



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature  
First Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Public Accounts

Tuesday, April 29, 2025  
8 a.m.

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First Session**

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts**

Sabir, Irfan, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall (NDP), Chair  
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC), Deputy Chair  
Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)  
de Jonge, Chantelle, Chestermere-Strathmore (UC)  
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Eric Leonty	Assistant Auditor General

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## **Standing Committee on Public Accounts**

### **Participants**

Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas

Tom Davis, Assistant Deputy Minister, Resource Stewardship

Andrew Horton, Assistant Deputy Minister, Lands

Kate Rich, Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Water and Circular Economy

Travis Ripley, Assistant Deputy Minister, Regulatory Assurance

Merry Turtiak, Executive Director, Regulatory Programs

Alberta Energy Regulator

Martin Foy, Chief Operations Officer



8 a.m.

Tuesday, April 29, 2025

[Mr. Sabir in the chair]

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

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

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

**Mrs. Johnson:** Jennifer Johnson, MLA, Lacombe-Ponoka.

**Mr. Lundy:** Morning, everyone. Brandon Lundy, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont.

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** Good morning, everybody. Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

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

**Mr. McDougall:** Myles McDougall, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

**Mr. Horton:** Andrew Horton, ADM for lands division with Environment and Protected Areas.

**Ms Rich:** Kate Rich, assistant deputy minister with water and circular economy, Environment and Protected Areas.

**Mr. Davis:** Tom Davis, assistant deputy minister, resource stewardship division, Environment and Protected Areas.

**Mr. Ripley:** Travis Ripley, regulatory assurance division, assistant deputy minister for Environment and Protected Areas.

**Mr. Foy:** Martin Foy, chief operating officer, Alberta Energy Regulator.

**Mr. Wylie:** Doug Wylie, Auditor General.

**Mr. Leonty:** Eric Leonty, Assistant Auditor General.

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

**Mr. Ellingson:** Court Ellingson, Calgary-Foothills.

**Ms Renaud:** Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

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

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

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

Approval of the agenda. Hon. members, are there any changes or additions to the agenda? If not, would a member like to move that

the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the proposed agenda as distributed for this Tuesday, April 29, 2025, meeting? Moved by Rowswell. Any discussion on the motion? All in favour? Any opposed? The motion is carried.

We have minutes from the Tuesday, April 15, 2025, meeting of the committee. Do members have any errors or omissions to note? Seeing none, would a member like to move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts approve the minutes as distributed of its meeting held on Tuesday, April 15, 2025? Moved by MLA Johnson. Any discussion on the motion? Seeing none, all in favour? Any opposed? Thank you; the motion is carried.

As members are aware, our committee will be spending some time of our meetings this year reviewing specific reports of the Auditor General, which is a bit of a departure from our normal practice of reviewing ministries' annual reports. Today we will review the Auditor General of Alberta's July 2024 surface water management report. This is the Public Accounts Committee's first audit-specific review undertaken since it reviewed the Better Healthcare for Albertans report of the Auditor General back in 2017. In the surface water management report the Auditor General reviewed the effectiveness of the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas processes to manage surface water allocation and use as well as if its public reporting to Albertans was adequate. We have officials from the office of the Auditor General, the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas, and the Alberta Energy Regulator joining us today.

To begin, I would like to invite the Auditor General to start off our review by providing opening remarks on his audit report. You will have 10 minutes.

**Mr. Wylie:** Thank you, Chair, and good morning, Members and management team. It's great to be with you this morning. Thanks for the opportunity to participate in the discussions, as you'd mentioned, Chair, regarding our surface water management report that we did release in July 2024.

I'll start with a brief overview of the audit, and then I'm going to turn things over to Eric Leonty, Assistant Auditor General, who actually oversaw this project within our office.

Whether you're working the land or running a business or just turning on the tap, as we know, water plays a role in almost every part of our lives in Alberta. It's central to our economy, and it's key to maintaining the quality of life that we all rely on both now and into the future. Growing pressures from population growth, resource development, and land-use changes: these all have an effect and make the effect of water management more important than ever.

As you will have seen in our report, Alberta has several major water-using sectors with agricultural irrigation being the largest. Our audit objective was to determine if Environment and Protected Areas had effective processes to manage surface water allocation and use and had sufficient public reporting on the outcomes of surface water management. We focused on the following three areas: water management planning, licensing and compliance monitoring, and public reporting on surface water management.

To support the department's efforts to improve surface water management, we made three recommendations that were aimed at addressing areas where we saw that there were some opportunities for improvement. They were establishing processes to identify when to develop, assess, and update water conservation objectives; improve licensing and compliance monitoring processes; and publicly report relevant and reliable information on managing surface water. The department accepted all three of these recommendations, and as is custom, once the department indicates that they are ready, we will begin our assessment of implementation work.

Before I pass the rest of the time over to Eric, I do want to say that we received full co-operation – full co-operation – from management, including access to information and the individuals from the department during our audit work. Management, I sincerely thank you for that co-operation. That makes a huge difference on our work and the effectiveness of our work, so I want to thank you specifically.

Eric, I'm going to turn it over to you for the rest of the time.

**Mr. Leonty:** Thank you, Doug. With the remaining time I'd like to highlight the key findings from each of the three focus areas that we identified in our audit, starting with surface water management planning. Our first key finding in that area is that there isn't a clear process in place to decide when water conservation objectives should be developed or updated. Water conservation objectives are a very important mechanism from the Water Act to help balance aquatic health and environmental needs with water withdrawals. They are like a gauge to help determine if a river basin is healthy or stressed. When an objective is put into place, it impacts licence conditions going forward but not retroactively. Thus, if a water conservation objective is necessary, the sooner the better.

Objectives may not be necessary for all basins, but a sound process should be in place to help make that determination. Currently most of Alberta's major river basins don't have water conservation objectives in place. Currently two basins have ones that are fully operational. Because the lead time required to develop a water conservation objective is significant, potentially up to 10 years, having an evidence-based process for identifying the need for objectives is important.

Finally, where water conservation objectives do exist, it is unclear whether they have been effective because their performance isn't currently being evaluated. For example, we didn't see evidence that the Cold Lake-Beaver River subbasin objective has been evaluated since its implementation a number of years ago. The implications of these findings are that failing to proactively identify the need for water conservation objectives or to evaluate and update existing ones could increase the risk of shortages and other negative impacts on those river basins. To that end, we recommend that the department establish a process to identify the need for water conservation objectives, regularly assess their effectiveness, and update them to ensure sustainable water supplies.

The next key area we examined was licensing and compliance monitoring. The highlights of what we found examining that area include licence applications that were being approved without support for key decisions. For example, there wasn't evidence that compliance assessments were being completed for over half the licences we examined when it came to renewals being issued. We also found that there's insufficient monitoring of licensee compliance with requirements, things like allocations and withdrawal limits.

Currently public complaints are a key method for identifying noncompliance. Also, it's expected that licensees self-report on noncompliance. However, these mechanisms haven't been fully effective. We did find a number of instances of licensees not reporting things like water usage or exceeding allocation limits, and these weren't detected by existing processes.

**8:10**

Our last key finding for monitoring and compliance processes is that there's no assurance that licensee-submitted water usage is accurate and complete. The implications are that without robust monitoring enforcement, there is a risk of overuse or misuse of water resources, which could undermine sustainability efforts and public trust.

Monitoring compliance isn't an easy task, and the goal isn't to add layers of costly or complicated processes. It really does come down to: what are the legislative requirements, what are the conditions and the licences, and implementing a sensible, risk-based, cost-effective process to ensure requirements are met and that compliance is encouraged and licensees continue to learn. We do understand that the department's digital regulatory assurance system should help play an important role in improving some of these processes.

Based on our findings we recommend that the department improve its licensing and compliance monitoring process. This is to ensure that approved licenses meet requirements; approval decisions are made consistently, fairly, and comply with requirements; that key decisions are documented, particularly when there's discretion that's employed; and that licensee compliance is cost-effectively monitored.

The last key area we looked at was the public reporting on surface water management. What we'd found is that currently there's a lack of reporting on water allocation, and this is particularly at the basin and subbasin level. Water usage is not publicly reported, and while water levels are publicly available, we did find that there are areas for improvement on ensuring the accuracy and completeness of that information.

Surface water management involves many complex processes and has a profound impact on people, so the complete and accurate reporting of key information like usage and allocations is critically important. Thus we recommend that the department publicly report relevant and reliable information on managing surface water, including water usage.

In closing, I'd like to add that when we developed our recommendations – and in this case it was no different – we had internal deliberations as well as discussions with the department to be able to focus on the areas of highest impact, what was realistic, but also make those recommendations specific enough to help with the joint and aligned objective of helping moving processes forward. We look forward to completing our assessment of implementation work in the coming months based on the timeline that the department has provided.

As Doug said, I'd really like to thank the management group here today for their time, co-operation, and assistance during our many audits that we do at the department.

This concludes our opening comments, Chair. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I would now like to offer officials from both the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas and the Alberta Energy Regulator the opportunity to provide any remarks on the audit report not exceeding five minutes.

**Mr. Davis:** Okay. Hello, everyone. Good morning and thank you to the chair and to committee members for having us here today. I pass along regrets from Deputy Minister Sherri Wilson. She's unable to be here today. However, we will do our best to support the discussion happening here today.

Thank you for this opportunity to describe how Environment and Protected Areas has been working to address the recommendations relating to the surface water management audit that was in the Auditor General report of July 2024. Joining me today are assistant deputy ministers and a representative from the AER that will assist in addressing your questions as they relate to surface water management items outlined within the report.

Joining me today are Martin Foy, chief operations officer with the Alberta Energy Regulator; Travis Ripley, assistant deputy minister of regulatory insurance division, Environment and

Protected Areas; Kate Rich, assistant deputy minister of water and circular economy, Environment and Protected Areas; and Andrew Horton, assistant deputy minister of lands, Environment and Protected Areas. Also in the gallery today are Ryan Fernandez, assistant deputy minister of financial services, and the senior financial officer for Environment and Protected Areas; Michael Lapointe, who is the director of contaminated sites and remediation with Environment and Protected Areas; and Merry Turtiak, who's the executive director for regulatory programs in Environment and Protected Areas.

