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The 27th Legislature
First Session

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The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 27th Legislature

First Session

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[Errata, if any, appear inside back cover]

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Renew us with your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature 48 very special guests seated in the members' gallery. They are from St. Martin's Catholic elementary school. We had a chance to have a very brief chat this morning. The students are accompanied by teachers Mrs. Tracy Deal and Mr. Rae Molzan and parent helpers Mrs. Adele Bilyk, Miss Toby Starko, and Mr. Daryl Phillips. I would ask that this Assembly recognize their attendance with a very warm traditional welcome.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to be able to introduce to you and through you on behalf of the Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake a group of 19 from a school in Bonnyville, l'école des Beaux-Lacs. They're accompanied by their teachers, Lise Gratton and Lucie Lavoie, and by Joanne Shutter. I would like to ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed an honour to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 20 visitors from Northern Lakes College. They drove in early this morning just to see the activity in the Legislature. They are accompanied by Ms Christine Neidig and Mr. Jim Meldrum. They are seated in the public gallery, and I'd ask that they all rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly a group of 30 energetic, bright young Albertans from the Grande Prairie-Wapiti constituency. Visiting the Legislature today to learn about how government works are students ranging from kindergarten to grade 6 from Valhalla school. They are accompanied by parent and grandparent volunteers Andre Harpe, Mrs. Diane Harpe, Mr. Trone Arnet, Mr. Rob Kjemhus, Mrs. Jolene Kochendorfer, Ms Tera Fehr, Mrs. Deb Bue, Mrs. Lorraine Gerow, Mrs. Kathy Ostrander, Mr. Richard Harpe, and Mrs. Anne Harpe. This group will be arriving shortly, and I would ask members to extend the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly in anticipation of their arrival.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through to the members of this Assembly a group of 14 seniors from the Sears Plus Club located in my constituency. It is my understanding that they are presently touring the building and will arrive for question period. Nevertheless, I would like us to give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly five Albertans representing three organizations. Firstly, from the Alberta Cattle Feeders' Association we have chairman Jack de Boer and CEO Bryan Walton, whom I will be meeting with shortly.

Also with us today for the announcement that was made over the noon hour regarding the cull breeding swine/food banks program are Jodi Hesse, director, policy and communications, and Cara Dary, manager, quality assurance and technical services, both with Alberta Pork, and Richard LeSueur, resource development co-ordinator with the Alberta Foodbank Network Association.

Last but not least, Mr. Speaker, it's always a pleasure to introduce one of our hard-working officials from Agriculture and Rural Development. Here today in support of the food bank announcement is Marvin Salomons, senior manager of business expansion and commercialization.

Mr. Speaker, everyone is seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask that they now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jacobs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to rise to introduce the deputy mayor of the town of Magrath, from my constituency, Mr. Sam Johnston. Sam is visiting the Leg. today. It was my privilege to have lunch with him and to introduce him to some of my colleagues. I would ask Sam to please rise now and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two individuals who embody the Margaret Mead observation to "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The first person I'd like to introduce is my constituent Margaret Michaud. Margaret is the president of a small organization based in St. Paul, Alberta, called the Friends for World Development. This organization has now partnered with a second organization, which is the Welfare Association for Relief & Regional Development, which operates in the Himalayan mountains in India. Today we have with us Devasia Nellikunnel, who is a director of that second organization. The two of them are partnering together to fund small looms so that each family in that area can make a livelihood for their family. I'm very pleased to have both of them joining us and leading by example here in the Assembly today. Please join me in welcoming them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly two officials of the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association – Don George, vice president, and Brian Munday, executive director – seated in the public gallery. They're with us today having just concluded a meeting with the hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration and his parliamentary assistant, the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung. The Alberta Land Surveyors' Association and their counterpart, the Association of British Columbia Land Surveyors, have just signed a mutual recognition document in line with TILMA at their 99th annual meeting in Lake Louise last Saturday. I understand this is one of the first documents signed by professional associations in Alberta. I would ask Don and Brian if they would please rise and receive the traditional hearty welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Before I call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore for a member's statement, let's all wish the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills a happy birthday on this momentous occasion.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Technology Initiatives in Schools

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is seen nationally and internationally as a leader in integrating new technology into the educational system. This government has been instrumental in the development of SuperNet, which significantly supports the use of technology in our schools. Studies indicate that technology can be used to create a dynamic learning and teaching environment that engages the 21st century learner. In our knowledge-based economy technology can improve collaboration and analytical and problem-solving skills that Alberta students need to remain competitive in our interconnected world.

There is no better way to celebrate Education Week and our education system than an allocation of resources to ensure continuous support for cutting-edge development, continued system improvements, unique learning opportunities, and excellent student outcomes. The Alberta government is investing over \$55 million this year to broaden technology initiatives in schools across the province using a variety of technologies, including electronic whiteboards, video conferencing, laptops, and other hardware and software.

1:40

International and intercultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes are increasingly important for students to develop in order to live and work in a complex and increasingly independent world. New technologies support innovative and engaging learning environments which enable students to develop the skills they need for global citizenship, lifelong learning, and participation in the world of work.

The release of this funding information coincided this morning with an uplifting international event that the Minister of Education and I attended at Queen Elizabeth high school in my constituency of Edmonton-Decore. This was the Videoconference for Hope, a student fundraising activity involving 15 schools across Alberta and others from around the world. Students are using video conferencing technology to raise funds to build a school for street children in Nicaragua while learning the values of global citizenship.

At the event we were able to communicate with people in Nicaragua and the United States.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Student Financial Assistance

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is estimated that a postsecondary graduate will earn a million dollars more over their lifetime than someone with only a high school education. Whether it is to become a nurse, an accountant, a tradesperson, an artist, or a research scientist, the ticket to success is a quality education. In our province there are endless opportunities for Albertans of all ages to pursue a postsecondary education and realize their dreams.

Mr. Speaker, we have built a postsecondary system that is the envy of the world. As we lay the foundation for the next Alberta, I am pleased that we are also ensuring that Alberta's students have the supports and options they need. Eighteen months ago the affordability framework for Alberta's postsecondary system was launched to encompass a range of costs and the supports that are available to students, certainly reaching beyond tuition.

Yesterday the work of Alberta's affordability framework for students reached another milestone. By reducing interest rates, removing restrictions on scholarship earnings, increasing student living allowances and loan limits, and doubling part-time earning exemptions, we have taken important and vital steps to enhance an already strong support system. Over 62,000 students alone will benefit from the cuts to fixed and variable rate loans.

Mr. Speaker, these changes to Alberta's financial assistance for students have been widely endorsed by student groups and institutions alike. Students of Lethbridge College and the University of Lethbridge thank you for these important supports. This pays tribute to the holistic Campus Alberta approach that combines the roles and mandates framework, access planning, and the affordable framework.

It's no secret that the world is looking to Alberta as a player in the global economy, and it will be Alberta's students of today and tomorrow that will show the world Alberta's talents, skills, and knowledge.

Mr. Speaker, a postsecondary education is one of the best investments any person or any government can make. Yesterday Alberta recognized what students give back to our province, building the bright future that our province will enjoy.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Land-use Framework

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta sits in 2008 with unparalleled development and still no enforceable land-use framework. Currently there is such an attempt going on, the third since 1993. A clear, enforceable land-use framework is urgently needed in this province and must be a top priority of this government. Today we have increasing conflict over water and land, declining quality of life, threats to our environment and to our economy. We continue to make decisions on the basis of first-come, first-served and short-term economic gain instead of planned, strategic, and sustainable land use.

Scores of groups, including aboriginal communities, have called for a land-use framework and regional planning. Climate change and water declines demand action now. Does it make sense to threaten our eastern slopes – our water towers, our lifeblood – for a

few dollars in oil, minerals, or forest products or lose prime agricultural land to acreages and landfills?

The time is long past for approvals of development one at a time. The notion of cumulative effects measurement, total impacts on all activities in a watershed, is finally in this government's vocabulary. Genuine progress, triple bottom-line measures, and accountability must direct our decisions within the realities of limits to growth, and these limits must be legislated. Despite recognizing the need for a land-use framework, this government may take many years to implement and in the interim refuses to change the way they make decisions today or slow development. This contradicts their commitment to good stewardship of the environment and the economy. Albertans deserve responsible development now, not greenwashing and good intentions.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

Asian Heritage Month

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today to recognize Asian Heritage Month, which runs through the month of May. The genesis of Asian Heritage Month can be traced back to the United States when in 1977 President Carter signed a joint resolution and made an official declaration. Then, President Bush proclaimed May as Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month in 1990, enacting legislation that was signed into law in 1992.

Here in Canada the Senate of Canada passed a motion to officially designate May as Asian Heritage Month in 2002 to recognize the important contributions of Asian Canadians to the settlement, growth, and social and cultural development of Canada and in recognition of Canada's diversity.

The Asian Canadian community is diverse. It includes Japanese Canadians, south Asians, and Chinese Canadians, who have had close to 150 years of presence and participation in Alberta and Canada; the Filipino and Korean communities that have been here for almost half a century; and newer members from origins such as Vietnam and Nepal just to name a few.

While the three Ds, namely dress, dance, and dine, remain a colourful component of the month-long festivities, Asian Heritage Month in the 21st century is much more than songs and dance. It provides communities and organizations the opportunity to work across cultures and sectors, to engage key institutions to broaden their scopes of programming, and for the communities to look at issues of identity and belonging, integration and cultural retention as well as issues of access and meaningful participation. So there will be feasts for our stomachs and much food for thought.

In closing, if I may, Mr. Speaker, invite the hon. members of this House to consider that if you have taken yoga, had tandoori chicken, kimchee pizza, or Vietnamese noodles, have taken tai chi, have used chopsticks, or had the teriyaki chicken that was served in the Legislature cafeteria today, maybe there's a little bit of Can-Asian in you.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to acknowledge the Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health, who had their 2008 annual invitational symposium here in Edmonton from April 27 to 29 at the Westin Hotel.

CADTH provides health decision-makers with credible impartial

advice and evidence-based information about the effectiveness of drugs and other health technologies. This year's theme, Beyond the Evidence: Making Tough Decisions, acknowledged that health-related decisions cannot be made solely on scientific evidence but rather in tandem with judgment preferences, values, resources, and other factors which are key in the decision-making process.

Mr. Speaker, I want to recognize CADTH for its work in educating and supporting health decision-makers on important issues surrounding drugs and other health technologies and for working earnestly to broaden the knowledge and skills of those people working in the health field, whose jobs are integral to maintaining a sustainable health care system in Alberta as well as high quality of life for its citizens.

This is the first time that it has ever held its annual symposium outside of Ottawa, and I think that's a sure sign that Canada is looking to Alberta to be leaders in delivering health care services to our citizens.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

World's Longest Hockey Game

Mr. Quest: Mr. Speaker, it's a bit late, but from February 8 to 18 a courageous group of 40 players and hundreds of volunteers came together once again to play the world's longest hockey game. This 10-day continuous game was led for the third time by Dr. Brent Saik. The group had two objectives: to break their previous Guinness book of world records record for the longest hockey game and to reach their goal of raising more than \$500,000 in pledges for pediatric cancer research. For Dr. Saik, the players, and volunteers, their theme was This Time It's War, as the battle against cancer is far from over.

The game was played in Strathcona county on the NHL-sized outdoor rink on Dr. Saik's acreage, known as Saikers Acres. The players persevered through a brutal cold snap, with temperatures in the minus 30s, exhaustion, and injury. On February 18 they achieved their goal of 241 hours of straight play, beating their previous 2005 record of 240 hours and their initial 2003 record of 80 hours. The referees ensured once again that the world's longest hockey game was played according to official NHL rules. They were also able to meet and surpass their goal of raising \$500,000 in donations, with donations still coming in.

1:50

The community as a whole came together to encourage the effort, with physiotherapists, chiropractors, referees, and hundreds of volunteers supporting their aspiration. The game was also open to the public all day every day, and thousands took the opportunity to come and support this worthy cause.

Mr. Speaker, I was personally able to watch parts of the game on the first and last day of play and witnessed first-hand the dedication and courage of each player and volunteer. It was truly inspiring to see, and I commend them for their efforts.

I would like to thank Dr. Saik and his fellow players for their continued commitment to finding a cure for cancer and congratulate them on their new Guinness world record. Thank you.

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Waterfowl Deaths in Oil Sands Tailings Pond

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday after an anonymous

tip reports emerged of several hundred ducks dying after landing on tailings ponds connected to oil sands mines. These ponds are pools of toxic water so vast that it takes the largest earthen dams in the world to hold them in place. Some of them are literally on the edge of the Athabasca River, and they grow by millions of litres a day. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. How does this government expect the world to have confidence in this government's ability to manage the oil sands when it takes an anonymous tipster to let the government know of hundreds of dying birds?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I think the world will have confidence in our system because within hours of this incident happening, we were informed. We have our team on the spot, and we're investigating. If there's any negligence on the part of the operators, the conditions of operation there are very clear. They have a legal obligation for waterfowl and migratory bird deterrence. Our team will determine if it is in place and if it was operational. If it wasn't, there'll be legal consequences.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the world expects more than anonymous tips to protect the oil sands.

Yesterday the Premier said that 20 or fewer birds die per year as a result of the tailings ponds, but it's obvious that the monitoring system isn't working very well. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Will he table the information that is the basis of the Premier's claim?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. Leader of the Opposition should be careful about making comments, allegedly factual, about who said what to whom when this is, in fact, under dispute in the public realm right now. Our staff, as I've repeated, was informed Monday. We had people there Monday, and we've been getting information. I'm proud of the work that's been done. As I said, we will get to the bottom of this. We'll get the facts, and if there's been negligence, negligent parties will pay.

Dr. Taft: Mr. Speaker, given that it's a matter of public record that the Premier said that no more than four to 20 birds die per year, once again will the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development table the information that supports the Premier's claim?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, yesterday this government called a news conference to communicate with Albertans about this incident that occurred in Fort McMurray at the Syncrude site. We have very, very strict rules in place. I made it very clear yesterday, and I make it very clear again to the media that are sitting listening today to the question with respect to the rules in place. We expect companies to live up to the conditions of the licences that we permit, and if they don't, there are consequences. It is now a matter under full investigation. We're not going to prejudge the circumstance until all of the evidence is on the table.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Monitoring of Oil Sands Tailings Ponds

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In reality tailings ponds like these are oily lakes seriously contaminated with heavy metals like arsenic and mercury as well as other toxins. They have been filling

one after another for 30 years. To the Minister of Environment: given that the monitoring system for migratory birds completely failed and relied on an anonymous tipster, how can Albertans be confident that the monitoring system for seepage into water sources hasn't failed as well? Or do we need to depend on anonymous tipsters for that as well?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, the system that is in place to monitor the water is a series of tests that are conducted both by industry as well as CEMA and other organizations that are associated with the oil sands and accumulated within Alberta Environment. We have the utmost confidence that that system is secure.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess to the same minister, then. Well, didn't you have the utmost confidence in the system that was monitoring the life and progress of migratory birds, or did you have doubts? You can't have it both ways.

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, when someone installs a smoke detector in their home, it doesn't ensure that they'll never have a fire. It ensures that when they have a fire, they have early indications. In this particular case, we acted when we became aware of the situation, and we believe that we have acted in a prudent and appropriate manner.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Well, thank you again, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: do government employees check the liners of these tailings ponds, or is that responsibility also left to the self-monitoring of the oil sands companies?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, like any compliance organization Alberta Environment depends upon a series of different checks and balances, one of which is auditing. There is an ongoing auditing program. There is a requirement of the operator to report, and those reports are audited. There is also a reality that we recognize that Albertans have pride in this province, and we expect Albertans to be our eyes and ears as well.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Compliance with Environmental Regulations

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Tragically, up to 500 ducks right now lie dead or dying in decades-old toxic lakes of hydrocarbons, heavy metals, and tarry silt; in other words, a deadly threat to all species. These unreclaimed tailings ponds are the environmental price we pay for development at all costs without full scientific understanding of impacts, human and ecosystem, of unmanaged growth. To the Minister of Environment: after decades of growing toxic lakes, why has so little been reclaimed?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it is a long process from the point that tailings ponds are originally commissioned until the point when they are reclaimed, but the fact of the matter remains that tailings ponds will be reclaimed. In the meantime there is in place a series of regulations on the operation of those tailings ponds that have a number of requirements, one of which is that there be bird deter-

rence in place and in effect at all times. That is what is under investigation at this time.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Environment minister: given that the Kearl tar sands project had its water licence pulled by the federal courts due to incomplete water impact assessments, how confident can Albertans be in the provincial approval process?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, the two examples are totally unrelated. This deals with an incident that happened allegedly because the deterrents that are a requirement of operation were either not operating or were ineffective. That is the focus of our attention right now. We need to know, and we will find out what happened and what needs to be done to prevent it from happening again.

