



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature  
Second Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Forestry and Parks  
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 9, 2026  
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-2-4

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta  
The 31st Legislature  
Second Session**

**Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship**

Dyck, Nolan B., Grande Prairie (UC), Chair  
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP), Deputy Chair  
Elmeligi, Sarah, Banff-Kananaskis (NDP),\* Acting Deputy Chair  
Al-Guneid, Nagwan, Calgary-Glenmore (NDP)  
Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)  
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Ip, Nathan, Edmonton-South West (NDP)  
Petrovic, Chelsae, Livingstone-Macleod (UC)  
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC)  
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC)

\* substitution for Heather Sweet

**Also in Attendance**

Sabir, Irfan, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall (NDP)  
Tejada, Lizette, Calgary-Klein (NDP)

**Support Staff**

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## **Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship**

### **Participants**

Ministry of Forestry and Parks  
Hon. Todd Loewen, Minister  
Dan Lux, Assistant Deputy Minister, Forestry



7 p.m.

Monday, March 9, 2026

[Mr. Dyck in the chair]

**Ministry of Forestry and Parks  
Consideration of Main Estimates**

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

At this point I would love to go around the table and do introductions and have members introduce themselves for the record. As well, Minister, if you can introduce the officials who are joining you at the table, that would be fantastic. My name is Nolan Dyck. I am the MLA for Grande Prairie and the chair of this committee. We will start with introductions to my right.

**Mr. Cyr:** My name is Scott Cyr, the MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

**Mr. Yao:** Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

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

**Mrs. Petrovic:** Chelsae Petrovic, Livingstone-Macleod.

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

**Mr. Loewen:** Todd Loewen, Minister of Forestry and Parks. On my right I have deputy minister Ronda Goulden. On my left I've got senior financial officer and assistant deputy minister Matt Grossman. Further to my left I have assistant deputy minister of forestry Dan Lux, and further to my right, assistant deputy minister of lands Shane Schreiber. I would also like to thank the ministry team here today and those supporting us in the gallery for their hard work in preparing for Budget 2026.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Good evening. Who am I today? I'm the MLA for Edmonton-Rutherford, Jodi Calahoo Stonehouse. Nice to see you all.

**Dr. Elmeligi:** Sarah Elmeligi, MLA for Banff-Kananaskis.

**Member Tejada:** Lizette Tejada, MLA for Calgary-Klein.

**Mr. Sabir:** Irfan Sabir, MLA for Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

**The Chair:** Excellent. Thank you so very much, everyone, for being here.

We don't have anyone participating remotely, so we can skip that part. I would like to note the following substitutions for the record: Dr. Elmeligi for Ms Sweet as deputy chair as well.

I've got a few things here for housekeeping just to run through for some of us just at the beginning as we kick off estimates. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live-streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn your camera on while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on a speakers list are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should signal to myself, the chair. Please

set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

All right. I'm going to get a little bit longer here. There's been just some confusion as we set up estimates on substitution process. I'm just going to quickly outline this at the beginning here, and hopefully we don't have to do this again during the estimates process. According to Standing Order 56 committee members wishing to have an official substitute must file a notice of substitution with both the Clerk of the Assembly and the chair of the committee. It is appreciated if you also advise the committee clerk.

Second, substitutions sent by e-mail must be sent directly from the member and not their constituency staff or by caucus staff. Written notices of substitutions must be signed by the original committee member.

Substitution for the chair and deputy chair requires 24 hours notice while other committee members may submit their notices prior to the scheduled start time of the meeting. If the substitution is for the chair or deputy chair role, please make it clear if your substitute is going to be filling in as chair or deputy chair or if you are appointing an existing committee member to that role. In the case of a Monday meeting a chair or deputy chair substitution notice must be filed before 4:30 p.m. on Friday, and the original committee member is responsible for ensuring their substitute is prepared to participate in the committee meeting.

For today's meeting it was agreed that while there were some irregular notices, these irregular notices would be accepted. However, going forward, it is expected that the rules regarding substitution notices will be followed. If you have any questions, feel free to contact the committee clerks before your notice of substitution is due. Housekeeping is wrapped up.

All right. The main estimates for Forestry and Parks shall be considered for two hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(7) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to two hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimate schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Now, pages are also available for delivering notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery, please don't approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

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

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

Finally, the committee – I didn't know this was my estimates committee after talking so long – should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers without interruption during estimate debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times,

including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

Okay. I would now love for the minister to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes for your opening remarks, Minister. Please go ahead.

**Mr. Loewen:** Okay. Thank you very much, and thanks, everyone, for being here. I'm pleased to be here today to speak to Budget 2026, a plan that sustains the services Albertans value most. It strengthens wildfire protection, keeps pace with growing demand for outdoor recreation, looks after our public lands, and supports Alberta's long-term fiscal health, and it does this while making sure Albertans get fair value for the use of their publicly owned land and resources.

If passed, Budget 2026 will provide our ministry a total of \$379.5 million in operating funds, an increase of \$12.2 million over last year, alongside a capital plan of \$147 million, up \$18.2 million from Budget 2025. This allows us to support salary settlements for our front-line and technical staff, enhance wildfire management capacity, meet growing demand for parks and public lands services, grow our forestry sector, and invest in targeted capital projects in parks, trails, hatcheries, wildfire facilities, and watercourse crossings.

Budget 2026 builds on the solid work already under way in Forestry and Parks and reflects what Albertans told us they care about most: safer communities, healthy forests and watersheds, more recreation opportunities, and strong, responsibly managed public lands that keep supporting jobs and local economies. These priorities are at the heart of the ministry's 2026 to 2029 business plan, and Budget 2026 helps us keep moving them forward.

Forestry remains an economic driver for the province, supporting tens of thousands of direct and indirect jobs, particularly in rural and northern communities. The sector contributes billions of dollars in GDP and export revenues each year, with the United States continuing to be our largest softwood lumber export market at \$1 billion. We are also seeing growing exports to other international locations, including Japan and South Korea.

Our forestry sector is tough, but there's no question it's dealing with some headwinds, everything from softwood lumber duties to shifting market conditions. That's why we're standing shoulder to shoulder with industry and working with Ottawa to push back on unfair trade actions. Budget 2026 includes \$2.4 million for softwood lumber litigation and keeps us fighting for fair market access to the U.S. markets and defending Alberta jobs. Members here from forest communities understand how important a stable, competitive forestry sector is for local mills, contractors, and service businesses. Our goal is simple, to protect good-paying jobs in our rural communities and give Alberta producers a fair shot.

Wildfire remains one of the most significant risks facing Albertans, our communities, and our economy. In 2025 Alberta responded to more than 1,225 wildfires burning roughly 681,000 hectares, which is above the five-year average for total fires. That's why Budget 2026 sustains the historic investment in Alberta's wildfire preparation and response efforts, maintaining more than \$160 million in base funding and increasing overall wildfire management funding to approximately \$169 million in '26-27. This stable funding means wildfire crews, aircraft, equipment, and technology are available when and where they're needed, makes sure that we can continue expanding the use of night-vision-capable helicopters, infrared-equipped drones, and hoist-capable helicopters, improving safety and access in remote terrain, and we can modernize core wildfire applications and decision support tools supported by \$4.2 million in capital investment in '26-27.

7:10

Budget 2026 also sustains focused funding on wildfire mitigation, recognizing that protecting communities requires action well before a fire starts. This includes \$30.7 million in '26-27 for wildfire mitigation initiatives, including the community fireguard program FireSmart, mitigation on Métis settlements, and mitigation work in provincial parks. Included in this is \$15 million for community fireguards, \$9.3 million for FireSmart programming, and approximately \$1.5 million for wildfire mitigation in provincial parks, helping to protect campgrounds, trails, and nearby communities.

Through the community hazardous fuel reduction program we are proactively reducing high-risk forest fuels near vulnerable communities, working with tenure holders to align mitigation with approved forest management plans. Communities like Bragg Creek, Edson, and others have recognized the value of mitigation work and are putting in the work to reduce the risk of wildfire by removing fuel that could allow a fast-moving wildfire to spread into communities.

Forestry and Parks has also launched a comprehensive wildfire mitigation strategy that takes a whole-of-society approach, bringing together municipalities, Indigenous communities, industry, and homeowners. Budget 2026 will accelerate priority work under this strategy, co-ordinating landscape-scale fuel reduction with community-level actions like FireSmart and fireguards.

For communities like Fort McMurray, Wood Buffalo, and Grande Prairie, where wildfires and industrial activity intersect, this combination of stable response funding, new technology, and targeted mitigation is important to protect people, infrastructure, and economic activity. Through these programs and initiatives our ministry is prioritizing the long-term health and resilience of our forests while also proactively protecting Albertans and their communities.

Turning to lands, Budget 2026 focuses on fair returns for Albertans and strong stewardship of public land. We're making sure Albertans get a better return on their public lands by updating rental rates that haven't changed in decades. While industrial users will see increases to reflect inflation, bringing in an expected increase in revenue of about \$50.2 million, their overall fees remain some of the lowest in Canada, keeping Alberta competitive.

Budget 2026 supports the regulatory audit and investigation service, which plays a key role in making sure companies follow the rules, report royalties accurately, and meet environmental and legal requirements, protecting both our landscapes and the revenues that belong to Albertans.

From a stewardship perspective we are renewing investment in the watercourse crossing program with \$39.3 million over three years to repair and upgrade aging crossings. This work protects drinking water, improves fish habitat and stream connectivity, and supports native trout and recreational angling across Alberta.

In early 2026 Forestry and Parks assumed oversight for the province's fish stocking operations, taking on important work to support the health and diversity of Alberta's fisheries following their transfer from the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas. This change brings all of Forestry and Parks' land and wildlife work under one roof, supporting a more integrated approach to land, wealth, life, and fishery stewardship.