The department has been working hard to address the recommendations in the Auditor General report on the management of surface water by Environment and Protected Areas. The department is taking this opportunity to improve our operational processes in relation to planning requirements, water licence decisions, and compliance assurance, as well as improving the accessibility of information to the public. We have accepted the recommendations from the office of the Auditor General and submitted our implementation plan in December 2024.

The implementation of the department's regulatory online system as part of regulatory transformation will address a number of the operational issues, including improving water-use reporting, links between compliance standing and licence decisions, documenting decision rationale and compliance monitoring of licence conditions and water-use reporting. The implementation of this online system will make it easier to provide the public with access to allocation and water-use information.

The department is also committed to developing a systematic process for decision-making on water management plans and conservation objectives. We are improving water flow supply and information in key subbasins to support existing water management plans. As an example, the department will install a hydrometric station in the Wapiti River subbasin to support that water management plan.

The department will complete a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the existing water conservation objectives, as noted through the audit. An audit will also be completed by the department on the process for water flow data reporting and maintaining quality control and quality assurance in current process and future reporting.

In conclusion, work is under way to improve the way we manage surface water, and we will continue over the next two years to address the recommendations in the Auditor's report. While the department does not believe the current actions and processes in place have resulted in negative impacts on surface water management, we are always striving to improve the way we manage Alberta's water. Alberta's long-standing water allocation and management system has and will continue to serve the province well, and Environment and Protected Areas will continue to strive to improve and modernize the way we manage Alberta's precious water resource.

Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

As it has been some time since the committee has conducted an audit-focused review, I would like to identify the scope of our review today. Questions should relate to the Auditor General's report, the recommendations made in the report, and the ministry's related action plan and surface water or surface water rights generally within the province.

Finally, before we get to questions by the members, I will note that as part of our audit-focused meeting the committee will utilize a different question-and-answer format which aligns more closely with how other committees conduct reviews, allowing members a

question and a related follow-up question and alternating between caucuses as much as possible. I will be keeping a list of speakers, so if you would like to speak, please signal to me or the committee clerk.

With that, I will now open it for questions, starting with Member Schmidt.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Thank you very much. Yesterday the department released a press release called Making Every Drop of Water Count, announcing a second phase of consultations on changes to the Water Act. Some of the targeted improvements that the department is looking for include streamlining regulatory decisions, enhancing water-use information to support licence transfer decisions. It specifically says that some things are not up for discussion, including changes to the first in time, first in right water allocation system, but it's a little bit vague on this idea of maintaining water conservation objectives.

So a multipart question if you will. While you're answering this question, if you could clarify for the committee what the difference is between a water management plan and a water conservation objective, that would be really helpful. I find that going through the Auditor General's – the Auditor General is quite clear in that he's talking about water conservation objectives. The implementation plan, I find at times, conflates water management plans and water conservation objectives, so if you could clarify that for the committee and just tell us what the future of water conservation objectives will be in a new Water Act. Like, are those going to be maintained, or are you thinking of making changes to the processes of developing water conservation objectives, that kind of thing?

8:20

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you for the question. As we go through answering, because we've got a number of us that touch on elements of these things, we're going to go back and forth if that's okay for the chair and members as we do that. I think in this case, in terms of the difference between water management plans and water conservation objectives, I'll look to Andrew Horton to take a first attempt at that, and then in terms of the future and the engagement I'll look to Kate Rich, who's leading that process for us.

Thank you.

**Mr. Horton:** Thanks, Tom. Water management plans are the larger, more strategic look at what is going on in that particular watershed to cover off all the different users, to cover off all the different uses that we see, to have those conversations with stakeholders, including Indigenous communities and others, to ensure that we're meeting the overall intent of that particular region. The conservation objective itself, as Eric had mentioned earlier, is really that sort of guidepost about what the water is being used for and where we are with the specific use within that particular basin, if that helps clarify.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Sort of. Chair, I'm stymied by the format here. We're not used to follow-ups in this format.

A water management plan: does it have an objective that you're measuring? Like, my understanding of what a water conservation objective – if I look at the water conservation objective for the Red Deer River subbasin, for example, it has a specific number. It's a flow rate at this time of year, at this point in the river, right? If I understand that correctly. If you're not meeting that, then something has to change in the Red Deer River subbasin to the water management so that that number is achieved, if I understand that correctly. But what will prompt a change in water management in an area where only a water management plan is in place and no water conservation objective is in place? If that question makes sense.

**Mr. Horton:** Through the chair, it does. There's a lot that goes on when it comes to managing water at the local level. When there is that water management plan without the objective, we rely a lot on the decision-makers who are there, who work quite closely with each other and use their technical judgment to determine what sort of are the overall stresses on that particular environment. As it gets closer to what we see as a bit of a challenge, that's when the planning stage kicks in, and we begin to work more closely to develop that actual conservation objective, that number that exists that sort of says this is the balance we need to strike when it comes to aquatic health and water use. Did I – sorry; I'm trying to . . .

**Mr. Schmidt:** Yeah, and . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mr. Schmidt:** I guess I'll leave it up to the chair to . . .

**The Chair:** I think I will ask ADM Rich if she wants to comment, because the deputy minister mentioned that she will comment on the act portion of your question.

**Ms Rich:** Yeah. As you noted, released yesterday was a discussion document, the launch of engagement on proposed measures to enhance water availability, considering the Water Act requirements, and making some changes. But also in that scope document, as you mentioned, are pieces that are not proposed to change. One wouldn't be able to list every measure that isn't proposed to change, but there are some highlights given in the document. The priority water licence allocation system, which is called first in time, first in right, generally referred to that way, will not be changing. The water for life strategy and its goals and objectives to manage water for communities, for the environment, for the economy, as well as traditional uses is maintained. Those types of things are held. The discussion document clearly indicates which parts of the act are proposed for some change, but it is based on engagement, as noted in the press release. No preconceived notions; we are out engaging now. We just launched on that.

With respect to the questions on water management planning and WCOs and those portions of the act, water conservation objectives are included in the act. They are not proposed to change.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

MLA Lundy.

**Mr. Lundy:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the officials for joining us this morning. This is a very important topic for all Albertans, so I appreciate you guys sharing your insights.

I want to ask I think kind of more broadly about First Nations consultation. I know there's a process for MOU development, so I'm just wondering if you could maybe start by commenting on what that relationship looks like and what steps were taken when it comes to water sharing agreements and what that consultation with our First Nations consisted of.

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you for the question. I'm going to turn to ADM Ripley to speak to that because it's been his team that has led the development of the MOUs with both stakeholders and First Nation groups.

**Mr. Ripley:** Yes. Thanks for the question. In terms of the water sharing agreements that was one of our nonregulatory tools that we implemented last year due to the significant impacts that we felt would be occurring due to drought. The signatories to those water sharing agreements would typically range from the larger water users in the basin. As part of that process we reached out to First

Nations communities and talked with them about the drought, talked with them about the circumstances that we were preparing for, and we did engage with First Nations. First Nations were offered to be observers at the water sharing table, but they weren't signatories to the water sharing agreements. We did everything we could to help support the First Nations communities during this process.

**Mr. Lundy:** Thank you for that information. Are there any sort of specific actions regarding First Nations water rights or how those are respected through this process?

**Mr. Ripley:** Yeah. In that process as observers, although they were nonsignatory to the water sharing agreements, the department did issue a letter to all nonsignatory water users in the area that suggested that if there was to be an agreement that was becoming effective due to low water levels in the area that we would hope that each of those licensees, including First Nations that hold a licence by our department, would adhere to the restrictions if possible.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

MLA Schmidt.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Thank you very much. I appreciate the fact that the water conservation objectives and water management plans are not under consideration when you're considering changes for the Water Act.

In the department's response to the Auditor General's findings, the department lists a bunch of actions and then subactions and plan completion dates. One of the actions is to "develop a systematic process to decide when new or revised water management plans, conservation objectives, or other measures are necessary." The subaction is to "document current actions that are being used in major water basins to manage surface water," and that won't be completed until June of 2025. Now, the Water Act has been in place since 2001. Isn't it reasonable to expect that the department already has documentation of the current actions that are being used in major water basins, or shouldn't that be documented? Shouldn't you just have that to give to the Auditor General right now?

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you for the question. I think there are a number of things that have come at play. As we've said, we've recognized what the Auditors General have raised, and we see this as an opportunity for that systems improvement. Looking at where we have established water management plans, it typically has been because there has been a pressing need historically to find a way. An example would be that South Saskatchewan River basin. Because of the allocations, the pressures in that space, the plan was developed, and the water conservation objectives were done with the purpose of understanding that.

8:30

We recognize there's more work to be done in that space in general about how we approach it. There are other tools we have used. Our surface water management quality and quantity frameworks would be an example of how on a cyclical basis we are measuring both the quality and the quantity of water that is there. Through those water management frameworks we have triggers that set off at different levels for management activity. That would then lead to further follow-up as it might be investigating something related to a water quality issue and working with the stakeholders to understand why that might be and what actions we need to take within the system.

You raise a great point: should this all be documented? Some of it is. Some is not, and we're taking this opportunity from the OAG to improve that.



**The Chair:** A follow-up?

**Mr. Schmidt:** Related to that, in answer to this, my last question and my first question, you're implying that water management plans have some triggers for action although they're not – yeah. Like, a water conservation objective, as I understand it, is a legal trigger, but water management plans have some other triggers that I guess are kind of in a grey area if I'm correct. Like, it's not an order in council that's signed, but everybody agrees that: okay; if we hit this trigger in a water management plan, something needs to be done. But, like, I guess, help me understand that process of establishing those triggers and deciding whether or not, how those would be managed. I don't know. I'm not making any sense anymore.

Obviously, the Auditor General found that that wasn't satisfactory. What changes will be made to establishing these water management plan triggers so that the Auditor General can come back in his follow-up and say: "Yes; now we have a clear understanding of what the process is?"

**Mr. Horton:** Through the chair, thanks for the question. Hopefully, I can try to answer better than I answered the first one. With the documentation that we're working on right now in terms of the actions that are supposed to be part of it, that's part of that whole, the larger sort of piece around: how do we develop these water management plans more broadly? What ADM Davis was talking about with respect to the frameworks is a slightly different way of managing a particular environmental thing in which cases, which is under another piece of legislation.