Dr. Swann: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is about the credibility of the Environment department. When will the minister admit that his department, at less than 0.5 per cent of the provincial budget, has no ability to monitor and enforce the regulations in place?

The Speaker: Well, we'll be careful because later today the estimates for the Department of Environment are up, and our tradition is that we do not have questions with respect to budgets in this House on that day. Policy, yes, but not budgets.

Dr. Swann: Mr. Minister, is this stewardship? Are you able to provide stewardship?

2:00

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, of course we provide stewardship. The role of Environment is twofold: one, to develop policy to ensure that the stewardship responsibility of government in Alberta is adhered to; and secondly, that we have the necessary compliance mechanisms in place to ensure that that policy is being adhered to.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. During the 2007 estimates debate the Minister of Environment said, "The best way to ensure that you have compliance with environment legislation is not by going out and hiring more policemen." Today we see the folly of that approach: 500 migratory birds stuck in the goo of a Syncrude tailings pond because Syncrude failed to follow the regulations. We know about this incident not because Syncrude reported it but from an anonymous tip. My question is to the Minister of Environment. Will the minister now recognize that self-monitoring of environmental regulations is little more than the fox guarding the henhouse?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I already indicated that self-monitoring is only a small portion of the way we ensure that our environmental regulations are in fact adhered to. We have 57 inspectors and 23 more investigators that do the audits, that follow up where it's appropriate. So I reiterate what I said earlier: hiring more policemen is not the way to deal with this; ensuring that our laws are respected and adhered to is.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I wonder where those people were yesterday.

The minister told the media that voluntary compliance usually works well. Is the minister satisfied with that standard?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, whenever a system breaks down and results in a tragedy such as we're dealing with right now, I'm not satisfied. What I am determined to do is find out what broke down, what happened, and what needs to be done to prevent it from happening again.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again to the minister: instead of spending \$25 million convincing the rest of the world that Alberta is environmentally responsible, wouldn't it make more sense to use that money to make sure that we actually are?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, since the money is under the Public Affairs Bureau, it's my responsibility. I believe I gave a very clear answer to that question yesterday. Twenty-five million dollars is well spent in ensuring that we protect the integrity of this province not only within Canada but within North America and around the world. We will continue to do that, and here's why: 30 years ago Syncrude pioneered the bird aversion strategy, the research. For 30 years things went well. One year we have one incident. That is what's being used by that party to try and damage the reputation not only of the Department of Environment and of a company but also of this Legislature, because they're using this Legislature to communicate that misinformation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Syncrude Response to Waterfowl Deaths

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Unlike the Official Opposition Fort McMurray is my home, and it has been my home for over 30 years. Citizens, I might say, care deeply about the environment in my home of Fort McMurray as do all Albertans. In 30 years there has never been an incident like what happened yesterday. It's been 30 years and never an incident like this. It's an impressive track record. To the Minister of the Environment: what would have gone so wrong yesterday in terms of any communication from Syncrude relative to this issue, unlike the last 30 years?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to express to the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo my respect for the people of Fort McMurray and my acknowledgement that there is a track record that we should be proud of. On the other hand, we can't ignore the fact that a very serious incident took place on Monday. We currently have under way a thorough investigation to determine what caused that incident and what we need to do to prevent it from happening again.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, on that point – and I thank the hon. minister – the question would be this: what has taken place within the Ministry of Environment in the past 24 hours in terms of what is going on to prevent this from ever happening again?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have mobilized our ASERT rapid response environmental team to the site. We have worked with SRD officials and other government officials to ensure that the

necessary inspection is under way. As we speak, there is an ongoing recovery operation to try and save as many of the birds as possibly can be done. Finally, we have ensured that the necessary bird deterrents that were inoperable are in fact operable as we speak.

Mr. Boutilier: Final question, Mr. Speaker, to the Minister of Energy. I'd ask the Minister of Energy if, in fact, the company officials from Syncrude Canada have contacted him relative to the situation and if the minister intends to meet with all oil sands players to ensure that whatever good work is being done, this can be prevented so that it will never happen again, not for the next 30 years or the next 30 years after that.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Knight: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Most certainly, I would have to indicate to the member that we do have ongoing discussions with all of the players in the oil sands area, serious discussions with respect to the tailings ponds and what we see as opportunities in front of us to not only address the situation with respect to historic tailings ponds, but on a go-forward basis we are looking at some technologies that we believe will really reduce this risk a tremendous amount for any environmental concern, not only migratory birds.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Protection of Wildlife

Ms Pastoor: Mr. Speaker, thank you. The Deputy Premier is in Washington attempting to implement this government's greenwashing plan to convince Americans that this Tory government is environmentally responsible. Five hundred dead ducks in a toxic lake just made his job that much harder. This is not spin; this is stark reality. This government must face the truth. To the President of the Treasury Board: Mr. Minister, would you not agree that the \$25 million would be better spent protecting migratory waterfowl from death in toxic lakes?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, once again, the Public Affairs Bureau budget will be before the House in a matter of days. The budget lies within my purview, that of Executive Council.

Mr. MacDonald: Do you want to change it?

Mr. Stelmach: It will remain there.

I will defend the \$25 million because it's not only the various environmental groups that we have to work with in Alberta and in the United States; it's other levels of government in the United States and others around the world. Investment is attracted to Alberta from so many countries that we have to protect our reputation.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. My next question would be to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Given that the protection of wildlife is this minister's job, could this minister not use some of that \$25 million to put systems into place to protect wildlife from the dangers posed by toxic tailings lakes?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud of the initiatives that this government has done in the past. In bringing forth even more under the land-use framework, the emphasis is being put on habitat conservation and preservation. The hon. members opposite know very well that wildlife, waterfowl, fish all depend upon habitat as the key to their prospering, and we're putting a big emphasis on habitat conservation and preservation.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. To the President of the Treasury Board again: given that this incident will no doubt do further harm to Alberta's environmental image in the eyes of the United States and, indeed, the entire world, as I understand CNN will cover this incident, is there a plan to increase the taxpayer-funded advertising campaign to minimize this incident?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, this question was asked by the media earlier this morning. Most of the questions today that were asked by the opposition were already asked this morning. It's a coincidence, but anyway.

With respect to the \$25 million, as I said, the budget estimates will be going through this House. I am committed with all of my government colleagues to doing the best we can to protect the reputation of this province.

One thing CNN will know is how quickly we reacted. We were there on-site. Also, after a full investigation the public will know exactly what went wrong, and that to me is transparency, and it's accountability to the public of this province.

2:10 Recruitment of Foreign Workers

Mr. Allred: Mr. Speaker, if I may change the subject. Through you to the hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration. There was a recent article in the *Edmonton Journal* that indicated that Germany is providing funding to jobless Germans to relocate them to jobs anywhere in the world. Has the minister been in contact with his counterpart in Germany to see how we can assist jobless Germans to relocate to Alberta to assist with our current labour shortages?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am aware of the unemployment issues in Germany, and we see that as an opportunity for Alberta. The German Department of Labour has been working with the Canadian embassy as well as the Canadian provinces, including Alberta, and with individual employers to help unemployed Germans find jobs. Our government along with Alberta employers has participated in some recruitment activities and recruitment missions, just recently for the hotel and motel and lodging industries and, again, most recently in March for the construction and building trades.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Allred: Thank you. One supplemental, Mr. Speaker. What assistance does your department provide to foreign workers . . .

The Speaker: I think, hon. member, that in a few minutes from now the minister himself will be in this Assembly to deal with his estimates, and that question will then be answered at that point in time.

Mr. Allred: Okay. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Water Quality of Athabasca River

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last summer I canoed down the Athabasca River with 30 concerned citizens and saw first-hand these toxic tar ponds. Tragically, this week 500 birds, what I would call canaries in the mineshaft in a sense, registered and raised other serious concerns for us about what this toxin is doing to soil, to water, indeed potentially to human health. Again to the SRD minister: what in your department's assessment is the annual loss of wildlife associated with the tailings ponds? Do you have any numbers at all?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member had had his eyes open when he was paddling down the river, he would have noticed that tar seeps naturally into the Athabasca. It has for hundreds of years been used by aboriginals, long before Europeans arrived, for patching canoes and was used by the voyageurs for the same reason.

In terms of the question I'll be happy to provide a number to that at a later date.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Dr. Kevin Timoney, a University of Alberta ecologist, this past year reported that levels of arsenic, mercury, and polyaromatic hydrocarbons had increased even since the monitoring started in 2000. Unfortunately, there were no baseline studies before that. Based on the government's aquatic monitoring program can the Minister of Environment tell us categorically that ground and surface water in the Athabasca River has not been contaminated?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, we have done extensive amounts of testing of the water in the Athabasca River. We continue to do an extensive amount of testing, and there is nothing that we have that indicates that there is any reason to believe that there is an impact on the quality of the water in that river as a result of the industrial activity in that region.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the health minister: given that the government's own monitoring system shows significant levels of arsenic, mercury, and polyaromatic hydrocarbons, can the minister table any research on the combined long-term health effects of arsenic, mercury, and polyaromatic hydrocarbons?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I'm not aware of any research, but I do know that this hon. member has made a number of accusations in this House about similar kinds of claims in the Fort Chip area. We've done extensive research in that area and have found the claims to be unsubstantiated.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Out-of-province Welder Certification

Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Companies in Lethbridge are bringing in welders from United Kingdom, and in particular they

are having trouble passing their exams here to get certified for work in Alberta. Many of these workers finally get fed up and just go home. My question is for the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. What is your ministry doing to help get out-of-province welders through the exams, certified, and working to fill labour shortages in Lethbridge and the rest of the province?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, we're working with employers not only here but in the country of origin in some cases. We assess the qualifications of international workers who need to meet Alberta's journeyman standards. Temporary foreign workers in these trades have to receive their certification within six months of entering Alberta. We work with the employers; in fact, we partner with postsecondaries in some cases. The role of the employer is to help those individuals train during that time towards certification. In many cases the practical exam is not really the issue. Many of these tradesmen are very skilled; they pass it. It's the written exams that they need a little more help with, and we encourage employers to work with us in that respect.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you. My only supplemental is to the same minister. What is your ministry doing regarding upgrading programs to prepare these workers for exams and certification?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, many of our colleges and technical institutes in the province are working, and in some cases very directly, with employers and some of the labour organizations that are in the province. We're doing exactly that. We're trying to tie what is required in terms of upgrading or academic or English as a Second Language along with the practical experience and expertise of our employers. After we get through the budget deliberations and everything else, it is our hope that we'll have 36,000 spaces available within the province for our apprentices to access our postsecondaries.

The Speaker: The hon. member?

The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Calgary Health Region Funding

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When asked about the Calgary health region's deficit last week, the health minister said that he had spoken with the CEO of the region and "he expressed to me that they were [very] appreciative of the dollars that they received in the budget." To the minister of health: when you spoke with the CEO of the Calgary health region, were you informed of the additional \$25 million that this cash-strapped region needs, or did you miss that part of the conversation?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, the chair of the Calgary health region and I spoke as recently as a few days ago. We both agree that the Calgary health region's role is to ensure that services to residents of the Calgary health region are provided uninterrupted, and we also agree that the payroll of the Calgary health region will be met. The only concern that seems to continue to arise is from the opposition, fuelled by media stories.

Mr. Hehr: Will the minister again explain why this government has allowed a situation where hospitals are left empty because health regions either are dangerously short-staffed or their employees are overworked to the tune of \$34 million in overtime bills?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's no secret that the entire province has a workforce shortage issue. If the hon. member has some magic that he can all of a sudden deliver us several thousand nurses to meet that workforce shortage need, I'd be very happy to hear his response. The Calgary health region is facing the same issues that many employers are in this province in finding highly skilled, qualified professionals.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister explain to the people of Calgary why it is more of a priority to spend \$25 million on government greenwashing and gadflying about the United States rather than preventing the people of Calgary from sitting in the hallways in the hospitals?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, it's very important to ensure that people around the world understand what we have to offer in this province, and they sure are not going to get it from those folks over there.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Sexual Orientation and Human Rights

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the start of this legislative session the minister responsible for human rights promised to consider changes to the human rights legislation that would include sexual orientation as a prohibited grounds for discrimination. Now two weeks have passed, and I wonder if the minister can tell the House if he's had the time to consider whether or not this form of discrimination warrants inclusion in the laws of Alberta.

Mr. Blackett: Mr. Speaker, as I said a couple of weeks ago in this House, we are conducting a thorough investigation of the entire Alberta Human Rights Commission, and that means looking at the process, looking at the employees, the composition, and includes looking at future legislation if we decide to move in that direction. We are in that process and will continue to do so, and when I have the ability to come forward and say more on that issue, I will do that.

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister then tell us why it takes a full review for his government to decide if they oppose discrimination based on sexual orientation, especially given that it has been 10 years since the Vriend decision?

Mr. Blackett: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member knows, there are many different issues that are important to all Albertans, and if we take the position that we are going to review legislation, we have to look at all legislation, how it affects all Albertans, not just one particular segment.

Mr. Mason: No, you don't.

The Speaker: I'm going to recognize the hon. Member for

Edmonton-Strathcona, but would you put a clamp on the guy sitting beside you?

Ms Notley: If the Speaker has any suggestions, please let me know. [laughter]

To the minister in charge of human rights: can the minister tell us if his government still opposes rights for sexual minorities, as it did 10 years ago, and if not, why can't that policy change be reflected in the human rights code?

Mr. Blackett: Mr. Speaker, as we've said before, sexual orientation is protected for the members of that community right now. The Supreme Court has assured us of that. Our ongoing day-to-day activities reflect that. If a person has a complaint lodged through our Alberta Human Rights Commission, all our information will indicate that those rights are protected, and we will certainly honour that.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Lacombe-Ponoka, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Cull Breeding Swine Program

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We all know that the livestock feeding sector continues to experience severe challenges. Right now pork producers are being particularly hard hit with the anticipated mandatory country-of-origin labelling in the United States. This combined with exchange rates and input costs that are high and continue to rise – it's a crisis situation out there. My question to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is: how is the government of Alberta responding to this worsening situation?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The situation in this industry is critical, and producers need both short-term and long-term support. We continually strongly oppose mandatory country-of-origin labelling along with the federal government. In the fall we, of course, announced \$165 million for the Alberta farm recovery program to provide short-term assistance. Long term we're working closely with all the livestock industries to help them until they develop some sustainable solutions to the problems out there.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question to the same minister: now that the federal cull breeding swine program is under way with an estimated 4,000 sows to be processed in Alberta, can the minister explain what is going to be done with all this meat? How will it be used?

Mr. Groeneveld: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. The meat will not be wasted. I'm proud to say that in true Alberta fashion we're going to make the best of a challenging situation out there. This afternoon we announced that along with the Alberta Foodbank Network Association and Alberta Pork we will work to distribute the meat generated from the culled animals to the food banks. We estimate that nearly 600,000 pounds of ground pork will be made available.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: how will this arrangement work to ensure that the meat is distributed to the right people?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Groeneveld: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, under short notice the government has committed \$300,000 to help pay for the processing of the culled sows. The Alberta Foodbank Network Association will fund the remainder. Alberta Pork, I'm proud to say, will oversee the donation program, and they're going to work with Sunterra Meats, Lucerne Foods, and the Western Hog Exchange to process and transport the meat to the food banks.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Waterfowl Mortality Rates in Tailings Ponds

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a matter of public record that the Premier stated: 20 or fewer birds have died per year in oil sands tailings ponds. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: would he please table the information that is the basis of the Premier's claim?

