



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 16, 2026
7 p.m.

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The 31st Legislature
Second Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Wiebe, Ron, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (UC), Chair
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP), Deputy Chair

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Eremenko, Janet, Calgary-Currie (NDP)
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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation
Hon. R.J. Sigurdson, Minister

Agriculture Financial Services Corporation
Darryl Kay, Chief Executive Officer

7 p.m.

Monday, March 16, 2026

[Mr. Wiebe in the chair]

**Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation
Consideration of Main Estimates**

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

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

Mr. Wright: Well, good evening, everyone. My name is Justin Wright, MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

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

Mr. Bouchard: Eric Bouchard, MLA for Calgary-Lougheed.

Mr. van Dijken: Glenn van Dijken, the MLA for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock.

Mr. Sigurdson: I am R.J. Sigurdson, Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation and the MLA for Highwood. Joining me at the table to my left is my deputy minister Jason Hale. To my right is Matt Grossman, assistant deputy minister of finance, as well as Darryl Kay, CEO of Agricultural Financial Services Corporation. Thank you, Chair.

Ms Sweet: Thank you. I'm Heather Sweet, MLA for Edmonton-Manning, shadow critic for Agriculture and Irrigation.

Member Eremenko: Good evening. Janet Eremenko, MLA for Calgary-Currie.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: [Remarks in Cree] Jodi Calahoo Stonehouse, MLA for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Dach: Lorne Dach, MLA for Edmonton-McClung and shadow minister for Transportation and Economic Corridors.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation shall be considered for 3 hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for the consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committee. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined

only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to 3 hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule and the committee will then adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call for a 5-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. However, the 3-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having this break? Seeing none.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Pages are available to deliver notes and other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members. However, members have priority at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking time will be paused. However, the block of speaking time and the overall 3-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

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

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

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

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's my pleasure to be here and introduce the Agriculture and Irrigation representatives joining me, of course, again at the table. Joining me is Jason Hale, deputy minister; Matt Grossman, assistant deputy minister of finance; Darryl Kay as well, our CEO of Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. Other ministry staff joining me are John Conrad, assistant deputy minister of primary agriculture; Karen Wronko, assistant deputy minister of trade, investment, and food safety; Miranda Senoussi, the executive director of executive operations; Jeanna Friedley, director of communications. Also here representing AFSC are Mark Prefontaine, chief strategy and innovation officer; Steve Lappin, chief financial and risk officer; and from my office joining me is Callum Reid, my press secretary; and Ryan Hubble, my policy adviser. Thank you all for being here this evening.

Agriculture has a vital role in Alberta. The sector has injected billions into our economy and is responsible for thousands of quality jobs for Albertans. While the economic impacts of our ag industry are essential, the importance goes farther than that. It's a part of our shared history and the foundation of so many of our rural communities. Alberta's farmers, ranchers, and food processors work hard to put the best food on plates here at home and around the world. This year's budget reflects our commitment to these folks and aims to help the ag sector grow and thrive, especially in uncertain times like these. It invests in research, seed processors, and agricultural societies. Let's look at the overall numbers.

Agriculture and Irrigation's operating budget for the upcoming year is \$827.8 million, which is down \$31.7 million from Budget 2025. This will ensure we can continue attracting investment, expanding trade, and supporting our farmers, ranchers, and food processors. This year's budget has \$85.2 million in capital grant

funding, most of which is for irrigation-related projects. We are also providing a continued \$2.5 million for agricultural societies' infrastructure revitalization projects and \$9 million for co-operative seed processors. The main share of revenues is \$685.7 million coming from premiums, fees, and licenses; \$667.2 million of that comes from AFSC's producer premium revenue for insurance. The other significant contributor is federal transfer payments, including \$493.1 million to AFSC for its business risk management programming and \$57.7 million to the department for the sustainable Canadian agricultural partnership.

Those are the highlights. Now we will get into the details. Alberta Seed Processors have a pivotal role in our ag sector. On top of providing basic seed cleaning, they support growth in the local and global agricultural economy. That's why we're allocating \$9 million over three years for upgrades at local seed co-operatives. Alberta has 66 seed processing plants, many of which have safety concerns or outdated equipment. By modernizing these businesses, the program will support the local economy, provide jobs, and help ensure the long-term sustainability of rural communities that rely on these plants as a regional employer. This three-year, cost-shared capital grant aims to address these issues by funding upgrades to improve safety and efficiency.

This funding is more important now than ever. Earlier this year Canada and China agreed to a new trade deal to diversify markets and increase Canadian exports to China. As part of the agreement China has lowered tariffs on Canadian canola seed to a combined rate of 15 per cent. The trade deal impacts producers directly, and many may decide to grow more canola seed. An increase in canola seed could also translate to the increased use of processing plants to clean the seed. I'm confident this funding will help Alberta thrive on the global stage.

Moving on to ag societies. Of course, we all know ag societies improve the quality of life of their communities by providing educational programs, events, volunteer opportunities, services, and facilities. From rodeos and bench shows to educational and agricultural programs, ag societies help their communities thrive. That's why Budget 2026 will continue \$2.5 million in annual funding for the agricultural societies' infrastructure revitalization program.

Here's the impact that the program has had so far. Since 2023 the program has supported major facility repairs so ag societies can continue making a difference in Alberta communities. In the program's first year 34 ag societies received capital grant funding for major repairs and renovations to commercial kitchens, roofing, dressing rooms, and more in facilities like community halls, arenas, and rodeo grounds. In 2024 thirty-seven more ag societies received grants, and in 2025 thirty-five additional ag societies received funding. Total to date: that's 106 ag society projects that have received funding.

7:10

We also know how important research is to the ag sector. Research, when it's based on the realities that our farmers are facing every day, ensures the sector remains strong and continues to grow. Results Driven Agriculture Research, or RDAR, manages the Alberta government's agricultural research funding and leverages every public dollar at a ratio of nearly 3 to 1 with industry and partner contributions. RDAR delivers actualized, results-oriented research that has become the envy of many other jurisdictions.

This investment nurtures a co-operative model that brings government, industry, and postsecondary research dollars together, giving producers and industry commissions a strong voice in the direction of ag research and extension in this province. Since 2020 Alberta's government committed more than \$370 million to fund

agricultural research for 10 years through RDAR. This includes sustainable cap funding of \$14.6 million in 2026 as a part of its accelerating ag innovations program.

Along with this significant RDAR collaboration we are investing an additional \$4 million in innovative research partnerships. My ministry has funded Western Crop Innovations to deepen its exploration of feed and forage varieties that will flourish on the Canadian prairies with strong industry guidance, and we're partnering with the county of Newell at the Crop Diversification Centre South in an innovative collaboration that contributes to Alberta's agricultural research and extension.

Alberta's crop diversification centres are prime examples of how successful government-industry collaboration can be. CDC South is a production and research greenhouse facility and base of operations for plant health surveillance and field operations. We collaborate with industry and postsecondaries to conduct applied agricultural research, developing advancements and technologies in agriculture, food, and soil science to improve food security, and our ag sector remains profitable and sustainable.

Moving on to Agriculture Financial Services Corporation. AFSC has had a long, proud history of helping Alberta farmers with lending assistance and insurance for crop, livestock, and wildlife damage. It has also kept many farmers afloat with income stabilization through programs like AgriStability. Alberta's government continues to invest in AFSC to make sure farmers and ranchers continue to have access to the programs they can depend on. This year AFSC is projecting a \$29.2 million decrease in operating expenses largely due to changes in actuarial methodologies for moisture deficiency insurance.

AFSC has adjusted the historical precipitation normals for moisture deficiency insurance as well with that moisture deficiency endorsement and silage green feed lack of moisture insurance. This has resulted in slight changes to normal moisture levels for most weather stations. The overall impact on clients will be small. The calculation used to determine moisture each year at weather stations historically will now match the in-year moisture calculation. These changes are necessary to protect the program and meet our agreement with the federal government. We're committed to supporting moisture-related programs in the long term while keeping premium costs affordable.

AFSC also distinguishes itself as a lender through the next-generation loan program, which provides new and returning producers with up to \$1.5 million in lifetime borrowing at a discounted rate for the first five years. This program supports seamless transition of farm operations between generations, and AFSC's programs reflect the realities of farming today.

In conclusion, Budget 2026 is focused on what matters to support the ag sector and the communities that rely on it.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Before we go any further, I see Member Stephan has joined us at the table. Can you please introduce yourself for the record?

Mr. Stephan: Surely. Jason Stephan, Red Deer-South.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

I understand that Member Sweet is up first. Member, would you like to combine your time with the minister? If yes, Minister, do you agree to the combined speaking time with the member?

Ms Sweet: Do you want to go back and forth?

Mr. Sigurdson: I agree to that. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before you proceed, you have – no. I think that's it. Continue.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister and your staff, for being here this evening. My hope is that we're going to just be able to have a really good discussion about the future of agriculture in the province and to get some clarity.

What I would like to do is start talking about value-added agriculture. We'll see on business plan page 19 key objective 1.1, increase investment in value-added agriculture to generate economic growth and create jobs. On business plan page 19 performance metric 1(a) is on the total value of investment in primary and agriculture processing sectors. And, again, government estimates page 44, line 3.1, on export and investment, which covers attracting investment in agrifood and bioindustrial sectors. The reason I highlight those three is because I'd like us to just get into a conversation without, hopefully, interjections around: have I referenced any page numbers? The page numbers have been referenced.

Mr. Chair, value-added agriculture represents one of Alberta's strongest pathways for long-term economic diversification and competitiveness. As the RBC Seeding Scale report highlights, Canada possesses one of the world's most progressive agriculture systems and is a net exporter of value-added food products, yet the nation is steadily losing ground as a preferred place to start and scale agrifood firms due to structural gaps in investment and innovation. These challenges directly impact Alberta, where the potential for value-added growth is high but increasingly constrained by national investment trends. I did table this report in the Legislature today. RBC identified \$13 billion of national investment opportunity in agrifood start-ups but notes that the sector attracts only a small portion of domestic capital growth.

The first question that I have to the minister is that the RBC Seeding Scale report shows that Canada's agrifood sector, despite being globally competitive, is undercapitalized, receiving less than 2 per cent of government-backed growth funds and only 4 per cent of total growth capital, leaving a \$13 billion investment gap to 2030. This creates a severe gross state capital cliff where deals actively drop off by about 450 per cent, slowing commercialization and pushing companies to seek foreign investors. As a result, Canada risks losing value-added processing opportunities, including in Alberta, where firms struggle to secure domestic financing. The report warned that without targeting investment totals and better aligning government programs, Canada will continue to miss major opportunities. My first question is: can the minister outline how Alberta's fiscal plan positions the province to capture its share of this \$13 billion opportunity, particularly in value-added processing and agrifood manufacturing?

Mr. Sigurdson: Definitely something that I'm extremely passionate about and was very excited when it was first announced. As the minister of agriculture my predecessor had moved forward the agriprocessing investment tax credit. That, combined with the fact that Alberta has no provincial sales tax, the lowest corporate tax, and tax breaks all the way across the board – of course we're outpacing the rest of the country, but we also understand that this is a global competitiveness. We're not just competing with other

provinces, but I would say that when we combine those together, Alberta's agriprocessing industry continues to demonstrate the strongest growth in the country.

Now, last year we attracted more than \$725 million in our agriprocessing sector, exceeding our annual target of \$639 million and leading to the creation of over 500 jobs. Since the inception of the agriprocessing investment tax credit we've created almost 2,000 jobs and we have almost \$5 billion in investment interest. We have \$1.6 billion already up and operating in the province right now, and we have become a beacon for agriprocessing investment. It doesn't mean that we can't continue to do work in the space. As you mentioned, this is a very competitive space. We are on a global market, and we have to make sure that when we're looking at that overall \$13 billion that's possible, we're doing everything possible to make sure that lands here.

Of course, some of the constraints that I've heard as I continue to travel globally is that we also need some partnership from our federal government to have more strategic investments in infrastructure as it relates to port, rail, and air. That is our biggest constraint at this time. We can continue to do what we need to do here in the province to create a better environment, but we're going to need the same partnership from the federal government. We have heard over and over again that one of our biggest issues that we're losing in the competitiveness space right now is the cost of shipping and the access to port and international markets, so that is something that we are currently taking a look at.

7:20

I do want to pump up my AgriInvest team. I want to take that opportunity right now. Our AgriInvest team has, of course, got dedicated, experienced staff that deals with agricultural-related investments. They have a site selection tool. They have specialists that work on this constantly. As well, they're promoting our province and our country and our producers and farmers through international offices in Tokyo, Beijing, Seoul, Mexico City, Minneapolis, Düsseldorf, and Singapore. They are doing exactly what we want them to do, which is looking for that investment that's going to grow the sector.

By Q3 of 2025-26 AGI has completed 30 market development activities and six market readiness activities involving 115 participants to date. I would say that we are seeing Alberta trending up as we look at the investment, but of course we continue to keep a very close eye on what's happening internationally and make sure that we can continue to be competitive in the space. But we are leading the country, and we're definitely leading as one of the top jurisdictions in all of North America right now.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. I agree with you. I did ask your colleague the minister of economic corridors about port access and ensuring that we were looking at trying to address those very concerns, so I appreciate that you and I are on the same page.

I do want to talk a little bit – because you've mentioned Saskatchewan, the comparison between Saskatchewan. I appreciate the 12 per cent with the APITC grant – you're welcome – and the fact that that was a very smart move by this government to create that grant. I think it was something that both sides agreed to have that happen. When we look at Saskatchewan, however, I recognize that we talk about the corporate tax rate in Alberta versus Saskatchewan, but Saskatchewan is actually much better at their value-added agriculture incentives.

