

Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Act

3:02 p.m.

[Chairman: Mr. Dunford]

THE CHAIRMAN: Order please. I call this meeting to order at 3:02. What we'd like to have, Mr. Minister, is an opening statement of a duration of no longer than 15 minutes, and then we'll start with the questions. We will alternate between the Liberals and the Conservatives. We allow, though, three questions from each member as it is their turn. They don't have to be supplements of the earlier one; they can be three distinct questions. So we would ask for your co-operation. If you would like to proceed, sir, we'll hear your statement.

MR. DAY: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Knowing how astute my colleagues are and how right up on all the issues they also are, I know they're familiar with this program. As a way of reminder the OH and S program was established in '81. We had the purpose of encouraging innovative occupational health and safety practices. Ten million dollars was actually set aside in the Alberta heritage savings trust fund for the program. A variety of initiatives, as we discussed last year, have been developed over the years: development of training courses and information, awareness for workers and for employers. The program in our business plan was designated to be phased out. The year coming up will be the last year of the program with \$500,000 designated in '95-96. We're in the last year of the program.

Members – do they not? – have before them the document on the fund itself with the programs listed which were funded, I believe. So I'd certainly be willing to take any questions on that.

THE CHAIRMAN: Just the '94-95 report, if that's what you mean.

MR. DAY: That's fine. That's what I was referring to, yeah.

THE CHAIRMAN: It's just a line item that indicates how much money was spent.

MR. DAY: Okay. So members, then, do not have an actual something which shows which programs themselves?

AN HON. MEMBER: No.

MR. DAY: I regret that I was not aware of that. While questions come, I could have copies of this prepared quite rapidly, if that would assist people.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. While that's being done, Mike, do you want to begin?

DR. PERCY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. DAY: Now, don't ask me anything on the programs until you get the stuff.

DR. PERCY: Mr. Minister, at the end of the day, now that the program is going to be phased out, are there any projects that stand out in particular as having made a very significant contribution, and if so, what has happened to that work?

MR. DAY: The projects have been considerable. To me one of the most satisfying aspects of the program is the fact that we have before

us today, should people want to seek the documents out, all the research reports, the books, the manuals, the videos, the training materials that were produced through this available in fact through the Alberta Labour library for public access and public circulation. That library is actually used extensively by the public and by industry. Again, the reports themselves have all been sent to the National Library of Canada, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, and because of certain follow-up requirements that are put on any successful grant applicant, we can document, as we have – and I'll make that document available to you – exactly what has taken place over the years and what industries have been successful.

The whole intent was preventing injury and ill health and promoting healthy lifestyles among Albertans. There are available to us, as I said, the training courses that have been developed, the research that has led to a lot better information on which to base those workplace decisions. Workers at all levels, that can be pointed to when you see before you the programs, have benefited from the training, improved health and safety practices.

I think over the last two years, especially this last year, we have really accented the whole aspect of developing partnerships on the workplace in terms of health and safety initiatives. The degree of self-awareness and the degree of self-reliance have grown in industry itself, just the somewhat phenomenal growth of safety associations alone within industries, some of which have been initially started by the investment in that particular industry. Then as other industries have observed the benefits, they have taken off also in terms of developing safety associations. That, to me, has led in the last couple years to I think the most significant gains in terms of awareness in the workplace between employers and employees. Co-operative initiatives based on partnerships are indeed beneficial; they are successful. With the first emphasis for most of the years on the development of resources and training materials that are site specific and then seeing industry on an association basis really move and take up the initiative, I think we can look with a great deal of satisfaction at some of the results of those positive initiatives.

DR. PERCY: The final question is: has any mechanism been set off to shift over, then, to some of these private safety associations some of the work that has been done as kind of a liaison function by your department with the whole array of safety associations out there?

MR. DAY: Yeah. As you'll see when the final results come in for '95-96 – because that particular budget, if you remember, has been reduced to \$500,000. A good portion of that has already been allocated, and that's been one of the main thrusts, what you've just indicated, that type of passing and moving to industry associations.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay.
Howard.

MR. SAPERS: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, just to clarify a comment in your opening remarks. You made mention of \$10 million being set aside to fund the program since '81. In the annual report it uses a figure of \$12 million. Is it \$10 million, or is it \$12 million?

