



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Forestry and Parks

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**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
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First Session**

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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

Daniel Lux, Assistant Deputy Minister, Forestry

Shane Schreiber, Assistant Deputy Minister, Lands Operations

Darren Tansowny, Assistant Deputy Minister, Parks

8 a.m.

Tuesday, November 5, 2024

[Mr. Sabir in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone in attendance.

My name is Irfan Sabir, MLA for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall and chair of the committee. As we begin this morning, I would like to invite members, guests, and LAO staff at the table to introduce themselves, starting on my right.

Mr. Rowswell: Garth Rowswell, MLA, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

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

Mr. Lundy: Good morning, everyone. Brandon Lundy, Leduc-Beaumont.

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

Mr. Cyr: Good morning. Scott Cyr, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

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

Mr. Schreiber: Shane Schreiber, assistant deputy minister for lands.

Mr. Lux: Good morning. Dan Lux, assistant deputy minister of forestry.

Ms Goulden: Ronda Goulden, deputy minister of Forestry and Parks.

Mr. Grossman: Good morning. Matt Grossman, ADM of financial services and senior financial officer.

Mr. Tansowny: Good morning. Darren Tansowny, assistant deputy minister of parks.

Mr. Leonty: Good morning. Eric Leonty, Assistant Auditor General.

Mr. Ellingson: Morning. Court Ellingson, MLA, Calgary-Foothills.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

Ms Robert: Good morning. Nancy Robert, clerk of *Journals* and committees.

Mr. Huffman: Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: A few housekeeping items before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Assembly website.

There is no one participating via videoconference. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting, and comments should flow through the chair at all times.

Approval of the agenda. Members, are there any changes or additions to the agenda? Seeing none, can a member move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the agenda as

distributed for its Tuesday, November 5th, 2024, meeting? Jackie. Any discussion on the motion? All in favour? Any opposed? The motion is carried.

Approval of minutes. We have minutes from the Tuesday, October 29, 2024, meeting of the committee. Do members have any errors or omissions to note? Seeing none, can a member move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the minutes as distributed of its meeting held on Tuesday, November 29, 2024? Thank you. Any discussion on the motion? All in favour? Any opposed? The motion is carried.

Now I would like to welcome our guests from the Ministry of Forestry and Parks, who are here to address the ministry's annual report 2023-24 and the Auditor General's outstanding recommendations. I invite officials from the ministry to provide opening remarks not exceeding 10 minutes.

Ms Goulden: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, everyone. My name is Ronda Goulden, and I am the deputy minister for Forestry and Parks. It's a privilege to be here today to discuss the progress and achievements made by the department over the past year. I'm joined today by a number of my key executives from my department, who have already introduced themselves.

Forestry and Parks is responsible for managing Alberta's diverse landscapes, its forests, parks, and public lands. These areas are central to our province's identity, offering economic, recreational, cultural, and environmental benefits that improve life for all Albertans. Today I'll provide an update on our key initiatives and accomplishments in the fiscal year 2023-24 and explain how we're working to protect, manage, and improve our province's outdoor spaces for both present and future generations.

Alberta's public lands, forests, and provincial parks are key contributors to our economy, including sectors such as forestry, tourism, agriculture, and outfitting. They also serve as the foundation to what it means to live in Alberta by supporting many activities like camping, hiking, trail riding, hunting, and fishing. Provincial Crown lands also hold cultural and spiritual significance for Indigenous communities, who have stewarded the land for thousands of years. Our mission is to balance these diverse needs, ensuring the health and sustainability of our natural resources while promoting economic growth and outdoor recreational opportunities for all Albertans.

As we'll see today, our department has much to be proud of, but 2023-24 also came with challenges. One of the most significant was Alberta's unprecedented 2023 wildfire season. One thousand and eighty-eight wildfires burned more than 2.2 million hectares of land, impacting communities, infrastructure, and natural resources. Our wildland firefighters, support staff, and emergency personnel worked incredibly hard to control the wildfires and minimize their impact, and I do want to take a moment to thank them for their dedication and their hard work.

As wildfires become more frequent and severe, our department recognizes the importance of preparedness, response, and mitigation. This is why we have taken proactive steps to enhance our wildfire management capabilities. The lessons learned from the 2023 wildfire season have informed several measures, leading us to start our response and mitigation efforts earlier this year. In Budget 2024 a record \$151 million over three years was invested to strengthen our resources in firefighting capacity, and this funding helped us hire additional firefighters, expand contract firefighting crews, and procure technologies such as night-vision-equipped helicopters and drones and artificial intelligence systems to better predict and manage wildfire patterns.

But fighting wildfires is only part of the solution. Our department is also focused on preventing them. Through programs like

FireSmart and the community fireguard program we are working with municipalities and Indigenous partners to help communities prevent and prepare for the impacts of wildfire. That's why \$5 million was directed to the community fireguard program in 2023, enabling communities to take a more active role in keeping our province safe. These initiatives help protect Albertans' homes, infrastructure, and livelihoods while reducing long-term wildfire risk.

The forest industry is a cornerstone of Alberta's economy, supporting thousands of jobs and contributing significantly to our GDP. To ensure this sector thrives while maintaining the sustainability of our forests, we are focusing on forest management strategies that prioritize ecosystem health, align with species at risk requirements, and reduce wildfire risk. We've also renewed several forest management agreements which secure access to timber for industry operators and maintain good-paying jobs for rural Albertans. These renewals maintain long-term economic stability while ensuring responsible use of our province's forests.

Our department also continues to minimize regulatory hurdles and expedite approval timelines, making Alberta an attractive place for forest companies to invest. Thanks to concerted efforts on the part of forestry division staff, we have cut operational forestry plan review timelines in half, reducing approval timelines for forest management agreements from approximately six months to one month, and shortened timber export and import requests from an average of 30 days to just 10. Our department has accomplished all of this while maintaining the environmental health of our forests and meaningfully engaging with stakeholders, thanks to world-class sustainable forest management frameworks. In addition to these successes, programs like the Alberta value-added wood products program are helping small businesses and supporting industry-wide research projects to ensure the effective and responsible use of our harvested timber.

Both large- and small-scale forest industry operations are thriving in our province. When it comes to our forests, however, our focus extends beyond economic growth. We remain committed to protecting ecosystems and fostering resilience. Through initiatives like the mountain pine beetle control program we have successfully reduced beetle populations by over 98 per cent since their peak in 2019, helping to preserve the health of Alberta's forests for future generations.

I'll now shift to Alberta's provincial parks, which have been cherished by Albertans ever since the first provincial parks were created in the 1930s. Alberta's parks are unique spaces that offer world-class recreation opportunities while preserving our provincial heritage. Thanks to the hard work of parks division staff, our department continues to achieve conservation outcomes while protecting cultural sites in diverse landscapes throughout the province. This past year we were proud to establish two new parks, including Kleskun Hills provincial park and La Biche River provincial recreational area, adding over 1,000 hectares to our park system. These expansions reflect our ongoing efforts to preserve Alberta's natural beauty while giving more people the chance to experience the outdoors.

To improve the visitor experience, we launched a new camping reservation platform: shop.albertaparks.ca. This platform has made it easier for Albertans to plan their trips with improved browsing, reduced wait times, and more payment options. We're proud to say that millions of visitors enjoyed our parks this year, taking advantage of our award-winning interpretive programming and the wide variety of recreational opportunities that the Alberta parks system has to offer.

When it comes to improving recreation access and delivering key experiences in provincial parks and on public lands, our success is built on strong partnerships with Indigenous communities, local

governments, and other stakeholders. For instance, we've collaborated with 24 partner organizations, providing approximately \$4 million in grants to support recreation, tourism, and environmental initiatives. These partnerships help us continue to expand and improve Alberta's trail networks and recreational infrastructure. By working with community partners and providing grant funding, we are ensuring that Alberta's landscapes and recreation spaces stay accessible and well maintained.

8:10

Our commitment remains firm to expanding outdoor recreation opportunities across provincial parks and public land. In the past year we invested nearly \$60 million to enhance and expand trails, campgrounds, and day-use areas across the province. We completed 82 projects, creating new ways for Albertans and visitors to enjoy our great outdoors.

As part of stewarding Alberta's public lands, the department is responsible for ensuring the appropriate and sustainable use of over 60 per cent of our province's land mass. This encompasses an area of almost 400,000 square kilometres of public lands, an area larger than France or California.

This year we made significant progress on speeding up decision times for land-use applications, clearing backlogs in the assignment and renewal processes for dispositions encompassing agriculture, commercial, and recreation. We also made strides in modernizing our digital systems, introducing an online platform for commercial film and photography permits and streamlining guiding and instructing permits. These improvements show our commitment to making government services more accessible and responsive to the needs of Albertans.

In April 2023 we released a rangeland grazing framework, which supports rangeland health and biodiversity while balancing the needs of agricultural stakeholders. We also introduced a feral horse management framework to sustainably manage feral horse populations while protecting sensitive ecosystems. In addition to these frameworks, millions have been invested in watercourse crossing management to support fish habitat and watershed productivity. By addressing these legacy issues, we are ensuring that Alberta's waterways remain healthy and productive for future generations.

Another accomplishment from this past year that I'm proud to highlight is our department's development of the public land trail guide. This guide is the first of its kind, providing Albertans and visitors easier access to high-quality recreation opportunities on public land throughout the province.

Another way Forestry and Parks continues to support recreation and camping access is by reinvesting revenue from the public land camping pass. In 2023 the pass generated over \$1 million in revenue, helping to maintain infrastructure, support conservation goals, promote public safety, and provide better waste management for Albertans enjoying the outdoors.

Our department also helped communities prepare for and mitigate the impacts of wildfire through continued funding of the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta's FireSmart program. In 2023 the forestry division supported 13 education and outreach projects, two interagency training exercises, one legislation project, and 42 vegetation management projects. We're proud to work alongside Albertans and their communities to increase wildfire resilience throughout the province.