The reason I say that is that they've got nonrefundable CIT credits with graduated rates – 15 per cent up to \$400 million, 30 per cent for \$400 million to \$600 million, 40 per cent \$600 million and over, capped at \$250 million total credit for projects up to \$10

million, redeemable over three to 10 years – and very aggressive scale incentives for major plans. The m and p investment tax credit, which is stackable on plant equipment, is refundable at 6 per cent of capital costs of qualified m and p property, useful along SVAs for equipment-heavy builds and complementary programs such as product development programs, ag tech growth funds, and broad value-added programming menus to move projects from prototyping to commercialization.

What this means is that for the \$10 million to \$200 million ag processing builds Alberta's 12 per cent APITC is simple and competitive – and it is coupled with our CIT, so it does give a strong cash flow – and for very large, over \$400 million, agrifood megaprojects Saskatchewan can far exceed it and sees to closer to 30 to 40 per cent on those upper tranches. I guess my question is that if we're trying to attract the bigger projects, Saskatchewan is outpacing us with the ability to stack. I'm wondering what your ministry is looking at and whether there's some comparativeness happening there on the stackable, because the tax credit in itself and the corporate tax reduction isn't adding up to the same incentives that Saskatchewan can provide.

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, I would say that even if you look at a front-end stack – of course, when we designed our agriprocessing investment tax credit, Saskatchewan already had theirs in place. We used it as a model to make sure that we were more competitive, and what I can say is that when you combine all the other tax advantages of Alberta, we pencil out better over the long term.

You have to understand that it's not just about a front end. These investments that are happening in agriprocessing: these companies are investing for long term. A lot of businesses have a 20-year business plan. When you get into talking to the P&Hs, the Cargills, the Richardsons of the world, they have a 50- to 80-year plan for their investment, and that's where we pencil out much, much better. A lot of the front-end advantage that some will try to put ahead in jurisdictions is eroded in fewer than five years, and when you look at Alberta's overall tax advantage as a whole, no PST, lower corporate tax rate, you end up with a far better advantage. That's why we're seeing much more investment here than anywhere else in Canada.

Proof of that, I can say, when you talk about the larger investments: we can talk about Imperial Oil's \$720 million investment here in the Heartland. Even more that would prove the fact that I think we're outpacing Saskatchewan is the Parrish & Heimbecker Milling investment, a \$241 million investment to construct their new flour milling facility in the hamlet of Springbrook. That was something that used to exist in Saskatchewan, and they chose to build it here in Alberta. I would say that if the private sector is pencilling it out, it's working. We are outpacing other jurisdictions across Canada right now.

I would put our agriprocessing investment tax credit and our overall environment here in Alberta against any other jurisdiction in Canada right now, and we continue to promote it that way. The corporate world: they see it as well, and that's why they're choosing this as the destination for these incredibly large investments. I'm not saying that we don't have to continue to reassess this year over year and take a look at the changes that are happening beside us and to the south as well to make sure that we continue to be the best in North America.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister.

The report also highlights – I hear what you're saying. When I'm talking to the investor community across the province, I mean, there's a ton of interest in investing in agrifood in Alberta. Like, there are people that want to do it. There is a lot of conversation

happening about it, but the one thing that I continuously keep hearing about is capital and, like: how do we have access to capital? This report through RBC is very clear that that is one of the biggest barriers. The report highlighted Phytokana, an Alberta-based company attempting to build 300,000-tonne pulse processing in Strathmore but struggling to secure domestic capital and therefore exploring foreign financing. My question is: on a bigger scale what specific tools or intervention is the ministry considering to ensure that value-added processing projects stay in Alberta rather than shifting their investment and future jobs to foreign jurisdictions?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, of course, we've held a lot of round-tables on this over the past three years talking to the value-added and agriprocessing industry. You have identified that the capital investment gap on the front end is large, and it continues to grow. That is a concern for us as we always want to make sure that we are looking at every opportunity to secure those types of investments.

I can highlight through AFSC that we have our agribusinesses loan. The agribusinesses loan program targets value-added enterprises like our food processors and all other agribusinesses. The loan volume under the agribusinesses loan program to the end of the third quarter 2025-26 was \$32 million, an increase of 167 per cent over the same period in the last fiscal year. Of course, we are looking at those opportunities. We understand that that is a gap, and we are working with AFSC, our lending institution within, to be able to look at every opportunity we can to provide, you know, assistance for them to get off the ground, get those agriprocessing facilities, open, understanding the net benefit to the province for creation of jobs. We're going to continue to find ways to be able to work within our department to shorten that capital gap.

Ms Sweet: Yeah. I appreciate that.

This is the part that I think is really interesting, that we haven't seen an increase in the budget. I appreciate a \$9.4 billion deficit. We have to be smart about where we're spending our money, but we need to look at the ROI. When you say there's a 167 per cent return on what is being done through AFSC and being able to leverage that capital, why are we not looking at an opportunity to build on that fund or that program when it's got such a great return on it?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, I was commenting that we've seen a 167 per cent increase of what people are trying to access. Of course, I do want to just tout that AFSC is doing an incredible job for us. It is the one institution that we have that provides us the ability to deal with issues just like you said, and we are continuing to do that.

Of course, we want to make sure that as we continue to grow in the space, our focus has to be with AFSC working on that lending side, that the lending is self-sustainable and doesn't end up costing taxpayers. That's the number one important thing we have to do. Remember that the changes that we make as far as that risk side of it, assessing, and the growth to this has to be in a manner that we can ensure the sustainability. We look at every opportunity to be able to land these investments here, so we are working within our government to make sure that we are providing as many opportunities to access that capital. That's the best thing we can do for those investors here domestically.

7:30

Ms Sweet: Sorry; to clarify, it wasn't 167.

We're seeing an increase in demand. We're seeing that there's an opportunity for an ROI. I appreciate that we don't want to put the risk on the taxpayer. I totally understand that. What assessment is being done on the dollars that are being used to determine what the

ROI is and how much risk is actually being leveraged for the taxpayer? Are we doing that work?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, I would say that, I mean, as a lending institution the ROI is actualized by the investors themselves. We're trying to provide them the access to the capital and ensure that rates, amortization, and everything else matches up to be able to protect the sustainability of the lending institution that we have.

You know what's great? I have an incredible staff with AFSC that manages these programs extremely well. This is why, of course, we have our CEO Darryl Kay at the table, and Darryl can talk a little bit more to the details related to some of these lending programs and their strategies for the agrivalue and value-added sector.

Please go ahead, Darryl.

Mr. Kay: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MLA, for the question. Maybe where I would start is to say this. Obviously, agribusiness is an important program. You know, we have a significant amount in primary agriculture and supporting succession planning, but we also know that agribusiness is a key piece. It creates jobs, creates investment in the province. In 2021 this government increased our lending limit from \$15 million to \$30 million. What that allowed us to do is to just be part of more conversations. We work with other banks to try to do deals as well.

We're seeing some real success stories over the last couple of years in terms of things like biorefineries, greenhouses, flour mills, plant protein. A number of deals are coming forward. Obviously, we need to do it in a way that's prudent. We are doing that without any funding from the government of Alberta. We're self-sustainable. How we lend that money and our credit department is extremely important. The last thing we do is come forward with a number of losses.

Proud of the work that we're doing in our agribusiness area. We are seeing deals come through. We are creating jobs. Happy to support the government through AFSC.

Mr. Sigurdson: In short, like, I'll just add by saying that we have done an increase, and we're looking at those additional opportunities. Once we're confident that the program is sustainable with that increase in volume, we'll continue to look at opportunities to be able to grow those for those processors to access that capital.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister, and thank you for the answer. I would be curious to see how we're doing the risk analysis on the lending, but I appreciate that we don't have a lot of time for that.

I do want to talk about the growth stage capital cliff. Growth stage investment deal counts fall by about 450 per cent between the early stage and growth stage for companies nationally. It's a major barrier to scaling value-added agrifood companies. Will the minister consider, because I'm all about suggestions, the creation of a growth stage capital tool such as a first loss guarantee, patient capital, subordinate debt, or revenue linked instrument to address this gap and support Alberta companies attempting to commercialize value-added innovation?

Then on top of that, just because I recognize that we've got some time left, the report also highlighted regulatory timelines in Canada. I appreciate that the minister is working with his colleagues in red tape reduction. Have you assessed the regulatory delays impacting investor confidence in Alberta given the fact that Saskatchewan is able to get many of these projects through approvals faster than Alberta is?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. That's why, as I mentioned, as a department we've been working with the industry to have industry led round-

tables to be able to talk about some of the challenges that they're facing in order to continue to not only get started in Alberta and get new projects done but also some of the additional challenges that they're facing as of today. Of course, this creates a lot of conversations within my department. Some of it is within my control; some of it is not. That's why we work collaboratively as a government to be able to address those issues.

You identified the largest one, which is red tape, regulatory burden. Our government has consistently year over year led the country in red tape reduction. That is benefiting businesses in the province to the tune of billions of dollars. We continue to try to look at every opportunity we can to improve the regulatory space. My department is looking at every opportunity to work with those government departments to be able to decrease and set more clear guidelines and targets. I've seen even my colleagues have been moving to strategies like automatic yes, understanding that we're in that competitive space and, if we land the investment, we have to make sure that they can get that business open on time, on schedule, and then as well that when they continue to operate, they can grow and expand as necessary. It is a constant focus. There are many things that are happening every single year, but the number one thing for us is ensuring that the regulatory burden, red tape reduction continues to happen year over year, which we're seeing positive impacts from.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister.

One amazing thing about Alberta is that we actually because of our oil and gas industry have a lot of people interested in investing that money back into the province. It's their thank you for being able to be so successful and trying to find those opportunities. I believe that there's a lot of venture capital that exists, especially in Calgary, and agriculture is a big conversation in Calgary. The problem is that in Canada and globally only 6 per cent of corporate venture capitalists invest in agriculture. I'm curious. I feel like you and I are probably having the same conversations. How do we encourage people that are looking for that opportunity, that want to invest back in Alberta, want to be part of that community – how do we sell that agriculture is the place to invest?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, I think what we're seeing right now, at least from a lot of the investments that have happened here in the province that I think is bringing more to the forefront is – you talked about ROI. With a lot of the current investment that we have in the province right now, those investors are going back to their shareholders and sharing stories to them how their projected ROI of five to 10 years is being met in three. That's really bringing it front and centre as a conversation to venture capitalists about how these investments are returning money at record rates.

I've said it over and over again. My department can probably do my opening speech when I talk about this. I do believe that agriculture is the greatest opportunity to grow and diversify our economy, and we're seeing that right now. The level of investment we're seeing, jobs coming along with that, long-term, high-paying jobs. Of course, with that, internationally I would say that we're seeing a lot of those larger firms that are diversifying their portfolios into agriculture. Agriculture is a growing piece for them, and they're seeing high returns. This is a move that I think has already got a bit of critical mass, a little bit of a momentum that's already happening. No matter where I've travelled, through Japan, South Korea, southeast Asia, right out into the Middle East, we see more and more people that are understanding that a large part of their portfolio should focus around agriculture. Highlighting that is why we continue to travel and do these trips to be able to promote Alberta agriculture.

As well with that, a key piece on why we're seeing massive investment here, and a selling feature that we don't talk about enough, is our irrigation: what we have, the investment in irrigation, the infrastructure that already exists in the province, and, of course, the record \$933 million that we're putting towards irrigation modernization and revitalization. There are very few areas in the world that have as many irrigated acres as we do, and we have the lion's share of the irrigated acres in the entire country and in North America. That's another great selling feature on why people I think are going to continue to see Alberta as the greatest place to invest.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister.

Another opportunity that I think is very interesting is that Saskatchewan actually just lost a multibillion-dollar value-added biofuel facility due to cost and some regulatory uncertainty. Has Alberta reached out to bring that investment here given Alberta's lowest corporate tax environment and agriprocessing tax credit? I'll leave it there because I think we need to have a conversation about biofuel. I'll open it up with that, that I actually think it's a real opportunity for us.

Mr. Sigurdson: I see it as an incredible opportunity as well, and that's why I'm very happy to see that it's through the regulatory environment right now. When we talk about biogas, rimrock, their investment continuing to move forward in what will be one of the largest facilities across Canada, we're seeing more and more interest every single year in biogas. Of course, I went to the Biogas convention this year to have direct conversations with investors and those looking to advance biogas and the facilities here across the country. I learned a lot there about some of the challenges that they're seeing, but you did point out one large one, a bit of the current instability as it relates to trade with our largest partner to the south. That instability has caused some to kind of reassess what those projects' costs are going to be and possible delays due to that. I would say that is definitely a big part of why we're actively engaged in so many conversations within the U.S.

7:40

I really praise our Premier and her leadership to getting down into the U.S. to have those important conversations with decision-makers to be able to make sure that they understand how important the CUSMA agreement is and how not only integrated our food supply chain is through to the U.S. but how integrated our economies are and that if we want to continue to see growth both here and in the U.S., free trade through the CUSMA agreement is a big part of that. I'm sure as we continue ratifying that and moving it on for 16 years, we'll see more security in those projects, many of which are seeing a bit of challenge right now. I'm sure they will be picked up and moved forward.

Our AgriInvest team connects with all these industries, all these businesses, and always looks at every opportunity to have conversations to look at ensuring that they highlight what Alberta has to offer, to seeing if we can overcome some of those challenges and have those projects continue to move forward regardless of the current climate and trade situation.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. I'm just recognizing we've already – you and I chat a lot.

Let's move on to our other topic that I had hoped that you and I could get to. We'll reference business page 21, outcome 2, essential support in delivering world-class research and knowledge transfer to power the productivity, sustainability of Alberta's agriculture. Furthering initiatives supporting key objective outcome 2 include WCI, crop investment centres, RDAR, et cetera, et cetera.