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, I've already answered that question. I think the Liberals are singing quite a different tune today than they were singing during the month of February when they were up in Fort McMurray talking about how they supported the oil sands development and the community in Fort McMurray. I didn't hear them complaining about 30 years of Syncrude pioneering the first in the world oil sands recovery. I'd like to see a little consistency on that side of the House.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, we support sustainable development and a safe environment for fish and wildlife.

Again to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: who in his department told the Premier that 20 or fewer birds have died per year in oil sands tailings ponds? Who told the Premier that from your department?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, this is information that I received yesterday when we did the news conference. We'll gather the information if the individual who gave me this information is so important.

We're focused on the bigger picture. The bigger picture is finding out what went wrong in a bird diversion system that's been employed for 30 years. Something went wrong. We want to know what it is, and we're going to bring that information forward to all Albertans, not the name of the individual who gave me some information.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, this time to the Minister of Environment: who in the Department of Environment told the Premier that 20 or fewer birds have died per year in the oil sands tailings ponds?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker and to all the people in the gallery, you know, all afternoon they've been shuffling the same piece of paper from one member to another and asking the same question. We're getting the information. We'll provide the information. I'm going to do my best, you know, to stay in Premier-land and not respond to that kind of line of questioning. We are very concerned about the protection of the environment, the waterfowl, all aspects. We're going to bring that information forward once a full investigation is done. That is so important because we want to know what has gone wrong. The other thing is that we don't start pointing fingers at someone else unless the evidence is there, not like this group here.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Boyle Renaissance Project

Mr. Vandermeer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's time to move on to some good news. I understand that a unique affordable housing project for Edmonton was announced yesterday. To the Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs: can the minister describe how this project will contribute to the revitalization of Edmonton's inner city?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is good news. The Boyle renaissance development that Mayor Mandel and I announced yesterday is a very creative inner-city project. It's a development that will provide 1,100 housing units for residents living in the inner city. This will include seniors, aboriginal people, students, people that are moving from homelessness to transitional housing, and it will also include other options like health care, social services, educational opportunities. This is not just for the inner city but for the area residents as a whole.

Mr. Vandermeer: Mr. Speaker, my second question is to the same minister. How is this project unique from other housing projects in Alberta?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is a very unique development. In fact, the Edmonton Oilers foundation is building an inner-city high school, and they're going to have 75 housing units immediately adjacent to the high school so that students can live in a safe, secure place while they're going to school. Also, we have the Paraplegic Association developing barrier-free homes. We have an aboriginal welcoming centre. There are a number of very unique concepts. But what's really important is that residents often find it difficult to leave the inner city to access services, especially those that are very vulnerable, and this will bring the services to them.

Mr. Vandermeer: My final question is to the same minister. Will the Boyle renaissance be a model for other Alberta communities?

2:30

Mrs. Fritz: It will, Mr. Speaker. In every Alberta community the municipalities identify their needs and their priorities, and they make the decisions on how they're going to meet those needs and priorities. In fact, municipal and community leadership on housing and homelessness is essential because they are the people that are closest to the need. I applaud Mayor Mandel and I applaud Edmonton city council for bringing together the partnerships, the community involvement for this project. It will lead the way not only in Alberta, hon. member, but also across Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Calgary Urban Campus Partnership

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has made a commitment to increase the number of postsecondary spaces in the province, yet the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology isn't committing to support the U of C urban campus, which will create 4,000 new student spaces in Calgary. To the minister: why is the government sitting on its hands when there's a clear need for

more postsecondary spaces in Calgary and the U of C along with five other institutions have already committed to the project?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, that is a very interesting question. I would tell the hon. member that we are not sitting on our hands. In fact, we were at the table with those five, six other institutions. The hon. member well knows that the only institution that has made that their highest priority is the University of Calgary. We've also had some new entrants into that partnership from the EnCana side. As well, we're in discussions with the Alberta College of Art and Design. What we're trying to do is ensure that we build the right thing. We are not saying that we're not supporting the urban campus. Indeed, we believe the idea is a good one, but we want to know what that idea really is.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. It's a good one, and it's becoming more expensive every day. To the minister: given that the project was expected to cost \$235 million in 2006 and will now require well over \$300 million to build, will the government stop wasting time and get on with the project instead of waiting until costs go even higher?

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's wonderful to be able to toss out a number when you don't know what it is you're going to build. What we don't know is the programming that's going to go there. Albertans and taxpayers are more interested in what the programming plan is going to be and what those spaces are going to be and how it's going to actually fill the need than they are in designing a nice building.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. These five institutions have been collaborating for years, and the minister is aware of that collaboration and their goals.

Given that thousands of eligible Alberta students, who have the grades and can afford the inflated tuition, continue to be turned away due to lack of space and since the plan for the urban campus was announced in 2004, why has this government sat by for four years, claiming today that they still need to know more? Build it, and they will learn.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, it would be wonderful to build. It's what they will learn that we're most concerned with. Indeed, we are not the ones that announced the urban campus. In fact, I met with all of the board chairs this morning. We spent three hours talking about Campus Alberta and how we are going to take what we know to be the demand and what we know to be the capacity and match those things up over the next three, five, 10 years. Certainly, we had a discussion about all of the capital projects around the province. SAIT has a tremendous capital project in the hopper right now that is being suited to the demand in the city. We recognize that seats are needed very seriously in the city of Calgary but also across this province, and it's our job to make sure that Campus Alberta works.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Special Walleye Licence

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In January the Minister

of Sustainable Resource Development announced that after a successful two-year pilot project the government approved making the special walleye licence permanent. This licence allows anglers to catch and keep a limited number of walleye from Wolf Lake, Pigeon Lake, and Lake Newell. My question is for that minister. What are the benefits of using the special walleye licensing as opposed to having an open fishery for walleye?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that the constituents of the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar are going to be very happy with her when they see the continuation of this program. Opening up the lake completely would result in a collapsed fishery. The fish population is strong, but if you simply open it up, you can't control the number of fishermen or the number of fish taken. This program is a nice balance in-between. This is how good it is. I fished on Pigeon Lake last year for 90 minutes with my nephew and niece and caught two fish. My nine-year-old niece caught and released 11 walleye in the same period of time. It was a lot of fun, and that's what this is about.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary question is also to the same minister. Is this special walleye licence operating exactly like it did during the two-year pilot project, or has his department made any changes after the pilot project?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are two important changes. There'll be no restriction on time this year on the special walleye. People with boats can go out and fish during the summer, and for that rare breed of angler that likes to sit in the little house on the ice during the winter, they can use their walleye licence during the winter. Secondly – this is more good news – there are 6,300 licences still available, that are undersubscribed. Starting on Friday, the day after tomorrow, these licences are available. You're entitled to three. We'd encourage all hon. members to go out and have some fun fishing this summer.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is also to the same minister. Do youth need to have a wildlife identification number in order to enter the draw for a special walleye licence or buy an undersubscribed licence?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Morton: Mr. Speaker, thank you. The answer to that is yes. All applicants must have a wildlife identification number, a WIN number. This includes youth under the age of 16 but also seniors over 65, First Nations, and Métis. The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne pointed out to me yesterday that this potentially creates a bit of a barrier for youth entry, and we intend to address that and make sure that youth can get out and take advantage of this as well. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Tourism Promotion

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This morning in Calgary, which, of course, was the very proud host city of the 1988 Winter Olympics, the government announced support for initiatives associated with the upcoming Winter Games and our own Olympic legacy. My first question is to the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation. The 2010 events take place in Vancouver/Whistler, but we often hear that the Olympic road to B.C. runs through Alberta. Is it merely a catchphrase, or are there actual, tangible benefits that Albertans can expect from the Olympics?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Ady: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. We see benefits for Alberta's tourism, sports, and cultural sectors. World attention is going to be focused on western Canada as we ramp up towards these Olympics and through them, and we're going to take advantage of every opportunity we can to bring the eyes of the world on this province. We're also investing in the upgrading of the 1988 Olympic facilities to ensure that they're up to international training and competition standards. As well, there will be a Cultural Olympiad associated with the 2010, and my ministry is working closely with the minister of culture and community to profile Alberta artists to the world.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. We have a growing province. There are all sorts of needs requiring all sorts of dollars. How does this department explain financially supporting elite athletes?

Mrs. Ady: Well, Mr. Speaker, we did announce some support for Olympic athletes this morning. I recently read a newspaper article on a Lethbridge athlete, Carla Pavan. She's a member of the Canadian women's skeleton team. In the article she talked about the financial burden of trying to train and the intense training that they do and trying to support herself. These athletes sacrifice career earning potential to train for the events that make us proud, so we're happy to support them in this way.

Mr. Rodney: Finally, to the same minister. The argument is well received about Olympians being supported, but constituents ask myself and I'm sure every member of this House: what have you done for me lately? In this vein the question could be: how will this funding benefit everyday Albertans – youth and adults, weekend warriors – not just elite athletes?

Mrs. Ady: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are some 111,000 individuals in this province that work in the tourism industry, so this industry is critical to them. We know and believe that these Olympics are going to create a lot of opportunity as we ramp up towards them, as I said before, to allow this industry to grow and to have economic benefits. Our young athletes in this province will get to see some of the best in the world. They'll get to be mentored by them and trained by them and eventually, we hope, coached by them. Our artists and cultural organizations will gain international profile and respect on the world stage.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-North Hill.

Offshore Education Accreditation Program

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This question is to the Minister of Education. I'm aware that a colleague here in the Legislature as well as several department officials and officials from a school board visited a school in Macau, China, which is accredited by Alberta Education to deliver the Alberta program of studies to its students. My question is: why is the minister so concerned about education in China?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, Alberta's education system has been the focus of many countries around the world. A lot of international attention has been focused on Alberta because of our education system. Foreign delegations come to Alberta to learn about what we're doing here in terms of curriculum, learning resources, assessment, and teaching. We're involved with foreign educational programming because students who have come through an Alberta accredited program are more likely to consider Alberta as a destination for work, for further study at our higher learning institutions. We need more people, and people who know about us and who are educated in our curriculum can do a good job here.

Mr. Fawcett: Mr. Speaker, my first supplemental to the same minister: are Alberta taxpayers' dollars going to fund these foreign schools?

Mr. Hancock: No, Mr. Speaker. The model for our offshore accreditation program is strictly cost recovery and revenue neutral. We have a comprehensive fee structure that we charge the schools and a number of terms and conditions with which they must comply. It's important that we maintain the integrity of our curriculum and our accreditation process. Not everybody that applies gets accredited. There's a very comprehensive structure and a fee schedule that goes with it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Fawcett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also understand that many of our school jurisdictions are accepting international students. Are those students also funded by the Ministry of Alberta Education?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No. There are strict legislative requirements in place to ensure that international students are not funded by public dollars. School jurisdictions can charge a tuition fee which goes above and beyond their actual costs and make it beyond a cost-recovery program, so they can actually supplement programs that they offer to Alberta students. In fact, the federal government has estimated that international students across Canada contribute about \$5 billion to our economy. From an international perspective it's also important. We have a stronger and a better learning opportunity for our students when they have the opportunity to engage and associate with students from other countries.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that was 102 questions and responses today.

In 30 seconds from now we will continue with the Routine.

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Kang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one petition today to present to the Legislative Assembly. This petition has been signed by 20 concerned citizens. It reads, "To commission an independent and public inquiry into the Alberta Government's administration of or involvement with the Local Authorities Pension Plan, the Public Service Pension Plan, and the Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund." Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have an additional 40 signatures calling upon the government to look at the local authorities pension plan, the public service pension plan, and the Alberta teachers' retirement fund.

I have 36 signatures on a petition that states: "We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to pass legislation that will prohibit emotional bullying and psychological harassment in the workplace."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, rise with 20 names signed by concerned citizens mainly from Calgary who want the government to have a public inquiry into the Alberta government's administration of the local authorities pension plan, the public service pension plan, and the Alberta teachers' retirement fund.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have 40 signatures on a petition calling on the government to commission an independent and public inquiry into the Alberta government's administration of the local authorities pension plan, the public service pension plan, and the Alberta teachers' retirement fund.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two petitions to present to the Legislative Assembly this afternoon. The first one reads:

Whereas the ongoing rent affordability crisis is contributing to Alberta's worsening homelessness situation, we, the undersigned residents of Alberta, hereby petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the government of Alberta to take immediate, meaningful measures to help low-income and fixed-income Albertans, Albertans with disabilities and those who are hard-to-house maintain their places of residence and cope with the escalating and frequent increases in their monthly rental costs.

The second petition I have for the Legislative Assembly this afternoon is from residents of Strathmore and Calgary. Twenty of them have signed this petition, and they also want a "public inquiry into the Alberta Government's administration of or involvement with the Local Authorities Pension Plan, the Public Service Pension Plan, and the Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund."

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have one petition

to present today. It's urging the government of Alberta to "commission an independent and public inquiry into the Alberta Government's administration of or involvement with the Local Authorities Pension Plan, the Public Service Pension Plan, and the Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund." This is signed by a number of Alberta citizens.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Montrose.

Bill 7

Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2008

Mr. Bhullar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce and move Bill 7, the Post-secondary Learning Amendment Act, 2008.

The proposed amendments align the act with Advanced Education and Technology's recently approved roles and mandates policy framework. The amendments will enhance the implementation of the framework by enshrining in the act the six sector categories identified in the framework, establishing the Campus Alberta strategic directions committee, and clarifying research capacity of postsecondary institutions. Other housekeeping amendments are for clarity and align the act with current practices at postsecondary institutions.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 7 be moved onto the Order Paper under Government Bills and Orders.

[Motion carried]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment.

Bill 8

Climate Change and Emissions Management Amendment Act, 2008

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to request leave to introduce Bill 8, the Climate Change and Emissions Management Amendment Act, 2008.

Mr. Speaker, while this amendment is administrative in nature, it reflects our commitment to continuously improve this legislation, which, as I've said a number of times, is the first of its kind in North America. It will allow Alberta Environment to establish the group to oversee the climate change and emissions management fund. As you know, the fund is one of three compliance options large industrial emitters have to meet Alberta's CO₂ emissions reductions requirements.

[Motion carried; Bill 8 read a first time]

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Enterprise.

Bill 11

Insurance Amendment Act, 2008

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with great pleasure that I request leave to introduce Bill 11, the Insurance Amendment Act, 2008.

The purpose of this bill is to update the legislative provisions for insurance contracts such as life, accident, and illness, as well as home and business insurance. We're harmonizing our legislation with British Columbia. We've worked extensively together in the spirit of the trade, investment, and labour mobility agreement. TILMA is an initiative that reduces barriers between the two provinces, giving our businesses and workers seamless access to a larger range of possibilities and opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, this bill makes it better for consumers. There's enormous opportunity here for consumers. The changes will allow people to move between jurisdictions with confidence that their insurance coverage will be consistent. It's a modernized framework for legislation for insurance contracts in strengthening the consumer protection as well as providing more flexibility for innovation in the insurance industry.

[Motion carried; Bill 11 read a first time]

**2:50 Bill 12
Teachers' Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2008**

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I request leave to introduce Bill 12, the Teachers' Pension Plans Amendment Act, 2008.

This legislation authorizes the Crown to pay the teachers' share of contributions related to the pre-1992 funded liability of the teachers' pension plan. The payments will continue until September 1, 2009, when the Crown will assume full responsibility for the unfunded liability.