While our work is never finished and the challenges we face are always evolving, Forestry and Parks made important progress during the '23-24 year in moving closer towards a vision of a balanced, sustainable future where Alberta's natural beauty can be enjoyed for generations.

In closing, I want to thank the dedicated staff, partners, and volunteers who support our department's work.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

I would now turn it over to Assistant Auditor General Eric Leonty for his comments. You will have five minutes.

Mr. Leonty: Good morning, committee members and those officials here from the Department of Forestry and Parks. The Auditor General sends his regrets that he was unable to be here today. Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with an overview of the work of the office of the Auditor General, specifically as it relates to the status of our follow-up work with the department.

I'll start with our financial statement audit work for fiscal '23-24. We audit the financial transactions at the Department of Forestry and Parks as part of our audit work of the consolidated financial statements of the province. For the year ended March 31, 2024, our work is complete but not yet made public. It will be included in our annual report to the Members of the Legislative Assembly, and the date of that release will be announced shortly.

I would now like to move to an overview of the status of recommendations the office has made to the department. There are four outstanding recommendations to the department that are not ready for assessment and have been outstanding for more than three years. Responsibility for these recommendations was moved from Environment and Protected Areas to Forestry and Parks back in April of '24. Three of the recommendations were made in our Management of Sand and Gravel Pits Followup report in 2019. This includes a recommendation originally reported in 2008 and then first repeated in 2014. That recommendation was for the department to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of reclamation monitoring and enforce reclamation requirements. Our 2019 report also added recommendations that the department collect sufficient security to compel operators to reclaim the land and to cover reclamation costs if operators fail to do so. As well, we recommended that the department collect outstanding royalties for sand and gravel on oil sands sites. If action is not taken on these recommendations, Albertans may have to pay reclamation costs for these sites and may not receive the royalties due for the province's sand and gravel. Unreclaimed pits also potentially create environmental and safety risks.

The final outstanding recommendation dates back to July 2015. We recommended that the department define and communicate the environmental, social, and economic objectives it expects grazing leases should provide all Albertans as well as relevant performance measures to monitor and ensure that those objectives are being met. Without clearly defined objectives and relevant performance measures for grazing leases on public land in Alberta, the department cannot ensure those objectives are being met or that Albertans are receiving the benefits that they should.

Thank you to the management group here today for their time, co-operation, and assistance during our audits. That concludes my opening comments, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Leonty. We will now proceed to the questions from the committee members. We will start with the Official Opposition for 15 minutes of questions.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am going to be referring to page 18 of the report that discusses the department's response to wildfires in '23-24.

The fiscal year we're talking about saw a record number of acres burned by wildfire in Alberta. It was catastrophic. The ministry cut funding for rap attack. Now, did the ministry do any analysis around

the impact of cutting this program and the impact the program's cancellation may have had on this being a record year for fires?

Ms. Goulden: Thank you for the question. When combatting wildfires, our number one priority remains helping Albertans in keeping their communities safe. The decision to eliminate the Alberta wildfires rappel program was made after careful consideration of the specific advantages provided by the rappel crews, the types of wildfires Alberta has experienced in the past, and those we expect to experience in the future. Removing the rappel program from our wildfire response tactics has not negatively impacted our capacity for an initial attack of wildfires.

Ms Renaud: A follow-up on that, the rap attack programming only cost the government \$1.4 million annually with a proven efficacy at preventing and addressing fires early. Given that performance metric 1(a) shows that the department didn't meet the target of 95 per cent fires contained by 10 a.m., did the lack of rap attack contribute to the department's failure to meet its target? What was the rationale for not bringing it back?

Ms Goulden: The answer to whether or not the elimination of the rap attack program impacted our response is no to that. The 2023 wildfire season was unprecedented in intensity and number of fires, so the unique nature of 2023 was what contributed to the unprecedented impact of 2023. The decision to eliminate the rappel program was made after comprehensive consideration of budget and wildfire management needs and was determined not to be the best use of our resources.

Ms Renaud: Just out of pure curiosity, at what point do we stop using "unprecedented" when we describe wildfires or fires in the province? We seem to have these enormous events every year, and we call them "unprecedented." I was wondering if there's a criteria in the department.

Ms Goulden: Part of what we would say was unprecedented in 2023 were a number of things. The number of hectares burned, which was 2.2 million hectares, was significantly different than the average of hectares that are burned in other years as well as the number of communities that were impacted in 2023.

Ms Renaud: Okay. In 2019 the government shut down 26 watchtowers. This closure has led to a large amount of fire-prone forests being unwatched. Were any of the fires active in 2023 in the sightlines of the closed watchtowers?

Ms Goulden: I will turn that question over to my assistant deputy minister, Daniel Lux.

Mr. Lux: Thank you. We use a variety of techniques to detect wildfires, not just the towers, including loaded patrols. We use fixed-wing helicopters as well as the public and industry. We didn't see a decrease in our detection methods.

8:20

What we saw last year was that the detection was fine. The crews were able to get to those fires in a short amount of time. What was different between 2023 than what we normally see was the drought codes. By the time the crews actually got there, these fires had already grown beyond their capacity to deal with. There were just really dry situations. But we did have the resources, and the detection programs did hold up last year.

Ms Renaud: Would keeping these watchtowers open have improved the containment time metric?

Mr. Lux: It comes down to – last year, like I say, these fires were growing so quickly that by the time they were detected, even within just a few minutes, these things were multiple hectares in size beyond the resources of what we call. Typically what we would be doing is that when the crew arrives, we would be dispatching tankers right away. There were several occurrences, especially in May and early June, that the tankers were ineffective by the fire growth and the amount of extreme weather that we were experiencing at that time.

Ms Renaud: Do you believe that the containment time metric would have been improved keeping the watchtowers open?

Mr. Lux: No. It really came down to the rate at which these fires were growing. Like I say, by the time our crews had got there, these fires – it was such dry conditions and the trees were stressed out and drought, that the winds were just blowing them beyond resources very quickly.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. The ministry didn't meet its target of 95 per cent of fires contained by 10 a.m. the day following the assessment. What measures is the ministry taking to address this shortcoming?

Ms Goulden: There are a number of technology changes that we made this year as well, partly the use of our air tankers as well as our night vision helicopters. Our ability to fight fire overnight was increased this year. Those are some lessons that we would have learned from last year. The air tankers that we were able to contract this year help with that initial attack.

Ms Renaud: Just a follow-up, then: can you explain to the committee why you didn't meet your target for this year?

Ms Goulden: This year for 2024-25? That has not been published yet.

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'm going to move on a little bit. Page 21 of the annual report discusses fire mitigation programs carried out over the years. The ministry provided \$13.9 million in funding to construct seven emergency fireguards and granted the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta \$5 million to administer the community fireguard program, provide FireSmart grants to 130 projects, and it goes on. Can the department provide mapping for the province in regard to fire risk, high-risk communities, targeted areas, and areas that would benefit from mitigation?

Ms Goulden: Yes. The department does have that information, and we used that information earlier this year, actually, as we were launching the community fireguard program with extra money to write letters to some of those municipalities that are in higher risk areas, encouraging them to apply for some of the mitigation money that we have available.

Ms Renaud: Can the department explain why \$13.9 million was allocated to build seven community fireguards? Is there a target for the number of communities that needed the fireguard? Then, I guess, my third question there is: how were these prioritized and selected?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. The \$13.9 million that you're talking about was actually in emergency fireguards. Those were fireguards built during the emergency. We then have an additional \$5 million that was given to FRIAA for a preventative community fireguard

program, to which we also added \$12 million this year in Budget 2024.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Can you just explain to the committee how many staff were assigned to administer the FRIAA program? I'm too lazy to say it all.

Ms Goulden: Administering the FRIAA program would be information that you could get from FRIAA's annual report. I don't have line of sight to that.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. I'm going to turn it over to my colleague.

Mr. Schmidt: Great. I just want to circle back on this containment goal. The deputy minister said that the results of containment for the '24 wildfire season haven't yet been published, yet on the 30th of October, just last week, the department put out a press release saying that 85 per cent of wildfires were contained within 24 hours of detection. I don't know what published means, but putting out a press release seems to me to be a publication that the department again failed to meet its targets. So can the deputy minister tell the committee what lessons they learned from the '23-24 wildfire season, and why they failed to meet their target again this year?

Ms Goulden: In terms of the lessons learned, we saw opportunity to increase, as I said before, our ability to fight wildfires at night. We increased the tanker capacity, which again helps with that initial attack. We will be doing our own internal review of how this wildfire season occurred and what could be done better. Those are brand-new numbers that are out, and I believe that we're here talking today about the '23-24 annual report. Definitely, there were lessons that we learned from last year; we applied them this year. What we will say is that the number of hectares burned this year, the number of wildfire starts we had this year was greater than last year, but the number of hectares burned this year has been significantly less. So there have been definite improvements in the outcomes of wildfire fighting.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, I mean, forgive me for pushing back on what the deputy minister is saying. When you don't meet your own target for wildfire containment, how can you say that there is any improvement? Like, last year, '23-24, you had 87.5 per cent containment by 10 a.m. the next day. This year you're saying that you had 85 per cent.

Mr. Lundy: Point of order. Thank you, Mr. Chair. This is clearly a point of order, 23(b). As articulated by the deputy minister, we're here to talk about the annual report from last year. This is the second question in a row from the member opposite on a report that was released just last week. I can't imagine a more straightforward or clear point of order, 23(b). The member is asking questions outside of the scope of this committee here today.

Thank you.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. Honestly, it's like *Groundhog Day*. We have the same raising of the points of orders that are not points of orders, and then – I don't know – maybe we'll see the government members overrule your decision again, like we saw last week.

