



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Ministry of Forestry and Parks

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Dan Lux, Assistant Deputy Minister, Forestry

Shane Schreiber, Assistant Deputy Minister, Lands Operations

Shakeeb Siddiqui, Assistant Deputy Minister, Financial Services, and Senior Financial Officer

9 a.m.

Tuesday, October 27, 2026

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

The Acting Deputy Chair: Good morning, everyone. The time is 9 o'clock, so I will call the meeting of Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone in attendance. My name is Glenn van Dijken, the MLA for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock, and I'm the acting chair of the committee. As we begin this morning, I will hand the floor over to the Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright for brief remarks.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you very much, Chair. I'd just like to ask everyone to take a moment to reflect on the issue we had at the Wainwright military base and reflect on the soldiers that were injured and lost their lives. Not only that but I was able to go to the hospital, and the emergency people: they just did a tremendous job. Some of them were very stressed by this as well, so just take a short moment to reflect before we start our meeting. Thank you very much.

That's good. Thank you very much.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Good. Thank you, Member.

As we start this meeting, I would invite members and guests and LAO staff at the table to introduce themselves. We will begin at my right.

Mr. Sinclair: Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chair. My name is Scott Sinclair, and I'm the MLA for Lesser Slave Lake.

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

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

Ms Lovely: Good morning, everyone. MLA Jackie Lovely from the Camrose constituency.

Ms Goulden: Good morning, everyone. Ronda Goulden, Deputy Minister of Forestry and Parks, and I'll have my team introduce themselves, starting on my left.

Mr. Lux: Good morning, everyone. My name is Dan Lux. I'm the assistant deputy minister of forestry.

Mr. Schreiber: Morning. Shane Schreiber, assistant deputy minister of lands operations.

Mr. Siddiqui: Good morning. Shakeeb Siddiqui, assistant deputy minister of financial services and senior financial officer.

Mr. Lamabe: Good morning, everybody. Trevor Lamabe, seasonal ADM, Alberta Wildfire.

Mr. Peters: Good morning. Phil Peters, Auditor General.

Ms Hayes: Good morning. Patty Hayes, Assistant Auditor General.

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

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Member Eremenko: Good morning. Janet Eremenko, Calgary-Currie.

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

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

The Acting Deputy Chair: We will now go to those joining us online. I would ask that you please introduce yourself as I call your name. MLA Eric Bouchard.

Mr. Bouchard: Good morning, everyone. I'm Eric Bouchard, MLA for Calgary-Lougheed.

The Acting Deputy Chair: I would note for the record the following substitutions: Mr. Bouchard is for Mr. Lundy with Mr. van Dijken acting as deputy chair, Mr. Rowswell for Ms de Jonge, Mr. Sinclair for hon. Mrs. Sawyer.

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts is mandated to review the Public Accounts of the government of Alberta and reports of the Auditor General. The committee examines the administration of government policy, not the merits of it, with the objective of enhancing transparency and accountability in government spending of public funds. The committee operates best when it maintains a nonpartisan approach in carrying out its responsibilities on behalf of all Albertans.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. The microphones are operated by Legislative Assembly Office 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 Legislative Assembly website.

Those participating by videoconference are encouraged to please turn on your camera while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. Members participating virtually who wish to be placed on a speaker's list are asked to e-mail or send a message to committee clerk Warren Huffman, and members in the room are asked to please signal to the chair.

I would ask that you please set your cell phones and other devices to silent for the duration of this meeting. I would also remind all members that comments should flow through the chair at all times.

Hon. members, we have a draft agenda put before us. Are there any changes or additions to the agenda as presented? Seeing none, if a member would like to move the agenda to be approved. Member Rowswell. The Standing Committee on Public Accounts approves the proposed agenda as distributed for its October 27, 2026, meeting. Any discussion on the motion? All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. On the phones, in favour. Thank you. That motion is carried.

We have the minutes from the May 12, 2026, meeting of the committee. Do members have any errors or omissions to note? Hearing none, I would ask for any member that would like to move the approval of the minutes of the May 12, 2026, meeting. MLA Cyr. Any discussion on the minutes? Seeing none, I'll call the question. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Online. Okay. Thank you. That motion is carried.

Agenda item 4. I would like to welcome our guests from the Ministry of Forestry and Parks and the office of the Auditor General, who are here to address the ministry's annual report 2025-26, responsibilities under their purview during that reporting period, and relevant reports and outstanding recommendations of the Auditor General. I invite officials from the ministry to provide opening remarks not exceeding 10 minutes at this time.

Deputy Minister Goulden, you may proceed.

Ms Goulden: Thank you, and good morning, everyone. As mentioned, I'm Ronda Goulden, Deputy Minister of Forestry and Parks, and I'm glad to be here today to share our department's results from 2025-26 and to speak about the work our employees and partners are doing across Alberta. I'm joined today by a number

of key executives from my department. You've met these at table. I also have Darren Tansowny, assistant deputy minister of parks, sitting in the gallery as well. Together this team represents the major areas of the department's work.

Alberta's forests, parks, and public lands are among our province's greatest strengths. They support jobs and communities, offer outstanding recreation, and hold deep cultural and environmental value. Our department is responsible for managing these landscapes so they continue to benefit Albertans now and into the future. Today I'll highlight our results from 2025-26 and explain how we are balancing the many demands on Alberta's landscapes. That includes protecting communities, supporting economic activity, expanding recreation opportunities, and caring for the long-term health of our lands, forests, wildlife, and parks.

Alberta's public lands, forests, and provincial parks are key contributors to our economy and our way of life. They support forestry, tourism, agriculture, and outfitting as well as camping, hiking, trail riding, hunting, and fishing. Provincial Crown lands also support the exercise of treaty rights. Our role is to balance these many uses while keeping Alberta's natural resources healthy and productive.

In 2025 we managed strong demand for outdoor recreation. We completed the strategy for Crown lands recreation and conservation. We successfully hosted the G-7 Leaders Summit in Kananaskis and released Alberta's wildfire mitigation strategy, positioning Alberta as a leader in the country on wildfire management. We also made continued investments in projects and infrastructure that matter most to Albertans.

I'll begin with the plans that will guide how we manage Alberta's parks and Crown land in the years ahead. In January 2025 we released the Crown land recreation and conservation strategy and a new plan for parks. Together these plans set a clear path forward to balance recreation outcomes with conservation and keep Alberta's outdoors a top destination for Albertans and visitors, while also ensuring their long-term sustainability. Well-managed Crown lands strengthen Alberta's economy, support communities, and offer people many ways to enjoy the outdoors. They also protect the land, water, and wildlife that make these experiences possible. As more people explore Alberta's outdoors, these plans will help us make consistent, responsible decisions and guide our work for years to come.

Demand for Alberta's parks remained strong in 2025. More than 730,000 camper nights were booked, and park staff delivered nearly 3,000 educational and interpretive programs. Satisfaction with those programs remained above 95 per cent. Our employees also played an important public safety role during the G-7 Leaders Summit in Kananaskis in June 2025. Conservation officers supported human-wildlife conflict mitigation work, backcountry patrols, check points, and trail work. Park staff worked to minimize disruption to the visitors who explore Kananaskis in the spring and summer, and the wildfire team was vigilant as ever in being ready to respond. Hosting an event of this scale required careful multijurisdictional co-ordination, and I am incredibly proud of the professionalism our staff brought to that work.

9:10

Alberta's government also continued to invest in Crown land and parks infrastructure to meet growing recreation demand. Safe drinking water, washrooms, campgrounds, trails, and day-use areas are the foundation of a safe and enjoyable visit. Maintaining and improving these facilities helps more people experience Alberta's outdoors. In '25-26 we invested \$64.3 million in recreation infrastructure and completed 67 projects across Alberta. These projects improved campgrounds, trails, day-use areas, and essential

services, giving Albertans and visitors safer and more accessible ways to enjoy the outdoors.

Alberta Forestry and Parks prioritized sustainable land management through habitat and forest management activities that help keep Crown lands healthy and productive while maintaining access for recreation, agriculture, and other uses. This includes work to maintain the health of aquatic and rangeland ecosystems such as improving watercourse crossings to reduce impacts on fish habitat as well as managing Alberta's rangelands responsibly. The scale of this work is significant. Our lands division helps manage the appropriate and sustainable use of over 60 per cent of our province's land mass, or 400,000 square kilometres of public land, which is an area larger than France or California.

In '25-26 we invested \$10.8 million in rangeland operations. This supported the management of more than 7,100 grazing dispositions across 8.6 million acres. The work helps maintain sustainable land use that provides environmental, economic, and social benefits. This is important work that supports rangeland health and biodiversity while balancing the needs of agricultural stakeholders. We continue to manage our rangelands in sustainable ways, as outlined in the 2023 rangeland grazing framework, and to implement the feral horse management framework. We also continued work on watercourse crossings management that can fragment fish habitats or impede watershed productivity. Repairing or replacing priority crossings reconnects habitat and supports healthier aquatic ecosystems.

The ministry also updated the Wildlife Act and related regulations to make the rules clearer and help keep hunting and trapping safe and sustainable. Participation in hunting and angling generated more than \$32.2 million in licence and permit sales. The minister's special licence program generated about \$1.5 million more, providing stable funding to reinvest in conservation initiatives.

I'll now turn to wildfire management, which remained one of our largest operational priorities. The 2025 wildfire season was another challenging wildfire season that we approached with new strategies and more efficient use of existing programs and services. Nearly 1,300 Alberta wildland firefighters and support staff worked to keep crews, equipment, and aircraft ready and in the right places. Despite challenging conditions more than 85 per cent of new wildfire starts were kept under two hectares in size. We also expanded operational technologies and capabilities to improve wildfire response effectiveness and also wildland firefighter safety. A new helicopter hoist program helps crews reach difficult locations more safely. We expanded night response capability through heavy equipment, water tenders, drones, night-vision helicopters, and firefighting crews.