MR. DAY: My information is that it's \$10 million, but I can get back and try and get a clarification on that for you.

MR. SAPERS: Okay. Yeah, I'd appreciate knowing. Thank you.
The \$500,000 that's remaining to be spent before the program

terminates: will the document that you're having distributed to the committee list the projects that will be using that \$500,000?

MR. DAY: No. The one that's coming back is the report up to April 1, programs for '94-95. So the ones that are presently in process won't be until the end of this fiscal year.

MR. SAPERS: Okay. So these aren't ongoing projects. These are projects that would begin and terminate in this next fiscal period.

MR. DAY: That's right. Yeah.

MR. SAPERS: Okay.
Was that three?

THE CHAIRMAN: No.

MR. SAPERS: Okay. Good. Thank you.

The last question I have. One of the concerns that's been raised over these last couple of years in the area of health care has been the occupational health and safety implications of program changes and major staff changes in health facilities. Can you tell me whether or not any of the 14 funded projects from last year specifically address the occupational health and safety concerns or needs of health system workers?

MR. DAY: Yeah. As soon as we get those back, you'll see that there were some very direct programs related to health care, which we feel have had a positive impact. In a matter of moments we'll be able to look at that in a little more detail.

THE CHAIRMAN: Just a point of clarification before we move to the next person. It would be our practice here, Stock, that once you have the information as to whether it's \$10 million or \$12 million, you'd provide it to the chair, and we'd circulate it then.

Okay. Heather Forsyth.

MRS. FORSYTH: Thank you. Mr. Minister, I have two questions that I'd like to ask you. The first one is: has there been a shift in funding priorities by the occupational health and safety heritage grant program?

MR. DAY: Well, as I indicated a few minutes ago, I think it's fair to say that there has been a shift. There has been a difference. When you look at the last couple of years of the program – I'd say that when you see the '94 priorities, the emphasis there really is on partnerships with Albertans promoting health and safety in workplaces, facilitation of those partnerships, whereas in the earlier years it was a very specific development of training procedures and processes on site for specific work areas and dealing with specific items. There has been a shift, and really I guess the beneficiaries over the last couple of years have been those projects that have been directed at pursuing those new directions and the partnerships for future delivery of those services. The shift has been clear. I believe it's been a shift that has been wanted and looked for and will have some far-reaching results. But, yeah, there has been a shift.

3:12

MRS. FORSYTH: Okay. My second question then: how does the ministry ensure that commitments being made by the occupational health and safety heritage grant program are being met?

MR. DAY: Well, there are a number of safeguards that are put in place. It's not widely known, but in fact when you have your projects come in and you get approval, most projects have holdbacks on final instalments as a condition of funding. So you don't get the full funding until you've measured up and met the criteria.

The projects are audited. Funds won't be paid until there's that satisfaction that it's met the funding objectives. The applicants have to provide in advance copies of materials that they anticipate to be produced and also what the plan is for the completion of their final reports. There are even times, depending on the particular type of grant, where the agreement may require interim reports, and that's added to the holdbacks on the final instalments.

Over the years I think it's fair to say, too, that there have been projects that have run into difficulty, and in those cases occupational health and safety staff are ready to work with the applicants to address whatever difficulties they might be running into. So there are a number of checks and balances that are put in place that people have to be aware of in the applying process.

MRS. FORSYTH: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: All right. Thank you.
Debby.

MS CARLSON: Thanks. According to schedule 6 in the financial statements here, it says, Mr. Minister, that you only expended 20 percent of your budget for the '94-95 year. Could you tell us where the cost savings were found?

MR. DAY: It wasn't so much a matter of savings. In this shift of emphasis looking towards those projects that would encourage safety associations and partnerships, what was already being pursued in tandem with that were similar policy initiatives through WCB and through occupational health and safety as a department. We thought there'd be quite an uptake on the programs, but because industries were able to also plug into programming through either WCB incentive programs or OH and S themselves, there wasn't the anticipated draw on those dollars. I think, though, that as '94 closed out, that '94 fiscal year, and people were aware that – because remember it was just in the last two years that shift happened. That accounted for an increase in awareness over this final year, which is why most of the \$500,000 that has been accounted for this year, that I'll report on next year, has actually been subscribed for. It was in that shift period. People maybe not being fully aware of what projects are going to be directed towards, other competitive forces offering that type of thing, and now the awareness of how these programs work, how these partnerships and associations work, and much more attention on that for this year is why there was that – it's not a saving as much as the fact that the programs were not oversubscribed.