Alberta's agriculture sector delivers one of the strongest economic returns of any industry, and recent studies show just how much value the province is leaving on the table for Budget 2026. Independent research commissions found that every dollar invested in Alberta's crop research generates about \$3.80 in economic value, reflecting gains from higher performing varieties, better agronomics, and long-term productivity improvements. Beyond this direct return, research dollars act as a powerful leverage. Each dollar invested in variety development attracts \$1.80 in partner funding while every dollar invested in agronomic research draws about \$4.30 in co-investment, multiplying the impact of provincial dollars many times over and stretching every public dollar far further than almost any other sector in our economy. This would include RDAR. Secured continuity for research in long-run databases represents not just program cuts but long economic opportunities, foregone growth, foregone innovation, foregone private and federal dollars that we could be capturing. When a sector reliably returns nearly \$4 for every \$1 invested, choosing not to invest in research is an economic loss.

With that in mind, Minister, let's talk about Lacombe for a bit. I've given you your message box. Please take it to the federal government. Obviously, there are some serious concerns going on, and I think you and I agree about what's happening in Lacombe. I'm just wondering what assessments your ministry has conducted on an economic and community basis for community impact on the loss of the potential workforce and what supports you're thinking about providing to affected employees and their families.

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, this is very fresh and emerging. This is just within weeks of the federal budget and this announcement that we've been looking at as a department. Of course, the federal government struck a committee. I had the opportunity to speak at committee about the impacts of both the work that's happening there in the crop side and the abattoir, some of the critical things that are going on there that are just not happening at any other research facility across all of western Canada. We talked about variety registration and the importance of the research happening there.

I've met with the county as well, Lacombe county, and had a conversation about the 116 jobs that are currently there and what the future of that means. Also, they shared with me what they believe is the overall impact to them, which is deeply concerning. Of course, you know, the conversation now is going to really stem on what the federal government as a result of this committee work is going to come back to the table. I was very clear to them about our concerns. I expressed to them very similar, the returns on every research dollar made. That's why I'm extremely proud about the work that RDAR is doing not only with the \$41.6 million that they got last year but also that, in leveraging that \$41.6 million, they're getting \$3.2 million on average back through cofunders, collaborators, and industry partners. So that \$41.6 million is really three times that or over three times that of investment through the real great work that RDAR doing.

Now, Lacombe facility: the final decision will be made by the federal government, but I was clear that I asked for them to come back to the table, to meet with the province, actually all provinces that are going to experience closures of research facilities, and that a clear economic impact assessment was done and a direct conversation was to be had with that province to make sure that the research, the essential research, is happening, continues to happen, understanding that it's the key to the success, the future success, of the agricultural industry.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. So the facility has been open since 1907, so it holds more than a century's worth of data research. It has some of our specialty seeds. It has a variety of different things. It is also an expensive building, which I appreciate. I appreciate that the federal government is saying that the operating costs of that building are extremely high and that carrying those costs may be part of the problem. What I'm wondering: is there an opportunity, knowing that we have a facility across the street, to move some of that work, not the abattoir, not some of the stuff that we know has to stay there, but some of the others across the street? And is there a way to negotiate with the feds to get them to help offset some of those costs?

Mr. Sigurdson: Absolutely. I would hope so. That was my request, and I really want to get them back to the table so we can have exactly this conversation. I think it's a great chance for us to highlight the creative and innovative things that we're doing here. Of course, in my opening notes you heard me speak about the collaboration with the county of Newell right now for the revitalization of CDC South. WCI has moved into a corporation on its own, a partnership with the government.

We are creating made-in-Alberta solutions for the future of research and the sustainability of the sector to make sure that when we look at fluctuating governmental budgets, it doesn't impact as much when it comes to the research side and trying to provide innovative, new, collaborative ways to be able to have more of a co-operative approach to these research facilities to ensure their sustainability and longevity and make sure that they don't end up being the first budget line item that somebody wants to decrease when the government isn't seeing the revenues or a struggled year.

So yeah, I definitely want to get the federal government back to the table to look at the possibilities, understanding, of course, that I want to make sure they are a partner in this. They have to be. The agriculture is important to the entire country, and I would expect that the federal government steps up to the plate and is a contributing, meaningful partner in a meaningful way to make sure that this type of research continues. As a province we've shown our commitment and our ongoing commitment to be able to continue to have meaningful research happen here in the province of Alberta.

I do want to boast about RDAR just a little bit. Just on that, we talked about the \$41.6 million, \$3.2 million leverage. We can talk about just the impact: 67 best management practices adopted or products in development, 31 projects increasing private investment in Alberta, 56 new jobs created in RDAR-supported projects, 55 – fifty-five – new crop varieties seeded, and 73 producers' public and private partnerships. This is incredibly important, and what we're seeing with these new innovative models like RDAR is that they are far earlier adoption and with this producer-led co-operative that is happening right now, it's become an incubator where we're seeing that research being actualized at the farm gate quicker, faster, and adopted extremely quickly. These are the things that we want to continue to support.

7:50

Of course, the Lacombe facility is essential for the province, and I am calling on the federal government to come back to the table so we can have a very important conversation to make sure that they understand the economic loss of that research and that we find a pathway forward. This is what the industry needs. This is what our farmers and ranchers expect from us, to be able to continue to support this type of research.

Actually, as an overlap, I do believe RDAR has five research projects – three or five, I think; okay, three – that are happening within this facility as well right now, so RDAR has a vested interest

as well in the future of this facility with some of the current project-based research that they're doing.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. I think you might be right: six major ones, but I think there are 13 projects that are somehow attached to Lacombe in some way, and I think that's the question, too, that I'm hearing from folks. It's all rumours, right? So everybody's kind of like: what are we actually hearing? The question that's come up often to me is: what's happening with the land for this season? My understanding is that the feds have agreed that they're going to continue for this year, or is that still not decided yet for the crop production?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. Listen, we got the chance to present at committee. This is completely and wholly in the hands of the federal government, and we're looking for expediency to be able to come to a decision to protect the research. We've made on that call. I'll continue to express the concerns of the industry and the necessity for this to continue, but unfortunately, I mean, I haven't been given any timelines from the federal government at this point other than the fact that it's currently sitting within committee. I do think they're done with presentations and that they're looking for deliberation and then submitting what their response is to that input that they received.

Ms Sweet: So we don't actually have a timeline?

Mr. Sigurdson: Not that I'm aware of.

Ms Sweet: Okay. Thank you.

You had mentioned CUSMA, so let's chat a little bit about what that is going to look like. Obviously, CUSMA is open to be negotiated over the next little bit. The President of the United States has made many comments in regard to what he thinks is going to happen or could happen. Supply chain and supply management has come up a couple of times. It has been discussed for a variety of other things.

The U.S. accounts for about 70 per cent of Canadian beef and livestock exports. The Canadian-U.S. beef industry functions as a single integrated North American market with cattle and feed crossing the border daily in both directions, as you would know. There is concern that Alberta cannot economically withstand a U.S. cattle beef tariff, especially with the scheduled CUSMA review in 2026, so my question to you is: what are you bringing to the CUSMA negotiation, and what kind of conversations are you having in regard to our beef industry?

Mr. Sigurdson: We're taking every opportunity to – first of all, very early on at the point in which the federal government was wound up in the election, we immediately headed to the U.S. and started having conversations with decision-makers in the U.S. to make sure they understood how integrated our food supply chain is across North America. I know you made a comment about the fact that our beef industry couldn't withstand a tariff situation with the U.S. Arguably the U.S. beef industry cannot withstand a tariff situation, and we've heard that loud and clear from the industry in the U.S.

Of course, I had the opportunity to be the Canadian lead at the NASDA convention in Arlington to be able to have conversations, which was very well attended from secretaries of agriculture from many states across the U.S. Then again we just had a recent NASDA convention in Morelia, Mexico as well, having a lot of bilateral meetings both with Mexico and the U.S., and the focus of the U.S. bilat that we had with the Canadian representatives that were down there was solely on CUSMA.

I can tell you that secretaries of agriculture from every state that I have met are 100 per cent in support of CUSMA, understanding how it is in the best interest of not just Canadians; it's in the best interest of U.S. citizens, not just for food security but also for food affordability. So we understand how this would impact Canada. They understand, very much so, how this would impact them domestically in the U.S. as it relates to food security and food affordability. We have to continue to support that message and make sure that we put that front and centre. I would say that with the understanding that we're seeing and the agreements that we're seeing from many states in the U.S., our hope is that that message will continue to echo up through the White House and that the CUSMA agreement will continue on in its form for another 16 years and that it's ratified after review this year.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. Let's chat a little bit about the AgriStability cap. The cap remains unchanged for the last 20 years, still paid in part by the federal government. It had a temporary increase to \$6 million in 2025. Obviously, rising input costs mean that AgriStability now covers only about 8 per cent of allowable expenses, down from the 24 per cent in 2023. This is an MMP report, not my numbers. Large Alberta feedlots hit the cap very quickly, while producers are exposed to multimillion-dollar losses during market shock, trade disputes, and disease events.

I understand that the BRMs are also being negotiated. You've got a lot of negotiations going on: CUSMA, BRMs, all of the things. Can you tell us what the negotiations are looking like when we're talking about an adjustment to the BRM models and the federal government compensation adjustments?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, I would say that they've been positive. Of course, in Alberta we're leading a lot of the work when it comes to the changes with our BRMs. We've made some changes to improve MDI for timeliness of payment. It's now going out monthly. We had a, you know, high heat limit. We've been successful in making a lot of changes that are improving our BRM programs as feedback that we hear from farmers and ranchers all the time.

AgriStability: very proud of the work that we did in holding a pilot here, understanding that we had heard over and over again that AgriStability works for some but doesn't work for others, and because of that pilot the allowable expenses has changed. Of course, we advocated. We got it to the table on the FPT. We got an agreement, which you have to do to get these changes. The majority of farm cash receipts need to be outside from your provincial colleagues before you get to be able to get the federal government to take a look and agree to it. Of course, now you're looking at a better option for the feed inventory valuation method using P2 pricing that better reflects real market conditions, of course, recognizing pasture rent for grazing as an allowable expense. We're continually having conversations on how we improve these programs.

Of course, I've heard about the cap. We are having that discussion, but as I mentioned, understand that this is not the minister of agriculture of Alberta who gets to make that decision. This is a discussion with all of our provincial and federal counterparts to be able to come to an agreement to make those changes. But we definitely take that feedback to the table, and we look at every opportunity to improve our BRMs understanding that they are critical to the future of the agricultural industry, for the sustainability of our industry. You know, we're going to continue to engage on this level to see what we can do to improve every program that we have.

Of course, AFSC is looking at everything within their control as far as timeliness of payments, additional options for how they

assess crops. We have new success stories with drone technology that is, you know, assessing crops more accurately and quickly. We are utilizing every tool within our control to be able to improve these programs as well as having conversations for the broader extent of how we continue to deliver the programs on a federal level as far as caps, understanding that we have seen changes in the past that are improving. But there are still other areas that we can continue to improve.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. One of the requests that has also been made is that there be a five-year review on an ongoing basis. So every five years we would do the evaluation. We would look at that. Given the fact that there has been such a long time in having these conversations, are you looking at advocating for those requests for a mandatory five-year review?

8:00

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, listen, the sustainable Canadian agricultural partnership is every five years, of course. The current \$508 million that we have towards SCAP right now, as we're looking at the next policy framework, that's one of the major negotiations that we have ongoing with the federal government currently, understanding the importance of SCAP to farmers and ranchers and support.

When it comes to BRMs, I would say that we have to keep that on the table constantly. My approach when it comes to business risk management programs: of course there's going to be a mandatory five-year review and that's where a lot of the major changes will happen. My position with the federal government is that BRMs and improvements should be on the table every time we meet. Every chance that we have to be able to have the discussion, work with our provincial counterparts, understanding the ever-changing conditions within the agricultural industry, it has to be front and centre, and we have to be able to make adjustments to those programs when necessary, including stepping in when we do see disasters, which we have seen in recent years as it relates to drought.

We're using a lot of what we have seen from those drought years also to have deeper conversations about how BRM programs, when structured appropriately, could move us away from having to do ad hoc recovery programs and that we need to be able to make those adjustments to make sure that the BRMs are there for producers if they choose them, understanding they can be the key to overcoming those tough years.

Arguably, it's not if they're going to happen, it's just when. I would say that all of our AFSC BRM programs are to a net benefit of our producers, and they make sure that our farmers and ranchers can continue to do what they do, which is feed families here and abroad every year.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. As we continue to talk about BRMs and the fact that it is a shared cost between the federal government and the provincial government, when I look at your budget, you have decreased the contingency fund in relation to payout. But as you just said, it's not a matter of if; it's when. Why are we decreasing a contingency fund – I know the practice is to use a contingency fund to pay out BRM. I guess the question that's coming from many producer groups is: why don't we have a guaranteed line item so that they know that there is a guarantee there and that it's not just going to be, well, maybe the money will be there because it's in contingency. Contingency funds are very volatile in the sense of what can be pulled out of them, and producer groups are wondering why there isn't – we've seen it year after year after year – a dedicated commitment to also show and demonstrate what is actually being paid on an annual basis?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. Very similar to when this question was asked to me, of course. Those line items, though they're reported in my budget, are set by Treasury Board and Finance. If you're looking for changes as it relates to that, that would be a line item that you'd have to address on how they break that up.

What I can say is this. This is the most important piece to understand. Business risk management programs are a statutory payment. To the farmers and ranchers out there, you will always get your crop insurance. You will always get paid out. That is the message that we need to continue to put out there. When it comes to some of the line items and how it's broken down in a budget or whether we actually try to guess at what's going to be paid out or whether we used the contingency in the past, arguably, what I could say is that the manner in which we've been reporting and delivering BRM programs works.

The money is always there for our farmers and ranchers every year, and it'll continue to be there every single year. If you want to take a look at how that's reported as overall line items issued by Treasury Board and Finance, like I said, you'd have to direct that to them on how they do those actuarials and reportable figures that end up being those line items that relate to and transfer over into my budget.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. I guess it's good that I'm going to see him tomorrow.