Budget 2026 provides \$12.8 million for our hunting and fishing branch, helping ensure Albertans can hunt, trap, and fish sustainably across the province. This includes our popular fish stocking programs, which create chances for families to go out on the water together, passing down traditions, landing supper, or just making memories. Albertans have told us how much they value our

public lands, trails, and outdoor experiences, and these investments help us keep delivering the high-quality services people count on.

On the parks and outdoor recreation side Budget 2026 keeps things steady and focused on what Albertans value. It puts \$104.4 million into the parks program so we can keep the lights on and the gates open, supporting the staff, contracts, and day-to-day work that make our parks safe, accessible, and welcoming year-round as more people head outdoors.

With stable operational funds and targeted capital investment, Alberta Parks is able to strike the right balance between recreation and conservation. Albertans consistently tell us we are on the right track. Visitor satisfaction with park services and facilities has held strong at 85 per cent, and Budget 2026 is designed to maintain that level. We're continuing to put real care and investment into Alberta's parks and public lands, making sure Albertans can get outside, enjoy nature, and pass these special places on to the next generation.

For Crown land recreation capital initiatives we're setting aside more than \$270 million over the next three years with just over \$87 million in '26-27 through Budget 2026 to refurbish facilities, upgrade water and waste-water systems, and build and improve trails across the province. This includes \$40.2 million over three years to add more campsites, part of our long-term plan to build over 900 new campsites with more than 300 new sites by 2027. It also provides an investment of \$25.9 million over three years to keep Crown land trails safe and accessible for hikers, OHV users, equestrians, and other outdoor enthusiasts.

These investments make a real difference in communities. Folks in southern Alberta will see benefits in the Crowsnest Pass and eastern slopes. Families in western and central Alberta will have better access to recreation close to home, and for communities in east central Alberta, improved parks, trails, and fishing spots will keep supporting local tourism and those weekend adventures Albertans love. These investments support the plan for parks and the Crown land recreation and conservation strategy, both released in January 2026, which set a long-term vision for sustainable recreation growth while protecting important landscapes.

Mr. Chair, Budget 2026 allows us to deliver on our ministry's business plan and the Premier's mandate letter by sustaining historic wildfire investments, by supporting competitive forestry sectors, by updating public land rents, and by expanding and renewing parks and recreation infrastructure. Budget '26 gives us steady, responsible funding to grow our economy and improve recreation across Alberta and look after the lands and parks we all love. We're continuing to protect communities and support good stewardship and make our parks even better.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Well, thank you, Minister. I really appreciate those words.

Now it's going to be our question-and-answer period. For the first 50 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. You will see the timer on the edge of the screens of how much time there is. For the first block of 50 minutes, the first block is 20-minutes long. You may either, if agreed upon, go back and forth, or it will be blocked time.

I'm not sure who is going to go first. Excellent. Member, would you like block time or shared time?

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Chair, I would like to go back and forth with the minister.

**Mr. Loewen:** We can go back and forth.

**The Chair:** All right. With the minister's blessing back and forth it is. Go ahead.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you, Chair. I want to thank the minister and everyone who works with you for your work on the plan and the budget and also to my team for support with the questions. I know everybody has put a lot of hours and time into this, so I appreciate it. Thank you.

My first question: I'd like to start first by asking about the slight shifts in the tactical approach to achieving outcomes and objectives within the business plan year to year, because they signal a change in the approach and attitude by the ministry which I'm curious and would like some insight on. For example, on page 76, outcome one, the phrase land and forests provide "critical environmental benefits and natural beauty," has been added while, "leadership efforts," has been removed from the year before. I'm curious if the minister can give us a sense of what "critical" means in the context and why that seems to be a shift from how the government understands its role as a leader throughout the province in the land and the forest management? So comparing the language from last year to this year, provide "critical environmental benefits and natural beauty" is what's quoted this year, and I'm just curious as to why that shifted from "leadership efforts."

**Mr. Loewen:** Which page is that on again?

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Page 76, outcome one.

**Mr. Loewen:** And the question, again, was regarding the switch from which?

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** "Leadership efforts" was removed. I was just curious as to what the sense of "critical" means as opposed to "leadership," and what is the context? What is the shift here?

**Mr. Loewen:** I think it's, you know, kind of a commitment to stewardship, and we want to make sure that we're providing that opportunity for our department to be able to do that critical work. When we look at stewardship of Alberta's Crown lands and forests, we want to make sure that we hit that balance between industry being able to do work, create jobs, and get the job done on that end, but also protecting and making sure that it's done in a way that's sustainable and that it's effective when it comes to conservation. It's finding that balance there, so we want to make sure that that's reflected in the outcomes. I don't know that there is necessarily a big shift in how we do business, but we do want to make sure that the words reflect what we do.

7:20

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you, Minister.

On page 76, objective 1.3, the phrase, "collaboration with Indigenous communities," has been removed in relation to Crown land stewardship. Why? What impact will this have on trust between the government and First Nations, particularly those nations that are adjacent to Crown lands?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. It wasn't just about removing Indigenous communities; it's just tightening up the wording because what was taken out is, "with stakeholders and collaboration with Indigenous communities." So it involved all that; it was just a matter of tightening up the words. Again, no difference in how we do business but making sure that we accurately represent what we do in the document. Of course, it goes on to say, "while respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples," so, you know, those words were removed, but it also removed "stakeholders." It still left, "respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples."

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you for clarifying that.

On page 24 of the fiscal plan – we’re going to move towards the tariffs on softwood lumber – it states that “ongoing softwood lumber duties continue to weigh on Canada’s forestry sector.” These are, of course, in reference to the recent hikes on lumber. Since the vast majority of Alberta lumber comes from Crown land, are these shifts in language forecasting potential changes in harvesting volumes that may impact already strained relationships with Indigenous communities surrounding these Crown land sources?

**Mr. Loewen:** The volume that we harvest is something that’s done in a manner to make sure that we have a sustainable harvest over generations. So there’s no shift in how we harvest based on duties and tariffs with the U.S. The duties over the last three years have went from I think about 8 per cent to about 35 per cent, so a real dramatic change in the amount of duties that the forestry companies have to pay. The tariffs that were in place added another 10 per cent to that, but the large part of the hit to the forestry industry was the 35 per cent duties.

Again, those issues are separate from how we harvest, and we want to make sure that we have our industry well supported. We’ve done investments in grant programs such as the Alberta value-added wood products, and that promotes research and innovation for new products so that we can make sure that the forestry companies have an opportunity to do more value-added work within the province here. We obviously have been advocating for a long-term, stable trade agreement with the U.S. and we haven’t got there yet, but again, we’re working with the federal government who is working with the U.S. government on trying to get that more reasonable when it comes to duties and tariffs. It’s an issue that we feel is incredibly important, and it is a big concern to us and industry to make sure that we have a marketplace for our forest products. That’s why we’ve been doing so much work with countries like Japan and South Korea to make sure that we have other options for our products to go to when we have issues with the U.S. and entering their markets there.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you.

Back to page 76 of the business plan, objective 1.4 outlines a clear shift away from “co-ordinated conservation” in 2025 to a heightened “enforcement program that . . . [conserves] landscapes, safeguards natural resources, and promotes the safety and well-being of Albertans,” in 2026, which sounds like to me it’s less about conservation, about resources, and more about enforcing regulation and defending borders. How will the stated 10 per cent increase in the budget funding of \$1.3 million break down precisely for, one, education; two, prevention; and three, enforcement?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Key objective 1.4 deals with the Crown land enforcement program, so obviously this portion of the document deals with enforcement, but we enforce so that we can have those conservation results in the end. We did take out the words “co-ordinated conservation,” but we left “to protect and conserve Alberta’s landscapes [and] safeguard natural resources,” so the intent when it comes to conservation and protecting landscapes is still there. Again, the focus of that part is on enforcement because that’s what that key objective is, is regarding enforcement.

Crown land enforcement: the budget is \$14.7 million. That’s a \$1.3 million increase, and that’s mostly just because of the increase in wages of government employees due to the contract negotiations that happened.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Okay. Thank you.

While the landscape conservation enforcement is up, on page 88 of the fiscal plan there’s “[expected] savings of \$14 million in 2026-27 through reductions in programs such as the provincial grazing reserves and hunting and angling conservation grants,” demonstrating a potential net \$4 million reduction in conservation grants. How does this reduction break down, and how will this reduction in programming impact conservation research efforts, including access to research funding streams for Alberta-based graduate students?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Some of the things that are included in that \$14.4 million are grants on forest management, which have been taken over by FRIAA, the forest resource organization that forestry companies pay into. About \$3 million of it was for hunting and fishing branch grants that are now going to be distributed through ACA, which is the organization, the Alberta Conservation Association. A lot of those savings are from those kind of grants that are moving between and are just being funded from different organizations rather than coming out of the budget for the government.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** And how do you think this will impact students, particularly the Alberta graduate students’ program?

**Mr. Loewen:** I don’t believe there should be any changes for those students on that. I’m trying to find out here where that – yeah. I don’t see anything there on that as far as any changes on that.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** And then is there an overhead charge to the ACA for administering these grants?

**Mr. Loewen:** No. No.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Okay.

On page 77, key objectives, moving to the disposition increases, objective 2.2 includes new intention to deliver new “policy . . . [on] long-term access to . . . fibre supply for the forestry sector,” as well as a \$6.1 million increase to disposition management initiatives. How will new policy impact fibre supply access, and will new disposition management resources facilitate access to the supply?

**Mr. Loewen:** Definitely fibre supply is one of the biggest concerns, I believe, for industry, and fibre supply can be affected by wildfire, can be affected by different things happening on the landscape. There’s nothing in these documents that will affect fibre supply. The fibre supply: there are regulations that control how much forestry companies can harvest and when they can harvest it. Those regulations are all still in place. Again, you bring a good point because fibre supply is paramount to these businesses, and we want to make sure that they have the fibre supply they need.