The actual management plans, though, themselves and what we're trying to achieve with this sort of collection, with really documenting and making sure that we fully understand what's there, is to make sure that we can show the whole process, not only so there's clarity amongst our own staff and amongst the AER and others but also with our stakeholders as we go out to do the engagement to build new water management plans.

That was one of the challenges we have. We're very familiar with how to manage water. It's just not that it was in a centralized place that was very clear and also part of this larger system of developing a water management plan if that makes sense. It is really about saying: yes, we know how to manage the water, but now how does that fit into developing a water management plan, building those water conservation objectives, the decisions of decision-makers as one holistic view of the system?

**Mr. Schmidt:** Okay.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Do I get a follow-up, then?

**The Chair:** We will move back to MLA Lundy.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Oh, that was my follow-up.

**Mr. Lundy:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to ask a question about some internal processes with the ministry. More specifically, through the chair, has the ministry conducted an internal assessment of the effectiveness of its water management practices over the '23-24 period just sort of in relation to supplementing what the OAG report might have said?

**Mr. Ripley:** Thanks for the question. In respect to reviewing of our management practices over the '23-24 year period, I am assuming that a lot of this conversation is about the situation we were facing with drought. As part of that we did kick off a drought emergency

operations centre to address that particular concern, and we've developed a number of key internal assessments that we have been looking at over the year, which included the development of the water sharing agreements, the nonregulatory tool that we use to help ensure water continues to be used in the best possible way.

We deployed additional equipment to strengthen the information about river flows, about the storage capacities in the reservoirs as well as understanding better the snowpacks and the information that was available to us to help predict what might come. We did engagement and outreach with all of our water management partners, including industry and municipalities, First Nations, and others. We conducted risk assessments, particularly in relation to our drinking water facilities and our waste-water facilities to ensure that under low-flow conditions they would still be able to operate effectively in that situation. We also drafted and released our drought response plan to help identify the criteria used for staging of different drought scenarios, and all of that was done to help support, you know, that '23-24 period with additional information.

I think the last thing I would like to mention on this piece is that part of our work was also to undertake a compliance sweep of a lot of the water licences particularly affected in the south area of the province during those low-flow conditions to monitor and check on compliance with those water licences that were in place.

**Mr. Lundy:** Thank you.

Just as a follow-up, during the process you've described, is there a specific procedure to address problems that become identified? And what's the nimbleness or the timeline that the department is able to respond once you have identified some of these problems?

**Mr. Ripley:** Yes. Thanks. We've done a lessons learned on our water sharing agreements. We've also done an internal postincident assessment review process that looks at recommendations that we've been considering in response to the work that we did last year. I'm happy to say that the water sharing agreement lessons learned document will be made publicly available. We're just in the process of getting that out the door, but that would definitely help support documentation and awareness of the work that we've done and where we're going forward.

**Mr. Davis:** Chair? If that's okay.

**The Chair:** Yeah.

**Mr. Davis:** Maybe to also add to ADM Ripley's response to the question you asked as it related to the ability to pivot and turn and address quickly, I think one of the hallmarks of the co-operative approach that was taken in the south as it related to the management of the pressures last year was the frequency that – first was the spirit of collaboration. Like, the partners got together and really wanted to work through these things and find ways to find solutions. There were biweekly meetings, so there was that ability to identify something through that process, turn it around quickly, and be able to implement something. The ability to move quickly through that process as it related to finding solutions was, I think, an element that we saw it work quite well, and as we prepare for this year, it's one of those things that has been identified in the actions about making sure we're building upon that.

**Mr. Schmidt:** In response to Member Lundy's question about managing drought-prone areas, you identified that there was work done to better understand snowpack and some of these other things that are predictive of water supply. In the Auditor General's report he identifies that supply and demand estimates in the province haven't been done for 16 years, but it sounds like there is some

patchwork – sorry. The kids are getting unruly here at the table this morning. It sounds like there's a patchwork of bits and pieces of information in subbasins around the province to help at least in the local area predict that work. Like, give me an understanding of what capacity the department has to do the supply and demand estimates province-wide and why it hasn't been done comprehensively, I guess, for the last 16 years.

8:40

**Mr. Davis:** Yeah. Thank you for the question. I'm going to turn to Merry Turtiak in a moment to call upon her to address this part of your question because she has led this process for us last year and as we go into this year.

I think the differentiation I would raise is the framing of it at a provincial scale. I think what we have looked at is the availability of water based on the basin scale, like from a river basin perspective. That has not been aggregated up to say: here's the bigger picture. We have looked at this in that river basin element. We look at what is there in terms of reservoir levels, in terms of snowpack to begin to try and shape, "What do we forecast is going to be the challenge?" and then that drives our planning from there.

I'll turn to Merry, who has led this last year but also has been working this year.

**The Chair:** Please introduce yourself for the record. Then you can go.

**Ms Turtiak:** Good morning, everyone. I'm Merry Turtiak. I'm the executive director for regulatory programs, and last year I was the drought incident commander for the province.

In terms of the improvements and readiness for 2025 if you were to look at the Alberta river basins, which is an application both on your phone or on the web page, there have been significant enhancements that detail by region water supply demand, flow, snowpack, precipitation levels, and those are available in real time. For some of those measurements like snowpack, of course, we do them twice a month and of course they are updated on that kind of monthly basis. For real-time information as well you can look at any river flow reservoir level in the province. As ADM Davis has identified, we did a number of enhancements last year to make that information more readily available. In the forecast section as well you will see that there are some of those summary pieces talking about water supply and demand in context to the historical aspects of the day.

The other piece that I would just quickly add here is related to readiness of the department. We've undertaken not only, of course, the lessons learned in the postincident assessment and released some of that information, with more being posted, that teams are actively monitoring the situation on a biweekly basis. Of course, weather moves fast, but weather also moves slow in the context of drought. We are watching closely and are regularly engaged. Should situations go poorly for us, we will activate the respective teams and work with all water management partners on the landscape.

**The Chair:** You can follow up.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Yeah. I mean, given the availability of the information, and maybe the Auditor General can provide us some information here, like, what is it that the Auditor General would look for when it says that it's satisfied that the department has done a water supply and demand estimate? Given the information that we just heard from the department, is that what you're looking for? Is there something else that needs to be added? Help us understand what's missing here.

**Mr. Leonty:** It's probably a couple of things. I think starting off with just what's been described here, some of the additional information and changes being made sound like they will help to deal with some of the matters raised. I think at the aggregated level as it's been discussed as far as sort of overall big picture sort of supply and demand pressures, I mean, the last review was done about 16 years ago when that was pulled together. Looking at, you know, obviously, things that have changed, growing risks, changing risks, recognizing that there's likely a need to update that information at the basin level and then the subbasin level, ultimately that can help as far as some of the long-term planning that takes place.

Then of course, you know, there are those processes that deal with some of the real-time monitoring as well. We had pointed out things like water levels and acknowledged that information is being provided but did see that there is the need to improve some of the accuracy and completeness of that information. I think those are steps, it sounds like, that the department has already been taking.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk.

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** Thank you, Chair. Through you to ADM Davis, in response to the Auditor General's report we can see that the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas has released their implementation plan, which shows the ministry's progress on recommendations set out by the Auditor General. One such recommendation set by the Auditor General relates to the process to decide when to develop or update water conservation objectives. I see that the ministry is developing a systematic process to document current actions that are being used in major water basins to better manage surface water going forward. This item is set to be completed in June 2025. Could you please explain to this committee what progress has been made so far on this item?

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you for the question. I'm going to defer to ADM Horton.

**Mr. Horton:** Thank you for the question, through the chair. We are well under way on this particular item. To document that, the deadline, as you suggested, is June 2025. We'll be ready and have that done for that timeline. It is about going through the department, going with and working with the other department staff and sort of assembling all those pieces to make sure that we have that in one comprehensive piece, that one comprehensive place that then speaks to how that fits into the larger, holistic sort of desire to develop that systematic process for water conservation objectives and water management plans. It's just one of those elements that fits into that larger piece. Yeah, we're well under way to have it done by June 2025.

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** Chair, I have a supplemental.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** Chair, through you again to ADM Davis, I can see that the ministry is working on evaluation metrics to indicate when water management planning should be considered and how to prioritize needs for water management planning. This item is set to be completed in October 2025. Could you please explain to the committee if they expect to meet this completion date and what progress has been completed on the item to date?

**Mr. Horton:** Again, that's mine, through the chair. Yeah, we're also on track for that specific item as well. Making sure that we

have robust evaluation metrics to identify and prioritize water management plan needs, including when to initiate or even to revise the plan, is critical to the system's success. It's also, again, part of that larger systematic process that we're trying to identify. We're trying to capture and record properly – so we have that kind of down and dusted – so that next time we have to do something, it's very clear how we are going to approach that.

This isn't, however, an insignificant amount of work. In addition to those other two pieces, we are also developing that guide to formalize the implementation of water management plans, including that clarification of roles and responsibilities throughout the system.

**Mr. Schmidt:** One of the things that the Auditor General identified was that it was unclear if the implemented water conservation objectives were effective. Can you explain to us what criteria, measurement, or indicators the department has to evaluate the effectiveness of water conservation objectives?

**Mr. Horton:** I'll grab that one. Thank you, through the Chair. That's an excellent question. We do have a very robust system of managing and monitoring water within Alberta. There are more than 400 hydrometric stations that inform us of the in-stream flow, the kind of requirements that are there. We know what licences are being used and where that water draw is coming from, so we're able to use those to judge against the conservation objective that we have in place to determine whether or not it is effective.

What we did lack is a process that clearly outlines how we do that overall, which is one of the things we're working on now. It's not that we didn't know necessarily; it's that we didn't have that very documented process to walk through how we do that. That's one of the things that the Auditor General identified, and it's one of the things that we're working on.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Yeah. I'm really struggling here to understand a lot of – so a water conservation objective as it's set out in the Red Deer River subbasin: I go back to that one because that's the only one I looked at before this meeting. It's quite clear. Like, it is a number. It's a number at a specific place at a specific time, but presumably that was implemented for some reason, right? We needed to have this number, this volume of water flowing through this point in the river at this specific time because of reasons.

