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Food and Rural Affairs

Ministry of Children, Community
and Social Services

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Thursday 10 June 2021

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de l'Alimentation
et des Affaires rurales

Ministère des Services
à l'enfance et des Services
sociaux et communautaires

1^{re} session
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Jeudi 10 juin 2021

Chair: Peter Tabuns
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Peter Tabuns
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Thursday 10 June 2021

Jeudi 10 juin 2021

The committee met at 0901 in room 151 and by video conference.

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD
AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good morning, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 101 of the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. There is now a total of five hours and 20 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

When the committee adjourned on June 9, the official opposition had just completed their round. We will now move on to the government's round of questions. We have the minister here. MPP Barrett, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Thank you, Chair. Am I coming through okay?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You are very clear.

Mr. Toby Barrett: All the squeaky toys are put away except one; I can't find it. Here's hoping. I've also moved the guinea hens out of the guest bedroom, so we should be clear.

I know the MPP for Thunder Bay forfeited that last two minutes. I have to say, and I think committee members might agree, it's so interesting to hear about the potential for agriculture in the north—and also hearing that, of course, from critic Vanthof. Thunder Bay: I also know Peggy Brekveld. I've visited her dairy operation in Thunder Bay, and I spent a bit of time in the Slate River Valley. There's tremendous innovation and potential going on.

I've got to mention the Emo research station in the far northwest. I showed up there during an oat harvest. Big kudos to Kim Jo and what she's doing up there.

I do wish to kick off with a question with respect to the LEADS program. Minister Hardeman made mention of this; it's been raised several times so far, just in the commencement of these hearings. As some will know, LEADS stands for Lake Erie Agriculture Demonstrating Sustainability. This year alone, something like 220 projects have been approved—several years running, now.

With a program like this, I think Ontario is ahead of the game. I've always felt we were ahead of the game, going back, gosh, over 20 years ago, when the province of Ontario brought in nutrient management legislation. I know MPP Doug Galt and I spent a couple of years working on that, working with people like Randy Jackiw, actually. I

think we're well ahead of the game as far as, for example, helping out Lake Erie.

As some will know, the LEADS program is a funding program to assist farmers with respect to erosion—something we have seen, certainly, over the years with the continued growth of cash crops—and concerns with respect to soil health. Further to that, when nutrients get into the water system, they get into Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair.

I would like the minister—and I'd like to hear from some of the specialists in OMAFRA—to give us some more detailed information about this program, a description of the program and, secondly, why it's so important to have these kinds of programs. This one is specifically through our Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question, Toby. First of all, I want to start by saying thank you to you, Mr. Barrett, for all the work that you've done on the LEADS program since we've been working together on this file—obviously one of the things that we really wanted to do. The LEADS program has been around for a while, and it has been working very well, but we didn't have a measurement to look at whether, with all the different projects, we were achieving what we were setting out to do, and so there's all the work that you've done in reviewing some of the applications that have been approved and the results from those to get a better handle on whether we're succeeding.

I'm proud of our government's record on the environment and supporting a Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan. We're committed to addressing Ontario's environmental challenges and helping farmers make their operations more environmentally sustainable. I'm happy about the work we've done with the farming community to help them reduce their environmental footprint, including work done through the Soil Action Group to help protect the health of Ontario soil. OMAFRA, in collaboration with partners, developed and released New Horizons: Ontario's Agricultural Soil Health and Conservation Strategy, a long-term framework that sets a vision, goals and objectives for soil health and conservation.

We're supporting agriculture programs that promote adoption of best management practices such as the Environmental Farm Plan, an education and risk assessment program for farmers, and the 4R Nutrient Stewardship program, which promotes the right fertilizer at the right rate at the right time in the right place; 4R is a science-

based program to help farmers understand how efficient fertilizer application improves profitability, reduces nutrient loss to waterways and can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Continuing efforts through the Lake Erie Agriculture Demonstrating Sustainability program, or LEADS, help keep our soil healthy and protect our waterways for future generations. This program contributed approximately \$7 million for projects to support farmers who are taking action to reduce phosphorous entering the waterways. Some of the projects undertaken include modifying equipment to improve management of agriculture nutrients and to reduce soil compaction and soil erosion. We work with the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks to monitor the pesticides in crops and to ensure that the right pesticide is used at the right time.

OMAFRA is working on an agri-food environment plan that will be posted on the environmental registry for public comment in the coming months. The agri-food environment plan aims to set out actions to protect the environment and measure progress on soil health, water quality and greenhouse gas reduction while ensuring productivity on our farms in our food processing plants is maintained. Once finalized, the agri-food environment plan will be the first integrated plan in Ontario that brings industry, government and other partners together to support sustainability and the government's Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan.

With that, I will turn it over to the deputy. I'm sure he can add some of the intricacies that you questioned us about, Toby, as to where we're going with the LEADS program. Deputy?

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister. John Kelly, deputy minister for the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

I want to thank MPP Barrett for the question, because what it does is highlight the value that OMAFRA puts on our environment and the promise that the environment has for us in agriculture.

With regard to the Lake Erie Agriculture Demonstrating Sustainability project, it has been around for about four years. It is an initiative which is regionally targeted for stewardship, supporting Ontario farmers in the Lake Erie way. As MPP Barrett knows from Norfolk county, that has a lot to do with what happens in his area, but this is really targeted for the Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair watersheds. It's really to take action to improve soil health and water quality. We know that water quality, both in the Great Lakes as well as in Lake St. Clair, is hugely important to maintaining the Great Lakes' efficiencies.

I will be asking Assistant Deputy Minister Kelly McAslan to come in in just a moment, but maybe if I can shed a little bit of light on these projects.

0910

We do a lot of these projects in concert with the CAP, the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, and it's really to do with farm environmental health projects. Like I said, supporting the soil health, water quality—the minister correctly mentioned nutrient management. As we know, excess nutrients in precision agriculture—we want to use

precision agriculture so we don't have excess nutrients which go into our systems. That also supports the 4R program, which was mentioned yesterday. I think with this LEADS program, the ministry is showing good leadership with environmental programs.

We recently announced over \$2.5 million in government funding to support more than 200 projects under this program. This builds on the previous 700 projects that have already been funded through this program: a completion of a reviewed environmental farm plan, a voluntary assessment completed by farmers to increase their environmental awareness and a farmland health check-up are required to receive the LEADS cost-sharing funding. It's one that farmers are well engaged with.

So with that as a set-up, I'll move it over to ADM Kelly McAslan. Thank you.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Thanks so much. I'm Kelly McAslan, the assistant deputy minister of the food safety and environment division. I'm really pleased to be speaking about this initiative today.

Yesterday, I spoke a lot about some of our environmental stewardship programming that we're also really proud of, but I'll drill in a bit more on the LEADS program specifically because it is a bit of a showcase initiative for us and one that we're extremely proud of.

As the deputy was saying, it's really a targeted stewardship program supporting farmers in the Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair watersheds, and it really is about improving soil health, water quality and reducing phosphorous in the lake. The program began in 2018 and runs until 2023. Funding has been provided at about \$7 million so far, under the CAP framework, the Canadian Agricultural Partnership agreement, funded by federal and provincial governments. It's really a program that builds on the leadership that Ontario farmers are taking in the Lake Erie watershed and have demonstrated taking action to improve soil health and water quality.

One of the things under LEADS is that farmers can complete field-specific risk assessments and then can receive cost-shared funding to support implementation of selected on-farm improvement projects that will help reduce risks and make improvements on their farms. There's work around reducing nutrient loss, in particular phosphorous, from agricultural production within the Lake Erie watershed, improving soil health of farmland and providing co-benefits for enhancing pollinator habitat and building resilience to climate change while strengthening the sustainability of the agricultural sector. Again to the question, this is extremely important in terms of some of the outcomes that this program leads to.

Farmers in the area respond to the greatest soil health and nutrient loss risks on their farms through a couple of different opportunities. One is through the completion of a farmland health check-up, which is done in tandem with a certified crop adviser or a professional agrologist to assess farmland's environmental risk and then, through that, there's targeted funding available for on-farm management practices to improve soil health and water quality. As I said, a significant amount of funding has been provided on that.

The other piece is that there's a completion of a reviewed environmental farm plan, which is a voluntary assessment completed by farmers to increase their environmental awareness in 23 different areas on their farm, as well as the farmland health check-up, which really helps target in terms of their areas of risk and where funding can be most helpful to their specific farms.

Since the launch of LEADS in 2018, more than 460 farmland health check-ups have been completed with farmers identifying priority actions for farms to improve soil health and reduce nutrient losses. As well, more than 930 on-farm environmental improvement projects have been approved, which really help farmers implement actions identified in completing their farmland health check-ups and environmental farm plans. There has been more than \$2.5 million in support to complete the addition of an additional 220 on-farm projects in 2021 under the LEADS initiative.

As I said, there is a cost-share funding program available, and there are 10 different categories that are covered under the LEADS program that can support farmers. The categories are around adding organic amendments to the soil; cover crops, which as we know are critically important; equipment modifications to improve manure application; fragile land retirement; equipment modifications to reduce soil compaction; buffer strips; erosion control structures; tillage and nutrient application equipment modification; windbreaks and wind strips; and crop nutrient planning. So it's a very, very fulsome program. We're extremely proud. I think it's brought a lot of success to many farmers in those particular target areas.

I'll stop there. Thank you very much for the question.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Barrett?

Mr. Toby Barrett: I was going to ask, Chair: How much time do we have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Okay.

Yes, that's quite a fulsome answer. I appreciate the run-through on the list of some of the best management practices that we see more and more farmers using—or more and more farmers, perhaps, going back to cropping and mixed farming practices that we saw in years gone by.

One question that I had—and I was involved in a bit of a consultation on this as well. Just the other night, I was over—I'm surrounded by cattle, my one neighbour just to the south of me. I go over occasionally in the barn when they're throwing down hay and we chat about beef—excellent farmers. It's a mixed farm; cash crop as well. They have horses. I know they mudded in oats this spring. They're doing everything right. I mentioned a program like LEADS to them, but they don't do that kind of stuff. They're not much on computers. They're excellent farmers.

How can we reach out to some of the other farmers? There's great potential, or maybe they are going out of livestock and they're putting crops on sloping land and what have you. How can we get more people involved? How can we reach out to some of these people? Because I

know, oftentimes, many of the very large operations know about these programs. They know when to hit the computer button, just after midnight to get their application in. How can we perhaps broaden this out to reach out to cover more acreage, again, all for the benefit of Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question. I think it's very timely and, obviously, the work that you've done was critical to try to deal with that challenge that you're mentioning. As has been mentioned, this program has been going on for a few years now. It does seem to be a very high take-up, and when we opened the intake, it seems to, almost momentarily—in the same half day, it gets completely taken up by people who are continually using it. When you did your consultation, your recommendation back to us, of course, was that we have to find a better way to give everybody a chance and to give people notice of when we're going to do the intake and when they need to apply and then still be in the running, not have the money already all gone. We are looking at trying to do a little bit more communication to make sure we have more people—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: —who understand that the program is there and then, rather than first come, first served, make an intake based on the length of time that everyone can apply. Then we can assess all the applications based on the merit of how well they accomplish the targets that we're setting, and as the ADM mentioned, about all the different streams that are involved, where we are getting the best advantage for the investment, going forward, and so we can assess all the applications and hopefully give everybody an equal chance, but also expand the program to areas that we're presently not covering as well as we should.

0920

Like you said, there are a lot of farmers that are too busy farming; they haven't got time to read government documents and look at what programs are available. I think we need to make sure that we get a hold of everybody and we expand the program to accomplish what we're trying to do, which is to reduce the phosphorous in Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair. I appreciate all the work you've done to get us to realize that we need to make some changes in the application process so we can get better coverage for the whole area.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Thank you. Again, it's all about phosphorous. We know Ontario signed that agreement with Michigan and Ohio and we set a target. I think it was a 40% reduction in the phosphorous loading in Lake Erie by 2025, so we're under the gun on that one. I know OMAFRA works with the Ministry of the Environment, which also has some excellent programs with respect to protecting our Great Lakes. I think we're heading in the right direction. I really appreciate the detail of the—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Barrett, with that, you're out of time. I'm sorry.

Before we go to the official opposition for their 20-minute rotation, we have two people who have joined. I

need them to confirm their identity and location in Ontario. MPP Skelly?

Ms. Donna Skelly: Good morning, Chair. Good morning everyone. It is MPP Skelly. I'm in Toronto.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you so much. MPP Vanthof?

Mr. John Vanthof: Good morning, Chair. I am indeed MPP Vanthof, and I am still in Cobalt.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you so much.

With that, we go to the official opposition—a 20-minute round. I'm assuming, MPP Vanthof, you'll be leading that?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): The floor is yours, sir.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much, Chair. First of all, I would like to apologize to you, Chair, and to the committee. I had to leave early yesterday, and it's not because I'm not interested in agriculture, but as many of you know there's a bit of a constitutional crisis brewing and we are being called back to the Legislature. As the whip, I had to do some organizing, so I heartily apologize to the committee. I am very interested in this subject and wanted to listen to all the discussion, so some of my questions may be repetitive because I wasn't present. But, again, I apologize.

First, I'd like to start with the minister. There has been a transfer from some of OMAFRA's budget into the infrastructure budget, and some will characterize that as a cut. I'm not going to do that; I think it's a transfer, when you look closely. The issue, I think, as a rural resident, is: Are there safeguards to ensure that that money will continue to be directed towards rural Ontario in the future? And what role does OMAFRA play in ensuring that that happens?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question. I think that it is a very important question, and I think that's the concern all would have when you look at the numbers. The amount of money going to be spent on infrastructure doesn't change regardless of which ministry is delivering it, but at the same time, we in rural Ontario know that the numbers of the participants are smaller, so there's always that concern of where it's going.

I think it's important to recognize that that which was transferred, one of the big items, of course, was broadband. It was being delivered by OMAFRA not because it's a rural issue; it was delivered by OMAFRA because we had a system set up for distribution and looking after projects like that because we have all the support programs and so forth. So it was put there.

When we devised a Ministry of Infrastructure that was going to do that and a lot of other programs, it seems that providing Internet for the province of Ontario is an infrastructure issue. We're not looking to provide it just to rural Ontario; it happens to be directed at rural because most others already have it, but it's an interest that's shared by the province. We want to make rural equal to urban, because we all need that service.

When we put the new system in place for the expansion of Internet, investing \$4 billion by 2025 to get it to every

household in the province, it is not a rural development tool; it is a provincial infrastructure initiative that crosses the whole province. It will go between and connect to the urban infrastructure and so forth.

We, as a government, for efficiency's sake, put all the infrastructure together because the Ministry of Infrastructure is in the best position to build infrastructure across the province. It was put there to allow them to do other things in the infrastructure envelope, to put in a similar infrastructure within the ministry to facilitate the broadband the same as other infrastructure. So who is going to get it is still the same people. I just want to reassure you that that part is not at risk of not getting a share in rural.

Now, the other part of the infrastructure that's moved out of the ministry—our ministry was only the paymaster, not the decision-maker of where the money was going to be spent. With the funds that were going to municipalities, the decision of how much municipalities were getting was not made by OMAFRA; OMAFRA just processed the applications. So that didn't change either. I think the concerns that you expressed and that I would share with you have been alleviated because that part hasn't changed at all.