Regardless, we are clearly here to talk about the lessons learned. We have evidence to show that the lessons that the department may have learned didn't actually improve one of their metrics that they hold themselves to. All I'm asking is for a discussion of what went wrong and what the department is going to do to improve response to wildfires.

The Chair: Well, thank you. I think we are here to discuss the '23-24 report. I do agree with Member Lundy that this question is outside that reporting year. The deputy minister has tried to answer that one. I would ask members to make their questions related to the '23-24 report of the Auditor General's recommendations.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you very much.

The annual report makes reference to Budget 2024. Obviously the department is interested in talking about Budget 2024 here at Public Accounts today. Again, can you tell us what different applications you would have made in Budget 2024 to achieve the targets of 95 per cent containment, knowing what you know now?

Ms Goulden: Ultimately the concern with wildfire is what is the impact on what we call "values at risk," the number of communities, the number of economic operations that are at stake. What we have found, the lessons we learned from 2023, led to different budgetary decisions in 2024, where we increased a lot of, as I said, ability to fight fire at night, the ability to add more artificial intelligence. We added firefighters. As a result, although there were more fires that started in 2024, we had significantly fewer hectares burned. Significantly fewer hectares burned.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. That doesn't change the fact that you didn't meet your own targets and that the department is failing to meet its own targets for fire containment.

I want to circle back to this issue of the fireguard program. You spend \$5 million on the FRIAA program. You spend \$13.9 million on community fireguards, for example. Now, from my reading of the annual report, the FRIAA program grants money to Indigenous nations. Are Indigenous nations eligible for community fireguard spending?

8:30

Ms Goulden: We also work with Indigenous Services Canada, and that is also another source of money for extra funding for Indigenous communities.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. With respect, that wasn't actually an answer to my question. My question was whether or not Indigenous nations are eligible for provincial funding through the community fireguard program?

Ms Goulden: Yes. Yes, they are.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you.

How many staff administer the FRIAA program?

Ms Goulden: I thought I just answered that one.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Forgive me. How . . .

Ms Goulden: Just so we're clear on that one, there's zero of our staff that administer the FRIAA program. What FRIAA uses would be in their annual report.

Mr. Schmidt: Understood.

The annual report states that the department invested \$4 million in innovative wildfire technologies. It failed to actually meet the containment metrics that the government sets for itself. Tell us more about the systems that are invested in. And how do you evaluate their effectiveness? How could you tell average Albertans that they are getting their money's worth from the \$4 million that you've invested?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. The \$4 million in innovative wildfire technologies included night vision aircraft, artificial intelligence to

better predict wildfire patterns, detection and avoidance technology to enable use of drones and crude aircraft in the same airspace, and the potential use of remotely piloted aircraft systems. One of the things that we found – ADM Lux referred last to the 2023 season and the drought – one of the things we were dealing with this year was heat, for example. One of the best times to fight wildfire is at night, so that is again the increased use of the night vision helicopters, the ability to fight fire when it's cooler and potentially when the humidity is a bit higher at night. Those are the ways that we know that we're able to get control of some of these fires.

Mr. Schmidt: Again, except that you're not meeting your own targets. So, you know, how does the department evaluate the \$4 million that they spent on these technologies compared to – I don't know – just having more people on the ground fighting fire? Like, what's the trade-off there?

Ms Goulden: Part of what we evaluated is the number of fire starts, then the number of hectares that are burned, the number of communities that are impacted, the values that are at risk on the landscape, and whether those values are protected or not. In that sense, then, there was a success.

Mr. Schmidt: If those are the metrics that the department is actually using to measure its success, why aren't they in the annual report?

Ms Goulden: We have a measure in the annual report. There are obviously other things besides one metric that we would use to make decisions. You asked me what those were, and I've told you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to questions from the government members. You also have 15 minutes.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for being here today. On page 30 of the report we can see that the Ministry of Forestry and Parks has some detailed information pertaining to the Kananaskis conservation pass, which is a vehicle-based day-use fee introduced in 2021 to help protect and future-proof Kananaskis Country and the Bow Valley corridor from increasing growth pressure. This is very important, particularly for people from Calgary, who I think are the overwhelming source of visitors to this park. Over the reporting year we reported that \$12.1 million was collected from this Kananaskis conservation pass, which accounts, as I understand, for about 60 per cent of the annual Kananaskis Country budget. On the same page I see a breakdown, a financial breakdown of how that money from those fees was allocated, but could you please explain to the committee how this \$12.1 million in revenue generated from the Kananaskis conservation pass has been reinvested in Kananaskis Country, elaborate a little bit more on what those line items represent?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. I'd just like to reaffirm that all of the money that is collected from the Kananaskis conservation pass is reinvested in the area. It's directed towards maintaining operations, visitor services, conservation programs, including the Moose Mountain Trail Bike Society, the Friends of Kananaskis Country, and Bragg Creek Trails.

In terms of the revenue allocation we had \$950,000 of that revenue directed to conservation and environmental education initiatives. We had \$2.2 million of it related to trail stewardship and maintenance; \$1.5 million went to mountain rescue and dispatch; \$1.6 million went to recreation planning and administration; \$2 million went to enforcement and technology; \$1.95 million went to

operations of the specialized facilities, including the Canmore Nordic Centre and William Watson Lodge; and \$1.9 million to facility and infrastructure maintenance and operations.

Mr. McDougall: When you talk about the facilities operation and maintenance, the \$3.85 million, that is primarily for the Canmore centre and Watson lodge. Would that be 100 per cent of that? How much of that money would be for those two facilities?

Ms Goulden: Well, \$1.2 million went to Canmore Nordic Centre and \$750,000 to William Watson Lodge, which is a total of \$1.95 million.

Mr. McDougall: You reported the \$12.1 million, as we mentioned, which is 60 per cent of the total budget. Can you explain to this committee how that revenue generated this year compared to the previous year and why the difference or what is the trend there?

Ms Goulden: Based on the revenue results since 2021, approximately \$12 million in revenue from the K pass has been earned each year, so it has stayed relatively the same, and we do expect continued consistent revenue levels going forward. Since the introduction of the pass, visitation in the region has remained consistently high. Almost 5 million people explore Kananaskis annually.

Mr. McDougall: Since 2021 what kind of increase are we looking at between then and the current year?

Ms Goulden: It has stayed basically the same.

Mr. McDougall: Okay. All right.

On page 21 of the report you can see that in 2023 there was a hazard reduction burning take place across Alberta, the practice of burning forest areas around at-risk communities to mitigate the risk of out-of-control wildfires reaching these communities. Last year this hazard reduction burning was completed around communities under our provincial jurisdiction such as Lac La Biche, Grande Prairie, High Level, Peace River, and Fort McMurray, with the total area burned amounting to about 1,374 hectares. Can you please expand as to why those communities were particularly chosen and speak on the efficacy of the wildfire mitigation strategy?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. We work quite closely with the municipalities we help. We have data through our forest management branch that helps us understand where the high-risk areas are, and also municipalities have an understanding of their own risk as well, and they reach out to us. So it's a combination of working with municipalities that helps choose where some of this prescribed burning would occur.

Prescribed burning can be quite helpful in protecting communities by reducing the buildup of forest fuels. It can also benefit forest health, to your question about efficacy, by minimizing the spread of disease and insects. We've worked closely, as I said, with the municipal organizations and Indigenous communities that have experienced wildfire incidents or have a high degree of fuels conducive to wildfire starts. Then agencies or stakeholders wishing to propose a prescribed fire can initiate a proposal with our ministry.

Mr. McDougall: Perhaps you could you elaborate. Certainly, we don't want to talk specifically about what transpired in Jasper this year as that's a different year from the report, but the more general question of: how does the department work with, or what is the relationship between the department and national parks that are also located within the province of Alberta in terms of fire mitigation and preventive measures?

Ms Goulden: Yes. We have reciprocal firefighting agreements with Parks Canada, so we work quite closely with them. All of Alberta, many of the provinces, and Parks Canada are all part of an organization called the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, or what we colloquially refer to as CIFFC. There's a co-ordination of efforts through that. We have mutual aid agreements also with Parks Canada to be able to fight fire collaboratively with them as well.

Mr. McDougall: Okay. But the primary responsibility for what transpires within the national park lies with Parks Canada?

8:40

Ms Goulden: Yes. That's correct.

Mr. McDougall: Okay. Given that hazard reduction burning is a safe and viable strategy for mitigating the possible damage caused by wildfires to at-risk areas, could the ministry please explain to the committee how Forestry and Parks balances the fire mitigation strategy with the responsible stewardship of Alberta's diverse forest ecosystems?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. The prescribed burns, as I said, help to maintain, restore, and protect an area's recreation, tourism, and ecological value. You're choosing where you're going to burn, control. They remove the dry grass, the vegetation, the aging or dead trees so that all of that does help the forest ecosystem. In addition to helping reduce the impact of wildfire, the prescribed fire can also promote forest health and landscape management by diversifying the vegetation composition and structure. This helps minimize the spread of forest insects and disease while maintaining and/or restoring wildlife habitat. So when carefully planned and administered, it really can do both, prevent wildfires as well as promoting forest health.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you very much.

I'd like to cede the rest of my time to MLA Lundy.

Mr. Lundy: All right. Thank you. Good morning. Through the chair, I'd like to thank you all for joining us today and for your hard work. Deputy, I would really like to echo your comments in your opening, when you thanked the people who are on the ground during these very difficult times for Albertans. Again, through the chair, I'd just like to reiterate that. Thank you.

I'd like to start my questions with a couple on Alberta's provincial park system. I know personally that I certainly enjoy getting out with my family and friends to our provincial parks. I know that I hear from my constituents a lot about the opportunities that they enjoy, and I just really think it's important to highlight these recreational opportunities and that we all get a chance to enjoy our beautiful province.

