new firefighting equipment, secure two additional air tanker contracts and two new night-vision-equipped helicopters. We will more than double the crews available by mid-April, and our full complement of firefighters and support personnel will include 532 government wildland firefighters, 372 seasonal support staff, and 320 contract firefighters, a 20 per cent increase over last year. We are investing \$55 million in capital funding over three years to upgrade facilities and equipment that support wildfire operations. This includes upgrades to bunkhouses, camps, fire bases, air tanker bases, and lookout towers as well as new and improved equipment for wildland firefighters on the front lines.

This budget also includes capital funding of \$1.4 million over three years for improvements to FireNet. This funding will enhance Alberta's radio communications network, ensuring effective communication between fire line staff, aircraft, and logistics personnel. In addition, we will continue to upgrade our fire weather monitoring systems with \$906,000 in capital funding over three years. All of these improvements will promote effective wildfire response.

In our commitment to help Albertans and our communities take an active role in wildfire resilience, Budget 2024 allocates an additional \$12 million for the community fireguard program. This funding aims to improve wildfire suppression and containment efforts near communities and reduce the likelihood of damage to homes and property. This is in addition to continued funding of \$9 million for FireSmart initiatives. Finally, this budget makes funding provision for the procurement of additional government-owned water-skimming aircraft. These are extremely valuable assets for Alberta's firefighting efforts, and the province will be in a multiyear process of acquiring five new planes.

Budget 2024 investments reflect a measured, co-ordinated approach informed by the experience of last year's fire season. With significant investment in our preparedness and response capacity combined with targeted prevention efforts such as the early start to fire season, we are preparing for the season ahead while also planning for the long term.

Outside of these changes to wildfire funding, this year's budget largely sustains our good work in Forestry and Parks. We are continuing to provide outstanding educational and cultural opportunities, creating reliable, good-paying jobs for Albertans, and enhancing the experiences and places that define Alberta's charm. Budget 2024 prioritizes investments in Alberta's outdoor spaces with consistent, targeted funding for initiatives that enhance the health and longevity of our province's forests and public lands. This ensures Albertans have ample opportunities for camping and recreation.

Forestry and Parks continues to be an economic driver for the province. In 2022 alone forest product manufacturing contributed \$3 billion to our provincial GDP while supporting over 17,000 reliable, good-paying jobs for Albertans. That is why Budget 2024 also provides continued support for Alberta's forest industry with \$2.7 million invested in softwood lumber trade disputes. The U.S. Department of Commerce continues to impose unfair tariffs on our wood product manufacturers, and we are working hard to ensure fair market access and competitiveness of Alberta's mills. Alberta's

forest industry remains a key economic driver. We are dedicated to preserving these good-paying jobs in primarily rural communities.

Our provincial parks, public lands, and recreation areas are also significant sources of revenue, with more than 10 million annual visitors contributing over \$1 billion to Alberta's GDP and generating nearly 9,000 jobs per year. Albertans also spend \$2.3 billion on Crown land recreation annually, largely supporting local economies throughout the province. Our ministry is a leader in the government's work to foster rural economic development, and we will continue to engage with municipalities, Indigenous communities, and other organizations to ensure every corner of our province benefits from Alberta's sustained growth. Budget 2024 will allow us to build on these successes in Alberta's parks and Crown lands infrastructure, supporting high-quality, low-cost recreation opportunities for Albertans and visitors to the province.

7:10

Albertans value their trails and outdoor recreational experiences, so we are allocating \$23 million over three years for capital grants and investments for Crown land trails, including \$4.5 million in the new funding for trail upgrades in the Kananaskis area. This funding maintains and enhances infrastructure, ensures environmental outcomes are achieved alongside recreational goals, improves education, and promotes public safety.

For safety on public lands Budget 2024 includes \$2.9 million for human-wildlife coexistence. This investment aims to minimize human-wildlife conflicts and promote safe outdoor recreation and education for all Albertans and visitors.

We are also fulfilling our mandate to support entrepreneurs and other organizations in creating accessible and welcoming spaces on our province's public lands. We are proud to work alongside many provincial partners who work to improve recreation management on Crown lands, and Budget 2024 enables us to sustain this valuable work. This, in turn, strengthens rural economies and ensures responsible use of our Crown lands.

Alberta's government provides stable funding for hunting, fishing, and trapping, ensuring these important economic and cultural opportunities are accessible, widely available, and environmentally responsible throughout our province. As a lifelong outdoorsman I'm very proud of the investments we're making in Alberta's public lands. These exciting developments on our province's Crown lands are just the beginning of the story for accessible year-round recreation opportunities.

Alberta's government is investing \$91.6 million for the parks operating season, maintaining our commitment to provide Albertans unmatched opportunities and access in our provincial parks. Albertans take great pride in our parks system, and we are eager to amplify our success and visitation and satisfaction ratings by broadening opportunities and inviting more people to experience Alberta's outdoors. This funding will help us maintain strong collaborative relationships with partners, organizations, and local businesses, sparking new, exciting cultural experiences and recreation opportunities.

Our parks system not only plays a key role in the strength of our economy but also in the health and well-being of our citizens, and we want to ensure every Albertan benefits from our environment. We're improving accessibility for our provincial parks through our new Alberta Parks camping reservation system. Booking camping reservations in Alberta's parks is now simpler, with reduced wait times, expanded payment options, and enhanced browsing and booking features. Plus, Alberta Parks continues to offer 5,000 first-come, first-served campsites, ensuring no Albertan will miss out on an adventure.

Alberta's government is also working hard to expand camping opportunities province-wide. Budget 2024 allocates \$21 million in capital funding over three years for new campground and recreation opportunities development. This supplements the \$175 million investment over three years in capital maintenance and renewal projects in provincial parks and on public land, including \$8 million to upgrade waste and water infrastructure in campgrounds. These investments propel our ministry towards its mandate of building 900 new campsites over the next decade. Additionally, the investments help develop trails, infrastructure, and services to support diverse outdoor recreational opportunities in our provincial parks because, ultimately, parks are for people, and we are ensuring every Albertan has the chance to explore and enjoy our province's breathtaking natural spaces.

We consistently reinvest revenue from the Kananaskis conservation pass . . .

The Chair: Minister, we will now begin the question-and-answer portion of the meeting.

For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams. Who is going to be speaking first? Member Sweet, would you like to share time?

Ms Sweet: If the minister is willing to go back and forth.

Mr. Loewen: Back and forth. Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. You have 60 minutes to talk.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister for being here and for having your staff here as well. Just real quickly, I wanted to do a housekeeping question that I have. On page 99 it doesn't line up with page 65 of the business plan. Page 99 indicates \$197,603,000 for the total forest budget, but on page 65 of the business plan it states \$213,143,000. So there is a remaining \$16 million missing. Do we know where the \$16 million is?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. It's due to amortization.

Ms Sweet: Well, see, that was an easy answer to the question.

Dr. Elmeligi: Starting off on something.

Ms Sweet: Starting off on a good note.

I wanted to move to – we'll spend some time on wildfire management preparedness if we could. Obviously, we know we're going to be entering into a year that could potentially be a very serious fire season. I'm obviously referencing again on page 99 as well as looking at the service delivery measures and outcomes. I wanted to speak about the 100 wildland firefighters that are now going to be hired once the budget is passed. Last year what we heard was that when we were hiring up and the season had already started early in May, there were some staff that were being sent out with zero experience and very limited training. I'm just wondering. Given the fact that you've already identified that you're going to be hiring 100 new staff, what is the plan to ensure that the training is being done so that everybody that's out there is ready to go?

Mr. Loewen: That training is happening right now. As soon as we started the process to take in applications, we started with fitness testing and with the training process at that time. So far we've been working mostly on the ones previous to the 100, and we sent out another round of advertising for applications for those extra 100. Those ones will be – as we get closer and closer to April 15, then

we'll have more and more firefighters trained. They're in that process now and moving forward. We had fitness training, I believe, in early December, and then we also had one in early January, that I attended myself, too. That fitness testing was taking place at that time, and the training continues to happen as we speak. A lot of our firefighters, summer firefighters, are students, so we make sure that they can fit their training around their school schedule.

Ms Sweet: On page 64, outcome 4: wildfire management promotes safe and resilient communities and healthy, productive forest ecosystems. I want to talk a little bit about the Alberta wildland urban interface guidelines. I'm curious because one of the guidelines is that there should be an annual review after the end of every fire season. I haven't seen an updated report from last year. I'm just wondering if we can get an update as to if the review has been completed and where it is.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. At the end of every season there is a review, and there was a review this past season also. There's also an external review that takes place, especially after a season like we had this last year. That external review isn't done yet. We wanted to make sure we did an internal review so that we could make sure that we could implement changes to this coming fire season and not wait for that external review to be done. That's the situation as it is right now.

When we look at some of the things we learned, of course, it was unprecedented in its severity and scope. We had unusually hot and dry, windy conditions, and we had an early start to intense wildfire activity. I guess that's the key there, that that intensity was early enough that it got – again, it was unprecedented. That's why we decided this year to make sure that we started the fire season early but also made sure that our crews were ready to go earlier, and that way we can be prepared for an early start to fire season this year if that happens this year.

We continue to do other improvements. As we've talked about already, we have additional crews that are being hired both within the department and in contract crews. We've also worked on different parts of technology to try to take advantage of some of the newer technology for wildfire fighting.

Ms Sweet: In the guidelines one of the highlighted sections in the introduction is:

Wildland Urban interface fire operations are high-risk! All organizations participating in a deployment of the Alberta WUI Program must ensure that all applicable requirements of the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Act . . . Regulation, and Code are met and that the requirements of other applicable legislation are followed.

Given the fact that we have so many contracted students that work as wildland firefighters as well as many of the other staff that work in dispatch and many other places, I'm just wondering: given their short contract, can you update us on how the occupational health and safety code works within those contracts? As well, if there are any extreme experiences, what supports are provided when the contract ends?

7:20

I'll give you an example: emergency response by a wildland firefighter; maybe a car accident that they may respond to, which is outside of their purview, but because they're the closest first responder, they arrive on scene and may have some mental health supports required. I'm just wondering: past the contract date what kinds of supports are being provided to those staff to help process some of that work?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. When something serious happens, just as within any government organization and most companies also, the mental health of the people working on the ground is of utmost importance. When critical incidents like that happen, there's always an opportunity for those individuals to have help when it comes to that. Overall, incidents have been trending downward over the last five years, apart from the 2023 wildfire season, which has been an anomaly due to the length of the season. Psychological injury has not been adequately reported to provide meaningful numbers or trends, but the wildfire branch is working on a strategy to better track psychological incidents as well as physical moving forward to record the trends. When it comes to bullying and harassment, the complaints are reported to Alberta labour, and issues handled by talent and acquisition are not included. But, yeah, there's definitely help for those individuals, and our heart goes out to those people that end up in situations like that, where there's a serious incident that they have to be involved in.

Ms Sweet: Thank you. I'm glad to hear that we're moving towards that. I have heard from some that have worked in the field in the past that have said they haven't maybe been aware of that information, so I would just ask that if those are available, once the contract ends, maybe making sure that they know where they can go if they need that help.

Staying with page 98 – and just making sure that I am; it is the WUI report, so it's still under page 98. In the report – or I guess it's more the process – it indicates that the supports will only be provided for up to 12 hours if a municipality or a request is being made. What happens when the support is required past those 12 hours? Who pays for the support? Is it the municipality? Is it the province? When we move from the white to the green and the green to the white zones – sorry; I should clarify that. We also have people who are only contracted for up to 7.25 hours, so how does the overtime work? And then: what if municipalities are sending their staff outside of their municipal zone to help create buffers?

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Maybe I'll just start with talking about the wildland interface, which is kind of what you're referring to there. Alberta does have an exceptionally high number or a high incidence of wildland interface when it comes to municipalities and industrial sites and things like that. When a fire breaks out in a forest protection area, then Wildfire is in control of that fire and is the first on the scene for that. When it starts outside of a forest protection area, then it's a municipality that at present takes the lead in that, and we do have agreements signed with most municipalities across the province, mutual aid agreements that allow us to work with them back and forth. We provide help as requested when it comes to a municipal government handling a wildfire, and we make sure that we stay involved with that fire as long as necessary because we want to make sure that we do our best to protect Albertans' lives in their communities and their homes. So that's something that we continue to do and want to make sure that we're active on the landscape there.

We know that municipal firefighters are trained more for urban fires and structural fires, and our firefighters are more trained for wildfire, but when it comes to working together, then we want to make sure that we help each other as much as possible to make sure we fulfill that common goal of protecting lives and livelihoods.

Ms Sweet: I think that that's a good point. That's one of the feedbacks that we've heard from the municipal fire departments, that they're experts in their areas, right? We have our municipal firefighters who are very experienced in structural integrity, and

then, obviously, our wildland firefighters are very experienced in diverse landscapes.

My question is – and one of the recommendations that had come out of last year, I believe, is more of that cross-training between municipalities and the wildland. I just wonder if you can update us as to where we're at with that cross-training.

Mr. Loewen: Yes. That's a really good point to bring up. We want to make sure we have as many people trained as much as possible to help with wildfire. You're exactly right that municipal firefighters are trained very well for their structural firefighting jobs, and we will be providing opportunities for them to advance their training in wildfire also. Of course, our key part of preparation is to make sure that we have our returning firefighters with their brush-up training and also the new firefighters to get their training as a priority. Then we're happy to train others as we move into the wildfire season. Again, it's good to see the municipal firefighters and their ability and their training and their experience with fighting structural fires.