MS CARLSON: That's it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay.
Peter.

MR. SEKULIC: Yes. Mr. Minister, just a quick question here. I note that one of the educational tools that is being promoted by these expenditures is the grants that have been given, for example, for petroleum industry field worker safety. I think there's a listing of about 15 different videos that have been put together for safety. I'd

like to know, in terms of outcomes and your relation to both WCB and this program, if you have seen the benefits, the outcomes of the educational program. I note that one of them is low-back injuries. Have you seen a lower incidence of low-back injuries resulting from these educational videos?

MR. DAY: Yeah, in two areas. First – I think you mentioned the oil industry – just for starters, overall the emphasis on increased awareness in the oil industry. You know, it wasn't that many years ago, back in the '80s, when the oil and gas industry was unfortunately referred to as the killing fields. There was sort of an attitude that, well, it's risky work, and bad stuff is going to happen. That wasn't acceptable obviously to those of us concerned about occupational health and safety. So as this focus with this program and others began to take hold, we have seen a reduction overall certainly in workplace-related accident and injury. In oil field and gas-related work, certainly with a lot of the manual labour and the moving around of items, courses directed toward that have been helpful.

One of the most positive results that we've seen now in the oil and gas industry is that because of how the partnership program works – and some of these fund dollars have been expended to make people aware of the partnership program – contractors can't even get on-site unless they can prove and show that they have certain programs in place. So it's not just the main operators and, you know, the drillers association and IPAC and these different ones as the majors, but everybody contracted coming on-site is made aware that if you don't have a program now, you're going to have to have one in place if you're going to do work here.

Then in terms of back injury specifically, certainly in oil and gas there have been programs related to health care in that particular area with, for instance, the nursing profession, just the amount of moving of patients and the awareness and teaching on-site of the various techniques. Something which might appear as simple as moving somebody around on a bed has resulted in a greater awareness and therefore less injury. As a matter of fact, in raw numbers there was this year over last year an actual reduction in claims by nurses overall throughout the province. So we have to say – and I know what you're thinking – that with the programs, since they're designed for and wanted by those in the industry, we believe there have been some positive results. Anytime you've had instruction and training on the causes of low-back injury, whether it's actually on moving things around or whether it's ergonomically designed workplaces – I won't raise any recent specific examples of that which seem to have created some media attraction – with that type of awareness there indeed has been a lower number of cases related to back injury. It's still one of the biggest single sources of application at WCB. There's a way to go on that.

MR. SEKULIC: That was my primary question, just regarding the outcomes and the results of implementing these programs. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay.
Danny Dalla-Longa.

MR. DALLA-LONGA: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think you made the comment earlier, Mr. Minister, that there just didn't seem to be a lot of people applying for these grants or assistance to implement these programs within their own industry, yet there were 11 applications, and six were denied. Would you mind maybe commenting on the reasons for the ones that were denied?

MR. DAY: I don't have the list here of the ones denied. Sometimes they simply don't meet the criteria. As I said earlier – I think you

were just coming in – there was a shift in emphasis over the last couple of years in terms of site-specific or text-specific requests, and the shift was to those particular programs that would actually enhance participation between and development of industry associations. This was over the last couple of years. Because of that shift, even though it was announced, it takes time for people to realize that. Projects would have come in that in fact don't meet those guidelines anymore. So that would have been largely the criteria there.

As I said – and I think you may have missed that also – in this last year, because the industry has sort of been more acutely aware now after one year of the shift, the major portion of the remaining \$500,000, which is allocated this year and which will be reported next year, has now been subscribed to.

3:22

MR. DALLA-LONGA: Okay. I don't have any other questions. Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay.
Howard Sapers.