This amendment is an important step in implementing the memorandum of agreement between government and teachers and will see government assume the teachers' share of the pre-1992 unfunded pension liability in exchange for five years of labour peace.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; Bill 12 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, on April 22 I tabled the 2008-09 government estimates. I am now tabling a replacement for page 70. This page shows the income statement for the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Unfortunately, due to a problem in the compilation process the revenue figures for the two types of investment revenue were transposed in the comparable '07-08 forecast and the comparable '06-07 actual columns. This tabling does not affect the appropriations being considered by the House or the Budget 2008 fiscal plan.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to section 15 of the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Act as chair of the Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund it is my privilege to table the appropriate copies of the third-quarter update on the fund.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first is the appropriate number of copies of the brochure describing the organization Friends for World Development. Earlier today I was fortunate enough to be able to introduce to the Speaker and to the members of the Assembly one of my

constituents who is the president of this organization, so I would like to table five copies of the brochure describing what they do.

The second tabling is also connected to people who were visiting us in the gallery. These were the individuals that joined us yesterday afternoon to witness the debate for the ministry of seniors, including Michael Marlowe. He has written a letter to the hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports and had asked me to table copies of that letter. They are still really concerned that the benefits that were taken away from seniors in the mid-90s have not been replaced and continue to ask the question and not receive an answer as to when some of those benefits will be restored.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have five letters to table this afternoon. They are all from residents of the constituency of Edmonton-Gold Bar, and these five residents too are concerned about Alberta's labour laws and would like to see five significant changes. These citizens are Luanne Muise, Frank Zastre, Lori Leanne Charron, Bonnie Russell, and Harvey Russell.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of an e-mail sent to me by one of my constituents, Jeannette Beaudoin, who is very concerned about the shortage of staff in the long-term care centre where her mother resides. She writes that wages need to be raised and that staff to resident ratios also need to be adjusted so that more people will be attracted to work in the long-term care sector.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of the hon. Ms Evans, Minister of Finance and Enterprise, pursuant to the provincial judges and masters in chambers registered and unregistered pension plans regulation the Provincial Judges and Masters in Chambers Registered and Unregistered Pension Plans annual report for the year ended March 31, 2007; and on behalf of the hon. Mr. Snelgrove, President of the Treasury Board, pursuant to the Conflicts of Interest Act and the Legislative Assembly Act the Report of Selected Payments to Members and Former Members of the Legislative Assembly and Persons Directly Associated with the Members of the Legislative Assembly 2006-2007.

Calendar of Special Events

The Speaker: Hon. members, before moving on, as this is the last day of April, oftentimes during Members' Statements members will rise and give a recognition of various dates or weeks that are being commemorated provincially, nationally, and internationally, and a number have not been made mention of. So invariably what happens is that my office tends to get letters saying: how come a member recognized this day or this week but not that day or that week? So by going through the list of dates and weeks and commemorations that occurred in the month of April, that will acknowledge to everyone that we actually are acknowledging everyone.

April was: from April 6 to 12, National Wildlife Week; April 7, World Health Day; April 7 to 13, Young Poets Week; April 13 to 19, National Dental Hygienists Week; April 13 to 19, National Victims of Crime Awareness Week. April 16 to 22 was National Soil

Conservation Week. April 17 was Equality Day in Canada. April 17 was also World Hemophilia Day. April 19 was Law Day. April 19 to 27 was Passover. April 20 to 26 was Administrative Professionals Week, including Administrative Professionals Day, April 23. April 20 to 26 was National Immunization Awareness Week, as it was National Medical Laboratory Professionals Week, as it was National Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness Week, as it was Education for All Global Action Week. April 22, we heard, was Earth Day. April 22 to May 19 is National Physiotherapy Month. April 23 was World Book and Copyright Day. April 23 was Pascha; that's Easter in the Orthodox faith. April 23 to 29 was Global Action Week. April 25 to 27 was Global Youth Service Day. April 26 was World Intellectual Property Day. April 27 to May 3 is Education Week. April 27 to May 3 is also National Volunteer Week. April 28, as we already know, was National Day of Mourning: Remembering lives lost or injured in the workplace. April 28 to May 11 is March of the Living in remembrance of the Holocaust. April 29 is International Dance Day.

Tomorrow will be May 1, and we will provide for all hon. members a date appropriate for the month of May.

Orders of the Day Committee of Supply

[Mr. Mitzel in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

Main Estimates 2008-09

Employment and Immigration

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon to each and every one of you. I would like to start by introducing all of our staff from Employment and Immigration who are here today and also thank them for the great work and contribution that they provide to our ministry. On the floor with me and to my right is Shirley Howe, our deputy minister; on my left Alex Stewart, our assistant deputy minister; and farther to my left Shelley Engstrom, chief financial officer. Also joining me in the gallery are Rick Nisbet, executive director, human resources; Myles Morris, acting executive director, strategic services; Sonia Sinha, public affairs officer for communications; Melissa Schneck, executive assistant to the deputy minister; Peter Kennett, manager, strategic services; and Wendy Rodgers, my executive assistant. Please join me in welcoming our staff upstairs.

3:00

Mr. Chairman, Alberta has the hottest economy in Canada. A vibrant economy translates into healthy job markets. In 2007 Alberta created over 89,000 new jobs, bringing the total number of people working to an all-time high of 2 million people.

The number one issue that employers and industry identify is the skilled labour shortage, a high priority within the government and for my ministry. The focus of my ministry is to invest in our workforce. We need to make sure that Albertans have the training to get and keep jobs, we need to ensure that Albertans are safe and treated fairly at work, and we need to make sure that Albertans have the basic supports to live. This year my ministry is investing a total of \$920 million in Alberta's people. This is an increase of \$77

million in investments over last year's spending. [some applause]. Thank you.

I'd like to quickly take you through the estimates to highlight where we're making additional investments in Budget 2008. Mr. Chairman, training for Albertans is our priority, and we are investing \$149 million in employment and training for Albertans in Budget 2008, which represents an increase of \$15.5 million over 2007. This funding for employment and training programs will provide supports to underrepresented groups like aboriginal people, Albertans with disabilities, people with low literacy levels, and immigrants moving into the labour force.

We will continue implementing our government's 10-year labour force development strategy, building and educating tomorrow's workforce, or BETW, including working with individual industry sectors to develop more strategies that address specific labour force needs. Workforce plans are being developed focusing on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, on transportation and logistics, and on forestry, aerospace, and defence industries.

Even in a province with the highest income and employment levels there are some Albertans who struggle to make ends meet. We are adding \$5.9 million to our budget for a total of \$307 million in income support benefits to Albertans in need. New funding in employment and training programs will help these Albertans get support so they can reduce their dependence on income support. Last year, Mr. Chairman, 17,600 Albertans received a 5 per cent increase in their income support benefits. While there has been no increase in benefit rates for income support clients in Budget 2008, our investments will ensure that we continue to offer these benefits and our excellent supplementary benefits to all Albertans who need them.

Through our 59 offices across the province we provide access to the homeless and eviction prevention fund to help Albertans avoid eviction or secure accommodation. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has allocated funding of \$44 million to the homeless and eviction prevention fund in Budget 2008.

Ensuring that Alberta's workplaces are healthy, safe, and fair will continue to be a priority, and we have allocated almost \$38 million to this area in Budget 2008. Collaboration with employers, labour groups, safety associations, and employees has worked well, and we achieved our lowest loss-claim rate of 2.12 per 100 person-years for 2007.

The flow of immigrants has been gradually increasing. About 20,000 newcomers came to our province in 2006 compared to 19,000 in 2005. One of the key initiatives for Employment and Immigration is to increase the combined number of international immigrants and temporary foreign workers to 50,000 by the end of 2009. To help achieve these targets, Mr. Chairman, an additional \$15.3 million for a total of \$80 million will be allocated to attracting new immigrants and helping them settle in their communities. This is an increase of almost 24 per cent over last year.

New Albertans need to feel included in their communities. We are increasing funding by \$1.8 million to \$8 million for services provided by settlement agencies, like interpretation, translation, newcomers' outreach, orientation, referral, and support and counselling. It is important that new Albertans can use their skills to alleviate labour shortages.

Funding of \$3.5 million, an increase of \$2 million over last year, has been allocated for a foreign qualification action plan. This plan will help newcomers with foreign credentials and work experience make the most of their skills in our economy.

Funding of 4 and a half million dollars will support our objectives of doubling the number of workers entering the provincial nominee program to 3,000 in 2008-09. Additional funding will support our objective of looking at options to expand the nominee program.

Temporary foreign workers will continue to play a key role in our labour market. In the past there have been concerns raised over the treatment of temporary foreign workers. This government is working to protect and help these workers. For example, two temporary foreign worker advisory offices have been established as a one-stop access to information and services, and employment standards officers are doing proactive inspections of workplaces with temporary foreign workers.

A funding increase of \$1.8 million over last year will continue to support access to translation services, assist workers in finding new employers, work with immigrant servicing agencies to encourage the reporting of complaints, and facilitate educational sessions for temporary foreign workers and their employers. We will also be investing in \$1.4 million for a two-year settlement services pilot project for temporary foreign workers.

We are also stepping up our efforts to increase the number of skilled immigrants coming to Alberta. Our investments in the area of international marketing will look at new ways to profile Alberta opportunities to potential workers through international marketing and recruiting activities.

Newcomers to Alberta often need to upgrade their language skills or learn more about Canadian workplaces. To this end, in Budget 2008 we are providing a total of \$57 million for English as an Additional Language and bridging programs, an increase of \$9 million from 2007.

Mr. Chairman, Employment and Immigration is working with the ministries of Health and Wellness and Advanced Education and Technology through the health workforce action plan to help address worker shortages in the health care sector. We are investing \$48.5 million in the health workforce action plan, an increase of \$18.5 million from 2007. Employment and Immigration will implement several initiatives under the health workforce action plan. For example, health career centres have been established in Calgary and Edmonton to help foreign-trained medical professionals navigate accreditation and licensing processes. In an effort to support Alberta's communities hit by the global economic downturn, including the forestry and agricultural sectors, \$5 million from the new federal community development trust will be used for training and skills development assistance for forestry industry workers affected by recent adjustments in the economy and assisting greater aboriginal participation in Alberta's labour force.

Mr. Chairman, the Appeals Commission for the Workers' Compensation Board and the Alberta Labour Relations Board are important parts of this ministry. Funding of \$3 million has been invested in the Alberta Labour Relations Board and \$10 million for the Appeals Commission.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, I look forward to the comments and questions from hon. members. If there are some questions that I cannot answer, I will certainly provide written responses. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

3:10

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Certainly, when we look at the estimates for the Employment and Immigration department, it is a vital department. Sometimes it's overlooked, and it surprises me that it is, but it is vital. A lot of people rely on the programs and the smooth and efficient delivery of those programs in this province.

Now, Mr. Chairman, as I understand it, I have 20-minute intervals up to the first hour with the hon. minister and his staff. I would like to start with the Labour Relations Code. Now, goal 5 of the business

plan calls for the province to have "a fair, equitable and stable labour relations environment." It goes on to outline that "the Alberta Labour Relations Board is an independent and impartial administrative tribunal, responsible for the day-to-day application and interpretation of Alberta's labour laws."

In November of 2002 – and some of the members that were involved in this are still sitting in this Assembly today – there was an MLA committee report on that Labour Relations Code, and there were a number of recommendations around a review of Alberta's labour laws. There were recommendations on the construction sector, on health care, on first agreement legislation, general certification, agriculture workers. It's interesting to note that the committee recommended that the Alberta human resources and employment minister at the time commence a review of agricultural labour relations as soon as possible. There were recommendations on secondary picketing. My first question: is there going to be another review of the Labour Relations Code in this fiscal year?

Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, first, I also want to acknowledge the importance of this particular ministry. As your comments alluded to, hon. member, this ministry touches the lives of many, many individuals. It's a critical ministry, and it's a ministry that is set up to help improve the lives of Albertans.

As it pertains to the Labour Relations Code, we're very, very confident, Mr. Chairman, that our current labour legislation meets the needs of Alberta workers. Our wages, benefits, and working conditions in Alberta are, as we are led to believe, amongst the best in Canada. We also have a very, very strong record of labour peace. Generally you might find that more than 99 per cent of collective agreements were settled in the last fiscal year without job action. Although we've got no immediate plans to do a complete review of our labour legislation, it's necessary from time to time that we make amendments to keep it relevant. Generally we involve stakeholders, and certainly public input is part of that whole review process.

You're quite right. The last consultation on the Labour Relations Code was in 2002. At that particular time stakeholders, including the building trades, indicated to us that the legislation was generally working quite well, was balanced, and that it contributed to a lot of labour relations stability within the province. We will however keep the right to review it at times, and if there's a need to open it and to make some amendments, we will do that.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, go ahead.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. I appreciate that, Mr. Chairman. I must make a comment about the website of the department. I used to be the critic for this department for quite a few years, and then I had three or three and a half, four years off. I must say that in my absence as critic the website has improved. I find there's a lot more vital, valuable information provided on that website than there has been in the past. Now, your associate, hon. minister, has a look of horror on his face, so I certainly hope there's not going to be a change and less information put on there. But I think it's a very good website, and it's nice to scroll through there.

I have one question at this time, and that's on the 2007 annual Alberta labour market review. In here there is a chart on Alberta landed immigrants between the year 2002 and 2006, and the number of landed immigrants in 2002 is roughly 15,000. It goes up to 2006, and I'm estimating it to be about 20,000. Now, I would like to know – and the hon. minister was talking about the skill shortages in this province – how many of those landed immigrants were qualified as tradespersons when they came to Alberta?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Again, I thank the hon. member for his kind comments on our website. The information that we provide on the website is critical for all Albertans and anybody interested in the province of Alberta, and we want to make sure that that particular information is always up to date and provides the services it needs to do. We are always reviewing the website and trying to make some improvements to that.

The report that you're alluding to, the 2007 annual Alberta labour market review – and you made some comments on page 6, where you've identified the number of people in 2002 from 15,000 to a little over 20,000 in 2006 – does not, Mr. Chairman, give a breakdown of what categories those are in. We would have those numbers available, but I don't have those numbers at my fingertips. So to be able to say that there was a certain percentage of actual trades: we would have to get back to you on that one.

Expanding the provincial nominee program will address some of the broader labour market needs that exist in the province, and we're looking at, certainly, expanding Alberta's workforce, of which a lot would be in the trades area.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now, we not only look at this report, but on a monthly basis we look at the unemployment rates in Alberta. We recognize and are very concerned about the conditions with our forestry sector and our lumber industry. There doesn't seem to be a reflection in these statistics of a high number of forestry workers being unemployed. Does the department have any programs right now that would retrain forestry workers to participate in the construction boom that's going on?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, we're very proud of the unemployment rates in the province of Alberta. You know, this particular province is very blessed to have the opportunity to provide a lot of jobs for Albertans and for Canadians and for individuals that might be laid off from the forestry sector. A few years ago there was a plant that got shut down in my constituency. They had hired well over a hundred individuals. We thought that it would be quite devastating for the community, but with the buoyant economy and the demand for jobs the community at that particular time didn't feel a lot of strain. However, with the added pressure on the forestry industry that we're seeing today, there's no doubt that there are more individuals from the forestry sector being laid off.

The federal government, as I indicated in my opening comments, announced the \$1 billion community development trust fund in January. This particular fund is designed to help provinces such as ours and territories to assist communities and workers suffering economic hardships caused by the current volatility in global, financial, and commodity markets.

3:20

Out of the \$1 billion Alberta is expected to receive about a hundred million dollars over the next three years, of which we will be investing \$5 million in 2008 to support programs to help those workers, both in the forestry industry sector and the agricultural sector, who might need retraining to remain in their industry or to work in other industries. Those dollars will also support projects to encourage mature workers to remain in the workforce, economic development in aboriginal communities, and increased workplace productivity through the use of new technologies. So a lot of those

dollars, Mr. Chairman, will be directed towards those employees that may be affected by layoffs in the forestry sector.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Yes. I must say that I don't have the confidence in the temporary foreign worker program that the government has. There have been obvious reasons why this program is not working to the benefit of the temporary foreign workers. Many are getting caught up in real jams, and there doesn't seem to be any place for them to go. I would much prefer to see the government target sectors of not only our local economy but the Canadian economy where workers are, unfortunately, having difficulty keeping their jobs and recruiting those individuals to Alberta to participate in the construction boom. I'm referring to the laid-off auto workers in Ontario. Certainly, we heard last fall during the royalty debate that there were large pockets of unemployed in the Peace River area in the oilfield service industry. It was never reflected in your statistics. I would urge the department to look at not only places in this province but across the country where we could recruit workers before we expand our temporary foreign worker program.