Again, our wildfire firefighters, when it comes to our unit crews, our firetack crews, and our helitack crews, are type 1 firefighters, and they provide a really good service and an experienced service to Albertans when it comes to firefighting. Actually, when it comes to firetack, we're looking at increasing their training, as they desire, to make sure that they have an opportunity to help as much as they can and maybe help when it comes to other jurisdictions requiring that help. On years when we need help, we bring in help from other jurisdictions, and on years when other jurisdictions need help, we provide that help to them. We're happy to have that agreement that goes back and forth between other jurisdictions across Canada, across North America, or even around the world. That helps us when we're in need and helps them when they're in need. It's good to have as many people trained for that as possible.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister, through the chair. Part of the collaboration between municipalities and our wildland firefighters is also the requirement, and it's found in the WUI – the PPE, so safety equipment standard. If they're responding to a wildland fire, the expectation is that the standard is met at the provincial level, which is different than what the municipal firefighters use. It's different equipment. I'm just wondering how we're ensuring, when it's an emergent response – Parkland county, for example. We didn't know it was coming, and it was just kind of there, and it grew pretty quickly. How are we ensuring the safety and also ensuring that the PPE requirements are being met for those that are coming to help?

I think, also, Minister, just because you've made comments in the past about looking at volunteer people, like community members coming to help out, too – I'm just wondering how we're going to ensure that those PPEs are available for all the people that are wanting to come out and help.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Obviously, our highest priority is the safety of our firefighters and anybody that helps on those fires. We have warehouses full of equipment that's ready to go. When we look at, for example, municipal firefighters, those are professionals, they are trained, they know their jobs well, and they will know through their command structure what's needed for PPE as they move into a wildfire fighting situation.

When we look at emergencies, when they happen, that's oftentimes when people react first and do their best to help out. That's why we wanted to develop this system where we have people that can, I guess, in essence, volunteer but be able to offer to help. That system that we brought in there requires a lower level of

training, but it still requires some training courses to be able to join in and a bit of a physical test, also, to be able to help. They'll be helping on lower grade fires and also under the direct supervision of experienced firefighters.

I understand the concern there, and that's been a concern all along, to make sure that this can be done safely. We will obviously make sure that they have the appropriate PPE when they go out in the field. Again, it's safety first. We want to make sure that we protect the lives and the safety of those people that are out helping and battling fires on our behalf.

7:30

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister.

Just staying on that piece, do we know – I've heard stories that last year there were hoses being sent out that had holes in them and that there were some issues around equipment failure. Just wondering: have we gone to the warehouse and ensured that all the safety requirements, all the certifications have been completed before the season has started? Like, are we done now? Are we ready to go and new equipment has been purchased?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. I've been to the warehouses, the warehouse in Edmonton, the main warehouse, and I've been to the Whitecourt warehouse and in Grande Prairie also. The equipment is all there. The Edmonton warehouse gathers the equipment together at the end of the season, and probably throughout the season it's bringing equipment back. They have facilities there to patch and fix and replace and rebuild just about every piece of equipment that firefighters use. It's actually amazing to have the opportunity to tour that and see what's going on there because there's so much equipment that's there. I guess I'd like to see that that equipment is being fully utilized, but, again, they go through every piece of equipment when it comes back, and they do the repairs and the fixes that are necessary. I'd be happy to take you there some time to see it yourself.

Ms Sweet: You're, like, the best minister ever. Let's go on a tour together.

Just in regard to overtime rates again, under the WUI, when any member, crew, or apparatus has [been working] longer than the operational period, as defined by the Incident Commander, [it] is eligible to claim overtime at 1.5x the rates listed in the above . . .

Oh, you don't need to see the above tables, but I have tables.

The Incident Commander must approve any hours worked over the operational period . . . [but this] does not apply to any GoA employee or municipal staff and STPS . . . will collect compensation as defined.

So I guess my question is – it's here on page 25. I'm curious: if we're saying that GOA employees and municipal staff do not qualify for the 1.5 times rate, who are we paying overtime to, then? Isn't pretty much everybody a GOA employee or maybe potentially a municipal employee?

Mr. Loewen: Like, I guess there are some contract people that would not be considered employees of the government, but as far as that overtime, we do pay overtime, so I'm not sure . . .

Ms Sweet: We should update this, then.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah, maybe. I'd have to believe that anybody that's working with government that works overtime gets paid overtime.

Ms Sweet: Yeah; it's misleading. And to be clear, this is, like, the 2023 WUI. It's the most current one I've got.

Okay. Well, that's good to know. The other piece around compensation – and then we'll move on – is that, obviously, we were still hearing from some municipalities that haven't received full compensation yet for last year's wildfire season. Just wondering where we're at on the update for that for municipalities.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. That money is paid out through DRP through AEMA, so that's actually under PSES, Public Safety and Emergency Services. My understanding is that we've announced \$175 million to DRP to support communities impacted by wildfire, but that process involves the feds to cover some of those funds, and the feds are incredibly slow and incredibly meticulous at going through the details of every invoice. That can sometimes take a substantial amount of time, but I believe we've upfronted some of the money just to kind of take some of the pressure off municipalities, and then we'll await the feds to finish it off and to fully compensate us back as government of Alberta.

Ms Sweet: Just before I move off the review, I'm just wondering: once that review is done from last wildfire season, can we have it tabled, please?

Mr. Loewen: I'll check with the department on that, and when we have that ready, then we can . . .

Ms Sweet: Thank you.

Mr. Loewen: Yep.

Ms Sweet: Great. Moving on, then. I'm wondering. Under page 99 again, under forests, 2.1, wildfire management, \$155 million. The minister has been saying that it's an increase from last year, and I guess that if you look at 2.1 for wildfire management, it is an increase from \$103 million to \$155 million, but what I would say is that 2.3, which is wildfire suppression and response, spent \$45 million last year. If you take 2.3 and you just move it up into 2.1, the math is the same. So it's not actually an increase in the budget; it's just that you've moved one line item from one section into the main line item for wildfire management. I'm just wondering if you can clarify for me how you can say it's an increase when in reality it's just a move from 2.3 to 2.1.

Mr. Loewen: The 2.3 is actually a part of the contingency. If we look at the contingency part, you'll see something to the effect of \$792 million, but the actual spend was \$739 million, so that's that figure there. That is something that wasn't there in the – well, it was for '23-24, but it's something that wasn't there in the past. Again, it was a move from contingency to that item there.

Ms Sweet: I guess my question would be: why are we not anticipating needing to spend wildfire suppression and response funding? Like, why wouldn't we put something in the line item, recognizing that we're probably going to be spending some of it?

Mr. Loewen: Again, that portion there is part of the wildfire suppression and response that you'll see under 2.3 in contingency. On page – what is that?

Mr. Marchand: It would be page 100.

Mr. Loewen: Page 100. Yeah. You see it's \$793 million, and the actual spend was \$839 million. It's just a matter of where Treasury Board and Finance has put those numbers. If something similar was done next year, there would be the same amount of money coming from contingency back into the budget.

Ms Sweet: So it's a shell game of the numbers a little bit.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Well, disaster funding versus base funding.

Ms Sweet: If we look at page 65, statement of operations – the business plan, but it's statement of operations, Forestry and Parks, page 65 – in 2023-24 it was actually a billion dollars that was forecasted, and now we're back down to \$213 million. Can you walk me through? Because the numbers, again – we say \$793 million is over here and we're saying that's contingency, but then we're looking at the forecast and the forecast is actually a billion dollars. The contingency is \$2.5 billion, but that's including agriculture and drought. Like, that's not just wildfire. I still don't see how we can spend a billion last year, we can say, well – or maybe it was \$793 million. Like, there's money missing between \$793 million and the billion dollars, also, in this piece, and then we're back down to \$213 million, which is . . .

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. The \$1 billion is the base funding plus the contingency amount. Just like has always been the case with wildfire, the base funding is the base funding, and contingency is taken care of in contingency. The base funding has increased this year, so that is something that helps us, going into the season, to be prepared. That's a benefit to helping us preprepare for wildfire season. But again, the number, the \$1 billion figure, is the base plus the contingency.

Ms Sweet: The concern that I have – and I just came out of agriculture estimates – is that there is also a significant amount – the \$2.5 billion doesn't add up to what was spent between the two ministries on contingency plus the other things. So I'm wondering: is the government just hoping that we're not going to get there, that we're not going to end up spending the contingency fund?

Mr. Loewen: I guess I'm maybe not quite understanding the question, but when it comes to contingency, that's a figure that Treasury Board and Finance has developed as their best guess – or their educated guess; I shouldn't call it a best guess but their educated guess – which is the same with all budgets. All budgets are basically educated guesses on what the expenses are going to be for the upcoming year.

That's what they've expected for contingency. As we've seen in the past, if there are expenditures beyond what is budgeted for contingency, it will be covered because it is emergency services, so we'll make sure that it is covered. Just like last year it was, it'll be the same this year if we exceed it.

Ms Sweet: Yeah. I mean, I know, like, ultimately whatever needs to be paid will get done. I just wish it wasn't always in contingency all the time. It would be nice to have bigger line items so that you could get the resources up front instead of having to react, right?

7:40

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. That's the difference between \$100 million budgeted last year and \$155 million this year. That reflects part of that right there plus the increase in capital expenditures, too.

Ms Sweet: Let's chat a little bit about fireguards and keeping communities safe. I'm keeping to a theme. I know I should share my time, but I'm really bad at sharing. Twenty-five community fireguard projects are in play right now. Is that correct?

Mr. Loewen: I'm sorry.

Ms Sweet: Twenty-five projects are currently . . .

Mr. Loewen: I don't know the exact number. I know we have about a dozen that are being worked on right now when it comes to the community fireguard program, the new program, but there are fireguards being built on the previous fireguard program that have been worked on this winter already.

Ms Sweet: So has the grant gone out? The last time I checked the website, you couldn't apply yet for the fireguard program.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I think the website is up to date, but that hasn't stopped the progress on it. The initial part of the process is for communities to identify where they feel fireguards are needed. They talk to the experts at FRIAA. They are the ones that they work with to develop those proper fireguards. That planning has been going on even without the website having the application process on it. Those communities have been – it hasn't stopped the progress continuing. With some of those programs that are being worked on right now, there is First Nations consultation that needs to be done, so that work is being done as we speak.

Ms Sweet: Yeah. Some feedback that I've heard from some municipalities – my colleague probably will bring it up as well – is that in reaching out to FRIAA, a lot of the requests to look at these programs have been referred back to the education funding. Like, it's about firesmarting, and it's about teaching your community how to do some of that stuff. I think there's a disconnect in communication around municipalities being able to access this. Just feedback; like, I don't expect an answer today. It's just that I think some municipalities are still confused about how they actually get access to the program.

Mr. Loewen: Fair enough. I appreciate that feedback, for sure, on that. I think what might be happening, too, is that some of the ideas that municipalities may have may fit better into FireSmart as opposed to the community fireguard program or the regular fireguard program, so that may be some of the disconnect. But happy to have that feedback so we can look into that.

Ms Sweet: Okay. Just recognizing I've taken half the time already, I will share with my colleagues.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you.

Ms Sweet: Oh, the Member for Banff-Kananaskis. Sorry, *Hansard*.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, my colleague from Edmonton-Manning, through the chair.

To the minister: are you okay to share time?

Mr. Loewen: Yep.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. I'm going to shift to the parks part of the file. Like, literally move all that over there. I have a few questions that I think mostly stem from page 101 of the estimates, the expense amounts funded. There are park operations fees of \$50.3 million there, and I'm assuming that some of those fees come from the Kananaskis conservation pass, so I wondered if we could talk about the KCP for a little bit. My first question is, really: how much of that \$50.3 million comes from the Kananaskis pass? How much did the Kananaskis pass generate last year or is expected to generate this year? Both of those.

Mr. Loewen: I just want to make sure we have the correct number here. Just a sec.

Dr. Elmeligi: Yeah. Sorry. It's page 101 of the government estimates.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. The forecast is \$15 million.

Dr. Elmeligi: For 2024-25 for the Kananaskis pass?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. It was the '23-24 budget and also the '24-25 estimate.

Dr. Elmeligi: Sorry. That is what it generated last year as well.

Mr. Loewen: That's what it's projected, because the fiscal year isn't over yet.

Dr. Elmeligi: Yeah.

Mr. Loewen: That's what it's projected to produce in the '23-24 budget cycle, which comes to an end at the end of the month.

Dr. Elmeligi: So you are projecting that the fees generated by the Kananaskis pass will stay the same over the years.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Kind of looking, I think the – okay. Yeah.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. Can you explain how these specific fees are tracked to ensure they end up back in Kananaskis Country and not in other parts of the province, since that is what Albertans were told when they were implemented?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. We've made a commitment right from the start that when it comes to KCP revenues, they'll be reinvested back into Kananaskis Country. We know that the owners of Kananaskis Country are Albertans, and they expect that those fees that are collected are reinvested back into Kananaskis. We spend substantially more than that in Kananaskis each year, but we do ensure that that money is spent back into there.

As you know, Kananaskis is a very busy place. There are lots of people that visit there on a regular basis. I think there were close to 5 million people last year that were able to visit Kananaskis. That's an important part of the province, and we want to make sure that there is funding available to make sure that the services there are kept up, maintained, and then an opportunity to create more opportunities for people in those areas with things like trails and facilities and, like, some of the conservation initiatives and grants and partnerships and research. We spend about \$300,000 there. Continued investment in local trail organizations, Bragg Creek Trails and examples like that: \$900,000.