Alberta also secured a contract for five new De Havilland Canadair DHC-515 water bombers, which will be built in Alberta. This project represents an investment of about \$400 million, with the first aircraft expected in 2031. Once delivered, the new water bomber capacity will strengthen aerial wildfire suppression capacity and make a difference in future wildfire seasons. But fighting wildfires is only part of the solution. Our department is also focused on the important work of mitigation across the province. In 2026 we launched the Alberta wildfire mitigation strategy, establishing a province-wide framework to reduce wildfire risk, protect communities, and improve long-term resilience.

Alberta's forest industry supports thousands of jobs, rural communities, and economic activity across the province. Our role is to help provide a secure and sustainable timber supply while focusing on forest management strategies that prioritize ecosystem health, align with species-at-risk requirements, and reduce wildfire risks. We renewed timber quotas and licences and continued

discussions on forest management agreement renewals. These agreements give industry operators greater certainty, support long-term planning, and help sustain good-paying jobs for rural Albertans. These renewals maintain long-term economic stability while ensuring responsible use of our province's forests.

In addition, 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. These programs help small- and large-scale forest industry operators adopt new technology, develop products, and reach new markets.

I just want to go back to wildfire mitigation for a moment to highlight the \$24.9 million in wildfire mitigation initiatives. This includes FireSmart education, the community fireguard program, and projects that reduce hazardous forest fuels. Through this work we supported the construction of five community fireguards near a number of different communities, creating nearly 1,000 hectares of strategic fuel breaks. We also re-treated existing fireguards near Swan Hills and Hinton, helping maintain protections for at-risk communities.

The results I've shared today reflect the breadth of our department's work. We strengthened the management of Alberta's parks, forests, and public lands and invested in the places where Albertans camp, hike, work, and explore, and we continue to support the industries and communities that rely on these landscapes. There is more work ahead, but we have strong plans and a clear direction for the future. We will continue working to keep Alberta's landscapes healthy, safe, and accessible.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister Goulden.

I now turn the floor over to the Auditor General, Mr. Phillip Peters, for his comments and opening remarks.

Mr. Peters, you have five minutes.

Mr. Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good morning, hon. committee members and officials from the department. Thank you for permitting me and my office to be part of these proceedings. We are deeply committed to the duties we owe under the Auditor General Act and the value we bring by identifying through an independent lens opportunities for improving government processes. We are happy to provide assistance to this committee during or after these proceedings.

I will begin, however, with a few comments related to our outstanding recommendations. There are four; one is ready for assessment. In our 2023-24 financial statement audit work we made a recommendation that the department improve financial information preparation and reporting processes, which the department has indicated are ready for assessment. The remaining three outstanding recommendations relate to our October 20, 2008, performance audit of the management of sand and gravel pits and subsequent follow-up work conducted in 2014 and 2019.

In 2008 we recommended that the department improve the effectiveness and efficiency of reclamation monitoring and enforce reclamation requirements. We conducted a follow-up audit in 2014 where this recommendation was repeated, acknowledging work that had been done to improve land inspections, including the introduction of a regulation and developing and delivering land management inspection training. However, key findings of our report also noted concerns around inspection: falling short of inspection targets, not following established processes, and failure to levy penalties. In 2019 we reported that the department had not implemented our recommendations, and we made two additional recommendations: that the department collect sufficient security to compel operators to reclaim the land to recover costs if operators

fail to do so and that the department collect outstanding royalties for sand and gravel on oil sands sites.

The reason I summarize some of the history of our recommendations is mostly to draw attention to the length of time some of the recommendations have been outstanding. Contextually, we acknowledge some of the complexities to implementing our recommendations. For example, responsibility for these recommendations has moved across numerous departments over time. We will continue to work with the department regarding implementation of our recommendations.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank the committee for its ongoing work and for the Department of Forestry and Parks for its co-operation and assistance throughout our audit work. The department's willingness to engage with our office and provide the information we require is essential to the effective completion of our work.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I welcome any questions the committee may have.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Okay. Thank you.

We will now hear questions from committee members. We will begin with the Official Opposition caucus. You have 15 minutes.

Member Schmidt will begin.

9:20

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. I want to start with the wildlife management responder network, which is discussed on page 33 of the annual report, and I want to start by going back to the grizzly bear recovery plan that the department put out, which states that the population in each bear management area should be resampled every five years. Now, the last data that we've been shown was that work hasn't been completed since 2008.

Can the department share with the committee its plans for data collection and whether it plans to conduct a new province-wide DNA population assessment of grizzlies in order to support the population management decisions that are being made and to meet the objectives in the recovery plan?

Ms Goulden: Yes. Thank you for the question. I just would remind the committee that the responsibilities for monitoring belong with Environment and Protected Areas, and then we are responsible for allocation of game species and then also there's some other wildlife management, including human-wildlife coexistence.

I can say, though, that there is a project under way with FRI to do the exact measuring that you're asking about.

Mr. Schmidt: Sorry. Who is FRI?

Mr. Lux: It's called FRI Research. It's based out of Hinton, Alberta, and in the past, under Gordon Stenhouse, has done a lot of the monitoring, and that organization will continue that work based out of Hinton.

Mr. Schmidt: Can the department tell the committee what the scope of work is and when that work will be completed?

Ms Goulden: As I mentioned before, the responsibility for monitoring is with Environment and Protected Areas.

Mr. Schmidt: Oh, I see. This is something that you're aware of but not in control of?

Ms Goulden: Exactly.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Yeah. I guess my follow-up question, then, is: because the department makes wildlife allocation decisions but

isn't in control of the data collection, in the absence of having data, how do you make those decisions on how many tags are allocated, that kind of thing?

Ms Goulden: First of all, I'd just like to clarify the difference between grizzly and allocations otherwise. Because grizzly is still a protected species and has a recovery plan in place, we don't do allocations for grizzly. For the rest of the wildlife populations we look at the numbers, the population assessments, and then our own biologists and scientists look at what would be the right allocations, how do we manage the population, what's the right number of female tags versus male tags. Those kinds of things are what our department would be responsible for.

Mr. Schmidt: The state of recovery priority for grizzlies is to resolve human-caused mortality and to ensure a supply of high-quality secure habitat through appropriate land management. Can the department provide the committee with a status update on progress on achieving this recovery priority?

Ms Goulden: Again, this species-at-risk work is with Environment and Protected Areas.

Mr. Schmidt: Then how does this department ensure a supply of high-quality secure habitat for grizzlies?

Ms Goulden: Our department would be looking at some of the land management areas, and we would be following the grizzly recovery plan. The plan is put out by Environment and Protected Areas. It sets out certain requirements, and we follow that in our land management decisions.

Mr. Schmidt: Don't spare the details. What work has the department done in '25-26 to manage the land in a way that habitat is available for grizzly bear recovery?

Ms Goulden: Well, I'll give you one example. In the Kananaskis region we did some habitat enhancement projects there. Obviously, that's an important corridor for wildlife, and we did some habitat enhancement areas even in how we redid our Spray Lakes campground. There was a lot of science that went into designing that campground and figuring out where it should be to reduce human-wildlife conflict with bears in the area as well as to enhance habitat.

Mr. Schmidt: But does the department itself have any kind of goals or performance indicators around habitat recovery and status? You're doing the work; how do you know that you're working towards providing enough habitat for grizzly bear recovery?

Ms Goulden: Again, we work very closely with the Department of Environment and Protected Areas in this regard. They are responsible for species at risk. They are responsible for the recovery plan, and we work with them. We have the scientists, we have . . .

Mr. Schmidt: I understand that, but who's ultimately responsible for deciding whether or not government is meeting its objectives? Is that your department, or is that environment?

Ms Goulden: That would be environment. They're responsible for the plan.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. So if your department is failing in its duty to achieve an objective with regard to land management for the purposes of recovery, who's ultimately responsible for that failure should it happen?

Ms Goulden: Well, you're speculating at the moment, so . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Yes, I am, but hypothetically speaking, if your department were not to provide adequate recovery habitat, would you bear that responsibility or would environment bear that responsibility or would it just be a passing the buck situation that we often see in government?

Ms Goulden: We work very closely with Environment and Protected Areas, so if there is a problem with grizzly recovery, which there isn't at the moment – it is a recovering species, and the numbers are going up – we look at those numbers, environment looks at those numbers, and we make decisions. They then would adjust their plan. If there was something that was happening that wasn't good, they would adjust their plan, then we would work with that plan.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. Now, what are the objectives and targets of the wildfire responder program, specifically with respect to grizzly bear management?

Ms Goulden: I assume you're talking about the wildlife responder . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Yes. Sorry. The wildlife management responder program.

Ms Goulden: The responder program doesn't have targets. We're not trying to achieve a certain thing, a certain number of animals responded to. What our ultimate outcome with the wildlife responder program is human safety. Where there are assessments of human-wildlife conflict with human safety or public safety, that is when we respond, but we don't have a target of how many we're trying to respond to.

Mr. Schmidt: I think you were misinterpreting my question. It wasn't necessarily asking whether or not there were targets for the number of bears to respond to, but you did mention that there is a target for wildlife safety. Does the ministry track any patterns of human-bear conflicts, and if so, how does the ministry use that information to manage this program?

Ms Goulden: The program is a last-effort program. Where the public safety need is higher than any other need, that's when the responder program comes into effect. It is a program that the fish and wildlife enforcement service would have been doing beforehand anyway, so it's not a new thing that there would be a response to problem wildlife. What we measure: it's a more well-rounded program than just the responder program. We also have the BearSmart grants that we give for public education to try and prevent human-wildlife conflict in the first place, so there's quite a bit of work that goes on on the front end with education. Many organizations are partners with us in that to try and reduce human-wildlife conflict, and the responder program is only activated at the very end when human public safety is at risk.

Mr. Schmidt: Right. Can the deputy minister tell the committee: how do you measure public safety risk, and what is the threshold above which the wildlife responder program is activated?