MR. SAPERS: Thanks. Mr. Minister, now that I've had a chance to take a look at the document you had circulated, I note that of the projects which received funding in '94-95, whether they be new projects or ongoing projects where the final installment was received in the last fiscal year, there is actually only one that relates specifically to health and safety issues in the health care work environment. That was a grant given to the Alberta Long Term Care Association to do a feasibility study to see whether or not that industry would like to have a co-ordinating body on a provincial level to look at their health and safety needs. So I'm wondering whether or not you anticipate that there will be an unmet need as a result of all of the changes in health care dealing with health and safety issues. Maybe you could give us as a committee some advice about the kinds of recommendations that you may feel would be helpful about heritage savings trust fund dollars being expended in this regard.

MR. DAY: I think, you know, the figures are so clear in terms of the aggressive uptake in industry itself across the province and involvement in safety associations and forming safety associations. Then those associations themselves begin to develop their own products and begin to be able to be very specific towards the needs of their members. That's really one of the reasons in terms of the phasing out of this program. Industry associations, which also of course charge levies – levies are assessed on each member of the industry – begin to develop those products and training manuals and procedures which are best meeting their needs. That's why I don't feel that the closing down or the phasing out of this program is going to result in a vacuum. A lot of good things have happened. There's clearly been a shift in how people approach occupational health and safety, much more partnership based, and that will, I believe, more than adequately take the place of these projects which are being phased out. I think you're going to see within industry associations those associations themselves putting forward grants to their members who will be developing programs and initiatives specific to their needs.

MR. SAPERS: So you don't have any concern at all that even where there are work sites where there is a tradition of attention being paid to worker health and safety issues and even where there are associations that represent workers – and I'm specifically thinking, for example, of acute care hospitals and nurses – changes in the way that they're being achieved in the health care system at this time will create very unique occupational health and safety concerns that are

beyond the mandate of any one particular professional association and would be the kind of circumstances that would seem to fall into the criteria for project funding to look at, maybe even some site-specific concerns.

MR. DAY: Well, as I said before, I think that awareness has become so acute in the employer/employee relationship and the relationship, for instance, with WCB and people are so acutely aware of how positive it is to work together to address these issues that I really think a culture has been developed which is more than sustaining itself. It's proving itself. Different ways in which WCB will be reaching out through their various programs to the health care sector just this year alone I think show that there's a co-operative approach.

There was a recent document that was put together in partnership with OHS, WCB, and the nurses related to stress-related and violence-related injury in nursing homes, mainly dealing with the aging population, where abuse of nurses actually is a risk factor. That was something that was brought forward by nurses' associations. They said: you know, we need some help with this. Because of the awareness of working together in partnership, those types of programs were developed outside of and without the OHS grant program. So I really think – not that all the answers are there – that the culture has been so positively developed and ingrained that as shifts in types of work happen, the various representatives on all sides in a workplace are going to be out there. I'm not speaking just idealistically, but in fact in practice that's what seems to be happening. They're out there. They're trying to identify what the areas are. Then they're going back either to occupational health and safety as a department or to WCB as an insurer and saying, "We need to address this," and finding, I think, a pretty positive response.

MR. SAPERS: Thanks.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. I don't see any further questions.

Is any member of the committee opposed to the chairman making a comment on a document in front of us in order to blow his own horn?

AN HON. MEMBER: Go for it.

THE CHAIRMAN: In your document that you presented this afternoon there's an item on page 13, number 10, called Occupational Health and Safety Management Assistance Program (OHSMAPII) – High River. I want to commend the minister and the department for having sponsored that particular project, in this case in High River. I'm speaking as both the creator and designer of OHSMAPII, and I am pleased to see that at last something that I may have done is at least being further developed. I needed to say that.

MR. DAY: I think, yeah, there's good reason to do that. The management assistance program, that particular one, I think involves something like 22 different businesses, with the Chamber of Commerce taking the lead. So very significant industry participation there. A well-deserved acknowledgment.

THE CHAIRMAN: Well, thank you.

Now that I'm just full of goose bumps, is anybody wishing to read a recommendation into the record?

A motion to adjourn? We have it. Okay.

[The committee adjourned at 3:30 p.m.]