I'd like to pick up on some exciting news. You mentioned our two new parks in northern Alberta in '23-24. I think, through the chair, our committee would love to hear a little more information and some details involving the Kleskun Hills provincial park and the La Biche River provincial recreation area, including what Albertans can expect from these new sites.

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Well, I'm happy to talk about the Kleskun Hills provincial park. That park added 1,087 hectares to our park system, and it was created from previously purchased private land, with a total of 19 titles that were purchased between 1994 and 2018, showing, really, the long-term sort of planning and preparation work to create parks. It rises about 100 metres above the plains surrounding Grande Prairie, and the park protects the largest parcel

of native upland prairie vegetation remaining in the Peace Country. So it's very important to Alberta for that purpose.

Recreation opportunities in Kleskun Hills include hiking, birdwatching, nature activities, hunting, and other day-use activities compatible with the intent to conserve grassland ecosystems.

La Biche River provincial recreation area: 65 hectares, was created from previously purchased private land, with a total of three titles purchased in 2018. This site will enhance recreational opportunities by providing staging and facility support for hunting, motorized and nonmotorized trail use for visitors accessing the adjacent La Biche River wildland provincial park.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, through the chair, for that information. I don't see our colleagues from Grande Prairie here, but I'm sure they'll be excited with those new additions to our provincial park system.

I think on the same page, maybe page 15, there was also a reference to the expansion of three existing parks. I'm wondering if you're able to share a little information with the committee on those.

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Those three parks are the Lois Hole centennial provincial park, the Bleriot Ferry provincial recreation area, and the Peaceful Valley provincial recreation area. On the Lois Hole centennial provincial park, 238 hectares were added from previously purchased private land, again. For Bleriot Ferry there were 2.9 hectares from previously purchased private land, and the Peaceful Valley provincial recreation area there were 37 hectares from lands transferred to the Alberta government from the former Alberta Sport Connection foundation. All of them allow further recreation activities.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you. Some exciting updates here as well.

I might just dive in maybe a little deeper into some of these operations or even some key capital investments. This is all under key objective 3.2. Of course, I imagine this is all on the topic of visitor experience, but I would like to look a bit more into the ministry's efforts to maintain or improve operations, infrastructure, and visitor experience on Alberta provincial parks and public lands as highlighted in key objective 3.2 on page 27. Through the chair, my first question is: what operational outcomes has the ministry seen in '23-24 from its focus on creating outdoor recreation and camping opportunities, building trails and facilities, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the parks system?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Well, I will start with referring to one of our performance metrics, which is the satisfaction rate of visitors to our parks; 87 per cent of Albertans reported they were satisfied with the quality of services and facilities. So that is a measure of the outcomes that we are producing there. That's a 1 per cent increase over 2022 and 2 per cent above the 85 per cent target, and that number remains basically stable. More than 10 million visitors explore our provincial parks annually, so that's another outcome, how many people are actually getting onto the land base and enjoying the outdoors.

Forestry and Parks continues to refurbish and enhance our infrastructure to positively impact visitor experience. The capital budget for the infrastructure supports recreation assets in parks and on public land, and it's meant to replace and renew existing access; for example, refurbishing a shower building or replacing an outhouse.

Maybe I'll just stop there. I think that speaks to some of the outcomes of actually seeing specific changes to the infrastructure and the landscape, the number of visitors we attract, and their satisfaction with the park system.

Mr. Lundy: All right. Thank you, through the chair. It's certainly important to make those types of investments both on the operating and capital sides.

We're getting a little short on time, so I might just switch it up and ask a quick question about the public lands camping pass. In the '23-24 reporting period \$1.1 million in revenue from the public lands camping pass was reinvested to maintain infrastructure, improve public education, and support conservation. Through the chair, could you please give this committee a breakdown of how these funds were effectively reinvested to protect Alberta's vast biodiversity and support conservation efforts on public lands?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. The \$1.1 million on public lands was put into maintenance and repair to trails, bridges, fences, and gates; construction of new trail and recreation infrastructure; assessment of existing trails and infrastructure; replacement of wayfinding and signs; contracted services for maintenance of outhouse and garbage receptacles, so waste management; hiring of field operations staff and seasonal recreation engagement officers to provide both education and information; the printing and distribution of public land use zone maps; the enforcement efforts in promoting public safety and conservation initiatives, sustainable public use.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will move back to the Official Opposition for questions. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. My next set of questions is on wildlife management, which is discussed on pages 30 and 31 of the annual report. The Forestry and Parks department has in place a grizzly bear recovery plan, which recommends having a human-bear conflict specialist in each bear management unit to work with communities and landowners to address sources of conflicts and work towards coexistence. These positions are meant to be full-time year-round, and they're supposed to work with landowners and communities to reduce human-bear conflict. How many human-bear conflict specialists were working full-time in the department in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: We have six people working on human-wildlife coexistence as well as 87 conservation officers who also routinely respond to human-wildlife conflict.

Mr. Schmidt: Are any of those six dedicated specifically to bear conflict? Is bear conflict their sole job?

8:50

Ms Goulden: Bear conflict is by far one of the greatest volume of conflicts that we have, so the resources that we have devoted to human-wildlife coexistence spend much of their time on bears.

Mr. Schmidt: That was the longest way to say no to answer that question. Thank you very much.

How many incidents did they respond to in '23-24?

Mr. Cyr: Very disrespectful.

The Chair: Do you want to raise a point of order? If you want to raise a point of order, you can do so; otherwise, you should let the member ask questions.

Ms Goulden: If you just give me a moment.

In '23-24 there was a total of 1,007 human-wildlife conflicts.

Mr. Schmidt: One thousand and seven. How many of those were bears?

Ms Goulden: I don't have that statistic.

Mr. Schmidt: You don't have that statistic. Can you commit to responding to the committee in writing with that response?

Ms Goulden: Yes, we can do that.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

Where in the province were the human-bear conflict specialists working?

Ms Goulden: I will turn that question over to ADM Shane Schreiber.

Mr. Schreiber: Okay. There is a dedicated bear-human wildlife coexistence person within the park system down in Kananaskis. He's world renowned, a guy named John Paczkowski. He is full-time. He has additional three or four staff, depending on how many we can afford with FTEs, on a seasonal basis. There is another one up in Grande Prairie, and then there is a third one that works for the conservation officer service. And then, essentially, every single conservation officer, so all 87 of them, and all of the fish and wildlife enforcement service, so about 180 of them: they're all human-wildlife coexistence or conflict specialists.

In terms of actual full-time FTEs within the department we have about three, but there are an awful lot more people that work on that file on an ongoing basis.

Mr. Schmidt: It's interesting. The deputy minister told the committee that there were six. Now the assistant deputy minister is saying that there are three. What's the real number here?

Ms Goulden: It's three that are directing our staff, plus the three in Kananaskis is the six.

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

Now, how do conservation officers work with fish and wildlife enforcement officers who are managed under the Alberta sheriffs? Does this department track how many fish and wildlife incidents that the fish and wildlife officers respond to?

Ms Goulden: We work very closely. Our conservation officers and the fish and wildlife enforcement services in the department of public safety and enforcement services work very, very closely together. We know how many they reported. There were 151 human-wildlife conflicts reported by our own branch and FWES, fish and wildlife enforcement services, reported 856 human-wildlife conflicts. That's the total of 1,007 that I gave you before.

Mr. Schmidt: So fish and wildlife responded to 856.

Ms Goulden: Yes.

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

How many problem grizzly bears were identified by the department in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: FWES identifies the problem grizzly bears.

Mr. Schmidt: Sorry; you used an acronym that I'm not familiar with.

Ms Goulden: Sorry. I used it before, and I apologize. The fish and wildlife enforcement services identifies the problem grizzly bears.

Mr. Schmidt: Even though the department works closely with fish and wildlife service and you know how many human-wildlife

conflicts they responded to, you don't know how many problem bears they identified.

Ms Goulden: I don't have that number because that would be in their knowledge.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you very much.

What work did the department do to minimize human-bear conflict and reduce the need to hunt problem bears?

Ms Goulden: In the efforts to mitigate human-bear conflict, we have a number of different programs in place. There are some that are not related to bears, but we also have a bear conflict mitigation program, including in Kananaskis. We have a Kananaskis bear aversion program. We have provincial black bear hazing protocols from industrial sites. We have delivered a grizzly bear aversive conditioning program for 23 years in Kananaskis Country.

Our conservation officers and dedicated bear technicians respond to the reports, and there have been protocols to determine, to permit – the ministry supports community BearSmart groups in the Crownest Pass, Canmore, Sundre, Rocky Mountain House, and Waterton biosphere reserve areas and is building new capacity in Bragg Creek and Beaverhill biosphere area. We also continue to support the Waterton biosphere reserve association's communities and carnivores program through a multiyear grant. This program has been funded by the province since 2009. So there's a significant amount of effort that we put into helping avoid human-bear conflict.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

This year the minister unveiled a new program where members of the public are going to be hired to hunt problem bears. What work did the department do to consult on this significant change to bear management in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: We'll be talking about that in our '24 to '25 annual report.

Mr. Schmidt: No, no, no. What work was done in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: I've outlined to you some of the efforts that we make on bear mitigation. All of that – all of that – includes conversation with people who are having bear conflict and leads us to the determination of how we will run our programs and steps that we will take.

Mr. Schmidt: How do staff who hunt problem bears – how are they monitored? How does the department know whether or not the staff who are designated to hunt problem bears are doing their job?

Ms Goulden: I'd just like to clarify that we don't have staff designated to hunt problem bears. What we have is staff dedicated to solving human-bear conflict, and we have a protocol about what that looks like and how staff are to interact both with the humans who are impacted by bears and with the bears themselves.

Mr. Schmidt: So, then, at what point does the department decide that a bear needs to be hunted?