But, again, there are factors outside of our control, like wildfire, that definitely affect fibre supply, and we want to make sure that we do everything we can. I know with the wildfires we’ve had in the last few years, the forestry companies have been harvesting the burnt timber. If they get it off quick enough, then it still has some value. If it’s left too long, then it doesn’t have much value or, actually, no value at all. That’s been a focus of ours. We’ve facilitated as much as we could that harvest, the speedy harvest of those trees that were burnt.

As we go ahead, we’re always conscious of the fibre supply, but if there’s any change in what’s left on the landscape due to fire or whatever other circumstances, then their annual allowable cut is adjusted accordingly.

7:30

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Okay. Thank you.

Crown land recreation strategy implementation. On page 77 key objective 3.1 calls to “implement a Crown land recreation and conservation strategy” while on page 78 there’s an increased allocation of \$87.1 million to infrastructure capital investments to refurbish facilities and build new trails. However, the new strategy calls for assessments on how to build new trail access across ownership boundaries. How much of this new allocation will go to assessment, and will that assessment take place in collaboration with First Nations and Métis communities?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. When it comes to consultation with First Nations, there’ll be no changes with that. That’s something that’s done on all these plans as they move ahead.

As far as the allocation of the \$87.1 million, that money goes to recreation and capital initiatives, including refurbishing infrastructure and facilities and buildings and building trails and things like that. There should be no change in the amount of money that goes to assessment. This plan that you’re referring to doesn’t necessarily cover individual projects and costs of individual projects. It’s an overview so that when projects are planned, there’s a document that they can refer to to help guide what the priorities are. That’s why we consulted on that so much, to make sure that we have input from different people and different organizations on what they want to see in those plans. That’s where that has come from, as far as working with those different groups and making sure that we have kind of a 50,000-foot view of what we could do and want to do on a landscape. That’s what guides the actual plans that get the work done.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Okay. Of the \$87.1 million: is all of that allocated to assessment?

**Mr. Loewen:** No. No. It’s for the projects themselves.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Okay, so none of that goes to the assessment.

**Mr. Loewen:** Assessment would be a part of the planning, just like it is today. It’s going to be the same tomorrow. The process isn’t changing, but you’re right. The new plan does talk about assessment, but assessment is something that happens on all projects regardless. It isn’t really broken down as far as what’s assessment and what’s actually done. It’s a complete job, and that job includes assessment and includes the actual work on the land.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Okay. Thank you.

A new plan for parks. Objective 3.1 also calls to implement the recently released new plan for parks, and on page 13 of the new plan is a call to action to support Indigenous tourism. To what extent will the \$87.1 million be used for Indigenous communities for tourism that authentically shares history and culture?

**Mr. Loewen:** I think maybe that question may lead more into tourism and Travel Alberta when it comes to individual projects that deal with Indigenous tourism.

There are seven Indigenous-owned entities and partnerships that represent 10 First Nations and one Métis organization, and those are actually – sorry. Those are tenures for forestry.

When it comes to parks, we have Kehewin Cree Nation in northeastern Alberta that operates the provincial recreation area and campground through a lease. I’m not sure if that’s what you’re getting at, some of those partnerships that we have with First Nations.

You know, we’ve been working collaboratively with Enoch Cree Nation on Big Island provincial park. That’s something that we’ve been doing. Since 2018 we’ve operated two teepee comfort camping units in Sir Winston Churchill park. We have an active service contract in place with Cold Lake First Nations for maintenance services on English Bay provincial recreation area. And at Writing-on-stone provincial park the delivery of culturally sensitive interpretative programming and stewardship of Indigenous rock art features occurs in collaboration with elders and knowledge keepers in the Blackfoot Confederacy. Members of the Blackfoot Confederacy were instrumental in having the park receive a prestigious designation as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization world heritage site. So we have different projects like that.

Yeah. We carefully considered all input received during both phases of engagement for Alberta’s new plan for parks, including from Albertan stakeholders and Indigenous communities. That was part of the engagement process with the plan for parks that included Indigenous input.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Okay. So that \$87.1 million then is going to go back to these projects.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. That’s an overall spending and, of course, there are these other projects. Some involve Indigenous communities; some don’t. But those are some of the ones that we have right now that we are working with Indigenous communities.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Okay. Conservation. In estimates last year the minister stated that an investment in recreation is an investment in conservation. I’m curious how these equate to each other, and what science or experts are we using to guide the ministry to this conclusion in developing the Crown land strategy and the plan for the parks?

**Mr. Loewen:** If we do good planning when it comes to recreation activities on the landscape, it naturally leads to conservation. There are times in places in the province where we have a lot of people that want to enjoy the landscape. Kananaskis would be a prime example. If we don’t invest money in trails and work with trail partners on having people focus their activities in certain areas where we can actually build trails and upkeep trails, then their activities on the landscape will be spread across a wider area. It’s better for conservation if we have people focused and we have the activities in areas where we can, again, maintain trails, make sure there are facilities for people in those areas rather than have them moving across the landscape without any kind of organization or structure. That’s why when we look at these things, we have an opportunity to do what’s best for conservation by creating recreational opportunities that would be less damaging to the landscape.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you, Minister, for answering my questions.

I would like to share my time, Chair, and pass on some time with my colleagues.

**The Chair:** Perfect. Whoever’s next, would you like shared time or block time?

**Dr. Elmeli:** Do you mind if I just do block time, Minister? My first series of questions is kind of long.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah, we’ll do block.

**Dr. Elmeli:** Okay. So I will go next, and I’ll do block time.

In the business plan, outcome 3 on page 77 is about Albertans being able to enjoy safe, accessible, and sustainable Crown land recreation experiences. I believe that the management of hunting and angling fits under this outcome because it's one of the key objectives supporting the outcome, and there is \$12.8 million allocated to support sustainable hunting and fishing programs in Alberta. That's on page 78 of the business plan.

So my next questions are really about how we manage these hunting and fishing programs. Hunting allocations and special licences allow for the hunting of specific species or a type of animal during an identified hunting season within a specific area, which we know. Allocations are used to manage hunting opportunities for hunters who are guided by a professional outfitter. Easy enough. And primary allocations were meant to be for resident hunters with nonresident allocations typically being determined after resident allocations were calculated. The standard practice for this used to be that allocations for nonresident hunters were limited to 10 per cent of available allocations, which really allowed all hunter-guide outfitter businesses to serve their clients and to succeed. But in the past five years we've seen reduced opportunities for Alberta hunters in some WMUs running counter to the minister's previous statement commitments to increase hunting and angling opportunities for Albertans to enjoy our wild places and gain appreciation for wildlife as a public resource. This pattern raises questions about the cut to funding for hunting and angling from \$16.8 million to \$13.5 million, which is on page 79 of the business plan.

I'm concerned because some of these reductions in hunting allocations disproportionately affect Alberta hunters. For example, in WMU 360 a reduction in the number of white-tailed deer tags from 183 to 29 seems fine and is based on scientific data, but the allowance for the outfitting industry serving nonresident hunters has stayed the same. So 27 individuals can be hunted under hunting allocations for nonresident hunters, which is now 93 per cent of the allowable harvest, which means that most of the harvest for white-tailed deer in this WMU goes to nonresident hunters.

7:40

The changes to allocations have reduced opportunities for Albertans, because outfitters can make more money guiding nonresident hunters. I'm sure we can all appreciate that guiding a nonresident you can charge more per day, like, \$1,000 per day versus \$300 a day for an Albertan. All of these hunting allocations are now administered by the Alberta Professional Outfitters Society, which also favours nonresident hunters because of this financial incentive. At these rates of \$1,000 per day versus \$300 a day the sale of allocations has also increased and is as much as \$1 million for two to three allocations, which means that the hunting and guide outfitting businesses that serve Albertans cannot afford to purchase allocations. Businesses targeting resident hunters can't afford the allocations, which means less Albertans have an opportunity to engage in hunting. More and more allocations are being reserved for the outfitting industry, which makes more money with nonresident hunters. These program changes have reduced the opportunity for education-based guiding programs that are designed to engage Albertans new to hunting in this very traditional form of recreation and subsistence. But the changes do benefit outfitting companies that serve nonresident hunters.

In this year's budget the expense to operate hunting and angling is being cut from \$16.8 million to \$13.5 million, which I stated previously. Is this cut because APOS, or the Alberta Professional Outfitters Society, is now administering licences? How will this cut in budget impact access for Albertans to hunting opportunities

through hiring local guide outfitters to teach them new skills? Will the minister be revising the allocation policy as part of this budget line item to adequately consult with all hunter-guide outfitter businesses and redefine an allocation policy that again favours Albertans' use of this natural resource? What protections are in place to ensure hunting opportunities favour Albertans rather than nonresidents?

That first series of questions is really just about the allocations for resident and nonresident hunters.

Moving on to the minister's special licenses, which I have asked about before. Last year, according to ministerial disclosures, the minister and senior staff from his office and executive directors within the ministry spent over \$141,500 on international trips and trade missions. This is a significant spend of taxpayer dollars. The minister's office expenses are increasing this year to \$938,000, and corporate services is increasing from \$4.5 million to \$4.9 million. This is on page 115 of the estimates. Are there more foreign trips planned for this year? What value did Albertans get from the minister's trade mission to Japan? This funding could be much better spent on a variety of wildlife programs such as researching grizzly bear population density, helping farmers better co-exist with elk on private land, consulting with Indigenous nations on hunting regulations and traditional use, and so much more. How are those priorities determined?