Ms Goulden: There are a number of criteria in the program for when the responder program is activated, and I'm going to ask ADM Shane Schreiber to talk us through those.

Mr. Schreiber: Yeah. Chair, the wildlife responder program works in close co-operation with the fish and wildlife enforcement service. With grizzly bears specifically they do everything in accordance

with the grizzly bear management plan. What happens is that, just for those of you that may not know this, if the fish and wildlife enforcement service determines that a bear needs to be euthanized because they've been habituated or they're a public safety threat, they can if the conditions are right ask for one of these responders to come in and deal with the problem bear.

9:30

It's interesting because what we're finding is that we're seeing a significant increase in human-wildlife conflict or human-grizzly conflict, especially in the southern, western part in and around Pincher Creek, that area there. We've seen an increase in responders there, and an increase in responders in the northern range of the grizzly bears, largely outside of their core recovery area.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, assistant deputy minister. There are a couple of things that I want to drill down with here. You're saying that there is an increase in human-bear conflict. Does the department have any quantification of that measure, and if so, what is that?

Mr. Schreiber: Yeah. We largely track that through the fish and wildlife enforcement service. They keep track of all the reports of wildlife conflict, and then we also have data on – so, for instance, we used to run the . . .

Mr. Schmidt: We're burning time here. What are the numbers? How many conflicts were there, say, 10 years ago compared to now?

Mr. Schreiber: Yeah. See, we don't have those numbers. Fish and wildlife enforcement service has those numbers. I can get them for you, though.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. So there's an as-yet unsubstantiated claim, and I was told that we would have criteria for when fish and wildlife deemed that wildlife responders would be the appropriate response mechanism for a grizzly bear. What are those criteria?

Mr. Schreiber: Sorry. Just a correction, Chair. I do have the number for '25-26. It's that 1,084 human-wildlife conflict incidents were reported, and 509 with bears. Yeah.

Mr. Schmidt: Five hundred and nine with bears. Okay. And the criteria?

Ms Goulden: And your criteria. The assessment considers factors, including the nature and severity of the conflict, the public safety risk, the bear's behaviour and history because many of these bears do have collars, the likelihood of future conflict, and whether relocation or other management options are likely to be successful.

Mr. Schmidt: So what are the conditions then that fish and wildlife decide: "No. We can't handle this. We have to call out to wildlife responders?"

Ms Goulden: It's not about fish and wildlife's capability.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. But we just heard the assistant deputy minister say fish and wildlife made the determination about when to activate the program. What triggers their determination that the program needs to be activated?

Ms Goulden: They make the call that a bear needs to be removed, and then . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Right, but based on what criteria?

Ms Goulden: Which I just gave you.

Mr. Schmidt: Yes, but it's still not specific. So a bear needs to be removed. Why can't fish and wildlife do it? Why does the wildlife responder network have to be activated? You know, the deputy minister seems to think that she's giving us specific information, but she's not. What is the specific trigger for activating the wildlife responder network?

Ms Goulden: Fish and wildlife can make that call if it's possible, if they know that there are responders in the area. It also saves on a public resource to have the responder do it instead of fish and wildlife. It's not about their capability, though.

Mr. Schmidt: It's about the ability to respond. So what is the measurement for the wildlife responder's ability to respond that triggers this? How do they know that wildlife responders are going to be better able to handle this? What is the measure that they use to activate that?

Ms Goulden: The responders have to have proven their ability to euthanize an animal, and they do that through their hunting experience.

Mr. Schmidt: Okay. So we have 4,000 applications according to the report. Now, are those submitted in hopes of being called up for the wildlife responder program, or are those only submitted once fish and wildlife has determined that they need to activate this program?

Mr. Schreiber: The 4,000 applications are the sum total of all the people that applied to be a responder, and then from that pool we pick a much smaller number, largely around geography so that the response can be timely, you know, kind of north and south. It's a much smaller number that's actually selected. I think it's 50 that are selected in each region. Then from that much smaller pool, essentially the fish and wildlife enforcement service contacts one of our staff members who can pull the next name on the list and dispatch them, and ask them if they are available.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Thank you. That concludes the opening 15 minutes from the Official Opposition.

I will now turn the floor over to the government caucus. MLA Rowsell will begin. You have 15 minutes in this portion.

Mr. Rowsell: Thank you very much. I'll focus on some wildfire series of questions here. On page 51 and 52 the Forestry and Parks' annual report for '25-26 shows that ministry expenses were \$766.6 million higher than budgeted primarily due to wildfire presuppression and response. Similar variances occurred in '24-25 when Alberta experienced another significant wildfire season, including the Jasper wildfire. Could the deputy minister break down the \$766 million variance between presuppression and direct wildfire response costs?

Ms Goulden: For the '25-26 fiscal year, as you mentioned, approximately \$756.2 million in wildfire-related expenditures were recorded; \$232.2 million was for presuppression, \$524 million was for suppression or wildfire response, and that represents about 70 per cent of the expenditures. These expenditures reflect the significant resources required to maintain wildfire preparedness and respond to them throughout the fiscal year.

Mr. Rowsell: Since presuppression involves planned preparedness activities, you know, should you be able to budget for them more accurately than, say, a heavy wildfire season and fighting the fire as

opposed to preparing to fight the fire? Would that be unusual to have that much come out relative to preparedness?

Ms Goulden: It's not unusual, and this is an ongoing topic about how much should be in a base budget and how much should be in the contingency. There is an important distinction between your planned base preparedness and your variable presuppression. Base funding covers the expected and planned costs required to maintain annual readiness. It would have your regular permanent, your seasonal staffing, your training, your facilities, your telecommunications, some of your prevention and detection activities. That's what would be in our base budget and is planned for every year.

The presuppression response funding covers the unpredictable and highly variable costs driven by actual wildfire conditions. Those can include aircraft flying costs. When we're talking about presuppression, we're talking about: how do we move our resources to the right area? We have those base resources, but there is an expense in flying the helicopter or flying the airplane to the place where we know there might be wildfire risk at that moment based on the drought conditions or the fire risk. The scale and location of wildfire activity cannot be reliably known in advance, so Alberta maintains the base capacity and uses the province contingency mechanism for extraordinary wildfire expenditures.

Mr. Rowswell: It must be difficult then to budget for that. Like, are there any improvements or lessons learned that you could change, or are you doing the best that you can do?

Ms Goulden: We definitely are always learning lessons. I'll give you some examples of the lessons that we've learned over these past seasons. Seasonal firefighters were hired earlier and contracts were extended later to improve readiness at both ends of the wildfire season, because we're seeing elongated seasons. We also expanded our night response capability because we could see that there's some value in fighting some fires at night when it's cooler and you have a better chance of getting ahead of the fire. We also had, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, the helicopter hoist capability to be able to get both people in and people out of the fires, our firefighters in and out of some of the more difficult fires. So we're always modernizing our information.

We did also take some actions this year to improve expenditure management. We strengthened centralized oversight through the Wildfire Coordination Centre, particularly for some of our major cost drivers like our aircraft, and we also incorporated budget considerations when we were looking at our operational strategies.

9:40

Part of what I have given the team is to say that your primary job is still to get the fires out, but I don't want you to think that you have a complete blank cheque when you do that. You need to think about the cost. Is this the wisest move? We've put some controls in place to make that happen.

Mr. Rowswell: You mentioned night firefighting. Was that new in '25-26, or has that always been there? Has that been improved, or do you have more capabilities?

Ms Goulden: I'm going to ask ADM Trevor Lamabe to talk in a moment about when it started. It wasn't new in '25-26, but we expanded the number of night-vision helicopters in '25-26.

For when it started, Trevor?

Mr. Lamabe: As it relates to the aerial side of it, we took a real serious look in the year before. Having aircraft out during that –

like, those three fire seasons were extremely challenging for us in a fire environment, finding an environment that we could safely put the men and women on the ground, support them, and provide the necessary assistance to some of the communities that we are trying to protect.

The year before we brought in our first NVIS, or night-vision helicopters, and we had a successful trial. The results and the investment proved itself without doubt. The next year we expanded it even further, and we looked at different types of aircraft with different types of abilities, larger water capabilities, larger buckets.

But then we were concerned about the firefighter on the ground. If something happened in those conditions where we couldn't get that individual out, how would we manage that? Now our last step is looking at another night-vision helicopter under our hoist program with the capabilities of pulling firefighters out.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you.

Page 43 and 44 of the annual report describes – and you've talked a little bit about this – the Alberta wildfire mitigation strategy launched in March '26. The strategy establishes a province-wide framework focused on risk awareness, partnerships, governance, technology, land-use planning, and hazardous fuels management. Could the deputy minister explain how the wildfire mitigation strategy changes Alberta's approach from responding to wildfires after they begin to proactively reducing risk before the fire occurs?

Ms Goulden: Certainly. Thank you for the question. The Alberta wildfire mitigation strategy shifts our provincial approach from relying primarily on emergency response to: how can we reduce risk before the fire begins?

A couple of the major actions in here were adopting a whole-of-society approach. Wildfire management is not just the sole responsibility of ADM Lamabe and his crew. Everybody in society has a role to play in preventing fires from starting.

We took action on three scales: the individual homeowner, the community, and then the landscape levels. Some of the changes that we've made in particular here have been our fireguard program, looking at the community and landscape level, not just the individual homeowner and community through our FireSmart program. Those are our two big programs, FireSmart and fireguard, that we've been using to implement the mitigation strategy.

We've also done some accelerating of hazardous fuels management. When we looked at the top communities that had wildfire risk in the province, we identified them with our own wildfire experts and then created what we call a hazardous fuels reduction program, where we work with forest companies to reduce the hazardous fuels around those communities so that should a large fire happen, we have a much better chance of getting that fire out and it not reaching the community in the first place.

Mr. Rowswell: You mentioned in your report that you accomplished five of those communities.