It is interesting – and I would like a comment from the hon. minister – that in the annual Alberta labour market review I see where the 65-plus age group experienced the largest rise in employment rates, 1.7 percentage points, between 2006 and '07. I would like to know if the department has a program to target or to encourage older workers to re-enter the workforce. I'm not saying that older workers want to go there because they don't have enough money from their pensions to pay their power bills; I'm not going to go there. But if you could explain this rise to me, I would be grateful.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The temporary foreign worker program is only one of the tools that we use in the province of Alberta. We first and foremost put a priority on all Albertans, and we will target those Albertans that require help primarily. If there's a need to retrain our own individuals, we will do that. We will certainly look at hiring individuals from the disabled community. We've got special emphasis on our aboriginal communities. We do work very, very closely with employers to make sure that they do retain their senior employees, and there are different activities that occur there that encourage that to happen.

We certainly give priority to Albertans, then probably our second priority is Canadians. If there are people that are laid off in other parts of Canada and willing and interested in moving to Alberta, we'll encourage them and welcome them with open arms to come and actually settle here in this particular province. Before a temporary foreign worker is accepted, there is a process whereby employers have to show us that they cannot get individuals from this particular province or from elsewhere in Canada. Once they've gone through that process, they can turn to the temporary foreign worker program.

So, Mr. Chairman, there are a number of techniques that we utilize to maintain our own individual Albertans to work here in this particular province, then other Canadians, and then finally others from elsewhere around the world.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I would like to move on if you don't mind, hon. minister, to employment standards and workplace safety.

You talked a little bit about this earlier, in your opening remarks. This year's budget increases funding for labour standards and workplace safety to a little bit over \$37 million, up less than 3 per cent, and that's an additional \$1 million.

Now, in 2006 the department was unable to meet its lost-time claim rate and disabling injury rate performance measures. If we look at that, it's by a considerable margin. This year the department seems to have overcome these obstacles and has met its goals. I think that is noteworthy, but is this change a result of poor employer reporting practices? Are we changing how we're reporting our lost-time claim rate?

Also, earlier this week on the National Day of Mourning we were talking about compliance at worksites for occupational health and safety and employment standards. How many workplace inspectors per worker are there in Alberta, and how many new inspectors will be hired with this budget increase? What do you anticipate the ratio will be in 2008 and '09, and does this include – you can correct me, please, if I'm wrong. I understand there's sort of the temporary foreign worker police. There are four in Edmonton and four in Calgary. I did phone that 1-800 number one night. I got voice mail, but that's to be expected. I was doing a bit of research, and I didn't talk to anyone directly, but it was late in the evening. If you could clarify whether these new inspectors, or temporary foreign worker police, are included in these workplace inspectors or not, I would be grateful.

A significant portion of workplace deaths occur in motor vehicle accidents. What proportion of the workplace health and safety budget will be devoted to addressing these avoidable deaths? I was watching the news the other night, and there's an engineering outfit in the city that doesn't allow their staff to answer cellphones while they're driving. I think that's a very wise engineering company. What efforts are being made to reduce the number of workplace deaths? Could the minister tell me and the House if he knows of any of these workplace motor vehicle accidents where the victim was using a cellphone at the time of the crash?

Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce, the Alberta government's 10-year labour force strategy, outlines a significant increase in inexperienced workers and the need for supervisory training. Inexperienced workers translate to an increased risk in workplace injuries and deaths. Why are we not seeing an increase in the area to match the need? I know that in the past this department has really made an effort to try to train younger workers and in some cases slow them down, and I would like some more details on that if you don't mind, please.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. The occupational health and safety numbers that you're alluding to – we have not changed our reporting systems. We rely on WCB data. Those numbers truly reflect a reduction in workplace incidents, and we're very, very proud of that. Our relationship with the employers has been good and has indicated that, you know, there is a seriousness about the health and safety of workers in the province of Alberta. There's a collaborative effort to make sure that these numbers are down and keep on going down.

3:30

You've talked about a couple of things. One is the occupational health and safety officers' numbers. You will note if you go back far enough in the numbers that we presently have 83 occupational health and safety officers. If you go back, that's up from the 64 that

we had in 2000 and 2001. There was an increase of six of those individuals last year, and we don't anticipate hiring additional officers in that particular category for this upcoming year. You talked about the employment standards officers that we have. We have hired six new ones. Those individuals are going to be dedicated strictly to the temporary foreign worker program. So we talk about two different things: one, the occupational health and safety officers and the other one, the employment standards officers. Both have an important role to play.

When it comes to your questions on cellphones, I believe that would be more of a Solicitor General type of question. We do not keep statistics on that, nor would I feel very comfortable in knowing whether, you know, those numbers are accurate or not. I'm not sure that we'd be able to get some very, very accurate numbers in terms of statistics on cellphones or whether anybody that has an incident on a road would admit that he or she was actually talking on a cellphone. Those are my personal feelings on that particular one.

When it comes to the issues with young workers, hon. member, we don't have necessarily a program that we target specifically to young workers, although we have, you know, some guidelines in terms of hiring and training individuals. Rather, we will target those employees that have higher incident levels and higher numbers, and we will work very, very closely with them. We'll probably provide and do a lot more inspections with them to ensure that they maintain the safety record that we expect them to have.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. minister. You stated that you have 83 occupational health and safety officers. The other day I took a walk up to the Alberta employment and industry library on the third floor of the building on 99th Avenue. I was under the impression that for each and every fatality in the province there is an investigation done and that it's catalogued in the library. I was surprised at the number of accidents that actually do occur and the number of individual accident reports that are in the files.

Not all the accident reports, I have concluded, are in the files. I would like to know why they're not or if – "if" is a better word – we do an investigation only on workplace fatalities, or do we also do an investigation on an individual who may die at the age of, say, 67 of asbestosis? Is there an investigation done for victims of occupational disease? Is there an investigation done whenever there is a motor vehicle crash that results in someone dying as a result of their activities coming to or from work? Like, the three categories of fatalities. So I'm quite concerned about the speed at which these investigations go on. We know what happened with the double fatality at CNRL, where the two temporary foreign workers were working as boilermakers and the site just crashed and they were killed and there were four others working.

My next question would be: of the 83 occupational health and safety inspectors that we have, how much of their yearly job duties are taken up by accident investigation? Do they actually have any time left to go out and monitor and inspect work sites? Clearly, the accident reports that they're supposed to do, in my opinion, are not showing up in a timely fashion, if at all, in the Alberta Employment and Immigration library so that we can check to see who's responsible for which accident and what's being done to ensure that it doesn't happen again. If I could have some information on that, Mr. Chairman, I would be grateful.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. First, our library does contain a lot of excellent information, but at times we have to respect the fact that some of the reports deal with very, very personal information of both the individual employee and the individual employer. You know, at times the information might not be fully there or might not be there at all because of privacy issues.

When it comes to occupational diseases, I believe that we don't do a detailed investigation, although there is some tracking that's being done. In a way, we recognize that, you know, a lot of the occupational diseases probably come from asbestos exposure many, many years ago, and those are coming back. So there is a tracking system, I understand, but not specifically a detailed investigation.

When it comes to the 83 occupational health and safety officers, those individuals are mandated to do a number of things. They do targeted investigations. They do ongoing monitoring. They do various inspections that are required. It's a combination of all the things that you're asking about. They are quite involved that way.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again to the hon. minister: is the department in this budget year planning to do any extensive research into, for instance, welders in this province – there are a lot of them, and we need more – to determine if their occupation or their classification of job is causing them to have a shorter life than what the average is in this province? I know a large number of welders who, unfortunately, have not had the opportunity to enjoy their pensions. I think it is a major issue. We are looking at different welding techniques. Certainly, respiratory protection for welders has come so far. It's welcome, but is the department doing any research to determine if welders have a shorter life expectancy than other Albertans?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, to the question directly, no, we don't do specific research, but we do recognize and monitor the research that is happening through the academic field, the various sectors, WCB. I'm not sure, and I don't have those numbers as to whether a welder would have a shorter lifespan than another individual working in a particular trade. I don't have those numbers. I'm sure that those numbers would be available somewhere, but specifically we are not involved in direct research, although we would encourage that type of research to happen elsewhere.

3:40

Mr. MacDonald: I would certainly like to see a small amount of money set aside to do some research. I've tried, and I cannot find where there is any information. Certainly, we know the situation with firefighters. I would really appreciate it if the department in the next couple of years could consider doing some research into that. I know times have improved with safety for those involved in the welding trade, but some of the older welders just don't seem to be getting the opportunity to enjoy their retirement or their pension benefits like other trades individuals.

Employment standards, Mr. Chairman. Employment standards protect the well-being of Alberta workers. It's such an important piece of legislation because there's such a small percentage of Alberta workers that are protected by collective agreements. Almost 4 in every 5 workers rely on the Employment Standards Code for some form of protection.

Now, job security is an important part of a worker's quality of life. In announcing the employment standards review in 2005, the former department of human resources noted that the Employment Standards Code was last reviewed in 1988 and that since then technologi-

cal advantages, globalization, temporary foreign workers, and changes to family and workforce demographics have altered Alberta's workplaces. Over 50 labour, employer, and social advocacy groups and 5,500 individual Albertans contributed to this review through public consultation. This gives us an example of how important this issue is to the health and the confidence of Alberta's workforce.

My questions around the Employment Standards Code, Mr. Chairman, are: what is the status of the implementation of this review? If it has not been implemented, why? And funding for line item 3.3.1, legislation, policy, and technical support, under Employment Standards – it looks like a slight decrease here, I think, of roughly \$200,000. Can the minister please inform the House how much the ministry has spent on the employment standards review which began in 2005? And correct me if I'm wrong. I would like to know how that's progressing. I do not see anything in the business plan or the line items that mentions the employment standards review. Does this mean, of course, that the review is complete? If it is, when can the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood expect to see a copy of that?

Now, Alberta is the only province in Canada that does not provide protection to workers who must take time off to care for terminally ill relatives. This means that employers of Albertans who leave work in order to care for their dying spouse, parent, or child are not obligated to keep their job or reinstate them after the leave ends. What is the justification behind Alberta's failure to provide compassionate care leave?

While we're at that, I have a motion before the Assembly to increase paid time off, holidays, from two weeks to three weeks after 52 weeks of employment. I am wondering if the department has considered increasing the vacation time for all those hard-working Albertans. If you look at the statistics, we're the hardest working individuals province by province in Canada. Has any consideration been given to increasing the vacation period, where all the rules are met, from two to three weeks per year?

We've also heard from a number of individuals in this province who are concerned about the state of employment standards for farm workers. Many letters deal with this. We had an individual here from Mexico, from somewhere I think around Guadalajara, who was employed as a temporary farm worker. He was Armando Garcia. It was an issue here about a year ago. I can't understand why this department refuses to enforce in a meaningful way employment standards for temporary foreign workers and agricultural workers.

After I say that, Mr. Chairman, I must say on the record that when I brought Mr. Garcia's individual file to the attention of the department, officials within your department, sir, worked straight away to investigate that matter and try to have it resolved. When it was brought to their attention, they worked at it straight away, and I appreciated their kindness and their efforts in trying to resolve a rather difficult matter between Mr. Garcia and his employer.

If you could answer those questions regarding employment standards, I would be grateful. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The hon. member has asked quite a number of questions in this one, so I'll attempt to follow some of the comments and the questions that he had.

First, he indicated that we should maybe allocate some dollars for research, and I can say that we will seriously take that into consideration and look at what we can do in the future when it comes to allocating some research dollars.

When it comes to the overall employment standards, one of the things I want to point out is that on the comments that our budget

has dropped, you were probably looking at the wrong line, hon. member. I direct you to line 3.4.1, which is legislation, policy, and technical support. You will note that we've gone from \$2.685 million up to \$2.791 million, so a little bit more than a hundred thousand dollar increase rather than the \$200,000 decrease that you alluded to. We are actually increasing those dollars.

On the employment standards review we don't deal individually, piecemeal. The scope of the employment standards review includes a legislative review and a review of government programs, services, and publications relating to employment standards. As you indicated, a number of consultations have taken place with stakeholders and the public focusing on consensus for a very strong, common vision as well as the development of priorities. In 2007 there was a three-year plan that was drafted that laid out the key program initiatives, with a strong focus on promoting awareness of employment standards requirements. Many of these strategies are under way or in the process of being implemented.

When it comes to compassionate care and vacation time, increasing vacation for employees, that has to be done on a much broader basis. We need to look at it from a full package rather than piecemeal. So, you know, part of it is to go through our process. When we look at the employment standards code review, we need to look at policy changes that would involve things like the compassionate care and personal leave provisions, new methods to determine entitlement to general holiday pay and how we would calculate the general holiday pay itself, look at increasing the number of unpaid breaks available to employees and maybe redesigning the permit approval process. All of that has to be taken into a global situation and as a full unit rather than dealing with them individually. We need to bring it through our own individual process of caucus and cabinet before we get to that stage.

3:50

Mr. MacDonald: I have one more question at this time for the hon. minister. I was going to bring it up the other day during the International Day of Mourning. This is perhaps a more appropriate time to discuss this, when we're discussing the budget. I'm looking for a very modest amount.

On Monday I took a little walk west of the centennial flame before question period started, and I had a look at the plaque or the marker that was installed there to recognize the International Day of Mourning when Mr. Peter Trynchy was minister of labour. I'm requesting that the department consider finding in this budget a modest amount of money to move that marker or that plaque and upgrade it into a permanent monument, hopefully on the north side of the Assembly between the Assembly and the department of labour up on 99th Avenue, a permanent monument to all the injured and deceased workers who have either been removed from the workforce or who have died as a result of a workplace accident.

There are thousands of Albertans that have unfortunately not gone home at the end of the day. While I respect the plaque that is there, I think that in light of the fact that there are more and more each year, it would be a reminder not only to the public who come here to visit but to each and every hon. member of this Assembly that we have so much work to do to make our work sites safer. I think that somewhere outside on the north side of the Legislative Assembly so that when we walk up to the department of labour, we are reminded every day of the dangers that are in our workplaces. If the department would consider that and work through various labour groups.

There's a monument there to the francophone community. There's one there to the Italian community. I think there are over 40 monuments or plaques on the grounds, Mr. Chairman. I just think it would be appropriate in light of the statistics to have a reminder as

we enter and exit this Assembly on a daily basis of the cost in lives of our dangerous work sites.

Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, I really appreciate the hon. member's comments. Any time we see anybody injured or killed on the job is a serious concern for each and every one of us. The marker – and I've seen the marker a number of times as well – has served a very, very useful purpose. Maybe the emphasis is not quite as strong because it's on the south side of the grounds rather than on the north side of the grounds. You know, I can indicate to the hon. member that any time we can bring more attention to those individuals who have died on a work site is a benefit to all of us. Although my ministry is not responsible for the plaque nor the grounds here, I would hope that the Speaker and maybe the Minister of Infrastructure would see our comments in *Hansard* and react accordingly. I can certainly indicate to you that I will talk to both of them and, you know, see if there is a possibility of providing a lot more prominence than we've had in the past. As I indicated, we do have thousands, literally thousands of people that walk all around the grounds, and they are exposed to that particular plaque. Again, as you indicated, the more exposure, the better it would be.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank the minister for his presentation and his answers to the questions so far as well as welcome his staff who are with him today.

I have a few questions in different areas, and I'll just work through them. First of all, I would like to talk about income supports. I see that the funding for income supports is relatively static. I guess I would like to know what the department is forecasting for caseloads both for people who are expected to work and for the not-expected-to-work categories of Alberta Works. I'd like to know how the department sets the level of funding and whether or not they've considered basing the benefits on a market-basket measure, which would provide some opportunity to connect it to actual costs as they change.