With that, I think I could turn it over to the deputy to give a—maybe they have a little bit more of the particulars of it, but those are the general terms that we—

Mr. John Vanthof: I think that has been answered adequately. I appreciate the answer.

I'm just going to shift gears a little bit. I was listening to the previous questions regarding the nutrient management plan. It has been a while since I did one—I haven't milked for a while—but I did one and did an environmental farm plan. If I remember correctly, and maybe this has changed, the nutrient management plan, at least when I filled it out, didn't include the amount of commercial fertilizer I used as part of my nutrient load. I understand 4R does, but is commercial fertilizer part of the nutrient management planning process?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I guess to be clear—and I will have to turn this one over to the deputy to be clearer, but I'm going to explain it to you in layman's terms as I understand it and as likely the way you will understand it too. The nutrient management plan was based strictly on the nutrients created on the farm from livestock based on—to make sure that we put that on the field, applied it properly and made sure that we didn't overload the ability of the crop to use it and have it go into the stream. The 4Rs is to take it one step further, and that's why we support that program and just re-signed it last year, because that's the second step in the process: to make sure that when you're adding commercial fertilizer, you're getting the right amount in the right place at the right time for growing the crop. But the nutrient management plan is strictly to deal with the management of the nutrients that are being generated, that they're being properly utilized for crop production and not denigrating our environment.

I think one of the things that we have done—you said you did once go through a nutrient management process, and I think it's important that we have made some changes

to make it not to take away from its need and the adequacy to make sure that it's being maintained, but not to have to keep renewing it if nothing changes, once you've made your thing, so to simplify it for our producers. Again, in my opinion, it was a lot of red tape—when you just have to keep reapplying but nothing has changed. You could almost send in your \$25 and a plan that you had last year and say, “There you go.” We have changed it so they don't have to keep renewing it unless there is a change in what they're doing. If they've changed their volume or the type of building they have or the type of farming they're doing, then they have to create a new plan. So we're doing that.

0930

I can turn it over to the deputy if he has any more he would like to add.

Mr. John Kelly: Thanks for the question.

It really does support our interest in the environment, as I indicated previously. The Nutrient Management Act addresses more than just manure management. It also manages the application of non-agricultural source materials to farmland, and that's often in as a cash crop.

I am going to ask ADM Kelly McAslan, who is responsible for the food safety and environment division, to chime in in just a second.

I will add that OMAFRA, Fertilizer Canada and the Ontario Agri Business Association, or OABA, are working in partnership with Ontario farmers and conservation groups to support the adoption of the 4R program, which was mentioned.

The 4R Nutrient Stewardship is one that supports the Nutrient Management Act goals: right source, right rate, right time, right place. The advantage of this is that it is science-based. It really supports the development of precision agriculture. When you're applying nutrients to fields, you want to make sure you have the right amount of nutrient in the right part of that field. As you know, MPP Vanthof, fields go up and down; they undulate. You're not going to have the same amount of, for example, phosphorus being applied in one area of the field versus the other area of the field. I know on my own fields, for example, on my cornfields, I can tell where there are nutrient deficiencies just by looking at them.

With the precision agricultural system, we're able to define exactly the amount of fertilizer or nutrients that need to be put into a specific area, and then, by doing that, there are several benefits. One is that you're not overloading the environment with unnecessary nutrients—and that is a key part of what the Nutrient Management Act is all about. Second, you're not paying for extra fertilizer to support putting down fertilizer where it's not needed. That adds a third benefit in that the efficiency of the farming operation increases, the returns to the producer increase, and it's good for everybody in the entire program.

We work with certified agri-retailers across Ontario, and we do support improved nutrient management planning across the entire province.

With that as the set-up, I'll pass it over to ADM McAslan, and she may get some support from one of her directors as well.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Thank you, Deputy. I'm Kelly McAslan, assistant deputy minister of food safety and environment division.

I will turn it over to director Thom Hagerty in a moment, but just to touch on a couple of more pieces here: As the deputy mentioned, our nutrient management regulation primarily deals with nutrients from manure as well as from non-agricultural source materials such as biosolids. Farms that are required to have a nutrient management plan, as well as a non-ag source material plan, do have to account for all nutrients, including commercial fertilizers and their nutrient balancing. But based on the legal definitions in the act and the regulations, pelletized biosolids are classified as commercial fertilizers and must meet the requirements under the federal Fertilizers Act to meet those definitions. Biosolids that don't meet those requirements are regulated under NASM and the Nutrient Management Act. Commercial fertilizers normally have a significant purchase price and are carefully managed on the farm to reduce cost of production.

We do have some other supports in place around fertilizers, however. The deputy mentioned the 4R program, which is really important. We partner with industry on that initiative. We also have some tools that we provide to support farmers within our own programming. AgriSuite is a cloud-based technology tool to provide users with a better user experience and flexibility in conducting their business. This really provides decision support tools to help farmers with key crop fertilizer management decisions and really helps direct them in terms of the right levels to be applying on their farms. So that's been a really helpful tool for farmers, and there has been a lot of uptake around—

Mr. John Vanthof: Excuse me—if I could break in. I really appreciate it. The one thing, as a farmer: I don't know a farmer on the planet who wants to spend more money on fertilizer than they absolutely have to. It's a huge bill. But what I was trying to get at is—and I'm going to go from personal experience. While our area was primarily livestock-based and most of the land fell under a nutrient management regime, our area is now primarily cash crop-based with no livestock, so that land is now not under any formal regime.

Again, farmers care about our land. It's a profit-driven industry, and you're not going to throw money away at fertilizer. You certainly don't want it to wash away. But you drive around the countryside and you see that not all precision agriculture is as—particularly on rented land, it's not always happening what should be happening. We all know that if you have rented land and you throw a bit more nitrogen on, you will mine the soil.

I'm not trying to advocate for more regulations either; I just want to know how we're going to address that. We are going much more to precision agriculture. The much bigger farm operations, which I'm not opposed to either, but the connection to the farmer and the soil often isn't there anymore when it's the farmer paying rent for the soil, not the farmer improving the soil for further generations.

I don't know if that's the government's role. I'm just blue-skying here. We made huge steps with the Nutrient

Management Act, and not all farmers were happy about it. I agree that the focus should be that if a farm operation significantly changes—so your dairy experience: If you're going from 50-cow tie stalls and you're building a 100-cow free stall, yes, you need to redo your Nutrient Management Act because your nutrient management load will change. I think we can all agree on that. But I'm not sure that we have a handle on when the concentration of livestock moves to one or two areas and the rest of the province, or big parts of the province, go to basically unmanaged commercial nutrient. I don't know how we're going to address that.

So the 4R program—again, supportive, but it is not to the same level as the Nutrient Management Act.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes, I think you're right to that extent, but it wouldn't be covered. At this point in time, we are putting, shall we say, our faith in the fact that the farmers are the stewards of their land and they are not going to put more nitrogen on or more fertilizer on at a great cost to hurt our environment when they can get the same crop with spending—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes remaining.

0940

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: [*Inaudible*] last month. I would agree with you totally there. Because it's rented land, I think, first of all—and I stand to be corrected, but most land that's being rented, at least in our area, is rented for the long term, so most of those people are trying to keep soil—

Mr. John Vanthof: If I could break in, just in my minute. I bought 160 acres. You know where my farm is. I bought 80 acres of 160 acres—I didn't have the money for the whole 160; this was years ago—and the next 80 was bought and rented out, and it was farmed as one farm. Twenty years later, when you drive down my concession road, you can see the difference, even in the soil colour.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes. And the point I'm trying to make, and going back to the LEADS program and to programs like that, is that we're trying to do everything we can to support farmers who want to do these things to better the soil compaction, and the things that you're talking about that are happening—how we can avoid that. We're doing that with cost-shared programs to help farmers protect the soil quality, because that has a lot to do with the runoff and the soil compaction and the growth that we get.

It's the soil health that has deteriorated on the 80 acres that were rented that you're talking about. So we're doing everything we can with our support programs to make sure that we get them on there to protect all lands so that everyone benefits from improving the quality of our soil and keeping it that way.

I'm not suggesting that there isn't more to do that we could be doing. Again, I want to point out that nutrient management plans do not include places where there are no homegrown nutrients to manage or where you're importing—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, I'm sorry to say that you're out of time.

We go now to the government side. MPP Cuzzetto, I see your hand. The floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I would like to thank the minister for all his hard work.

COVID-19 has impacted everyone in Ontario, especially our agri-food sector. I know at the beginning of COVID-19, our store shelves were empty—not only that; I noticed I was getting a lot of calls from our food banks with shortages of food. I had to get on the phone to find food for them, and I was able to find a lot of donations through Sure Good Foods. They're meat wholesalers here in Mississauga–Lakeshore, and they donated 35 tonnes of chicken breast—that's two transport trucks—which I got out to all the food banks across Ontario with Feed Ontario. I was able to go up to Barrie–Innisfil to pick up some fresh onions and eggs from our local farmers up there, and they told me about the challenges that they were facing during COVID-19.

I was wondering, with all this impact during COVID-19, what has your ministry been doing during these challenging times?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question. I think it's so important. We talk about all the challenges we faced to keep our food chain going during this pandemic and to keep our producers healthy and safe on the lines, growing their crops and all these things. But at first, we had challenges in the supply chain because the food was being changed. Our food service sector was no longer operating because all the restaurants, you will remember, were closed, and so they weren't handling that.

People then had to go to the stores to buy more, and there were some things that weren't on the store shelves. Milk comes to mind. We had this challenge that we were still producing the same amount of milk. We had the same amount of people consuming milk, but they were consuming it in a different way, in different places, so it had to be packaged differently, it had to get onto different trucks going to different places to get it to our kitchen tables. So for a day or two, or for a week, maybe, there was a shortage. There was an excess on the production side, and there was a shortage at the kitchen table. They were very quickly able to repurpose some of their processing systems to put more into the trucks that were going to the grocery stores, and that was soon alleviated.

But one of the things that I think we should remember about what happened then is that the normal course of events, people buying a little extra in the store and taking it to the food bank, was no longer happening. Our government did almost immediately—and it wasn't through the Ministry of Agriculture and Food—put out some money to help support food banks going forward, so they could have more product. What our industry did, and I want to commend them all for it, is that every one of the industries increased their contribution to the food bank.

Now, you mentioned the chickens. I think they are worth just talking about a little bit. The chicken producers, again, found quite a change in the marketplace between what they were selling before and what they were then selling, up to and including the size of the birds. The

roasters were no longer being processed, because they were being used for the food service industry and they weren't needing that anymore.

So the chicken growers of Ontario had all along been producing and providing donations to food banks of chicken. They have this steady program—they're still doing it today—where local chicken producers would get together and donate a certain number of the birds produced to the food bank to give out to the community. They immediately, when they had the extra—like you said, you could find someone that would donate that and get it into the food bank. The food bank could manage food in the same way that the food service sector was handling it and how they got it to the consumer, so if it wasn't in the marketplace to go directly to the consumer, they could get this into the food bank. I want to point out it wasn't the quality of the chickens; it was the size and the amounts and so forth. And so they moved in and donated an awful lot of food to our food banks.

That wasn't just our chicken farmers that did that. Our egg producers started a program—I know I had a large egg producer in my area that put an ad out: Anybody who wanted eggs, they could come and get them. And again, because of how the sales were going differently, they could provide what wasn't going out in the normal channels to our people in need and they could get that. It was primarily because the food banks were having trouble because their normal course of supply was gone, because people weren't able to go and get more than they needed and give a little to the people that needed it. So we were very happy to do that.

Just about every one of our sector stakeholders did what they could to help our more vulnerable and needy people with food supply, so nobody was going hungry. As we were going along, I think we were finding out that a lot of our food banks, with the help of good people like yourself, were now better stocked during the pandemic than they were before the pandemic. I think that really says something for the industry, but it also says something for the people of Ontario and our producers, that when we drop the eggs on the floor—don't worry about it, that they all broke; turn the stove on and make an omelette. That's exactly what our agriculture community and food community did, was to put it all together and make sure that it didn't go to waste.

I guess in the whole time that we were going through this, the one complaint I heard, the concern from people, was people who were concerned because in the milk industry, in order to go from the food service to the grocery store system, they had a few days that they had more milk than they could process in the plant, and they had dispose of that. The people of Ontario were really concerned when they read that, that we had to dump milk and there wasn't milk on the store shelves. I want to assure everyone that it wasn't that they didn't want to do it that way, they just couldn't facilitate that.

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So they got together as Dairy Farmers of Ontario and they put in place a system where they advised which

producers should dispose of some of the milk, but the cost of that would be spread across all the producers. So it wasn't that one person couldn't ship their milk and other people could. Everybody still carried on as they did and we all covered the cost of what we needed to do to address the situation.

Then again, too, they turned around—the Dairy Farmers of Ontario have always been great at supplying milk for students in schools. Of course, if there are no students in school, the milk isn't going to go there. But again, they were looking for places where they could deliver the milk and make sure that everything we had was being consumed, and except for those few days, it was and it really worked well.

Like I say, I guess the pandemic brought out the most negative part, as it impacted our way of living, but it also brought out the best in people. It also brought out the best in our producers, and it brought out the best in politicians like yourself, who decided that if the food bank needed help, and you had some leverage you could pull and we had some levers we could pull, we could pull together and make sure that we got food.

I noticed, looking at you, Rudy, that when I said that at the end of it, a lot of our food banks had a greater supply than they had before the pandemic—I think that's a real testament to the hard work of all the people like yourself and all the people of the province who provided the food and, rather than have anything go to waste, make sure that it's there, where the people can get it.

I guess maybe if I could turn it over to the deputy and see if he could fill in some of the intricacies that I missed, but I just couldn't resist saying thank you to all the stakeholders who came to the forefront and decided to build that order you put in for the food bank and said, "We have chickens—so here it is."

Deputy?

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you for your question, MPP Cuzzetto. It's one that has been a significant impact on the ag sector in the past year—actually, more than a year now. There have been, as the minister indicated, specific sector impacts. Early on, we saw changes in consumer behaviour—restaurants not being able to use what they had. A really good example would be in the egg sector, where the types of eggs that would go to the restaurant sector are a different size egg than goes into the consuming sector. So we had some imbalance in the amount of the medium eggs and the large eggs that we had in the sector.

I have to give a lot of credit to the sector for its ability to rapidly respond to changing marketplaces, and that's really what COVID did in that part of it. It did change some of the market pressures that were there.

What the ministry did in a lot of responses to COVID: During the pandemic, Foodland Ontario undertook specific, targeted promotions under specific agri-food sectors to try and address oversupply or production issues, to assist them to help producers recoup any losses due to challenges in the supply chain. What the pandemic has also shown is that the agriculture supply chain is extremely resilient and can respond to many of the impacts that we have.

I'm going to introduce you to Cordelia Clarke Julien in one second, but one of the things the ministry did in response to COVID was the creation of the COVID Agri-Food Secretariat. What this did was it provided the direct, targeted focus of our ministry on those impacted by COVID, both in the production sector but also through the processing sector and into retail. Trying to address any challenges that we saw come through because of COVID, we had to respond quickly and develop programs, develop responses to COVID to support the sector.