8:50

What were those reasons, and how does the department know if the reasons that you've implemented that number, that you picked that number are the right reasons? You know, is the water conservation objective not only being met, but is it doing the thing that it's supposed to do when it was chosen? Give us a sense of what the reasons were for picking that number and how the department tracks that or doesn't.

**Mr. Horton:** Yeah. Thank you for the question, through the chair. We can certainly get that information for you in terms of the Red Deer basin specifically.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Sorry. I'm only using the Red Deer River basin as an example. Like, there are other water conservation objectives in place. They are quite specific in terms of what the number is – right? – although they're different for each water conservation objective. For all of the water conservation objectives that have been put in place, what were the reasons that those numbers were chosen, and what was the plan to evaluate whether or not achieving that number actually achieved the broader goals of establishing a water conservation objective in the first place?

**Mr. Horton:** Through the chair, I'll attempt to answer that again. The water conservation objectives are chosen based on the science in the particular water basin – what are the sort of in-stream flow needs for that particular area; what does the aquatic ecosystem need? – as well as the work that we come from, sort of the collaborative relationships we build over time through the WPACs, the water protection advisory councils, and through others. That informs sort of what the other users and residents in that area would like to see with respect to that ecosystem.

That helps inform what we're going to set that water conservation objective at. That speaks to sort of why that line is set. It's not necessarily just for what is required to keep the ecosystem safe. It could be higher than that for a number of other reasons, that we work through with that larger stakeholder group to determine it to bring forward for decision-makers. When it comes to the actual achievement of that, that's one of the things that we rely on, the overall information we collect from water licensing and use, and that helps inform where we are. We are monitoring where that sort of flow is at.

**The Chair:** MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk.

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** Thank you, Chair. Through you again, continuing on the topic of when to develop or update water conservation objectives, I see that the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas is in the process of developing a system to record and track stakeholder concerns and water supply risks identified during licensing to inform if water conservation measures or other measures are required. Tracking concerns from key stakeholders will ensure that Alberta's government remains alert and responsible when it comes to water conservation efforts across the province. Could you tell me when we are expecting to see the updated system implemented later this year? Until that time, where are Albertans and key stakeholders able to voice their water conservation concerns?

**Ms Rich:** Maybe I'll start. I just want to note that for any concerns we do have kind of call lines that anybody can call – it doesn't have to be limited to this particular topic; it could be anything on environment – that are manned through our workday. People are pretty responsive on that. There is actually a separate environmental emergencies line that is 24/7. But for a common one like this, which would just be a call number, we do have one established for the entire department, so anybody could call on any topic.

Just before handing it over maybe to Travis, I just want to add that I think your question is also about where we're going and where we're headed. As part of our Water Act proposed change engagement that we launched yesterday, which is based on the feedback that we received from the engagement on water availability that was conducted in the fall and early 2025, in that fall and early 2025 process we asked Albertans and water-using sectors and interested parties to tell us their ideas on opportunities and barriers to enhance water availability in this province, again, to meet all the needs, community growth, economic growth, aquatic ecosystem health, et cetera, so it was not lopsided toward any user.

That said, one of the pieces is enhanced: our standardized reporting and measurement of water use, which links back to some of the Auditor recommendations. We are engaging on what act changes may be needed to enable that standardization. Depending on the age of your licence or the type of licence, you have different reporting requirements in to us in order for not just the department but – water is a shared stewardship and a shared responsibility. How you manage your land, how people use their waters come into play. It's really important to have information out, which is part of the

Auditor findings. We are looking to change things in the act, following engagement, that would enhance that.

Before that I'm going to hand it to Travis, who has also been working on actually getting the allocation amounts available. That's not necessarily what's used but what would be allocated to given parties.

**Mr. Ripley:** Thanks. I would just like to update on the digital regulatory assurance system, our online transformation system that's being worked on and has been worked on for a number of years. We are moving into a really great space, not only capturing, as ADM Rich mentioned, all of the water licences and the allocation but also driving a complaint process or a compliance process into the system so that we can monitor and track better all of the water licences and the use that allows people to see in real time their own licences and any considerations that are under way.

One of the great features of this new system is what we've just recently released, which is our environmental records viewer. A lot of the information has always been made publicly available, but it's been very difficult to access, and it's always been a challenge without knowing the exact water licence number to be able to pinpoint the information that's needed. With the rollout of our ERV – we're calling it the environmental records viewer – we can now see all of the existing water licences in Alberta. We can see all of the allocations that are forwarded to each of those licences across the province, and it presents a real cumulative effect of understanding our water licences and where people can provide their information to us.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Follow-up?

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** No, thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Then we'll go back to Member Schmidt.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Thank you so much. In answer to my last question, ADM Horton mentioned in-stream flow needs as part of the development of a water conservation objective. Thank you for introducing yet another term for water management that is poorly defined here at the committee. The point of a water conservation objective, as I understand the ADM has told us, is to protect the in-stream flow needs that manage aquatic health but also to provide some kind of user expectations. I don't know. Maybe I can float my canoe down the Red Deer River at some point in September; there is enough water for me to do that kind of thing.

It's my understanding that the province actually hasn't determined the in-stream flow needs of any river or subbasin in the province. Is that correct? What is the process that the department would go through to establish the in-stream flow needs? You talked about science. Is that done by the department? Is it done by university researchers? Is it done by other people? Like, help us understand the process of developing in-stream flow needs, and tell us about the work of continuously monitoring those factors that were used to develop that.

**Mr. Horton:** Thank you, through the chair. Maybe I'll start, and if any of my colleagues wish to supplement in terms of some of the science side, that would be helpful. One of the things that is at the basis of the water management plan, just to go back to that larger piece, is sort of "What is the environmental need?" but also "What do the users in that area need?" as well.

9:00

You spoke of the Red Deer plan, but if you look at the approved water management plan for the Battle River, it identifies in that plan

a number of different users across the landscape. There is the aquatic ecosystem and what we need to keep that healthy. That is that sort of in stream, the flow needed, required to keep the fish alive and the aquatic ecosystem healthy. But then there are all the other users on the landscape that require water. That includes municipalities. That includes agricultural licences that are there, power generators that are on that landscape, what oil field injection needs might be identified.

We look at all of those, and that in turn helps us to determine, along with growth and other pieces, what that conservation objective should be. We know that if we're getting closer to that, we need to begin to take some action in terms of different kinds of ways of managing water. Is it looking at different ways of integrating with land planning at the municipal level? Is it looking at different structural pieces that may be required to improve the amount of surface water quantity that is there in that particular region or particular basin?

So that's sort of one of the things, how we get to that place. When it comes to where that number comes from, that's driven a lot – maybe I'll look to ADM Davis to fill in, because he has a lot of the science folks with him, kind of what we know from a biology side in terms of what's in those basins, what does the habitat need to survive, and what does our monitoring tell us when it comes to what's in that particular basin.

Tom?

**Mr. Davis:** Yeah. As the Auditor pointed out, we don't have the robust framework documented that we need to. That's part of the work we need to do, right? We're working towards that. I think, what I would say, the way it's being managed currently is at that basin scale, based on the way we have deployed staff across the province. So we have our compliance staff and approval staff, that would be part of Travis's team, that are based regionally. Within the air and watershed stewardship group within the department we have scientists that would be, you know, water and air. I know we're talking water here, but those specialists are regionally based, so they have an understanding of that reach. Then, as it relates to those in-stream flow objectives, it ties to things like fish habitat. We have our fish and wildlife stewardship branch as well, so from a fish perspective they're out looking, they're doing FIN surveys, they're doing those things to see what is happening in that space.

The pieces are there. We're managing in that way in terms of trying to understand and then take management response. I think one of the things we've observed is that documented in a robust way is one of the things we need to improve, and that's one of the elements that we will be delivering through the implementation plan.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Earlier this year the department announced that it is abandoning the process of holding back water when water licences are transferred in the South Saskatchewan River basin. It's my understanding that that process was implemented a number of years ago because the department at that time intended to develop an in-stream flow needs assessment for the South Saskatchewan River basin, and then the holdbacks were designed to make sure that the department could guarantee that those in-stream flow needs would always be met. If the department is stepping away from holdbacks on licences, does that mean that the department is no longer interested in developing and implementing in-stream flow needs in rivers? What science was used to make this decision that the holdbacks weren't necessary anymore?

**Mr. Davis:** Maybe I'll start, but then I'll refer to ADM Rich. The department is still concerned and will work on in-stream flow

objectives and the water conservation, so it's not that that is not important. I just want to be clear there. In terms of the decisions as it relates to how to manage the holdback, I'll turn to ADM Rich because it's been her team that's been managing that in terms of the policy.

**Ms Rich:** Yeah. Again, I think your question said: if we're changing the holdback policy, are we therefore not developing WCOs? That is not the case. They are two separate things.

Just in case you're not aware of what a holdback is: when it's an approved water management plan, which we have in the Battle, the South Saskatchewan, and the Milk, the Water Act enables a licensee to transfer part of its water licence in whole or in part, temporarily or permanently. A holdback is allowed where the department can take up to 10 per cent of that transferred volume back to the department and for the environment.

Now, we did update our guidance very recently for those three basins, and I don't think it's quite as simple as that. The Milk River basin, as you noted, does not have a WCO at this time, and no holdback was recommended in that report. The guidance is: don't take a holdback because there isn't a WCO. And there was no such recommendation in the approved plan.

In the Battle the approved plan – when I say approved plan, it's a cabinet-approved plan. The approved plan says, "Take the maximum 10 per cent holdback," so the guidance is, "Take the maximum 10 per cent holdback." We want some consistency in these decisions. We want to be transparent in how we're applying these policies.

For the third, which is the South Saskatchewan basin, which has the most transfers that have occurred to date, it says that the director can take up to 10 per cent. We always had guidance, and it evolved over time as to when to take it and when not to take it. For example, if a farm is split in two – you know, maybe it's transferring to children or something like that – we were saying: don't take the 10 per cent holdback for that. That's the same licence. It's just transferring, or maybe something's expanding in the same capacity.

But it isn't quite as simple as saying: don't take the 10 per cent holdback. It says that you may take it if it is required to protect the aquatic environment or if it negatively affects downstream users, other water users, because you can't have a Water Act decision that has a negative impact on others. It's not removing it; it's clarifying those situations where you should take it in the SSRB, it's clarifying that you must take it in the Battle, and it's clarifying that you needn't take it in the Milk.