Another question that comes up often is an emphasis on reactive rather than proactive risk management. Historically, much of Alberta's agriculture spending related to disaster events is focused on post-event financial supports rather than proactive risk mitigation. Budget 2026 does little to shift this. From a grain producer's perspective the most effective risk management strategy is investment in preventative measures, so expanding soil moisture monitoring networks, improving irrigation planning tools, enhancing crop insurance designs, and agronomic research focused on climate resiliency. Without stronger investments in these mitigations producers remain heavily reliant on reactive compensation versus proactive compensation. The question is: why are we continuously being reactive instead of proactive?

Mr. Sigurdson: I would argue that we're not. When you talk at all of the proactive things that you just listed, those are all actively happening in the province of Alberta right now. This is a big part of our sustainable Canadian agricultural partnership with the federal government on some of the programs that we're seeing, to be able to build a resiliency. Of course, we've already talked about some of the things that we're doing to be able to improve BRMs as far as timeliness of payouts that also deal with that, that I think is very proactive, and we've heard.

Let's talk about RALP. Let's talk about, you know, how that improves soil health and protects from drought in the future. This is an incredibly popular program that we have through SCAP. We've seen a lot of positive results as a part of that. A lot of the research that RDAR is doing right now relates exactly to improving soil health, quality, moisture retention. When we talk about our \$933 million for irrigation, it's not just about expanding irrigation; it's about modernization and technology, moving from open canals to piping so we have less evaporation and loss of water. All of this is a proactive approach, understanding that we need to learn from the lessons that we've had.

Like, I could run down a list on all the proactive things, I mean, even including the AgriInsurance beneficial management practices pilot. A pilot project which will link soil or granite carbon levels to crop insurance premiums for wheat is under way. This is the type of work that's happening. It's actually why I think we continue to

need to talk about agriculture more and more. It's such a diverse industry, and there is so much going on within the province right now.

But our farmers and ranchers, the number one thing that they know as the key to their success and profitability is soil health and moisture management, and these are conversations that we have every single day. The research is leading in that direction. The supports are leading in it. AFSC is looking at possibilities to link many of their BRM programs to that. It's a direct conversation in the next policy framework for SCAP, how we continue to build flexibility within that policy framework to be able to address these issues, understanding this is what the industry expects and what they want, and how they want to direct their dollars is to those exact investments.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Minister. One of the things that actually has come up, and I hope you're aware of this, that the Alberta Water Council lost all of its funding, and they were notified that in 90 days they will no longer have staff. The Alberta Water Council's responsibility was to bring everybody together and come up and be able to deal with the water strategy. I guess the curiosity that is coming from many producers is that the intent of water for life was being monitored and supported through the Alberta Water Council. Given that part of your ministry is irrigation and water and dams and reservoirs and all of the things, how are you ensuring that there's a collaboration with irrigation, air quality, reuse, drought pressurizing, all of those sorts of things that Alberta Water Council was responsible for that now no longer exists?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, I mean, remember: when it comes directly to water, that's always under Environment and Protected Areas. I'm in charge of the infrastructure, management, and maintenance of the infrastructure that relates to that. What I would say is that, when we talk about the management of water, our irrigation districts are incredible. What they do is amazing. For decades they've been managing water within the province. We meet with AIDA constantly to be able to have conversations about water management across, you know, our larger irrigation districts to the south, and definitely our department is always working on innovative ways to look at how we manage our reservoirs and dams better and drive additional efficiencies every single year. I can tell you through my department we are working with an additional \$5 million on water feasibility studies to be able to understand what opportunities there are as well to grow and expand water storage as a critical key to the future.

8:10

Listen, it's always an important conversation, but if you're asking me as the minister of agriculture, to be clear, our irrigation districts working with our municipalities and my department are doing a great job of being able to manage what's under their control. When it comes to my department with the investments under infrastructure, we'll make sure that we have a strategic plan that aligns and fits with a lot of the pressures that we've seen. Understanding that we need to strengthen our irrigation districts, we need to make sure that we're getting the proper dollars towards maintenance and operation of our dams, and we're looking at every opportunity as it relates to storage, of which we have many projects right now through the IMP but, as well, additional feasibility studies that are happening right now for building more water storage.

To date – I'll just update – 57 modernization projects have been substantially completed so far under the IMP. Thirty projects are in progress and three reservoir projects are in the early stages of development, moving forward right now. That's an incredibly

substantial commitment this government has made, and we're looking forward to getting these projects done as quickly as possible.

Ms Sweet: All those investments and all those projects are great, but the Alberta Water Council is about bringing everybody in industry, all industries, not just agriculture, but oil and gas, everybody into the room together to negotiate water licences, to talk about the use of water, to do all of those things. We can build all the infrastructure that we want, but people have to share.

The fact that the AWC has been defunded – it's not under your ministry, and that's fine. But, like, take it to cabinet, and tell your colleagues that it's actually a very vital and important part of this whole network of conversations. The producer groups are concerned that they're not going to be able to have that ability to have those conversations. It's a real issue. It doesn't matter if it sits with a different minister. The government of Alberta is the government of Alberta, and this is the one time where I can't just say like that's fine, go talk to someone else. Groups are concerned about not being able to have this group to come together and have these conversations, and they were given, like, zero notice. Ninety days is not enough to be able to come up with a plan to address the issue.

I will, however, because I've only got 2 minutes, move on to something else because I have a proposition and an idea that I would like you to consider. Obviously, the Richardson's ground squirrel issue is a real problem for our crop producers. Recognizing the federal government has obviously decided that they're going to manage pest management their own way and don't really understand our Richardson's ground squirrels, I have two questions. One is an offer. One is a question. What steps is the ministry taking to support farmers dealing with increased Richardson's ground squirrels infestation, and how is the government advocating to the federal government regarding the restriction of controlled products and availability of safe alternatives for producers?

Then the second part, which is my offer and question that I would like you to consider: given the crop losses caused by Richardson's ground squirrels are not currently eligible under the wildlife damage compensation program administered by AFSC, will the Alberta government work with the federal government to expand eligibility under this program to include damage caused by ground squirrels, recognizing that the program is federally funded and intended to support producers facing wildlife-related crop losses? The reason I'm saying this, Minister, is I think it's a help to you. You will then be able to track it and be able to go back to the feds and be like: this was a bad decision; also, here's the data. Right now we don't have data. It's all kind of based on farmers' reporting.

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. We lean on our ag field men and our farmers for a lot of our crop reporting though. I would say that we know this is an issue. That's why we went for an emergency use reregistration on October 1, 2025. I went directly to the federal government explaining that what we've seen since the ban of 2 per cent strychnine in just a short three years has moved this province into a state of emergency. I do have in my office water lines, irrigation lines that were damaged due to the overpopulation and, even more concerning, gas lines that have been damaged so bad that now we're talking about a safety issue. We've seen an overpopulation in areas that is actually affecting our native grassland in a manner that is deeply concerning, understanding how we just can't replace native grassland.

I do want to comment and make sure our farmers ranchers understand that, when it comes to production loss on crops, that is

still applicable. That's still insurance. If a farmer has production insurance on their crop and there are damages and they see that production loss, that is covered.

The Chair: Well, thank you, Minister, and thank you, Member, for the questions. Just a reminder that debate flows through the chair at all times.

With that, we'll move to the government portion, and you will now have 20 minutes with the member and the minister. Member Wright, you're up first. Would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Wright: Very much so.

Mr. Sigurdson: That works for me, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

You may proceed, Member Wright.

Mr. Wright: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and through you to the minister. Minister, I'm going to be focusing on page 21 of the business plan for the \$2.3 million for marketing capacity growth on our beef producer SMEs. You know, Alberta's beef industry is not just an anchor of our ag economy, but it's a globally recognized brand that represents quality, trust, and world-class production standards. I often talk about that oil and gas may be the backbone of our economy, but really the heart and soul of this province is in our ag industry. With representing a southern Alberta riding, we have some of the largest cattle herds in the entire country down in southern Alberta, and our beef industry becomes more and more prevalent down there with regard to size of the producers, whether it's small, medium, or large producers.

Now, on page 21 of the business plan the ministry commits \$2.3 million to support small and medium-sized processors and new entrants into the beef value chain by helping them navigate regulatory frameworks, improve business development capacity, and strengthen both domestic and international sales. This investment speaks directly to maintaining Alberta's leadership as an agrifood manufacturer and ensuring our beef sector remains competitive at home and abroad.

Through the chair, can the minister please explain how this \$2.3 million investment will support small and medium-sized beef producers, particularly when it comes to navigating regulatory requirements and accessing new market opportunities? Minister, can you also explain how the funding will help new entrants establish themselves in the red meat processing sector and what kinds of business development tools or technical support will be available to them? Kind of on that last question, finally, how will this initiative strengthen Alberta's reputation as a top-tier brand producer globally, and what economic development benefits does the ministry expect from enhancing processing capabilities and expanding market access?

Mr. Sigurdson: I definitely thank you for that question. It's always a great time to say that in my time as minister over the last three years travelling this globe, we do have the best beef in the world with the highest food safety and quality standards, and that is well known. This is not something that I have to explain to a lot of our importers and exporters globally. They recognize this. This has been generations of effort by our beef producers put into their herds as well as a commitment by the government to ensuring that the quality and safety standards that we have are world leading. That really is what sets us apart and why we're a trusted partner when it comes to supplying beef.

We recognize this, so of course this \$2.3 million in investment is going to be delivered as \$780,000 per year over three years, as approved in Budget 2025. It strengthens support, as you had mentioned, for small and medium meat processors, particularly in business development and food safety. Like I said, of course, when you look at business development, it's about marketing and being able to provide that support and making sure that they have the support navigating the regulatory environment. Of course, we want to make sure that the food safety is also being a very large part of our key and success as an international trading partner. It's very important we support there.

This is six full-time positions. With that, to be able to assist, they'll be providing hands-on guidance to help processors navigate, as I mentioned, the regulatory requirements, look at any kind of compliance issues they're having and solutions to that. One of the things that I think will be well received is, of course, access to new and emerging markets while also within that ensuring that we continue to have the strongest inspection and investigative capacity to protect our food supply chain and maintain that confidence in our world-class meat products.

8:20

This is the money that we're putting towards this, understanding, of course, that beef is our largest agrifood export, and we want to make sure that we support small and medium producers within that to be able to continue to grow and grow with the industry as we continue to see global demand grow.

Mr. Wright: Well, thank you for that, Minister, through the chair. Transitioning a little bit here on the ag file side, you know, something else that's a really big industry for my community and my region is around greenhouses. We have some of the largest greenhouse producers in the entire country. Redcliff, which is just a hop, skip, and a jump from Medicine Hat, is the largest greenhouse producer on the prairies. There are so many that are set up there. We've got Big Marble Farms, a number of different independent growers.

You know, in the initiatives under page 19 there's \$10 million to build food sovereignty. Now, there have been many challenges in market access across all of our products in recent years. Our relationship with some of our largest trading partners like the U.S. and China has been a bit unstable, to say the least, and with the introduction of tariffs by both countries, some of which have thankfully been removed so far, expanding market access and maintaining predictable trade is essential, but it is only one way that we will address these challenges. There's still a need for us to invest in local producers to ensure that our province sees our own success moving forward. Alberta needs food security and resiliency systems in place so that we can be confident in weathering any future storms.

Growing opportunity for Alberta to build food sovereignty is through building greenhouses right here within the province. Looking at page 19 of the business plan, there are initiatives supporting key objectives. I see there is a new growing greenhouse program, which invests \$10 million to develop Alberta's greenhouse sector. Minister, can you outline how this program will operate? As well, how can we expand this benefit to attracting investment? And then, lastly on this piece, how does this program tie into food security, affordability, and resiliency to ensure that we are producing what we eat, consume here locally?

You know, I'm always very excited when I can even go into the Costcos up here and see Big Marble greenhouse cucumbers and tomatoes, knowing that that greenhouse is producing absolutely some of the best product you can find anywhere, and it's a short 15

minutes from my house. It's just that sense of pride that wherever you go across the province, you can see a little bit of home with you.

I'll turn those over to you, Minister.

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, a very exciting program. I mean, we heard a lot of support for taking a look at a program that would continue to build on localized food production. Of course, I've toured a lot of greenhouses across the province. Right now we have 195 greenhouses currently in the province. They're generating \$145 million in produce; 60 per cent of those are operating year-round. Greenhouse food production right now is growing by 6.2 per cent annually. We also noticed that Alberta's greenhouse sector ranks fourth in Canada, and we understood that we could probably put some programs in place to be able to assist for us to continue to grow in this space.

The program was developed with advice directly from the Alberta Greenhouse Growers Association, so it reflects the sector needs and focuses on those practical barriers that they expressed to us that were a bit of an issue to expansion. The program provides cost-shared funding that supports new builds, expansions of vertical farming facilities that produce food at a commercial scale, strengthening the foundation right here in the province for year-round production. As well, it supports modern production technologies such as energy-efficiency systems, advanced lightings, automations. These were continued things we heard over and over that we needed to support as well for existing greenhouse producers. The program was launched in 2025 under the sustainable Canadian ag partnership, aligning greenhouse growth with the broader sector competitiveness and resiliency priorities, understanding that as we've seen and experienced those volatilities and we continue to have conversations about food affordability, continuing to increase production is a key to that.

We increase the supply to keep up with demand. That's how we're going to be best partners in combatting food inflationary costs and providing additional opportunities to stabilize and lower – I mean, arguably, one of the biggest costs right now as it relates to food in our grocery stores is the cost of shipping and logistics to move that food around. As we continue to expand and get more localized food production, that's assisting with some of the cost pressures we see on food in our grocery stores. It's an initiative for us to be able to push back on food inflation, increase food security, and support local jobs here at home. So very excited about the greenhouse program.