I'll send it over to Cordelia to describe some of those responses. Thank you, Cordelia.

Ms. Cordelia Clarke Julien: Thank you, Deputy. Cordelia Clarke Julien, the assistant deputy minister for the COVID Agri-Food Secretariat in the ministry.

Thank you, MPP Cuzzetto, for your question. You are absolutely correct, and the minister nailed it on the head in terms of the reaction or response when all this happened. We saw that for everyone in terms of the pandemic. I totally want to reiterate the minister's point, where while the pandemic had some negativity with it, it really did bring out some positive pieces in terms of how people responded and how the sector came together with respect to that. Some of the things we did do were we did have a ministers' sector leadership group where we did bring together all the sectors. Some of the things that the minister was talking about in terms of being able to coordinate and being able to adjust and move forward were in response to us bringing the sectors together, having the conversations, really showing that leadership through government in terms of: How can we make this work? What can we do? How can we adjust accordingly?

One of the things that came out of that was the prevention and control strategy, which the ministry has put together with not only the sector but of course our partners in government—so with the Ministries of Health, Labour and others—working together with local communities as well as the sector to put together this 35-point action plan, which would help us to move the sector through as we endured the pandemic.

As the deputy said, we were quite resilient, or continue to be quite resilient, but we're not crisis-proof, so we still had to address those types of things, looking at the strategy pieces. All 35 of those action points have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented. They were divided into three approaches, helping our farmers organize and be able to put things in place before workers are on farm, while they're on farm and, of course, some of the housing pieces. We were able to put things together so that we were able to keep places safe so that workers could work and so that we could continue to keep the food moving through the supply chain. That was quite crucial in terms of that strategy piece in making that work in terms of that.

We also recognized in the early days that this was going to be an extraordinary cost on our producers. We knew that on our processes as well. And so we quickly mobilized to put in place programming that would help in terms of health and safety, prevention and control. We did put in

our Enhanced Agri-Food Workplace Protection Program, where we were able to provide supports in PPE and other types of protective gear that would help in terms of those pieces. It would also assist farmers and others in making safety plans, including isolation plans as well, if there was an outbreak. We were able to quickly mobilize to support them on that, and we're proud to say, to this day, that was close to \$36 million in investment to ensure that they were able to do that prevention and control on that side.

We also looked at other outbreak supports in terms of that. We worked closely with municipal colleagues as well as our federal colleagues to put in place isolation centres, as well, if there were outbreaks, just so we could manage that, and things such as cohorting, in terms of that nature—so, many different pieces that we put together just to support and ensure that the food could continue to move, but of course, making sure that the workers are healthy.

I think the minister talked about the early—like, as the pandemic first hit, but as we moved through, we knew some of the issues that the farmers were faced with were just being overwhelmed with information. At some points, there was some conflicting information: "Where do I go for support? What do we do in terms of that?" There were some delays in travel with respect to our temporary foreign workers coming, who are crucial to our farming and agri-food sector. And of course, there were outbreaks and stuff that we were managing. So the ministry was very much active—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

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Ms. Cordelia Clarke Julien: —in making sure that we're able to provide that support as we go forward on those areas, and including things such as working closely with our local partners on mobile testing and things of that nature.

So I just wanted to give you a little bit of tidbit of some of the great things the ministry was doing in terms of supporting and making sure that the food could continue to move through the supply chain as we step forward.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I really appreciate hearing all that. Before the pandemic, we heard about the agriculture and food sector but we didn't know much about it, especially here in Mississauga-Lakeshore. We don't have farmers down here.

I really want to say thank you to the agriculture farming industry, because they showed the real Ontario spirit. I couldn't believe the people who came out to donate stuff to our food banks. I work very closely with three food banks. We even shipped food out to Manitoulin Island—zucchini, lettuce, cucumbers.

I also want to say thank you to Minister Hardeman for all his hard work with this ministry.

I just can't believe the spirit here in Ontario. I hope that continues in different ways moving forward in the years to come.

Thank you very much for all your hard work.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for your question, Rudy.

You say there are not many farmers in Etobicoke—

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Mississauga.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman:—Mississauga—but I can tell you that when it comes to the food part of our ministry, we have more food processor workers in the urban areas than we do in all of rural Ontario. So, obviously, you're a big part of our ministry there—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister, I'm afraid your time is up.

We'll now go back to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you to MPP Cuzzetto for bringing up the food banks—it's very important—and to the minister for bringing up what the dairy farmers did, and the chicken farmers.

We all talk about supply management, and a lot of people don't understand some of the other benefits there are for our total society with supply management; specifically, with dairy—because that's the one I know the best. Farmers pool their costs and their losses. The minister brought up when, because of the transition and because of the packaging, some farmers had to dispose of milk. Milk is a very perishable product. It needs to be processed right away. Because of the way the system is set up, all the farmers in Ontario helped pay for that. I think that's a very crucial thing.

Something that a lot of people don't know about supply management either is that we pool our costs—the former “we,” but I'm still a big supporter. When you live where I live in northern Ontario or when you live in Oxford county or in Ottawa—the farmers pay for the transportation of the milk, and they all pay the same because the cost is pooled. Actually, farmers close to Ottawa—because there are bigger processors there, that's the cheapest place to ship milk, and the most expensive place is my part of the world. But we all pay the same.

It's those things that keep the industry strong, and it's why anyone in this sector works so hard to support supply management. By working together, it keeps them all strong, and because they are so strong, they could contribute to the food banks.

I would be remiss if I didn't bring up, in a discussion about food with the Ministry of Agriculture, that food banks provide a vital service—but it's not something to be proud of, that in Ontario, even pre-COVID, of the 14.57 million people in Ontario, over 530,000 of them depended on food banks even pre-COVID, and that was up 5% from the year before. With COVID, that demand has gone up significantly, but I'm focusing on pre-COVID, because COVID changed our lives radically.

I don't think it's rocket science to figure it out. In many parts of the province, if you're working on minimum wage, there are some things you can't afford. This is more a statement than a question—I'm not asking anybody to fix this—but I think it's something. We also contribute to food banks, and I commend the people who work so hard to provide that service, but the fact that we have families relying on that on a regular basis is something that we need to look at, as a society where food is so plentiful, that not

everyone has the same opportunities in this province. Some of the people who we call essential workers are some of the people who can't afford to buy all of the food that they work to provide us, and that's something that we really need to be cognizant of and need to never forget going forward, to try to work on helping that situation. It's not just enough to make sure the food banks are well stocked; we have to look at the causes of why people depend on it, look at those root causes and see if we can change that.

Having said that, yesterday I was focusing on preservation of farmland, which is at the other end of the spectrum. You can't produce food if you don't have farmland. I believe the minister and the deputy minister both talked about how much more productive each unit of farmland is than it was 10, 20, 30, 40 years ago. I 100% agree, but the fact remains: Even if we're growing 300 bushels per acre on land, if you lose that acre, that's 300 bushels you have to replace somewhere else.

I know we have plans: the Golden Horseshoe plan; the greenbelt. I've quoted this number myself, that we are losing 175 acres a day of access to land. Does the ministry have a handle on how much capacity, in acres, that we are either gaining or losing on a yearly basis?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Well, I think that's a rather pointed question. I appreciate that, and we will turn it over to the ministry to see if we actually have a number. I'm not sure that we have. I think everyone could come up with a number. I'm sure that if you ask 10 different organizations, we would likely come up with 10 different numbers, because how do you make that decision? We'll go to that, but I think we need to reassure everyone that our number one objective is to save farmland.

Totally apart from that, I've been told that an old-timer may have been the one who went up north to dairy-farm when he left office.

Mr. John Vanthof: Quit picking on my dad.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: But I was told that if you want to make a good investment, you should buy land. The reason for that is that they don't make it anymore. So the amount of land that we have, in total, is not going to go up, ever. The amount that we turn into uses other than agriculture, that can't be reclaimed, is going to be gone from producing food forever, and I think that's a given. I suppose that's why land is worth so much more today than it was when I bought my 10 acres. So that's one of the things we have to realize.

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Now, having said that, I think we are doing everything we can to make sure we protect that land for agriculture. Will it be enough for the years to come? I don't know whether anybody has a handle on the population growth and the need for more food and whether the world can keep producing—it's totally different than what we're talking about today, whether the world can produce the food for the amount of people that it's producing. I don't know. That goes beyond our statistics, shall we say. But we do work very hard to make sure that we protect farmland as best we can.

One of the things that we've heard a lot of debate about is whether—and I think we've heard that particularly through our agricultural organizations and federations, the Christian farmers and the farmers' union—when we say we're protecting class 1, 2 and 3 land, we should increase that to 4, 5 and 6 too, to make sure. I don't disagree, but I think what's really important is that when we are looking at the classes and what needs protecting, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that class 1, 2 and 3 protected are going to produce a better result than protecting 4, 5 and 6 at the expense of 1, 2 and 3. Those are the types of things that we have to work on. In our process, I think that's what we're doing: making sure that we protect the most valuable cropland that we have as much as we can. That's really, basically, where we're going.

I'll turn it over to the deputy to actually answer the question of how many acres we had, and then I'm sure the rest of the staff can fill us in on where we're going and how we're going to accomplish it.

With that, Deputy, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister.

MPP Vanthof, great question. Certainly, the use of farmland versus the urban pressure that everybody is under is of key concern to the ministry. Part of our objective is to protect as much of that farmland as we can from non-agricultural uses.

There are certainly policies that have been put in place. If you look at what's happening in the Mississauga area with the densification of population and urban populations growing up, if you look at downtown Toronto, everything is growing up, and you'll see more and more of that happening. That said, though, we do see that there is a balance between urban development, agricultural land use and agricultural land protection. We are certainly listening to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and the Christian farmers in their positions on how we need to protect as much farmland as we can, and that has to be a key priority for this.

With that, I'm going to bring it over to my ADM, David Hagarty, to talk about proper land use planning, because that's really what we're discussing here. We're under pressure for the development of urban areas, and we have to balance that pressure with agricultural operations. So David, if I can pass this to you, I will do that.

Mr. David Hagarty: Thank you, Deputy. Thank you for the question. David Hagarty, assistant deputy minister, policy division, with the ministry.

As I mentioned yesterday, we do work very closely with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to ensure that current policies to protect farmland are upheld and to provide input into land use policies as well as guidelines. Integration of land use planning and economic development all help to increase viability.

We did mention yesterday the four provincial plans covering the greater Golden Horseshoe, and they do require an agriculture systems approach to identify and protect vital agricultural land and to support a prosperous agri-food sector—again, A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe; the Greenbelt Plan; the Oak

Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan; and the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

We did talk about the agriculture systems approach. That's comprised of two parts: a continuous protected land base for agriculture, and an agri-food network consisting of the supply chain essential to the sector.

Within the greater Golden Horseshoe, municipalities need to include mapping of the agriculture land base. We talked about that quickly yesterday, and policies to support the agriculture system in their official plan. To assist municipalities with their implementation, the province has released mapping of the agriculture land base within the greater Golden Horseshoe, and municipalities may make refinements to provincial agriculture land base mapping when it's implemented in their official plan. In accordance with guidelines provided by our ministry and within the greenbelt, the provincial agriculture system mapping is in effect now.

Outside the greenbelt, as we mentioned yesterday, the deadline for municipalities to update their official plans with the agriculture system mapping policies to conform with A Place to Grow is July 1 of next year. Municipal refinements to the provincial land base are proceeding with our support, and work is progressing well. Most municipalities in the greater Golden Horseshoe are expected to be substantially completed by the July 2022 deadline.

Outside of the greater Golden Horseshoe, the new provincial policy statement encourages municipalities to adopt an agriculture system approach. As we mentioned, some municipalities—Huron county is an example—have started the process of adopting and implementing an agriculture system approach.

Agriculture impact assessments are required for settlement areas, expansion, infrastructure projects, aggregate operations and other non-agriculture uses in the—

Mr. John Vanthof: Just to refresh my memory, an agricultural impact assessment, where it's required—is it similar to an environmental impact assessment, where if you are going to change something, it has to be remediated or replaced? Or is it simply a suggestion? Those are two totally different things.

The second part is, planning has taken on a much different—and I appreciate good planning. As a former municipal politician, I know bad planning on a small scale can be—but planning has taken on a much different tone. When the government of the day says that an MZO—“We want to put out more MZOs, and an MZO trumps everything, even the provincial policy statement.” So having the best policy statement and the best plans in the world—if you say that the MZO trumps that, I'm concerned.

Having the agriculture impact assessment actually have some teeth to it—does it, and if it doesn't, why doesn't it? I think that's more a minister question.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes, you're right. Thank you very much for that question.

I think in very simple terms, as David mentioned, they put the requirement of the impact assessment in their official plan. So to make the planning decisions on those, they must use the environmental impact plan, as to how

they're going to deal with that. You ask, how binding is that? It's the same binding as—you mentioned other environmental assessments. This is the assessment as to weighing all the options. The application that you're asking for—is that the best we can do to accomplish what needs to be done, or can we do it in a better way? That's exactly what environmental assessments—environmental assessments don't always say no—

Mr. John Vanthof: I agree.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: So that's the same thing as the agriculture impact study—put in an assessment and look at what the impact could be and how we can mediate the impacts to do what we have to do. The impact study doesn't have to be done for every application that a municipality makes. It has to be done when they do their official plan, when they have to consider if this is what we're going—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: —to do in this area, then this is what you have to rationalize. Then we have to weigh the value of all the information as to whether what they're doing is the right thing.

I think it's important to say, in the total context, as far as protecting our agricultural land, we've had a number of times that we've had—and you mentioned that the municipality is not always looking at the big picture. We've had a number of times where I've had to ask the Minister of Municipal Affairs to appeal a decision to the tribunal because municipalities are not being consistent with our provincial policy statement. I think that's the type of thing we need to make sure we look at, and through the environmental impact systems in the same way. If they want to put that in and then they want to review it and say, "We're going to do this, this and this," we want to make sure that they can prove that that would be in the best interests of society, weighing all the pluses and minuses.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. That is encouraging, because when I listen to Minister Clark on MZOs, Minister Clark always says that they defer to the municipality. In many cases, in my opinion, that is an abdication of the duty of the government, to say the municipality always knows best.

The municipality looks out for and they do what they should do for their municipality. I don't have an issue with that. But each level of government is elected to reflect a bigger part of the picture. We still have the issue where, under the way I read the current legislation, an MZO can trump the provincial policy statement. Now, if that—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry, MPP Vanthof. Your 20-minute rotation is up.

Colleagues, we're going to recess for 10 minutes. Be back shortly after 10:30.

The committee recessed from 1022 to 1031.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We're back in session. The opposition had finished. MPP Skelly, the floor is yours.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Good morning, Chair, and good morning, Minister. It's lovely to be able to participate with you on this committee this morning on this beautiful sunny

day here in the nation's—or, I should say, the provincial capital; I'm in Toronto.