Ms Goulden: Yes. Over a thousand hectares of land cleared as well.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. How many communities would require that, to consider that or do that?

Ms Goulden: Well, perhaps I'll ask ADM Dan Lux to talk about the statistics in that regard. There is quite a long list of communities. Like, any community that's embedded in the forest protection area or the green area of the province is going to have some level of risk attached to it.

We had sort of a top 10. We were able to address a top five. Canmore is a perfect example of that, of the fireguard work that we've had there.

Dan, if you just have anything to add.

Mr. Lux: Yeah. Thanks. For the community hazard reduction we assessed every community in Alberta for their wildfire risk, looking at the fuels entering that community. From there we triage down to the ones that were the highest risk – it's also the communities that actually had the most merchantable timber – in order to have an impact on reducing that wildfire risk because we were using the forest industry as our main tool in these kind of communities. At the end, initially, we identified 24 communities at that high risk, and the industry readjusted their harvest plans in order to target those areas right adjacent to that community and priority.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you.

How do you measure the performance? Do you have key performance measures to see if this is being successful or not?

Ms Goulden: Yes. We are in the process of creating them. Part of what the strategy commits to is that we will create them, and we're using a bit of a staged approach to measure progress. Some of the things that we're looking at are in the investments committed, what was actually spent, the number of projects completed and under way, the verified hectares that are treated and maintained, verified kilometres of fireguard completed or maintained, the number of priority communities receiving mitigation support, and the number of advanced home assessments completed and assessors trained. It just gives you some of the ideas of the kinds of things we're measuring. It's always difficult to prove a negative. How do you prove that a fire didn't happen there because of those efforts? It's not really an experiment we want to run, so we have other kinds of key performance metrics.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. I think I'll focus in on some water bomber questions here. You know, as the member for where Wainwright – that fire that happened on October 17: the incident was on federal land, and it was fast. Water bombers couldn't have helped because it was so quick that it happened. Page 40 of the annual report indicates that Alberta has committed approximately \$400 million to purchase five new DHC-515 water bombers with a \$120 million deposit paid in '25-26. Where is this multiyear investment reflected in the ministry's budget and financial plan?

Ms Goulden: The \$120 million deposit paid in 2025-26 shows in the financial transactions vote by program in the department's last incumbent schedule under the ministry financial information. Remaining payments will follow the contract and aircraft delivery schedule and are reflected through the ministry's capital planning because all \$400 million hasn't been spent. Only \$120 million has been spent.

Mr. Rowswell: When will each new craft become operational, and what will happen to the existing fleet as the new water bombers are introduced?

Ms Goulden: Well, the first aircraft is expected in 2031. The remaining aircraft will be introduced in accordance with the manufacturer's delivery schedule. They will still require commissioning, crew training, and operational integration before service. The existing fleet is something we're carefully monitoring. It will continue to provide aerial suppression capacity during the transition, and then we will make decisions at that time about

whether they should be retired or disposed, depending on the quality condition of the aircraft at that point in time.

Mr. Rowswell: What analysis demonstrated that owning the new provincial fleet provides better operational readiness and value for money when contracting additional aviation services?

Ms Goulden: Yes. It's an interesting question. Everything about wildfire is a balance of what you prepare for. Do you prepare for the worst, or do you prepare for the median? We built a ton of surge capacity into the system as well as resource-sharing agreements with our provinces, but provincial ownership does provide more assurance of us having those aircraft available. We don't have to worry about whether we can contract those aircraft for whatever reason. We get to be in control of the maintenance. We can see the safety. So it's a balance of: how much do we own versus how much do we contract? The analysis has been that it would be better to own some of these, especially as we see wildfire seasons across the country. The need for aircraft across the country is one of the top conversation topics at the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers about: what are we doing with our aircraft capacity? Alberta is well on its way to being self-sufficient in that regard.

Mr. Rowswell: Relative to that is interjurisdictional wildfire assistance. It's kind of what you're talking about there. The annual report on page 41 indicates that Alberta brought in more than 1,085 personnel and three air tankers from other provinces, territories, and countries during the '25 wildfire season. Could the deputy minister explain how mutual aid resources were co-ordinated and deployed and what financial arrangements govern the sharing of personnel and aircraft?

9:50

Ms Goulden: Yes. Resource sharing is an established component of Alberta's wildfire response model and does provide surge capacity when our requirements exceed our normal capacity. We do participate in the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, or CIFFC, which facilitates movements of firefighters.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Okay. Thank you. That concludes the questions from the government caucus first rotation.

We now move to the second rotation. Opposition caucus members have 10 minutes, and I will hand the floor over to MLA Eremenko.

Member Eremenko: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a few more questions on the wildfire responder program and problem grizzlies. The annual report reports that three bear authorizations were issued and one bear was killed under the program. Where was the one bear killed? Where in the province?

Mr. Schreiber: Yeah. I think it was, if I can recall correctly, up in the Grande Prairie area, up in the northeast.

Member Eremenko: Okay. So it was up north.

How many bears were removed in '25-26 by fish and wildlife officers?

Ms Goulden: I do not have that information.

Member Eremenko: Okay. Can you provide that to us in writing?

Ms Goulden: I think you can ask for that from the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Services. That's where the fish and wildlife enforcement service resides.

Member Eremenko: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought that previously with my colleague you had talked about how fish and wildlife are the determinant to decide when a problem bear can kind of tip over into the wildfire response program, but fish and wildlife is not under your purview?

Ms Goulden: Correct. It's a challenge for us, too.

Member Eremenko: Okay. With the one bear that was killed and, I suppose, any kind of, you know, future bears that might be removed under the program, what evidence is collected to determine whether the bear killed is the correct bear?

Mr. Schreiber: Yeah. I'll try and answer that. First of all, usually the bear is identified through – like, fish and wildlife enforcement service will try and keep eyes on the bear so that they can then positively identify it and hand that over to the responder. Where they can't and they have to track it, the responder will be given photographs and other positive identification so that they know they have the right bear. Subsequent to the bear's destruction we can do a number of different DNA tests to confirm if it was the right bear. They can use hair samples, paw prints, et cetera.

Member Eremenko: They can, but is that a requirement, for example, in the program?

Mr. Schreiber: It's not a hard and fast requirement, but it is a best practice that fish and wildlife enforcement service use so that they know that they've got the right bear.

Member Eremenko: Fish and wildlife but not the responder program, not the civilian who's been granted this opportunity to kill the bear?

Mr. Schreiber: Correct. The civilian, the responder, has to provide the bear carcass to fish and wildlife enforcement officers so that they can prove this is the bear that was euthanized, and they can take samples and do the confirmation that's necessary.

Member Eremenko: They can, but they don't have to.

Now, of the 509 human-wildlife conflict incidents, what kind of tips an interaction with a bear into a human-wildlife conflict incident? What qualifies under those 509?

Mr. Schreiber: For the most part those are what people have reported. It could be something as simple as that they had, you know, run into a bear while they were out hiking, or it could be something more dramatic like, for instance, that they had a bear in their livestock pen that was killing their animals or that was chasing their dogs. So it's a pretty wide variety.

Ms Goulden: But just to be clear, if somebody reports seeing a grizzly out when they're hiking, that doesn't trigger the responder program. Those are examples of human-bear interactions and how they're reported and then looked at for the overall interaction of: how is that bear interacting with humans?

Member Eremenko: So of the 509, how many of those do tip into problem bear that needs to be removed?

Ms Goulden: Well, we can only speak to the responder program, and what you saw was one.

Member Eremenko: Okay. Three, actually. Three bear authorizations were issued, and one bear was killed.

Ms Goulden: I was talking about the removal. But, yes, you're right.

Member Eremenko: To authorize an authorization, not an authorization to remove?

Ms Goulden: Yes. You are correct. Three authorizations to remove and one that was removed.

Member Eremenko: Okay. How much money – maybe I'll start by asking: is it even the ministry's responsibility to talk about putting toward, you know, funding other coexistence measures like electric fencing, attractant management, livestock compensation, or working with landowners to find coexistence solutions to reduce human-bear conflict? Is that even within your ministry's purview?

Ms Goulden: We do lead the BearSmart program, and that is a granting program that we have to help fund those kinds of education and initiatives to reduce human-wildlife conflict.

Member Eremenko: Is there actual kind of granting to support infrastructure or investments around electric fencing, for example, to make for some very tangible and quantifiable and observable impacts to help reduce the conflict?

Ms Goulden: A lot of the BearSmart programming provides education about what a homeowner may want to do or a ranch owner may want to do or a farmer may want to do, and then they may have access to other programs for the actual infrastructure. The BearSmart is more focused on helping people understand what could be done and what needs to be done.

Member Eremenko: So just education but no funding toward the substantive ways that we might actually reduce conflict.

Ms Goulden: The BearSmart program does – for example, we had \$135,000 that was given to the Waterton biosphere reserve carnivore and communities program. There was \$20,000 provided to the Bragg Creek Wild Society and Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley. There is the shot livestock compensation program. So there are a number of different programs that are working on human-wildlife conflict reduction.

Member Eremenko: I'll have to come back to the shot livestock.

I'm going to move to forestry. I'd like to unpack performance measure 1(a) on page 21 concerning forest health. The minister is measuring the percentage of forest regrowth as a result of reforestation, and it's done around the 14-year mark I believe is what I read. It seems like a weird measure to measure forest health, how well planted trees are growing. You know, I think of forest health. I think about diversity. I think about kind of ecological resilience. Can you just tell me a bit more? How much is kind of weighted on this definition of forest health, and why is it based on, from what I can tell, just regrowth rate of replanted forest?

Ms Goulden: I'll ask ADM Dan Lux to take that question.

Mr. Lux: Thanks. What we're measuring is the company's reforestation success rate. A company: when they do harvest, they're legally obligated to reforest. After year 14 those trees are well on their way in order to be successful. The definition of forest health is to make sure that those trees are actually going to be there, more of a coarse filter. The trees are going to be there. They were there before they were harvested. The reforestation rate just demonstrates to the public that the trees are back, returning in that area, providing habitat and providing those services.