Many of these trips were to various hunting trade shows where the minister auctions minister's special licences for nonresidents to hunt Alberta wildlife. Notably, the buyers of these special licences are not subject to the same regulations around location and time of year that Alberta hunters have to follow. How much money was raised from the sale of special licences in 2025? The funding from special licences is also managed by APOS, who distributes grants based on committee decisions to support wildlife conservation. But the process and the decisions around those conservation projects are biased because they are based on projects that address the greatest concern to the hunting and outfitting community. Effectively, these grants are to increase habitat and populations of animals that are hunted, thus not serving all wildlife. What are the reporting requirements from APOS to demonstrate how the money is distributed, and what overall conservation benefits are achieved through this program? With the increase in the minister's office budget, can Albertans expect to fund more trips to sell our wildlife to the highest bidder so that we can fund more conservation projects for species that are hunted by the highest bidder? I'm not convinced that's a good spend of taxpayer dollars if that's the case.

Also, under this same program is the wildlife management responder network, which I have also raised questions about before. People now pay an application fee of \$50. Last year about 4,000 people applied, generating \$200,000. Does this money go back into grizzly bear or elk conservation programs or into human-wildlife conflict programs to address the source of the issues?

For my last minute and 44 seconds I'll switch gears to talk about the plan for parks, which as my colleague mentioned is key objective 3.1, page 77 of the business plan. The plan for parks is ambitious, and the parks expense budget increases from \$116 million to \$128.5 million, page 79 of estimates. Will the minister be hiring more park planners to conduct the public consultation and do the planning required to deliver these commitments to Albertans? Where will the budget increase be allocated if not?

Recently this government reduced Spray Valley provincial park by 130 hectares and Evan-Thomas PRA by over 950 hectares to accommodate all-season resort areas. Does the minister think these changes counter the action in the plan for parks, which has an objective to expand parks? By reducing these parks, the minister has reduced habitat for species at risk and compromised protection

of the headwaters in Kananaskis. How was the boundary decision made? Who did the minister consult with on these changes and when?

Tourism and Sport does not have any on-the-ground staff to enforce any regulations or do trail maintenance on these lands, and now parks does not have jurisdiction of these lands. Where in the business plan, strategic plan, or budget is the need to allocate park staff to enforce regulations on lands that no longer fall under their purview?

Are other provincial parks being considered for having their boundaries altered or reduced to allow for more development? If yes, then can the minister explain why we have parks at all if their boundaries can just be eliminated to allow for development, which is the very reason that many parks were created in the first place?

That's my 10 minutes.

**The Chair:** Excellent. Okay.

Minister, you have 10 minutes in order to respond.

**Mr. Loewen:** Okay. Sounds good. Thank you very much, and thanks for the questions. Kind of going through the first part, maybe we'll cover the reduction in the budget from \$16.1 million to \$12.8 million. That amounts to a \$3.6 million decrease; \$3.1 million was actually grants that went out to different organizations. Those grants will now be distributed from Alberta Conservation Association going forward. So those organizations will remain whole in that money that they receive. Part of it is also for the transfer of the wildlife, the predator compensation program that has now gone to Agriculture and Irrigation and not through Forestry and Parks anymore, through ACA. That's the variance in money. The actual money that's being spent within the ministry has not changed, then. That remains the same.

You talked a lot about the allocation and some, I guess, insinuation that there's a preference to some hunters over other hunters. You used an example, I think, of white-tailed deer and WMU 360. Just so you know, there's no limit of resident tags in WMU 360 for resident hunters, but there is for outfitted hunters. They only have a certain number of allocations. So any resident hunter in the province of Alberta can buy a hunting licence for white-tailed deer and hunt 360. I think there are 145,000 or 150,000 resident hunters, but again the allocation numbers for outfitters has remained unchanged. I have not changed an allocation number in the province of Alberta since I became minister, and I don't believe there's been any change in the numbers of allocations for outfitters probably in the last maybe 10 years or more.

You kind of mentioned in there, too. I think maybe you got a little mixed up there because you were talking about the minister's special licence in regard to those same allocations, but of course the minister's special licence is something that's substantially different.

Again, kind of going back to that part, when it comes to the allocation, there are multiple species in the province of Alberta where residents are unlimited in the number of tags that they can have. There was a reduction in antlerless tags for white-tailed deer that were available to residents, but the antlerless tags aren't available to outfitters at all. Those were done in relation to populations. We want to make sure that we have healthy populations of wildlife. I think that's something that not only hunters can appreciate but all Albertans can appreciate, that we have healthy wildlife populations with an age structure that's appropriate also. Again, any changes in numbers when it comes to the number of tags that we allow to be purchased has to do with making sure that we have well-balanced and healthy wildlife populations on the landscape.

7:50

You got into the minister's special licence and the trips and the different things, and I guess you even brought in the trade mission to Japan. Now, of course, the trade mission to Japan and South Korea: those are trips done for forestry to make sure – and we already covered here today the stress factors that are taking place on the forestry industry, especially in our dealings with the United States. We want to make sure that we create as many market opportunities as we possibly can for our forestry companies in the province of Alberta. Our forestry companies are very proud and happy to be working in Alberta because we make sure we have a business environment that's friendly for them so that they can have certainty of being in business and having fibre supply. That's something that's critical to them. Again, our forestry industry is very happy with their work in Alberta.

When it comes to special licences, the minister's special licence, you mentioned the opportunities that a person that has a minister's special licence has that others don't. I would say that they call it a minister's special licence because there are special opportunities that come with that. Not all the minister's special licences are auctioned off to the highest bidder. We have the corresponding minister's special licence for everyone that's sold. In fact, there are actually more that are raffled in Alberta to strictly Albertans, and those ones: residents of Alberta can buy a ticket and have an opportunity to win that exact same opportunity that's auctioned off elsewhere. Also, residents of Alberta can and have in the past bought many of the minister's special licences at auction, so Albertans can have the opportunity not only to buy at auction, but they can actually buy tickets and have the same opportunity that others have when they buy it in auction.

As far as the money that comes from those special licences, the money that comes from the raffles is managed by the Alberta Conservation Association, and they have their board and they decide how that money is spent and distributed. The money that's raised from the minister's special licences by auction: that money goes to APOS. They have a committee that's made up of multiple organizations that take in applications for those funds from different biologists and students doing different work. That information on how that money is spent is available publicly. It's available online, so you can actually look at that yourself to see where that money is spent. They're very transparent and open when it comes to that, and not every dollar of that money is spent on huntable species. You'll be able to see that if you look online there, too.

I'm trying to think what else there is there. A plan for parks when it comes to all-season resorts: I think if we look back to 2019, the areas that we're talking about, that were taken up into the all-season resorts, affect less than .03 per cent of Alberta's park system, so an incredibly small portion of the province a portion of the parks are taking up with those areas for all-season resorts. I think it's important to realize that parks are for people and different people choose to recreate differently. We need to make sure that we have a place for everybody. Everybody should be able to see themselves represented in the activities that can take place on provincial parks.

I think since 2019 – I'm trying to think how much area this government has added. For instance, just Gypsy Gordon alone was added by this government into the park system, 158,000 hectares, and I actually believe the number since 2019 was about 300,000 hectares that have been added to the park system since this government, you know, formed government in 2019.

Obviously, parks are important to this government. Parks are important to me. I think parks are important to every Albertan, but again, every Albertan needs to have an opportunity to be able to recreate in a park in a way that they feel represented as long as it's

done in an appropriate manner. As we move through these programs, you know, when we have a resort or a ski hill or something that has a footprint on the landscape, I think it only makes sense that we provide opportunity year-round for that footprint to be utilized rather than just having it only for a small part of the year. So that's what the all-season resort plan is about. Obviously, if you have any more questions on all-season resort, you could probably go to Tourism and Sport as they're the ones in charge of that.

They talked about the grizzly bear responder program and the fee and the number of people that have put in to apply for that opportunity to help manage problem wildlife in the province. That money goes to Alberta Conservation Association. Again, Alberta Conservation Association is arm's length from government. They have a board that decides how they spend the money, and I think we can all agree that they do some good work across multiple species, not just the huntable and fishable species in the province. So we know that money is being spent.

I think when we talk about something like the minister's special licences and the amount of money that hunters put into the system, a large percentage of every hunting licence dollar that's spent in the province goes to Alberta Conservation Association to be spent on conservation in the province. I think that's a great news story because the people that care the most about it are the people that are out there on the landscape, and they're putting their money where their mouth is and being involved in that.

**The Chair:** Excellent. We do have some more time on this segment. You can switch speakers or continue on.

**Dr. Elmeligi:** I'll cede my time back to Jodi.

**The Chair:** Excellent.

To this point, do you want block time or shared time?

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** I would like shared time, please.

**The Chair:** Minister, do you still want to share time?

**Mr. Loewen:** Sure.

**The Chair:** Perfect.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you.

I'd like to turn your attention to wildfire. My question would be that wildfire continues to tear through our lands, forests, and communities at above-average rates with increased intensity and volatility. I want to commend the ministry for building a competent and capable of firefighting fleet and sending our group abroad to help Manitoba and California. Thank you for that. However, wildfire is also ripping up a \$700 million hole in the budget every year. More needs to be done in prevention and mitigation, and as I understand it, there are, as you mentioned in your press conference, two dozen fires burning throughout the province. On page 78 of the business plan the \$30.7 million allocation for wildfire mitigation support services is not increasing. Why?

**Mr. Loewen:** When it comes to the \$30.7 million, that goes to multiple different parts of the wildfire mitigation plan. It includes \$15 million going to the fireguard program, which is to protect communities. Now, that's a program that started, I believe, in 2024. That's a relatively new one.

It involves \$9.3 million going to FireSmart, which is a program that's been around a while, but that's more on the scale of community and even individual homes and how to best protect themselves from wildfire. It includes money for parks to protect so

we can work in the provincial park system. Some provincial parks are adjacent to communities that we want to make sure that we can protect. We need to make sure that we do the proper analysis there and the proper work there to help protect those communities. It includes money from the feds to help with Métis settlements and fire mitigation there.

It also includes the very new program, the hazardous fuel reduction program that started really, basically, just in the last year.