But my riding is actually in Hamilton, and I just wanted to share with people who are watching, Hamilton has a very rich history, of course, in the steel industry, and now, we're quickly becoming a destination for foodies for a number of reasons: We have phenomenal restaurants, and we are becoming a destination for restaurants and entertainment, music etc., but we also have a thriving agri-food sector. In fact, the agri-food sector in Hamilton contributes over \$1 billion annually to the economy. And as I said, although Hamilton has a history, a very rich history we're very proud of, in the steel industry, we're also very proud of our contribution to the agriculture sector as well. I wanted to thank you and of course all of your ministry staff for helping us be so successful in our agri-food sector.

Hamilton also abuts one of the strongest wine regions in Ontario. Certainly, over the course of my lifetime, we've seen Ontario's wine industry evolve, and now, we are perhaps, arguably, one of the best producers of wine anywhere on the globe. But like so many sectors, Minister, the wine industry has taken a hit because of COVID-19, not just because of the fact that it's part of the agricultural component but because of tourism. Minister, what are you and what is your ministry doing to help people who are in Ontario's wine industry, who work in the industry, who own wineries? What are you doing to help them access some of the financial support that our government has made available to them because of the pandemic?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): The minister is on his way, honestly.

Ms. Donna Skelly: There's the minister. Minister, it's so nice to—

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I've been here all the time. Somebody didn't let me on.

Thank you very much for the question. I was listening to it. I do want to say that you mentioned "arguably" it was one of the best, and I just want to say that it's without argument from me that it is the best wine in the world.

The second thing I want to say is that I recognize the challenges that the wine industry has faced because of the pandemic. It's primarily because—again, I talked earlier about the other foodstuffs and how that marketplace changed in streams, so the food service industry closed up, so all the food had to go to grocery stores. Well, what happened was, we were able to allow restaurants to sell wine with takeout meals. That was one of the first things that our government did, to allow that. That never has been allowed before, where if you ordered takeout from a restaurant, you could order a bottle of wine to go with it. In fact, it worked so well that it has now been made permanent. I think that's a positive for the wine industry. But that had a major negative impact, when all of a sudden people were not going out to eat, and I know you—

Ms. Donna Skelly: Minister, if I may: I've heard from many representatives within the sector that it was long overdue. They wanted this modernization, and the timing couldn't have been better, because they were looking for

some sort of help, and this was a critical element, a critical addition.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: That's what I say, yes, very much so, but it still didn't make up for the amount of sales they lost because people were no longer going in to eat out, and buying sometimes maybe even a second bottle if it was really good.

Obviously, our government was committed to the success of our local wineries. We have come a long ways in the last 20 years in the quality and the volume of good wine we produce. That's why, of course, Minister Bethlenfalvy has worked with wineries, in the 2021 budget, to help them. The 2021 budget is helping wineries with additional funding to help recover from the impact of COVID-19. This includes one-time funding of an \$11.2-million grant to help wineries, cideries and distilleries impacted by lockdown measures and ensure agricultural and local jobs are maintained in our rural communities.

As the province's economic recovery continues and to ensure the long-term success of the sector while the alcohol review continues, we're also providing a one-year extension of the funding support for the VQA Wine Support Program. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs is working with our delivery partners, Agricorp, to deliver the 2021-22 VQA Wine Support Program applications. They were sent out to the wineries in May, and wineries will be working on those applications to send in for their support there. We remain committed to the success of local wineries and helping their businesses grow.

We know this industry is full of opportunities. It's come a long ways, but it has a lot further it can go. We recognize that these programs are important to the industry, as they help the sector with key business decisions and planning while the government continues to conduct its overall review of the beverage alcohol sector. You will be aware that we have been doing the review on the selling of wine and the taxation of wine and so forth. We've been doing that review for quite a while to try to improve the marketability or the consumption of our Ontario wine in the system, and we have not yet come to the final end result of that. That's why we have these programs there.

To be physically sustainable, the government is ensuring that programs are focused on delivering maximum value for farmers, the agri-food sector and rural communities. Our government is also expanding retail opportunities for our wine makers and grape growers, to help them grow their businesses, which will help grow our economy and result in more jobs for Ontarians. There are well over 200 wineries and almost 500 grape growers that produce over 67,000 tonnes of grapes to meet the demand for Ontario wines. We are working towards achieving a regulatory environment that encourages the growth of our farms and local businesses while maintaining the rules that keep Ontarians and our environment safe and healthy.

We recognize the significant economic benefits of the beverage alcohol sector in our provincial economy, and Ontario remains committed to the success of local wineries and continues to help producers grow and succeed. As you mentioned, COVID slowed the industry down tremendously,

but we are already in the process of bringing it back and improving it as we go forward.

With that, I think I'll turn it over to the deputy. He can put some of the statistics in place, and how the programs will be delivered. Deputy, the floor is yours.

1040

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister. MPP Skelly, thanks for your description of the agri-food sector in Hamilton. My farm is actually located in that area, so we're one of those contributors to—

Ms. Donna Skelly: Good to hear.

Mr. John Kelly: There you go, up in Flamborough.

We've seen, with the impact of COVID, that there has been an amazing impact on restaurant sales and those types of things that have happened. I think the minister described very well the impact on having wine being able to be sold through restaurants. That's been a real boon for many, many wineries around the province. I will note for MPP Barrett, for the Ontario South Coast Wineries and Growers Association, this is also very helpful for them, as well as Niagara and those in Prince Edward county and others in the Lake Erie north shore wine areas. So it's a very positive development for them, and it will support the continued expansion of our wine sector.

The wine and grape sector is significant. It contributed around \$479 million to Ontario's GDP and 7,400 direct jobs in 2019. So those are some of the stats that are there. But we also have other areas which are related to this. The craft cider industry, for example, is worth about \$12 billion, and it's sort of in the same type of boat. Grape production: The minister mentioned the 500 growers, but that has \$380 million in sales, right? So it's not small change here that we're talking about.

There are about 100 wineries that receive payments through the VQA Wine Support Program. All sizes of wineries are eligible to receive these payments. I'm going to turn over to ADM Hagarty in just a second because he can provide you some details on the programs that have been brought forth to support wineries this way, but just as an example, in the 2020-21 program, payments ranged from a low of \$130,000 to a high of \$289,000, so there's quite a range in the opportunities here.

We're supporting the sustainability and the recovery of the wine and agri-tourism industry, and there was a one-time announcement of \$11.2 million in the 2020-21 Ontario budget. This is to help wineries, cideries, distilleries impacted by lockdown measures and just the real impact of COVID on them.

I'm going to pass it to ADM Hagarty and he can provide some of the details of what is happening there. Thank you.

Mr. David Hagarty: Thank you, Deputy. David Hagarty, assistant deputy minister, policy division. I'll mention the support programs and the supports that are in place, and then I may hand it to my colleague Randy Jackiw in our economic development division to provide a bit more detail.

I'll start with the Ontario Wine Fund. It provides \$13 million annually to support the Ontario wine and grape industry to optimize investment in the areas of the government's strategic economic priorities, so increased jobs,

sales, investment, productivity and innovation. That fund has been extended out to the 2022-23 year, and that includes \$7.5 million for the VQA Wine Support Program that, as the deputy said, supports approximately 100 wineries. They annually receive payments through the VQA Wine Support Program: \$4.8 million for marketing tourism and export initiatives; \$250,000 for a performance management initiative; and then \$250,000 for research, innovation and development.

Ontario wine sales have grown from \$734.5 million in 2014-15 up to \$943.3 million in 2019-20. That's a 28%, or almost a 30% increase over those five years. I think you've seen some of that in your area. Our calculations suggest that about 7,450 jobs and about \$479 million in gross domestic product can be attributed to the grape and wine industry and the associated value chain from farm, processing and retail. That's a 2019 number.

The deputy did mention the small cidery and distillery program. That supports small cideries and distilleries in their growth and competitiveness and helps those businesses scale up, by providing direct cash payments to cideries and distilleries. The funding also has been extended to that 2022-23 year. That includes \$1.775 million for cideries and about \$825,000 of funding for distillers. That was increased by \$1.2 million, for a total of \$2.025 million. That program, as I mentioned, has been extended out to 2022-23. That supports 68 cideries and 32 distilleries.

Craft cider sales through the LCBO have gone from half a million litres in 2014-15 to 3.1 million litres in 2019-20. The craft cider segment has grown from 4.5% of total cider sales through the LCBO in 2015-16 to almost 20% in 2019-20.

Craft spirit sales through the LCBO have gone from 0.2 million litres in 2014-15 to 0.8 million litres in 2019-20, and the craft spirits segment has grown from 0.19% of total spirit sales in the LCBO in 2015-16 to 0.61% in 2019-20.

They did mention the announcement, as part of the 2021 budget, for the winery agri-tourism COVID-19 relief program, and that's going to provide \$10 million in one-time relief to support the recovery and sustainability of wineries and cideries affected by the government lockdown measures due to COVID-19. We're currently working together with our colleagues at the Ministry of Finance on the design and planning for those payments to be going out later this summer to—as many as 270 wineries and cideries would be eligible.

So those are some details on the programs.

Randy Jackiw, my colleague at economic development division, may have more to add.

Mr. Randy Jackiw: Thank you very much for the question.

What I would add to this is some of the other things that wineries and the craft beer as well as the cider industries have been doing. Many of them were also significantly impacted because of the lack of the agri-tourism component of this, which is really significant to many of the smaller operations. They had worked pretty hard over the last number of years to have communities of support that

included direct deliveries, and so a lot of that continued. We saw many of these operations really ramp up their online and delivery aspects and a lot of support from Ontarians in sourcing their products and supporting those smaller businesses.

There was a program that we also rolled out under the CAP, the Canada Agricultural Partnership program, with the federal government. The minister focused on businesses improving their online presence, whether that be their websites, whether that be electronic funds transfers, and many businesses took advantage of that program as well.

I think I could stop there for now, unless there are some other questions.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Ms. Donna Skelly: All four of you mentioned the cider industry. Has it grown? How large is it today in comparison to 10 years ago?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: For sure, it has grown. I don't know the numbers exactly. So I'll ask the deputy, or whoever wants to answer, whether we have a number on the actual amount of the increase, but it has grown exponentially in the last number of years.

1050

Ms. Donna Skelly: I know. John, you probably know some of the cider farms in my area, the cider breweries in our area of Flamborough. I'm seeing more and more. Maybe you can speak to the growth in that particular sector in Ontario.

Mr. John Kelly: Yes, two concessions from my farm is a cidery farm on 8th Concession in Flamborough, so a shout-out to them. They do great work. One of the things that we perform very well here in Ontario is the creation of these craft ciders. It's really showing through sales at the LCBO. I don't have the individual craft cider sales—

Ms. Donna Skelly: Anecdotally, I would suggest—

Mr. John Kelly: —but I do for the LCBO, and it's gone up sixfold in seven years.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Wow.

Mr. John Kelly: Right? That means that there is a significant demand for Ontario's ciders. There is evidence to show that the growth of the cider market is largely, in part, due to the support for locally produced product. Certainly, with the sales that occur at the cideries as well as at the LCBO, they're doing extremely well. It's about a sixfold increase.

Ms. Donna Skelly: That's incredible. Is that a global—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I am sorry to say, with that, you're out of time.

The rotation goes back to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you once again, Chair. I am going to go back to the last question about how much land we are losing per day. I didn't get an answer from the minister; I got a good explanation from the minister that, yes, we can all come up with our numbers, depending on agriculture land. I agree with him that agriculture land is

not a homogeneous product, so classes 1, 2 and 3 are different than 4, 5 and 6. For some of us who are not in the agriculture business, the land is classed—I'm going to be very layman—by its productive capacity, the quality of the land, where it is, the heat available. There are many factors. Anyone who has ever bought a farm, you look at how your land is classified. You don't look at the buildings; you look at how the land is classified, because that's its productive capability.

It's really important that we protect classes 1, 2 and 3. Again, I'll take the words from the minister who quoted someone near and dear to me, "They don't make it anymore," which is very true. That's why I would suggest that we need some kind of handle on—you need to know how much you're losing or gaining to adequately determine what kind of measures you need to protect it. You need a stat. I'm going to stay with 175 acres a day, because I haven't heard a different one.

I'm assuming that there's some level of knowledge about how much we have. I can look at the land stats. There are four million acres of class 2, 3 and 4 land in Ontario. I can see smaller projects, but we see big projects where we lose thousands of acres at a time, possibly. There needs to be some type of accounting. If there isn't, why isn't there?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for the question, John. I think I'm going to start off by saying that my first answer still holds.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm not saying it doesn't.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Every time there is a lot developed for other purposes, it doesn't change the millions of acres we're talking about that are there. I think what's really important is the process we have in place to try and protect the land that we have. Our number one priority is to make sure we conserve class 1, 2 and 3 land for food production.

My comments yesterday were about the productivity of it, and the increase of productivity is also so important. As we're looking at going forward, being able to increase productivity on the acreage we do have is as important as making sure that we have all the acres, because it's producing food for the people of the world. I think we've got to keep focused on that.

Like I said, once it's out of production, it's gone forever. But we want to make sure we put everything in place to protect all we can, but the actual acreage per day—I want to say, right now, there are too many acres per day being consumed for other purposes. We have to do everything we can to reduce that number. What the number is, I don't know, and I can tell you that whether it's one number or the other, I don't think that's the important part. The important part is what we're putting in place to reduce the consumption of good farmland for any other purpose.

Again, we've been talking about the provincial policy statement encouraging municipalities to implement the agricultural system, but I think it's more important to put everything in place we can to facilitate the protecting of the land. It's that simple. I don't want to sit here and have a debate about whether it's 175 or 154, because neither one is going to be a satisfying answer unless it includes, "We've

got to reduce the amount of the land that is being consumed for purposes other than agriculture."

I think I'll turn it over to the staff to talk about how we're doing that, but I think that's really the important thing: what we're doing to protect our agricultural land. Like I say, some day, when I have nothing to do, I will sit down and do all the calculations and make sure that whatever number that you want is accurate. But today, I could give you any number, and there is nobody that's going to prove you or me right or wrong.

Mr. John Vanthof: Before we go to staff, I'd just like to—actually, I don't disagree with the principle, and I'm not here to quibble about one or the other. But the fact is, I don't know of any other resource that we're worried about saving but we're not worried about counting. I don't know a bank, I don't know anyone who is going to say, "We need to work as hard as we can to protect X, but we really don't know how much of X we are having or have."

So whether it's 175 or whether it's 180—175 times 365 is 60,000 acres a year. I'm not here to say, "We're really concerned about saving something, but we really don't know how much we have, and it doesn't really matter how much we have, because we're just going to protect as much as we can and produce more of what we have." If I went to my bank for a loan on that, I would be laughed right to the street.

That is a tough one, and I realize it's really difficult to measure because it's class 1, 2 and 3. Is it lost agriculture? Is it switched to something else? Or if it's class 2, 3 and 4, again, it's a whole different number. I realize that it's not easy to pin that number and it is important that we maintain the productivity, but we also have to know what we have so we know what we're losing. If, as a society, we're unwilling to pin down what we have, we also can't actually measure what it's worth. If you have an agriculture impact assessment and you don't really know how crucial it is to keep those acres, because you don't really know what you're losing, how can you adequately assess that? I'm not here to quibble about an acre or two, but we need to have a really good handle on it.

1100

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I don't disagree with your comments. I do disagree totally with you to equate going to the bank for a loan and saying you don't know how much you have and so forth. Our land base is not that. Our land base is not something that we're going to be able to deal with that way.