Mr. Wright: Well, thank you, through the chair, for that.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to cede the remainder of the time to Member de Jonge.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Member de Jonge, go ahead.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Chair. All right. I was wondering if you're going to prompt me to say something. Thank you so much for being here, Minister, to your deputy and to your other department officials. Really appreciate the important work you do on behalf of Alberta agriculture. Love the conversation about greenhouses. As you know, I grew up on a farm. My dad had greenhouses, and they made me pick cherry tomatoes at 6 a.m. on my weekends. Actually, it was a great childhood. I loved it.

I want to chat about a key objective 1.2 in your business plan and chat a bit about agriprocessors. You talked a bit about this earlier already. I think over the last few years we've learned some very valuable lessons about food sovereignty and food security and, you know, really, lessons that we've learned globally. I know we've got

some amazing success stories right here at home and a great story to tell about agriprocessors investing right here in our province.

While you talked about this earlier with, you know, the member opposite, your critic – I really enjoyed that discussion – I'm wondering if you can expand on the work that you've done to promote Alberta and ensure it's the best place for agriprocessors to invest. Can you, in particular, expand on what steps are going to be taken by your ministry to ensure that what's on our plates and what we're eating here in the province is grown and produced right here at home? Finally, can you provide some specific examples of success stories of Alberta's government attracting agriprocessors to invest here in Alberta?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well thank you, MLA de Jonge. You're right in the centre of agriculture in Alberta down in your riding, as many rural MLAs are. I've had the opportunity to tour a lot of greenhouses. Very excited about that program, though I will say that bees do scare me a little bit when they're all over you in those greenhouses. My deputy minister will admit that it is my one fear, so we can all have a laugh about that later.

When we talk about agriprocessing investment, so critically important, a conversation that we've had for a long time in this province. With the initiatives put forward with the agriprocessing investment tax credit in combination with our government initiatives of lowering red tape, lowest corporate tax, you know, no provincial sales tax, high quality of living, low cost of living, we're attracting these major investments in the province right now, something that I find incredibly exciting. We're seeing a critical mass. We really are a beacon for this type of investment, and what that means for our producers here is exponential. As you mentioned, it gives them an additional sales source so they're not just looking at selling some of their commodities straight to an elevator. It gives them an additional outlet.

I mean, one prime example of that is Imperial Oil's \$720 million investment in biodiesel facility expansion in which Imperial was very clear in saying that 80 per cent of what they procure would be here from the province. You know, the opportunity is for our canola producers to have that additional outlet for sale.

8:30

We can talk about Parrish & Heimbecker Milling, \$240 million investment for a flour mill. We have G.S. Dunn Ltd.'s \$30 million investment in a mustard facility, Saputo's \$38 million investment in upgrading its Edmonton milk plant. We have Canary Biofuels, an \$18 million investment in a cold press oil seed crushing plant. We got Beretta Farms, a \$10.9 million investment to expand its Lacombe facility with additional warehousing and cooler space boosting their capacity; Little Potato Company just south of Edmonton here, a \$39.5 million expansion of its Nisku facility; DIW Buildings and Land Corporation, a \$73.7 million investment to construct Canada's first milk concentration facility in Blackfalds. I was there for the grand opening. What an incredible success story for us to be able to ship here in the province. JBS Food has announced a \$90 million investment for a new patty processing plant. These are highlights of the type of investments and the amount of investments and the sheer value of the investments that are coming here to the province of Alberta.

All my trade missions that I do internationally are about promoting Alberta agriculture and looking at every opportunity to continue to leverage those conversations into additional investment in the province, and we're seeing a high level right now. It's unparalleled to what we've seen historically. Our AgriInvest team is hitting their benchmark and far surpassing it every single year. As I mentioned, since the inception of the agriprocessing

investment tax credit, we have a little over \$4.4 billion in interest, 1.6 done, over 2,000 jobs created. This is a huge success story into the type of investment and job creation and what we're seeing in the agriproduction space right now.

The best part for me when we have these conversations is that these investments are creating long-term, high-paying jobs in rural Alberta and supporting rural communities, which is an incredible key to the success of rural revitalization as well as supporting our communities all across Alberta. I'm very excited about the work that's happening right now. We want to continue to be at the forefront.

Our trade missions we do as well: we take all of the input we hear on those trade missions. We come back. We take all of that information that we've heard internationally both on the investment side to be able to communicate to our AgriInvest team and on the competitiveness side to take a look at what we need to do better here in Alberta, understanding that these are globally traded commodities. We're not the only ones trading these commodities, and we have to continue to come up with strategies that keep us at the forefront of global competitiveness.

Also why we have to have a deeper conversation here as a country to be able to get the federal government to come to the table and have that very important conversation on how we're going to strategize to make sure that – we have the potential to grow our agricultural industry here exponentially in the province. We want to also make sure the federal government is at the table to have the conversation about what's going to be required as far as shipping logistics, port, rail, in order to be able to facilitate that type of growth, understanding that – flat out I'll say it – we've got the highest-grade commodities in the world, we have the highest-grade protein in the world, and we have to make sure that, you know, we have the ability to be able to get that to port and access, understanding that we're a net exporting province. The bulk of what we produce is shipped internationally. Whether it be to the U.S. or elsewhere, we have to make sure that opportunity is there for our producers and processors.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Minister.

One of the ways that our ag industry grows is through R and D. I don't think people realize how much technology is used in the ag sector and how much innovation there is. A lot of people don't know that throughout high school I worked on a dairy farm. I milked cows, and there are a lot of really neat technologies that are used in dairy parlours and used in that particular industry. It was really neat to be part of it. It's important that as a province we're investing in agricultural research to improve efficiency, to support our farmers and our producers, and to ensure that, you know, to your point, we remain a leader in global food production. On page 21 of your business plan it talks about this. It mentions that there's \$2.2 million in funding allocated to WCI, Western Crop Innovations. They're a key partner in that ongoing research in Alberta. I don't think we're going to have enough time for you to address the actual question, but maybe I'll just leave it as emphasizing that investing in ag R and D is really important.

The Chair: Thank you, Member and Minister. That concludes the government members' first block of questions.

Just a reminder: we will take our break in about 10 minutes, after we start our second round of questioning.

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

begin this rotation with members of the Official Opposition, who will have up to five minutes of questions and comments, followed by a response from the minister, who may also take up to five minutes. After both individuals have had an opportunity to speak once, we will then move to the government caucus in the rotation. If members and the minister agree to share time, we will proceed with a 10-minute segment during which time neither member or minister may speak for more than five minutes at a time. Members are reminded that they may not share any unused portion of their five minutes with another member.

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

Member Eremenko: Mr. Chair, I believe Member Calahoo Stonehouse . . .

The Chair: Oh, sorry. Member Calahoo Stonehouse.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Yes. I would like to share time if that works for the minister.

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. That's amenable, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Member Stonehouse, you may proceed.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Chair. The fiscal plan's economic outlook for beef on page 33 notes that one of the ongoing policy challenges with the United States of America is the product of U.S. meat labelling rule, potentially reducing demand for Alberta meat and livestock. While a key spending objective for the ministry business plan on page 21 allocates \$2.3 million to the beef industry for, one, regulatory navigation for processors and, two, tech support to boost international sales on Alberta's beef-strong reputation, I'm curious. Through the chair to the minister: how does this spending break down per initiative? Is the \$2.3 million enough to make a difference against the American labelling rules? What kind of tech support is leading the industry currently? Which is delivered? Could it bolster Alberta's reputation globally? But more specifically, I'm curious about the United States.

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. One thing I am going to point out right now is that we're going to continue to make sure that we find ways to support our beef industry on a competitiveness level when we're taking a look at the global space. I do have to say this. Right now the demand has never been higher for beef. That's why you're seeing the reflection. I mean, the demand is very high, and the supply, unfortunately, is lower than we would like to see. Now, that's a combination, too, of a couple of different factors as it relates to a couple of drought years and a lower than what we'd like to see native cow-calf herd but also an emerging screwworm outbreak in southern Mexico that has isolated millions of head that would normally be a supply into the U.S., which has shifted demand back up here into Canada. Listen, that's just a comment on the supply and demand side that I want to get on the table.

Because of that we're seeing the higher than normal pricing. Now, this is one of the ones where you can kind of take a look at our cow-calf industry that is holding back heifers at records we haven't kind of seen in quite some time. That's a positive sign as it relates to the industry growth. As well, we see our cow-calf sector and our feeder sector making major investments, too, to grow. With that, we want to be able to have a conversation about our small-medium. I mean, that is a key to the success, making sure that we have opportunities for not just the big players but the small and medium producers, so this is really kind of where this is targeted at.

8:40

Like I said, it's going to be three years, \$780,000. It supplies six full-time employees to address regulatory requirements, compliance, take a look at market opportunities, and, of course, always making sure that we're strengthening our food safety and security through investigations. To be clear, our department always goes out and works on and always has done education and making sure that they're working with our processors to improve, making sure that we understand that our food safety standards are the highest in the world and are a key part of why our beef and other proteins are very marketable around the world, and we want to make sure we maintain that. Based on a lot of that growth and demand, we felt it was pertinent to be able to put this money in those buckets to be able to assist small, medium producers and continue to make sure that we provide them the support and allow them that opportunity to be able to grow as we're seeing that growth in demand.

The labelling in the U.S.: understand that that's only a voluntary labelling. The U.S. lost a challenge under the WTO. They lost a challenge when they were going to a mandatory labelling, so they've done a voluntary labelling program. We haven't seen a high uptake of that in the U.S., not to the levels that I think are concerning. When I continue to go to NASDA, where we have a high participation of state secretaries of agriculture, this is where we continue to have the conversation about how integrated our beef industry is north-south and have conversations about the fact that when it comes down to creating additional barriers for market access, it's not in the best interest of consumers.

We have such an integrated supply chain that when I look at it, I look at the beef industry as being a very integrated system all the way from here into Mexico. We need to treat it as such, and that relates to everything from food security, safety, trade, foreign animal disease. That's how we approach these conversations because that's what I think Canadians expect, that we should always have a lens of ensuring food safety and security and that every position that we take as it relates to trade and as it relates to foreign animal disease is going to protect the industry and make sure, you know, that we're building the industry and we have the most affordable product possible.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Minister.

Through the chair, you raised the issue of animal disease. Another pressure on the cattle industry is mentioned in the fiscal plan, page 33, the heightened concerns over animal disease adding pressure to the industry. The advancing corkscrew worm in northern Mexico is particularly concerning. A key spending objective from your business plan, page 21, allocates \$3.1 million to fund veterinarian education at U of C specifically in surveillance, animal welfare, and disease management systems. How will this funding break down per priority? Is this enough investment in local research to make a difference on the international fight against disease management? For instance, the Saskatchewan government committed over \$6 million in funding on vet research projects last year alone and \$13 million on vet education the year before that. I'm just curious as to how we are comparing next to Saskatchewan on these investments.

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, I think year over year we've done incredible work when we look at the money that's going towards veterinary medicine here, understanding how critical it is. You have to look at the entire bucket that this government has really put forward, understanding that, yes, you're pointing out a certain portion of my budget that relates to certain parts of veterinary medicine, but understand that over the past I guess it'd be four and a half years there's been a commitment to bring back a diagnostic services unit

here to the province that we didn't have before, so we're turning around diagnostic services. We have a full circular lab at UCVM we've fully funded. They're operational. We've doubled the number of vets from 50 to 100. That's \$68.5 million from Advanced Ed for those additional seats to make sure that we have veterinarians and the number of veterinarians necessary here in the province of Alberta.

Just to touch and make sure that you look at – you asked about \$3.13 million. Of course, it's an increase to UCVM to continue to operate the diagnostic laboratory as approved in Budget 2025. That's the ongoing operations of the diagnostic services unit expansion towards a full service diagnostic laboratory to support the Alberta livestock industry and expand ability to test different types of infectious organisms, provide learning opportunities for vet students, and support disease investigation services. That's the breakdown of the funding that you're seeing as reflected in the budget. It really is a critical piece for us. Understand that it's not just \$3 million that this government has put forward, understanding how important veterinarians are to the key of the agricultural industry. You're talking about \$3 million combined with \$68.5 million to expand to the additional 50 seats of trained veterinarians plus the building plus all the money that's been put behind getting that DSU built and the laboratory there plus the operational funding.

We are making serious large investments, understanding that the largest risk to the agricultural industry is foreign animal disease. We treat it as such. And we're making sure that we're putting the right investments in place to make sure that we have what we need both for veterinarians plus diagnostics plus lab areas for research.

As well, just to highlight, we led at the FPT table on foot-and-mouth disease, understanding that we did not have a vaccine bank yet here in the country. And because of the conversations and our advocacy at that table, they did agree to an FMD bank. Our province has committed \$1.2 million to building out that vaccination program knowing that FMD is an incredible risk, a very fast-moving foreign animal disease. We have seen cases in the U.K. and elsewhere that present concerns for us. As you mentioned, there's the screwworm or corkscrew worm. It's front and centre.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now take our five-minute break, and then we will return with the government caucus asking.

[The committee adjourned from 8:47 p.m. to 8:52 p.m.]

The Chair: All right. Welcome back, everyone. We will now go to the government caucus for the next set of questions. Member van Dijken speaking. Would you like to share your time with the minister or go block time?

Mr. van Dijken: Yeah. Shared time, if that works?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yes, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Shared time is good. Member, you may proceed.

Mr. van Dijken: Okay. Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister thank you for all the work that you do for the agricultural industry in Alberta. I hear a lot of good reports back in my constituency and throughout the province as I travel, so thank you for being here. Thank you for the staff that have made their way here as well to help out.

Probably the very first stakeholder that I engaged with after the budget address was from the co-operative seed processors. The president of the Alberta Seed Processors, Uwe Quendenbaum, is a constituent in my riding and he was quick to highlight the co-

operative seed processors program for modernization of the facilities that they have in rural Alberta and how important it is to get on top of the modernization and to help them ensure that they are there to provide quality seed, healthy seed, and ensure that the industry is able to thrive right from the south all the way into the north.