Ms Goulden: Again, we don't decide that the bears need to be hunted. That's not a hunting. It's not a hunt. I think we've been pretty clear about that as well as the officers themselves. There may be a time where a bear needs to be euthanized. Those situations do occur. That is not a situation that we want as an outcome, and we have significant protocols leading our staff into what needs to be done long before that would take place.

Mr. Schmidt: Can the department table those protocols to the committee?

Ms Goulden: I believe that the grizzly bear protocol is already public, but certainly we could do that.

Mr. Schmidt: Public. Thank you very much.

When a problem bear is euthanized, what happens to the meat and the hide currently, or in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: I will defer to ADM Shane Schreiber on that one.

Mr. Schreiber: Yeah. So that would depend on the condition of the carcass. Quite often it's simply disposed of through incineration or other means.

Mr. Schmidt: Does the department think that that system is working well, or would it anticipate any changes?

Mr. Schreiber: Because euthanization is a relatively rare event, that has sufficed to this point. It's really the call of the fish and wildlife or conservation officer on the ground, based on the condition of the carcass. If the carcass is in good shape . . . [A timer sounded]

The Chair: You can finish your sentence.

Mr. Schreiber: Oh. If the carcass is in good shape, I think we would look to donate it for educational purposes, so whether it's taxidermy or whatever.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to questions from the government side. You also have 10 minutes. MLA Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: Good morning. Thank you. We're – what? – halfway through the two-hour block here. I do appreciate everything that you've done, especially when it comes to fire mitigation. I will say that it appears that we're headed in the right direction.

I really would like to, I guess, discuss wildfire response. Now, I recognize the opposition is focused on this, so some of my questions may be repetitive, but really I'd like to drive into a few specific areas. On page 21 of the report I wanted to bring to the attention the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta FireSmart program. This program, funded by the Ministry of Forestry and Parks, is a multifaceted approach to manage and reduce the threat of wildfires across Alberta. In the '23-24 period 75 of these FireSmart projects were completed across the province to help prepare Albertans for wildfire season. Considering there were 75 FireSmart projects completed across Alberta, could the ministry please explain to this committee the decision process to determine which areas of the province require FRIAA support, and how are we going to ensure that FRIAA remains accountable to our government and all Albertans?

9:00

Ms Goulden: Yes. Thank you for the question. FRIAA is accountable through a number of different means to the public, so I'll start at the end of your question around accountability. They're accountable through the grant agreements that we have with them and the reporting requirements that they need to give back to us. They're also accountable through regular conversations with our staff. We also have ADM Daniel Lux who sits on their board, so the decisions that they make are also reviewed and the government has input into those decisions. And then their process for their

applications is open and competitive. When people or municipalities are applying for the grant funding, those are open and competitive processes for the application.

Sorry; did I get all of your question?

Mr. Cyr: You did. You did.

Could the ministry please give the committee a detailed breakdown of the 75 FireSmart projects and expand on how these projects are supporting Albertans during the wildfire season?

Ms Goulden: Sure. In 2023-24 there were two interagency or cross-training exercises, one legislation project, as well as numerous education and outreach projects, community FireSmart plan developments or updates, and vegetation management projects that were funded. For example, just to give you some examples, the Kananaskis improvement district planned a detailed review of the current FireSmart regulations in the Kananaskis improvement district and recommendations to strengthen them to meet some national guidelines for the wildland urban interface fires.

The communities of High Level and Lac Ste. Anne county planned wildfire-specific interagency tabletop exercises to identify strengths, weaknesses, and improvements for wildfire management approaches. The summer village of Ghost Lake, the town of Banff, and many other communities used this funding to plan hundreds of home assessments as well as offer public education opportunities, including town halls, for Albertans. Important FireSmart planning was enabled for communities such as the Elizabeth Métis settlement, whose project aimed to develop a wildfire hazard and risk assessment plan and wildfire preparedness guide.

So that just gives you some examples of how that funding is used.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you. Elizabeth Métis settlement is also in my constituency, so thank you again for that funding. I very much appreciate it. I know the board also appreciates that funding. That was exciting for our local constituency.

On page 21 of the annual report I can see that the Ministry of Forestry and Parks, in addition to the 75 FireSmart projects funded in '23-24, directly funded the completion of 34 additional FireSmart projects at the cost of \$900,000. This is also in addition to the 24 wildfire prevention and mitigation projects on Indigenous people's land in the forest protection area, which were completed in agreement with Indigenous Services Canada in addition to the \$1.4 million.

Can the ministry please explain to the committee how these 58 additional wildfire prevention projects helped Alberta in at-risk areas of the province prepare for and stay safe during the wildfire season?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Again, this money was targeted to different areas, but it accomplishes similar things to what we just chatted about. The co-operative work helped Indigenous communities be better prepared for wildfires. It helps them implement FireSmart principles, train firefighters – so it goes to training as well – to respond to wildfires and remove vegetation that could add to the wildfire risk in their communities.

We work closely with Indigenous Services Canada, and that's where some of those projects occurred. That included 12 FireSmart plan developments or updates, again, more vegetation management projects, and one interagency training exercise.

Mr. Cyr: I can see on page 22 that you did arrange a contract with Cold Lake First Nations. That also is up in my constituency, so thank you again for that. I know that the Cold Lake First Nations – we actually had a celebration of how well the province is working hand in hand with my nation. Thank you so much for that.

Moving on, I'd like to focus on page 17 of the annual report. Under key objective 1.2. it says that Alberta's forests and rangelands are places "of incredible biodiversity" and "protecting and supporting the health of these landscapes requires focused and sustained action." In particular, the report highlights mountain pine beetle infestations that threaten the long-term sustainability of Crown forest resources. However, the report is highlighting good news with the continued decline of newly infested land and the mountain pine beetle density results down from 3.5 trees per kilometres squared in 2019 to .06 trees per kilometres squared in 2023. That's a 98 per cent – 98 per cent – decrease. Congratulations on that. That's great. Can the ministry expand on the factors that have gone into this decrease, including natural factors and actions taken by the ministry?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Well, there are numerous steps that we have taken as a ministry. I'm going to turn to my ADM Daniel Lux to speak to some of the things we've done as a ministry, and then we can speak to some of the other natural pieces that have happened as well.

Mr. Lux: Thanks. When the pine beetle first started to be an issue in the province, we took a different approach than other jurisdictions, in particular B.C. We took it at a provincial level to come up with provincial objectives and goals and focused our efforts in on where the beetles had the biggest risk of spread to some key values. One of the values was the key watersheds along the eastern slopes, knowing that if we had a massive amount of pine mortality along those eastern slopes, it could be devastating to water supplies, water treatment plants.

The second major objective was preventing the spread of mountain pine beetle across Canada given that we were the corridor for beetles to hit the Jack pine, go to Saskatchewan, and potentially move across Canada, which is a real risk, based on some science done from the federal government out of Natural Resources Canada.

As we had done that, we took an approach to identify the high-risk trees. We had a variety of tactics in order to control the high-risk trees, including single-tree treatment using contractors. We also had the forest companies change their harvest patterns in order to target areas that were infested by mountain pine beetles. Then, if there were areas that weren't impacted by mountain pine beetles but were threatened, the forest companies proactively removed some of those mature pine trees well before the beetles actually got there to reduce that risk of damage, population growth, and potential spread.

We continued with that program for several years very consistently, improving it as we got more information on the science and learned a little bit more of beetles moving into Alberta. We adjusted our programs and just fine-tuned it a little bit more.

The last piece of that was partnering with municipalities. Given that we don't have jurisdiction everywhere from Forestry and Parks, we had a grant program for municipalities to control beetles in their own jurisdictions as a broad, unified approach of everybody controlling beetles.

By doing that over several years, we started to see the populations decline not only in Alberta, but as those populations started to decline in other jurisdictions, we started to see less in-flights coming in over top of the Rocky Mountains year after year after year. Eventually, with all those programs in place, the population started to drop.

Mr. Cyr: That's quite fascinating.

One aspect of the pine beetle control program is administrated by the Forest Resource Improvement Association – so that's FRIAA –

by supporting forest industry efforts in the mountain pine beetle management. In 2023 – oh, it looks like I'm not going to get my question in.

Thank you so much for the responses you've given.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will move back to the Official Opposition for questions for 10 minutes.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As I jump in, I'd just like to throw out there that some members of the room have been hiking in Kleskun Hills because that's where we grew up.

I want to jump back a little bit into the tech and into my former role as the critic for Tech and Innovation and the work in the tech ecosystem. What evaluations are you doing? How is the department assessing the technologies that are available, and which ones do you think are going to be most likely? We talked about the tech that you did purchase and start using. Tell me about your process in choosing those technologies.

9:10

Ms Goulden: Yeah. In a moment I'll ask ADM Dan Lux to give you a little bit more on the process, but I would just say that we regularly are asked to explore all sorts of new technologies. Lots of people and companies write to Alberta Wildfire all the time with new ideas. So new ideas are always coming, and we are doing evaluation.

ADM Dan Lux, do you want to speak about the process of assessing which ones we do?

Mr. Lux: Yeah; very much so. We have a lot of vendors from across the world that come to us with innovative technologies. We have staff dedicated who are wildfire experts in order to look at how that technology could be implemented into our program, and they liaise with our incident commanders, who are the ones that are on the ground making those decisions.

If it seems like there's a technology that would have some benefit, then we start gradually integrating it into our programs as more of a redundancy system. Like, when you're fighting wildfire, you know, our incident commanders know what works, and they're comfortable with that. Any time you bring new technology in, you want to be careful that you're not going to upset the way that we're typically fighting fires. So we'll usually do it as a parallel process where we'll have the technology working alongside with our existing processes, and we'll get much more comfort, we'll better understand how we can actually use that, and then actually integrate it fully into our programs if it makes sense for a variety of reasons.