I don't want the agriculture assessment to say, "Well, you have that many acres and you don't really need to save that many, so this one isn't important." What we are doing is important. What we're protecting is important, and I think how much we're losing is important based on that application, that time when you are taking it out. I think it's not really productive to start talking about the millions of acres we have, assuming that the land we're protecting today is not that important because we have millions of acres, because, one acre at a time, reduction is the impact.

Mr. John Vanthof: I agree.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: That's why I'm not as interested in the actual number. I'm interested in what we're doing and are we doing our best to protect every acre we can for future food production.

I'll turn it over to the ministry to talk about what we are doing to do that. But I think that's the important part.

Mr. John Vanthof: If I could, I don't think we're that far off on that every acre is important, every acre needs to be assessed on its value. It's just that it's hard to assess the true value of that if we're not looking at the big picture.

I'm sure you have it when you drive into work. When I drive into work from my house to Queen's Park, every drive I see less acres—every drive. I used to drive once a year to Toronto. I remember when Canada's Wonderland was in a field. I'm old, but I'm not that old, right? Some people would disagree on that. It's not just happening on that corridor. I'm not going to stay on this subject, but it is very concerning and it's very politically difficult. I fully appreciate that.

I'd like to switch to something else also on land. We are having a lot of agriculture development. It's moving north. Maybe my father was ahead of the curve; I don't know. Some people would dispute that as well—personally, between Ernie and I. But there is significant development in northern Ontario.

I understand that OMAFRA has helped a northern group catalogue private land that may be available for agriculture. That's a good thing; I'm in favour. A lot of that private land was previously in agriculture, and because we didn't know what the challenges were in northern Ontario—one of the biggest challenges in the north is because our season is shorter, and that most of the agricultural parts of northern Ontario are in a clay belt. There is no natural drainage. When we used to live close to where the minister lives, it was a tile drainage house, but there's also natural drainage because there's a lot of gravel bottom. We don't have any of that. Once we learned that—and tile drainage makes a significant difference. So a lot of our land was cleared and grew back into forests because we just—I'm saying it collectively—didn't know how to farm it.

There was another issue as well. There are several major industries in northern Ontario: mining and forestry, and agriculture is becoming bigger. When the mines are doing well and when the forest industry is doing well and you're looking at trying to make a living on your swampy farm or making a lot more money working in a mine or a mill, that decision is kind of made for you. But now we have learned how to farm more successfully in the north. The climate is changing, and a lot of people from other areas are moving here, and a lot of local farmers are taking advantage and getting bigger, too, and that's a good thing. The Matheson area is one of the few places we're actually getting more dairy farms instead of less, because some dairy farmers are taking their quota—specifically, the Mennonite community is taking their quota and moving north, and that's a good thing.

So we've got a supply of private land, but we also have—the minister said, and I agree with him, that they're not making any more land, but we could develop more. There

is a potential for programs. Many farmers have expressed frustration about access to crown land which could be used for agriculture. There needs to be—and I'm hoping we can start that, and maybe you're a lot further down the road than I am—a discussion on how that land is distributed, what happens to the forestry sector when that land goes out of forest management plans. It's a public resource, and we need to know, if there are plans, what the consultation process will be if there is an effort to make some of that land available to agriculture, and also—actually, I'll have a second question on it.

Anyway, where are we on access to crown land? I know there is a program now, because it has happened in my part of the world, where, if a farmer, his own land is fully developed and he has an adjacent property on crown land that has potential for agriculture—there is a process now, and it has happened in my riding. But there are also requests for huge swaths of crown land. Could you please enlighten how far along that process OMAFRA is?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question, John. I will turn the actual question over to the ministry, as to where it's going and where we're at in the process.

I do want to point out, and obviously you will have been involved when, jointly with the Beef Farmers of Ontario and the province, we were working together, trying to figure out how we could make a beef industry viable in northern Ontario, recognizing that sending one farmer at a time—first of all, you didn't have the willingness of people to want to do that. Secondly, you didn't have the process or capacity—and after you have the process or capacity to consume, you have to have economies of scale in order to make it work. That process has been rather slow, and it came to what you would say—I wouldn't say a grinding halt, but a very slow crawl when it came to the issue of the crown land and when it came to the issue of the competing interest for the people who wanted to keep it for forestry or for environmental purposes in its natural state and—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have about two minutes left.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman:—what a beef industry would do with that. We're still looking at that, as to how we can put together a package to make that viable. So far, obviously, we have had a proposal from a group of people in the north to talk about development in the clay belt. We are working at that, hopefully, through our program to help support a study as to what we can do going forward. And that will also include looking at how we deal with the ownership of the crown land.

1110

With that, I think there is very little time left in this one. I'll turn it over to the deputy and he can take what time is left.

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister. I want to congratulate all of the people who are trying to expand up into the north. I know of some fruit and vegetable farms that are also doing that, with great success, actually. I know there has been support for them to develop their farms. We've supported agriculture and the agri-food value chain in the north through a wide range of advisory services, tech

transfer programs and initiatives, but we do work with the other ministries.

Specifically to your question on crown land, we work with the regional economic development branch for the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines to deliver these economic development programs, tools and resources to rural municipalities and organizations in northern Ontario. ENDM, energy, northern development and mines, has the lead on the northern Ontario growth plan, but OMAFRA has supported this plan through a sub-strategy called the Northern Ontario Agri-Food Strategy. Both of these strategies have been overarching in the northern livestock plan we have up there. ENDM is currently developing a blueprint for economic recovery in northern Ontario that will replace the northern Ontario growth plan for economic recovery and resilience, and we're one of the partner ministries that has been identified to outline—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you. I'm sorry to say, you're out of time.

The next rotation goes to the government. MPP Parsa, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Parsa: It's interesting and always good to be a part of a conversation between MPP Vanthof and Minister Hardeman. It's very educational and I learn quite a bit whenever I see them outside and in the chamber as well.

Before I go any further, Minister, like all my colleagues, I want to thank you and everyone on your team—the deputy minister, all of you—thank you very much for the work that you have done in the last few months, and thanks for being here to answer our questions.

Minister, again, thanks to you. I want to start with—there were a lot of issues facing Ontario farmers when you entered into office. As you know, right after being elected, I personally travelled across the province meeting with Ontarians to hear from them on what we can do to improve job creation and really make it easier for all Ontarians to be able to scale up and to be able to create those good-paying jobs. Having travelled to hear from them, it was really, really clear at every meeting—and we had many farmers who took part in our consultations—they were clear: lots of red tape, excessive paperwork and programs that weren't solving problems. We know those programs that farmers were not seeing the benefits in enrolling, for example, the AgriStability program. I'm wondering how you have worked to make programs more user-friendly and beneficial for our farmers.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for the question; I think it's really important.

Obviously, even before the pandemic hit, there was a lot of concern about the AgriStability program and how it wasn't working. In fact, we were seeing a great decline in enrolment because a lot of our producers were saying—and you heard that in your travels, I'm sure—that the amount of paperwork they had to do in order to qualify, and then they realized the way the program was designed, that they qualified for less money than it cost them to prepare the application. So they were just losing interest in being involved in the program. Then, when it came time for the harvest, they were actually out of luck getting any

help because they hadn't registered and they weren't in it now. And then, all of a sudden, when the need was there, it wasn't there.

So we immediately started working with the federal government at the federal-provincial-territorial ministers' meetings to talk about how we can improve AgriStability to help when help was needed, and to reduce the paperwork required to be enrolled and to apply when the time came.

We had a number of meetings. I want to say, it was rather interesting. Of course, the ag stability program is part of the agriculture partnership suite of programs, which is 60% federal and 40% provincial when it pays out. At the meeting, everybody realized that something needed to be done, not only in 2023, when the next phase of it starts and we have to negotiate a whole new deal, but presently—the trigger point and the reference margins are wrong. Like I say, most of them didn't feel that if you have to make less than 70% of the average of the previous three years—in those three years, if nobody made a profit, and you don't get paid until you get down below 70%, it just didn't work out.

So we worked with the federal government to change the reference margin and make other changes in the short term. We did get some movement on it that's going to remove the reference margins so it changes the amount of the payout that's eligible, increasing the support for the program. We didn't get all we wanted, but we're going to carry on with the negotiations. Obviously, Ontario is a leader in that vein. We are ahead of the curve, shall we say.

Also in the ag stability program, we have a provincial support program: the business risk management program. It's \$100 million a year that we pay out, provincial only. That was put in place to help cover this. When the federal government reduced the payment on the ag stability, the province put in the \$100 million.

When we reached COVID and the challenges farmers were facing were getting serious—we had promised to increase that \$100 million by another \$50 million in our third year in office. We did that a year early, recognizing the challenges. So that program is now \$150 million to help make up that shortfall. But we are still working on trying to—and we'll have a meeting again, I think, in September to talk about the next phase of ag stability to get it up to where it can actually help our farmers out.

Again, we put in the extra \$50 million to help out in the short-term, and that's \$50 million per year. That's also an ongoing support program that we can keep doing. That's where we are now.

Of course, that program is much simpler to work. They just send in their figures, and then we can send them a cheque based on the figures they give at time of sale. The ag stability is something that takes until the following year before they can get all the information out. So it works a lot quicker.

The other thing we did do because of COVID: We decreased the timelines in the amount of money they could get. We increased all the advance payments on the programs so that you get paid. In spite of the fact that all the

paperwork hasn't been done yet for that year, we can give an advance payment to help with the cash flow. That was another thing that helped them.

But they really are looking for an improvement to that program. When the time comes that they have a loss, it shouldn't be that we pay to just below break-even but that we actually have some kind of guarantee. Like the farmers would tell me: "We want something that's predictable and bankable," and the ag stability program doesn't do that and our business risk management program does. We're very proud of what we were able to do.

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I think that fairly much covers the principle of it. I'll turn it over to the deputy if he wants to add a little bit on that to clarify what I missed. Deputy?

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister. You didn't miss much, because you have been so engaged with the industry. That's a message that I'd like to give this committee: Minister Hardman has been incredibly engaged with all of our stakeholders when it comes to the development of AgriStability, both at the provincial level and at the federal level. He certainly has been a leader. At the FPT table, Ontario is currently co-chair with the government of Canada, so that means that Minister Hardeman is the chairing provincial minister, along with Minister Bibeau. Certainly, in our last FPT meetings, we had a lot of discussion about AgriStability. It was through his leadership that we were able to successfully negotiate some of the improvements to ag stability that have happened.

With those FPT negotiations, it does take co-operation amongst the ministers right across the country. The rules are, I believe, two thirds of the provinces have to agree and also two thirds of the users have to agree to changes to these programs. It does take significant negotiation and significant convincing ability to do that, and Minister Hardeman has done that in spades for his stakeholders.

I'm going to turn it over to our AgriStability expert, Heather Cassidy, in just a moment, but what I would like to do is read a quote on ag stability from one of our key stakeholders: "The government of Ontario is once again standing up for its farmers and recognizing the important economic input that farming and agriculture provide to the province and country." This is by Markus Haerle, chair of the Grain Farmers of Ontario. "Our federal government is long overdue to show the same support for our food system. These cost-shared programs are more important than ever, and we need them to be viable, well-funded and well-managed. The federal government has a vital role to play in this." Certainly, you can see from that quote that the support of the sector is there.

I'm going to pass it over now to Director Cassidy to provide some of those intimate details about the changes and improvements to ag stability. Heather, over to you.

Ms. Heather Cassidy: Thank you, Deputy. Heather Cassidy, director of farm finance with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Thank you, MPP Parsa, for the opportunity to speak to this question and some of the efforts we have done to make AgriStability more beneficial and easier to access for farmers across the province.

As the minister noted in his opening remarks yesterday, we spend over \$250 million that we invest as a province in business risk management programs each year. These are very important tools to producers to help them manage risks beyond their control. One of those programs, of course, is AgriStability, which is offered in partnership with the federal government. It is our key program, really, that helps protect producers against large declines in their farm income. This can be for a variety of reasons, and that's calculated on a whole-farm basis, which means that once per year, producers have the opportunity to review what's gone on on their farm—their production, their costs and their market conditions—and really take time to reflect and to apply for the program.

We do cost-share this program on a 60-40 basis with the federal government, with the province paying 40% cost-share of any payments under the program. In Ontario, we deliver AgriStability through Agricorp, which is a provincial crown agency that falls under the responsibility of the minister and is responsible for delivering a number of the programs that the minister referred to, including our provincial-only risk management program. Because of the importance of this program, and because of the leadership that this minister has provided for us at the national table, we've been able to work really hard with our government partners across Canada and with Agricorp to make this program easier to interact with for producers and essentially more beneficial for them when they are in a situation where they draw payments.

The minister mentioned that this is a program based on margins. Under the program, you have a program year margin, which is your allowable expenses that are defined in the program, subtracted from your allowable income, also defined under the program. Then that production-year margin will be compared against your prior-year margins, which is an Olympic average based on the last five years. We do adjust that margin for changes in inventories and other things to get that full picture of what's going on on an individual farm business. Then, if your producer's production margin does fall below 30% of the reference margin, a payment will be calculated, and it's 70% of the difference between these two margins that the producer will receive—cost-shared, again, with the federal government.

This program is demand-driven, which means total payments under the program fluctuate year over year. They are very much a factor of participation, the actual experiences and margin declines that are calculated for each producer, and the commodity and input prices that happen during a year. So it is a very dynamic environment, and our forecasting under this program, as a result, is very dynamic, and we work with partners to do that. When we talk about it being demand-driven, it means that it is here for producers when they need it. One of the things we've done at the FPT level is to try to make it even more available and accessible for producers. The minister did speak to how, over the last decade, we have seen a trend of declining enrolment in the program, which is a concern for us, because this is one of our main programs that we'd like to see every producer in Ontario participating in.

Fortunately, though, in the two most recent program years, 2020 and this current one we're in, we've seen that decades-long trend actually reverse, and I think that's attributable to some of the recent challenges the sector has faced: in 2019, a very late, wet growing season for many producers, and then COVID-19, of course, brought much uncertainty to the sector. So there has been that reason we've seen producers return. Also, some of the key improvements we've made have attracted people back to the programs.

The deputy talked about a number of committees we co-chair. Of course, at the officials' level, at the staff level and the ministry we also co-chair a number of committees. We have been successful in gaining quite a bit of traction to make several administrative improvements and program benefit improvements that I'd like to share.

The minister talked about removing what's called the reference margin limit. Starting in our 2013 program year, reference margins were limited so that they couldn't exceed the average allowable expenses in those three years that it was calculated. What this meant was, essentially, producers' margin, or the amount it could drop, was limited to their allowable expenses. We heard a lot of concerns from producers who have low allowable expenses—those in the grain sector, some of our cow-calf sectors and some of our horticulture sectors—that this meant that the program wasn't generating a lot of benefit for them. We were able to get agreement to remove that reference margin limit, and that required agreement across the country to do so.