Again, we could go through the list if you'd like, but we maintain about 1,600 kilometres of trail in the summer, and that's a cost of about \$1.3 million. The mountain rescue and dispatch program is 1 and a half million dollars. Recreational management includes approvals, permitting, park rangers, planning, administration, management, parking control: \$1.6 million. Canmore Nordic Centre, William Watson Lodge all receive funding there, too.

Dr. Elmeligi: Through the chair, thank you to the minister.

I think part of the challenge with this whole Kananaskis pass – I mean, I have a lot of challenges with it – is that the revenues from the Kananaskis pass go into general revenue and then Parks operations, and all of the things that you just listed are funded out of general revenue, really. There's still this concern, however, that there were significant cuts made to the Parks division in 2020 and that the fees from the Kananaskis pass do not compensate for the cuts that were made to the Parks division in 2020. If it's all just going into the same pot of money and then Parks is funded out of

that, Parks has experienced a budget cut because the Kananaskis pass is not equivalent to the budget cuts that were made.

What assurances do Albertans have that the ministry is actually increasing spending in the series of parks and public lands that are arguably the most visited, from a recreational perspective, in the province?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I think if we look at the amount of money that we spent at that time compared to what we spend now, I think there's been a significant increase over previous years' budgets, so I think we can see that those funds are coming right back into Kananaskis and into Alberta Parks.

Dr. Elmeligi: Where can we see that in the budget? Sorry.

Mr. Loewen: I guess if we were to compare the budgets from that time period to now, it would be the way to tell that. I don't know that we have the 2020. As it is right now, we're spending close to, well, 91 and a half million dollars for Parks this year, and if we look back in the past, there has been a substantial increase in spending.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay.

Mr. Loewen: Another thing that happens, too, with the budget process is – I probably should maybe let Matt respond to this. In a budgeting process as money comes in for certain income within a government department, then Treasury Board allows that money to be spent back into that department.

Did you want to kind of expand on that, Matt?

Mr. Grossman: Yeah. Thank you, Minister. I mean, as the member was pointing to on page 101, that's exactly what the minister is talking about. Those amounts are funded by credit or recovery, so those amounts are put back into the system.

7:50

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. Thank you for that clarification. I still have really just one more question about the Kananaskis pass. Through the chair to the minister, you will be aware that Kananaskis Country is not only parks but a mixed-use landscape with public land-use zones and provincial parks and wildland parks and provincial recreation areas and, you know, even some private land along the edges, grazing leases, et cetera. There are a lot of things happening in that landscape.

One of the concerns with the Kananaskis pass was, really, that the need to charge the pass was not equitable amongst all user groups. For example, nonmotorized users have to pay the Kananaskis pass to use the trails in the provincial parks. Motorized users at McLean Creek or in the Ghost, which is in the same park division region, do not have to pay for a Kananaskis conservation pass; guide outfitters do not have to pay for a Kananaskis pass even though they would be using those same landscapes in that Kananaskis region. This I have always found problematic with the Kananaskis pass because I have to pay to register my vehicle and drive it to the trailhead, and then I also have to pay to use that trail in Kananaskis. Is there any intention of expanding the Kananaskis conservation pass to include motorized users and guide outfitters to make it more equitable?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. When it comes to the McLean Creek there, they do have to pay the public land camping pass. So they do have fees that they pay to be in that area, too. Guide outfitters pay allocation fees and increased costs with hunting licences because they're guiding nonresidents that pay additional funds to be there. I think everybody is paying. I think we could look at it, as you say, as possibly being – you're suggesting it's inequitable, but in the end

I think everybody that's on the landscape is actually paying a certain amount to be there. I think that's how that has been developed over time.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. I'll take that as a no.

Moving on to – I believe it's probably still under this page 101 of parks operations. There are always changes to our parks system. We're adding parks, decommissioning some sites. You'll be well aware that in 2020 there was a long list of sites that were proposed for delisting that generated all kinds of public outcry, and then earlier this year there were two new provincial parks created, Kleskun Hills provincial park and La Biche provincial recreation area. Both of these were private land deals. I'm assuming that the cost of purchasing those is reflected somewhere in this budget. My first question is: how much did we pay to acquire Kleskun Hills and La Biche PRA? Yeah. That's the first question. How much did we pay for those?

Mr. Loewen: I don't have those figures. But, for example, Kleskun Hills, I think, was bought over a five- or 10-year period, probably 10 to 15 years ago. So we don't have that reflected in the budget because that was purchased a substantial amount of time ago. The same with La Biche; I think that was a couple of different purchases there. A couple of different land titles are included in that. I think that's, yeah, three titles purchased in 2018. So, again, that wouldn't show up in this budget. I think it's good, though, to recognize that these came to fruition, that they're actually there now; they're actually as parks now.

You talked about the delisting of some of those areas, but that delisting didn't change any of the use on the landscape. Those had been inactive for sometimes 10 or 15 years. So a lot of that was just basically making official what were decisions that were made decades ago.

Dr. Elmeligi: Then I have two follow-up questions based on that. My first question is: if Kleskun Hills was purchased around 15 years ago, why did it take so long for its official designation?

Mr. Loewen: That's a really good question, and you could even ask your colleagues that were in power from 2015 to 2019.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, maybe I will. I know how long it can take for ministerial orders to pass sometimes.

Mr. Loewen: I hear you. Good point. Thanks.

Dr. Elmeligi: You did kind of allude to this, but I'm wondering if you can provide a little more detail about those other 12 sites that were decommissioned in that same announcement. I understand that some of them were damaged in the 2013 flood and no longer used. Is there a list of criteria that helps the ministry decide which sites might be ready for delisting? What kind of public consultation processes are required when sites are proposed for delisting? Can you just shed some light on what the internal process is there?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I think what's important to realize is that a lot of these decisions were made, like you say, 10-plus years ago. But you're exactly right. Some of them were part of, you know, flooding situations, where they realized there's no use rebuilding anything there or having any kind of designation there because it could flood again. If we look at, like, the boundary for Egg Island ecological reserve, it was a correction because it actually – oh, sorry. It's Big Elbow provincial recreation area that was deregulated because it fully overlaps with Don Getty wildland provincial park. So when

you have one area that's covered by two designations, then it's easy to decide: let's pick one and stick with it.

Let's see here. Some of these were used by Alberta Transportation and Economic Corridors for roadworks purposes. Those are pretty easy to realize if they're not needed anymore, to be able to take them out of the system. Again, a lot of this is really just a matter of – it didn't change any impact or access to the land. What was happening with it last year is still happening with it this year, with the deregulation. It's more of an administrative change rather than an actual on-the-landscape change.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. Is there a list of criteria that the ministry can turn to to identify sites for decommissioning, or is it decided on a one-off basis based on the criteria of a particular site?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I would say that it's a one-off criteria. I mean, again, when we look at the different things that were involved with that bunch of deregulation areas, we've got, you know, overlap of two different areas. We've got transportation sites that aren't being used anymore. We've got places that were flooded and then places that were just shut down for whatever reason a decade or more ago. So I don't know that there's any real set of criteria there that could encompass them all.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. Going back to the public consultation piece, through the chair to the minister, when I used to work for Alberta Parks, which really feels like a lifetime ago even though it's only a few years, we had a list of changes to park boundaries or facilities or infrastructure inside parks that would trigger public engagement or public consultation. Do those criteria still exist, and if so, was there consultation conducted on removing these 12 sites from the system?

Mr. Loewen: I think maybe what's important in this situation and, I guess, in future situations, too, is that the consultation would depend on the situation. These changes didn't reflect any change. All it was was, again, administrative in nature. If there was any substantial change to what was going to happen on the landscape, then you're probably right; consultation would have been necessary. But, again, this was just basically making official what had been the practice for 10 years or more.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. Just one last question about Kleskun Hills and La Biche PRA. Because these are private land deals – and also Glenbow Ranch provincial park was a private land deal – are we relying on private land deals to create new parks and PRAs in Alberta? Is that going to be our sole way to create new parks and protected areas, or are there other pieces of Crown land that the ministry is considering for protection?

Mr. Loewen: I think we could consider anything, but I think what's important is that – and, again, these are decisions made before my time. When government in the past had seen an opportunity to purchase some land that was very special in nature, like the prairie land in Kleskun Hills park – it's a grassland, a Peace Country grassland. It's very unique. The hills themselves: I've spent a little time on them myself, and it's a very unique part of Alberta. I think it's great to realize that somebody had the forethought years ago, when they'd seen that land coming up for sale, that they made the decision to invest in it. I think that was a great investment for the province and great investment for Albertans.

8:00

Dr. Elmeligi: Yeah. I would agree with that for sure.

Okay. Moving on. Outcome 1 in the business plan on page 62 speaks broadly to sustainability and stewardship of Alberta's Crown lands. The initiatives to support these broad objectives could be numerous, but the ones talked about here are \$9.5 million for the watercourse crossing program and \$10.3 million allocated for Crown land enforcement and awareness. I'm wondering if you could speak to the potential for other key initiatives to support sustainability and stewardship of Crown lands and forests, specifically planning programs designed to address multi-use landscapes or conservation programs that target the impacts of recreation on species habitat use or habitat restoration programs in parks or public education programs. Do those kinds of programs also fall under this outcome, and if so, what kind of funding do they have?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. They would show up here, too, but a part of them are in conjunction with parks also, so, you know, when it comes to creating these opportunities, then I think that it's included in there, too.

Dr. Elmeligi: You mean part of it is coming from the protected areas budget as well, or no?

Mr. Loewen: Some of these projects and everything are in outcome 3, safe, accessible, sustainable Crown land experiences. I hope that answers the question.

Dr. Elmeligi: Sort of.

Mr. Loewen: I may have missed the mark on that one, but . . .

Dr. Elmeligi: Yeah. It's okay. I think what I'm trying to do is to really get an understanding of who is responsible for habitat conservation and restoration programs inside provincial parks, because the split of the ministries to Environment and Protected Areas and Forestry and Parks and Parks as an operations branch under your ministry has always been confusing for me. There is the need for habitat restoration, rehabilitation inside provincial parks, and I'm trying to figure out who is doing that work.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Parks is responsible for that part for sure, and of course public lands is responsible for theirs on public lands. I get what you're saying, I think, because we have public lands and parks together in one department, but again, I think within the department there is the public lands branch and there is the parks department that's operating. So they both have a responsibility to . . .

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. So public lands branch would be responsible for, like, habitat work inside the boundaries of provincial parks. So from the perspective of ecological integrity the public lands branch is looking at all Crown land, regardless of the protected designation?

Mr. Loewen: No. Public lands would probably be more focused on things like grazing leases and gravel pits and those type of projects that happen on public lands. Parks is responsible for the work that happens on the parks.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. I think that this is an important distinction because – well, I have questions about it, but I know what they are in my head.

When we look at, you know, the management plans for some of these protected areas like Bow Valley provincial park, Bow Valley wildland provincial park, Peter Lougheed and Spray Valley provincial parks, those management plans are all over 20 years old now. They're extremely outdated, and they're management plans

that create guidance based on a volume of recreation that doesn't exist in those parks anymore. I think the Peter Lougheed plan talks about 23,000 visitors a year or something, and the Bow Valley plan talks about a maximum of 300,000 visitors a year, and now it's, like, 5 million. So we have these management plans that are extremely outdated, but the number one priority for all of these protected areas is conservation of the ecological integrity.

Recreational opportunities definitely play a secondary role to conservation, and what I'm trying to understand is: who is responsible for implementing the conservation programs in these land bases? Who is restoring habitat? Who is creating the management guidance to prioritize core habitats for species at risk or those kinds of things, identifying areas in need of restoration?

Mr. Loewen: Again, Parks is responsible for the work that happens in those parks, and you're right; the use of the land has changed dramatically over the last decade or two. There's no doubt about that. But, again, Parks is responsible for that. That's something that hasn't changed. That's been that way for as long as Parks has been Parks.

Dr. Elmeligi: I mean, it's something that I don't see reflected in these budget documents, but is it on your radar to engage with Albertans to update some of these management plans in our most visited parks?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. We are looking at being able to review some of those plans and have a plan for parks strategy and consultation and public engagement.

I guess maybe one thing I'll say is that, you know, we talk about the amount of recreational activity that happens in the parks, so we're spending money on trails and with trail organizations. Those are things that, yes, help the recreational part of it, but that money helps protect the environment and the habitat. By not having those expenditures on things like trails and working with these different organizations that really care about the area, that actually helps protect the environment so that people that do visit those areas have a place to go and a place to enjoy the parks and in an environmentally safe way.

Dr. Elmeligi: Through the chair to the minister, thank you for that answer.

It's a great segue into my next sort of line of questioning around trail and recreation group funding. One of the key objectives in the business plan on page 63 is to maintain or improve operations, infrastructure, and visitor experience in parks and public lands. That's quite broad, as, you know, objectives are, and it's being followed up with \$90.7 million to refurbish or enhance outdoor recreational opportunities, natural features, and buildings and \$10 million to refurbish and build recreational trails. What kinds of recreational opportunities are the focus of this spending, and how will these improvements be prioritized? Is there already a capital plan associated with new buildings on Crown land? Do you have target areas that are going to be the recipient of this funding?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. We do plan on investing an additional \$5 million in trail upgrades, particularly Kananaskis Country. Again, these are things that help protect Alberta's wild spaces for future generations. We have the Canmore area trails strategy, which is to establish an integrated and sustainable trails system for lands across the Bow Valley that supports the functioning of wildlife corridors and habitat patches while maintaining outdoor recreational experience.