**The Chair:** MLA Johnson.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Thank you, Mr. Chair and through you to the department for being with us this morning and for all the work that you're doing.

My first question is about the river basins that we've been talking about a little bit already. In the Environment and Protected Areas implementation plan we can see the ministry is working expediently to address the Auditor General's concerns regarding water conservation objectives in major river basins across the province. I can see the ministry has begun construction on a hydroelectric station in the Wapiti River subbasin, which will improve water supply and flow information for the area. Could the ministry please explain to this committee how this hydroelectric station will work towards addressing the concerns outlined by the Auditor General in his report?

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you for the question. Maybe just a point of clarification. We are working to establish a hydrometric station, not hydroelectric. The hydromet station is intended to be able to

measure those water quantities throughout, so that's installed in the river in that area. It's an area where we don't have that information at the moment, so recognizing the need for that, we are establishing that station, and then that will provide us continuous information on the water quantity that is there. That allows us to have a better understanding of what's happening in that subbasin.

**The Chair:** A follow-up?

**Mrs. Johnson:** Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the clarification, through you.

I see the ministry is also working towards generating a model of the Battle River subbasin to calculate the water flows, which you referred to, which is expected to be completed July next year. Could the ministry please explain to this committee what steps have been taken during the 2023-2024 period on this item and how this model will further water conservation in the Battle River area?

**Mr. Ripley:** Thanks for the question. With regard to the specificity of the Battle River area, I think it also speaks to the general area itself. My team has been working with the watershed alliance groups in that area as well as the local municipalities, and the steps we've taken so far are to evaluate the natural flow in the Battle River, looking at all the existing licensees and licences that are on that river system. But to the point earlier, it's also looking at the in-stream objectives and how those could be best used over the course of a year.

**9:10**

To the point of looking at the hydrographs, I think it's a lot of detailed analysis looking at the hydrographs. When do we see that the peak in water flow is occurring? What is the current water allocation in the area, and how do we best manage that in the Battle River to ensure that we have flows all through the year? That work is very technical, as I understand it, being done by the technical teams working with the communities and the watershed alliance groups to help drive that final outcome next year.

Thank you.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Okay. Talking about the development of water conservation objectives, water management plans, those kinds of things, in 2021 the department held consultations on the Oldman River basin water allocation order. At that time it was widely suspected that this was being done to allow coal mines access to more water. I just would like the department to tell us what current plans it has for the Oldman River subbasin and how that works into – like, are you considering future changes to the allocation order there, or is that off the table at the moment?

**Ms Rich:** I can take that one. We're not currently engaging on the water allocation order. For your awareness, there's 1,100 acre-feet, or about 13 and a half million cubic metres, reserved under that order in the upstream portion of the Oldman reservoir, but it's actually specified for specific purposes. I want to make that really, really clear. It's held there. But a small portion, about 10,000 acre-feet, is for irrigation; 1,500 acre-feet for other purposes, including agriculture, municipal, rural, commercial, and recreation; and others for industrial purposes. Like, it's 150 acre-feet that would include coal mining, which is a very small amount.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Right. So that's not going to change now.

**Ms Rich:** We are not engaging on changing that order at this time.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Thank you very much.

**Mrs. Johnson:** The Auditor General in his report states that “it is unclear if the implemented water conservation objectives are effective.” It is important that our government answers to the people of Alberta and is able to show the effectiveness of our water conservation objectives going forward as surface water management is a key priority for many Albertans across the province. Through you, Mr. Chair, I see the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas, as outlined in their implementation plan, is prioritizing the completion of a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of existing water conservation objectives. Could the ministry please explain to this committee what a comprehensive assessment of these objectives entails and what that means for Albertans across the province?

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you. I’ll defer to Andrew.  
Thank you.

**Mr. Horton:** Thank you, through the chair. I want to make sure that we’re clear that we do have mechanisms in place to ensure that we know what’s going on in the system. There are those 400 hydrometric stations in Alberta that provide us with continuous and real-time flow information. We have a lot of information that comes from decision-makers in terms of what they’re looking at and sort of the people on the ground to tell us what’s going on. So there is that.

What we are working on, and what the Auditor General identified, is our ability to systematically determine this so we have a really good process in place to make that happen. We are evaluating that, and we’re looking at the objectives that are currently there to make sure that they are in fact meeting the outcomes that they were established for. This is, again, not just about necessarily the aquatic ecosystem itself but also about the other users in that particular basin. Is there sufficient water for growth? Is there sufficient water for industrial development, for municipalities, et cetera? What does that actually look like? And it is about working with, at some stage, the folks in that region as well to make sure that they’re aware and that they have that ability to contribute to what those conservation objectives are.

It is also about looking at the data over a longer time period. Water flows change over time within a calendar year and also year over year, so it’s about looking at that longer time frame to make sure that we have a really good sense of: is this objective what we would like to see in the region? How do we make it better, and how do we also make that process work so we can make this repeatable and easily understood for Albertans and for others?

**The Chair:** Follow-up?

**Mrs. Johnson:** Nope. I’m good. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Member Schmidt.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Thank you. Just to comment on the response to my questions around the Oldman water basin allocation order, I would be thrilled if the department could convert its units to cubic metres and drop this acre-feet business. Like, we’ve been on the metric system for over 50 years. Get with the times, guys. Maybe the Auditor General can do a report into the metrication of government services. No.

My question, then, is around that water conservation objectives, when they were implemented in the legislation, also contemplated the possibility of developing water quality objectives. Everything that we’ve talked about today has really focused so far on quantity. Certainly, water quality is top of mind with the government’s plans to mine coal in the eastern slopes. We’re hearing a lot of concerns about potential selenium impacts and those sorts of things. Can the

department tell the committee what work is being done to develop water quality objectives in river basins across Alberta?

**Mr. Horton:** Yeah. I can speak to that. Through the chair, thank you for the question. We actually have a very robust system in place with environmental management frameworks for surface water quality. We have water quality reports for the lower Athabasca region, upper Athabasca region, North Saskatchewan, and South Saskatchewan region. Those are issued. Those reports look at all the aspects of that particular watershed or that particular river, set up triggers, sort of signs, posts that say: this is a time that we have to look into what’s going on in this particular water basin or this particular river with respect to a particular, specific thing.

If we look at – sorry; I apologize. I’m just pulling up the one for the South Saskatchewan River or upper Athabasca, let’s say. What is it looking like for potassium, for sulphate, for dissolved nickel, for total suspended solids? When those triggers are reached, we look into what that is. There are also limits that these frameworks set up that say: you cannot go past this line. The triggers are sort of the early warning piece. The limit really sets out: we need to take action.

Whenever those triggers are hit, we do an investigation to see why that has hit that particular trigger. It can be that there is a problem with a specific industrial user or something else, but it can also be an issue with where our monitoring station is located or the monitoring station itself. So it’s really important for us to do the investigation to look into what that is before we take action. But that system that’s in place allows us to monitor what’s going on in those basins for water quality and be ready to take action as we’re doing that continual monitoring. These reports are all available publicly, and we do them on an annual basis.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Has there been any time when a trigger has been reached and the department has implemented some kind of investigation and management plan? Like, can you give us a specific example of when a trigger was hit and what the department did in response to that?

**Mr. Davis:** Sure. I’m going to look to Martin Foy because it would be great to bring the AER into this at some point as well. I’ll use a couple examples. The Muskeg River has a water quality management plan. What we have seen are some elevations in some of those elements that are being tracked in that plan. We have started work within our management team, so within EPA but also with the AER, as it relates to what may be causing that and are working with industry in that same space to be able to draw upon their compliance information. It would be an example.

Another example would be some of the things that are related to where we’re seeing elevations relayed amongst selenium in some of the rivers downstream of existing coal mines. Again, we’re sharing that information, when we see a trigger passed, with the AER. The AER as the regulator has that ability to work with the companies in terms of imposing other elements.

I’ll look to Martin in terms of that aspect of the management action from a regulatory perspective that happens.

**9:20**

**Mr. Foy:** Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for the question. Typically what we do is we work really closely with environment, our experts, their experts, and we seek to understand the challenge. The one on selenium: if there are active coal mines, typically what we put in place is something called the selenium management plan, and all active coal mines in Alberta now have a selenium management plan where they’re required to monitor selenium. They’re required to take action to reduce the levels, and we attempt to resolve the issue

that has been identified by environment using those tools. Where it's more difficult is when it's historical coal mining. We have some coal mining from the 1930s or, you know, older coal mines. It's more difficult to address some of that historic introduction of selenium.

On the Muskeg example we work closely, again, with Tom's team to understand the natural contributions, the contributions from companies. Then we look to use their approvals to mitigate any introduction of sulphates, in this example, to get it back to achieve the management trigger.

**The Chair:** MLA Johnson.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. From the Auditor General's report on surface water management I can see the South Saskatchewan River basin contains 13 per cent of Alberta's surface water. It hosts 37 per cent of Alberta's population and accounts for 68 per cent of the province's water allocated to users. I can also see the water conservation objectives have not been assessed since 2006. First, can the ministry explain whether it considers the existing approved water management plan for the South Saskatchewan River basin to be effective for managing water?

**Ms Rich:** Yeah. Sure. I can start. I should just note that under the approved water management plan for the South Saskatchewan River basin it effectively closed the basin to new allocations, right? A lot of this is about managing water to protect aquatic ecosystems through WCOs and the like, and our water licence – those that work as directors under the act to approve our licences cannot issue a new licence in that. Now, we just mentioned the Oldman order that was put aside, but it's a very small component of that basin.

In essence, what happens now is that there's still a role in water management in that if a licensee wants to transfer part or whole of its licence temporarily or fully, there's still a role for the department to oversee to make sure that that is still allowable and would have not a negative effect on other users in the system. I want to just highlight that as a key component of that plan, that I think shows it is effective in how we're managing our water, how our water users have invested in conservation, efficiency, and productivity measures to maximize the use of every drop. We're getting, frankly, more irrigation area and crops produced. We're getting tighter municipal uses, et cetera.