I'd like to go next to occupational health and safety. There was a recommendation to give the minister discretion to order individual work sites to have more than one worker on-site. This was not put forward for public discussion. I'd really like to know why. There has been a concern for many years particularly with respect to young people working late at night alone and in potentially vulnerable positions. I recognize that there are costs associated with this to employers, in some cases significant ones, but I'm just wondering what the thinking is on that and whether or not we can do something that provides a degree of flexibility and allows the minister to use discretion or to have the department exercise some discretionary authority in that matter.

I want to talk a little bit about employment standards with respect to people under 15 in the workforce. I know that there are a number of restrictions on people under 15 using dangerous equipment and so on, restricting their hours, requiring parental permission, and that sort of thing. I'd like to know how extensive this is, the use of children in the labour force, how many permits there were in the last year, and whether or not the ministry is reviewing the regulation with a view to phasing it out at some point. How is it working, how are they keeping track of it, and how extensive is the use?

I'd like to also ask a little bit about first contract arbitration. That's, I think, an idea we had in this province two or three years

ago in a very turbulent labour climate with a number of strikes and lockouts existing. Not all of them were in provincial jurisdiction, I hasten to add, but some were.

There were a couple that were longer and bitter. They resulted in collective agreements in both cases but not without considerable disruption both to the employees and the employers and in some cases to the public. One was the Lakeside strike in Brooks. Following that, Mr. Chairman, we raised this in the House and got a very qualified assurance from the then minister that this would be reviewed, that they would be taking a look at whether or not first contract arbitration might have been an appropriate device to use in that case and whether or not it could have headed off what was a very tough strike, where there was some violence. It was very divisive. The other one was the prolonged strike at the Palace Casino. Now, in both cases collective agreements were eventually achieved, but I think it could have been a lot easier for everybody. I'm wondering if the ministry would be prepared to take a look at that.

4:00

The other question has to do with the structure of collective bargaining in the building trades. We saw last summer quite a bit of disruption. There was some wildcat activity and so on. But there's a real structure in place in terms of the various trades, or there's a threshold, and once a certain number have reached an agreement, then it goes to arbitration and so on. This was something that the minister at the time, who was the minister after the one at Brooks but before the present one, indicated that she might be prepared to review that. I think that was the now provincial finance minister. So I wonder if that is under consideration. I'd just like to follow up on the previous minister's suggestion that that would be looked at.

Mr. Chairman, those are my questions, and I look forward to the minister's response.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the member for the questions. I hope that I'll be able to respond to all of the questions. If I do miss something, please remind us, or we can review *Hansard* and try to get back to you at that particular level.

When it comes to income supports, you've alluded to market basket and whether or not we use that type of measure. We do and we don't. We use a number of measures to establish rates. The number of individuals that will be supported this year we estimate will be very similar to those numbers that we supported last year. We don't anticipate a dramatic increase in numbers there. We do look at, as I indicated before, the benefit rates, including the market-basket measurement as well as what's happening in other provinces. So it's a combination of all of those that are being used to establish the ongoing rates.

You talked about working alone. Again, our inspectors have the authority to go onto a particular site, and if they deem that there's a dangerous situation, they can issue orders and work with the employers to make sure that the conditions are safe for those who are working by themselves.

When we look at the employment standard for those under 15, we're certainly not looking at phasing it out, although when we look at the number of permits that are given out, we're sort of seeing a flat line. We're not seeing dramatic increases. There's a number there, but it has not changed very dramatically in the last few years. So that number has pretty well flatlined there. Those under 15 receive basically the same protection as anybody else when it comes to workplace protection at that particular level.

I disagree somewhat with you when you talk about and use the word "turbulent" in terms of collective agreements. I truly feel that of all the provinces this province is one of the most stable when it comes to settling agreements. More than 99 per cent of the contracts are resolved without reverting to some form of action. I recognize that there are some situations that become very, very critical, and they're urgent for those members who are affected and we tend to hear from them, but for the most part the numbers are actually quite low.

Mr. Mason: I was referring to a specific year.

Mr. Goudreau: Okay. That's right. Where there were more that happened there.

Generally, to the member, then, we're quite confident that our current labour legislation meets the general day-to-day needs of Alberta workers. Our wages, our benefits, and the working conditions in Alberta tend to be some of the best in the country, and we're very proud of that. Not to say that we can't improve, but we are wanting to head in that particular direction.

When it comes to the construction sector bargaining, 24 out of 25 groups have reached negotiated settlements, and you'll find that that includes at least a 23 per cent increase in wages that's identified over the next few years here. So when we look at that particular package, there have been some pretty good settlements there.

When we go back, then, to the bargaining sector or the actual consultation process, the last consultation was in 2002. We found at that particular time that the majority of our stakeholders, including the building trades union, were quite satisfied with our existing legislation, saying that it was working well, was quite well balanced, and contributed to maybe more labour relations stability across the province rather than the opposite.

Having said that – and I'm going to repeat some of the comments that I made earlier – when we do review the labour code, you know, some of these items that you brought up have to be part of the broader discussion. You talked about first contract arbitration, for instance, and certainly that can be incorporated into a broader discussion at that particular time.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Mason: Don't I get my 20 minutes?

Ms Blakeman: He's done his 20?

The Deputy Chair: There was no arrangement made for 20.

Ms Blakeman: Okay. If we had to fix that, how would we fix it?

The Deputy Chair: Okay. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, go ahead.

Mr. Mason: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Hopefully we'll get this all clarified so we all know the rules, because I was just talking to the Government House Leader, and I guess it wasn't . . .

Mr. Hancock: You have to notify the table to make arrangements to combine your time to the 20 minutes.

Mr. Mason: Okay. My apologies, then, Mr. Chairman.

I have just one other question. Is the department planning a comprehensive review of labour legislation in this province? If so, when will that be, and how does the minister see that unfolding?

Mr. Goudreau: To the hon. member: we don't have a set date at this point. You know, there are some considerations being given to it. There may be a time when we need to bring in some amendments, but we don't have a formal time frame for doing what you're suggesting.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I would take advantage of the combination of the two ten minutes in order to get a 20-minute segment here with the minister. He has been quite co-operative.

I'm just going to start out by linking with the subject that was on the table previously, and I want to add my voice very strongly to the need for reconsideration of our labour code in this province. I know that it's a political ideology of the government members. They're not particularly supportive of unions or union sites, et cetera, et cetera. But I think we have enough statistical information in front of us now about the effect of a union work site: that it's safer, that more people go home if they're working on a union site, that there are fewer injuries. I mean, you want to branch beyond that, then economically you will have workers that have pension plans in place so that they're not running the risk of becoming a so-called burden on the government because they're looked after. They're much better at helping their union members through the maze of WCB concerns and things like that.

4:10

To me, I think the thing that we really are missing in this province is first contract legislation. I mean, the longest, nastiest, most destructive labour strikes we've had in this province are all directly connected to first contract legislation and the fact that we haven't been able to get it. You look at Dynamic Furniture, the *Calgary Herald* – oh, I wish my colleague was here; he could list off the four or five worst labour disruptions in this province, that were all directly connected to first contract legislation.

You know, I don't understand why this province can have so much, can be so lucky, can have so much money and be so nasty. You would think that all of that should be a sign of generosity, of an openness to allow everyone to advance, yet I consistently see not a reluctance but a definitive push back from government around that. If we really care about our workers in this province – and let's face it, they're the ones that make this world go round, not us – I would think we would do everything in our power to try and protect them and enable them and empower them, and to me first contract legislation is about that.

Second to that is replacement worker legislation. I know that that will truly horrify some of my colleagues here in this House. I don't care. It's the right thing to do. You cannot expect that you will have two parties equally at a bargaining table when one of them is allowed to go out and hire other people to continue to do their business. It completely removes any reason for a strike. It completely removes any reason to bring that owner or organizer or whatever to the table to deal in good faith. They have no need to do it because they just hire a bunch of other people and keep right on going. To me that is blatantly unfair, and I think it reflects very poorly upon this province. I know that that's a socialist way of thinking, and I don't care because, frankly, I think it's the right thing to do for this province, and I think that's the direction that we should go in. So there's that and a number of other issues that need to be opened in that labour code.

I know that in the fall there were a number of petitions, individual letters, I think, that were signed that we were tabling. I've still got almost half a box back at my office, so I'll continue to table those.

They're outlining five specific parts that they want looked at for the labour code, so I'll just bring that issue up to start with.

Now, what I'd like to do is concentrate on a couple of specific areas. I know my colleague from Lethbridge-East wants to talk about caregiver assistance, but I want to concentrate on underemployment of marginalized groups. I mean, we have a labour shortage in this province, no question, and it is always interesting to me the lengths that we will go to bring people in from other countries to fill our workplace vacancies, yet we will not concentrate on people that we have right here. When we're talking about money that is going to stay right here in our province, where people are going to buy groceries and pay rent and buy cars and pay for their kids to go to soccer, the government seems to run in the other direction from doing that.

One of the most obvious groups that the government consistently overlooks when we're looking for workers to come into the workforce is women. A big part of that is child care spaces, so my first question to the minister is: what specifically, measurably is the department doing to work with his colleagues to create more child care spaces in this province? We have educated, trained women who want to work, who can work, who should be working, and who are not working because they cannot get quality, accessible child care for their children. We are so far behind in creating spaces; it will take us a long time to get caught up.

What other innovative measures has the department looked at specifically? Please tell me that there's some sort of interdepartmental committee of deputy ministers that actually is addressing this particular issue, because if we want to look at the health workforce, we could have a lot of trained nurses back in our health workforce within a couple of months if we could just provide them with child care spaces. You want to look at what's happening to them in Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray. I've been there. I've talked to those people. Those women would work happily. They would happily pull shifts, and they can't because they can't get child care. In this day and age, in this kind of a world we should be able to be flexible enough in our child care that it isn't just the traditional 9-to-5 child care. We should be able to cope, especially in places like Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray, with shift work, with flextime, with different opportunities for child care.

Alberta has demonstrably one of the lowest rates of women's participation in the workforce. If we, for example, had kept up with initiatives like Quebec has put in place, our economy would have the benefit of 17,000 additional workers that are women, that we don't have right now, that we're looking for. We're bringing people in from other countries to do that work. I mean, 17,000 people. Even if half of those people actually wanted to be in the workforce and could be in the workforce, you're still looking at an additional 8,500 people. Imagine what we could do with 8,500 people in our workforce right now who are educated, trained, wanted to be here, and their money stayed here. Yet nothing. I would like to know the government's justification for ignoring that particular sector and insisting on concentrating on other areas which, in my opinion, are less productive. So what's the particular policy that is driving that?

For example, are you working with the municipalities to amend the MGA or to look for possibilities through the MGA to allow for different kinds of planning or zoning options through municipalities to require that daycare spaces be built into new buildings? I mean, you want to create spaces. You've gotta have the space. Why aren't you putting it into new buildings? They're prohibited from doing that because in many cases the MGA does not give them that flexibility.

You guys have got to start getting out of your silos because a piece of that is also about worker accessibility. It's about transit and

availability of transit around; I mean, the number of people that have to get a car so that they can get to a work site that's remote. What are we doing to work with the municipalities about provision of transit? Well, you say: oh, that's not my problem; that's not my ministry. Yes, it is. You know, if we're talking about workers and we're talking about getting the right workers to the right workplace, get some innovation.

I'm noticing as well that if we look at budget 4.2.4, labour attraction, that budget has gone up by 60 per cent, but when I look at settlement and integration services, which is 4.2.1, that budget doesn't look like it has gone up as much, significantly less. I mean, one has gone up about 60 per cent, and one has gone up about half that. My question is: we seem to be able to get workers here, but we can't keep them, so why do we have the retention part going up significantly less than the recruitment part? What choices were made there that have resulted in that differential in the budget?

I think my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar spoke quite a bit about temporary foreign workers, but I'm going to let the minister answer the questions I've put on the table, and then I'd like to come back and talk a bit more about income supports and then return to talking about women's issues.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. There were actually quite a few comments there. Again, I will reiterate the fact that if I do miss on some, please feel free to come to me for additional information.

When it comes to, again, the labour relations codes, I want to re-emphasize that generally we have a fairly positive climate in the province of Alberta. As I indicated to the previous member, we do have a strong record of labour peace in this province. More than 99 per cent of our collective agreements were settled this past year alone without any form of job action. Can we do better? Sure, but we do have a very positive track record when it comes to that.

4:20

You talked about first contract legislation, replacement worker legislation. Again I need to emphasize that those are certainly not new. Those comments have been brought before in this particular House, and when we do open up the code, then certainly those are some of the items that could be reviewed at that particular time.

Moving very, very quickly to the employment of marginalized groups of individuals and the comparison with the temporary foreign worker program, for instance. We are spending a lot more money on groups like our aboriginal communities, our low-income workers, those that are unemployed. We're spending more money on training for those individuals than we are by far on the temporary foreign worker program. As well, our targets to have greater participation in the workforce: our numbers are much higher in the aboriginal community than the numbers that we are using under the temporary foreign worker program. We do want to make sure that those individuals within the province of Alberta and those, as you indicated, that might be part of a marginalized group have first choice, ahead of those under the temporary foreign worker program.

We're certainly not ignoring the child care spaces. If we see that the child care spaces are a barrier for employment, then as a ministry we will pay for those. We'll also pay for some supplementary benefits. You alluded to transportation, and if we find that transportation is a barrier to employment, we'll help to cover those particular costs. I might also add that we also will cover cost of tools, for instance, or clothing if that's what's required for those individuals that are marginalized to get into the workforce.

I, too, believe that our females can have a greater role in the Alberta workforce, and certainly, as you identified that there might be some barriers, we're prepared to overcome that, including working with more employers to see if there is a possibility of offering some flexible work hours. Employers also might have responsibility in terms of offering individual daycare spaces, and some have gone that far to ensure that they get increased worker participation. I agree that the child care spaces are an issue, and we need to keep on working with all of our colleagues, those ministers here, especially the minister of children's services, to see that some of those spaces are increased. The minister has indicated over the past few days right here in the Legislature that she is working on increased daycare spaces for the province of Alberta.

Going back to some of the last comments, when you looked at the voted expenditures there, you alluded to line 4.2.4 under Attraction. You indicated that maybe those numbers are up by 60 per cent. If you look from our estimate in '08-09 and compare it to the expenditures in '07-08, the numbers go from \$6.374 million to \$7 million. In my math that's up by 10 per cent, not by 60 per cent. So we've done that. Then you go back to the settlement one, and the numbers go from \$6.464 million to \$8.274 million, and that is up by 30 per cent. That number has climbed by about 30 per cent. So we are putting more emphasis on the supplement side than we do on the attraction side, and we've increased those budget dollars accordingly.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm sorry; I just can't let this go by. I know the minister didn't say that this was union friendly, but he said something close to that. That's an unbelievable statement. I mean, this is a province where we allow a non-union union like CLAC to enjoy all of the benefits that are allocated to those few unions that we do have. It doesn't represent their workers. So to say that, well, we're just as good as every other province – I mean, it's unacceptable. This is a province that puts Merit Contractors on the Labour Relations Board. I mean, unbelievable statements.

I'm going to move on, or my head's going to pop off. To say that, you know, it's a first choice – but it's not a choice at all if people actually cannot participate if there are barriers to them.

I'm interested that the minister says that the ministry will help with transportation to get people into the workforce. So two questions: exactly how does that program work, or where is the access point for it? Two, is it only getting into the workforce? Is it also retention and staying in the workforce? If transportation's an issue, is assistance also available?

My question to you about working with your colleague around daycare spaces. I was looking for what you were doing that was measurable, so maybe I can get you to go back and look at that again.

I'm just going to look at some of the supplementary benefits that are offered here.

Mr. MacDonald: Are you a member of CLAC?

Ms Blakeman: Absolutely not. I won't even shop in their store.