**8:00**

Now, the community hazardous fuel reduction program. We went around the province and had our experts go around the province to identify what the most at-risk communities are. We've identified 32 of the most at-risk communities, and of those 23 communities have already approved forest management plans and are being prioritized for harvesting. This program is working really well. When we look at what happened in Jasper, there was work done around Jasper to help protect the town from wildfire, but it didn't go far enough. We seen embers coming in from the Jasper wildfire from probably two or three kilometres away that caused that community to suffer the losses it did.

When we looked at that, we realized that we would need to go out five kilometres and reduce the hazardous fuel five kilometres from around the most vulnerable communities. That way we could actually make a difference. That doesn't mean that we knock down every tree in that five kilometres, but we want to focus on the most hazardous fuel trees, which are mostly the spruce and pine. That program: we're working with the forestry industry to take those trees out. That way there's a benefit, you know, to the province as far as making use of those trees for an economic benefit to create jobs and economic benefit, but it also helps protect those communities to make sure that we have an opportunity to slow down a fire when it is coming into a community.

If it's done right, the fire will drop to the ground and that makes it a lot easier to fight than when it's a crown fire moving across the landscape. So that's the goal of that program, to protect the communities, again, working five kilometres out, making sure that when the fire does approach those communities, there's a way to slow that fire down and then get it down on the ground, where it can be fought easier.

I think to date we have about 1,300 hectares of trees that have been harvested. Actually, that was by the end of the calendar year, too, so there's probably even more been done since.

Some may be aware of the work that we did west of Canmore – actually, I guess it would be southwest of Canmore – two different areas there, one last winter and one this winter, where we were able to harvest some trees in those areas to help protect the community of Canmore and the Bow valley. Interestingly enough, we've been fighting wildfire for about 80 years in the province, and overall I guess we've become relatively good at it because we've created a landscape that's somewhat unnatural. When Canmore agreed to do that project, they had pictures from the late 1800s of the Bow valley. In the late 1800s the Bow valley was a beautiful grassland. I'm sure it was perfect for wildlife, for elk and deer and sheep. You know, those ungulates were able to see predators at a distance, and they would have lots of food to eat there.

If you look at the pictures today, it's almost all old-growth pine and spruce. Normally it would have probably burned decades ago and created that habitat that was there in the past. What was interesting on that, too, is that I don't believe my office received one complaint from the harvest of those trees because I think the people understood the value not only to protect their community but also for habitat for wildlife. Those are some of the projects that we're working on.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thanks.

Just to differentiate between the \$30.7 million on prevention spending, the capital plan identifies \$1.3 million increased spending on readiness. My question is: will new funding be dedicated to emergency preparedness in this plan?

And then wildfire reclamation program: what has been allocated, and what's the plan there?

**Mr. Loewen:** Okay. Yeah. There may not have been any increases, but you know, these increases that we see: in fact, just about that total budget has been an increase in the last probably two years. Like, the fireguard program went from zero to \$15 million and some of the other programs didn't exist at all two or three years ago, so there may not have been an increase just year to year this year. Then when it comes to emergency, our base budget is increased by over 50 per cent from 2022-23 to what we see now. So again, some of the budgets may not have increased in the last year but some of them didn't even exist a couple of years ago, and that base budget has increased dramatically over the last couple of years.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** The enhanced recovery of legacy disturbances are some programs, and I'm curious about the sustainability and what extent this will be funded and what is the forecast for future years?

**Mr. Loewen:** I think that one is probably in environment. They're the ones that deal with the legacy disturbance as far as reclaiming cut lines and things like that. I know there's been a lot of work done on that. I think that's a project that has been worked on mostly for caribou habitat, and so those disturbances – I know they have been reclaiming cut lines, and I don't have the fingers in the top of mind here as far as how many kilometres have been reclaimed, but it is a substantial amount. Again, most of that has been done to try to get in line with the federal government's demands to have the 65 per cent undisturbed on the landscape.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you. On page 88 of the fiscal plan, there's a promise to ensure that contracts for equipment, aircraft, and workers will be in place early. What is the current state of these contracts, and what ratio will be hired of staff versus contract staff, and will there be hiring expectations from First Nations and Métis communities?

**Mr. Loewen:** I'll answer the last question first, I guess. When it comes to Indigenous wildland firefighters, we do have our firetack crews which are all contracted through Indigenous communities, and I believe there is, I want to say – what's the number of contracts? Eight people per crew . . .

**The Chair:** Excellent. Well, thank you both opposition side as well as the minister for those questions. We are now going to be moving over to a 20-minute block for the government side. Right now, first up, I have MLA Rowswell.

**Mr. Rowswell:** Go back and forth?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yes.

**Mr. Rowswell:** Great. I know every ministry was challenged with finding savings wherever they could this year, yet on page 113 you're getting more money than what was budgeted and forecasted last year. Now you did mention that wages were going up because of raises and stuff like that. I'm just curious. You know, there are raised costs and there are also maybe programs that might get more money and others that may not. So I'd just like you to expand a little bit and talk to any specific programs or even priorities that you're

identifying that will see an increase in funding for this coming year, if you want to expand on what you've said already.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Okay. No, that's good, and it's a good catch, too, on that.

Yeah, most increases in '26-27 expense estimates are primarily driven by the core service pressures, the salary escalation, and priority program investments. You are right. The salary escalation has been the largest part of some of these increases.

When it comes to wildfire management, Budget 2026 sustains a historic investment of more than \$160 million in wildfire management, that supports crews, aircraft, equipment, technology, mitigation, and preparedness. This includes increased operating costs related to staffing contracts and readiness. When it comes to parks funding, that increase is to address the rising visitation, higher operating costs, and sustaining wildfire mitigation in provincial parks. A lot of that is, when we see the number of people that have enjoyed our provincial parks, that has added increased pressure but also increased income from using our campgrounds and things like that. Again, that includes staffing contracts, utilities, and maintenance required to keep the parks open and safe and accessible.

As far as the wildfire mitigation initiatives, Budget 2026 sustains continued funding for FireSmart, community fireguards, and the hazardous fuels reduction program that I just talked about a little earlier. That increases both prevention and resilience capacity. These increases reflect a higher demand for services and cost pressures rather than expansion into new discretionary programming. We feel like we are doing the things we need to do, but some of those services have increased as far as cost-wise, so that reflects that in the budget.

**8:10**

**Mr. Rowswell:** Okay. You mentioned there that fire management saw an increase in funding, but forest management was decreased. Maybe you can differentiate between them.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Some of those funds were grants that were given to different organizations and for different programs for the forest industry, and those funds will now be coming from the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta, I believe it's called. We just call it FRIAA, Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta. That organization receives the majority of its funding from timber dues that forestry companies would have normally paid to government, but now some of those dues go into a fund for them. That fund was set up to specifically do things like that, to do research and to find different markets and different opportunities for the forest industry. That funding is still ongoing as long as FRIAA feels it's appropriate to have it spent there.

**Mr. Rowswell:** So it's kind of: they're funding themselves indirectly, then, that way.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Exactly. Again, I mean, the money that goes to FRIAA is part of their timber dues. Those dues would have normally come to government, but they now go to FRIAA through an agreement with FRIAA to be able to decide how that money should be spent to help their industry.

**Mr. Rowswell:** Oh, good. Okay. Well, that's good.

You also talked about the hunting and angling and reduced expenses there. Maybe you can expand on that a little bit, too.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Similar thing there, where the different organizations were being funded through government, and now we

have the Alberta Conservation Association that, basically, operates a lot of different funds for a lot of different things related to conservation, hunting, and angling in the province. The responsibility of funding those programs with those different organizations has gone to ACA. ACA has received more money in the past due to hunting and angling licence increases, so this is an opportunity for those organizations to still get the funding. It comes from an organization that's focused on the same priorities and issues that those organizations have. In fact, I believe every one of those organizations has somebody on the board of the Alberta Conservation Association. It's a really good fit as far as that goes. The funding still gets there, but it's funded through the Alberta Conservation Association.

**Mr. Rowswell:** Interesting. So then from fiscal responsibility, like, that's less money you have to spend, but you don't get it in the first place.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. That's right. Again, as the prices of hunting and angling licences have increased, then they've been able to pass on those funds to these other organizations.

**Mr. Rowswell:** Okay. So the ministry is doing some enhanced fiscal responsibility moving forward. I'm just wondering what lessons you've learned from increased estimates. How will the department account for the pressures that you're having relative? Like, I can see that this redirecting money is a neat way of going about things, but what else are you doing?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. You know, we want to be focused to provide quality services to Albertans and do it in the most cost-effective way that we possibly can. A couple of ways we can do this are risk-based approaches – like, enforcement, audits, welfare mitigation, and capital planning – so that we can direct resources where they provide the greatest value and risk reduction and also doing multiple-year capital plans and rolling project prioritization to manage cost pressures while maintaining the service levels. It's obviously important to prioritize things when we have budget pressures like we have now. We want to make sure that we're spending the money on the most important things as far as services to Albertans.

One of the key lessons reflected in estimates is that the core services such as wildfire protection, public safety, and land stewardship are increasingly cost-intensive, and we're responding by strengthening discipline, prioritization, and accountability rather than reducing these essential services. We want to make sure the services keep up, but there are always ways to streamline things and make things more effective and efficient, and that's where we're focusing our energy.

**Mr. Rowswell:** Great. Thank you very much.  
I'll cede my time to Member Cyr. Go ahead.

**The Chair:** Excellent.

In classic fashion: Minister, back and forth or block time?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Back and forth is good.

**Mr. Cyr:** Thank you for that, Minister, and thank you for your time this evening and for all your staff as well. I really do appreciate the time. We've talked about budget constraints and the work that you're doing there.