Another key feature that really helped try to attract producers back to the program was for the 2020-21 program year. We introduced a cash margins pilot. Lots of producers in Ontario, as we know, file their taxes on a cash basis. We've heard, for a number of years, producers say, "Why can't I just take my tax information on the basis I file it, and Agricorp, you figure out the rest?" So we have been able to figure out a way to pilot not having to do those accrual adjustments for producers, which resulted in a lot less paperwork for producers to be able to participate in the program. This is a two-year pilot, so we will see at the end of this how many people participated and how much it returned benefits for the producers. This is an exciting pilot for us in Ontario, because we wanted to do something like this for a long time.

For Agricorp in particular, we've done a lot of streamlining of forms, and we've also made something called personalized fillable forms available. A producer can log on to the Agricorp system, put in their information, and their previous years' tax forms, their applications from previous years, our contact information will all be available. So that was a really easy way—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you.

Ms. Heather Cassidy: Oh, thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

1130

Mr. Michael Parsa: Ms. Cassidy, thank you very much. Thanks for the heads-up, Chair; I appreciate it.

I have a question for the deputy minister, and perhaps the minister can chime in. Minister, I know most people

get surprised when I tell them we have farming in Richmond Hill, but we do. We produce some great corn, soybean, wheat, cauliflower, broccoli, squash and strawberries right out of Richmond Hill here. I'm quite proud of it.

I just wanted to thank you on their behalf because they said that, even during COVID, your team had done a great job of reaching out to each and every one of them to hear their concerns and to provide the supports that were needed, so thank you both.

Deputy, I have a question for you in the limited time I have, and that is, I'm always interested to know how we fare against other jurisdictions when we benchmark our positions and the supports that we're providing to the people. How often do you do that? How do we fare in Ontario when we look at other areas, in particular, when you have a minister, as you said, who is so engaged and is always listening to the farmers and the stakeholders? Can I leave that with you, please?

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you for the question, because what I think it points to is that Minister Hardeman has an excellent reputation amongst the sector.

We are a leading jurisdiction when it comes to supporting our producers. You have to remember that in Ontario's farm gate receipts for agriculture, we are the number one province within the country; Saskatchewan would be number two. What one of our challenges is in Ontario is that because we have such a diverse economy, oftentimes we don't really get that fact known.

But in terms of working with the sector, the ministry has made it a priority—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you. With that, I'm sorry to say, you're out of time.

We'll go back to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you, Chair. I'm going to go back to northern Ontario land use in a second, but following up on the last two questions, specifically the remarks from Mr. Kelly about how often the ag sector doesn't get its due in this province, I fully agree. We have all been doing everything we can to bring up that importance.

The first time that I really appreciated it—and most people who are involved in the ag sector are so busy with their portions of the ag sector that they don't look at the bigger picture. But after I got elected and when the financial crisis hit in 2008, a lot of sectors were struggling and agriculture just kept growing, slowly and steadily. I think that's the first time that a lot of people realized how big an engine the agri-food sector is in this province, because everyone else was falling, and we were still standing—not only standing but continuing to grow. I think that was the first time that I really saw people say, "Whoa, wait a second. There is something going on here."

I don't think the people within the sector were that surprised because anyone who has got anything to do with agriculture knows that that's just the way it goes. There are more people who need to be fed. There are more uses for agriculture products other than food. I have not met anyone in the agriculture sector—if there is something to be filled, they're going to fill it. I think that needs to be said, that agriculture is an engine in this province and I think we should all celebrate that.

I would like to thank Ms. Cassidy for the explanation on AgriStability because I've been involved in agriculture a long time and it's the first time I actually really understood how AgriStability works. That was part of the problem with the program. I believe the minister said the same thing: When you went through all the hoops and when you finally figured it out, you realized that sometimes it wasn't actually worth your time, and the next time when it wasn't worth your time—even if it was—you didn't bother.

The one part I would like some more information on is the business risk management. The government has put more money into it; I commend them for that. A few times, the minister has said that you're looking at further changes to the program to make it look more like a true insurance program, or more of a commercial insurance program. Also, you stated that you would like that the funds, if it was possible—I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but if I'm wrong, please say so—that the funds, if not all used, could be carried over to a further year. Could you expand on that, and perhaps give us a timeline or where the ministry is at with those discussions?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for those comments. As long as they're the right words, I don't mind if you put words in my mouth, and on this issue, I think they are the right words.

First of all, I'll go to the carrying the money over. We have put in place legislatively the ability for Agricorp to create a business risk management fund, to allow the money that isn't spent in any single year to go into the fund, so it would be available in a future year over and above the contributions that all of the producers and the government put into the fund. If it's not used, it stays in the fund and the fund could grow. Our objective, of course, is to work very diligently on it, and I think all our stakeholders agree with us.

The biggest disagreement, I suppose, if we could call it that, is how fast can we accomplish it and how much it's going to cost to do it, to become insurance-based. Of course, the principle of "insurance-based" doesn't mean it automatically is going to get to where the premiums will pay the cost.

Now, recognizing that, if it's an insurance-based program, everything the government puts in is considered part of the premiums, too. Our commitment is to put in \$150 million a year. In our consultations thus far, the stakeholders have agreed that we will have those programs, the money will go in there and Agricorp will pay out the allotment that everybody is entitled to. The money that isn't used will stay in the account, and it will stay in the sector that it was saved from, so that would make it insurance-based. As we go forward when the fund starts to build, then there will be a connection between the amount of premiums and the amount of uptake.

I think the best way to explain the principle is the crop insurance. It's part of the business risk management suites, too. The premiums paid in for crop insurance are in relation to the amount paid out in crop insurance—over time; not in a bad year and then all of sudden your premiums jump up. The fund is set up so that it keeps balancing. That

principle is what we're looking for and trying to work towards, but recognizing that you can't do that overnight, unless somebody has enough money to put it all in in one fell swoop and say, "This money is going to be there," as it is with crop insurance now. But that's been built up over time, too. That's what we're trying to do.

We haven't quite got to the finish yet on how we can put a program in place that allows that building up without putting the support at risk in any given year getting there. But I think everybody is looking forward to the day when the losses would be covered, if you have them, and I think they would be willing at that point to give up getting money when they didn't have losses, which is what's happening now, because it paid out every year, because if it's not paid out, it's gone. And if they're not paid out, the premiums then can be paid out anyway or sent back to the people who paid them. We will be working towards making it, not an insurance, like you said, private insurance—an insurance-based program. So it's based on we put in in good years and we get paid out in bad years. It's based on loss, not on an ongoing payment for each and every year.

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Some part of that program works that way—that it's based on cost of production, and there are times when we're paying out when the cost of production was already covered by the sale price. So we're trying to alleviate that, but not at the expense of the money that we're spending on it.

I told the stakeholders on a regular basis that this isn't about the government putting in less money; this is about both of us putting in the money to make sure we're prepared for when we need payment because we have a disaster.

I think that's one of the things we've been noticing now. When you look at a certain sector—and you will be aware we had some challenges with pork prices earlier in the year, particularly when COVID started and we had processing capacity problems. At that point in time, we needed a program to help them through that rough time. If the market hadn't changed around as dramatically as it has, it could have been a very tough year for our pork farmers. All of a sudden, I think everybody realized that maybe looking at a way of taking the good times and storing some of that for the bad times would be beneficial to us all.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you for that answer.

One of the complaints or comments that I get from the agriculture sector on business risk management is that in some years, it's not—I guess we're saying something is not a true insurance because the payment you get, even if you've had a really bad year, might be a prorated payment. They said they wouldn't mind paying into the system if they knew, when you have a disaster, that you are going to get enough out of it to go on. That's not really the way it's set up right now.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Exactly. I know you will remember that we heard someone from the opposite side speak one day when they were talking about raising the cap, and that was because the cap was set at \$100 million. When the money is gone, that's all; there it goes. The money was gone every year. So even when you had a reasonably good year, that money was gone, and then it

becomes part of your ongoing—what you were saying—cash flow. So we're looking to collectively put in the money, and when it's needed, it's there, and when it's not needed, it stays there, waiting for the disaster.

The challenge becomes, first of all, in order to switch from one to the other, we have to get people to understand—and some do—that the money you were expecting, even when you didn't need it, has to stop if you're going to save it. And the people who aren't having problems like the idea of "Just send us the money anyway." And then when the time comes, we're not ready. But I think with a lot of consultation—and I think we're seeing our stakeholders are becoming very supportive of making sure that we have a program that is there when it's needed.

It's not good enough to buy fire insurance and then find out when you have a fire that the company says, "No, we haven't got enough money to pay you your total loss. We're going to cut it in half."

Having said that, the other thing, of course, that we used to say in debate as we're discussing where we're going with this is that you can't buy house insurance when the house is on fire. So you can't expect to have protection if you're not willing to pay the premiums when you don't need the payout. I think that's the principle we're still having discussions with our stakeholders on, but it's coming along fairly well. We have got the fund set up legislatively. If you read all the documents, you would have found that that part is done. We hope to move forward on starting to build the funds. If the prices stay really good, things are going along and the premiums come in, with the extra \$50 million, I think we will be starting to build some reserves.

Mr. John Vanthof: If you could expand a bit on part of this program: One of the hurdles is that—again, if I misunderstood, please correct me—if a sector doesn't use up their allotment, that money stays in that sector and they're saving that money for future years. Is that one of the hurdles?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Well, that part we've agreed on. At this point, it's not one fund for everybody. It's going to be a fund for the sectors. So over time, if we get to the crop insurance point of it, the premiums could vary depending on the sector, so if one never uses it or hadn't used it for a long time, the premiums could be different than the one where it had to go up, and a commodity that is very, very fluctuating could have higher premiums and so forth. But the amount that the government puts in would be put in the sectors proportionately, prorated exactly the same way it's being spent now.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. That was going to be my next one, and you alluded to it. I'm just going to use this; I'm not picking on any sector: Beef cattle, traditionally, has been very cyclical, over eight years or whatever, so depending on when you're at in the cycle, the premiums could be very punishing. Am I misunderstanding that?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I think the premiums would not be based that closely on the payouts, because going forward, the payouts are still going to be based on the amount of money that's available. We can't go to unprorated until we

have accumulated money to do that, because that would automatically require everybody to put money in at the worst possible time. We have to go through a number of cycles to get to where, in the good years, we've kept the premiums, so we have the payout.

One of the things that we are looking at, one of the challenges in the system, is based on different payouts based on your losses or benefits, rated two per year. We shift them all in the first half, and this is the price we get paid; this is the subsidy we get on those. Pork would be a good example this year: We have a really bad year, we get paid out for the first half and then the price goes through the roof. Now, they don't get any more, but they still got all the money that year for the bad year they had in the first six months. So we have to balance that again, to make it insurance-like. Their expenses are over the year, and so we have to be able to average out the payouts over that year, too.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. I can see that. And again, within each sector—I'll use beef as an example: There's the cow-calf, there's the backgrounder and there's the feedlot. In the life cycle, there could be huge changes to that. So even within the sector, there would have to be calculations somehow.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes. The—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You've got about two minutes left.

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Hon. Ernie Hardeman: We have to have a balance to make sure that all of them can function. I think the issue of the premiums is also a big issue, and you mentioned about how, when times are tough, we don't want the premiums to go up. But we do have to make sure that we have a system that mandates that if you want to be insured you have to pay the premium. And the premium is not paid on the bad year; the premium is paid before the bad year, and it doesn't stop. You can't cancel the insurance when the house is burned because it won't burn again; it might. When I'm talking about insurance-based, I think those are the types of things I'm hoping we can work out, to get something that works on the insurance basis, based on the commodities that we're trying to help and the process that we're dealing with.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, because—and this is a personal thing—when farmers, specifically around here—and I'm sure you know, fire insurance and liability for many farms is going through the roof—when they hear "insurance-based," they think, "Oh, okay. We're going to be priced out of the market." And that's not what you're talking about; you're talking about more the principles of how insurance should work.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes, because, to be perfectly blunt, we are working on the premise that we're going to only pay out based on what we collect. We're not an insurance company that's making money for other purposes. All the money that's there—premiums and our contribution—stays in that system. The biggest issue that we're talking about changing is to make the payouts when they are needed, not when things are going good. Payouts should never—and we heard from the Auditor General—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say that you're out of time. This rotation has ended.

We'll go back to the government. MPP Pang, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Billy Pang: I thank the minister. To me, today is a crash course on the farming industry in Ontario. I was born in Hong Kong—in a small city where there's very limited farmland, and even in my riding of Markham–Unionville, we have don't have the big farmers there.

But, Minister, I know drainage is something that you have been very passionate about, so could you please tell us what you have done to improve the Drainage Act and also how this would help Ontario farmers?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Pang. It's a privilege to speak about drainage, and I can assure you that I am passionate about it. Not only am I passionate about it, but I have a number of people in the family that actually are in the business of farm drainage. When my brother-in-law—he has since passed on, but his son now does it—when he first started his business, he had a sign on the side of his pickup truck. It said, "It doesn't cost; It pays to drain." That's because, if you drain the land, the crops will produce more and grow better than if you don't, not just because of the water but the aeration and the process underground. Wet soil is not what they want; they want moisture in the soil, but plants don't want wet soil.

It's a very important issue, particularly in my part of the country, where they say if we took all the drains that are in the ground in Oxford county and you took them out, Oxford county would be six inches lower, because the ground would just sink six inches, because that's how much tile is in the ground, holding it up. Every time they drain a field, it increases the bushels per acre of the amount of crop they grow. It's a very important activity in rural Ontario. When a farm comes up for sale in Oxford county—and it is one of the highest-priced counties for land per acre—one of the selling points of that acre of land is how well it's drained, because if it isn't really well drained, then the new purchaser is going to have to spend thousands of dollars to get enough drains in the ground to make sure it does drain to get the highest possible production.

The drainage we're talking about in the ministry is primarily the drainage that takes the water from all of the farms. We call them municipal drains, but the big drains to take the water from the area to a contributing stream somewhere to take it back to our ecosystem in the Great Lakes and so forth and take the water away. That part of the drainage program we help fund. The tiles that we put in are owned by the farmers and paid for by the farmers, but we administer that program and we subsidize or help the farmers pay for it through a grant. So we pay a third of the municipal drains, the big ones that take the water away. We pay a third of that and the farmers, collectively, pay two thirds.

We call them municipal drains because it has to go across multiple farms and it has to provide that service. Because if you live on the top of the hill, that may be different ownership than at the bottom of the hill. The

people on the top of the hill don't need the drain very much, but the water was laying on the farm at the bottom of the hill, so somebody has to help pay to get it all to the contributing stream. The municipality is responsible for building it and charging the farmers for their share, and then we subsidize the process by a third. That's our responsibility.

Actually, due to the strong municipal participation, the Agriculture Drainage Infrastructure Program had a backlog of funding requests for construction. When they finish the construction of these drains, they send in the bill and we pay one third of it. But they were doing more repairs and more building than the ministry was coming up with, so when we became government, the fund was depleted and people were waiting a year, a year and a half before they got the cheque for their third. We went to Treasury Board and we got an increase of \$6.8 million to the ministry's drainage program so we could pay up. Hopefully, going forward now, we will be able to keep up with the payment.

The ministry staff is working diligently to ensure that the backlog of grants is addressed as expediently as possible. Construction grant applications are being processed and reviewed using current program administration practices to ensure that the work proceeds as quickly as possible while maintaining appropriate levels of due diligence. We anticipate that almost 80% of the backlog will be cleared up by the end of June. We were talking about a year and a half that they were waiting before, and by the end of June, we're hoping to have it paid.