Member Eremenko: Of our current harvest numbers throughout '25-26 what percentage of trees is coming from reforested forests, and what percentage is coming from virgin timber?

Mr. Lux: I don't have offhand what that would look like.

Member Eremenko: Is there a target there? Is that something that your ministry cares to . . .

Mr. Lux: No. A forest company would look at the inventory. They would look at the trees that are suitable for harvesting and available for harvesting. For example, the trees would have to be big enough for their mill. They have to be the right species of tree in order to facilitate the product that they're making. And those trees could not be in areas that harvesting is unacceptable or unavailable, things like riparian areas or, you know, really steep slopes or whatnot. Regardless of whether it's reforested or whether it's natural, the companies would look at that: the characteristics of those trees and whether it's actually available for harvesting and in the right area for appropriate harvesting as well.

Member Eremenko: Okay. So it's forest health based on the potential to reharvest.

Mr. Lux: Yes. Well, no. It's forest health in order to make sure that that forest is again established after the harvesting has occurred to provide all those benefits that a forest provides.

Ms Goulden: If I might just add, the ministry has an interest in ensuring that the forests are sustainable and long term, and that is part of what that measure is trying to achieve.

10:00

Member Eremenko: Okay. Thank you.

Significant concerns have been raised about logging in the upper Highwood, Mr. Chair. Roads, watercourse crossings, and steep hillsides stripped of trees will lead to negative impacts on a pristine and very fragile river system. Water crossings are mere metres from bull trout spawning grounds. I would say, in addition, that the company who holds that forest management agreement in the upper Highwood has already had several charges laid against them in the last year, charges that were even greater because of what the ruling determined to be wilful negligence. How does the ministry square its commitment to conservation and recreation for Albertans in the pristine Kananaskis Country with that kind of forestry activity?

Ms Goulden: There are really two parts to that answer. The first is that . . .

The Acting Deputy Chair: That concludes the second round of questioning from the Official Opposition.

I now turn to the government caucus. MLA Lovely, you have the floor.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much, Chair. Pages 30 to 31 of the annual report indicate that demand for Alberta's provincial parks remains strong. More than 254,000 camping reservations resulted in over 733,000 camper nights, representing a 14 per cent increase in reservations, while satisfaction with park services and facilities reached 86 per cent. How did the ministry achieve this?

Ms Goulden: Thank you for the question. Expending \$98.7 million on provincial parks operations is probably the macro way that I would say that we achieved this through a mix of internal delivery as well as contracted facility operators. We also enhanced the Shop Alberta Parks camping reservation platform with new features such

as availability notifications that generated roughly an additional 13,000 reservations. We invested \$64.3 million in capital funding to complete 67 infrastructure projects, including adding 48 new campsites. We delivered over 3,000 educational and interpretive programs to visitors. Ultimately, we're maintaining low-cost outdoor recreation options, including free day use, which includes a free day-use entry, and a senior camping fee discount.

Ms Lovely: Could the deputy minister explain how the ministry accommodated increased visitation while maintaining service quality, public safety, and environmental sustainability?

Ms Goulden: Yes. Our provincial parks program implements several strategies and approaches to manage visitation pressures and support sustainable outdoor recreation and enjoyment of provincial parks without compromising conservation values. We have staff presence in provincial parks, which remains a key priority across the province, to support visitor engagement and compliance, to manage recreation and keep parks sustainable. We have approximately 600 seasonal wage staff across both summer and winter operations. Our park rangers, for example, working in the parks had over 158,000 visitor contacts during the camping season. We also have conservation officers that are present as well. We work closely with our local partners and volunteers. More than 184 provincial parks have partnership arrangements in place across Alberta.

The department continues to develop common-sense, targeted management plans to appropriately balance the recreation and conservation that are going on in our provincial parks.

Ms Lovely: How is increased parks revenue being reinvested to address maintenance, infrastructure, and visitor service pressures?

Ms Goulden: Parks revenue is generated through camping fees, passes, and also some of the retail sales at some of the provincial parks. This works alongside government funding to maintain infrastructure and public safety and deliver visitor services and programming. All of the money is reinvested into the park system.

Our revenues are captured in the published estimates, and last year we generated more than \$59 million in parks-related revenue. Camping fees are the largest part of that at \$33.2 million. Increased visitation both achieves additional revenue but also has additional operating costs as a result. We do not function on a complete fee recovery basis, so there are still public dollars that are invested in our parks.

Ms Lovely: Thank you.

Still on the topic of parks, key objective 3.2, beginning on page 30 of the annual report, discusses the operation of our provincial park system. The ministry oversees a large provincial park system, including campgrounds, campsites, ground camping areas, comfort camping, and backcountry sites across Alberta. The Forestry and Parks 2025-26 business plan allocates \$95.2 million to maintain operations of the Alberta parks system. What pressures or priorities contributed to the high spending?

Ms Goulden: Yeah. Sure. There's strong demand and increased visitation, as I just said before, so when we have more visitors, there are more operational costs. The operational requirements to maintain our visitor services, the municipal services – each provincial park is almost like a mini municipality, right? Some of them have water treatment plants, facilities across approximately 250 campgrounds, 14,000 campsites, 160 group camping areas, 95 comfort camping units, and 236 backcountry sites. So we have staff and partners that take care of all of those things. That all contributes

to the pressures of running the system. We also run interpretive programs, so that's also a cost as well. Very, very well received by our visitors, and we run over 3,000 of those as well.

Ms Lovely: On page 30 of the annual report it states that approximately 43 per cent of campground operations are delivered internally by Alberta Parks while 57 per cent are delivered by contracted facility operators. Can you tell us more about this mixed delivery system, how it provides value for Albertans?

Ms Goulden: Yes. We like to refer to our partnerships as the sort of secret superpower of parks, all the other people that are involved. But we do have some that are paid contract facility operators.

The mixed delivery system provides value for Albertans by delivering campground operations through a fiscally responsible and effective model that combines some direct Alberta Parks management and some contracts to run our facilities. Supporting local economic growth by leveraging civil society organizations: those are the ones that we don't pay but that are very interested in the parks and provide a great deal of service. We also drive small-business activity across provincial communities. We partner with private businesses across more than 184 provincial parks through leases, contracted service agreements, and operational arrangements.

We sustain high operational quality and visitor experiences that ultimately resulted in an 86 per cent visitor satisfaction rate, so that, I think, also shows how it shows value for Albertans.

Ms Lovely: Changing gears here slightly, this government recognizes the importance of providing more access to recreational infrastructure to support our growing population and visitor economy, which is evidenced by three mandate priorities in the Forestry and Parks 2025 mandate letter. Page 31 of the annual report states that "\$64.3 million in capital investment supported upgrades to campgrounds, trails, day-use areas, and utilities... including 67 completed projects." Tell us more about the projects completed in '25-26 and how Albertans will benefit from these projects.

Ms Goulden: Some specific examples that we did, just to pick a few to highlight: an upgraded seawall and improved access at Carson-Pegasus provincial park, a replacement check-in building at the Marten River campground in Lesser Slave Lake provincial park, a new Thompson Creek trail and staging area in David Thompson country. We spent \$2.55 million for phase 3 of the rail trail near Rocky Mountain House, creating a multi-use, all-season connection, and \$1.14 million for road, camping, and staging improvements at Dutch Creek in the Crowsnest Pass.

Albertans benefit through safer and more reliable infrastructure, improved access to campgrounds and trails, modernized visitor facilities, and better protection of public assets. Completing work before those assets fail also helps avoid service interruptions, environmental risks, and larger future replacement costs.

Ms Lovely: How are projects planned and prioritized? How do you make sure all parts of the province are represented?

Ms Goulden: The ministry uses a risk- and evidence-based process to prioritize projects. The decisions consider infrastructure condition assessments, visitor-use patterns and public feedback, operational requirements, environmental risks, and then, obviously, the available funding and what the competing priorities are. Projects are then evaluated according to importance, urgency, risk, and the expected public benefit. We do look at that. Assets in poor condition are normally prioritized because early intervention

prevents public disruption, right? It prevents degradation and disruption.

We maintain a rolling five-year-plus capital priority list covering the assessment, planning, approval. We have quite a rigorous process to ensure that we can be as accurate as possible in the projection of funds so that we can spend the dollars that come to us and spend them responsibly. A centralized team of project management and capital planning professionals administers the program and helps apply consistent criteria across the provincial parks.

10:10

Geographic balance is built into the process by considering needs across provincial parks and public land regions rather than selecting projects only from the busiest destinations. For example, the '25-26 program included work in the northern, central, and southern regions of Alberta, including Lesser Slave Lake, Carson-Pegasus, David Thompson, and the Crowsnest Pass.

Ms Lovely: Okay. Page 31 of the annual report notes that the province plans to create 900 new campsites sooner than expected. How will this be achieved given only 75 have been completed so far?

Ms Goulden: The commitment is ahead of schedule because progress is measured across the entire project pipeline, not only campsites that have already opened. Multiple projects are moving concurrently through planning, environmental review, design, regulatory approval, and construction.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Thank you. That concludes that round of questioning.

We'll return to the Official Opposition. MLA Eremenko, the floor is yours.

Member Eremenko: Thank you. Sorry; we ran out of time in my last block asking questions about logging in the upper Highwood, so I'd like to go back to that if I may. There is a real history of noncompliance with the company that works in that area, as I mentioned. Multiple fines have been laid against them, one of them in particular for inadequate erosion and sediment control measures. What considerations does your ministry take when a logging company has a record of noncompliance such as they do, and what will you do about it? They have plans that have been pushed back on, on several occasions successfully, by the public. Given real concern about the fragility of the ecosystem in that area and not a great track record here, what's your ministry going to do to make sure that they comply?