What you'll notice in – our investments have really been focused in on our sustained action capacity, so the 24-hour operations, for example; crew safety, for example; abilities to predict where the wildfire risk is going to happen. Again, that's all tied to crew safety to make sure that we know what we're putting our staff into so we can be much more aware and actually be much more effective at fighting those fires in those different conditions.

We're seeing a lot of growth in technology, you know, machine learning, artificial intelligence, drone technologies. All these things are really increasing at a very rapid rate, so we're just trying to integrate them as quickly as possible into the system as long as we make sure that they're safe, effective, and are not going to jeopardize the risk to our crews.

Mr. Ellingson: Clearly, in Alberta we do have bench strength in AI, ML, and drones. Can you tell me whether or not any of those technologies or companies that you adapted into your systems were sole-source Alberta companies?

Mr. Lux: I don't believe any of the technology ones were sole-source. I might have to double-check on that. I'll have to double-check whether they were sole-source.

Ms Goulden: The sole-source contracts will be publicly disclosed, so we'll be able to see that.

Mr. Ellingson: Okay.

Ms Goulden: I don't have that answer just right off the top.

Mr. Ellingson: And these were – my colleagues may think of these.

I'm interested, again, also in growing our economy. How are you engaging with – do you? – Alberta Innovates and Tech and Innovation in making these decisions and using interministry operations to grow our economy?

Ms Goulden: We definitely do, for sure, interact with Technology and Innovation as well as Innovates, and we have a group of people that are evaluating some of these technologies who will also pull on expertise. We have the wildfire fighting expertise in our department, but others have the expertise on things like artificial intelligence and the technologies themselves.

Mr. Ellingson: I do know that there is, you know, AI work in Technology and Innovation with a sole-source contract with an Alberta company. So, yeah, we'll look into the sole sourcing.

Now I want to pivot a little bit back to the mountain pine beetle. Maybe tell me more about 2023-24 but also previous years. How are we doing at reclaiming some of those lands or trees that had been previously destroyed by pine beetles? Do we have a target in how we're going to recover all of those forested areas?

Ms Goulden: The recovery of the mountain pine beetle destroyed areas is something that we work on with the forest companies through their forest management plans and their harvest and their own replanting. They're replanting what they're harvesting, so they're not replanting what the beetles have destroyed, obviously. When fire goes through, then there is also our wildfire reclamation program that we would be speeding up. This is a natural process, right? The trees would grow back in those areas, but we often help speed that up through our own replanting processes after wildfire goes through.

Mr. Ellingson: Those mountain pine beetle infested areas: were they more prone to wildfires? Like, were those areas that were targeted for mitigation of wildfires?

Mr. Lux: The science says that, yes, they are much more prone. We didn't have the same type of population concentration that we saw in other jurisdictions. Our beetles for the most part were fairly more dispersed, so when we reported on it, if there was one infested tree in a stand, we were calling that an infested stand, whereas not every tree was dying. In any areas where we saw this massive amount of tree mortality – most of that was up in that Grande Prairie area – the forest companies were on top of it, harvesting and replanting it before we had a chance for that buildup of a lot of dead material.

Mr. Ellingson: So it didn't necessarily change in any way our preparation for mitigating future wildfires?

Mr. Lux: It did. It changed the way we allocate our resources to be able to be there. Like I say, the forest companies were very motivated in order to get all those dead trees out of there and get a new forest started. The economy and the forest sector took on that role because they have a vested interest in making sure the trees

come back, as well as the province. What changed for us is that when the wildfire risk starts to increase, if there are dead trees from mountain pine beetles, that's factored into it, and we'll allocate more resources to be ready to respond if something happens in there.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you.

Now, also the cumulative impact of wildfire: we know that '23-24 was a pretty heavy year for hectares that were destroyed. What is our timeline now for the reforestation of those areas, and do we have targets in place? Are we meeting those targets?

Mr. Lux: If a forest company were to harvest any of those or salvage any of those trees that were burned in any of the wildfires, they have an obligation to reforest within two years for anything that is harvested, as a legal obligation by the companies. For any areas that aren't being harvested, for the most part Mother Nature will reforest it. In a lot of these areas these pine trees have actually, you know, evolved to deal with fire, and their cones will actually open up with the fire in order to get that new forest started. If there are areas where we're not seeing that regeneration, then there are programs at FRIAA. Again, proponents can request money out of FRIAA in order to reforest some of those areas and get them back into production, which can all be leveraged with the federal 2 billion trees program.

Mr. Ellingson: I'll pivot just once more, knowing that I've only got about a minute and 30 seconds left, back to the Auditor General report, which was talking about the monitoring of the rangeland grazing lands. I notice that in the rangeland grazing framework there are no performance measures. So picking up from the Auditor General's report, what are the plans to put in place performance measures to know that we're achieving the intended environmental outcomes from the rangeland grazing program?

Ms Goulden: Yes. Thank you for that question. As you saw in the rangeland grazing framework, we were able to clarify the objectives. The auditor had identified two things we needed to do. One was to clarify objectives, and the other was to put a performance metric in place, so we are finalizing that performance metric. We hope to have that done by this spring. We are working on the data collection that would sustain a robust performance metric in this regard.

Mr. Ellingson: The next question that I would have would be a forward-looking question, so probably not appropriate for this committee. [interjection] Sorry? Just try. What have we learned already? Like, you're already doing that work; you think you're going to put forward performance metrics for this coming spring, but we have a budget that's going to come out in February. Presumably you're going to want to allocate some funds to meet those performance metrics that will come out in the spring. Are we going to see changes in the next budget to meet those performance metrics?

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to questions from committee members on this side. You have 10 minutes.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair, through you to the deputy minister. First of all, I just want to recognize and thank you for all of the work you and your staff do. I think you do a very good job, and I'm acknowledging that. Also, could you possibly tell me again what the acronym FRIAA represents?

Ms Goulden: Sure. That's the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: I'm going to continue on from my colleague MLA Cyr's questions. One aspect of the mountain pine beetle control program is administered by the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta, FRIAA, by supporting forest industry efforts in mountain pine beetle management. In 2023 the municipal grant program was amended to also provide both funding and expert advice to municipalities that support mountain pine beetle management on municipal and private lands.

9:20

This funding has gone down, with the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta, or FRIAA – I'll never forget that – allocating \$219,015 in 2023-24. This is down from \$274,933 in 2022-23 and \$514,409 in 2021-22. Can the ministry explain why less funding has been provided to the municipal grant program and expand on the impact of the program?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. As we spoke about before, the trend in reduction in funding is related to the reduction in proposals for detection and control work because there's a reduction in beetles, so that's a good-news story. Just to give you an example, the program was funding beetle traps around log yards to prevent the spread of the beetle, and in recent years many traps weren't catching any beetles anymore – there just were fewer beetles – and as such are no longer being requested.

The majority of proposals were related to proactive prevention such as hanging verbenone – you might have to ask somebody else exactly what verbenone is – around tree genetic sites to ward off the beetle. Again, the need for that has decreased; therefore, the funding has decreased.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Just the thought of beetles makes my skin crawl, so I'm going to change the subject.

Chair, through you to the deputy minister, I would like to talk about the trails and recreation management, on key objectives 2.5 and 3.2. I'd like to highlight the key objective 2.5 on page 26 of the report, which is aimed at applying integrated development and capital planning to support infrastructure and service improvements for high-volume and potential new tourist areas. In particular, I want to look at the key high-recreation areas across the province in alignment with the ministry's mandate to improve infrastructure in high-use recreation areas. My first question to you is: can the ministry expand on the projects identified in these areas, specifically in Kananaskis, Canmore, Waiparous Creek, and Crowsnest Pass, including what projects are identified and what potential upgrades were being evaluated that are focused on infrastructure, increasing access, and preserving experiences for Albertans?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Exploring ways to improve infrastructure in these areas is a mandate item for the minister. In 2023-24 improvements were made to highway access points, parking lots, washroom facilities along highway 11 or the David Thompson corridor, which is another of the high-traffic recreation areas in the province. Working with other ministries, including Transportation and Economic Corridors as well as Tourism and Sport, potential recreation infrastructure and service projects in these areas have been identified. Those initiatives range from trail and campground construction, improved highway signage for recreation and tourism information, highway improvements to improve access – interchanges, wider shoulders, that kind of thing – and telecommunications improvements as well. These are being further assessed as to the approach to implementation and timing.

There are also several other mandate items that are complementary to this, which are developing new campsites, the trail upgrades for Kananaskis Country, and developing a Crown lands recreation and conservation strategy as well. So there's definitely lots going on in those areas.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Deputy Minister. Chair, through you to the deputy minister, can you expand on the Canmore area trail strategy that has been developed with the goal to establish an integrated, authorized, and sustainable trail system for lands across the Bow Valley that support the functioning of wildlife quarters and habitat patches, all while maintaining outdoor recreation and visitor experiences?

Ms Goulden: Yes. It's a good area to ask questions about because the Canmore area has obviously high demand and interest for tourism and recreation. Because of that, it requires a plan that supports sustainable trail management. The Canmore area trail strategy will ensure a trail management plan is in place both for the parks and the public lands within the Bow Valley. Work in '23-24 was largely planning, including gathering baseline data and also planning the engagement. As you may know, that engagement has launched, and those conversations are ongoing. The goal is to establish an integrated and sustainable trail system for lands across the Bow Valley.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Chair, through you, I would like to continue to look at the ministry's plans to maintain or improve operations, infrastructure, and visitor experiences on Alberta's provincial parks and public lands through capital investment, education, and compliance and implementation of the Trails Act as highlighted in key objective 3.2 on page 27 of the report. Deputy Minister, can you expand on what actions were taken and what results were achieved to create outdoor recreation and camping experiences, build trails and facilities, and ensure the long-term sustainability of the park system in an environmentally responsible way?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. In '23-24 park operations focused on ensuring the parks were open and accessible, also on improving amenities and delivering services such as interpretation. We continue to see high visitation in the parks during this year, the '23-24 year. More than 253,000 camping reservations were processed, representing 635,000 camper nights. The interpretation program was active in 32 park locations, with 39 seasonal park interpreters. They delivered around 3,700 public and school programs, reaching more than 170,000 Albertans and visitors. This included amphitheatre shows, guided excursions, special events, family drop-in programs, curriculum-driven school programs, and teacher professional development workshops. More than 182,000 people visited the Kananaskis information centre in '23-24, which is an increase of 12 per cent.