The government has committed to invest \$9 million in a brand-new co-operative seed processor program, and I'd just ask the minister, through you, Chair, to explain how this investment will help co-operative seed processors modernize their facilities and technologies so they can continue to meet the standards required by the customers and markets.

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, thank you for that question, MLA van Dijken. This was one of the new programs that we're standing up this year that we're very proud of. I also want to thank you as a producer yourself. The conversations that you and I have had have been very important, to hear from you yourself as a producer in Alberta on some of the things that you see. I know that you're an incredible advocate on behalf of the agricultural industry, and I know we've had some great conversations, and this is a reflection of a lot of those conversations that we have had with a lot of other producers as well.

Of course, as I mentioned, we have 66 co-operative seed processing facilities. What was clear is that a lot of them had some aging infrastructure, and it was limiting their ability to meet the increasingly stringent standards for seed and grain quality. To be clear, as I mentioned, our quality is globally well known. We want to make sure that we continue to meet that.

As well with that, we talk about grain quality, and that will always be a pinnacle piece of why we continue to support in this manner. Of course, there's worker safety and insurance compliance that was being brought up as well, so this is a cost-shared grant model. Processors can upgrade and replace equipment, adapt automation and advanced sorting technologies. They can improve seed treatment accuracy and expand or rebuild facilities where needed. These investments will help improve their operational efficiency and increase their processing capacity while strengthening that quality insurance and enhance so those processors can continue to do what they do, which is a critical part for us to continue to make sure that we have that infrastructure and support those 66 co-ops and the great work that they do.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Minister. Yes. Co-operative seed processors: it was the ability of coming together as growers and establish these co-operative seed processors that is so important for both the producers but also for rural communities right throughout this province. Without the co-operative model, the seed processors that we have currently: good chance that many of them wouldn't have survived.

I guess, with regard to the new seed processors program: how will this investment help strengthen the competitiveness and the long-term sustainability of Alberta agriculture as a whole?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, like I said, one of the things that I've heard clearly as we continue to do a lot of our international trade missions is the quality of what we do here in the province. When we take a look at the industry as a whole, we identified that our co-operative seed processing facilities were struggling with some of that outdated infrastructure, and we want to make sure that we're partners in ensuring that we have the best infrastructure, we invest in that infrastructure, we're partners with that, and that we have the highest technology possible as a key to ensuring that long-term success. It's important that we make these types of investments, and

we continue to look at every opportunity every year to ensure that we partner with co-ops and industry as a whole to make sure that we're moving in the right direction.

Understanding that, you know, you've seen it flat out: we have the highest-grade commodities in the world. We want to make sure that we have the highest-quality seed processing facilities in the world. This is a key to the marketability of Alberta agriculture, western Canadian agriculture, and as I mentioned, we're a net exporter. When we continue to be the best, people come here looking for those commodities first. That's a really key part to why we see so many opportunities in expanding agriculture here in the province.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Minister. Moving on, one of the problems facing Alberta's livestock industry is a lack of veterinarians. You spoke a little bit about this in the last set of questions, and I guess I think there's an opportunity to expand on what is being done to ensure that large animal veterinarians are, essentially, being made available throughout Alberta. In my constituency there's quite often a large distance that producers have to travel to get to the veterinarian services or for the veterinarians on-call to go out to producers, and it's really quite important that we have a large offering of veterinarians throughout the province. Can the minister explain what is being done to promote youth retention and interest in the agricultural sector in Alberta, particularly in rural and food-animal veterinarian practices?

9:00

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, this is a great opportunity to actually highlight how as a government we're supporting a rural veterinary program and building capacity by launching the Alberta veterinarian student recruitment and retention pilot program, which is designed exactly for that, for attracting future veterinarians to rural practices through structured summer placements. Of course, rural clinics can receive up to \$10,000 for new students for a summer placement with funding provided as a wage, salary, incentives. This approach encourages continuity, mentorship, and long-term retention. This program is planned to be fully funded through SCAP with a total budget of \$250,000 across 2026-27, reflecting, as you mentioned, a response to what we hear over and over again, that we have done those strategic investments in UCVM to double the chairs from 50 to 100, but the key to this is understanding that it has to also reflect where we're seeing the greatest demand and where some of the greatest need is.

You highlighted exactly that, that it is in large animal and rural veterinary practices, so programs like this, I believe, are going to be able to help encourage that mentorship and get veterinarians out into rural Alberta. As well, I do want to highlight that, you know, I will give kudos to the dean of the faculty of UCVM, University of Calgary Veterinary Medicine, in the fact that Dean Weller has been working on changing the criteria for how they allow placements around the province, not looking so much just at a GPA. They're looking at: where are these students coming from? Are they rooted in those communities? Different GPA levels and how they're connected to those communities. So I think a combination of those strategies. With this great program being led by Alberta through SCAP, we'll see an improvement to that rural retention and rural placement of vets in the future.

Mr. van Dijken: It's so important to have people coming into the industry and into the service of veterinary medicine that have an understanding of large animal veterinary practice and are willing to actually take it on as individuals because they have that

understanding. I've shared a story with you before with regard to a veterinarian in my facilities.

The Chair: Well, thank you, Member van Dijken.

We'll next move back to the Official Opposition caucus with Member Eremenko. Do you want to share or block your time with the minister?

Member Eremenko: We'll do shared time if that's okay with the minister.

Mr. Sigurdson: Absolutely.

Member Eremenko: Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead, Member.

Member Eremenko: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to hear the end of that story from the member opposite, but unfortunately we can't cede our time at this point. In section 2 of the government estimates on page 44 is the envelope of funding for rural programming and agricultural societies. Through the chair, I note that agricultural societies – I mean, really, that entire funding envelope has sat roughly around \$19 million, a little bit more than \$19 million, since 2023, but we're seeing quite a drop here for Budget 2026. Can the minister let us know: for the agricultural societies and exhibitions has that number remained flat because it's base operating funding and perhaps there's an ad hoc or project granting stream elsewhere in the ministry's budget?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. You nailed it. You kind of answered your own question right there, but what I would comment is that, of course, we saw some initiatives. We did the one-time funding of \$3.4 million approved in Budget 2025. That was for the regional ag society sustainability that we did with our regionals, and then, of course, what you see is a continue on of the base operational funding year over year to our primary ag societies.

Member Eremenko: Through the chair, did the minister fund that? Was that through a contingency fund, or is that elsewhere in the government estimates?

Mr. Sigurdson: That was in last year's budget. Of course, that was executed last year, and that's why it was out of a slightly different bucket in combination. What I can tell you is that in '25-26 and '26-27 it's \$11.5 million for the agricultural society operating grants. With that, we have as well the \$2.5 million in the ag infrastructure revitalization program that will continue.

Member Eremenko: For the capital?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. For the capital investments.

Member Eremenko: There was also a significant reduction – I mean, really, it's the entire reduction – under section 2 of the estimates for rural economic development. It dropped by \$3.8 million. I have a question here in regard to the economic development in rural Alberta plan. Through the chair: is it a plan that is still being adhered to? What is the reason for the drop in terms of the ministry's responsibility to uphold its part of NREDP?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. Thanks for the question. I will clarify. The \$3.8 million decrease from the prior year forecast, to be clear, was due to the one-time transitional funding support for the regional ag societies. That's the decrease. So it was a one-time yearly only.

The EDRAP program, or the economic development in rural Alberta program, is continuing. Budget 2025, \$0.9 million; Budget

2026, \$0.9 million. There's no variance to this. That's a continuing program that we continue to support.

Member Eremenko: Through the chair, can the department tell us how those dollars are actually spent to contribute to the rural Alberta plan? You know, we know that it's a very comprehensive strategy that includes many ministries in terms of their ability to actually enact different parts of the plan. Does it include the broadband strategy? What is the specific piece of the economic development in rural Alberta plan pie that you are taking care of?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, you kind of touched on it. It is kind of a broad-based, whole-government approach to rural economic development. This is one piece being delivered through my department. Of course, the main focus is on innovation, diversification, sustainable, long-term economic development to help ensure rural Alberta and agriculture continue to be that driving force in our provincial economy.

I can tell you about a couple of the grants that we had for fiscal years, just set some examples of kind of what we're doing with this. Of course, in year '24-25 we had Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities, the University of Alberta's research on entry and succession in primary agriculture, a massive issue. We know it is an issue. We had as well in that fiscal year the Alberta Association of Ag Societies' two Open Farm Days. Incredibly popular. As well, we had the Young Agrarians to support the development of farm apprenticeship and business mentorship programs. As well, we're working with Alberta Women Entrepreneurs Association, Association of Alberta Municipalities, Economic Developers Alberta, and Rural Municipalities of Alberta. This is in conjunction to work with them.

Member Eremenko: All right. I have a nice segue, then, in that case, Mr. Chair. In the last census the average age of a farm operator was about 57 years old – this is 2021, I believe – while 60 per cent of operators were over the age of 55. Many farm operators don't have a solid succession plan. The minister had just referenced that there was some work that was done out of the Augustana campus in regard to a report and researching succession planning. I think it reported that two-thirds of Canadian farmers did not have a plan regarding who would take over when it was time to retire. I'm surprised that that doesn't fit under the much stronger budget around agriculture research. However, glad that it is getting a little bit of funding from the ministry.

In objective 1.4 it also references succession planning. AFSC has the next-generation loan that allows for \$1 million of financing for people to be coming into farming, but what is the allocation for supporting those families who are going to be leaving the industry? I mean, of course, you never really leave farming. We do have this next-generation loan through AFSC to support people coming into the industry. What is the real, tangible dollar value of the supports that are being provided to close this gap around succession planning for those who are looking to retire from farming?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, I think there's – I mean, I'll speak to this. I think they're symbiotic together. One of the challenges we hear is about generational farmers, the next generation being unable to buy out their mom and dad so that they do have the capital to be able to move into retirement. That was a big issue. In the past – you talk to a lot of young farmers going in: it's tragic that I basically have to wait for ma and pa to pass away before I end up actually in possession of the farm. Then, on top of that, they have to experience one of the most punishing things ever, which is the capital gains tax by the federal government, in which they're generally forced, with that tax bill, to sell off land to be able to pay it. When we look at

the next-generation loans, it's actually not \$1 million; it's 1 and a half million dollars, and it's applicable up to \$3 million for a farm family.

9:10

What we've seen is – I might turn this over to Darryl with AFSC, but I will state that with the changes that we made both on some of the lifting of the restrictions and a different risk assessment as well as the expansion, the loan volume under the next-generation loan program to the end of the third quarter was \$330 million. Now, that's 65 per cent of the total loan volume. Of course, we made those changes of expandable eligible producers returning to farming or starting in farming, increased the lifetime limit to \$1.5 million. Changes continue to contribute to loan volumes. The loan amounts authorized this fiscal year under the enhanced criteria total \$87 million, representing 26 per cent of the next-gen loan dollars.

Member Eremenko: Respectfully, Mr. Chair, I'd like to stop there because I really do want to focus on the succession piece. There were a number of actionable items from the AgWellAB report that were specific to succession planning. Does the ministry, does the department have any plans to actually take specific action on some of those recommendations from the report?

I appreciate that these things absolutely go hand in glove, but when it comes to the legal costs, the tax considerations, the accountants, the professionals who can do it but really need to know and understand the challenges presented to the family farm right now when it comes to succession conversations, gosh, do you have a roster of accountants and lawyers who are themselves farmers and have experienced this in their bones in the way that I think people are asking for? Specifically, sir, through the chair, what are the actions being taken on that support for succession planning?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, of course, it's an active conversation. These are very personal discussions when you look to succession planning. They're very different, depending on the operation, and very broadly based. I will say that some of the work that's been done by our postsecondary institutions is guiding this discussion right now. Of course, as you mentioned, the one from Augustana is under review still to be able to look at what opportunities there are there.

Of course, when we look at the conversations that we're having on that whole agricultural literacy piece as it relates, a lot of that is an active conversation with students when they're going to Olds and Lakeland College. These are the conversations that they're having. We want to continue to be a part of that conversation and supporting through postsecondary. This really does involve a lot of tax law and changes that change every year as well, so you're kind of trying to hit a moving target.

Of course, AFSC does a lot of work, too, as well at bridging-the-gap sessions. They work in the industry as well, supported through our department to be able to have conversations just like that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go back to the government caucus. Member van Dijken.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Chair. I'm going to go back to where I left off with regard to training for rural skilled professionals. I guess I'm going to ask the question: can the minister outline how collaborating with postsecondary institutions helps rural areas attract and retain skilled professionals across the rural economy?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, we definitely have to make sure that we're in active conversations and find ways to be able to connect with our postsecondary institutions, understanding that they're training the

labour capital that we need to be able to grow the industry. You know, as a skilled trades worker myself we're taking a look at every opportunity. I think agricultural literacy and making sure that we're implementing more of that into K to 12 is important to heighten the awareness about the opportunities and then the connections on the postsecondary side to be able to make sure that they have the resources and facilities to be able to train.