We haven't touched on red tape reduction yet. Now, when it comes to red tape reduction, our province seems to have done a fantastic job. The Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses

have given us a third straight year of an A. We've actually beat our targets. Now, why this is important is that all of our ministries need to be contributing towards that if we want to ensure that we are able to stay on top of that. Red tape reduction remains a priority for this government, helping make it faster and easier for Albertans and businesses to work with government. This is important for your ministry, as outlined in the business plan, key objective 2.1 on page 77. Given the range of permits and approvals needed to responsibly manage public lands and forests, Minister, what steps will your ministry be taking to doing business on Crown land, public lands easier?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Thanks for the questions. Making it easy to do business on Crown land matters because it directly supports jobs, investment, and vibrant communities across Alberta. When we look at what happens on Crown lands, a lot of that is in rural Alberta. We want to make sure that we have those opportunities in all parts of the province. It helps businesses plan with confidence, workers rely on steady employment, and it helps communities grow. We are taking several steps to reduce unnecessary red tape that together are intended to make it faster and easier for businesses to access Crown land responsibly.

Some of the things we're doing is that we are minimizing regulatory and process barriers by streamlining approvals and reducing unnecessary steps while maintaining environmental and public interest safeguards. We are improving service delivery for public land dispositions, supported by focused investments in public lands disposition management to ensure applications are processed efficiently and transparently. We are investing in modernization and digitization, including moving applications and permitting processes online, improving clarity for proponents, and reducing administrative burden. We use risk-based and outcomes-focused approaches such as expanding the use of fast-track review processes for low-risk applications, allowing staff to focus effort where risk and complexity are higher. The applications are relatively simple, and they're common to do. We want to make sure that those ones are out the door quick. But some of the applications are definitely more complicated and have a greater degree of risk, and we want to make sure that our staff focus on those ones to make sure that we get the job done right as far as, you know, protecting our Crown lands.

**Mr. Cyr:** All right. Well, thank you for the answer to that part of the question.

Now, really, what we're talking about is reductions. You gave a very exhaustive list, which is quite remarkable. So good work there, Minister.

**Mr. Loewen:** Thank you.

**Mr. Cyr:** But, really, how do we measure the progress towards reducing approval timelines for activity on Crown land in the forest? You've talked about it, but how are we actually measuring it?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. It's measured through performance measure 2(a). That's the percentage of the Public Lands Act applications processed within established service standards. That tracks whether applications are processed within legislative timelines. The most recent actual result was 95 per cent, exceeding the previous targets. Our targets increase over time, reaching 97 per cent in '26-27 and 99 per cent in subsequent years. It's taken a while to kind of get through the backlog and get on to making sure that the applications that are coming in now are newer applications. Getting through the backlog has allowed us to up our targets so that we can be up as

high as possible when it comes to approving these applications and, you know, getting people or businesses into business as quick as possible instead of in a waiting game that doesn't help anybody.

The results reflect improvements achieved through the backlog elimination and fast-track processes and operational efficiencies. This performance measure provides a clear, transparent indicator of whether our efforts are delivering tangible improvements. That works across multiple programs. We're also working to modernize digital systems and internal workflows to reduce duplication, clarify requirements up front. When businesses come and they want to put forward an application, we want to make sure that they know everything they need right off the start so we don't have to go back and forth. The back and forth doesn't do us any good as far as our timelines and our efficient use of staff, and it doesn't do anything for them either. It provides greater certainty to these proponents that are seeking to do business on Crown land.

8:20

**Mr. Cyr:** That's fantastic. Again, we've talked about budget constraints with MLA Rowswell. We've talked about red tape reduction, which it sounds like you're ahead of. But I would like to build on what MLA Calahoo Stonehouse was talking about, which was our First Nations and our relationships with our First Nations. Now, as you're aware of Cold Lake, Saddle Lake, Kehewin, Frog Lake in my constituency, as well as Elizabeth and Fishing Lake settlements. You had already mentioned the English Bay in Cold Lake First Nations and the Kehiwin provincial park. That was quite generous of you to be able to mention my constituents, and I'm sure my First Nations really appreciate the investment that you're putting into them.

I'd like to move to key objective 1.3, page 76 of your ministry business plan, which speaks of improving Crown land stewardship while respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples. This is particularly important when it comes to managing the province's forests and Crown land, which are central to Indigenous culture and traditions. How is the ministry strengthening partnerships with First Nations communities in forestry, stewardship, wildfire mitigation, and park management, Minister?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yes, and thanks for that question because obviously our First Nation partnerships and collaboration are very important to us. When it comes to wildfire mitigation, Budget 2026 includes funding for wildfire mitigation initiatives that involve Indigenous communities. This includes the FireSmart programming supported through the federal agreements and provincial funding, including FireSmart initiatives on Métis settlements.

The community fireguard program supports community-led wildfire mitigation projects. There are approved fireguard plans and construction projects in multiple communities, including the Kikino Métis settlement, demonstrating Indigenous participation in wildfire prevention and resilience work.

We have recently completed a comprehensive wildfire mitigation plan in partnerships with Paddle Prairie Métis settlement. Paddle Prairie is a community that suffered in the past from wildfires back in 2019, for instance. So we know that that's important to them, and if it's important to them, it's important to us when it comes to wildfire mitigation.

The ministry works with Indigenous communities as partners in operation and stewardship of provincial parks and recreation areas. Indigenous communities serve as facility operators and partners in park delivery, supporting culturally informed management and local stewardship, just like we talked about the Kehewin Cree Nation operating the provincial recreation area there.

I also mentioned earlier about Enoch Cree Nation and Big Island provincial park, which is new. It's pretty exciting to have a provincial park that close to the city and having that partnership with Enoch Cree Nation.

The ones in Sir Winston Churchill park that you talked about, that's in collaboration with Lac La Biche Canadian Native Friendship Centre Association. That's another great partnership we have there, and we have an active service contract with Cold Lake First Nations. That's the one on English Bay that we mentioned earlier, too.

We have engagement in land-use and recreation planning. Indigenous communities are included in the engagement processes related to recreation, conservation, and land-use planning, including regional trail and land-use planning initiatives.

Of course, as I mentioned before, we do have our firetack crews. I want to say there are 40 contracts with eight crew members on each one, so I think that's 320.

**Mr. Lux:** Thirty-eight.

**Mr. Loewen:** Is that 38? Thirty-eight. Eight per crew. So that's a good core group of First Nations that are involved directly with battling wildfire in the province, and those are contracts directly with First Nation communities.

**Mr. Cyr:** Well, it sounds like we are doing quite a bit with our First Nations, and the amount that you're working in getting informed opinions from our First Nations and the knowledge being passed on from generations. So thank you for that.

I'd like to cede my time to MLA Yao, if that's fine.

**The Chair:** Absolutely. Minister, do you want to go back and forth with MLA Yao?

**Mr. Loewen:** Sure.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mr. Yao:** Thank you so much, Minister and your entire team, for all their hard work in this. My question is kind of like a little bit of my background, the firefighting aspect. You know, these wildfires, they're not just on our forests and landscapes, but they affect the communities, and you've been allocating a substantial amount of money. Over \$30 million is listed in your business plans to support wildfire mitigation initiatives, which I really appreciate because these wildfires don't obviously just affect life and property, but they can really negatively affect the reputation of the community as well as the province, right?

We're surrounded by some volatile forests. A community like Grande Prairie – I just visited there; absolutely beautiful – they have a lot of agriculture around them. Something like that could be easily managed where Grande Cache, as an example, is similar to Fort McMurray in that it's surrounded by all that black spruce and everything else. Those little Roman candles are just waiting to go up. In other words, there's still a lot of risk out there.

McMurray is an example where it's been a decade since the big fire. Mind you, we did have that evacuation, was it last year? That was a frustrating endeavour. That's what I mean by reputational effects on our province. That partial evacuation: half the city left, and I was sitting waiting to get into a city that there was no reason why they were holding me back. I mean, the things that happen because of a fire like that and how it impacts the decision-making turned out to be really frustrating. I guess my question is, like: how are you spending this \$30 million? How is this being invested to ensure that these things don't happen again?

**Mr. Loewen:** Kind of the main parts of that spending are the community fireguard program, which basically is building fireguards around communities at risk, the FireSmart program, again, which is more within the community and individual homes and things like that, FireSmarting so that it protects those homes kind of in a smaller, tighter scale. Then, of course, we have the FireSmart on Métis settlements and then wildfire mitigation, FireSmart in provincial parks. So it's broken down, basically, into those different categories.

But you're exactly right. When we want to make sure that our communities are safe; we want to make sure that people that visit those communities feel safe, too. You talk about the reputational damage. Again, when we have situations like what happened in Jasper, the world is watching us when those things take place. We want to make sure that we protect those communities so that people feel safe living in them but also visiting them, too.

**The Chair:** Minister, well timed. Thanks for that.

Okay. We're going to move on to a different section. We've done our government blocks. Now we're going to go into individual member blocks of time. There's a total of 10 minutes of time. If it is block time, nobody can speak for more than five minutes at a time, so that would give five minutes of questions and five minutes of response, or if it's shared a total of 10 minutes. You can't cede time during the 10-minute blocks, so, members, you're on the hook to ask questions and get a response during those during these periods.

Member, you're up here now.

Minister, would you like to go block time?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Might as well do block time.

Is that okay?

**Member Tejada:** I prefer block as well. Thanks.

Thank you, minister and ministry staff, for all the time and preparation that you've put into preparing budget. A couple of questions, and I'll start with the business plan in reference to the mandate. Just quoting the part where we're talking about collaboration with partners and who the ministry is working with, it talks about several listed stakeholders. I would actually like to clarify because I've seen it in other ministry business plans where there's a reference to work that's done with other ministries, and I know that I've heard reference to Indigenous Relations but also wondering about what other ministries you're doing crossministerial work with and how that's reflected in the budget and in the business plan. Off the top of my head I'm thinking Indigenous Relations but also, say, multiculturalism and Tourism and Sport.