I mean, I could go on and on. There's a lot that we've been doing. As the annual report referenced, there's \$59.7 million invested into 82 projects across the province. That's part of a broader – Budget 2023 actually promised \$211.3 million over three years. Initial planning work was advanced to build the 900 new campsites that have been mandated. We provided almost \$4 million in funding to 24 organizations to support trail and recreation management. Additionally, we did trail repairs and refurbishments in Dinosaur, Castle and Cypress Hills provincial parks, Kananaskis Country, and Terishshner Trail.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Deputy Minister. Chair, through you to the deputy minister, given that the province released

the first Alberta's Public Land Trail Guide in 2023-2024, Deputy Minister, can you provide further details on the contents of that guide and the results that it has achieved?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. The Alberta's Public Land Trail Guide for fall 2023 highlights Alberta's extensive public land trails designed for diverse recreational activities. It includes hiking, biking, as well as equestrian-use trails. The guide was developed in an attempt to help Albertans know what was out there and to know where they could experience the outdoors. It also sustains good trail management practices. It has an education concept as well. It covers Indigenous land-use rights and responsible trail etiquette, so really, just helping increase the usability of the trail system in Alberta.

At the time of the annual report the guide had received over 5,000 downloads since its release in August the year before, in 2023. Today the guide has been downloaded over 14,000 times, and it's an important source of information on how to recreate on Alberta's Crown lands.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you. Is it available in paper, or you just have to download it?

Ms Goulden: I believe there are a few paper versions, but it's mostly download. Yeah.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Okay. Well, thank you, Chair. I cede my time.

The Chair: We will now proceed to questions from the Official Opposition. You have 10 minutes, and that's our fourth rotation, final rotation.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I want to go back to wildlife management, which is discussed on pages 30 and 31 of the annual report. We know that the department has a grizzly bear recovery plan. What population estimates were made for the grizzly bear recovery plan and in which bear management units were those population estimates made in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: Go ahead.

Mr. Schreiber: Of course, it's an inexact science because they don't count each individual bear exactly. The population estimate is somewhere between 1,000 and 1,100 based on studies done by an independent academic out of the University of Alberta. I can't remember exactly which bear management units he based his study on, but we can certainly get that to you.

9:30

Mr. Schmidt: Can the assistant deputy minister clarify when that work was done?

Mr. Schreiber: Between 2019 and 2021, and then it's based on some earlier work that they had done before. Yeah.

Mr. Schmidt: So nothing was done in '23-24 to update those numbers.

Mr. Schreiber: No. I would say probably not really.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you.

Mr. Schreiber: Again, we look after . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Assistant Deputy Minister.

Mr. Schreiber: Oh, okay.

Mr. Schmidt: That was an answer to my question.

The grizzly bear recovery plan doesn't define recovery with respect to a target population. The other ways that the recovery plan defines recovery have not been met. Can the department clarify when it will know that the grizzly population has recovered? If a target population isn't used and you're not meeting your other requirements, how will we know when grizzly bear populations have recovered?

Mr. Schreiber: I think it's important to clarify the roles of the departments. We're responsible for hunting and fishing. You can't hunt grizzly bears, so EPA is actually responsible for grizzly population and management. We work with them, along with Public Safety and Emergency Services, with the fish and wildlife enforcement service. So I guess I would submit that that's probably a better question for EPA.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Thank you very much. I just want to clarify what the assistant deputy minister said. You couldn't hunt grizzly bears in '23-24. That is no longer the case.

Now, on page 30 . . .

Ms Goulden: Sorry. Just to clarify . . .

Mr. Schmidt: No, no. I'm moving on to my next question. Thank you very much.

Mr. Cyr: Point of order.

You know, the member, under 23(j), "uses abusive and insulting language of a nature [that's] likely to create disorder." He asked and answered his own question and then refuses to give the department the time to respond. Clearly, this is not a good way to run the meeting, making carte blanche points like this.

He also continues to use 23(c) as well, which is, "persists in needless repetition," in his questions. Mr. Chair, I would like to just have the chair acknowledge that when there is a question, the ministry should have the opportunity to respond to that question. He didn't give that ministry the time to respond.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. Obviously, this isn't a point of order. The department is here to answer our questions. If I want to read the department's press releases, I can go to the website and do that. I got an answer to my question. I would like to move on. This isn't a point of order.

The Chair: Well, thank you. Two sections were relied on by the member. First, I don't think that I see the case for repetition. Members sometimes do persist in questioning until they think they have gotten the answer. But I didn't see any of that.

With respect to the language that's "abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." Again, I don't think that I saw the conduct that would meet that threshold. Generally I would caution that at all times discussion should flow through the chair, and if the department wants to answer something, they could also, I guess, get my attention, and we can sort that out.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Page 30 of the annual report indicates that 19 wildlife management units were added to existing cougar management areas and created six new CMAs. What data informed those decisions to expand and increase cougar hunting opportunities?

Ms Goulden: I will first just clarify the last point, just to indicate that there is not a hunt.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

I just asked a question about cougar management; I would like an answer to that question.

The Chair: Member, let the deputy minister finish.

Ms Goulden: I'm just going to clarify that there is no hunt. It is an important point of clarification. On grizzly bears, there is no hunt.

When we're speaking now about cougars, I will defer to ADM Shane Schreiber about the information and creating the cougar management areas.

Mr. Schreiber: Yeah. We work in close co-operation with Environment and Protected Areas and the wildlife experts over there to do population studies. When we ascertain that the population of cougars in a certain cougar management area is large enough to hunt, then we approve either an increase in the quotas or allowable hunt rates, or in some cases designate new cougar management areas where we're having reports of predation.

Mr. Schmidt: Is there a threshold number that was exceeded this year that drove the department to expand cougar hunting in these areas?

Mr. Schreiber: I guess what I'd say is that there is probably not a single threshold number in each CMA, and it's assessed on a year-by-year basis.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay.

Cougar hunting was extended in the winter to include females. Why was that the case this year?

Mr. Schreiber: The impact of hunting females in terms of population control is significant, and what we were finding was that there was significant growth in the population and predation of cougars in some of those CMAs. That's why the number of CMAs was increased and in some cases the allowable harvest was increased.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay.

The department is using the amount of predation to drive hunting. Are those stats and figures on predation events – I don't know what they're called – available to the public somehow?

Mr. Schreiber: I think they are. If not, we can certainly make them available to the committee. They're gathered mostly through the predator compensation program and also from reports from fish and wildlife enforcement services and the public in general.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

What work did the department do to update population estimates for wolverines in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: Again, just reiterating what ADM Schreiber said before, the updating of populations is work that is in the purview of Environment and Protected Areas.

Mr. Schmidt: Right, but when the department makes decisions around whether or not to hunt or trap animals, that information is driven by data that you're getting from other departments. Did the department ask for any updates on wolverine population from Environment and Protected Areas in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: We have access to their population statistics. Yes.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. So what was the most recent population statistic for wolverines in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: I don't have that information readily available.

Mr. Schmidt: Would you be willing to table that?

Ms Goulden: If we have it, yes.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

Obviously in '23-24 the department maintained a ban on trapping wolverines in most trapping areas. Can the department explain why that was the case in fiscal '23-24? Why did the department maintain a ban on wolverine trapping in that fiscal year?

Ms Goulden: That ban has been in place for a number of years. It has not been modernized at all.

Mr. Schmidt: It hasn't been modernized. So what does modernizing mean, then?

Ms Goulden: Taking a look at the current trapping methods, the current trapping situation, the current trapping, frankly, technology. I mean, that sounds – the equipment used. There are lots of things that have changed over the years that have not necessarily been updated.

Mr. Schmidt: What were the advances in wolverine trapping technology that happened in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: I don't have that information available. I'm saying that your question was: why did we maintain a ban? I'm saying that that was something that has been in place and hasn't necessarily been addressed or thought about.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. But obviously population estimates would be an important tool – right? – to do this. Was there any indication that the ban was working so well that there was consideration for removing it in '23-24?

Ms Goulden: I've already given you my assertion that we would provide those population estimates to you.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much.

So, I guess, when the department is evaluating trapping techniques for modernization, what are you looking for? Like, less killing of wolverines, or what would you evaluate as an innovation in trapping?

9:40

Ms Goulden: Like everything that the department handles, there is more that can be looked at than any one department can do in any one year. So as things come up – that's why I was referring to modernization – there are opportunities to relook at things. When we look at that, we listen to the stakeholders; we listen to the people that are definitely involved or are key stakeholders as well as others around what's going on in a particular area. That's how we evaluate that.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. So what specifically drove the wolverine population this year?

Ms Goulden: I'm saying that when you asked the question of why the ban was in place last year, I was saying it has been in place for a while. It hasn't been looked at in 2023-24; we just maintained the status quo.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay, but were there any indications that it wasn't working?

Ms Goulden: Well, we just maintained the status quo, so that was part of what we were looking at.

Mr. Schmidt: The status quo was put in place because wolverines are a threatened species, so obviously if wolverines weren't a threatened species, then that would obviously drive a change. What other factors would you consider in changing the rules around trapping wolverines?