I would say that we have great postsecondary institutions, whether it be U of C, U of A, Olds, Lakeland. These are all great examples of institutions that are working to make sure that we're training the next generation for agriculture and making sure that we have access to that labour capital that we're going to need to be able to continue to support the agricultural industry.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Minister. My colleague from Chestermere-Strathmore started on essentially having the research capacity. A lot of our industry, the agriculture industry, is evolving, and it's driven by research and innovation and application of new technologies. I was fortunate to be able to go to a crop tour day at the U of A's farm just north of St. Albert and get to learn some of the projects they're doing there alongside RDAR and the like industry. The stacking of research dollars has become very effective in being able to drive some of this research. As research is a key driver of long-term growth and sustainability in the sector, can the minister outline how this additional funding to the Western Crop Innovations, \$2.2 million allocation, will contribute to new research areas or enhance existing research outcomes in the agricultural sector in Alberta?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. Absolutely. Of course, WCI was a made-in-Alberta solution to moving forward, and I'm very happy about and very thankful for the board that's operating WCI and the partnership that we have advancing WCI forward. Of course, this joint partnership is based mainly on what I believe is that co-operative model. It blends industry, academic, and public funding input, including a board with representation from entirely across the sector. I think that's critical to the continued success of what we're going to see of crop breeding that's happening in WCI. Of course, we allocated \$4.3 million to WCI for expenses through fiscal year 2027-28 as the organization continues to build capacity and an additional \$600,000 for capital purchases in '25-26 to replace and repair aging equipment. The funding is distributed over three years as follows: it'll be \$1.8 million in year '25-26, one point five million for '26-27, one million for '27-28, all for the continued support to make sure that they're able to deliver their strategic objectives that I know are going to be a huge benefit to the industry.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Minister. I am going to jump into, essentially, trade and growth opportunities. Agriculture has always been a cornerstone in this province. It's part of our cultural heritage, our way of life, especially in my riding. Very much agriculture is the backbone of my riding, and our producers pour their lifeblood into their farms to essentially provide the food necessary for our families. Their hope is to be able to continue farming and provide for their families. The cultural heritage of Alberta is not just oil and gas; it's also community spirit. Rodeos, farmers' markets, and the like right throughout my riding provide a cultural experience that I would suggest my constituents are very proud to be able to call their culture.

In the past few years geopolitical issues, market struggles: we've seen an increased strain on producers due to rapidly changing trade conditions. Whether it's China, India, the U.S., they've all taken actions that have affected our producers' access to markets. Looking at key objective 1.2 on page 19 of the business plan, I see

that Alberta's government is working to provide market access and promote Alberta's top-quality food products. Chair, can the minister describe the work he has done abroad through his trade missions to help expand and diversify our markets, and can the minister describe what opportunities for growth he sees for Alberta's agricultural sector abroad?

Mr. Sigurdson: Thank you for that question. It gives me a chance to highlight kind of why we do what we do. It's important to understand that every time that we do a trade mission, it really is a three-pronged approach that promotes Alberta as the most reliable supplier of safe, high-quality agrifood products. It connects Alberta companies directly with buyers and provides practical market intelligence that we're going to need to be successful in the future. Of course, we do this work connecting directly with Alberta producers and processors. We meet at international trade shows and missions to help them showcase products and pursue real, concrete sales and partnership opportunities.

9:20

When you talk about what the possibilities are, I would say that through the missions that I've done so far – more specifically, I guess, I'll highlight the recent mission that I did in Dubai in which we promoted Alberta beef, canola, wheat, pulses, and processed foods – it's almost unlimited. We can take a look at a lot of the trade that we're currently doing, but when you take a look at additional markets, the scope and scale of it is almost hard to explain. We already have a foothold into those markets, but you only have to be at the Gulfood fair to take a look at how many hundreds of millions if not billions of people rely on food around this world and understand how much more of a partner we could play in the space.

We have a world reputation as being the highest-quality commodities in the world, so being able to highlight that and make sure that we're continuing to lead and we're investing in the right way to make sure that we keep that advantage is important. Right now I can tell you that our Ag and Irrigation department is currently pursuing over 155 active investment leads representing over \$5 billion in potential investment and approximately 2,900 jobs. That just gives a rough highlight of really what these trade missions are resulting in. It's billions of dollars of potential investment and thousands of jobs created.

Mr. van Dijken: Great. Thank you for that. Of course, we've got to maintain market confidence. Food inspection and surveillance: I see there's \$16 million allocated for food inspection and surveillance. Minister, can you explain how maintaining a strong inspection and surveillance system is essential to maintaining our trade relationships and global reputation?

Mr. Sigurdson: It's definitely a key piece. I do have to say that, listen, when you're dealing with importers and exporters globally, they have to manage risk. That's the reality of it. And when we say risk, it's all risks. When you're talking about our food inspection, security, and safety, we have to make sure that we continue to look at every opportunity to improve but also ensure that we maintain the high standards that we have. A reason that we have such strong trading partners across this globe is because they have that confidence. We want to make sure that's maintained. It's always a forefront conversation with our federal counterparts. We're going to make sure that we continue to keep that front and centre as a key to our international market access.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

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

Mr. Dach: I'd like to continue the theme of sharing time, please.

The Chair: That work for you, Minister?

Mr. Sigurdson: Absolutely.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Much appreciate it. I'm sure the minister will agree with me that bees are big business, and we're going to talk a bit about bees right now. Given that, Minister, the Alberta honeybees, through the chair, are along with other pollinators ultimately responsible for Canada's \$44 billion canola industry crop and make it possible, I want to ask the minister: relating to the strategic plan page 9, effort of the government to continue "to build a competitive agriculture industry that attracts new investment and value-added processing and increases exports to markets across Canada and around the world," without bees we don't grow things in this province or anywhere else. Bees globally and in particular in Alberta, because that's what we're talking about, are under some continuous chronic threat from viruses, and also we'll know that honeybee colonies in Alberta, apiaries, suffer about a 25 per cent die-off every winter, and those bees that die off need to be replaced.

Now, there's a growing but still very limited supply of locally produced packaged bees for sale. Apiary operators must replenish their hives with new packaged bees from foreign sources such as New Zealand and Australia each year. The pandemic revealed how risky relying on offshore suppliers for packaged bees can be. I'm wondering: how much money is committed in Budget '26 to invest in developing techniques and practices to promote local production of replacement queens and honeybees, the worker bees that are the backbone of the honey production? Are we moving towards self-reliance and independence in making sure that we don't have to rely upon foreign sources for these packaged bees every year?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, what I can say is that, of course, I agree with you. We have to find a way to be able to strengthen, understanding how important it is. I think one of the greatest statements I ever heard was that there are a lot of things that can disappear from this planet and it may make subtle changes over time, but bees disappear and we end up in a desert real fast. Understanding the key and the importance to the industry as a whole is very front and centre.

Of course, I appreciate your questions over the past few years about that access to replacement bees. That's why we advocated so hard at the FPT table to have CFIA do a reassessment on the availability of bee packages out of the U.S., understanding the closer proximity and the easier shipping. We did see some complications to, as you mentioned, that offshore shipment of bees into the country. We have heard of some improvements that have been made for those international assessments. Unfortunately, CFIA did still determine there to be too much risk from the U.S. We're looking at continuing to have advocacy with our U.S. counterparts and conversations with CFIA to develop, you know, different compliant zoning. We're still working on that aspect.

As far as support for the localized production, it's not something that has been put front and centre for me from apiaries as even being possible. We have climate conditions that are a bit of concern. I think I'll take that time to be able to advocate, to say to our bee producers, our apiaries across this province: "Please connect with the AFSC, our overwintering programs and AgriStability as it relates to ensuring that you get those compensations to be able to replace your bees. That you can continue to be a viable producer is incredibly important." We have been working with AFSC to find ways that we can continue to strengthen, as I mentioned, all of our

BRMs and make sure that it's applicable to all of our producers in the province. It's a great program.

Mr. Dach: Mr. Chair, I'd like to drill down into this a little bit given that your answers seem to be leading towards reliance upon a closer market – that'd be the United States – for replacing packaged bees even though they have had a history of risk and disease. We have avoided that in the past. Now CFIA has also said that it's not there yet; we can't rely upon them. What I hope the minister would be doing, through the chair, is to continue the theme of made-in-Alberta solutions for Alberta agriculture by investigating ways of avoiding packaged bee purchases from overseas altogether. That's by growing our own here and not necessarily using – I realize that the seasons don't align. We don't have the bees available for us to use each spring that we produce here from raising new colonies. But what I'm talking about are colonies raised with overwintering a queen bee and using the bees we have right now. Like, it exists. I talked to small producers in doing my research for tonight's questions. They're doing it right now. They're self-sustaining with their own bees on an ongoing basis. They're producing bees with the queen and the honeycomb, and they're managing not to buy any bees at all.

This can be scaled up, I believe. That's the focus I hope the minister will see to try to balance the focus in the industry, just focusing on honey production but really making sure beekeeping is a big focus as well so that we can end up being an exporter ourselves. That's my comment. I'd really like to see the minister drill down on this technology that exists on a small scale. It's already in operation.

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, what I would say is that this is a great conversation, and I'll make sure that I share it with RDAR. RDAR is our research extension arm to the government that focuses on research across – and they do. The research they look at is shared across all sectors. I think this is a great conversation for them to have with our apiaries and bee producers to see what's possible. Of course, due to our climate, it's going to be tough to scale that up to a full commercial scale, but I think there is some opportunity to decrease that reliance but also taking a look at what we need to do to be able to battle against varroa mites, other pests, and be able to minimize losses. Overwintering, too, is going to be a key to the success of the industry. I'll take that as feedback to be able to continue that conversation on a government research basis.

9:30

Mr. Dach: Certainly, Minister, through the chair. I agree 100 per cent that we need to make sure we are leaders, global leaders, in fighting the varroa virus, which is a global threat. I'd like to see Alberta make sure we take the lead on that. We have a fantastic facility at Beaverlodge which should be continued to be invested in so that we can take a global leadership role in fighting the virus, but also in looking at ways to support what local producers are doing already in terms of growing their own replacement bees on an annual basis for the smaller operations, and find out a way to scale it up so we don't have ourselves at risk of procurement supply chains which break down given world circumstances. Hopefully, that will be a continuing focus so we can replenish domestic bees domestically and have a made-in-Alberta solution for that.

I also heard, as you mentioned, Alberta apiary operators want to keep our borders closed from American packaged bees, or nucs, due to the U.S. practices, which are still unresolved, which expose their travelling colonies to disease and depleted health due to monoculture malnourishment. That's the comment that I've had from operators that I spoke to about the packaged bees coming from

the United States as one option, and they'll be happy to hear that you're not having that intention to open up the U.S. as a market for us to buy from. Is that the case? Can you verify that?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, what I would say is that the feedback we're getting from the bee industry right now is there are complications on all sides. This is why we're trying to get a totally new risk assessment done by CFIA to take a look at it because right now, to be clear, the packages we're receiving currently come from Italy, Australia, New Zealand, and Chile. To put a pin in that, we're talking about 58,000 kilograms per year. What I would say is that air transportation issues and seasonal differences have impacted these packages coming into Canada. I will state as well that Alberta beekeepers themselves identify battling high chalkbrood issues suspected from packages sourced from New Zealand and Chile that we're bringing in . . .

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Minister. I really want to get on the record one more important issue that I'd like you to address as well, through the chair, and that has to be poultry processing in Alberta for the small producers. It's almost nonexistent for the small producers who are operating farms, you know, as little as an hour away, some of them who I buy from for my meat, though since the last poultry producer basically quit operations in 2025, what measures have you taken with your ministry to make sure that there are options available for small poultry producers? Smaller – like, 70,000 produced chickens and poultry birds were processed by this company that went down in 2025. It's not insignificant. What are you doing there?

Mr. Sigurdson: Not sure I can answer that in six seconds, but maybe we'll get a chance to touch on that in the next one. I do apologize, Member Dach.

The Chair: Thank you, Member. Just a reminder, Member Dach, that we cannot interrupt the minister when he's speaking.

Back to the government caucus. Member van Dijken, I can assume that you want to share your time with the minister?

Mr. van Dijken: Yes. If that's okay.

The Chair: Thank you. You may proceed.

Mr. van Dijken: Minister, I'm going to focus on irrigation in this set of questions and the modernization and expansion that we've undertaken over the last number of years. Expanding irrigation capacity has been a large priority for not only this government but for Albertans in general. I see that key objective 1.3 highlights this government's commitment to the need for this investment. Can the minister explain the work that is being done in Budget 2026 to expand and modernize our irrigation infrastructure?

Mr. Sigurdson: I'll first start by saying that I love talking about Alberta's irrigation districts, how much land we have irrigated. This is a big piece of what sets us apart from so many jurisdictions around the world, that we're putting the right investments towards these types of investments that stabilize yield, stabilize quality. This is key, and a great opportunity as we continue to expand and bring new acres on board to be able to grow our output every year.

Of course, there was the original \$933 million that was announced for the irrigation expansion and modernization initiative. This is the largest investment in Alberta's history. Budget 2026 includes \$79.7 million for irrigation projects, which is \$5.9 million higher than last year and includes \$60.7 million to continue progress on modernization and off-stream projects, plus \$19 million

in addition to that to our irrigation rehabilitation program capital grant. Of course, this will be focusing on completing the 35 remaining modernization projects and advancing the three off-stream storage projects that will continue to strengthen efficiency, and overall strengthen the resiliency. We'll build that capacity that we want to continue to build so that we can continue to bring more and more irrigated acres online.

Understanding that, when I talk to certain irrigators they can easily say – I asked them once. I said, "If you were to tell me how much more productive irrigated land is over dry land," and they said, "You can safely walk up to a microphone and say 300 per cent." We talk about what that means for the growth of our agricultural industry, and it's also a key to why we are now the largest potato producing province in all of Canada. Because of that irrigation we can grow those high-value commodities and provide more assurance on stable quality, and that's a key to why we're seeing a lot of that additional agriprocessing investment as well, to link up to the success that our farmers are having under those pivots and within those irrigation districts.

Mr. van Dijken: I think it's both stable quality but then stable supply. A big part of it is stable supply and that they can count on the supply being there year in and year out and that drought is not going to shorten their supply.

Minister, can you highlight some of the completed work that has already been undertaken in investing in irrigation infrastructure?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. The first comment I'm going to say about this is that all of these projects need to be completed, of course. We did see some initial challenges off the front end of this, some supply chain challenges, but I will update you that to date 57 modernization projects have been substantially completed. Thirty projects right now currently are in progress. The three reservoir projects are in the early stages of development. Of course, there's a lot more process that happens here as far as surveying, environmental impact assessments, and everything to go along, but they are progressing.