I look at it to say that – I know you asked about a broad plan – I think genuinely it's seen as quite effective. We also continue to invest in storage and other things to maximize availability in the south. We continue to pass more than our required allocation to Saskatchewan. So a lot of these plans and measures do work together to show how it is effective in managing water, which is relatively scarce in this basin.

**The Chair:** Do you have a follow-up?

**Mr. Davis:** Chair, if I could. Kate has done, I think, a great job of explaining what is. As we look at the water mandate and the future focus that's happening through that engagement, I think it's important that we've looked at what is happening in this space. Kate mentions the apportionment agreement. We're required to pass on 50 per cent of all water into Saskatchewan. We see from the monitoring that's happening that we're passing on more than 50 per cent, which is great for downstream, but it doesn't maximize what we as Albertans have available for whether it's an in-stream flow or it's for industry.

So how do we better approach this? Some of the work that is happening now in terms of understanding through the engagement, the elements of reporting, the water-use reporting – we have a

licence allocation. If the user is not using that, essentially that water is lost to Albertans, and it moves into Saskatchewan. Again, we want to be good neighbours, but at the same time we want to maximize what we do have. The ability that we see with monitoring and real-time reporting or near real-time reporting and the ability then to make decisions as the year goes on and if we look at storage so that we're capturing water at the right times, then we can begin to use that when we need it and still meet the apportionment agreement. This is a big part of what government is trying to do right now with the engagement, but the water mandate is what's that future ability to manage, understand what's being actually used, and then making sure that we are getting the benefit both environmentally, socially, and economically from that water.

I just wanted to add that as what we're doing in future focus. Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mrs. Johnson:** Thank you through you, Mr. Chair. The follow-up is: could the ministry, then, provide some insight into the challenges that arise when assessing the effectiveness of the water conservation objectives in the approved water management plan for the South Saskatchewan River basin? What are the challenges that will arise?

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you for the follow-up. I think one of the challenges right now is the ability to get what that real-time information is. We've set the conditions with licences, but then we don't have the system coming back to say: here's what's actually being used from that licence. One of those challenges is just having the actual use or consumption element, so we see that as an important part of improving how we're managing in that river basin.

**The Chair:** MLA Ellingson.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Thank you, Chair. First of all, as a gen Xer that grew up on a farm, I just want to say that some of us are, like, always old school. I can map out in my head how big a farm is by acres. Please don't tell me hectares.

The Auditor General notes that water allocation information is available through the licence authorization website. We've talked quite a bit about allocations here at this meeting, but it also talks about how the allocation information isn't available, like, in an aggregated term. The department has mentioned in this meeting that you do now have, like, tools available to you that show you the allocations province-wide. Is that province-wide allocation data also now publicly available in an aggregated form?

**Mr. Ripley:** Yes. Thanks for the question. My apologies if I misspoke earlier. The environmental records viewer I referred to is a publicly available tool that everyone can use. What's currently available on the records viewer is all of the current water licences by individuals who hold a licence with our department as well as the allocation use under that licence. It likely also speaks to certain elements of the licence, including the point of diversion of where the licence is directed to.

What's not available in that records viewer at this point in time is the water use. So we have the allocation afforded to each of the licensees, but not all licences issued in Alberta that date back, some of them to the '60s and '50s, were there to report on water use. As part of that process, we are in the midst of moving everyone's licence onto an online reporting system. That takes a bit of time. A lot of those older licences have been digitized, and we're reaching out to the licence holders to get them onto the new system, which

will then improve our effectiveness to speak to the Auditor General's report findings on how we can better provide that information to Albertans in a publicly accessible way.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Thank you for that answer. I think that kind of ties back to in your implementation plan, where you said that queries are going to be available. So you're going to take all of that data from the licensees, you're going to, like, make it digitally available, and in your implementation plan queries would be made available. If people were asking about the aggregated nature of licences for an entire basin or for an entire subbasin, talk to me about what people are going to be able to ask in these queries and what they're going to be able to get out of those queries.

**Mr. Ripley:** Yes. Thank you. When you were speaking to queries, the real effectiveness of the tool is it allows for a spatially defined geographic area to be user specific, so you can go on the tool on an online map around your farm area. You can click the entire watershed. You can click around just the single tributary, or you can click around the whole subbasin, and then the report will spit out the total allocation that's available under all those licences and who holds those licences. That'll become very user easily accessible information.

9:30

**The Chair:** Thank you.  
MLA McDougall.

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you very much. Thank you for being here today. On page 6 of the Auditor General's report I see that there have been no provincial-level supply and demand estimates completed in over 16 years, which we've discussed here today. The supply and demand estimates are one criterion listed in the MOUs for determining if and when to activate or deactivate the MOUs. Can the ministry explain how the decisions to activate or deactivate the MOUs can be made effectively without recent or accurate supply and demand estimates?

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you for the question. I'm going to defer to Merry Turtiak, who spoke earlier. Merry has led the MOU planning process last year and is guiding that work now.

**Ms Turtiak:** Thank you for the question. Through the chair, there are a couple of different pieces to understanding . . .

**The Chair:** You can introduce yourself.

**Ms Turtiak:** My apologies. I'm Merry Turtiak, the executive director of the regulatory programs branch and the drought incident commander last year. There are two aspects to this that are key. In terms of developing the memorandums of understanding for drought or water sharing last year we did a number of modelling exercises, particularly for all the basins or subbasins of the South Saskatchewan River basin. Also, if you look within the water sharing MOU agreements, there are a number of criteria that speak to activation and deactivation of those agreements.

It looks at the current and local conditions, reservoir storage. What is the minimum reservoir storage? What does that storage look like for both spring, winter, and summer flows? What are we expecting for those river flows and, of course, consideration of in-stream objectives? We also look at the timing in terms of removal of allocations, in terms of when people are going to be using water in the system. Then from the water supply and demand area we are looking at that real, live information again through a bunch of the monitoring that the ADMs have spoken to as well as where the communities are experiencing any issues. Are there local issues?

If I think of last year, we do look at, as many of you would know, the Milk River basin failure or the Calgary critical infrastructure failure and how do those places interface. The decisions to activate or deactivate are based on a collaborative discussion with the signatories of the agreement, which the department facilitates but is not a voting member per se.

**Mr. McDougall:** Just to follow up on that, then, what you're saying here today is that you feel that your supply and demand estimates that you have: you do have them, and you're comfortable that they're accurate.

**Ms Turtiak:** Correct.

**Mr. McDougall:** Okay. Thank you.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Thank you, through the chair. I feel like maybe we're now having a little bit of alignment. We know that there is data published on water flow, and we've talked a little bit now about how there's going to be a query available for allocations. In that supply and demand, you know, the tools that the department is using to make conservation decisions, is that going to be compiled together to be publicly available to people? Will that query tool also be able to map flow versus allocation and not just allocation but use? Will we have real-time use available so that we have real-time flow and we have real-time use, so that anybody who's using now your new digital tools: will they also be able to see in a basin or a subbasin not just the flow, not just the allocation, but also the use?

**Mr. Ripley:** Thanks for the question. If I understood correctly, you're looking at an opportunity for a system or an amalgamation of systems to talk about not only the flows, the supplies, the geographic extent and the use and the allocation all into one system.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Yes.

**Mr. Ripley:** Yes. I think that's something that would take a bit of time to work on. What we do have are disparate systems that work together to develop that real-time flow. As mentioned earlier, there's the Alberta Rivers app, and it's just been recently updated. That provides the flow information. It's going to show the drought risk in the different watersheds. It's going to highlight if there is a water sharing agreement that's in place. It might also speak to what the drought stages are for that area. You may be able to use that in conjunction with the environmental records viewer to look at the current allocation of licences. But to combine the two systems into a larger system that can compile all of that is a work in progress and is something that we would be looking into going forward.

**Mr. Davis:** Maybe just one element, I think, that you'd mentioned is about the actual usage in that system. While that doesn't exist for everything right now, that is one of the things that is being engaged upon as part of the changes, to have that reporting on the usage. That would be available as well to understand both allocation but also consumption and what's returned back into the basin.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Yeah. I'm appreciating that response. Use is something that may be coming later. Allocations and flow we have, but they're two separate tools.

I guess what I want to go back to and say is that, you know, like: is this something the department will work towards? I think it's an extension of the Auditor General's recommendations. We heard earlier and in the reports we noted that kind of, like, compliance is often – you know, like a member of the public is kind of coming forward and noting something. I think if we want to facilitate the public being able to do their role as a citizens well, we need to be



able to make information easily accessible to them. It's a challenge if they're faced with, like, disparate systems. They need to try and patch together all this information from disparate systems, and the user system isn't even there yet. I guess, I'd hope to hear a commitment from the department that you'll develop the user system and that you'll work to stitch these systems together to make it easier for the public and, quite frankly, for the users and for your own team.

**Ms Rich:** Maybe I'll start. Again, I'm going to maybe mention two things. First, going back to the engagement launched yesterday on Water Act changes, the standardization on measurement and reporting also gives the transparency of data, posting the data, and having it standardized could help them like for like and folks being able to compile that information. That's part of that transparency of getting the information out there.

Again, we're not the only water managers in this province. We have a critical role as the department, obviously, and of the AER. We do think that water management is for all users to do, so that transparency becomes critical. Not only is it important to look at it kind of licence by licence but, as you say, it's putting the story together at different levels. It's the basin, the subbasin, a stretch of a river, whatever the case might be.

We are investing in our models in this way because it's what you input to a model and output to a model that really helps with that supply-demand balance. Merry Turtiak mentioned that quite a bit of modelling was done to inform those MOUs, and that modelling gets updated with current circumstances. It's also important as is possible to have those models available to other users to use themselves and to help inform their decisions. So we're looking to update our models not only with how they're constructed and the climate data that's going on them, adding more and more climate data and those types of things, but we're also looking to make them more accessible for the public to be able to use. So public use of the models, our ability to actually put that model information out there – because it's typically answering a question like, "What is the supply and demand?" or "Is water available?" or those types of things, but also allowing users to have access to models as is possible becomes important for them to be able to try different scenarios themselves.

**The Chair:** MLA McDougall.

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you. On page 7 of the implementation plan, under key challenges and contingencies, it states that the "water management plans are also influenced by social and political priorities." Can the ministry elaborate on how these challenges affect the implementation of the recommendations?