Ms Goulden: First of all, we need to note that the logging in Kananaskis was always identified as an acceptable land use. The policy decision was made many decades ago that logging could occur in Kananaskis, and then our job as a ministry is to make sure that that forest harvest happens in accordance with the sustainable forest management principles and rules that we have, which I'll ask ADM Dan Lux to speak to. But the macro policy decisions were made many years ago that forest harvest can happen there.

Over to you, Dan.

Mr. Lux: Thanks for the question. As they do their planning, they will plan it out about 200 years in advance just to model what that disturbance will look like as they're harvesting it, and the approval is based on the pace of that harvesting to make sure that they're not going to have any negative impacts to that watershed and specifically the species at risk. The Department of Fisheries and

Oceans also has an approval process here when it comes to the water crossings and critical habitat.

Once the harvesting is done, we do have a very comprehensive forest operations monitoring program where we will go back and look at the company's work to make sure they're in compliance, they met the rules under regulations, so the ground rules from the provincial government, plus making sure it aligns with the plans that they had submitted. If a company is not in compliance with those operations, then there are enforcement penalties that come after that.

Member Eremenko: On page 14 of the annual report, where we talk about the 135,000 watercourse crossings in Alberta and the single-digit remediation projects that the ministry has undertaken: explain to me what remediation means in that context. Are the forestry companies responsible for the complete remediation of any of that presence after they have harvested an area?

Ms Goulden: Let's just clarify a couple of things. There is forest harvesting and the regulation of the forest industry. They are responsible for their own watercourse crossings. They have to meet standards. They have to meet the requirements of those watercourse crossings. The watercourse crossing program is different. It's for working with municipalities and addressing problems that we see that aren't necessarily attached to any particular company. Just so we're clear, the stats for those are two separate things.

Member Eremenko: Okay. But they are responsible for the complete and full remediation of watercourse crossings on blocks that have now been vacated?

Ms Goulden: Yes.

Member Eremenko: Okay. So you can understand my concern and, I think, the concern of Albertans when we're talking about this particular company being found to have 16 crossings identified, that seven were investigated and were found to be noncompliant, that that is significant. When there is the amount of activity happening particularly in Kananaskis Country but throughout our eastern slopes, I would hope, given the history of noncompliance, that there would be a stronger level of monitoring in those areas given the track record.

Can Albertans count on that level of monitoring given the history?

Ms Goulden: Well, I would say that the fact that those infractions were found out shows that our system is working.

Mr. Lux: I can answer that.

Ms Goulden: Go ahead.

Mr. Lux: Our FOMP program, our forest operations monitoring program, does have a risk-based factor to it. Two points. One, there has been a change in ownership of the company down south, so the history may not be reflective of what's currently happening, but fair. If we do see noncompliance from a company, then our FOMP program or operations monitoring program actually puts more emphasis on that company in order to make sure that their corrected behaviours are actually changing, so we do reflect it based on the company's behaviour and their past performance.

Member Eremenko: Okay. I'm glad to hear that.

It's a little bit distressing, however. Given the sale of the previous company: do any of the liabilities or any of the fines or any of the history from the previous company get carried over to the new?

Mr. Lux: They do. Not only those penalty enforcements, but also any kind of reforestation liability. Any other liability from the previous company is transferred onto the new company as well.

Member Eremenko: That's great.

I'm going to stay down in Kananaskis Country, if I may, and talk about the All-season Resorts Act. Now I know that these – technically it's legislation that fits under tourism, but it sounds as though this is a ministry that collaborates with others quite a bit and given that Fortress and Nakiska are only 13 kilometres apart and are situated right in the heart of Kananaskis Country, provincial park boundaries were kind of thrown out the window in order to allow for these to take place.

I would expect that there would be significant implications and involvement of this ministry when it comes to some of the planning and decision-making around those all-season resorts at Fortress and Nakiska. Did your ministry provide any advice on the impacts of these two all-season resorts located so close together? What was your understanding of the cumulative effects of the two of them situated so closely together in a very pristine area? Did the ministry advise on water usage and hydrological impacts? What about wildfire suppression and management and wildlife corridors, please?

Ms Goulden: I'm just wondering if you can point to a particular page in the annual report where you're asking these questions from.

Member Eremenko: Well, I think given that there are numerous areas where we talk about preservation of the provincial parks, access to recreation, conservation, and maintaining the integrity of our provincial park lands, all-season resorts significantly shifted what those boundaries would be. The ministry talks about wildlife conflicts. They talk about conservation and recreation access. That, in my mind, certainly speaks to the multiple uses in Kananaskis Country that are taking place that all-season resorts will impact.

Five million visitors came to Kananaskis Country. Given the significant areas – I can do a quick word count here to see how many times Kananaskis Country was mentioned in the annual report – I would expect that the all-season resorts and their presence and their development is going to have an impact on the numerous ways in which it's talked about in this annual report. I'm just wondering in which ways the ministry was involved in advising on that piece of legislation and on future development.

Ms Goulden: The decision to create all-season resorts is a policy decision of government. In terms of our department's involvement in that, we were involved in the changing of the park boundary to make Nakiska into public land so that it could be regulated under the All-season Resorts Act. We just want to be clear that all-season resorts still have a regulator. That regulator now is Tourism and Sport.

Member Eremenko: I think the public has a great deal of concern around park boundaries shifting at the will of another ministry to introduce new regulations or new legislation. What is the ministry's responsibility to maintain the integrity of those park boundaries moving forward?

Ms Goulden: I'll just reiterate that it was a government policy decision, not just the decision of Tourism and Sport, not just the decision of Forestry and Parks, so if there's a specific question for us from the annual report, then I'd be happy to answer that.

10:20

Member Eremenko: What planning is being done by the ministry, whether it be in the new plan for parks or, I'm sorry, the second

strategy that you referenced in your opening comments, to accommodate what are going to be significant changes in Kananaskis Country as a result of all-season resorts?

Ms Goulden: Yeah. We're definitely working on what that might mean. At the moment not everything is known about what it will mean, but we are doing some planning. You'll see that we actually have a mandate commitment to be looking at the Smith-Dorrien Trail, so there's definitely planning that is under way. All of it is just preliminary. The all-season resorts are still fairly new, the concepts of them and the implications of them. We're still waiting for project proponents to bring forward what all of those projects will look like. Once we know that, we'll be able to have more specific plans in place.

Member Eremenko: But the ministry does let us know that they're expecting 8,300 more visitors per day into Kananaskis Country for Fortress alone.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Thank you.

We'll now turn the floor over to government caucus for their third round of questions. Who will be taking the floor from the government caucus?

Mr. Cyr, the floor is yours.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Auditor General's November 2024 recommendations called for Forestry and Parks to "improve . . . the [timelines] and quality of financial information preparation and reporting [processes]." The recommendation is now identified as ready for assessment. Can the deputy minister outline the specific changes made to financial reporting processes, internal controls, staff responsibilities, and documentation in response to this recommendation?

Ms Goulden: Yes. Some of the specific changes that we made were to establish some detailed year-end timelines and checklists, enhance staff training for year-end activities, improve divisional awareness throughout the divisions of year-end requirements and deadlines. We strengthened internal financial reporting processes and controls; we restructured one of our divisions within existing resources to improve efficiency, oversight, and capacity, and some of that was enabling some greater leadership capacity; developed improved approaches for assessing and recording environmental liabilities; and implemented standing operating procedures and improved supporting documentation requirements.

Mr. Cyr: That seems very, I guess, consequential for the changes that you've made, so thank you for that. What evidence gives the ministry confidence that these improvements are sustainable and will prevent inaccurate or late financial information, business continuity disruptions, errors, or potential fraud?

Ms Goulden: Subsequent audits during the '25-26 audit cycle identified significant improvement in the quality and the timelines of financial information provided to auditors with no further findings identified by the Auditor General. The department anticipates the recommendation will be cleared this fall, hopefully. An implementation plan was submitted, and all of those actions were completed.

I can tell you that this recommendation was taken very seriously by the department, and we definitely moved some things structurally to ensure that they could be sustainable.

Mr. Cyr: Well, thank you for that. It's good to see something being completed by our good Auditor General and the recommendations

that they make. I know that all departments and ministries are looking to strive to get to be better at whatever they're doing.

I'd like to now move on to the sand and gravel pit reclamation. I recognize this has already been touched on, but the Auditor General first recommended improvements to sand and gravel pit reclamation monitoring and enforcement in 2008. That recommendation was repeated in 2014 and 2019 and remains not ready for assessment. The ministry previously expected implementation in 2025, but now anticipates completing its system-level solution by December of 2026. Could the deputy minister explain why this recommendation has remained outstanding for approximately 18 years and why the ministry did not meet its previous implementation dates?

Ms Goulden: Yes. The recommendation has been outstanding for far too long. The department recognizes the importance of completing it.

The challenge is that this isn't simply an inspection issue. Earlier work focused on making incremental improvements within the existing system, but as that work progressed, it became clear that the underlying problem was much broader. We needed better information at the application stage. We needed clearer operational and reclamation plans, stronger reporting requirements, and a better connection between those requirements and our activities of inspection and enforcement. For that reason we shifted to a systems-level solution rather than continuing to make isolated changes. That expanded the scope of the work and created dependencies on policy, on regulatory and even technological changes. Those dependencies contributed to the dates not being met. The objective now is to put in place a durable regulatory assurance system that allows us to identify risk earlier, monitor operations through the life cycle of a pit, and intervene where reclamation obligations are not being met.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you for that response. What remains to be completed before the recommendation can be submitted to the Auditor General for assessment, and is December of 2026 a firm completion date?

Ms Goulden: Significant work has been completed so far. It's just not quite ready for assessment yet. The remaining work includes finalizing updated inspection protocols, strengthening the linkage between the disposition requirements and the enforcement, improving reclamation reporting. We need to implement a standardized CORP – we call that the construction, operation, and reclamation plan – and completing the supporting system changes. Our implementation plan targets completion by December, as you mentioned, with implementation continuing into 2027. December is the target for completing the core, system-level solution. It won't be the completion of every implementation activity, but right now the system-level solution is quite important and the technology piece that we'll need for managing all the data.