The national child care supplement is treated as unearned income and is charged against social assistance. We have the Alberta government clawing back dollar for dollar the maximum supplement that's provided by the federal government, and Alberta is the only province to do this. How can the minister justify taking that money from people who are in transition of a benefit that was bestowed

upon them by another level of government? So the feds give them transition money, and the province then claws back their supplementary benefits dollar for dollar from what the feds are giving them. This isn't the only program where they do that, but I'd like to know what the justification is in doing that. When we're trying to move people, you know, transition them on, why does this government choose to do that to them at that time?

I'd like to know how long income support clients are able to retain those supplementary benefits after leaving the income support program. How long do they have? Please, if you could spell that out for us.

I think we now know or we have the documentation to show that economists and, certainly, social policy analysts recognize that asset-based clawbacks from government programs discourage poor families from saving. Can I get any kind of a commitment from the government to removing or reducing asset-based clawbacks in order to allow low-income or poor families to build a base for longer term security? Otherwise, we just keep this cycle going, and you guys know that as well as I do.

I want to go back to this situation of women. Almost half of the single, widowed, and divorced women over 65 are poor. We have a benefit program, the widow's pension, that's in place, but I believe that there's a sunset clause on it. I'm wondering if the widow's pension program will be replaced with anything else, and I'm wondering why there are no other programs besides the widow's pension which specifically target our poorest citizens, which are women.

The Deputy Chair: I recognize the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a couple of questions, if the minister would do me the honour of just going back and forth with him rather than lining up a whole bunch at once. My first one to the hon. minister is: what is the ministry doing in investing to raise the awareness of the employment standards rights and responsibilities?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, you said something about going back and forth. Does that mean in 20 minutes?

Mr. Berger: I won't be that long.

The Deputy Chair: Proceed. It's 10 minutes and 10 minutes or a combined 20 that can go back and forth.

Mr. Berger: We can go back and forth. The combined 20 is fine.

The Deputy Chair: Okay.

4:30

Mr. Goudreau: To the Member for Livingstone-Macleod: I appreciate that question. The question was: what are we doing to raise awareness of employment standard rights and responsibilities? We've got a three-year employment standards campaign that includes things like print ads focusing on the employment of young workers over the summer; radio spots highlighting minimum standards, focusing on our young workers. We do focus media to reach temporary foreign workers and others that are new to Alberta as well as employees in the construction, retail, and hospitality industries; we use online calculators to assist employers and employees to calculate their earnings, provide e-learning awareness tools on dispute resolution and minimum employment standards; and

we have publications for temporary foreign workers and their employers available in multiple language formats. I alluded to that earlier in my comments this week, Mr. Chairman. Those languages are French, German, Spanish, Chinese, with more translations on the way.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Minister. One of the real benefits in Alberta is the STEP program, the summer temporary employment program. I've noticed in the budget that – maybe it was rightsizing – it seems to have gone down from the 2006-07 actual to the 2008-09 estimate. Knowing the benefit of this program to all of our museums and summer student jobs, parks, all the different areas that utilize these, I was just wondering if this was changed because it was underutilized or if we're just phasing it down a little. Maybe the minister could comment on the budget for that.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. The STEP program has been around for many, many years, and it's proven to be a tremendous tool for a lot of employers, especially those employers that are working in the nonprofit, the voluntary sector, as the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod alluded to, libraries and museums and other agencies that provide a lot of the social services that make this province a much better place to live. A couple of reasons: one is that our individual ministry budgets are limited as well. Our dollars are limited, so we've had to look at, you know, the numbers of dollars that we could invest in the STEP program. We certainly tried to protect the STEP program itself and the good work that it's done, but we have not been able to fund as many positions as we've had in the past. We've increased the dollar coverage for individuals, as well, under a lot of the STEP program.

As well, Mr. Chairman, we recognize that there is a great availability of jobs in the province of Alberta. At one time the STEP program had been made to encourage additional jobs. We've also noticed that the applications have gone down just ever so slightly over the last two years, so a recognition, then, in a slightly lower number in our existing budget.

Mr. Berger: Once again, thank you, Mr. Minister. That is the answer that I kind of thought you were going to come up with.

To go further, in the budget of Employment and Immigration how are we addressing the underutilization of the credentials of our temporary foreign workers? We have all heard of the doctors, the nurses that are underutilized, doing jobs that we can fill here with people that don't have the credentials. Is there a place in the budget where that has been addressed and we're working towards bringing those people into their rightful position with the credentials that they possess?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. We just last week – I believe it was last week or a few days ago at least – announced with the Bredin Institute and Bow Valley College an agreement where we're looking at improving our abilities to move foreign individuals or Albertans through the accreditation program a lot smoother and a lot better. Budget 2008 more than doubled to \$3.6 million for international qualification assessment services, which allows for assessments of internationally trained persons' qualifications to determine Canadian equivalencies. We recognize that the recognition of credentials is a very, very complex process, and it's a very time-consuming process, so we are putting additional

resources behind that. Working with other ministries, we hopefully will be moving them through the process a lot quicker.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Minister. Down in my constituency of Livingstone-Macleod we've definitely got a shortage of workers for different employment opportunities. We do have some temporary foreign workers coming in. The next issue that seems to come up every time is the affordable housing accommodations for these workers. Is that part of the interministry aspect you were just discussing, or is there something directly in the budget of Employment and Immigration that addresses that or helps the employer address that, or is that something that is looked after directly by the employer without the input of the Ministry of Employment and Immigration?

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, generally, prior to an individual being accepted under the temporary foreign worker program, an employer has to show that there is some housing available to the temporary foreign worker. We see it as a responsibility of the employer and not necessarily a responsibility of the government. But having said that, we have put in some \$1.4 million towards settlement type of activities for our temporary foreign workers.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Minister. We've talked quite a lot here in the last little while about safety. Provincial statistics show that for 2007 there were 154 occupational fatalities, which is up from 124 in 2006. Within the ministry, budget-wise or otherwise, what are we doing to address the workers' health and safety issues?

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you for the question. We're very pleased to see that for the seventh straight year we've got an annual drop in the provincial lost-time claim rate to 2.12 per 100 person-years, and that's down again from 2.35 in 2006. So our Work Safe Alberta initiative is quite effective. But you are right: when we look at our statistics, our fatalities have gone up from 124 in 2006 to 154 in 2007. You know, that's an alarming statistic; however, it's a statistic and a number that's somewhat average over the last few years.

As a government we continue to hold employers accountable for ensuring that their workplaces are safe. We've got court-imposed fines, and those fines to the end of March of 2008 have already surpassed all of 2007. We're taking things extremely seriously. Fines totalling over \$1.9 million have been levied against seven companies compared to the 2007 total of \$1.72 million against 12 companies.

4:40

I also want to indicate that last year our officers conducted more than 13,500 inspections at Alberta work sites, and employers with poor safety records are specifically targeted for further inspections. With the additional dollars, \$1.5 million in the budget of 2008, we'll continue to make sure that the employers in Alberta provide some very, very safe environments for their workers.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, I'd also like to talk a little about the Workers' Compensation appeal. I have a lot of comments from constituents that say this is not a very easy process to get through. Now, in the budget are you spending any dollars on staff training to make the appellants feel a little more at ease when appealing their case, or is there a way that we can move that through a little easier?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I know even from my own constituency point of view that I do get a lot of issues and a lot of concerns concerning the appeals process. It's somewhat difficult for individuals that have never gone through an appeal process to go through the initiation and actually have the willingness to go through the particular appeals. Having said that, I think WCB has gone through some major improvements over the last number of years. I know the calls to my own individual office in the last couple of years have dropped quite dramatically compared to what they were six and seven years ago.

I want to indicate as well to the hon. member that this year we've provided an 18.6 increase in the Appeals Commission, and those are dollars for staffing. Those dollars can also be used for the training of their staff.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a final question, Mr. Minister. On our budget documents there's shown an allotment for new capital investments. This is probably the easier question. What exactly are these new capital investment dollars being spent on?

Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau: Generally, we don't have a lot of dollars when we compare it as a percentage of our full budget. There's actually, you know, some dollars allocated to that but mostly new computerized systems. I guess one particular budget amount is monies that are transferred from the federal government through our system, through our budget, for the francophone facility that's being established in Bonnie Doon. It's an expansion of Cité francophone, actually, that's there, and it provides that service. They qualify for some federal funding, and those federal dollars are being transferred through our system to them for the construction of that particular facility. That would be the largest chunk of those dollars, then, about \$3.6 million. Having said that, we as a provincial government also matched through the major facilities program some of those dollars so that project could move ahead.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Berger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Minister. I have no further questions.

The Deputy Chair: I recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have a series of questions for the minister, and perhaps we can just deal with them one by one if that's okay. The first question is in regard to – what do we call that program that was in and out of the department? – the \$100 million rural development fund. There seemed to be a wrangle between ministers in previous years. It was in the department of agriculture. Then it was moved into employment, industry and immigration, or whatever it was called. It's been moved back, and I was one of the ones who was advocating that it be moved back to the department of agriculture. What complement of staff left the department with the rural development program, and how much extra did it cost the department to administer this program?

The second question I have would be in regard to the Francophone Secretariat. I'm correct that this is the first opportunity that the

Department of Employment and Immigration has had to administer this program. What is the money, the million dollars, being used for this year? An explanation would be appreciated.

Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much for the question. The hundred million dollar rural development fund – and you've alluded to it – did go back to the ministry of agriculture, so they are responsible for that particular program. There are about eight staff members that were involved with that activity, so if you look at these staff members, there would have been about a million dollars that would have been allocated from our ministry towards that particular program, and those dollars for staff members would have flowed back to the ministry of agriculture.

You also talked about – is it \$3.68 million?

Mr. MacDonald: No. Line item 2.1.4.

Mr. Goudreau: Oh, 2.1.4, the Francophone Secretariat. That was a program that was administered under tourism, parks, recreation, and culture. That particular program followed me, actually. I am overall responsible for the Francophone Secretariat probably in part because of my ability to communicate with them on a day-to-day basis fairly easily.

The Francophone Secretariat does provide a tremendous amount of services to the francophone community. The francophone community is a very, very broad community encompassing quite a number of individual cultural groups that moved to Alberta and have been here for a number of years and also a number that are coming to the province from Vietnam, for instance, or Africa, a lot of the francophone African countries. So the Francophone Secretariat will provide that link between the government and the communities at large.

The staff and the contracts to work with them is about \$1 million, and then the balance would go towards providing additional services to various communities across the province of Alberta.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Line item 2.1.5, the Canada-Alberta co-operation agreement, francophone initiatives: a budget of \$3.6 million. Is that a transfer from the federal government, and what is that money going to be used for here in Alberta? I know we're trying to get details on the building Canada fund and what money is going to be provided to the cities of Edmonton and Calgary, and the minister is reluctant for whatever reason, but if you could give us an explanation as to this \$3.6 million, I would appreciate it.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, as I indicated just a little earlier, the \$3.68 million are dollars flowing from the federal government through our ministry back to the francophone community for the construction of the Cité francophone, which is right next to Bonnie Doon, across from the Faculté Saint-Jean, on the south side. They are expanding that particular project, and it's the federal government's contribution towards that particular project that's being channelled through our ministry.

Ms Blakeman: They're adding to it?

Mr. Goudreau: They are adding to it. That's right. They're basically doubling the Cité francophone there.

As I indicated, we as a province are also matching it through the

major facilities fund, and I believe the community is doing some fundraising. As well, the city of Edmonton has provided some contributions to it for an expansion. So, first and foremost, the cultural centre and arts centre will provide an avenue for the francophone community to meet and share some of the required services that they need.

4:50

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. To the hon. minister. I'm sure that the minister, the Solicitor General who was so silent there reading his files, is going to be looking at that application through the lottery system. I'm sure that there are a lot of members of that cabinet who are anxious to get the Solicitor General his coffee at a meeting these days because he's got the strings to the public purse there, that I hope he draws tightly on occasion.

The summer temporary employment supports program. The hon. Member for Livingstone-MacLeod talked about this. When I was at a public meeting last weekend, there was an individual in attendance who told me that the amount that is paid per student has gone down this year. Is that correct? I didn't think it was, but if you could clarify that for me, I would be grateful.

Mr. Goudreau: Are you talking specifically about the STEP program?

Mr. MacDonald: Yes.

Mr. Goudreau: Individual applications are reviewed, and my understanding is that we have not changed the criteria of the program. The total amount of dollars for the program has gone down. We've had fewer applications than we've had in the past. But my understanding is that, you know, the dollars per student has not necessarily been curtailed at all.

Hon. member, I fail to understand your previous comments that were directed at the Solicitor General.

Mr. MacDonald: Okay. That's fine. Hon. minister, I should have been clearer, yes.

Workplace health and safety: legislation, policy, and technical support. I would like to get on the record that I had that line item confused with the employment standards line, item 3.4.1, earlier in our discussion, and I apologize.

The compliance number. If we look at it from 2006-07, we see that's an increase of \$1.5 million, but if we look at it from last year, it is basically the same to provide compliance for employment standards. The minister is nodding his head, so I take it that's an indication that that's an adequate amount.

Now English as an Additional Language, element 4.2.5. We're looking at an increase of \$1.7 million. Is that to increase the living allowances that are provided to ESL students?

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. You've alluded to workplace health and safety. As I indicated in my previous comments, where you questioned the small increases under 3.3.3, those particular numbers have not changed very, very dramatically. As I indicated in my previous comments, we are maintaining the same number of officers that we've had, and the

dollars there just basically reflect a slight increase in the wages, the supplements that they've had. So those are the numbers that you've seen. If you go back a few more years, though, you will see that our numbers did in fact go up quite considerably.

Under 4.2.5, English as an Additional Language, the \$1.7 million difference is basically tuition increases. Those are actual increases towards that particular program.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. I have some questions regarding the income supports and poverty program. Now, Mr. Chairman, income supports is up by 10 per cent, or I think it's a little over \$28 million here. Estimates distinguish between four categories of expenditures under this area: learners, people expected to work or working, people not expected to work, and widow's pension. Of these four, three categories receive overall increases of approximately \$10 million each. Now, regarding caseloads, when was the last time eligibility criteria for income supports were changed, and can the hon. minister outline what constitutes a sufficient enough barrier to employment to name a person not expected to work? Does the department ever consider other systemic barriers such as education, addictions, or a personal history of poverty, et cetera?

Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, the criteria have not changed when we look at those particular criteria. We look at all the barriers that are in place. You know, part of my comments this week as well was recognizing that we get into cycles, and our role and our mandate is to try to break those cycles and try to work with the family and try to work with the community to get those individuals that maybe are not expected to work out of that particular cycle, working with the children, working with others within the particular family to do that. So a lot of our efforts are directed at those particular activities. The whole idea is to give a helping hand and to try to encourage people to get back into the workforce if that's at all possible.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Core benefits. One comprehensive, province-wide study completed last year estimated the average basic costs of an individual Albertan to be \$1,380 per month. These costs only include food, housing, transportation, and utilities. We certainly know that there have been significant changes since this living wage study was completed last year, yet core benefits available to individuals expected to work reach a maximum of \$402 per month, and for individuals who are unable to work due to a disability, et cetera, the core benefit levels again reach a maximum of \$667 only. These are in the budget highlights for 2006-07. Both of these supports amount to less than half of what is actually required to get by with a decent standard of living. The 5 per cent increase to most categories does not do much to improve this financial picture.

Does the minister actually think that people can meet their core needs with the benefits allotted to them under the income supports? Other provinces have indexed their benefit levels to the rate of inflation. This makes an extraordinary amount of sense because the inflation rate reflects more accurately the increases in the cost of living. When will this province adopt this measure to those benefits?

Now, on the website is a page providing information to rural Albertans regarding access to social services. Is there any difference

between what a rural person would receive in benefits in comparison to one of the major urban centres, like Edmonton and Calgary?

Thank you.

5:00

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Chairman, when it comes to the core benefits, we've increased the benefit rates for income support clients in each of the past two years. Effective May 2007 we had 18,000 income support clients, and they received a 5 per cent benefit rate increase. That was in addition to the 5 per cent benefit rate increase provided in 2006.