Investment in drainage and infrastructure will help to improve crop production in Ontario so that we can continue to maintain the security of our food system.

Obviously, Mr. Pang, you've been listening to the presentations for the last number of hours talking about land and production and levels of production. I can say that the drainage in our lands is one of the main contributors to the amount of increased production that we're presently getting on those acres of land. So when we say we could be getting 250 bushels instead of 100, I can tell you that when it was 100, not many of those fields were systematically tiled, and—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister, I'm sorry to say that we are now out of time because it's noon. The government has 12 minutes and 31 seconds when we resume at 1 p.m.

We will now recess until 1 p.m. in the afternoon. MPP Skelly will be ably chairing this committee.

The committee recessed from 1200 to 1300.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Good afternoon, everyone. We are going to resume consideration of vote 101 of the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. There is now a total of two hours and 32 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates. Standing order 69(a.1) allots 15 minutes to the independent member of the committee. They will have the opportunity to use this time today if they wish.

When the committee recessed this morning, the government had 12 minutes and 31 seconds remaining.

But before we go to the minister, we are joined by two MPPs. MPP McKenna, would you please state your name and share where you are?

Ms. Jane McKenna: Thank you so much, Chair. It is Jane McKenna, and I am at Queen's Park.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you, MPP McKenna.

MPP Rasheed, I will ask the same of you.

Mr. Kaleed Rasheed: Good afternoon, Chair. MPP Kaleed Rasheed, from Queen's Park, Ontario.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you.

As I mentioned, the government has 12 minutes and 31 seconds remaining. Who will be taking the lead? MPP Barrett.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Thank you, Chair. I hope I'm coming through okay. I know just before the break, MPP Billy Pang had gone through his presentation. So I would like, in the remaining time, if my colleagues agree, to initiate a discussion with respect to Ontario's assistance as far as temporary foreign workers, and if my colleagues are okay, I would use my round to ask a bit of a follow-up question as far as what we've been doing as far as helping out and preventing the spread of the virus. So I'll go forward, if everybody is fine with that, with the remaining time.

Certainly, we all know—our minister knows—that Ontario has done so much to protect farm workers from contracting COVID. I'll stress that the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and the seasonal agricultural worker assistance are federal government programs, and I commend the province of Ontario for stepping in during this crisis, through OMAFRA, through health, through the Ministry of Labour.

As Minister Hardeman explained, through his leadership group OMAFRA worked with farmers and other key players within the sector to develop a strategy. For the purposes of Hansard—it has a long title—I'll just read the name of this strategy, this document, that was rolled out late last year. It's entitled Prevention, Control and Outbreak Support Strategy for COVID-19 in Ontario's Farm Workers. Very significant funding has been allocated and rolled out, and certainly a great deal of other support on a number of—I think there's something like 35—key actions.

The tremendous outreach to farmers—and I can speak for my riding: Safety is paramount. We know the danger. I certainly hear at my constituency office—for well over a year now—the frustration from the farm community in being able to operate, given some of the restrictions. I know my public health unit was fairly unique, with some of the most stringent restrictions you would find anywhere in North America.

But I would ask the minister, and I would like to hear from some of the specialists on board, if we can get more of a detailed run-through of the actions that we have implemented and how they have helped prevent the spread of this highly contagious disease.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Barrett, for the question. It's much appreciated. Obviously, our number one priority has been and still is to prevent

the spread of COVID-19 in our agricultural workplaces so that worker health and safety is protected and Ontario's food supply chain remains strong. And, member, as you mentioned, this has been an ongoing thing since 14 or 15 months ago. I think one would remember the challenges we were facing not only in his riding but across the province with our workers a year ago.

As we speak, in a number of cases we were having—as was mentioned, there were a number of things we were able to do. Just for comparison, I would point out that at this time last year, we will all remember the number of challenges we were facing: greenhouses not being able to operate because they had no workers, and outbreaks, to a great extent, all over the province.

Since that time, I've been getting at least weekly reports. At first it was daily reports, and now it's once or twice a week I get a presentation from the secretariat. But I just want to point out that I have here a copy of a page that I got in this week's report. It's based on June 8, so that would be the day before yesterday. For on-farm cases, the number of active cases in the province on farms is four; the number of outbreaks on farms is three. So as you can see, the measures that have been taken, the way we're doing things differently and the fact that we seem to be seeing the light at the end of the tunnel on the outbreaks have really worked well, going forward.

Also, on the food processing side, of course, we were having the same problems: We were having large facilities unable to operate because of the fact that they had not enough workers to keep the line going. In the province, on June 8, we had nine cases, and we had five places that had cases. So obviously, again, there is minimal infection and minimal places where the infection is occurring.

A lot has been done, and I do want to just go through a little bit of it, but I do want to turn it over to the secretariat to explain exactly what we have been doing and how we got to see such great success that we've seen in the migrant workers. It's why we announced an additional \$10 million of investment, obviously, because of the results we were getting over the last year.

We announced a \$10-million investment for the enhanced Agri-food Workplace Protection Program, bringing the total to over \$36 million to help address worker health and safety issues as part of the agri-food sector's prevention and control measures. The program intake opened April 22, 2021.

We're making vaccines available to temporary foreign workers through the clinic at the airport and through local public health units. We're also providing health and safety information to farms through webinars, a website tool kit and a mail-out to every registered farm in Ontario.

We're providing up to \$400,000 to the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association to develop and distribute COVID-19 resources in multiple languages to better protect the health and safety of all workers, including a daily screening tool app to make it easier for workers to complete and reduce administrative burdens for employers, as well as information about vaccines to help workers make an informed choice about getting vaccinated.

Our government is also working collaboratively with our municipal, provincial and federal partners and the farming community to help farmers protect workers and stop COVID-19. As was mentioned in your question, Toby, we're working with industry partners on the 35 actions outlined in a comprehensive Prevention, Control and Outbreak Support Strategy for COVID-19 in Ontario's Farm Workers.

We have launched a new \$22-million Agri-tech Innovation Program to enhance workers' safety through the adoption of innovation and technology that enable better physical distancing and may reduce COVID-19 transmission risk between workers in the workplace.

There are a number of other actions we've taken, but as you mentioned, Toby, you wish to hear from the staff a little bit more about the particulars of what we've been doing to keep our workers safe, so I'll turn it over to the deputy, and he can direct it to where he sees fit to outline what we're doing and where it's going. So thank you very much, and over to you, Deputy.

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Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister. I'm not going to say anything here except that we have developed a COVID Agri-Food Secretariat, as the minister has indicated. They have taken a tremendous lead. Both Cordelia Clarke Julien and her branches have done tremendous work.

So, Cordelia, I'm going to pass it straight to you.

Ms. Cordelia Clarke Julien: Thank you, Deputy.

Thank you, MPP Barrett, for the question. Haldimand-Norfolk is one of the top three that get temporary foreign workers in Ontario. Absolutely, we have done quite a bit to ensure that our temporary workers and farm workers at large are protected as we go forward with respect to making sure we can get food on Ontarians' plates.

Some of the things that we have done to address temporary foreign worker health and safety—the minister has listed off quite a bit of things in terms of the actions, and those things were part of the 35-action plan, including the tool kit.

We've also, as the minister mentioned, put in place vaccinations at the airport. It was the first of its kind, and I'm pleased to say that even Quebec has just followed us in doing that. So we're pretty proud of putting that in place to ensure that we're able to get shots in arms at the airport as temporary foreign workers were coming in—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Ms. Cordelia Clarke Julien: —to say that as of today, we're up to a 70% consent rate at the airport. That does not include those who, when they do arrive at the farm, then choose to get the vaccination within a day or two based on the information they receive from us at the airport. So we're pretty proud of that piece.

We've also been working quite closely with the local public health units, including your own, MPP Barrett, as well as those in Windsor-Essex and Niagara. Through that, we're able to say that, as of today, close to 84% of our farm workers are vaccinated. We're pretty proud of that number. We've worked very hard to ensure that clinics were available.

As you know, temporary foreign workers, as well as farm workers writ large, were part of our phase 2 rollout for the vaccination program. So ensuring that people are healthy and safe in terms of those pieces is our prime objective.

In addition to that, we do have programs, as you mention—investments in the amount of \$36 million for enhanced workplace protection, where we're able to support employers in terms of providing the appropriate things, such as education and training, physical distancing, PPE, and also putting in place plans to ensure that we have appropriate levels of disinfection, cleaning and that sort of thing. We've done a lot in terms of making sure that the employers not only have the tools and the resources through our farmers' tool kit, but also that the workers themselves have access to information, resources to keep them safe, and are able to know that they are in a safe environment when they come to Ontario to work with us.

So I will—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And that is the time.

Now we will be going to the opposition side. MPP Vanthof, you have 20 minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: I would like to continue on the discussion about temporary foreign workers and agricultural workers in general.

Before I forget, I'd just like to give a shout-out. In the Timiskaming Health Unit, we had a couple of outbreaks regarding agriculture, and the health unit moved very quickly to make sure that all farm workers were vaccinated. It makes a difference. Each health unit has different issues to deal with, but for me, it showed that sometimes having people on the ground who have local knowledge is better than having decisions made hours and hours away. This isn't an agricultural issue per se, but I do know that the government is thinking about making the health unit regions a lot bigger. In our part of the world, since we are surrounded by mining and forestry and tourism and we have one pocket that is completely agriculture, covered by one small health unit, I'm not sure that would have been caught as easily in a much bigger health unit. Sometimes local is better, and I think that one is an example.

And another thing that I would like, before I forget about local—I read in the briefing book the investments that OMAFRA is making in research. One of those investments is in my part of the world as well: a new research station in New Liskeard. I would like to thank the ministry for taking on that project. There was a time when we were afraid that the research in northern Ontario, specifically in northeastern Ontario, was going to be closed. I think we have all realized—I hope that we've all realized—that this province is large enough that the growing conditions are much different and weather conditions are much different in some parts of the province than other parts.

Just anecdotally—and the minister spoke about this, that we can grow much different crops than we could 20 years ago. But one of the biggest changes for northern Ontario was when we started looking west to see what they grew in Manitoba, because what they grow in Oxford

county doesn't necessarily work in northern Ontario, but when they grow in western Canada, the hybrids—a lot of those are much more suited, and our climate is much more western. When we look at the weather forecast, we don't look at Great Lakes weather; we look at western weather.

That's a very important thing to realize when you're doing research as well, because how crops and how animals react—but specifically crops—to weather patterns is something that's harder to predict in a laboratory than in actual conditions, at least from our experience. I can't emphasize enough how important research is, and especially now that we have so many farmers and so many people moving here and moving around the province, how important it is that the results are published in a manner that works for farmers, because a lot of the farmers don't have the time or the resources to actually do all their own research plots. And when they're done, I know personally and still from farmers I talk to, they try out a lot of new things based on research that's happening at research stations. That's something that's really important. When that research station is—if anyone in the ministry or the minister would like to come to Timiskaming and open that building, we would give him a royal welcome, and not just because he's my uncle, either. We would treat him as a minister of the crown should be treated.

It's really important, and now that I've given out the flowers, I'm going to go back to more—on the crown land issue—and this is more of a statement than a question, but perhaps there will be a question in it as well. The one thing, as we move forward and if we move forward—some of the mistakes that we've made in the past on—because we're in new territory. With crown land, when you open new land up, we're in new territory, and as the minister knows very well, because we all have relatives in the drainage business, in Timiskaming, where we're from, the conditions are the same and tile drainage is paramount. But where we ran into trouble is municipal drains specifically on crown land, on unorganized townships. There isn't the infrastructure, and if the tiling gets ahead of the overall drainage construction, then you end up with pretty big erosion problems. We suffered those erosion problems in Timiskaming, and we could very well suffer them again in new land.

Something else that we have suffered, and where I'm hoping that someone has some comments, is, as part of the programs like the LEADS program and others, you're hoping to remediate problems of the past with buffer strips—which are all good ideas. As we open up, or if we open up, crown land, we shouldn't make the mistake of clearing wall to wall, which we've made in Timiskaming, which I've made myself as a farmer, and which is still going on now on private land. We know that there are better practices, and when we're starting fresh, we should learn from the best. I'm wondering if that is being taken under consideration as we, hopefully, take a look at farmland in northern Ontario that is, except for temperature, class 2 or 3.

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Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Am I supposed to try to answer that, John? I didn't know whether we just got a bad

connection or whether, in fact, you were going to stop. You were on a roll there, and I didn't think we were going to get to stop.

Thank you very much for the questions. I appreciate the comments about the research station. I totally agree with you—and this is particularly true for crop research—to be in an area where you need the research done because, like you said, how the seeds react in Timiskaming or in Oxford is totally different. You are right that you're more like the western provinces, if you look at the geographic location. So I think we're very supportive of that. I know I was quite critical of previous actions of government when they refused to look at the connection between research and eastern Ontario—that that was different than going to southwestern Ontario. Research—you need that located. When it comes to livestock and so forth, it's not quite as critical, because a cow is a cow regardless of where they live. So I totally agree with the need to do that. We were happy to do that, and we're happy that that's moving along.

You mentioned the health boards and the need to be local. I'm not going to have an argument about local. I think local is good. I want to give a shout-out to all the health boards in the province. Some are more local than others, but none were better than others in making sure that they looked after, particularly, our challenges with migrant workers, because of how they lived in congregate living and so forth, coming here new, and all the processes they had to go through, and then when we had the major outbreaks and all the boards of health were there and the front-line workers were looking after them. I want to give a shout-out to all of them, including those in Timiskaming. I thank all of them.

While I'm at it, I want to give the same shout-out to all the people in our ministry who worked long hours and, if it's possible, eight days a week, trying to make sure that we had a handle on what we needed to do. This wasn't necessarily a responsibility of our ministry, but to keep the food chain going and to keep our processors and producers going was our responsibility. Our ministry, all the people in it, worked endlessly to make sure that worked well. When I mentioned the numbers from today compared to a year ago, it really shows that what they did, in my mind, made a great difference to—it's a whole new crop, shall we say—a new group of people who have come in. But we haven't had the same challenges we faced last year because all these precautions were put in place and are working very well.

The drainage and the crown lands and how the crown lands are dealt with: I think the thing that I would look at is—and we had some of that discussion this morning—that's part of the assessment that's being made. In discussions between natural resources, the crown land responsibility, the agriculture people, the local municipalities and the people who want the changes to happen—to come together and decide what can be done, what should be done in the best interests, to protect all the interests the people of Ontario have. If we're looking at the crown lands and no ability, no infrastructure, to drain the crown lands after we've harvested the woods and turned it into farmland, if

we can't drain it, then we would have been better to leave the trees on it. I think those are the types of things that are required in the discussion.

I mentioned this morning about our work on the beef program. Again, when all the sides came together, the problem seemed to be of such a magnitude that maybe it wasn't as easy as it was originally envisioned how we could switch from crown lands to farmland. I think all those types of things need to be addressed, and going forward, I'm sorry that yourself didn't protect some of these buffer areas. But having said that, I think it's one of these things where we don't live by how we could have improved the past; we live by how we can make the future better. I want to make sure that when we're having these discussions—I'm 100% supportive of working towards increasing agriculture in the north, but I want to make sure that when we're doing that, we're doing it for the betterment of the province and for the betterment of our agriculture community.