Ms Goulden: That's a hypothetical question because we didn't change the rules in 2023-24; we maintained the status quo. As I've said, in '23-24 we looked at – wolverines wasn't something that was specifically looked at to change in '23-24. As we continue to work with the trapper population and we learn new things, then we look to see what needs to be modernized.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to questions from the government members, and you have 10 minutes. That's our final rotation.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the department staff for being here this morning. I see in the annual report that the ministry is working to manage Alberta's feral horses and, in the language of the report – this is page 15 – ensure both their sustainability and the sustainability of the ecosystems in which they live. This is something that a number of my constituents have contacted me about, expressed and shared questions and are concerned about Alberta's feral horse population.

I'll also say as the proud MLA for the Cheadle area that we have a bit of a local celebrity, Darla Connolly, who lives there, who has been well known for a number of years to adopt and train and find forever homes for wild horses. I'll give her a bit of a shout-out. She in the past few years was nominated for Canada's heroes of the horse award for her work in this space.

You know, I'm reading here, page 15, the government of Alberta "introduced [this] Feral Horse Management Framework to provide guidance to sustainably manage feral horse populations" in 2023, so I guess my questions are around that. It says how we have, according to the last survey, a minimum of 1,400 feral horses and that this program has a specific focus on preventing population increases. So my question is: what are the population metrics? Is 1,400 too many? What's the goal, and how is that goal determined?

Ms Goulden: Yes. Thank you for the question. The development of the framework was a very collaborative process with the Feral Horse Advisory Committee. This committee had members from industry, stakeholder organizations, First Nations, and law enforcement because the issue of feral horses is a very strongly held – many people have very strong beliefs and feelings around this, so it was important for us to come up with a framework that took everybody's perspectives into account. The framework, I'm proud to say, was a very collaborative process. It considers integration with other land uses and establishes an approach to management whereby feral horses, livestock, and wildlife can sustainably share the landscape.

You asked about population. You're right that currently there are over 1,400 feral horses, as determined through a ministry-led aerial survey conducted in January and February of '24. The results of that count are a summary of all the horses observed during the survey. It is considered scientifically accurate for management purposes.

A specific focus on preventing population increases in the Elbow, Ghost, and Sundre equine management zones will include initiatives such as adoption programs – and thank you to your constituent for the work that she does in that regard – and contraception efforts by horse advocacy groups. Those are the ways

that we are collectively managing the feral horse population according to a collaboratively created framework.

Ms de Jonge: So is there a goal to keep the feral horse population within a certain number? I'm just curious about that.

Ms Goulden: Yes. There is a goal to keep it within a certain population, and that number is determined through that collaborative process as a way of making sure that livestock and feral horses and other wildlife can all exist on the landscape together.

Ms de Jonge: You mentioned in your previous answer that you're working with horse advocacy groups. I'm curious if one of the groups you're working with is the Wild Horses of Alberta Society?

Ms Goulden: They are a part of our stakeholder group. Yes.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, through the chair. I also read in the report about management zones. There are a number of management zones that are listed there. Through the chair, can you please provide further details on those management zones and different initiatives to manage the population per zone, or is it sort of an overarching approach that you take across the province, or does that differ between zones?

Ms Goulden: It differs between zones because the zones are not all the same. There is an overarching sort of objective of management, but each zone is looked at. They're unique situations. The populations vary in the different zones. Even the landscape varies in the different zones.

Ms de Jonge: Moving on now. In the annual report, the next page, it's highlighting Alberta's watercourse crossing program. I see this program dedicates funding to address legacy issues of government-owned crossings, and consists of assessments and remediation grant programs and a capital investment program. According to the annual report assessments are being completed on about 800 government-owned crossings in high-priority watersheds for compliance with environmental laws, and the program funds the replacement and repair of watercourse crossing structures that are fragmenting fish habitat or impeding watershed productivity. Through the chair, can the ministry expand on the funding that's distributed through the watercourse crossing remediation grant program in '23-24 including funding distributed and remediation planning across Alberta?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. So this particular program that you've identified, which is the remediation grant program, is for municipalities. In '23-24 we gave out \$862,000 in grant payments: \$275,000 to Clearwater county, \$137,000 to the municipal district of Bonnyville, \$200,000 to the municipal district of Ranchland, \$250,000 to the municipal district of Pincher Creek. All of these were to either remediate or to complete detailed assessments and engineering designs for what the remediation should look like. A lot of planning goes into these remediations, including assessments and then the engineering designs. This funding helped about 18 crossings owned or managed by municipalities.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you. I see the ministry invested \$4.4 million in the watercourse crossing capital investment program in '23-24. Can the ministry explain what remediation projects were completed through that program and provide an overview of remediation planning that is continuing across Alberta? Is that capital investment program also for municipalities, or what's the structure of that?

Ms Goulden: This one's slightly different. This is not for municipalities. This is for, actually, Transportation and Economic Corridors. These are the government-owned crossings that we need to also remediate. We worked with Transportation and Economic Corridors in '23-24 for that amount of money. There were a number of culverts that were remediated through those dollars as well as ongoing assessment analysis for other remediation projects. We did planning for 28 crossings, and since 2020 we've assessed over 4,000 government-owned crossings to determine the numbers that were reported in the annual report.

Ms de Jonge: Through the chair, thank you. Now, jumping ahead to page 25. The Ministry of Forestry and Parks issued a total of, I see, 46 timber permits, including 22 permits issued to support access to fire-damaged timber from the 2023 wildfire season during the '23-24 reporting period. These permits are enabling short-term access to fibre up to five years for community timber program members and commercial operators. Through the chair: can the officials please outline how the number of timber permits issued for the '23-24 period compares to the '22-23 reporting period?

9:50

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Just to be clear about what a timber permit is, it's a short-term type of forest tenure, and it's designed for smaller forestry operators. We issued a total of 56 timber permits during the '22-23 reporting period, but zero of those were for fire-damage timber. Those were just sort of regular timber permits. So that's your comparison number.

Ms de Jonge: On page 25 it says that, in addition to the 46 short-term permits that were issued across Alberta, there were four timber quotas and nine timber licences issued in '23-24, which allowed access to fibre for up to a 20-year period. Can you please explain to the committee how Forestry and Parks is balancing long-term access to timber harvesting with the need for a sustainable and a secure fibre supply?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Alberta's forest regulatory framework adheres to internationally recognized principles of sustainable forest management. So we try to sustain multiple values on the landscape of both the ability of the forest companies to harvest but also the sustainability of the forest itself. Companies have to manage for a diversity of forest types and over a 200-year time frame.

The Chair: Thank you. For this final round members may read questions into the record for a written response. We'll proceed with questions from the Official Opposition. You have three minutes.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The expenses allocated to the rangeland lease program: how much is allocated to monitoring the state of the environment in lease lands? When will the department return to reporting on percentage of grazing lands that are of good standing? In the pursuit of red tape reduction to ease access and reduce regulatory oversight, how will the ministry ensure the environmental sustainability of rangeland ecosystems? How many hectares of provincial land were, through distribution, converted to productive agricultural land in the reporting year? How do we assess the economic value of forest ecology against the economic value of productive agricultural land in making those decisions and dispositions?

Ms Renaud: On page 29 the department talks about 87 conservation officers that are highly trained and goes into some detail about the training. Could the department tell us what training is done by these officers to understand disability? We know in law enforcement, for

example, it's important to understand when someone's having a seizure versus being unco-operative or someone is autistic versus being unco-operative, so if you could outline that training.

We also read that \$59.7 million was spent to improve and expand access to provincial lands and public spaces and the management of 3,485 kilometres of trail. Could you tell me what percentage or how many kilometres of trail are accessible and if you have any mechanism or any standards to measure that? I'm not really talking about William Watson trails, just general trails.

Finally, the ministry notes that there are 24 partner organizations that received \$3.95 million to look at the management of trail systems. If you could tell the committee: how many of those organizations that received grants in the year that we're talking about have experience or expertise with accessibility?

That's it. Thanks.

Mr. Schmidt: I would also like to ask some questions. Can the ministry or can the department provide results of gravel pit inspections and enforcement actions? Can the ministry provide specific details on its most current estimate for financial liabilities for unreclaimed sand and gravel pits. Can the ministry provide an update on how much in reclamation security was collected in '23-24 for gravel pits? And what work did the department do to collect outstanding royalties from gravel pits on oil sands sites? How much money was collected in '23-24 from those sites?

Thank you.

Ms Renaud: Final question. On page 27 I note that there will be a strategy that is expected to be released, but there's no year. Under key objective 3.1 at the bottom of the first paragraph there's a blank. If the ministry could fill that in.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move to government members for three minutes of questions.

Mr. Rowswell: Under outcome 2 on page 24 of the report the ministry aimed to provide timely and transparent decisions to support an environmentally sustainable forest, natural resource and tourism, and economic opportunities consistent with government plans and policy. One of these aims is to minimize regulatory process barriers to improve service delivery, reduce red tape, and support economic opportunities on Crown lands and forests. Can the ministry outline how service standards were improved while also reducing red tape in '23-24, and can the ministry expand on the effects of the modernizing digital system in '23-24 including the new Alberta Parks reservation platform?

My second one is the same as the opposition, relative to trails, so we'll let it ride there.

The Chair: Thank you. Anybody else?

Okay. I would like to thank officials from the Ministry of Forestry and Parks and the office of the Auditor General for their participation in responding to committee members' questions. We ask that any outstanding questions be responded to in writing within 30 days and forwarded to the committee clerk.

Other business. Are there any other items for discussion under other business? Seeing none, the next meeting of the committee is on Tuesday, November 19, 2024, with the Ministry of Technology and Innovation.

I will now call for a motion to adjourn. Would a member move that the Tuesday, November 5, 2024, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be adjourned? So moved. All in favour? Any opposed? The motion is carried, and the meeting stands adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9:57 a.m.]