I think that's important. By creating strategies to work with these trails, then we can take into consideration the habitat and the

wildlife corridors and make sure that things are safe when it comes to people enjoying these wild spaces. We prioritize high alpine trail refurbishments, increased sustainability and user experience, increased public safety, and decreasing resources necessary for public rescues and trail maintenance. When we plan these trails and have these strategies, I think it helps a lot of different parts of the puzzle, when it comes to people enjoying the outdoor spaces.

Dr. Elmeligi: Sure. Through the chair to the minister, you have mentioned a few times \$5 million for trail upgrades in Kananaskis, but on page 118 of the fiscal plan there's \$1 million for Kananaskis trail upgrades. So is the \$5 million over a three-year time frame, and we can expect the other \$4 million to come over the next couple of years?

8:10

Mr. Loewen: Yes. That's right. When it comes to, like, some of these trail agreements, we've got groups like the Great Divide Trail Association, Bragg Creek Trails, Moose Mountain bike society, United Riders of Crowsnest Pass, Friends of Kananaskis, Hinton Mountain Bike Association. Those are all organizations that are part of some of this funding.

Dr. Elmeligi: Through the chair to the minister, I feel like you're reading my mind. My next series of questions is about the partnership agreements, and as you will well know, many of those partners are in my beautiful riding of Banff-Kananaskis. I talk to them frequently, and of course they're very grateful for the government's support to do this work on some of our much-loved spaces.

How are partners for these trail grants – how are partners selected, and how is the funding distributed? Do they have to apply for this funding? What kind of reporting requirements are there? Is there monitoring of trail effectiveness and enforcement of trail management plans that these partners create? Basically, trying to understand where the checks and balances are in this program of partner grants.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Basically, they make applications to the grant process, and then they're granted the money. There is a follow-up within the department to make sure that that funding is being spent in an appropriate manner. These organizations: they can make a few dollars go a long way because they have volunteers. So it's actually definitely money well spent when it comes to doing that work.

I'm trying to think if there was a second part to your question.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, mostly just wondering what kind of follow-up there is to make sure that these partners are doing what they said they were going to do and that the trail work that they're doing is creating more environmental sustainability as well as a high-quality visitor experience. Like, what kinds of checks and balances are there to assure Albertans?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. They do have to report back to us on what they've done with those funds, and then there's continued engagement with the department and these organizations so we can see what's happening on the trails to make sure that the work that they're doing is what they said they were going to do in their application but also to make sure it is a benefit to Albertans.

Dr. Elmeligi: Perfect. To dig into this, into these partner grants a little bit more, 90 per cent of Albertans surveyed in a recreation survey take part in nonmotorized forms of recreation. The Off Highway Vehicle Association and the Snowmobile Association received \$1 million per year for four years. What is being done?

How are they spending that money, and what are the reporting requirements?

Also, towards the end of 2023 there was an announcement that nonmotorized groups would receive \$1 million in a few smaller grants in Kananaskis. So there's a big discrepancy here between the amount of money that motorized recreation groups are receiving and the amount of money that nonmotorized groups are receiving, but nonmotorized groups make up 90 per cent of the recreational users on the landscape. Why the discrepancy between motorized and nonmotorized users? Yeah. Why the discrepancy there?

Mr. Loewen: There are a couple of reasons, but one reason is that both the organizations that you mentioned are province-wide organizations, so they're working on a greater scale than, say, some of the Kananaskis groups that are working just within Kananaskis on a smaller scale. We've spent a lot of time talking about Kananaskis, and that's because it's your area, but there are lots of other parts of Alberta that are just as beautiful and should be enjoyed by all Albertans. That's my little my pitch for coming up to northern Alberta and enjoying the Peace Country.

But, yes, I do believe, too, that when it comes to providing that funding to OHV and snowmobile associations, I think a lot of people – I shouldn't say a lot of people, but some people may complain about the landscape with OHVs. But by providing that funding – and, again, they're doing the same thing as the other trail groups. Being able to leverage that money with their volunteers: I think it . . .

The Chair: Minister, that concludes the first portion of questions from the Official Opposition.

We now move to 20 minutes from the government caucus members and the minister. Who's going to start? Okay. MLA Hunter, did you want to share time?

Mr. Hunter: Yes, if we could, please.

The Chair: Okay. Share is okay?

Okay. Go ahead.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here with your team. I wanted to start out, first of all, by just asking some questions about stewardship and Crown land and just being able to find the balance. I'm going to read into the record a paragraph here for your information. It says:

Ecological Sustainability must permeate all economic and social policy. Meeting human material needs must not use more of Earth's resources than can be renewed within each generation.

Now, there's a few other points in there. It says:

Life on Earth is best protected by ensuring biodiversity, requiring recognition of each species' contribution to the planet's health.

Consequently, we have to view other species not as resources for human wants, but as respected members of Earth's living family.

Minister, that is in the NDP constitution at the end. I've read that into record before. One thing that I've noticed in the nine years I've been doing this is that there's a wide range of views on how parks should be managed and how we interact with parks and recreation in our province. So I'd like to ask you: how does your ministry balance the goals of environmental sustainability with public use and access of our forests and parks?

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Yeah. Thanks for the question. I think one thing we need to remember right off the start: when it comes to activity on the landscape versus ecological sustainability, they're not mutually exclusive. We can have both on the landscape at the same time.

You know, as you mentioned, there's a wide range of views when it comes to how the activity on the landscape is taken care of. There's definitely a part of the population that wants to see nothing happen on the landscape, and there's a part of the population that wants to see lots done on the landscape. I think there has to be some balance when it comes to making those decisions because, again, I don't believe that they're mutually exclusive. We have an increasing population in Alberta, and we have to respect that not everybody wants to recreate or do business the same way, so that needs to be respected. We need to make sure that we provide those opportunities for people both for recreation, for business, and for conservation.

Mr. Hunter: Well, that sounds great. I just wanted to reference that that was in the outcome 1 of the business plan that you guys presented.

Alberta's forestry sector is held to high standards. You and I have talked about this in the past, of sustainable harvesting, replanting, and minimizing their overall environmental footprint. How does your ministry enforce and monitor the environmental impact of the forestry sector while also not hindering the economic output of this industry?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Under the authority of the Forests Act we have strict regulations, planning and operating standards, and policy directives to manage forest resources in a sustainable and ecologically sound manner. So this includes monitoring of forest operations with audits, field inspections, and mandatory self-reporting by forest companies. So every forest tenure holder must follow applicable regulations, standards, and directives. These standards that we hold our Alberta forest companies to are the highest. There are many other jurisdictions in the world that would do well by following our standards. I know we have a federal government that sometimes likes to interfere and think that they're better at this business than we are, but, again, we have the highest standards here. We follow national and international guidelines, and we make sure that our forests are managed in a way that is sustainable and that the people that do that work for us, the forest companies, that they're held to those standards.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Minister.

On page 63 – this is also outcome 3 of the business plan. The business plan states that over \$90.7 million in '24-25 "allocated to refurbish and enhance outdoor recreational opportunities, natural features and buildings on Crown land." How does your ministry track which buildings need refurbishing, and how do you prioritize these projects?

Mr. Loewen: We do have staff, of course, and we do collect feedback from the public on different situations. So when it comes to capital maintenance and renewal, we have people who are looking at that and looking at the infrastructure, making sure that it's suitable, making sure that it's safe, and making sure that it's providing what it needs, what it was designed to do for the people of Alberta.

8:20

We do have an enormous amount of infrastructure across the province, but as far as capital maintenance and renewal we're investing \$83.8 million in capital maintenance renewal and new campground development; \$5.4 million in capital grants for Big Island provincial park, which is a new park on the North Saskatchewan River just within the city limits of Edmonton; and we have 1 and a half million dollars in operating expenses for public land operations to maintain infrastructure, support education and

conservation, and promote public safety. So those are some of the things that we're doing in this budget here. Again, we assess the quality of current and plan accordingly to priority needs when it comes to that infrastructure.

Mr. Hunter: All right. When conducting these refurbishments, how does your ministry ensure that these projects don't damage or interfere with the ecosystem surrounding them?

Mr. Loewen: That is important. By and large a lot of these projects that we do are based on that to make sure that we don't inadvertently have any damage done to the environment. We're committed to that. When we look at things like trails development, you know, people could say: well, that's damaging the environment. But, no, it's protecting the environment because it focuses the use in a place where we can create the infrastructure that will help protect that part of the land base.

Mr. Hunter: All right. Thanks.

Can you specify what is meant by "natural features" and what work will be done to enhance or refurbish them with this allocation?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Natural features range from mountains to lakes, grasslands, forests, and the hoodoos to other unique landforms and includes incredible wildlife. There's so much to enjoy in Alberta. We have such a beautiful landscape, and our wildlife is so unique and diverse. We want to make sure that as we do capital projects, they're designed and planned to limit impacts on the natural features, including wildlife mitigations, erosion control, and invasive species management. Improvements to trails and formalizations of day-use areas and parking spaces help create dedicated spaces for public enjoyment while reducing impacts on the surrounding environment and associated features.

Again, it's all part of, I guess, a bigger plan to make sure that as people go into the wilderness areas in Alberta, we have things for them to do and places for them to go so that they have an opportunity to not only enjoy themselves safely but also protect the environment, too.

Mr. Hunter: Thanks.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to cede my time to MLA McDougall now.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you. Thank you for being here, Minister. I'm going to take a little bit of a page out of the MLA for Banff-Kananaskis and focus a little bit on my own constituency to a degree; that is, to talk about one of the other amazing parks within the province, that being Calgary's Fish Creek, which, of course, my constituency is named after. That park is also one that has seen a big increase in use by people. It is something that is used not only extensively by people who live along it or contiguous to that park but by people from throughout the city. As the population is increasing in our province, in our city, we see that being used a lot.

I understand that the department is looking at and making some investments in the Fish Creek park area that includes some of the facilities in around the Ranche restaurant area, that zone. Can you elaborate a little bit on how much money you're planning to spend on some of this development work in Fish Creek, what is the plan so far on that, and whether or not and how much you have been consulting with people, other groups, things like the Friends of Fish Creek, as to what would be the optimal use of funds in terms of enhancing that park area?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Thank you very much. Fish Creek park is obviously a very important part of Calgary, giving people an opportunity to enjoy a little bit of wilderness right within the city limits. I visited there several times. It's an area with rich history and both First Nations and early settlers. The Bow Valley Rancho restaurant, like you mentioned, is a good historical building that was saved from demolition and is very functional and provides a lot to that area.

Yes, we do have plans there. We've committed, I think, \$750,000 over three years to the Friends of Fish Creek Provincial Park Society, which, again, is another one of those partnerships that we have in the park system that really does provide a good service to Albertans and to our park system. Overall, we'll be spending, I guess, \$10 million over the next three years to refurbish, restore, and improve the park's extensive trails and pathway systems. I know we just had some tree removal here done just, I think, these past few months that has been helpful, too, to create some safety for people there.

There are also plans that we're working on to replace the building there, the main facility there, that I think will be a real good benefit to the people that visit Fish Creek park. Again, it's a great place. There are lots of good things happening there. It has about 1,300 daily visitors, so it's incredible to think of that many people visiting Fish Creek park. Again, it's one of my favourite stops in Calgary.

Also, it's got the Sikome aquatic facility, and there's going to be some refurbishment going on in there, too. That's another thing, another facility that's greatly enjoyed by the people of Calgary right there in Fish Creek park.

Mr. McDougall: One of the issues that's come up – again, like, with the 1,300 per day average I guess that is, I'm sure there are some days that there's more. With the onslaught of electric vehicles and much traffic and bicycles and everything like that, there's a sense that, you know, safety becomes an issue – people who are walking versus people who are coming by on vehicles with wheels; let's put it that way – and perhaps the need to twin some of these pathways because of the congestion and safety hazards that you have. Is that something that's been given any consideration in your plans?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. For sure. That's a really good point. Again, that's through this trail strategy for Fish Creek park, that three-year plan to refurbish, restore, and improve the park's extensive trails and pathway systems. That will be part of it, too, to be able to look at the use and to make sure that we have an opportunity to make sure people can enjoy it in a safe manner. You're right; it is multi-use when it comes to hiking and biking and that sort of thing on those pathways. Again, that's why we'll have that strategy to make sure that people can enjoy it safely and sustainably and environmentally consciously for years to come.

Mr. McDougall: A little broader, then, now. Can you outline a little bit the strategy that the province has in terms of prescribed burns in Alberta? Perhaps with that some commentary about: are we increasing the number of prescribed burns that will be happening in the future, and how does that fit into your forestry practices, which I think achieve some of the same things? That is, you know, forests in certain areas that can function as a break, if you will, for fires in some areas and rejuvenation of forests. Well, first of all, prescribed burns, strategy on that, and the policy on forestry and the rate that areas that are allowed for forestry are harvested.

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Thanks for bringing that up. When it comes to prescribed burns, this year we're planning 35 hazard reduction burns near communities, and that's to help reduce the fire hazard

for those communities. If you intentionally burn some, then that'll take away the opportunity for a fire to come along and go out of control and threaten a community.

8:30

Another reason why we do prescribed burns is to promote forest health and landscape management through diversification of vegetation composition and structure. This helps minimize the spread of forest insects and diseases while maintaining and/or restoring wildlife habitat. If we look in the past, our First Nations people burned a lot of the areas where they lived and hunted because they knew it was good for the environment, and it's part of a natural process.

We've been pretty good at putting out fires over the last 50, 60, 70 years, so a lot of the areas of Alberta that would have burned naturally through that period haven't. There are two ways to take care of that. One is to use our forest industry to harvest those trees and reduce that amount of fuel on the landscape, and the other way is to do the prescribed burns. Again, I really do support and really do like the idea of having these prescribed burns. A lot of our foothills areas: the landscape has changed dramatically over the last 60, 70 years because of our reduction of fire on the landscape, and if we want to have a good natural habitat, then we do need to do something to either have those fires on the landscape or replace those fires somehow.