Of course, examples of some of the projects that are active are the – we've got 7.3 kilometres of pipeline in the Eastern irrigation district replacing some canal. I'm not sure you really want to waste your time for me going through a whole bunch of detail, but really this is a key to improving that efficiency. When you see a lot of these projects, we are replacing a lot of open canals with piping and then really focusing on those three major projects that are going to increase capacity and storage.

Mr. van Dijken: Okay. Thank you, Minister. I can see also that Budget 2026 continues \$5 million funding for feasibility studies to support exploring further expansion of our water storage systems. This carried over from last year. Can you provide an update as to how these studies are progressing and also explain the value of these studies and how they continue to help us increase our irrigation capacity? You talked about it earlier. Our forefathers had a long-term vision of irrigation in this province. Our government has continued that forward-looking vision on how irrigation can continue to support food supply both here and abroad, and these feasibility studies play a big part in understanding how we go forward.

Mr. Sigurdson: It's a great statement. I mean, we had forefathers that had such a long-term, incredible vision that has created infrastructure that we rely on to this day. I think we need to make sure that we appreciate that, respect it, and we be true stewards of that vision and continue that on for the future.

9:40

These feasibility studies do continue with that vision, of course. That includes the Belly River reservoir feasibility study and the Waterton-St. Mary headworks system optimization study, both of which assess technical feasibility, environmental impacts. We look at the Eyremore dam feasibility study. These are major projects. The feasibility is of course the front-end studies that need to be done to be able to take a look at scope, scale, potential cost. These are the initial steps we've got to take to be able to move these projects forward.

I look forward to getting these feasibility studies done as quickly as we can so that we can continue the conversation and look at furthering the process to make sure that we get these projects moving forward, understanding how many additional acres we could bring online, how much more we would stabilize our South Saskatchewan River basin through Belly, through Eyremore. These are critical pieces. We have to be true stewards of that vision and make sure we continue on with increasing capacity and bringing on more irrigation and strengthening those areas, understanding the impact for agriculture.

Mr. van Dijken: Chair, to the minister. Of course, maintaining what we have in our water infrastructure is critical in ensuring the future viability of these farms and ranches that rely on the systems. Ensuring our water infrastructure is safe now and into the future is essential. Can the minister explain why maintaining our irrigation infrastructure is essential to the farmers, and as well, can he highlight the work that is being done to maintain our water infrastructure and ensure it is safe for all Albertans?

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, it's always a constant conversation when we look at ensuring that we're doing everything possible to be able to make sure that we respect this as critical infrastructure. I've used that terminology over and over again. We don't let our roads go into repair to the point where people are hitting potholes and losing tires. We have to treat our irrigation districts in the same manner and make sure that we take care of that infrastructure, understanding that it will need liner replacements. We will need improvements to headworks over time.

Of course, we've got our IRP program that we work with our irrigation districts. That's a 75-25 share with our irrigation districts that we provide to them to look at irrigation revitalization projects. It was funded \$19 million in year '25-26, and this is to increase system reliability. We're replacing 10 concrete structures, widening an arm work and a canal, servicing 5,500 acres. We're working with our irrigation districts to be able to identify essential projects every single year and make sure that in addition to the one-time \$933 million, we have that IRP – that's a continued program – so that we have the funding in place so that they can continue to improve and revitalize our irrigation districts, working with them to make sure that investment is protected for future generations.

The Chair: Well, thank you, Minister.

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

Ms Sweet: Yes, please.

The Chair: Minister, do you agree?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yes. Sorry.

The Chair: Okay.

Go ahead, Member Sweet.

Ms Sweet: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Producers, small businesses, and consumers across Alberta are facing growing frustration as repair costs rise and access to essential repair tools becomes more restrictive. Whether it's farm machinery, electronics, or household equipment, Albertans are facing being locked out of parts, attachments, diagnostics, and programming they need to fix the equipment they legally own. Without access to these basic tools, producers are forced into costly manufacturing-controlled repair channels that exceed downtime, reduce productivity, and limit competition. To the minister: given that producers, small businesses, and consumers are facing rising repair costs and limited access to parts, tools, and software they need to fix their own equipment, why has the government not advanced a comprehensive right-to-repair framework? Will the minister commit to legislation that ensures Albertans can repair the machinery they own, reduce downtime for producers, and strengthen competition in the market?

Mr. Sigurdson: I've said this once already. Of course, we are going to continue to support our farmers and ranchers, understanding these pressures that are there. What I can say is that this is not under my ministry. This is Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction, but we understand the importance. This has been expressed to me over and over again. I'm having that active conversation to make sure that their concerns as it relates to the right to repair are being brought forward and that we're looking at every possibility to be able to look at their recommendations and what we can do to be able to advance those forward, understanding the pressures that we've seen in the past.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister.

Through the chair, the Alberta SPCA is responsible for investigating animal cruelty and neglect across vast rural areas in the province. That work requires trained peace officers, long-term planning, and stable staffing. A one-year funding agreement creates uncertainty that makes it harder to retain officers, invest in training, and plan enforcement coverage in rural communities. Rural Albertans expect animals to be protected and cruelty to be investigated, not subject to year-after-year anxiety. Can you please explain, Minister, how it is that we're only giving year-after-year funding agreements?

Mr. Sigurdson: Yeah. I've been meeting with SPCA. You know, they've expressed to me some of the pressures that they're seeing, absolutely. What I can say is that to be able to assist them, we have prepaid them \$1.27 million for year '26-27. We also, in addition to that, have given them a \$730,000 top-up of '25-26 surplus. We understand the pressures that they're seeing, and that's why we're trying to reflect that through additional commitments this year. We just did this within days, so you probably have not seen that additional \$730,000 that's gone to SPCA. We did recognize. We've had those conversations. We were able to work through some of the efficiencies within our department. Like I said to them, when we were able to get additional money to them so that they can continue to do the important work that they're doing, we would get them just that.

You commented on the year over year. Definitely, that is an additional discussion that we're having with them to be able to provide them more surety, understanding that that has kind of been a topic of discussion for the times that I've met with them. What I can say is that they've had consistent, no variance, stable funding from us over the past, but I'm very excited to be able to announce the additional \$730,000 that they'll get this year to help with some of the current pressures and deal with some of the issues that you brought up in your question.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair and to the minister. I appreciate that. I do believe there is still a shortfall in their operating budgets. They've been taking on quite a few large animals that are, obviously, far more expensive than companion animals, so I would just – as you continue to have conversations with them, recognize that horses are quite more expensive than cats and dogs.

In saying that, I do have one more question. It's in regard to the Indigenous Opportunities Corporation. I recognize it's not under your ministry, but it does speak to the value-added investment conversation that we were having earlier. Alberta's Agriculture and Irrigation mandate emphasizes the growth of value-added agrifood production to strengthen food security, diversify rural economies, and create jobs across the province. Indigenous communities have identified agrifood processing and value-added agriculture as key opportunities to participate in this growth and advance economic reconciliation.

However, we've heard concerns from Indigenous partners that proposed agriculture and agrifood projects have faced barriers accessing support through the Indigenous Opportunities Corporation, including reports that some agricultural-based projects have actually been denied. Given the alignment between Indigenous economic development goals and Alberta's value-added agriculture priorities, how is the government using the Indigenous Opportunities Corporation fund to support Indigenous communities to invest in agrifood value-added production? What steps is the minister taking to ensure that Indigenous communities have access to capital and partnerships to develop processing, manufacturing, and value-added agrifood projects?

9:50

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, though I can speak to the agricultural side of that, specifically as it relates to the AIOC that's a question for the Minister of Indigenous Relations, that operates the AIOC. What I can say is that through our advocacy we understood that there was an immense opportunity from what we've seen, as I mentioned before, incredibly quick ROIs on agriprocessing investment. That is why we advocated to have agricultural projects available as an opportunity through the AIOC. Now that we see that – of course, I can't comment on how they assess projects on a case-by-case basis. I'm sure they have a methodology and metric that fits whatever risk assessments they have to put forward on an individual project basis. What I can say is that we're trying to move as a department here in Agriculture and Irrigation, really looking at opportunities through meaningful reconciliation.

That's why when we were in the bilateral consultations and doing the Lethbridge Northern irrigation district liner replacement and we sat down with Piikani Nation, the one thing we wanted to do as a partnership with them was to build them an irrigation district, understanding the net benefits that we've talked about over and over again about irrigated land, and be able to provide that opportunity. I think it's an incredible opportunity for that First Nation, if they wish, to be able to connect with the land in a way that allows them through irrigation to be able to move forward and look at different opportunities within their nation. That's what we're doing through Ag and Irrigation. Very happy that the project is going to be completed very soon. We look forward to continuing conversations as they relate to additional opportunities every year. Of course, it was \$22 million in total to the Piikani Nation, but a large part of that was building that irrigation district for them, and we look forward to getting that done.

Ms Sweet: Yeah. Minister, I appreciate that, through the chair. I remember when the announcement was first made, when the

Indigenous corporation fund first came out. It was an agriculture partnership when it was announced. I mean, we're bringing it to your attention more in the sense of there's clearly a disconnect between whatever evaluations are being done under that ministry and the direction and the work that is being done in your ministry. We're not coming at it from a place of trying to be malicious or anything like that, I think. The concern as it's been brought to us is that there have been applications made, and the feeling is that oil and gas is being prioritized over agriculture projects. I would just ask that you go back and speak to your colleagues about: "We've heard that these projects are being denied. Is there an opportunity there to do that?"

Mr. Sigurdson: Well, listen, I'll answer this quickly. I'm going to say this. Across this province we have our AgriInvest team. I can't say this enough. We have one of the most incredible concierge teams in the world under our AgriInvest team in what they do to be able to guide businesses through the regulatory process, navigate, access grants, help them through building business models. We have some of the best business development officers that work and are specialized around agriprocessing. If there are Indigenous groups out there that do have projects on the table, reach out to our AgriInvest team. We're here to help. We want to see these projects be successful. We want to make sure that they get the business case put on the table, and we have the team that can do just that. I've been saying to our Indigenous partners across this province that I think there's great opportunity, unlimited opportunity in the space. I want to make sure that we provide every opportunity to be able to have those meaningful conversations and ensure they have those opportunities that I think are going to move them and connect them with land and increase prosperity for their nations.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go back to the government side with Member Wright asking the question. Member, do you want to share your time with the minister? Minister, will you accept?

Mr. Wright: I'd love to go back and forth with the minister.

Mr. Sigurdson: That's good for me as well, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead, Member Wright.

Mr. Wright: Awesome. Well, thank you, Minister, through the chair. You know, property rights is often a conversation of the local coffee shops, concerns around ranches and farms and really how the ongoing conversation around advocacy for property rights goes on in southern Alberta. Farmers and ranchers have a long history of hard work, pouring blood, sweat, and tears into the land and into their farms for generations. Often this work ethic and family farms are passed down through generations. I'm blessed that in my constituency we have some families that have farmed the area for over a hundred years. One that I often talk about is the Reesor Ranch, who predates the Cypress Hills provincial park down in my riding. This level of dedication and stewardship leads to these families having a deep and meaningful connection to their communities and to the history of the land. We even have an irrigation lake down there named after the Reesor family and their long-standing history in the region. Property rights are intrinsically tied to freedom for farmers and ranchers since they work the land day and night, in and out. It's a whole different level of meaning for them.

Looking at page 44 of the government estimate line 1.3 in Budget 2026, we see that it'll provide an increase in funding for the Farmers' and Property Rights Advocate office of up to \$1.4 million.

Minister, through the chair, can you explain the functions of the Farmers' and Property Rights Advocate office and how these funds will support farmers' and ranchers' interests? As well, can you outline what this government is doing to protect farmer property rights when it comes to renewable energy development?

Mr. Sigurdson: Okay. Well, I'll start, Chair, just by stating that the Farmers' and Property Rights Advocate office is there to provide that trusted independent support to rural Albertans by offering dispute resolution, practical advice, advocacy on land and property issues. Of course, it combines the farmers' advocate office and the property rights advocate office. That's for that dispute resolution, broader policy advice as well to the Legislature.

The increased funding allows the office, of course, to respond to some of the growing volumes of inquiries across rural Alberta. In 2024-25 the office handled more than 1,300 direct inquiries and hundreds of dispute resolution cases.

When it comes to defending property rights, of course, for our government this has been very important to us, understanding their importance. In two minutes or less I'll go over kind of where we've gone for some of the relevant facts related to renewable energy interactions through the farmers' and property rights advocates. Just to state that in 2024 they saw more than 12 presentations, webinars, engagements, and meetings on renewables with landowners, synergy groups, producer organizations, counties and municipalities, trade shows on renewables to ensure rural landowners and stakeholders had all the comprehensive information to prepare and negotiate on agreements that protected and addressed their interests.

We have heard the concerns. We definitely wanted to make sure that the advocate office had enough funding to be able to deal with some of the higher volumes that we're seeing. We're a growing province. We talk about a lot of the increased population. As well, with a lot of the increased activity we've seen some additional issues that had to be addressed. This money goes a long way to make sure the farmers and ranchers have the support they need if they wish to connect with the advocate office to be able to represent them on their behalf.

Mr. Wright: Well, thank you, Minister.

With 40 seconds left, I just want to say, from many of my constituents, a big thank you for taking their challenges head-on with this budget. A number have brought forward property right concerns, brought forward, you know, young farmers entering the landscape, and seeing a number of these concerns addressed in Budget 2026: it really means a lot to my constituents. I've had some great meetings on the constituency break we had. We were really able to level set a number of their concerns. With that, a big thank you from this side. Thanks for everything.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, everyone. That concludes the committee. The allotted time for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I would like to remind the committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 17, at 3:30 p.m. to consider the estimates of Executive Council.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