9:40

**Mr. Horton:** Thank you for the question. As we've talked today, a lot of the water conservation, the way we develop those water conservation objectives is with really strong stakeholder engagement, really strong involvement of the local community of water users, identification of what's in the region. What are the sort of outcomes that a particular watershed is looking at? What are the sort of draws that we see in the future? That's really when we speak to that sort of social and political priorities that are there. It's not just about the science; it's also about what we see for that particular basin.

It's not really a challenge to implementing the recommendations because the recommendations from the Auditor General are all around how we make that process robust and programmatic, like it's a system that we can all understand. We will continue to do, and we will definitely continue to work with stakeholders to have that

as an input into what those objectives end up being, but having a good sense even from stakeholders about how we go about developing that will be very helpful in terms of those conversations that we have going forward.

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you. How does the ministry plan to ensure that the water conservation objectives reflect the public interest?

**Mr. Horton:** Thank you for the question, again through the Chair. It may sound like I'm repeating myself, and I don't intend to, but it is really about that engagement process that we undergo, because without that, without the WPACs, the watershed protection advisory councils that are in the region, without the participation and volunteer time, in a lot of cases, from folks in the areas that contribute to those conversations in those consensus-building sort of environments, we won't have a good sense of what we set those conservation objectives at beyond purely what the environment needs. To recognize that there are other needs in that particular region and to make sure that we're providing an appropriate balance of protecting the aquatic ecosystem and also identifying opportunities for growth, opportunities for industrial development, for human needs, et cetera: that kind of engagement and consultation process is really how we ensure that we're reflecting the public interest with those water conservation objectives.

**The Chair:** Member Ellingson.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Great. Thank you. I'd actually like to pursue that a little bit. I thought that was a really good question, thank you, and how we are meeting the public interest in those objectives.

Now, I'd like to go back to the reporting. Again, what are we publishing at the end of the day? Like, objectives are established. My colleague was asking earlier about what those other things are that are attached to those objectives with respect to conservation and sustainability and habitat and user need. How is this being bundled together? What are we reporting back to the public with respect to those objectives and whether or not the objectives are meeting the needs of the public? What are we cranking out on an annual basis so that people can see it, that you're doing this assessment, and they can see the work that's being done and understand the direction that is being taken?

**Mr. Davis:** Thank you very much for the question. What I would point towards is that we have on our department website through the office of the Chief Scientist reports that are published there on state of environment or condition of environment reporting. As an example, ADM Horton had mentioned earlier about the water management framework reports that come out. Those have just recently been approved. Those reports that give an assessment of what has been the quality or the quantity of water in those watersheds would be available on the site there. The office of the Chief Scientist then, working with others in the department, takes that information, for instance, and will produce a report that says: here's the condition of this as it would relate to, perhaps, a species or a particular activity that's going on within an area. Those reports that we have that would be showing the cumulative impacts or the cumulative understanding would be available through the department website and the office of the Chief Scientist, in particular, those reports that are there.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Can those reports be tied back to, like, the live information that we have? Can those reports be used as – forgive me. I haven't read one of those current reports, but those reports are going to be looking at the past, right? So they will have been looking at what happened last year or two years ago and given that

state, and when you're looking at it, it's 18 months old or something like that. Can that report be used to inform the public so that then, when they look at live information, they can understand, they can relate that live information back to that status report and have a picture in their mind of what the status might look like today?

**Mr. Davis:** That's a great question. Perhaps this goes back to your earlier question around the availability and accessibility. I think one of the things we are working towards is that public availability of the information. As you mentioned, those reports look backwards at what has been. But with some of the improvements, for instance, that have been made to the Alberta Rivers app, someone can go in there and they can drill down to a very specific area to understand: what is the water flow happening here? There's the ability to put on alerts so that if someone is looking for something specific to an area, they can draw upon that. The changes that are being made through the implementation of our digital system will draw other information.

The commitment that you are seeking about how we bring all this together: I think that the intent is to make this available. It's a challenge in terms of making it one system, but the availability through it through other means – and there are some exciting things I think that Technology and Innovation, the department, is doing in this space around some of their AI and the ability to draw out that analysis of data.

These are some things that are being considered. We're not at the stage of saying that we're about to announce, but through our implementation plan and the things we're doing through the water mandate and the engagement, these are elements we're trying to ensure are considered as we build out these systems to improve them.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We have 15 minutes left. MLA McDougall.

**Mr. McDougall:** Thank you very much. I understand that many of the licensees within the South Saskatchewan River basin have senior licences, which to my knowledge means they are exempt from some of the water usage restrictions imposed by the water conservation objectives. Can the minister share more details about senior licences and how they affect surface water management?

**Mr. Ripley:** Thank you. The senior licences in the South Saskatchewan River basin and their impact to surface water management of water: the critical thing there is that it's a closed basin, so those senior licence holders have priority. We mentioned first in time, first in right. Under normal circumstances the way that would work is that if a water shortage was to occur, a senior holder of a licence, that has a higher priority than a junior, would be able to ensure that their water is maintained, and the water to the junior licence holder would be restricted.

Now, I think, as part of what we've been mentioning today, considering the drought situation, how we have managed to tackle that was to develop those voluntary nonregulated water sharing agreements or MOUs, in which that prevented those senior water licence holders from calling their priority. In fact, it actually managed to help them lower their water use to make sure that the priority wasn't called.

**Mr. McDougall:** So you've had situations with senior licensees that have voluntarily acquiesced, if you will, to reduce their use in order to meet the bigger, greater good. That's happening. Thank you.

**The Chair:** MLA Ellingson.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Thank you. Again, through the chair, we also now know through this conversation that there are hydrometric stations in place, I think over 400, in the province. The information to us also is that the department does, like, regular kind of equipment maintenance, integrity and also manual measurements to validate the data to make sure that equipment is still working. But for consumption we are reliant on self-reporting, and it doesn't appear that there's a similar situation with consumption where we do regular, routine, random follow-ups to see whether or not the consumption measurement or that self-reporting is working.

We talked a little bit earlier, I think, about how maybe that's something that's needed, but you've got to figure out how to do it in a cost-effective way. Tell me more about the plans that are in place to do some kind of, like, regular routine but also random consumption monitoring and how that's not going to, you know, break the back of the people working in the department or your budget.

**Mr. Davis:** I'm going to defer to ADM Ripley but also to Martin Foy from the AER as regulators for that.

9:50

**Mr. Ripley:** From Environment and Protected Areas' perspective I think what's critical here is that we do undertake some compliance sweeps, which are a general review of the different licences within a specific area. Now, those compliance sweeps may occur, but they're not as routine or frequent perhaps as what would be liked. The intent is that we rely on self-reporting or complaints into our system.

The improvements we're making are really going to tackle this issue from two perspectives. One is that the complaints can be logged within our system, and we have a new intake for all incident reports that can be triaged and managed accordingly for a quick response. Second is that the system will now require, once the digital licences are in place, an ongoing monitoring and reporting function that will allow us to keep better tabs on what is being reported for water use, and we can follow up with compliance sweeps to ensure that those are being maintained. That's the intent that we are trying to strive for with the new online system once it's fully operational.

**Mr. Foy:** Much like my EPA colleagues we do risk-based inspections. On term licences last year we did 163 unannounced inspections. We had a 90 per cent compliance rate there. On temporary diversion licences we did 254 inspections. We had an 82 per cent compliance rate there. The typical noncompliances were not having the physical licence on-site, improper signage. We did have some that were in the wrong location and then improper fish screens.

We use those unannounced inspections to verify that they're actually reporting and that they're reporting on their activities accurately. They as a requirement of their licence, say TDLs for example, have to report on a monthly basis on their usage. Term licences I think are the same, although some older ones might have a different frequency. We can use our spot inspections to kind of verify, do an audit of what they're telling us.

Thanks for the question.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Thank you.

I guess I'd like to just hear a little bit more on how we're scoring up, then. Does EPA also have a percentage of – like, when you do your sweeps, do you have a percentage of compliance, that 90 per cent were compliant or not and why they weren't compliant? I'd like to square up that. You know, it sounds like there are a reasonable number of complaints that are being filed. How many

complaints are being filed, and how does this square up against the relatively high compliance rate that you're seeing in your sweeps? Why are we getting complaints if there's a really high compliance rate in the sweeps?

**Mr. Ripley:** Thank you. I don't have that information available on hand as my AER colleague does, in terms of our percentages of compliance assurance, but that's something I could follow up with the committee to report back.

**Mr. Ellingson:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** MLA Chantelle de Jonge.

**Ms de Jonge:** Thanks, Chair. On page 9 of the implementation plan I see that the ministry is determining "a procedure for verifying the accuracy and the completeness of reported water usage data," and that is planned for completion by July 2026 and is based on the OAG's findings. My question is: can you share a more detailed overview of the plan, and specifically can you please provide this committee with an update on the progress of the plan and how that is going to reach its desired outcomes?

**Mr. Davis:** Thanks. I'm going to defer to ADM Ripley.

**Mr. Ripley:** Thanks for the question, and my apologies if I'm reiterating some of the information I provided earlier.

A lot of the work that we're doing around the plan and the reports on water usage and the data is really around the development of our digital regulatory assurance system and environmental records viewer. The real improvements that we're making to this system can be demonstrated in our efficiency at issuing licences and water approvals over the last number of years, which is a testament to how quickly the new information and the new system are able to work towards providing that information to licensees and clients. The other key deliverable here is that we've managed to reduce our backlog in a lot of our water licences and water approvals through the use of the new system.

In terms of how well the system is working and the progress, it's been very beneficial to this point in time. We've launched the environmental records viewer, and we're in the process of continuing to ensure that the licences that are still in paper format or in individuals' households are moved to our new digital regulatory assurance system. Again, that will help us increase our monitoring and reporting of the work that we undertake.

**The Chair:** Do you have a follow-up?

**Ms de Jonge:** Yeah. For the digital regulatory assurance system I see that the planned completion date was March 2025. Just to confirm, the system was completed?

**Mr. Ripley:** Yeah. We've been focusing on the system itself today from a water context, and that has been almost fully completed. I would consider it complete. Our current work on the system includes some of the work on our other types of approvals that we issue through our department.