Mr. McDougall: Can the minister provide some detail? We're going to invest about \$236.3 million in parks and Crown lands infrastructure in the coming year. Would you qualify this as a year for over and above in your department, you know, the threat of another particularly egregious fire season? With all this population increase that we're having in the province and the demands on the parks system, how much of this is to significantly enhance or expand? What is being done for our forestry and parks system, and how much is this maintenance? The last question is: do we anticipate or expect that the amount of forestry that is going to be harvested over the next several years is to be at the same rate as we have now, or do we expect that to change in any way?

Mr. Loewen: The forest companies develop their forest management plans, interestingly enough, based on a 200-year cycle. They want to make sure that they harvest responsibly and in a way that they can sustain their business and provide resilience in the forest. That's maybe kind of answering your last question first.

When it comes to the \$236 million over three years, that's to support high-quality, low-cost recreational opportunities in Alberta's parks and Crown lands. Some of the facilities, even the most basic and rustic facilities, require a certain amount of development and investment to be done in an environmentally responsible way, so we'll be doing 143 capital maintenance and renewal projects, representing an investment of \$167 million over three years.

When we look at the other projects that we have going on, we do have a substantial number of projects in Alberta Parks, but again these are investments in the landscape, investments in infrastructure, and will help people enjoy our parks and our Crown lands in a safe and environmentally responsible way.

Mr. McDougall: Not much time left in the block, so just a quick question. Nine hundred new campsites that we anticipate: where will those be located exactly? Is it a kind of geographical distribution of that?

Mr. Loewen: We'll be looking across the province. We do want to focus on areas of high use so that we can take some of the pressures

off some of the existing campsites there, but we do want to spread that across Alberta. We know that Alberta has a lot of beautiful landscapes across the province. When we look at places in the far north, the far south, the eastern part of the province, which may not get as much tourism and visitation, we need to make . . .

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That now concludes the government members' first block of questions. Now we move to the second round of questions and responses. Speaking rotation will stay the same; it will be the opposition and then government caucus. Just so everyone knows, the plan is to take a break after this next 10-minute section. We'll take our five-minute break then. We're trying to co-ordinate with the other room. That is what we're trying to do.

I'm going to assume that people are going to want to share time going forward unless everyone changes their mind, so we will carry on with the 10-minute block back and forth.

Member Kayande: Thank you very much. I just have a question about the revenue items on page 104 of the estimates. There are premiums, fees, and licenses. How much does stumpage account for that? Is stumpage in that line item? How much is that?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Just a second here; we'll grab that. Yeah. So the estimate for this coming year is \$119 million for forestry royalties, basically.

Member Kayande: Is that similar to years previous, or is that lower or higher?

Mr. Loewen: It's actually a substantial drop from last year, about \$39.5 million less, and that's as a result of the forest products prices dropping. A certain amount of the royalties is based on the market, and the market dropped. We saw super high prices on forestry products during the COVID years, then a substantial drop since then, so that's what represents that. It's about a \$39.5 million drop, I think.

Member Kayande: So \$119 million is more typical of what we see going forward probably, then, because we're out of . . .

Mr. Loewen: I guess I'm not sure what an average would be, but I would think maybe an average might be somewhere in between the two.

Member Kayande: Okay.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. It's a very, very volatile market.

Member Kayande: Okay. Next question is about the Kananaskis Country pass. I'm just a little bit confused. There's \$16 million of revenue, if I recall correctly, through the chair, what the minister said earlier. That \$16 million of revenue: like, how much of that gets plowed back into the K Country pass then, and how much is distributed to other parks across the province?

Mr. Loewen: It all goes back into Kananaskis and more. Yeah. There's a substantial amount, more than that \$15 million, that goes into Kananaskis, into that area.

Member Kayande: How much is the budget for enforcing that pass?

Mr. Loewen: I believe the implementation of it is around \$2 million.

Member Kayande: Is that contracted out, or is that government?

Mr. Loewen: It's contracted out.

Member Kayande: Contracted out. Was that a sole-source contract, or was that put to competitive bid?

Mr. Loewen: That was most likely a competitive process, but it was done before last year, anyway.

Member Kayande: Okay.

Mr. Loewen: So it doesn't show up on these books here.

Member Kayande: Okay. Very good. Thank you.

The next question I have is just around the allocation of contingency versus base firefighting. I'm just trying to get my head around, I guess – because we seem to be in a regime now where we have consistent fire risk and fire expenditures, how does the ministry think about, like, what's a regular run rate versus what's contingency?

Mr. Loewen: Basically, all the work we do in preparation for wildfire season and the contracts that we sign ahead of time would be base funding, you know, the equipment and those expenditures. When we're actually fighting the wildfire, then those expenses are the ones that come out of contingency. Again, last year we had \$100 million in the base funding; this year we have \$155 million in the base funding. This past year we spent \$839 million out of contingency, which is substantially higher than any other year in history.

I'm not sure. I guess it's not in this budget either, but the previous year, I want to say, was around \$250 million in contingency funds for fighting wildfire the year before. I want to say that it's in that neighbourhood anyway, \$250 million.

Member Kayande: I guess it's a bit of a "why" question, right? Because the other way that it could be done is that we could say that, well, we've got some base level of forest fire risk, so therefore we're going to allocate budget for that \$300 million, \$400 million, whatever we decide the math looks like, and then any amount over and above that is contingency. So I guess that my question, Mr. Chair, is why it's done this way, when it seems as though we're, you know – maybe, like, "Could it be an outdated approach?" I guess is my question.

8:40

Mr. Loewen: No, and fair question. I just want to correct myself. Last year was \$165 million. If we look at a year like last year's, at \$165 million, and a year like this year, of \$839 million, I think that's probably a good reason why Treasury Board, who actually ultimately makes this decision, have chosen to go this way. Again, this is the same way that's, I think, been in place for decades in the province. The contingency funding of the wildfire fighting at the time, I think, ensures that the funds are there, but also it's hard to budget with something that's so variable.

I mean, again, any time when we're budgeting in government, we're always trying to do an educated guess on what costs are going to be, but when you have, you know, one year \$165 million and the next year \$839 million, that's a huge variability. When you try to make a budget based on that, I think you're not only going to be wrong, but you're going to be way wrong most times.

Member Kayande: It's very similar to how we need to budget for a royalty income, for example, you know, which we do make an attempt at. So there are different approaches, and I'm sure we're going to revisit this next year, depending on how things go, and I hope they go better than we think they will.

Mr. Loewen: I just want to add, too: how the budgeting process works doesn't impede the work of fighting fire. You know, regardless of how much money is allocated, where and how it's all worked out, we still fight fire the same way. We hire what we need, and we do what we need to fight the fire.

Member Kayande: Okay. The next question that I have is just about sole-source contracts. There seem to be a few in the ministry dealing with noxious invasive plants species. Is there a reason that those particularly are sole-sourced rather than bid competitively?

Mr. Loewen: I'm going to guess – and we can try to find out more accurately – but a lot of that might have to do with because we're dealing with municipalities and paying municipalities to take care of the weeds or First Nations to take care of weeds. When you're dealing with a certain geographic region, then you're dealing with the people that manage that region. We will check up on that.

Member Kayande: Okay. All right. Let's talk a little bit – let's go back to the K Country pass for a minute. Was it used to hire conservation officers, extra ones, at any point? Again, like, I'm just trying to think of the distinction between those that went into K Country and those that maybe weren't.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. We definitely hired, like, park rangers, and I know there were some additional conservation officers that were hired. But, again, when we look at the overall expense in Kananaskis based on our overall expenditures in Kananaskis, the K pass is kind of a small part of the overall budget that we spend within Kananaskis. But, yes, there were park rangers, recreation management, admin management, supporting operations, specialized facilities like Canmore Nordic Centre and William Watson Lodge, facility infrastructure maintenance and operations. A lot of different things fall under that, the mountain rescue dispatch and maintaining the trails and that sort of thing. So there's a lot of money being spent in Kananaskis. It is a high-use area. But just in Kananaskis, K Country, itself, in parks, it's probably about \$20 million. There's a lot of money being spent there over and above what the K pass brings in.

Member Kayande: I have literally seven seconds left, so I will just use up the time.

The Chair: The all-desired break now for five minutes. We'll come back at 8:51.

[The committee adjourned from 8:45 p.m. to 8:50 p.m.]

The Chair: Okay. We'll get everyone to have a seat. We will start now with the 10-minute block, back and forth, on the government side. MLA Sinclair, I think you're scheduled to go, so you can go ahead and start.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister. I'd like to thank the minister and your team not just for your leadership and commitment to the file but, more importantly, your commitment to showing up and leading from the front. I'm a big believer in those who step forward and do the work, and you have a reputation for having real boots on the ground while leading. I can't tell you how important it is to the impact that it leaves behind on the people in our small towns and communities, especially during last year's fire season.

All that aside, I would just like to ask a question about wildfire management. Excuse me; I'm just trying to find my – I got off track with my sentimental part here. Just give me one sec. Sorry. It was like none other we've seen in Alberta, the wildfires last year. I was

side by side with the people in East Prairie there when they lost their homes. It's always difficult seeing the look on people's faces when they, number one, don't know if they've lost their houses, but they don't know what they're going to be returning to. I can appreciate your guys' ministry for having our backs and all the people, actually, in my riding stepping up and helping people, whether it was donating toys or opening up their homes to the people that were displaced. There's another line in here I have about it, but I've mentioned probably my wildfire experience in Slave Lake one too many times today.

I'll just move on to maybe my question. I'm going to go to the key objective 4.1 of the business plan, which is to explore and adopt innovative wildfire management technologies to promote the health and resilience of Alberta's forest resources. I was just hoping that the minister can provide us and the people of my area with a bit of an update on what they're expecting for this year's wildfire season. And I have a follow-up if there's time, but I'll let you go ahead with that one if that's okay, Minister.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Yes. Thank you very much. Again, as you say and we've said over and over again, this was an unprecedented year and it was sad to see the homes lost. My heart goes out to the people from East Prairie that lost their homes there, too. I know myself that within basically eight kilometres of my house we lost about 70 homes. There was twice I went home and wasn't certain; well, actually, I was certain that I wasn't going to see my home when I went home. But both times it was there. I got to do that same thing as you did: look people in the eye that lost their homes. It's a humbling experience, for sure.

When it comes to innovation, when it comes to wildfire management, I think we want to make sure that we're doing everything we can. When we look at the technology that we have now, nowadays compared to in the past, we have to be able to take advantage of that. This last year we had the night-vision helicopter. I believe that was the only one in Canada used for firefighting this past year. We're hoping to have two more this year. We used the drone technology, which was very effective. We were able to have the drones go up in the night and do thermal imaging on the fires, too, so that we would know what happened with the fire movement overnight and knew where to have the crews in the morning. Some of the technology like that has been incredibly helpful.

When we look at the amount of other opportunities we have, we want to make sure that we do more wildfire fighting at night when the fires are more subdued than they are in the daytime, depending on the temperature and humidity. So that's something that we'll be looking forward to doing more of. Again, some of that is a result of some of the technology that we have now that allows us to do that.

Yeah. I appreciate that. Rest assured that we're looking at all options and all things that are on the table when it comes to fighting wildfire.

Mr. Sinclair: I appreciate that. Thank you, Minister.

I always feel like I'm giving shout-outs, and I deeply regret sometimes forgetting to mention a lot of the people, the farmers that stepped up with machines, Big Lakes county in particular, which I think you met a couple of them again this week, people working their regular jobs and then going out at night and trying to protect homes. I deeply appreciate all the work they're doing and you guys working alongside them to make their jobs easier when you can.

Budget 2024, just as a follow-up through the chair, has allocated increased funding and operating and capital expenses for wildfire management. Do you mind giving me a little bit of a rundown on how some of these increased funds will be used?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Happy to do that. Thanks for mentioning that, too, about the people of Alberta that stepped up when it came to battling wildfire, not only protecting their own properties but their neighbours' properties, too. I was there in Big Lakes on one of the nights when the fire was moving across the landscape there with the people in your constituency, and they were working incredibly hard. Some hadn't slept for a day or two. It was good to see. We know that's the Alberta spirit right there at work.

When it comes to additional expenditures this year, we know that there are several things that we're doing with those funds. We're going to be able to have a couple more water bomber contracts, so that will bring in three to six more water bombers and probably three of the bird dog aircrafts. We're hoping to get the extra two night-vision helicopters. That's included in that budget there, too. It's going to allow us to have our contracts, like our Firetak crews, which were normally a 93-day contract. We're moving some of them to 123-day contracts. That will allow us to start them earlier and have them fight fires later because the fire season started earlier last year – so we've got to be prepared for that – and it went later than we were expecting. That's just some of the things right off the top where we'll be – oh, we'll be hiring a hundred more unit crews, which are type 1 firefighters. We'll be hiring those. That will give us additional boots on the ground when it comes to fighting fire. Again, just a lot of different good things are coming as a result of those budget expenditures that'll help us fight wildfire.

Mr. Sinclair: I appreciate it very much. Thank you for that fulsome answer.