My next question is around allocation of resources. How is the ministry allocating resources to support comanagement and shared stewardship agreements with First Nations, particularly as it relates to Crown land, as we've heard discussed here? This is also referenced in the business plan under objective 1.3 on page 76. I'd like to know from the minister what that allocation looks like in practice.

Just having a look here at outcome 3, I see a reference to a satisfaction survey, and I see that the performance metrics here are around an 85 per cent number. I'd like to know what the details are of this survey. Is this something that's publicly available? Is there demographic data recorded as to who is filling in the customer satisfaction survey? What is the sample size?

**8:30**

Also, in reference to outcome 3 key objectives I don't see an objective specifically relating to reconciliation though I do see a

note in the mandate around collaboration which includes Indigenous communities amongst a list of other stakeholders. Given that parks play a critical role in reconciliation, how is the ministry improving access to culturally significant sites, supporting ceremony, and strengthening Indigenous connections to land? Another question I have around this is if you can let us know how much is allocated to strengthen and expand comanagement and stewardship initiatives led in partnership with Indigenous communities.

I'd also like to know in relation to the wildfire prevention – I heard some mention here in terms of locations where programs are being delivered and contracts, but I'd like to know how the ministry ensures that Indigenous ecological knowledge is integrated into wildfire prevention, prescribed burning, or habitat restoration. This could be a part of outcome 4 in the business plan. In reference to page 115, line 2.1 of estimates, could you clarify how much of the funding is used to achieve this outcome and how it's used?

In terms of employment I know I heard lots of talk about contracts and workforce. What new or expanded staffing initiatives are funded in 2026 to support long-term, stable employment for youth and early career workers in parks, wildfire mitigation, and forestry operations? My next question would be: to what extent does the ministry support partnerships with postsecondary institutions to create internships, field placements, or research opportunities for students studying forestry, biology, land-use planning, or environmental sciences? Does the ministry have any plans to expand youth employment opportunities in parks, forestry, trail building, and ecosystem restoration?

How is the ministry advancing employment opportunities for Indigenous people, including in park operations, forest and land stewardship, wildfire mitigation, and conservation roles? I see that the ministry has gained 22 new FTEs according to page 160 of the fiscal plan. Do any of these new positions include roles advancing Indigenous partnership? How does the ministry ensure elders and Indigenous knowledge holders directly inform parks management, planning, and environmental stewardship?

Does the ministry track the percentage of its workforce hired from rural or northern communities, and if so, how is this budget being used to increase local hiring?

**The Chair:** Excellent. Thank you so very much.

Minister, you have five minutes to respond to her questions.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. When it comes to – I'll just kind of go through the questions as I heard them, anyways – the collaboration with partners and stakeholders and in particular what other ministries that we work with, when we look at those ministries, of course, you're right; we do work with Indigenous Relations. Environment and Protected Areas is also very important because we do have some crossover there on multiple different things when we're dealing with things that happen on the landscape. There are things, when it comes to permitting and everything, that have to go through EPA and the processes and everything. Tourism and Sport: again, that's one that we work with a fair amount, especially with the all-season resorts. Energy: again, energy is something that happens on public lands, and public lands being within this department, dealing with energy all the time. Ag and Irrigation: working with them and then tech also when it comes to dealing with wildlife and things like that. So there are multiple ministries that we work with regularly.

It's good you brought up partners and stakeholders because this ministry does work with a lot of partners and stakeholders when it comes to running campgrounds, and a lot of them are First Nations, too. I think I went through some of those different agreements that we have with First Nations in some of the previous questions. I'm

just trying to look at the different questions here. This, I guess, probably goes to partnerships with Indigenous – one of your other questions on objectives. Again, we have the Kehewin Cree Nation in northeast Alberta that operates the Kehewin provincial recreation area and campground. That's work done through a lease.

When it comes to Big Island provincial park, working closely with Enoch Cree Nation for establishing and operationalizing that project. The teepee comfort camping units in Sir Winston Churchill provincial park, built in collaboration with Lac La Biche Canadian Native Friendship Centre Association and also our contract in place with Cold Lake First Nations for maintenance services on English Bay provincial recreation area. Probably one of the more classic ones is the Writing-on-stone provincial park, which of course has an enormous degree of – it's a culturally sensitive area with that rock art. That work and the stewardship on that occurs in collaboration with elders and knowledge keepers from the Blackfoot Confederacy, and they were instrumental in having the park receive that UNESCO world heritage site. So that's just some of the partnerships there.

You talked about the 85 per cent satisfaction in parks. I think that's great. That's something that, I think, we've been exceeding somewhat in the past. It's been holding fairly steady, though, as far as that satisfaction. I think, when we realize the number of people that visit our parks, to have that kind of satisfaction is really good. This is done through a third-party survey, and it's conducted each fall to assess satisfaction during the prior 12-month period, so November 1 to October 31, and that includes Albertans age 18-plus who visited an Alberta park during the 12-month survey period. Visitors from out of province are out scope for this survey, but we want to make sure that we're making sure that we have Albertans' input on that as far as what kind of job Alberta Parks is doing.

When it comes to youth, I was trying to think of the name here, and I got it here now, the junior forest ranger program. That offers Alberta's youth 16 to 18 years old paid opportunities over the summer months to explore careers in forestry, including wildfire conservation, environmental stewardship, and more. The program also provides Alberta postsecondary students and graduates with employment as program crew leaders and subleaders, helping them gain valuable skills in leadership, team development, project planning, and networking with industry professionals. The junior forest ranger crew leaders and subleaders begin in May with two-week training at the Hinton Training Centre. It's a great program.

**The Chair:** Excellent. Well, thank you both for your questions and answers.

We will now turn it back over to the government side, and we have Member Yao. Member and also Minister, would you like to go back and forth or block time?

**Mr. Loewen:** We'll go back and forth.

**Mr. Yao:** Thank you, Minister. My next question is regarding how the different levels of government operate together. Obviously, for the fire in Fort McMurray and other incidents, you know, the province sends a team to assist and to support and to help run the emergency operations centre. You can help bring in equipment and manpower and all sorts of things. You know, it just demonstrates that there's an extremely high level of co-operation that is required.

That said, we can turn around and look at Jasper. I was not in your chair, I wasn't in the know, if you will, but from a perspective of someone who is basically in the public, I didn't see what the feds were doing at all. I mean, it looked like they were managing that like they have been managing the federal government, our nation, for the last decade, which is nonexistent, just a terrible job at it. I

guess, how do we prevent something like that from happening again? Can you clarify the province's role in wildfire response, whether it's provincial, municipal, federal lands? Like, what did you learn in Jasper in working with the federal government?

8:40

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. A good question. Obviously, Jasper is something that was very high profile, and of course the effects on the people who live in Jasper and the people who enjoy the Jasper park: it was an enormous effect on them and their lives. When it comes to wildfire responsibilities, it's basically defined by land ownership and legislation and with co-ordination across jurisdictions where fires cross boundaries. When it comes to the forest protection area in the province, then we are the lead agency for that. When it comes to municipalities and it's outside of the forest protection area, then the municipalities are the lead on that. When it comes to the national parks, the national parks have their own firefighting organization, so they take the lead on that.

For instance, when Jasper started, you know, we were informed that the fire had started and we immediately offered support. Based on the situation, there was some support that we offered and was requested that wasn't able to get in, like the planes that couldn't get in because of the intensity of the fire, the winds, and the valleys where the fire was taking place. When we couldn't get our air crews in there, then we tried to get air crews to come in from B.C. from the back side, and they couldn't get in either. Again, we did work closely with the national parks firefighting team, providing them any help that they requested because we knew it was a priority for them. It was a priority for us to do what we could to protect Jasper. I think as far as what we learned in that, it's good to have clear roles and make sure that we can collaborate as early as possible.

We do have an incredibly experienced firefighting team in Alberta Wildfire, and I think that experience goes a long way when it comes to battling a fire such as Jasper but also any of the wildfires that we have in the province. As mentioned, I think last year we had 1,225 fires in the province that Alberta Wildfire dealt with. That's a lot of fires to deal with, and some of the sizes of those fires and the intensity of those fires and endangering communities: it takes a lot of co-ordination. You know, we work good with our municipalities because they are the lead within the municipality if it's outside the forest protection area. We want to make sure that we work closely with them to make sure that we protect those communities to the best of our abilities.

Again, that's probably some of the biggest things that we learned, and we learn these on all fires where we're dealing with different jurisdictions, as far as being able to work together and to get in collaboration as quick as possible is what it takes to get the best result we can.

**Mr. Yao:** Thank you for that, Minister.

Now again back to McMurray, they have good resources, full-time emergency services. They have all the equipment you require to address the issues, and quite honestly all the land around there is burned out, so they can take anything on right now. But when I met with the Fire Chiefs Association there last year, a lot of communities, not from the north, which I thought, but from eastern Alberta, expressed concerns around being exposed to similar types of events. Their concern was that they don't have the resources. They don't have a lot of the equipment and other specialized stuff to address this forestry stuff. I'm assuming that over the last couple of years you must have had some discussions with them on this. What does the province do to address these issues?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. Like, we recognize that municipalities don't always have the capacity to manage these large wildland fires. They're more focused on fighting the fire within a community. Battling house fires is where their expertise is, not to say that they aren't extremely helpful when it comes to battling wildfire on the ground when it's approaching the community. When it comes to capacity, that's where Alberta Wildfire can come in and really help, and of course we have the air support that municipalities don't have.

We support municipalities through operational mutual aid, training, and specialized capacity. We have mutual aid fire control plans and agreements in place with over 100 municipalities and communities in the province. In 2025 the ministry provided support for 50 mutual aid incidents that occurred outside the forest protection area. Those are fires that we weren't necessarily the lead on but we provided help with to make sure that they had the best opportunity to protect their communities.

Municipalities and fire departments have free access to online training through the Hinton Training Centre. We want to make sure that the training that they want – because, again, most of their training has initially been for battling structure fires. But, definitely, municipalities have expressed interest in having training on wildland firefighting, too, so we made sure that there is online training available for that.