I would just also mention that in developing the system we worked closely with our colleagues from the Alberta Energy Regulator, and I just wanted to make sure that it was known that the water issuance, whether it's from the AER or whether it's from Environment and Protected Areas, uses the same system and the same information to make sure that we're working in lockstep with each other so that we're not issuing licences over top of one another.

**The Chair:** MLA Renaud.

**Ms Renaud:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Okay. I have a couple of questions around licensing and compliance. The first one: given the Auditor General's recommendation to improve licensing and compliance monitoring and that in the Auditor General's findings there were deficiencies in how and whether the department documents its decisions regarding new licences, renewals, transfers and compliance, can the ministry, the department say how it ensures that decisions are made in a way that is consistent and fair across the department across time and that the conditions placed on the licences are enforced?

**Mr. Davis:** Let me defer to ADM Ripley for the regulatory perspective.

**Mr. Ripley:** Yes. Thanks for the question. In terms of consistency in our approach related to licensing decisions each of those decisions is made with a lot of the policies and guidelines that we talked about earlier today in place. They evaluate the water flows. They look at the particulars of the licence request, including the point of diversion, the rate of diversion. The directors issuing the licences also have their ability to incorporate regional knowledge and surrounding licence holder information from the area, and we use the surface water quality frameworks as a point. That provides a lot of consistency in how we're issuing our licences. What the Auditor General report did pick up is that maybe that's not clearly apparent to everyone who might want to know how we're making those decisions.

Those are the steps that we're taking to make that determination. We're going to build that out with the work of the report findings.

**Ms Renaud:** A follow-up. Pardon me, but I didn't get the sense from the Auditor General's report that that was just lacking some clarity. Like, the concern seemed a lot deeper than that.

Given that the licensees currently self-report their own compliance and that the AG noted many instances where noncompliance had been reported by the licensees, can the ministry say how the AG findings of the deficiencies in assessment and verification of compliance impact the ministry's ability to make informed decisions and plans?

**Mr. Ripley:** Thanks. In terms of the compliance piece of the report what I'd like to highlight is that our compliance program is built around an approach that talks about when we see a noncompliance in our licensing system with a client or a licensee, we first look at trying to bring that licensee back into compliance. It's often not a heavy-handed approach. We work with them because there could be a myriad of circumstances that lead to why that licensee may be out of compliance.

Should the noncompliance continue, then we'll look towards more of an advisement that we're going to take some further actions and that we're going to assess the licensee in a more formal way. A last resort by our department is typically to lead to some type of formal regulatory approach where we're compelling the licensee to take action, which could be in the form of an enforcement order, or it could be a water management order that's issued to that individual. But those are usually the last resort.

I'm hoping that answers your question.

10:00

**The Chair:** Thank you, ADM. Right on the dot.

It's 10 o'clock, so that's all for questions today. I would like to thank the officials from the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas and the Alberta Energy Regulator and the office of the Auditor General for their participation and responding to committee members' questions. I ask that any outstanding questions be

responded to, if there is one, in writing within 30 days and forwarded to the committee clerk.

Officials may leave at this point. You can stay if you want.

At our March 25, 2025, meeting the committee passed a motion which stated that the 15 minutes after an audit-focused meeting be allocated for the committee to determine if it would like to hold a future meeting to deliberate on making recommendations related to the audit report to the Assembly. The subcommittee has also recommended that these deliberations be scheduled shortly after the audit-focused meeting and for at least one hour.

I think there are two questions here. Should we have a deliberation meeting? If so, I suggest that we do it next week sometime. First, it's open for debate. Should we have a deliberation meeting for one hour?

**Mr. Rowswell:** To the Auditor General, I'm unclear as to under what circumstances we'd want to deliberate. Is it to make our own recommendations based on the report, that we might report to the Assembly? Like, I'm just struggling with that a little bit.

**The Chair:** If I may jump in, I think PAC is one of the mechanisms for the Auditor General to enforce their office's recommendations. If we see somewhere where ministries are not accepting those recommendations or implementing those recommendations or where there is some need for the committee to intervene, that would be something where we can make some recommendations to the Legislature.

**Ms Robert:** Mr. Chair, can I just – sorry. When you're done.

**The Chair:** Sure.

**Ms Robert:** Thanks, Mr. Chair. In the past the committee, to the chair's point, has endorsed the Auditor General's recommendation in a report to the Assembly, but the committee may also make its own recommendations related to surface water. That's perfectly within the committee's remit.

In terms of reporting to the Assembly, again, it's up to the committee to decide if it would like to do that. I would recommend, if I may, that at least for this first meeting it might be a good idea to report just to let the Assembly know that you are trying this new process on a trial basis, as a means of just informing the Assembly. Of course, it's up to the committee.

**Mr. Rowswell:** Well, from that perspective, it looks like the department has accepted the report and is working towards implementation of the recommendations. I don't know if we need to meet to do that, but to make a report to the Assembly about this format and kind of what we're doing, I think that would be useful to make everyone aware.

**The Chair:** I think that was part of the subcommittee as well. Auditor General, if you wanted to say something.

**Mr. Wylie:** No, I have nothing further to add.

To the committee, I just, again, appreciate the committee doing this. You know, it is foundational to the role of this committee. This committee is really, if you look across Canada and following the Westminster model, the accountability mechanism. We report, but all we can do is make recommendations.

With respect to the implementation, the timeliness of the implementation, et cetera, that's over to you. As a nonpartisan committee that is your role, quite frankly, within our Westminster model. So your call, how you thought the meeting went. With

respect to the timelines of their implementation, you all saw their plan and you heard their responses to the action that they're taking.

We will do our job, and we will follow up whenever they say they are ready. When is that targeted for right now, Eric?

**Mr. Leonty:** I believe most of the timelines are by the end of this calendar year, so I think we'd be looking to follow up early next year. I think the point has been raised that, yeah, they've accepted those recommendations, and we've provided feedback on that plan, and I think that's heading in the right direction.

**The Chair:** Anyone else?

It looks like the will of the committee is to report the new process we started. At this point I think we will not be making any recommendations to the Legislature in relation to this report; therefore, we don't need that extra hour meeting for deliberation. Did I get that correct?

**Mr. Rowswell:** Yeah, I think. For me, yeah.

**The Chair:** Okay. So that's what we will do.

**Ms Robert:** I'm sorry. Can I just . . .

**The Chair:** Yes, please.

**Ms Robert:** Thanks, Mr. Chair. Okay. So what I'm hearing is that the committee has no recommendations it wishes to make, but it would like to make a report to the Assembly which provides information with respect to the process. Is that right?

I think, then, what the committee might like to do is give research services or the LAO direction to draft a report that the committee can review, and the committee should decide on how it wants to approve that report, if it wants the chair to approve it after the committee has seen it. You know, most of you have been through this before with other committee reports. There needs to be sort of direction on what you would like us to do and how you want to approve it and get it to the Assembly.

**The Chair:** Consider yourselves so directed.

I can ask the committee if they want to review the report or if they would trust me to review the report and approve it.

**Mr. Rowswell:** Yeah, I'm good with that, a review of the report.

**The Chair:** So I will review the report and approve it.

**Ms Robert:** Normally we would at least circulate it to the whole committee. Yeah? All right. Okay. Well, we'll take the consensus of the committee as our direction, and we will get something prepared and circulated as soon as we can.

**The Chair:** That'd be great.

**Mr. Lundy:** Chair, I have a question for you on that. Actually, this is for the clerk, I would think. This process of potentially down the road our committee reporting to the Legislature: is that going to pertain only to our audit-focused sessions? I believe we're still going to be doing, I guess you can call it, the regular process that our committee has always done, and then we're interspersing these audit-focused reviews.

And a follow-up to that: if there is a review down the road, where we as a committee would like to make a recommendation, could you add a little commentary? Is that a "for your information"? I don't think we can direct the ministry to make government policy. I'm just wondering what that would actually look like in the event we would do that down the road.

**Ms Robert:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you very much for the questions. The first question was about, I think: can the committee make reports based on annual report-focused meetings? Is that basically what you're asking?

**Mr. Lundy:** Yeah.

**Ms Robert:** Absolutely. In the standing orders this committee is permitted to make some . . .

**Mr. Lundy:** So we've always had that.

*10:10*

**Ms Robert:** We've always had that rule in the standing orders, that the committee is allowed to make substantive reports to the Assembly on the work that it does.

With respect to recommendations, they are just recommendations. Just like in a statute review, the committee will make recommendations to the Assembly and those recommendations might be: we recommend that the department of X do X. It's just a recommendation. Of course, this committee cannot direct the Assembly. The Assembly urges the government, right? That is the language that is used. So any recommendations would be just that, recommendations sent to the Assembly of X, Y, or Z.

**The Chair:** So we can recommend to the Assembly that they should change things to the metric system?

**Ms Robert:** Certainly. Whatever the will of the committee is.

**The Chair:** I think that there are 150 days for the Assembly to respond.

**Ms Robert:** To respond, yeah, I believe so.

**The Chair:** Something like that.

**Ms Robert:** Yes. Then that response comes back to the committee, and the committee does with it what it will.

**The Chair:** There is a little bit of other business. The written responses to questions asked at our March 25, 2025, meeting were received from the Ministry of Tourism and Sport and the office of the Auditor General, and they are made available to the members on the committee's internal website. Following our usual practice, they will be posted publicly on the Assembly website.

If there are any other items for discussion.

If not, can a member move . . .

**Mr. Rowswell:** Are we going to talk about pushing to 9, or is that just going to be a decision made?

**The Chair:** Yeah. There's one more thing. The next meeting of the committee is on May 6, 2025, with the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women, and we are suggesting that we start that meeting at 9 a.m.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Mr. Chair, I'd like to counter proposal with starting the meeting at 7 o'clock in the morning.

**The Chair:** All in favour? Seeing none. That one won't work.

If that's the consensus, 9 a.m. is a reasonable time. Most offices open at 9 a.m. So the next meeting will be at 9 a.m. on May 6, 2025.

Now I call for a motion to adjourn, for a member to move that the Tuesday, April 29, 2025, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be adjourned. Moved by Armstrong-Homeniuk. All in favour? Anyone opposed?

The motion is carried. Meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:13 a.m.]