I'm just going to switch gears quickly here. I know we're running out of time. I'm going to go to Crown lands and rangeland sustainability. Effective stewardship of Crown land is paramount, not merely as a bureaucratic obligation but as a solemn duty to safeguard Alberta's natural legacy for generations to come. It's a very wordy sentence. This stewardship entails a delicate balancing act – I know you mentioned some of the traditions of the First Nations doing the preburn, which I appreciate you mentioning – and ensuring the sustainability, utilization of resources while preserving the integrity of the ecosystem and respecting the rights and traditions of Indigenous communities and other stakeholders who have a profound connection to these lands. The land service foundation of Alberta's economy provides invaluable resources such as timber, minerals, and grazing areas that underpin key industries like forestry, mining, and agriculture. Would the minister, through the chair, please be able to share how the budget plans to fund initiatives that promote and enhance the engagement with Indigenous communities and other key stakeholders in the stewardship of Crown lands?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Thank you very much for that question. I believe it's incredibly important to engage our First Nations people. When we look at our Firetak crews, those are a partnership we have with Indigenous communities to provide those Firetak crews, an incredibly important part of our firefighting initiatives. We know that having Indigenous communities as stakeholders with trails organizations, conservation groups, hunting and fishing organizations, and municipalities: this is all part of a good recreation, conservation strategy.

9:00

When I look at our First Nations people, living on the lands for thousands of years and how they were able to survive and thrive through that time period, it's incredible to think about. We talked earlier about the prescribed burns and how First Nations used that for generations to rejuvenate the landscape. Now we have some of

our First Nations that are involved in the forestry industry and logging to try to replace the fire on the landscape, but also we know that there's more to be done there when it comes to doing that good habitat work by prescribed burns in some of the mountain valleys, for instance, some of our park systems.

Again, I appreciate that, and I appreciate the question and the chance to be able to talk about our Indigenous communities. Thanks.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Something I forgot to say is that during these 10-minute blocks you're not allowed to cede to anybody else, so you use what you use, and then we move over. Everyone knows that, probably, but I just wanted to make sure.

Now we'll go over to the opposition. Go ahead, MLA Sweet.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister, we're going back and forth still?

Mr. Loewen: Yes.

Ms Sweet: You're good? Okay. I know we're all getting tired at the end of the day.

I just wanted to chat a little bit about FRIAA and the funding that they receive or are able to deliver on behalf of the government. I am happy to see, looking at the website, that the community fireguard program is up. RFPs are now able to be applied for, so that's great. But what I do notice is that the FireSmart program is not up on the website. The information is there, but the ability to apply for any funding has now been removed. It's like FireSmart was there and it got removed for fireguarding.

I guess my question would be: if you look at the website right now, the applications for FireSmart programs are typically in the winter and in the summer, but given the fact that we've just gone through a serious wildfire season and are potentially going into another one, I'm just wondering why the ability to get that education was taken off the website and why communities – like, if anything, we'd think we would want to extend that process right now so that it's not twice a year and it's ongoing for this year.

Mr. Loewen: Yes. I guess I'm not sure why it's not on the website, but those programs continue to happen and will continue to happen. They are actually taking place right now. I know there are several communities that are taking advantage of that and with FireSmart. Again, I'm not sure why it's not on the website, but it's not a discontinuation of it, and it is still continuing on as we speak.

Ms Sweet: Yeah. To clarify, Minister, if you click on Programs, it still gives you, like: this is what FireSmart does. It's just that at the top of the FRIAA website right now it says: we have two announcements. The first announcement is the fireguard program, and then the other, secondary, is the mountain pine beetle, which just continues to infest that website forever. It's always there. That's fair.

In saying that, I'm just curious from a staffing perspective. As we see more opportunities for applications for RFPs or proposals, I'm looking at the fact that there are more opportunities being expanded. What is the staffing ratio within the ministry to ensure that these RFPs are being responded to in a timely manner and that the programs are being delivered efficiently?

Mr. Loewen: Those are the programs through FRIAA?

Ms Sweet: Well, my understanding is that there may be staff that exist in the ministry that help facilitate some of this work, and then, obviously, FRIAA must have a liaison, I would think, with the ministry. Maybe walk me through what the process looks like, Minister? I'm guessing here.

Mr. Loewen: I'm going to turn the mic over to Dan Lux, assistant deputy minister.

Mr. Lux: Sure, I can answer the question on the process there. There are two ways this happens. We have forest protection specialists in every one of the 10 forest areas that work with municipalities in order to identify opportunities for FireSmart hazard reduction amongst those communities. As the communities start getting up their applications and it goes into FRIAA, FRIAA also has experts that deal with this to help the community actually build their proposals and make sure that it's fully encompassing and make sure it does meet, you know, the objectives of the wildfire management program. So there's kind of a two-step process of going through there.

We also have staff that are part of the evaluation of the RFPs. Like, we do have some expertise in there. There's a subcommittee, that's out of FRIAA, that does evaluate all these proposals, sets their priorities, and then FRIAA actually funds based on those priorities and those evaluations that are done from the subcommittee.

Ms Sweet: Do we know how long, on average, it takes from the application process to the funds being delivered to the community?

Mr. Lux: It's a two-step process. For a lot of them, if it's just education, like, ones that are fairly straightforward, it's one intake process. Once the committee meets, those monies are allocated fairly quickly. Within a few weeks that money is allocated. If they're more complex programs like a FireSmart hazard reduction or a vegetation management program, it's a two-step process. A community will actually send a letter of intent to FRIAA to say, "We are planning on doing this," and then FRIAA would evaluate it and say, "Yes, it aligns with our objectives; it makes sense; now go forward and do up your full proposal," which comes in in the fall. So it's kind of a two-step process.

Ms Sweet: It would be still twice a year, then.

Mr. Lux: It's two intakes a year, yeah.

Ms Sweet: Okay. That's good to know.

Let's talk a little bit about fibre access and fibre security. Obviously, with the fires that have happened, there's been a lot of burn-off sitting. I recognize that some of the companies have been able to go out and start harvesting a lot of that already. I'm just wondering if you know where we're at in the sense of clearing off that burn, one, from a wildfire management perspective but also, like, the fibre access piece of it.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Yes. I know the forest industry is very active on taking the fire-burned trees. There are incentives for them to do that, and they want to do it, too, because they want to get that fibre and get it before it's gone to waste. It's only good for, depending on how severe the burn was, maybe a year and a half before it has no value. So they're incented to do it both for their own sake and because of incentives that we provide, too, to encourage them to do that. Another reason why they want to do it is so that they can get after the reforestation part of it and get it back into production.

As far as fibre security, probably the number one concern of the forest industry is to make sure that they have that fibre security. That's what they need to keep their mills going and to keep the jobs, the people employed, that they have going. When we look at Alberta compared to other jurisdictions, in particular our neighbours to the west, our forest industry is very happy to be working in Alberta because of that fibre security and that ability to do business here in Alberta. We see the drops in the market prices and we see mills closing to the west of us and hardly a change here in Alberta because we do have a great, business-friendly atmosphere for those businesses to do well here.

I think that should answer the question there.

I guess 2.5 million cubic metres harvested in December, and that's of coniferous timber. There have been large amounts being taken out. I've been on the landscape at some of the burns and seen some of the harvest that's already taken place, and it's substantial. I don't think some of these mills have seen trees that haven't been burned for a couple of months now. They're just processing it through as fast as they can. The only problem that's happened is that some of the pulp companies can't have any kind of charcoal come into the system, but they are doing extensive debarking to try to get rid of that charcoal. Hopefully, they can still use it in the pulp process. They can't bleach out that charcoal, so they need to make sure it's gone before it goes into the mill.

Ms Sweet: Yeah. Thanks for that, Minister, and I appreciate that. I've been out to a couple of sites already as well.

I'm curious, from a trade perspective, actually, if there have been conversations around – I recognize, depending on where we're exporting to, it has to be clean wood. Like, there can be no pine beetle. There can be no black mark, anything like that. What conversations are happening in regard to the export markets and looking at other opportunities for potentially using some of the burn-off? I mean, I know our industry is very innovative in their own way – they've created new opportunities for it – but I'm just wondering if we've had any conversations around that.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I'm going to take that question to Assistant Deputy Minister Dan Lux.

9:10

Mr. Lux: Two ways of answering that. Typically we don't see a lot of the market barriers in the U.S. when it comes to that damaged wood or pine beetle wood, the stained wood. The same with the China markets. Like, those seem to be willing to accept that damaged wood and wood that's a little bit off colour or maybe not quite to the highest quality. It's Japan. Japan are really the ones that look for that pure, clear wood, and companies get a premium for it when they sell it. So there are a lot of, you know, opportunities there to segregate that wood and actually market it specifically over to Japan.

We do a lot of work with the industry to try to find out those new markets and open those doors for them; you know, granting to a variety of organizations like Canada Wood and WoodWorks in order to facilitate some of that movement with them.

Ms Sweet: I'm just wondering. Our fibre allocation was increased in the last couple of years, I think under a previous minister, Dreeshen, who increased it. Have we ever met the actual increase of the fibre?

Mr. Loewen: I'll turn it over to you again, Dan.

Mr. Lux: What we did do there was that we did have some policy levers in order to make sure we were still sustainable in order to

increase that cut. We did actually enable things like using tree improvement seeds in order to increase the gains. We did allocate some new tenures through new RFPs for some wood that was actually unallocated going forward. You know, some of that was in the Slave Lake area, up in the Grande Prairie area . . .

The Chair: Thank you very much. We can pick that up when we come back for the next block.

We'll go over to MLA Dyck.

Mr. Dyck: Excellent. Thank you so very much, Chair. I just really appreciate the minister and the department being here tonight. I know it's getting late, so I appreciate you guys just being here.

Last year there was a significant fire just south of my riding, Grande Prairie. I know that there has been a fire barrier already created. I don't want to talk about that necessarily, but what I do want to talk about is that there's significant mature forest a few hours south. My last numbers, I believe, are close to 300,000 hectares of fairly mature forest. Somebody referred to it as almost geriatric trees. I didn't know there was a term for it.

But when you have a mature forest, or geriatric trees, that might be declining in quality, this leads to very unique challenges in dealing with potential wildfires. Minister, what is the strategy for dealing with mature forests, and are there specific line items associated with those expenditures?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Thanks. There are not necessarily any specific line items for that. Mature forests are prioritized by the forestry sector for timber harvesting. We work closely with the forestry sector on forest management plans, which take wildfire risk, habitat, watersheds, mountain pine beetle, Indigenous perspectives, and several other factors, that include forest maturity, into consideration. When we look at those mature forests, of course, they are definitely prime for catastrophic wildfire, so if we can get them off the landscape before the fire starts, that's definitely an advantage to us.

If they are pine stands, then they are definitely susceptible to pine beetle. I do have to say that our pine beetle situation in the province has improved substantially in the last few years. In fact, I think we're 98 per cent down on pine beetle compared to where we were at our peak in I believe it was 2016. So we're in a good situation as far as that's concerned.

You're right. Those mature forests do have a high value to the forest sector because they are nice, big trees. That's why they're prioritized, because of their value and to get them before wildfire gets them.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you, Minister.

Just staying on the topic of wildfires as well, particularly in these mature forests, what is the strategy for wildfire in the caribou range? It becomes a challenge. We want to be able to maintain and grow this population, but also, at the same time, there needs to be a strategy. Can you give me a view of what that strategy looks like in the caribou range?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. The caribou situation is a tough one for industry to work around. The caribou are currently listed as endangered, and the province is currently working with Environment and Protected Areas to address the section 11 requirements for ensuring the long-term viability of the herd through the development of the upper Smoky subregional development plan.

The development of the plan is being led by a dedicated team of professionals from within Environment and Protected Areas, and during the development of the plan Environment and Protected

Areas has been consulting with various government ministries, of which Forestry and Parks is one. As well as Environment and Protected Areas, we are also working closely with industry and other stakeholders and Indigenous communities on this plan.

You know, Weyerhaeuser, in particular, is highly engaged in the planning process, and Weyerhaeuser holds the rights to an FMA that largely, about 35 per cent, overlaps the caribou ranges in the upper Smoky subregion. The fibre from this FMA supports a Weyerhaeuser sawmill and pulp mill operated by International Paper. Currently there are various drafts of the plan outlining several strategies that may ensure the long-term retention of caribou habitat to meet the section 11 agreements. Again, it's kind of a delicate balance there. We have the section 11, that's guiding us on one hand, and then we have a forest industry that needs to make sure that its mills remain viable to provide employment in the area.

During the planning process some proactive harvesting in the range to reduce wildfire risk is being analyzed to understand the benefits to wildfire and the impacts on the caribou habitat, and in general diverse forests, which are different ages of deciduous versus pure conifer, reduce the wildfire risk compared to the mature conifer forests. That subregional plan, though, is still under development and has not been approved yet, but again it's something we're always conscious about when it comes to dealing with the caribou situation in the province and how it affects industry and Albertans as a whole.

Mr. Dyck: Excellent. Well, thank you, Minister. I really appreciate that.

I want to switch gears here just a little bit and talk about the manufacturing sector, particularly in the forestry industry. This is critical to our economy and also pursuing a diversified economy as well. I think of my riding. I believe we produce a significant amount of the pulp for Alberta, and I believe, from my understanding, a significant amount of that pulp actually creates the Amazon boxes here in Alberta. So we have an incredible industry that is being used here by many people if not all of Alberta.