In the 2026 wildfire season we will initiate a pilot program for municipalities outside the forest protection area so that they can access up to \$125,000 towards initial attack firefighting costs for wildfire assistance. If they feel that the fire is beyond their capabilities, they can call us in. We don't want municipalities to fear the costs. We do have agreements where if they're fighting a fire for us, we pay them. If we're fighting a fire for them, they pay us. That's what the mutual aid agreements are. But we don't want them to hesitate to call for assistance in the early stages of a fire so that we can get in there and help put out the fire. We don't want the decision-makers to be deciding financial decisions instead of community protection decisions. We've got \$125,000 assistance so that it removes financial barriers by municipalities to request our support.

**Mr. Yao:** Thank you so much for that, Minister.

I do see on page 115 of the estimates that the expense for wildfire management, 2.1, is listed as steadily increasing, which is fantastic. That sounds like that's along the lines of what you're doing to increase training for all, and nothing is better than having highly skilled and well-trained responders at these things. That's fantastic.

You mentioned some other things. I thought you said something about air tankers and stuff like that. Obviously, a very vital tool. I don't know if you can explain any investments you're doing in that world. I'm also kind of wondering: is your ministry emphasizing any wildfire management technologies? As you know, there are a lot of people out there saying that they have the best tool to deal with this, things that explode under the cover of the trees. Can you tell us anything about those things?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. A good question on the air tankers. Of course, we've secured a contract with De Havilland to provide five new air tankers to add to our existing fleet of four. That's pretty exciting news.

As far as the money in the budget there was a \$120 million deposit, which was basically in last year's fiscal year. There won't be anything in this fiscal year, but going forward, as the planes are delivered, then there'll be – upcoming budgets will have money attributed to those planes for them.

Good comment on technology. We're adding, I think, three more, so we'll have a total of seven night-vision helicopters. That allows

fires to be fought at night, when the fire tends to be smaller and easier to fight. We also have drones that have thermal imaging to be able to determine hot spots, so when our firefighters go out in the morning, they'll know exactly where the highest degree of activity is, so they know where to be first thing in the morning.

We've got a lot of different things. We're using fire currents prediction modelling to predict where wildfires may start. As we watch weather patterns, we position our crews where they need to be to make sure that they are where they are most likely to be needed.

**Mr. Yao:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Well, thank you very much for your questions.

I'm going to turn it back over to the Official Opposition. Member, it looks like you're up. Member and Minister, would you like to go back and forth or block time?

**Mr. Loewen:** Back and forth is fine if you want.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair. Through you, earlier I asked about the wildfire legacy disturbances fund, and you referenced about the caribou. I want to clarify. Maybe I wasn't clear in what I was asking. I'm looking at the reforestation after a wildfire. What is the budget on the wildfire reclamation program and the enhanced reforestation of legacy disturbances program?

**Mr. Loewen:** Yes. Yeah, when you started earlier, I guess I didn't catch the wildfire reclamation part. I thought it was just the legacy reclamation, which more or less refers to the cutlines and things like that. But when it comes to wildfire reclamation, the Alberta government may fund up to 50 per cent of the wildfire reclamation program liability, and industry will contribute additional funds. Prior to 2025 the government funded 100 per cent of wildfire reclamation program activities. In '25-26 \$6.25 million was allocated from the contingency budget to deliver the program, but just to give an idea, from the 2023 fire season I believe the portion that the provincial government put into that was about \$100 million. At that time it was 100 per cent, so it was a significant amount, but of course it was a significant amount of area, too, that was affected at that time. Now we cover 50 per cent, and the industry covers the other 50 per cent.

8:50

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you for clarifying.

The federal government plays a major role alongside the Alberta government in protecting Albertans from wildfire, hundreds of millions in wildfire-related funding over recent years that Alberta relies on from the federal government. Considering that this government has not denounced separatism and there's a very real possibility of Albertans voting in a referendum . . .

**Mr. Cyr:** Point of order.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** . . . to leave Canada this year, given . . .

**The Chair:** Sure. A point of order.

**Mr. Cyr:** Let's see; 23(b). Let's go with that. This is outside of the discussion that we're having right now. We should be sticking to the business plan, the budget, and strategic plan. I would like to hear where she can reference the referendum inside of Minister Loewen's ministry.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** The member.

**Mr. Sabir:** Thank you, Chair. I think Member Cyr just heard “referendum” and he went off to calling a point of order. There may have been instructions for him. But he didn’t let the member finish her question so we can determine the relevance. Relevance will be determined once the question is completed. In this case the member was not able to complete before the member raised the point of order. It’s not a point of order. It’s just, I guess, not letting the member ask the question.

**The Chair:** I appreciate this. Thanks to both sides for this. I think if we can keep it to the estimates.

Let’s wrap this up pretty quickly to get to your question if you may, Member. I will not call this a point of order right now, but let’s keep the questions on point at this point for the rest of this meeting and the future meetings.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Given the significant federal support funding that directly strengthens Alberta’s ability to mitigate, prevent, and respond to wildfire, how is this ministry planning for the real possibility that Alberta could lose all the federal wildfire program dollars if Alberta leaves Canada? What contingencies exist?

**Mr. Cyr:** Okay. Again, point of order. She clearly knew the instructions, ignored the instructions. Please rule her out of order.

**Mr. Sabir:** You didn’t cite any . . .

**Mr. Cyr:** Standing Order 23(b) again. Sorry.

**Mr. Sabir:** Standing Order 23(b).

**Mr. Cyr:** Yes. It’s pretty obvious.

**Mr. Sabir:** I think the question is that there are discussions around Alberta separating from Canada. The question is about what contingency plan exists in his budget. If there is none, the minister could just answer: there is none. I don’t think that this question is out of order because we do have contingencies built into the budget. She is just asking about a scenario that this government is promoting. In that case, I think the minister could just answer if there are any contingency funds in this budget. It is well within the scope of this debate.

**The Chair:** Thank you, both, for this. I do feel like this one is – I’m struggling with tying this to the budget. Is it technically out of order? I am struggling with it.

Maybe what I would ask, Member, is if you would be willing to move on to another question so we can use up your time. While I would rule that this question is potentially not out of order, it is on the line of what would be ruled out of order, and I want to make sure that we can continue here in a good fashion. So I’ll leave it to the member, but maybe, Member, if you’d be willing to move on to another question, I think that would be worth while.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you, Chair. I just would like to clarify that I’m curious about a contingency plan, particularly around First Nations as much of the funding is federal related, so I think it’s important that we talk about the stewardship of those relationships and what will be the contingency plan if wildfires do take place in our province and that funding is removed. I think it is pertinent to our discussion.

**The Chair:** Minister, I’ll let you answer. Maybe if I can ask the member to rephrase the question to be directly about the budget question instead of about a referendum question or a potential of what could happen. If you can just directly ask that question.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you. So if federal contributions do change, what is the contingency plan around community-based mitigation, particularly around the First Nations and Métis settlements?

**Mr. Loewen:** Thanks for the question. I think maybe what’s important to understand is that we do have contingency funds in the province, and those contingency funds are for unforeseen costs. That probably, I think, answers the question.

When it comes to the federal government money, we don’t get any money from the feds that doesn’t include a 50-50 partnership. And when it comes to the amount of money we receive from the feds, of course, any money we receive is appreciated, but it’s an incredibly small part of what we spend on the budgeted wildfire and what we spend in contingency on wildfire. Federal funds pay for wildfire response on Indigenous lands because that’s their responsibility. If we’re battling wildfire on a First Nations reserve, then the feds are responsible to reimburse us for those funds.

Again, mitigation programs that we’ve got in the budget include First Nation and Métis settlements. We want to make sure that they’re included in that kind of community protection. But again, when we look at the federal government, it’s usually matching funds, and when we look at what we spend each year on wildfire, it’s a relatively small amount.

**Member Calahoo Stonehouse:** Thank you, Minister. Last year Alberta lost over 681,000 hectares to wildfire. The performance measure 1(a) on page 76 of the business plan reports that the percentage of forest regrowth as a result of restoration was 97.2 per cent, taken in ’23 and ’24. The target for the next three years is to hit 97 per cent. I’m curious as to why the ministry is setting lower targets than actual performance. Shouldn’t the ministry be raising the standards, not lowering them, especially after consecutive fires over the past few years? Then further on that, what incentives are driving reforestation at a replacement rate that wildfire and logging are being removed by supply in forests? So a two-part question there.

**Mr. Loewen:** Yeah. When it comes to reforestation, this isn’t dealing with reforestation of wildfire areas. This is reforestation that’s legally required in Alberta for public lands that forestry companies have harvested. We want to make sure that we have a high target, and 97 per cent is a maintenance target consistent with past performance. Because of the site variability and dynamic of climatic conditions, it’s hard to have a 100 per cent target – it would be unrealistic – and the targets are based on a five-year rolling average. It may be adjusted for changes in silviculture practices.

**The Chair:** Excellent. Thank you, Members, for those questions. I see Member Petrovic.

**Mrs. Petrovic:** Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister for answering the questions and being here today. I’m just going to state: Livingstone-Macleod, I think, we all know it as God’s country down south. I know we’ve all visited it a few times. I like to say that it’s the absolute most beautiful riding in this entire province. It’s a beautiful place; you should come and visit sometime. I highly suggest that to the members opposite. Absolutely gorgeous place to be.

Now, Minister, I must ask you a question. Are you able to confirm this for Livingstone-Macleod, that it truly is God's country and it truly is the most beautiful riding in the province?  
Thank you.

**Mr. Loewen:** I was just there a couple of weeks ago. It is beautiful, but there are a lot of beautiful places in Alberta.

**The Chair:** Well, not to interrupt, and I apologize, but I must advise that the time for the committee allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I would like to remind everyone that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 10, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9 p.m.]