Mr. Cyr: Again, thank you for that response. How many public land pits are currently inactive, unreclaimed, uninspected, or noncompliant, and what enforcement action has been taken against operators that have repeatedly failed to meet reclamation requirements?

Ms Goulden: A couple of things. It's important to distinguish between all of those categories. A pit can be inactive without being noncompliant. An operating pit may appropriately have unreclaimed areas because reclamation occurs progressively and at the end of the operational life cycle. Our existing systems do not provide a reliable single count of unreclaimed pits that would accurately describe, but I can tell the committee that the department

has completed 183 sand and gravel inspections in '25-26. That included annual compliance, reclamation certificate, cancelled disposition, expired dispositions, and other inspections. During that period 22 new ones were opened and 15 were closed.

Where noncompliance is identified, the department uses education and corrective action and then compliance case management and then ultimately enforcement orders and other statutory enforcement tools. Cases can also be escalated to our Crown land enforcement branch when disposition holders fail to come into compliance. This is part of what we were talking about, the life cycle management of the pit, that we have an accelerating collection progression of enforcement.

Mr. Cyr: My next set of questions, again, still on the Auditor General recommendations: the AG found that the security collected from pit operators was insufficient to cover potential reclamation costs. The 2019 follow-up noted that no security had been collected for approximately 50 pits and insufficient security had been collected for more than 800 pits. The ministry is now targeting implementation of a revised approach for April of 2027.

I'll ask all four. We're running out of time here. Could the deputy minister confirm the current security rate and the ministry's latest estimate for the actual cost per hectare to reclaim a sand and gravel pit?

The next one is: how many pits currently have no security or insufficient security, and what is the total difference between security held and estimated reclamation costs?

The next one: will the new security framework require operators to provide enough security to cover the full cost of reclamation, thereby protecting taxpayers if the operators fail or abandon a site?

And the last one: what factors caused the implementation date to move from 2025 to April of 2027? Recognizing we have a minute left.

10:30

Ms Goulden: Sure. Regarding confirming the current security rate the current system uses a flat rate security approach, which is precisely the weakness identified by the Auditor General, so the new framework is being designed around site-specific, full-cost security tied to actual or anticipated disturbance and the estimated cost of completing the reclamation obligation. In terms of pits with insufficient security the reclamation liability does vary per pit, depending on the size and condition. We're moving towards a framework in which security is explicitly linked to the estimated full reclamation obligation.

You asked: will the new security framework have enough security? The answer is yes. That is the policy direction that we're moving towards. The objective is to move away from that flat rate approach and move towards full cost, the underlying principle being that the operator is responsible for disturbing public land and its reclamation.

Then, finally, on the factors causing the move, it's really about a little bit of economic sensitivity here because any reclamation costs that you hold but may not use.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Thank you. That concludes the government caucus third rotation of questions.

We now turn to the opposition caucus and MLA Renaud. You have the floor at this time.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I won't actually be referring to a page number in the annual report. I looked back through '24-25, '25-26, and really the only place that sand was mentioned was in the thousands. So that's a little bit alarming in the sense that an annual report is not talking about sand and gravel pits when we

know it's a pretty serious issue with an outstanding recommendation, 18 years. I wonder if the deputy minister can comment on that.

Ms Goulden: Comment on . . .

Ms Renaud: It's just not there. There's no discussion about sand and gravel pits.

Ms Goulden: I think that's partly because of the work that we're doing now to get ready to have the recommendations removed. The idea is that as that work comes to fruition, there would be something then to report into the annual report.

Ms Renaud: So after 18 years there's nothing to report. We're just going to do it with our new system. That's alarming to me.

Okay. Let's move on. If this is incorrect, please let me know. There are 2,700 public pits. Is that correct?

Ms Goulden: Sorry. That's just a distinction in the way that you are asking the question. There are 2,700 pits under public land dispositions. There's only one that's technically called a public pit, just . . .

Ms Renaud: So there's only one public pit under the purview of government.

Ms Goulden: No. Sorry. The 2,700 we give dispositions on on public land. The language of "public pit" is a pit that is run by government for others' use, and there's only one pit like that.

Ms Renaud: Okay. The Auditor General estimated in 2019 that it would cost about \$48 million to reclaim government-operated pits. I'm wondering if you can give us an updated estimate just for this fiscal. I mean, this is a couple of years ago now.

Ms Goulden: No. I think I've answered that in the previous questions about how the reclamation piece is still something that is being worked on and that the variance of the different pits does not allow a one-size-fits-all number to be used.

Ms Renaud: It's kind of odd that the Auditor General is able to come up with a number but the department is not.

Ms Goulden: Yeah. The Auditor General had its methodology of coming up with that. We are still working on the recommendations, as noted.

Ms Renaud: When coming up with recommendations is cover for not doing work for 18 years, that is a sad state of affairs.

Can you tell us about what safety incidents or negative environmental incidents have occurred over the past 18 years as a result of too many unreclaimed or uninspected sand and gravel pits?

Ms Goulden: Can you just ask the question one more time?

Ms Renaud: What safety incidents or negative environmental incidents have occurred over the last 18 years as a result of too many unreclaimed and uninspected sand and gravel pits? "What has been the result of not doing this work over 18 years?" is, I guess, basically, the gist of the question.

Ms Goulden: Well, I think the result of – it's the result of not doing the work. What the Auditor said is that we're not collecting sufficient security for the pits. That doesn't necessarily mean that accidents have happened. Like, the difference between security and reclamation . . .

Ms Renaud: But reclamation is also part of the problem, and there are very serious risks associated with that work not being done.

Ms Goulden: But there is still reclamation being done on many of these pits. It's wrong to assume that just because there's a recommendation around not collecting enough security, there's no reclamation happening. There is reclamation happening.

Ms Renaud: So, let's say that roughly of the 2,700 pits – I mean, I just didn't even know there were that many in Alberta. How many of these have active reclamation going on? Even a percentage. I'm just trying to get an idea.

Mr. Schreiber: Yeah. It's a good question. Because they're all at various stages in the disposition management cycle, we may not be able to give you an exact answer. I guess, maybe what I would say is that at least since I've come in, we've started a significant inspection regime. We've done, you know, in the year we're talking about, 16 site audit inspections, 235 audits, and we currently have 567 open noncompliance files. Now, the intent there, for those 567 open noncompliance files, is to bring people into compliance through the ask, tell, compel mechanism. That's probably not an exact answer to your question, but it gives you an idea of the activity that the department is undertaking in order to address that issue.

Ms Renaud: Like, how long have these – what is it? – 567 been noncompliant just on average?

Mr. Schreiber: Oh, that's another good question. There's no, like, universal one size fits all, but I'd say probably between four and five years on average.

Ms Renaud: Wow.

Mr. Schreiber: One of the challenges is that when you go to inspect a site, quite often you have to do a whole bunch of homework into what's been taken out, where the sand and gravel have gone, and then you have to do an audit on the individual's books and their measures. So it's a significant, onerous undertaking for the compliance staff.

Ms Renaud: And before you know it, 18 years go by.

The Auditor General reports that almost no enforcement action has been taken against operators known to be in noncompliance. Can the department explain why leases have been issued and in some cases renewed with operators known to be in noncompliance?

Ms Goulden: One of the things that the department has been able to do is to augment our audit and investigative capacity. We increased the number of resources on audit and investigations in '24-25, so part of this problem is actually sending signals back into the disposition system that we are going to enforce. For many years there wasn't enforcement, and that has incited, shall we say, lack of co-operative behaviour. We have started to increase our presence on the landscape and increase the number of auditors and investigators so that we get better behaviour. That also creates its own better behaviour loop as well.

Ms Renaud: Why wouldn't you put that in the annual report? You just forgot?

All right. What progress has the department made with respect to aligning reporting and monitoring between government and privately owned pits, as reported in the 2024 meeting of this committee?

Ms Goulden: Sorry. My brain was still on the last question. Can you just repeat the question?

Ms Renaud: Okay. What progress has the department made with respect to aligning reporting and monitoring between the government and privately owned pits – there's only one – as reported in a 2024 committee meeting? That would have been the last meeting of this committee.

Mr. Schreiber: I'll try and answer that. You may be aware that EPA, which actually is the regulator for pits on private land, did a bit of a review and update, and we were involved with that. We are still trying to assess and bring in line our mechanism so that we can report accurately both private and those pits that are granted under public disposition.

10:40

Ms Renaud: I was just looking at that report, the 2025 – actually, I think our chair was on that report – and the recommendations. Has there actually been progress made on those recommendations from that report?

Mr. Schreiber: Yes, but as you've already pointed out in the Auditor General, we have a significant amount of work to take a look at the pits that are disposed on public land. The answer is yes, but there's lots of work left to do.

Ms Renaud: Okay. The AG 2019 report states that the liabilities for reclamation of privately owned pits are \$120 million and \$48 million for government-owned pits, \$168 million in total. How is the department reporting this to Albertans? I could find nothing in the annual report.

Ms Goulden: That is actually work that is tied to that most recent recommendation. Sorry. I'm just looking for the right space in my book here. The most recent recommendation on our financial reporting also included that there has been work that our group has done on environmental liability reporting, and that is part of what will be now assessed for implementation by the Auditor.

Ms Renaud: Okay. Thank you.

Actually, I think my colleague asked a little bit of this, but I'll ask it again. Can the ministry say what other priorities are being ranked above the implementation?

The Acting Deputy Chair: Thank you. That concludes the Official Opposition's 10-minute block.

I now turn to the government caucus. MLA Sinclair, the floor is yours.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, everyone from the department, for making time for us today. Alberta's forestry sector is deeply integrated in the North American markets, with the United States as an important partner for forest products. The ongoing softwood lumber duties and trade uncertainty have real implications for Alberta workers. It certainly has implications in my riding, because we have several mills in my area, also on the forest department communities, investment decisions, and the competitiveness of our forestry sector as a whole.