In Budget 2008 we chose to invest in supports to help income support clients find and keep jobs. That's our mandate, even those that are in the category of not expected to work. Maybe that wording should be changed and reviewed. If there's a possibility of their getting involved somehow in the workforce, we will keep on working with them and encourage that to happen. We've got a wide array of supplementary benefits to support employment. You know, if we find that it will help an Albertan to find or keep a job, we will provide the support for tools, for clothing. If transportation is an issue, we will provide that particular support.

We also have the most comprehensive health benefits in Canada. We're constantly reviewing the income threshold. We've increased the income threshold so even more lower income Albertans qualify.

As you're aware, in May 2007 we began the administration of the homeless and eviction prevention fund to help Albertans manage rent increases. Last year there were about 27,000 households that received support from that particular fund, and the vast majority of these were individuals in receipt of income support.

You talked about rural Alberta. I want to indicate to the hon. member that our rates are standard right across Alberta. There are no distinctions. Whether you're from Small Town, Alberta, or Edmonton or Calgary or Grande Prairie or Red Deer, the benefit rates are very similar right across the province.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Now I have some questions regarding the WCB. It came up before. I was looking at the annual report from last year for employment, immigration, and industry. It confuses a guy, these name changes, but it's still basically the same department. I apologize if I forget "immigration" and some days I forget "industry," but the WCB is always under the umbrella of this department.

I notice that there was a surplus last year of \$762 million listed in the financial statements of the WCB. It's been an issue that each hon. member of this Assembly would know fully well. I don't think there would be an hon. member who has not had at least one visit from an individual who has a long-standing contentious claim with the WCB.

There was an effort made some time ago – I think five years ago – to address this issue of the long-standing contentious claims. The WCB pleads poverty, that they have no money to deal with this issue. In fact, the last time we were looking at the act in this House, the WCB act, there certainly was an amendment to address this issue if the political will of the government was there.

Now, my question would be in regard to the long-standing contentious claims. We have this surplus. What's the government doing about it? [Mr. MacDonald's speaking time expired]

The Deputy Chair: Hon members, I'd like to recognize the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Excuse me, hon. member. Do you wish to use the combined 20 minutes?

Mr. Weadick: Yeah. Combined 20 minutes and back and forth would be the easiest, I think.

The Deputy Chair: Okay.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you. This is my first opportunity, so I appreciate it.

Mr. Minister, I want to just ask a couple of questions about WCB while we're on that, just to get a little bit better understanding around the business plan. I've had some people in the office already that have some issues with workers' compensation.

I want to talk about the bigger picture. In 2006-2007 for a standard appeal we were looking at a 172-day average appeal period, and we're targeting for this fiscal year 145. First question would be: can we get to that target? Do you have the actual resources and people to reduce this to 145? The second one would be: how does 145 compare to other jurisdictions? Is it a reasonable time frame, or should we be trying to get it below that? That would be the first two questions.

Mr. Goudreau: Well, thank you very much for the question. We have added additional dollars in the budget, and we are hiring more staff. We feel very, very confident that we can achieve those targets. Certainly, the lower those targets, the better off we are and the better everybody will feel about those particular numbers. Is 145 the right number? I don't know. It's certainly a good target for us to head towards, and over the next few years if we can do better, then certainly we will.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Minister. I appreciate that. When an appeal is launched, is there any information as to how long someone may have been in the system before they get to the point where this actually happens? Is this within a month or two of the event, or is this a year or two down the road?

Mr. Goudreau: That's a good question. To the member: I know that we do track those numbers. We would have them. I don't have them at my fingertip, but if the member wishes to have them, we can certainly supply those numbers. We're very, very conscious of how long it takes to get through the system, and certainly we could provide those numbers.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you. I was trying to get to sort of the total number. Like, how long from, you know, the first day a guy falls off a ladder at work to where we actually get it dealt with? I was trying to get a sense of that number. I'll leave that for now if we don't have it here.

As you know, in Lethbridge and in the area around Lethbridge we have a fairly substantial aboriginal population, on two reserves plus within the city of Lethbridge. I noticed that one of your main strategies is to develop some labour market programs designed for aboriginal people to try to get them employed. Could you outline what programs you might have both on reserve and off reserve to assist with the very high unemployment rates within the aboriginal population?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you. Thank you very much for the question. The Premier as part of his mandate has asked me to emphasize the unemployment levels within the aboriginal community. We will be taking a very aggressive approach. We've got some quite high numbers that we're trying to achieve to make sure that our aboriginal community participates in the Alberta workforce.

We're working on several fronts to enhance the participation of the aboriginal people in our economy. We've got a thriving Alberta economy, and they should be able to be part of that particular economy. For example, we've supported the development of 13 First Nations and Métis workforce action plans which are aimed at enhancing skills and increasing labour force opportunities for the aboriginal people. We offer training and employment programs for our First Nations and Métis people to gain meaningful employment. Our First Nation members both on and off reserve are offered training in areas such as business management and entrepreneurial skills. We support partnerships between First Nations, Métis, and other aboriginal communities, partnerships with industry and employers and government to again create training and work experience projects leading to full-time employment for aboriginal people. We currently have about 59 such partnerships across the province: training-for-work programs, skills-based training that combines pre-employment training, academic training, and general employability skills with occupational-related skills. So there are a lot of activities being done, recognizing that a lot more can be done. We do want to work with them on a very direct basis.

5:10

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you. I appreciate hearing about the workforce plans and the partnerships. I think that's positive.

My next question would be: how are we doing with actual employment initiatives for the First Nations that are living on reserve? We have two very large reserves next to Lethbridge with fairly high unemployment rates and not a lot of industry. Are you having any success there? Can you tell me what you might be planning for the on-reserve half of the equation?

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much for the question. We are always pursuing different initiatives. As I indicated in my answer, we are working very, very closely with employers and other business theatres to provide employment to our aboriginal communities but mostly working very actively and directly with the federal government on various initiatives to provide that type of support on our reserves and within the aboriginal community.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you. To change direction a little bit, I know a number of businesses in Lethbridge have been struggling to bring in foreign workers to assist with their shortage of workers. The ones I'm specifically speaking to now are more like Tim Hortons type of employment as opposed to trades or health care workers. One of the employers has had a request in for about 40 employees for a number of months, and it's still delayed. They're having quite a bit of difficulty getting it through the works. Is there anything we can do at the provincial level, Mr. Minister, to help or to streamline that process so that we can get these workers into the province and working a little more quickly?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you. Thank you again for the question. Just last week I met with the federal minister responsible for that. We are working with the federal government, Service Canada, to see how we can speed up the process. In part of their bill, which has received a fair amount of attention over the last two weeks, they are looking at systems to speed up that particular process and see how we can make sure that once individuals are identified in other countries, they can move through that process a lot smoother and a lot faster to meet the needs of our communities.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you. I will compliment the minister because what I have heard from the companies that I've talked to is that when they've dealt with the province, they have had a fairly fast response, but they are finding some bottlenecks at the federal level. They're probably more interested in how you might be able to get the federal government to move a little quicker. I'm not sure if you can or if you can even answer that question, but if there's anything else you can add to that as you get up, I'd like to hear that.

The other one is: do you have any plans for the training of these workers as they come in so we can make sure that when they hit the workforce, they're ready to work?

Mr. Goudreau: Well, maybe to go back. On training, we did add about \$1.4 million to our budget to provide some basic training. We won't provide the same level of training that we might to the PNP program, for instance, but we do provide some basic training for the temporary foreign workers.

We've signed an agreement with the government of Canada for a sped-up process, an expedited process, for a labour market opinion. There are quite a number of occupations that have been identified at that particular level. Basically there are about 14 occupations, and that covers about 25 per cent of the jobs requested. At this stage to go through that particular process takes only about a week. So we have moved forward on that. Notwithstanding that, we can do a lot more, but this particular one is one where we've been able to speed up the actual process of bringing in individuals. As well, we've signed the temporary foreign worker annex. All of those are activities that, hopefully, will minimize some of the frustrations that individuals have.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you very much. To continue with that, to go to the next level, I got up and asked a question in the House today about advanced ed. We have some businesses in Lethbridge that are trying to bring in welders. These are people that are very highly skilled. They work in England, so language isn't really a problem. They're coming over here on a six-month trial, wanting to move to Alberta and work here. They're not able to get through the examinations, so they're not able to become permanently employed here in their trades. Many of them are getting frustrated. They're going back to their homes without being able to complete it.

A lot of it appears to be around two things that really limits the ability of people: how the testing is structured and the language in the tests. Unless they're very proficient not just in English but in the terminology that we use, they're really struggling to get through the technical parts of the test. I know your part is employment, but we've got to work together to make sure we get these folks into the workforce. Is there anything we can do there to really help that happen?

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you. I think you've partly answered the question. We recognize the need to be able to work together with the minister of advanced education. Certainly, the whole process of examination and if they do happen to fail an exam, how quickly they can go back and recertify or take another exam. I can attest to the fact that I will be working with the minister of advanced ed to see how we can streamline that and move that process forward.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you very much. The final question I have goes back to the STEP program, and it's probably fairly specific. I've had three or four calls or letters just in the last few days about the timing in the STEP program. They're from companies that didn't get the STEP programming that they absolutely needed to be successful, and it centred around: they postmarked it on the date that it was supposed to be postmarked, but the rules changed somewhere along the way and they weren't told, so it arrived after the date, and they were turned down. Subsequently, it's having a fairly substantial impact on at least three or four businesses in Lethbridge. I'm just wondering if we could get some consistency or if you could answer that question and how we can deal with that in the future because it is a big issue in Lethbridge.

Mr. Goudreau: Again, thank you for the question. Certainly, the STEP program, maybe over the last couple of weeks here, has received a fair amount of attention. That's in part because a lot of the employers have received their letters. As was typical in the past, there are never enough dollars to go around. Although the number of applicants has gone down somewhat, there are still not enough dollars to go around to satisfy everybody. So my colleagues and myself are receiving some concerns. I think it will have to be a review from our ministry here to see the importance of the particular STEP program. We recognize that it is serving a very, very useful purpose, as I indicated before, especially in the nonprofit sector, the voluntary sector in the province of Alberta.

We were approving, I believe, the STEP until those dollars ran out, so those applicants that came in towards the tail end especially were not necessarily approved. Sometimes there were some that didn't quite meet the criteria of the program and were turned down. Having said that, we need to review it and see whether or not we can add to the program.

Mr. Weadick: Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, do you wish to speak, or do you wish to defer to the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East?

5:20

Ms Blakeman: No. I'll take it. Thank you very much. I'll continue to do a back and forth in the 11 minutes we have left here. First of all, the questions the minister was unable to answer from my last series of questions I'm happy to receive in writing, and I look forward to that.

A couple of questions picking up on some of the other conversations I've heard here. The Member for Livingstone-Macleod was talking about the settlement money that was available for the temporary foreign workers, and the minister mentioned that there was \$1.4 million for settlement of temporary foreign workers. Could I get details on exactly how that money is being used? Is it being distributed to employers to pay for rent for temporary foreign

workers? Is the ministry buying an apartment building that people are going into? The \$1.4 million: how is that being used?

The next issue is WCB. I'm wondering what has happened to the recommendations from the two reports that were done on WCB. One was the Friedman report, and I think the second one was an internal report. That's come up a couple of times here this afternoon, and I'm wondering what's happened to the recommendations from that. Have we had any of the recommendations implemented? Are there any more recommendations that we expect to have implemented by the department in the upcoming year? I know my colleague asked about long-time, unresolved, contentious, but I know there were a number that were in there about medical reviews and the WCB doctors overturning people's medical practitioners, et cetera.

Last question in cleanup, then. The capital money that is coming from the federal government to pay for the additional building for the francophone community in Edmonton: is the province adding any money to that project, or is it completely a flow through from the federal government? Money comes in from the feds, goes out to the project; province doesn't add anything to it.

Those are the four questions that are remaining from the other things I've heard. The other question that I'd like to get on the record is – two questions around single mothers. One, we often end up with single mothers that are caught in a judicial process, and that often goes on over a long period of time. It's financially draining and takes up an awful lot of time. Has the ministry considered offering any kind of a supplementary benefit that would help single mothers that are currently on income support programs to deal with this additional burden of legal liabilities and having to go back to court over and over again to fight what the husbands or common-law partners are putting the women through in court? Right now they're left without any benefits. Is anything being considered there?

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women has noted – well, anybody could see – that children are poor because their mothers are poor, and most of the poor families in fact are headed by women. One in eight children in Alberta is poor – and that's Edmonton Social Planning Council numbers – so we are higher than the national average. We've got poverty linked to poor health and poor school achievement. Poor performance then goes on and becomes a fairly stable predictor of adult involvement in criminal activity. I'm wondering what the government is doing to stem and work directly around child poverty. You're the one that's allocating the income benefits that mothers are on. In particular, I'm wondering if the department still has in effect the requirement that any mother must start looking for work when her youngest child is six months old. Is that requirement still in place, or has it, I hope, been banished forever? Truly, that was an embarrassment.

Finally, is the government considering any kind of pay equity legislation?

I'll let the minister answer those questions. Thank you.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you for the questions. When it comes to settlement, that's about \$1.4 million that's been allocated to a two-year settlement service pilot project for our temporary foreign workers, and most of the money will go directly to the agencies. A number of settlement service agencies across the province will be selected to provide basic settlement services, including things like banking, grocery shopping, winter clothing, and just anything to help ease the transition to a new way of life in Alberta. It's all about orientation, and the dollars are going to the agencies to provide that type of service.

We'll have to get back to you on the WCB question. We'll provide a written response on that particular one.

You also questioned the \$3.6 million to the Cité francophone.

That's in addition to the building. It's a direct flow through from the federal government through our ministry back to them. We are not as a ministry putting additional dollars into that particular program. Having said that, in my previous ministry we did approve some dollars under the major facilities program towards that one. Provincially we were matching it but not through our ministry; it was through the major facilities program. As well I believe the city of Edmonton has put in some money, and the community at large has put some money in that one.

You talked about the single mothers on support. We do provide some support while they go through the court process. We'll provide the financial support that's required while they go through that particular process.

Finally, the one where you talked about the need to start looking for work after six months. That has been changed from six months to one year. So we did make those changes.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you. Alberta is the only province that does not provide protection to workers who take time off work to provide caregiver activities to terminally ill relatives. In fact, the federal government has just expanded their program. It used to be limited to parents or children, and now they've expanded it to include siblings and others. You know, in Alberta if you take that time off, the employer is under no obligation to hold your job open for you. I'm wondering why we have no compassionate care leave and if there are any plans to implement that here in Alberta. Again, that would keep some people in the workforce or would at least have them come back without losing them completely.

In addition, of course, when we look at things like the extended parent leave, what used to be maternity benefits – and we now happily look upon that as parental leave benefits – the province doesn't put any money into a benefit program that the parents can pull from. The province relies entirely on the federal government employment program for people to access funds while they're off work. Again, are there any plans for the provincial government to augment that program in any way?

I mean, this is 2008. I was very interested in the reaction from a number of people when I was talking about women in the workforce and women's place and encouraging women to work. It was not entirely supportive, which is very interesting in 2008 from legislators in the provincial Legislative Assembly. Not a good sign. I think there's an attitudinal shift or a paradigm shift that needs to happen. If we're trying to encourage women to have families and to contribute to their community, if we make it so difficult for them to find the benefits they need to in fact have a family and participate in the workforce as much as they would like to do: I'm wondering if the minister can comment on that, please.

Mr. Goudreau: Just very, very briefly I'll provide some information. You know, when you talk about terminally ill individuals and the protection for workers and the other issues, including employment standards for our ladies in the workforce, those kinds of things, that becomes part of that full review that we talked about earlier on. When we look at the overall employment standards code, we will have to bring that in as part of that overall review.

The Deputy Chair: I hate to interrupt the hon. Minister of Employment and Immigration, but pursuant to Standing Order 4(4) the Committee of Supply is recessed until 7:30 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]

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