What I want to talk about is the collaboration, the potential collaboration with the Department of JET, preparing to launch a manufacturing incentive tax credit under Budget 2024. This is a huge step to incentivize competitiveness in Alberta's manufacturing, creating that ecosystem of extensive enterprises and specialized manufacturers where they can really thrive. I understand that the introduction of this tax incentive is not just to stimulate primary and secondary wood product manufacturing but also to create a business environment and infrastructure favourable to maximizing Crown land economic opportunities. My question is in this – or I have a few. With the hopeful implementation of this tax credit in Budget 2024, can you provide an insight into the progress of those pivotal tax incentives?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. You know, tax credit programs are one way of creating business conditions that enable value-added entrepreneurs to invest in Alberta and in the future of our province. We've seen the benefits of that in the ag industry, that has had this tax credit program in place for a year or two now. It is part of my mandate, so we're working to ensure the tax incentive program will encourage investment in our province's forest industry. We want to make sure that it covers both large and small forest industries, so we're working alongside Jobs, Economy and Trade on this tax incentive, and we will be doing stakeholder engagement as we roll this out.

We're looking at opportunities for the tax incentive to support large- and small-scale manufacturers and enhance both primary and value-added wood product manufacturing in Alberta. When we look at our forestry products, if we have an opportunity to provide

that value-added here in the province, that helps our economy, helps jobs in our province, and, I think, is all around a good deal for Albertans. Again, we've seen it benefit the ag industry as far as those value-added products, so we look forward to seeing that in the forest industry, too.

Mr. Dyck: Excellent. Yeah. Just to follow up, this is a super integral part of our economy. It's a pillar of it. Manufacturing is not something that we often hear about, but it is so vital, not just in employment but in GDP, export revenue. So how does Budget 2024 intend to use this tax to boost the sector's productivity and competitiveness on the world stage, not just here in Alberta but on the world stage? Can you expand on that a little bit more for the folks at home that are looking at us right now, all those millions of views?

9:20

Mr. Loewen: The tens of Albertans watching us intently? Yes. It doesn't really fall in Budget 2024 because we're starting the consultation process now, so it will be implemented in the future. But Alberta's forestry sector is the fourth largest among Canadian provinces by GDP – we're behind Quebec, British Columbia, and Ontario – so it is a major part of our GDP in this province, and across Canada it's substantial, too.

In addition to its primary wood products and panel board producers, the Alberta wood products manufacturing sector is estimated to include 331 secondary wood product manufacturers. We are keen to ensure a future tax incentive program will support both large and small manufacturers and support an increase in the amount of value of Alberta's value-added wood-based manufacturing sector. Again, the manufacturing sector as a whole is an integral part of Alberta's economic prosperity and diversity, and we remain committed to doing our best for the Alberta forest industry manufacturers. It is an important part of the economy, the forestry industry, and if we can add that opportunity to have these value-added processes done here in this province, then, again, it's good for jobs, good for the economy, and good all around for Alberta.

Mr. Dyck: Excellent. Thanks, Minister.

Since I only have 10 seconds left, I want to give a shout-out to my son, who's four, Nash. He's often watching at this time of night, so just saying hello.

Mr. Loewen: Hi, Nash. How's it going?

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go over to the opposition side for 10 minutes. Go ahead.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Chair. All right. I'm feeling like I can't talk about Kananaskis anymore, clearly. That's okay because I recognize that the park system is very big and broad and encompasses a lot of really great places in Alberta that I'm very grateful for.

I want to spend a little bit of time talking about hunting and angling because that is also part of this massive portfolio. The hunting and angling is on page 104 of the government estimates. We can just see it's basically \$13 million that is allocated for hunting and angling management. That number hasn't changed too much over time, but I have a couple of questions about how that money is allocated and spent.

Earlier this year, through the chair, Minister, you went to travel and promote the premier special draws for bighorn sheep and other species in Nevada, for sure, but there was also another destination, I can't remember. These premier special draws for bighorn sheep

are actually pretty well established and subscribed already, so I'm kind of wondering why the need for international travel to promote these special draws and how much the trips cost.

Mr. Loewen: I don't believe that we have the totals on the trips. That'll be in next year's budget – or, I should say, I guess, well, when we finalize this fiscal year.

But, again, when I'm travelling to promote those licences – I think that I did the same last year – I think that we've seen a substantial increase in the amount of money that those licences raised. Last year, I believe, it was over a million dollars and this year, I think, was around \$900,000 or \$850,000. So there's a substantial amount of money that's raised. All that money comes back to Alberta for conservation projects. I think this is actually a great story. The bighorn sheep licence – and, again, it's just a licence, and we have a similar licence that's raffled off to Albertans to match that one – sold for \$320,000 U.S. That's a substantial amount of money. That money comes back for conservation.

Just as a matter of interest, I don't believe that any of the minister's special licence holders in the past two or three years have harvested a bighorn sheep. It's an opportunity to hunt; it's not a kill of a sheep. It's an opportunity to hunt. The people that spend that much money on a licence like that are people that care about conservation. They're willing to put their money where their mouth is when it comes to conservation. To them, it isn't all about killing, but it's about helping the resource. When I talked to the fellow that bought it last year, he said that the reason why he bought it and spent some money is because there's no other jurisdiction in North America that's done more for bighorn sheep than Alberta. Our bighorn sheep have been used to repopulate populations across North America. So, again, these are all really good-news stories.

Dr. Elmeligi: Yeah. I agree. I have nothing against the premier special draws for bighorn sheep. I understand that it is a revenue source and that they are very well received. What I'm asking is: do you physically have to go to these places and spend that money to travel to promote something that is already quite successful?

Mr. Loewen: Just to give you an idea, when we sold the bighorn sheep tag last year and this year, I was the only person that was given the opportunity to speak at either one of those conventions because I was there as the minister. The last speech I gave here a month or so ago: there were 2,200 people in the room. So it gives me an opportunity to promote Alberta as a whole. Again, I think it's noteworthy that of all the tags that were sold for all the different states – I think there were, I want to say, 16 other sheep tags that were sold from different states – I was the only one that was able to speak and to have that opportunity to speak to those people about Alberta.

Dr. Elmeligi: Through the chair to the minister, thank you.

Moving on to wood bison, in 2021 wood bison in northern Alberta WMUs were designated as wildlife and protected as a threatened species. This listing created opportunities for the Alberta government to partner with Indigenous communities in wood bison management and provided subsistence hunting opportunities for these communities. Hunting bison is now permitted in these WMUs under a special licence and allocation process, which is great. I really think this is part of reintroducing bison to the Alberta landscape, and it's part of truth and reconciliation in many ways.

There is a bison population in Banff national park that is growing rapidly and expanding its range into the Ya Ha Tinda along the eastern slopes, and there's growing interest in listing these bison as wildlife and working with Treaty 7 First Nations and probably Treaty 8 and Treaty 6 as well to have a bison hunt in this part of the

province also. This has the potential to increase hunting revenue from licences and strengthen reconciliation programs with Indigenous people. Through the chair, is the minister considering this potential revenue in this budget? Is the minister working with the ministers of Environment and Protected Areas and Indigenous Relations to explore the possibility of bison hunting along the eastern slopes?

Mr. Loewen: Okay. There's no reflection in the budget for revenue on any kind of licence sales for the bison from Banff national park. You know, I am actually excited about the bison, especially in northern Alberta, how the herds have grown and multiplied across the north. I think that's a great story of a species that was once all across the province of Alberta now being repopulated in many areas and repopulated while hunting was taking place and everything else. Again, I think this is a great story for Alberta, having those bison herds expand across the province.

We look at the Hay-Zama herd and how great it's done and the opportunities that both resident hunters and First Nations have had. This past year the hunt started again. It hadn't happened for a couple of years because of the movement of the buffalo herds. Again, I think the First Nations appreciated that. I think for the 40 tags for the residents of Alberta there were about 14,000 people that applied to have one of those 40 licences, so a very special opportunity for those that got a chance to get a tag.

Again, I think that when we look at bison across the province, it's a population that's growing. It's spreading. There are new herds starting up all the time. If we compare the bison population today to what it was, say, 50 years ago, substantial difference and a growing and spreading population.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, I would argue that one of the things that's different, too, is just the social appetite for the idea of hunting bison, but also I do think that bison represent a tremendous opportunity for truth and reconciliation with our Indigenous people. It would be really amazing if part of that hunting opportunity could extend beyond northern Alberta. This herd in Banff national park will rapidly be heading out onto Alberta public lands. There is an effort to continually push them back into the national park, but, you know, they're stubborn, large bison. Like, they're going to find their way. There is quite a big gap of Crown land between the national park and private land, so there is space for us to have bison on Alberta public lands, on Crown land, and open up this hunting opportunity. I know that there are people interested in this, so where is that conversation at inside the ministry that manages hunting and angling?

9:30

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I agree that those bison will – well, they've already been leaving Banff national park, and I think they'll continue to leave, as you say, as the population grows. I'm definitely excited to have the discussion on having a hunt on those bison, too. I think it's a great opportunity. For both resident hunters and First Nations people I think it's a great opportunity there.

Dr. Elmeligi: Okay. I have a minute left, and none of my questions are a minute. I'm just going to throw this out there . . . [interjection] What?

Ms Sweet: Boars.

Dr. Elmeligi: Wild boars, because that's only a 50-second conversation. Wild boars: massive invasive species. What is the ministerial response right now for wild boar management from Forestry and Parks?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Wild boar management is actually under agriculture.

Dr. Elmeligi: Yeah.

Mr. Loewen: I guess I would love to be part of the solution there, too, maybe on a personal level but also on a department level. You're right. It's an invasive species. It's a species that we can't allow to propagate far and wide. We need to keep them under control the best we can because I do believe that they could create an enormous problem. We look at other places in the world where they have created enormous losses to ag and other . . .

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Dr. Elmeligi: Nice. Right to the buzzer.

The Chair: We'll move on to government caucus. Armstrong-Homeniuk, go ahead.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Chair, through you to the minister. First of all, Minister, thank you for all the great work you're doing. I know you're very dedicated, and you really do have a lot of passion for nature and for Alberta, so I thank you for that. And thank you to all your ministry folks there. It's very late at night, and they're great support for you. I'm very impressed.

Minister, our public trails serve not only as pathways through the wilderness but as vital connections to the heart of our province's environmental and recreational heritage. Budget 2024 marks a significant step forward in our commitment to nurturing these connections, with substantial funding earmarked for the implementation of the Trails Act. This initiative underscores our government's dedication to enriching the experiences of Albertans and visitors alike, offering enhanced access to the great outdoors and fostering a sustainable relationship with our natural surroundings. The allocation of funds through the Alberta public land trails grant program and direct support to trail organizations reflects a rounded approach to trail management, emphasizing not only recreational enjoyment but also education on responsible use and conservation of wildlife habitats. Minister, how will the Alberta public land trails grant program and the Budget 2024 funding provided to key organizations like the Alberta Off Highway Vehicle Association and the Alberta Snowmobile Association contribute to the sustainability, maintenance, and enhancement of the province's trail systems?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Thank you very much. When we look at organizations like the Alberta Off Highway Vehicle Association, the Alberta Snowmobile Association, those are organizations that are dedicated to serving their members and making sure that their members are able to use the trails in Alberta and use them in an environmentally responsible way. I think that's the key right there. Us providing them funding to be able to use across the province, I think, is a huge benefit to all Albertans because they can leverage that funding with their volunteers and people that want to donate equipment use and things like that. They can get so much more out of it than what we can as government. I think these are great organizations that are definitely doing good work on the landscape. You know, when people have concerns over OHV use on our landscape, these are exactly the types of programs that help protect our landscapes and allow the responsible use of OHVs on public lands.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Given the focus on improving Alberta's trails through the Trails Act and the associated grant funding, how will these investments facilitate shared conservation, outcomes 1 and 3, for fish and wildlife, ensuring that protection and preservation of Alberta's natural heritage alongside recreational use?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Again we look at the Alberta trails and the Trails Act and how it was designed to not just provide recreational opportunity but also provide experiences and to protect our natural resources. These are all good projects. Again, we have the good organizations to work with and not just the OHV organizations and the snowmobiles organizations but organizations that do hiking trails and biking trails and things like that in our parks and our public lands. When we develop plans and strategies for trails, we take into consideration all the different aspects like human-wildlife conflicts and how the trails are going to affect the environment. So I think these organizations that we partner with: they're incredibly important, and having the Trails Act to kind of guide that Crown land vision is important.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Alberta's vast landscapes and abundant wildlife have long made hunting; my favourite, angling; and trapping integral components of our provincial heritage, symbolizing a deep-seated commitment to the conservation and prudent stewardship of our natural resources. These traditional activities do more than offer recreational opportunities; they connect us to our environmental roots and promote a sustainable coexistence with nature.

With Budget 2024 the government has signalled a reinforced commitment to these ends, proposing targeted investments and policy adjustments designed to enhance the management of hunting, fishing, and trapping activities. This forward-looking budget outlines measures aimed at enriching the experiences of outdoor enthusiasts while also bolstering the funding mechanisms critical for conservation efforts. These efforts are poised to protect our fisheries and wildlife, ensuring the vitality of Alberta's natural habitats for generations to come. Can the minister share examples of the targeted investments and policy adjustments being proposed?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. It's actually good you mentioned it. When we talk about hunting, angling, and trapping, I mean, not only are they important to the economy, but they're also important for wildlife and fisheries management. We need to be able to respect that and understand the importance of it there.

When it comes to, like, hunting and angling licences, some of the licence fees go to the organization, the Alberta Conservation Association. That's an organization that's focused on doing things like hunting and fishing surveys and surveys of deer, elk, moose, and fish populations. When we look at that money and how it's spent, I think that we get a good value for our money there, too.

Now, the department is taking action to produce and stock more fish. We want to make sure that – currently we have a lot of anglers that leave our province to go elsewhere to fish. I know that fishing is something important to yourself, and we want to make sure that we can keep some of the Albertans right here in Alberta, enjoying our fishing opportunities right here. We can do that by proper fisheries management and by stocking fish where necessary.