Key objective 2.3 speaks to the government's role in advocating for fair and open access to markets for the forestry sector. What actions has the ministry taken to reduce the impacts of tariffs and trade barriers?

Ms Goulden: Alberta has actively defended its forest management system through the United States' annual review of the softwood lumber duties, so we provide evidence to counter allegations that Alberta lumber is unfairly subsidized. The province has also supported Canada's challenges under the Canada-United States-

Mexico agreement through the World Trade Organization and before the U.S. Court of International Trade. Alberta joined other provinces and the Northwest Territories in calling on the federal government to make a new softwood lumber agreement a priority, so we continue to advocate for that.

While Alberta cannot unilaterally remove U.S. duties – and at this moment I’m talking about duties, which is the softwood lumber duties as opposed to the tariffs – we have acted on costs that are within the provincial control. Regulatory changes eliminated holding and protection charges to reduce costs for operators. These changes reduced industry costs by approximately \$3.8 million in ’25-26 but with an estimated ongoing savings of \$21.1 million annually.

We also updated the timber management regulation to remove outdated requirements and to recognize some emerging products such as biochar, wood pellets, and engineered wood products. That supports investment and diversification in the forest sector.

We’ve worked with our other government partners – the federal, provincial, and other territorial partners – on market access issues. Also, the minister and I were in Japan last year on a trade mission to support diversification as well.

Mr. Sinclair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Just a quick follow-up on the diversification. What work has been done to look at the new market opportunities for the forestry industry? Do you have any specifics on that?

Ms Goulden: Yeah. We’ve supported Alberta wood products in domestic and international markets. We have supported value-added manufacturing. We have a value-added program that the AFPA, or the Alberta Forest Products Association, runs, and we support that. We did the trade mission to both Japan and South Korea on both the lumber and the wood-pellet side. We find that those missions really strengthen relationships with existing customers. It helps our companies’ customers to see that government is involved, and it helps them to have confidence in the wood products that are being generated and that the government policies are in place for those products to be generated.

Mr. Sinclair: Appreciate that. Thanks.

I’m just going to pivot to fibre supply if you don’t mind. Communities and families across Alberta depend on the forestry sector for good jobs and local economic activity. The industry relies on stable long-term access to fibre to keep mills running and workers employed. Key objective 2.2 speaks to, “Deliver [policy] programs and services to support... access to a sustainable and secure fibre supply.” What is the outlook for fibre supply for the industry?

Ms Goulden: Alberta has a sustainable forest base, but fibre availability is under pressure. The annual allowable cut is fully allocated, and it is trending downward as we already come off a surge that was given during the mountain pine beetle infestation. So we see companies adjusting to: what is that new sustainable level of fibre?

These pressures are not uniform across the province. We continue to set harvest levels through approved annual allowable cuts, just as we always have, so that current harvesting remains within sustainable limits and doesn’t compromise. I should just clarify. When I say that we’re doing it as we always have, I don’t mean at the levels we always have, but it has always been a part of our process that we would be assessing the sustainability of the cut. Alberta’s tenure system does continue to provide predictable access for operators of different sizes. We have 21 forest management

agreements and a number of timber permits and quotas. Companies know that they have access to the area and access to the wood.

We also have a challenge in Alberta right now where the fibre supply differs by tree type. Most of what I’ve just talked about so far has been more about the softwood side. On the hardwood side we have plenty of supply. There’s not quite as much demand on the hardwood side for those products.

Mr. Sinclair: Excellent. Thank you very much. Just a follow-up on the fibre. How are you ensuring that decisions today about fibre supply support availability in the long term?

Ms Goulden: Harvest levels are established through approved forest management plans and annual allowable cuts that, as ADM Lux said before, do model hundreds of years out. These plans align timber harvesting with ecological objectives. The values on the land base have to be factored into the forest management plan, and then we have forestry experts within the department that can provide a challenge function to the plans that industry provides us and really look through and scrutinize the assumptions and the conclusions that are being drawn in those forest management plans.

Mr. Sinclair: Appreciate that.

I’m just going to switch over to some reforestation and reclamation. Key objective 1.2 on page 17 of the annual report speaks to sustainable forest management, including reforestation. The province has faced some devastating wildfire seasons over the past few years. It definitely creates an annual anxiety for my hometown of Slave Lake since we had a devastating fire in 2011.

The province has faced some devastating wildfire seasons over the past. As everyone knows, the wildfire reclamation program supports reforestation of areas impacted by wildfire. I see the province provided \$85 million in ’24-25 to support reforestation associated with the 2023 and 2024 wildfire seasons. What progress has been made on reforesting these areas?

Ms Goulden: I’m pleased to say that there were 16,500 hectares planted in 2025-26. That used 26 million seedlings, just to give you an idea of how many seedlings were planted. That compares to the year before of only 7,000 hectares and about 10 million seedlings, so there really has been an almost doubling, not quite doubling, of the program in ’25-26 because of that large amount of money given due to the large amount of hectares burned in 2023.

10:50

Mr. Sinclair: Appreciate that.

One of the great visits that I got to do in my riding was being able to tour the millionth tree planted by one of the local helicopter companies along with one of the local mills there. Pretty amazing, the area that you get to see. Just to follow up on the same subject area. What helped maintain strong reforestation results and meet that 97 per cent target for the fourth year in a row?

Ms Goulden: Performance is supported by company surveys. We also have the Alberta reforestation information system. We have ministry data validation. Again, ADM Lux had referred to the FOMP program, or the forest operations program, where we go out and test to ensure that companies are doing what they say that they’re doing.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you. Appreciate that.

I’m not sure how much time you’ll have. I just have one more on the Kananaskis conservation pass. The Kananaskis conservation pass was introduced in 2021 to help fund high-quality recreation and tourism activities in a very popular part of the province. Page

33 of the annual report notes \$12.4 million in revenue was generated through this aforementioned pass in '25-26. What conditions or changes to programming and visitation in Kananaskis has led to this figure?

Ms Goulden: As mentioned before, Kananaskis Country received approximately 5 million visitors in 2025. The pass does provide a stable, targeted source of revenue, and all of that money is reinvested back into the Kananaskis area. Approximately \$12.4 million, as you said, was collected from more than about 320,000 passes. Revenue was generally aligned with historical averages, although the G-7 Leaders Summit closures did affect some sales. Pass prices remained unchanged from previous years.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, everyone, for all of your hard work. Appreciate it.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Okay. That concludes our fourth rotation.

For the final round of questions members will read questions into the record for a written response. I look to the Official Opposition if they have any questions to read into the record. Member Schmidt, you have up to three minutes to read your questions into the record.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The ministry has increased trapping limits for several species, including wolverines, lynx, river otter, and more. At the time the limits were raised, the minister claimed that this was part of an exercise to collect data on the populations of these animals. Can the ministry provide updated population estimates for each of these species and any plans on how the knowledge of population estimates is impacting the trapping limits going forward?

The ministry has now permitted hunting black bears with dogs. How many tags have been sold for black bears, and how many bears were killed by hunting with dogs? How many cubs were orphaned? And how many grizzly bears were accidentally taken due to misidentifying a black bear?

How has the number of cougar tags sold and the number of cougars killed changed with the opening of the winter cougar hunting? How many cougar kittens have been orphaned? What happened to the kittens that were orphaned? And who pays for managing orphaned wildlife?

What data has the department collected since these changes were made to hunting and trapping black bears and cougars? And how is that data informing future management decisions?

Yeah. That's it for me.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The government caucus. Any questions to read into the record? Okay. MLA Bouchard, you have up to three minutes to read your questions in.

Mr. Bouchard: Excellent. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Pages 42 and 43 of the annual report state that the ministry invested \$546,000 to modernize wildfire information systems and replace or integrate the 30-year-old fire information resource system. Improvements

include real-time incident tracking, digital flight reports, municipal reporting, resource ordering, and the forestry data warehouse. Could the deputy minister explain how those technological improvements enhanced wildfire decision-making, field coordination, and financial reporting during 2025-2026? What controls and performance measures are being used to determine whether the new technology is delivering expected operational improvements and value for money?

One second, please. Bear with me. And here we go.

On page 25 of the annual report, it indicates that regulatory changes reduced industry costs by approximately \$3.8 million in the 2025-2026 and are expected to reduce costs by approximately \$21.1 million thereafter. Page 52 also reports that timber royalties and fees declined by \$24.4 million compared with the previous year. Could the deputy minister explain how these regulatory and timber dues changes support the competitiveness of Alberta's forestry sector, and how did the ministry assess the economic benefits of these changes against their impact on provincial revenue and the need to receive fair value for Crown timber?

The Acting Deputy Chair: That concludes your questions?

Mr. Bouchard: I am done, yes.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Okay. Thank you, MLA Bouchard.

With that our question and answer period comes to completion. 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.

You are welcome to stay for the remainder of the meeting if you wish to, but we will be moving on to other business. Thank you again for joining us today.

We move on to agenda item 5, a report on the 2026 CCPAC and CCOLA conferences. The chair of the committee, Mr. Sabir, has prepared to deliver an oral report on his and Ms Lovely's participation in the Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees' annual conference from this past August. He will deliver that report at a subsequent meeting.

We will move on to agenda item 6, other business. I will report that the committee received written responses from the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services on April 21, from the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas on May 5, and Assisted Living and Social Services on May 12. The responses were posted on the committee's internal site and, following our usual practice, will be made publicly available on the Assembly website.

Are there any other items for discussion for today? Hearing none, the date of our next meeting is November 3 with the Ministry of Technology and Innovation.

With that I will call for a motion to adjourn. Member Rowswell moves that the October 27, 2026, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be adjourned. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Thank you. That motion is carried, and this meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:58 a.m.]