We always are looking to explore and evaluate options for hunting and fishing regulation changes and engage with Albertans on this. When it comes to the hunters and anglers in the province, they all have an opinion on how our hunting and angling is managed in the province, so you always get a wide variety of opinions when we're consulting.

But, again, we want to remain focused on making sure that we have sustainable fish and wildlife populations in a balanced age structure so that we have not only for our generation but for generations to come.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister. My ice fishing was snuffed out this year because of the lack of ice.

Minister, how are these measures expected to directly benefit outdoor enthusiasts and contribute to the broader goals of conservation and coexistence within our natural environment? Well, you kind of touched on that, but do you want to expand a bit?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Again, when we look at our hunting and fishing opportunities in the province, we want to make sure that we're managing these resources and taking care of these resources in a responsible manner, and when we have an opportunity to increase some of the opportunities, we want to do that, too. Again, we always respect our First Nations and their ability and right to harvest both wildlife and fish. So, as we adjust regulations, we want to make sure – I guess how I've always described it: instead of trying to figure how to divide a small pie, we want to make the pie bigger for everyone. I think there's an opportunity to do that when it comes time – for wildlife, you know, things like prescribed burns to increase habitat will increase wildlife populations in a natural way and in a way that it has been for generations in the past. When it comes to fishing, we know that with proper management of our fisheries and with the opportunity to stock where necessary, we have opportunities we can expand across the board for hunting, fishing, and trapping.

9:40

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Well, Minister, thank you so much for that.

Just one last question here, which you have touched on, but I want to know if you want to expand on this a little bit more, possibly: how will achieving performance measure 1(c) support outcome 3 to enhance fishing, angling, and hunting opportunities for Albertans?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Some of these performance measures were still under development, and we will be reporting them in future years. You know, we recognize the importance of the broader ecosystem, and we wanted to add this measure to the business plan for increased transparency for Albertans on the management of things like grazing leases and rangelands and our natural ecosystems. Crown rangelands are managed by the government of Alberta in partnership with farmers and ranchers who are the disposition holders, who steward the land through sustainable range management practices for its long-term health, productivity, and sustainability. When we look at the grazing opportunities, particularly in southern Alberta, and how the cattle grazing on that land replaces the bison that once roamed that area, I think it's an important part of our future and an important part of our past.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Over to the opposition side for your last block of questions. Go ahead.

Dr. Elmeligi: I still feel like I have so many questions, but it's okay because I'm also very tired.

Just one last question on the wildland urban interface program. The Alberta Fire Chiefs Association have passed a resolution kind of feeding into what my colleague was talking about earlier about, like, the external report and sharing that publicly, but they're requesting that that external report include a comprehensive

financial audit of the program as well as an assessment of performance objectives for the program and that that be conducted by an external party. I'm just wondering if that is part of the review that is being done or if you could include that comprehensive financial audit and review of performance objectives when you do release that.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. When it comes to wildland urban interface, Public Safety and Emergency Services has the lead on that, so we'll see, you know, what they come up with as they go through these reviews and everything. But, again, I believe any kind of external review like that will be made available to the public to look over, for sure. When it comes to finances, all of the finances of the province of Alberta are gone over carefully. We have an opportunity in situations like what we're in right now to look at those numbers, but we also have the Auditor General that looks over numbers, too. Hopefully, that would be, I think, sufficient there.

Dr. Elmeligi: I didn't find it in the budget, but, through the chair to the minister, you did mention human-wildlife conflict in your opening remarks. I didn't catch how much of the budget is being allocated towards human-wildlife conflict, but I wanted to know basically how that money will be prioritized. You may be aware that the grizzly bear recovery plan actually recommends a human-wildlife conflict specialist in every bear management area of the province. There was one working out of the Kananaskis region. That's just where he was; I'm not prioritizing Kananaskis. He has now retired, so now there are none. There are no human-wildlife conflict specialists working in Alberta, as far as I know. Please correct me if I'm wrong. So how much money is being allocated towards human-wildlife conflict, again, and how is that money being spent across Alberta?

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Yeah. Thanks for that. Appreciate that. I do know that we do have experts both in my department and EPA. Appreciate the fellow that retired and everything. I'm sure he was very well experienced and an expert in his field. Again, we do have others that have expertise in that.

But when it comes to the human-wildlife coexistence, in Budget 2024 it's \$2.9 million, so that's a \$1.4 million increase. It just about doubled from last year to this year. It breaks down to a million dollars in salaries and wages; \$1.5 million, supplies and services; and \$0.4 million, operating grants. The FTEs are about six, plus six to nine seasonal.

Obviously, this government and this department are concerned about human-wildlife coexistence. We did have four people in the last two and a half, three years that have been killed by grizzly bears, and that's incredibly unfortunate. Our hearts go out to those people and their families that suffered that loss. We know that, for instance, in your area, Kananaskis Country – we're talking about it again; it's all good; it's a beautiful area – the grizzly bear aversive conditioning program has been operational for 23 years, and on average they deliver 500 conditioning actions annually. That's a program that has been pretty successful. We do have the wildlife predator compensation program. We have the Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association's communities and carnivores program, and we have the BearSmart messaging. Again, we have a lot of different opportunities to improve human-wildlife coexistence and, hopefully, reduce conflicts down the road.

Dr. Elmeligi: Feeding off some of what you said, a lot of human-wildlife coexistence, you know, really crosses – like, there are different kinds of issues based on the landscape that you're on. So human-wildlife coexistence in protected areas can be about

recreational impact or attractant management at a campground, but human-wildlife coexistence on a farm or a ranch can be about protecting livestock or separating, like, silage pits or something from bears having access to them. And it's not just bears, right? Like, there are other wildlife that create conflict situations. Did you say that there was money for, like, electric fencing and things like that for private landowners to tap into to protect their calves or silage from wildlife?

Mr. Loewen: I don't know that there's any funding for things like electric fencing. I think when we look at most of the ranchers, where they do their calving: a lot of times it's large areas that may be really hard to protect. Part of the program that we do is helping ranchers remove stock that die to make sure that those dead animals don't attract predators like grizzly bears to come in and then, while they're there, create other damage. All of our recreational planning takes into consideration, you know, human-wildlife coexistence.

I think one thing – I think we've discussed this before ourselves – is the Spray Lakes west campground, where there was some habitat work done to draw grizzly bears away from campgrounds and away from people, and I hope we can do more work like that both with prescribed burns and maybe mechanical clearing if necessary to make sure that we create that habitat. I would always prefer to have the prescribed burn as a more natural way to take care of it, but when we look at the landscape and the risk of a prescribed burn going out of control, then I know we're very particular on those burns and how we have them happen. So there may be an opportunity to do other things that may accomplish the same goal as far as that habitat enhancement.

Actually, just looking here with the communities and carnivores program – it's been operating since 2009 – there is an opportunity, too, for electric fence installation, so you were right. Thank you very much.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, through the chair, for admitting that I was right.

Are there other species being considered, other than grizzly bears, in this human-wildlife coexistence program?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. I believe that this kind of handles all human-wildlife conflicts. Another common predator issue would be cougars, because we have cougar attacks on people and, of course, black bears. We did have a black bear death, I think two years ago, in the province that unfortunately happened. It isn't specifically the grizzly bears, but it does appear that grizzly bears seem to be the biggest focus just because of the nature of the animal, which, of course, you know, I don't have to tell you about. I guess that's why there's probably so much discussion on grizzlies as opposed to black bears and cougars, which, again, create problems but maybe not at the magnitude of grizzly bears.

9:50

Dr. Elmeligi: It's really great to hear about the six FTEs and six to nine seasonal working on human-wildlife coexistence across the province because even though we do tend to focus on human-wildlife coexistence in the southern reaches of the province, that's just because that's where there are a lot of people. But, obviously, as we go north, we still have a lot of carnivores, and there's a lot of agricultural land. There's still a lot of recreation happening in the north. That potential for conflict exists, so it's good to hear there is increasing capacity in that regard.

I guess, you know, objective 2.4 on page 63 of the business plan talks about infrastructure and service for high-volume visitation. I'm just wondering how we define high-volume visitation, and what are new tourist areas in that objective? In 18 seconds.

Mr. Loewen: It's going to take a second to find it. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to waste time, but I do want to make sure I give you an answer that's – we may have to get back to you on that.

Dr. Elmeligi: That's okay. Maybe just e-mail me.

Mr. Loewen: Sounds good.

The Chair: Thank you. We'll go to the government side, and you have about eight minutes left. Go ahead, MLA Hunter.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I've been to lots of estimates, and this one would be kind of described like going to a vanilla-tasting conference. It's been pretty nice to be able to be here. Everybody seems to be singing *Kumbaya* around the table, which is nice.

Mr. Loewen: Are you saying that I'm boring?

Mr. Hunter: No, not boring, sir.

Forestry and Parks continues the journey towards fostering a more efficient, responsive, and business-friendly environment. The red tape reduction week stands as a testament to your collective commitment to streamlining processes and eliminating unnecessary regulatory burdens. This initiative not only aims to facilitate a smoother interaction between government services and the public but also seeks to unlock the full potential of the economic landscape in Alberta. Being part of a government that places such a high priority on these objectives does fill me with immense pride, specifically key objective 2.1, which is outlined on page 63 of your business plan. It underscores the dedication to enhancing service delivery, cutting through the red tape, and bolstering economic opportunities on Crown lands and forests. Minister, can you provide an update on the status of red tape reduction efforts that your ministry is undertaking?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Thank you for that. I appreciate that. I know that the red tape reduction is near and dear to your heart from your former position there. Appreciate the work that you did while you had that position in government.

You're exactly right. You mentioned a business-friendly environment, and that's so important for businesses to come here, to want to invest, to want to be here and employ Albertans. A business-friendly environment: a big part of that is the red tape and regulatory approaches.

When we had a chance to first sit down and look at – first, I will say that a lot of good work was done previous to me becoming a minister of this department. But when we sat down and looked, when I first became minister, and identified some of the timelines, we really wanted to decrease those timelines. Some of it has been in the service standards when it comes to land dispositions and grazing lease renewals, things like that, and some of the timelines were fairly extended. It would give us a chance to kind of look at them and see how we could streamline some of those processes. Some of it was, you know, modernizing our digital services, and others were just maybe realizing that there was a problem and then focusing on solving that problem and working through some of those backlogs. We did substantially shorten a lot of the timelines, and we did reduce a lot of red tape along the way.

I think one thing to remember is that when we had done a lot of that work, we analyzed what the savings would be. The savings were both on the government side and on the business side because we had less staff time going into certain things, where by streamlining them and making them quicker, reducing that red tape, the job was able to get done faster, which required less manpower

on the government side, but it saved millions of dollars also on the business side because they weren't delayed. They didn't have as many people having to work just filling out forms and doing paperwork. But it still gave us the opportunity to have the oversight that was necessary for government to have over industry. We don't want to give up the job that we are responsible for in government, to have that oversight, but we want to make sure that we streamline things to the point that it can be a benefit to both industry and government itself.

Mr. Hunter: Thanks, Minister. I noticed that the government had announced that they had hit that 33 per cent, or one-third, reduction in the total government. Was your department able to get to that one-third reduction?

Mr. Loewen: Actually, we were able to beat that one-third. We reduced red tape by 42.9 per cent, and that's as reported by the ministry of service Alberta. It wasn't our analysis that's come up with that grand number, but the minister of red tape reduction. Again, you know, we are proud of that. What we've noticed since then is that when we find a piece of red tape right now, sometimes it's just one number, but it makes a big difference. A lot of times some of the bigger numbers that came down were maybe not as substantive as some of the single numbers that were taken off one by one, so it was just kind of an interesting point to see. Like, there is a reduction that we've done here just recently, and we realized it was only going to take our count down by just one, but the effect on industry and on government was huge.

Mr. Hunter: Yeah. I know that it is just, you know, percentages and numbers and that isn't really what the red tape reduction initiative was all about. It was about actually getting government out of the way of Albertans so that they don't have to keep on jumping through all that red tape and those hoops.

One of the things that I've appreciated your department doing is working on the website to make sure that it's easier to be able to get campsites and stuff. I know that families love to get out. They love to be able to enjoy the outdoors. For your work on that, I applaud you.

I also wanted to applaud you on just a common-sense approach, as my first questions that I asked earlier on in the evening were about being able to try to find the balance. I know that as I've talked to different people throughout the province, they have said that they feel like this ministry has actually finally gotten to the point where they have a balance to the kind of approach that we should take; that you don't have to have it exclusively one way or the other, as we've seen sometimes in the past.

Down in our area, in the south, as you know, it starts to narrow down in that bottom area there. There are a lot more people down there and everybody is tripping over each other trying to be able to get to that special area to enjoy the outdoors. But I would just encourage your ministry to remember that there are many users of the land in that area and that all of them should have the right as Albertans to be able to use that.

Thank you very much for the work that you're doing, especially in that south area.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. You're exactly right. There needs to be a balance on the landscape as far as use. But I will take a little bit of time here just to do a shameless plug for shop.albertaparks.ca. That's the website for booking campsites in Alberta. I just wanted to point out that we have 14,000 campsites in Alberta that are booked, but 5,000 of those are first-come, first-served. So a lot of people are concerned that they have to go on the website to book a

camping site, but, no, we have a good percentage of them that are left for first-come, first-served.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry estimates has concluded.

I want to congratulate everyone on the well-informed questions and the well-informed answers. Well done, everybody.

I would like to remind the committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, Wednesday, March 20, 2024, at 3:30 to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