I think likely southern Ontario is a better example of how we might have done it better, going back many years, with areas that could have been protected and areas that didn't really need as much protecting, but it was handier, so they've been farmed. All of a sudden the areas that were protected are the better farmland, but somebody didn't figure that out.

I totally agree with you that as we're moving forward with expansion in northern Ontario, we need to make sure we're doing it right. That's why we're looking at helping fund the clay belt folks on looking at what the possibilities are, doing a study on that to make sure we have all the information before we make a statement of how we're going to move forward to getting something done. I think it's important to recognize something that I learned a long time ago about farmland being a good investment. The second one was that if you don't know where you're going, every road will get you there. I think it's very important that we want to make sure we know where we're going before we decide to build the road, and—

Mr. John Vanthof: If I could, Minister: I have no quarrel with what you said, but from personal experience, some of the people who are pushing hardest for agriculture development in the farther north have never experienced some of the issues, right? So in areas where local municipalities have concerns—in some of these areas, there are no local municipalities. We're in unorganized territory, and that's a whole different ball game for a lot of people.

I think one thing that those of us in agriculture—and I'm maybe not as guilty as I used to be, but when I farmed for a living, any use of land other than farming was a waste of that land. In northern Ontario, forestry is also a crop, but crop rotation is 60 years as opposed to yearly, right? So you're coming into direct competition with another crop.

In southern Ontario, there are some parts of the Endangered Species Act that farmers aren't—I don't want to use the word “exempt,” but that they don't have to contend with. But the forestry sector does deal with the Crown Forest Sustainability Act and the Endangered Species Act.

If we switch that land to agriculture, we can't expect agriculture to be exempt and forestry to have to play by the rules to protect the species that are there.

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I think those are issues that, as examples, are not insurmountable, not at all. But they are issues that need—and I'm sure that the ministry is fully aware of this and I'm probably preaching to the choir. But even a very foundational issue, that much of the land that we're talking about in northern Ontario has never been ceded by the First Nations and that we live in a different time than when southern Ontario was—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I think that's true. That's why, John, I want to re-emphasize that the approach we're taking is to fund the studies that are required to give us the information about all those things and not starting—and I think that was maybe one of the challenges in the previous attempt at the beef farming, that we decided we wanted a beef farm and then we went to see how that could be done. With the clay belt, we're hopefully going to be looking at studying what can be done before we decide what we should do.

I think one of the things you mentioned, about having the Indigenous involvement going forward because they will be affected by it—so whatever the plan coming forward is, it has to have that support too or it isn't going to work. There are a lot of things that we need to have addressed before we can move forward. But I just want to make sure that people from the north, including yourself, understand that we are supportive of looking at the opportunities that we might be able to find going further north.

Mr. John Vanthof: I can't speak for everyone from the north, but certainly, the agriculture community and people I talk to are in favour of sustainable agriculture development in the north. It's possible. We have the expertise. We have the tools.

If you drive through Timiskaming now, Timiskaming looks an awful lot like Oxford county. I use Oxford county as a really beautiful place for agriculture. No offence to Hamilton, but Oxford county is where I come from. If you drive over the hill in Timiskaming, it looks a lot like Oxford county right now, and it didn't look like that 20 years ago or 30 years ago. That's possible in other areas as well.

But we have made mistakes here, mistakes that we don't have to make again. I really appreciate that if we work together and look for a sustainable approach, that will do well for us and for future generations.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And that is our time. Thank you.

Now we will turn to the government side. Who will be asking questions on the government side? MPP Barrett, you have 20 minutes.

Mr. Toby Barrett: I wonder if I could initially continue with my previous question about the strategy for temporary foreign workers. I know Cordelia Clarke Julien seemed to be maybe partway through her answer. I would like to finish up that sector. I know we had a break for lunchtime.

Secondly, I have a second question that covers a broader area within our agri-food sector. Maybe just for Hansard,

I would like to pose that question now, and then those who are answering before the committee could pick up on this second question. The question relates to the fact that we hear from so many people—the ministry would hear from farmers right across Ontario—with respect to additional costs: the costs in implementing the health protocols, the uncertainty because of this pandemic that goes back more than a year now and certainly is bad for any business. You have enough uncertainty as it is, and farming is—namely the weather, for one, disruptions in processing, challenges to export product, for example.

My second question does relate to a better understanding of what the ministry has been doing to help out as far as some of the regulatory burdens, for example. We know a number of projects have been rolled out, cost-share projects with the federal government under CAP, the Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

That's kind of my second question. I would ask of the Chair if we could ask the people at the witness table to continue with their answers as far as the strategy for temporary foreign workers.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Okay. Thank you very much for that question. I think it's very appropriate that we finish that answer. So through the deputy, we will ask if he could get the—oh, Cordelia is there, ready to carry on. We'll let you finish the presentation on what we're doing with the temporary workers.

Ms. Cordelia Clarke Julien: Sure, Minister. Thank you so much. MPP Barrett, thank you in terms of the opportunity to continue to tell you about all the other things that we are doing to support—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): I'm sorry. I apologize. I hate to interrupt you—

Ms. Cordelia Clarke Julien: Oh, sorry. Cordelia Clarke Julien, assistant deputy minister of the COVID Agri-Food Secretariat. Apologies, Chair.

One of the other things that we are doing in addition to the vaccination campaign to ensure that workers are vaccinated not only once they arrive but also in community, in terms of the opportunity there—we also have other things that we have done, including things such as mobile testing. So we provided mobile testing with respect to being able to go out to farms and provide that testing piece in terms of that.

As many of you are aware, there is a really extensive approach to having temporary foreign workers come in. Prior to them coming to the province, they need to be able to provide a negative PCR test in the three days before. Once they arrive in Ontario, they are then taken and done another PCR test on day 1. At that time, we also offer the vaccination. They are then asked to quarantine for 14 days, and in that quarantine period, they then are done another test, at day 8, to ensure that they are still negative in terms of those pieces, and at that point is when they're able to begin work. So it is an extensive process that they go through in terms of coming into Ontario, and we are supporting them throughout that process as they get ready to work.

We then, of course, have been working with our employers to put in rapid antigen screening, and that is where

we're able to do screening on a frequency of two to three times a week, where you do a daily test of the rapid antigen to see if you have any positives in your cohorts that you may have already. This way, you can really minimize and mitigate the spread as we come.

Those are just some of the pieces we have done. We've also put in place isolation centres, understanding that workers are working together in cohorts. If there is an outbreak or if there is a positive and then there are, of course, close contacts, there is an opportunity and there are isolation centres in which we can put individuals to isolate while they quarantine and await whether or not there is any sort of spread and things of that nature. So we put those pieces in place as well.

I would be remiss in terms of your question, MPP Barrett, without talking about the investment that the government has made with the food and vegetable growers. We provided \$400,000 to help in preparing and producing resources and materials for our temporary foreign workers that gives them information around not only rights but also around COVID, vaccines and other components as they come into the province. They've also developed a screening app where they can screen in terms of symptoms with respect to that and support them on that.

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We've done investments on those areas. Also, we have made sure that our temporary foreign workers do understand their rights in terms of those pieces. Those are just some of the investments we have made.

As you noted in your previous comments in your earlier remarks, we do work quite closely with our colleagues at the Ministry of Labour, who have engaged in robust inspections of farms just to ensure that we are staying safe and healthy in terms of those pieces. That work has been under way as well, and continues to be, since last year in terms of those pieces. That is included in terms of not only inspections to educate, but also follow-up with webinars and sessions for employers to help them understand, because we know there's a lot of information. We do those webinars and things just to make sure that individuals understand what is happening and where things go.

I can probably go on and on because there is a lot—as the minister looks at me—so I think I'll stop there in case there are other questions. There is more, but I'll stop there.

Mr. Toby Barrett: It's a tremendous issue to discuss, some really big problems. We seem to know an awful lot more of what's going on compared to this time last year. I think back to the asparagus harvest and getting into strawberries and what have you.

I wonder, Chair, if we could go to the second question that I raised, with respect to assistance in dealing with the costs and uncertainty. I know there's a significant number of cost-share projects through the CAP program, the Canadian Agricultural Partnership. I just wonder if the committee could hear a little bit more about some of that work, please.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Barrett. The ongoing efforts to keep Ontario's agri-food supply chains operating during these very difficult times

are very much appreciated. Slowdowns in processing capacity at some processing plants is a factor that has caused livestock backlogs on farms. We are monitoring the situation closely and are assisting food processing plants and farms to prevent further processing disruptions.

For example, to help make things better for the sector, we have funding support available through the Meat Processors Capacity Improvement Initiative for provincially licensed meat processors to help them purchase equipment to increase productivity and efficiency and prevent slowdowns, such as improving conveyers and upgrading cooling and freezing systems. Investments in additional conveyers and freezers will increase overall meat processing capacity, reducing the potential for backlogs associated with further disruptions.

Funding through the Agri-food Workplace Protection Program to provincial meat processors to help them maintain a safe workplace, which includes purchasing personal protective equipment such as gloves, masks and face shields, and installing Plexiglas partitions to help workers socially distance: These measures have been shown to be effective in reducing transmission of COVID-19.

Financial assistance for the beef and hog producers through the Canada-Ontario beef emergency feed maintenance initiative, under AgriRecovery, and the hog maintenance feed initiative to help pay for additional maintenance costs for livestock that were kept on farms for an extended period of time: Farmers were able to claim \$2 per head of cattle per day to help pay for the additional cost to care for their animals during the processing disruptions.

The ministry also worked closely with the sector to reinforce public health protocols around maintaining physical distancing as feasible, diligent hand-washing and self-isolation equipment.

Requirements: Farmers continue to have access to ongoing support through the national suite of cost-shared federal-provincial business risk management programming. These are financial support programs available to farmers to help them deal with risks that are beyond their ability to control, such as the COVID-19 outbreak.

The minister has worked with the meat processing sector to implement a COVID-19 response protocol at all provincially licensed meat plants while continuing to support our inspection staff, stakeholders and operators to protect public health and meet operational demands. For example, we're investing in training of contingency inspection staff, and staff are providing support to increase food inspection capacity. Early in the pandemic, the minister promptly invested an additional \$150,000 in inspection capacity. Our government has provided relief efforts to several fronts, and we are grateful that the agri-food sector continues to work together with us and other partners to meet these challenges.

With that, we'll turn it over to the deputy. I'm sure he has some figures that he can add to it, and answer your questions.

Deputy, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Minister.

I want to thank MPP Barrett for the question. It certainly is one that has kept us busy.

We've taken a whole-of-government approach, really, to a lot of these issues that we see with COVID-19. At OMAFRA, we've had a lot of interaction with other ministries, including the Ministry of the Solicitor General; municipal affairs and housing; labour, skills and training development; MEDJCAT; the Ministry of Health, as well as the Chief Medical Officer of Health and others. We've had to help industries come back and try to address some of the severe challenges that they've had with COVID-19. For example, we've worked with the industry, in the processing sector, to help keep them open and provide tools that will support them in what they do. We've certainly worked with some of the provincial plants as well as the larger meat plants to develop systems to keep them going.

I'm going to ask ADM McAslan to provide some commentary on some of the work we did to keep these companies afloat and working.

Ms. Kelly McAslan: Thank you very much for the question.

The inspectorate is part of my division, so that's the food safety inspectors. When COVID-19 first hit, our front-line inspectors certainly stepped up to the plate to continue to protect food security and food safety at our provincial processing plants. Of course, they were deemed essential right from the beginning. Without our food inspection system and without our inspectors—they played such a critical part in terms of keeping the supply chain going. When COVID-19 hit, we had a lot of extra pressures on our inspectors, and we really managed this well, I think, by looking at the COVID-19 risks and thinking about the supply chain impacts and any disruptions to service delivery and being really on top of that.

We implemented several measures to ensure that if staff were impacted by COVID-19, critical services would continue to be delivered so that food security would also be continued. Some examples of that were: We had a risk-based contingency plan to deploy food safety inspectors to areas of highest need. We signed a resource-sharing agreement with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to ensure that inspection coverage at provincial- and federal-inspected meat plants continued. This actually came in handy when some of my food safety inspectors had to self-isolate due to COVID-19 exposure. We were able to utilize the agreement and seamlessly deploy CFIA inspectors within our plants that needed the service, so that proved very critical.

My food safety inspectors also worked significant overtime—almost 10,000 hours of overtime—over the last year to help keep the supply chain moving. Of course, on top of their regular duties, which are already front-line and really, really important, they had to be relied on, as I said, to work overtime, but also to accommodate frequent changes in scheduling, so maintaining readiness to be deployed on short notice when they were needed for slaughter or inspection services; to wear additional PPE, of course—critically important for work in operations where social distancing can be a challenge. One thing was, they really had to be extra vigilant to ensure that both they and plant staff were following all the COVID-19 evolving guidance and the latest guidance in terms of safety and protection.

First and foremost, we wanted to make sure our inspectors and plant staff were safe, and therefore, we could keep the food supply chain going.

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When there were cases when any provincial plant had their own staff that were impacted by COVID-19, we also worked in partnership with the plant operators, as well as our health partners, to make sure they had the information and resources they needed to respond. We really took that whole-of-government approach, as the deputy mentioned, to working in partnership.

There were many, many different strategies that we put in place to support our provincial plants across the province, and all in all, every year we support 24,000 inspections across our various food commodities under regulation, so a significant number of inspections. We also collect numerous thousands of samples to make sure our food is safe.

With that, I'll turn it back to the deputy, and thanks again for the question.

Mr. John Kelly: Thank you, Kelly. With the meat plants, we did have some plants that did have some pretty significant infections with COVID, and we had to be very careful with the market. There are a number of things that are involved with meat processing, but you can imagine that if there's a slowdown—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Mr. John Kelly: —in any part of the plant, then we have trouble and then we may have backlogs of livestock coming in. We did design a program to help with that. I'm going to ask our director, Heather Cassidy, to just talk a little bit about our agri-recovery program to help with those backlog challenges. Over to you, Heather.

Ms. Heather Cassidy: The deputy mentioned our Agri-Recovery programs. AgriRecovery isn't a program unto itself; it is a framework under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership for situations where farmers are facing extraordinary costs and the challenges that normal business risk management programs—like AgriStability, which we talked about earlier—can't accommodate.

We worked very closely with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada to do all of the assessments early on, because we did know right from the beginning, from what we had seen in some other provinces, that any processing challenges that occur because of COVID-19 would have immediate downstream impacts on our producers. Unfortunately, through March, April and May 2020, hog producers in the province did experience some backlogs of hogs that we were able to manage through a number of marketing outlets, but we did have to put in place an emergency Hog Maintenance Feed Initiative, so that producers could access some at 95 cents a day to feed those market-ready hogs, because they were dealing with extraordinary challenges. Similarly, we did put in place a set-aside program for cattle when they were backing up on farms due to processing shutdown of a large federal processor in December.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And that is our time. Thank you.

We will now move to the opposition side. MPP Vanthof, are you going to be speaking again?

Mr. John Vanthof: I think so.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Well, there you go. You've got 20 minutes to talk to your uncle.

Mr. John Vanthof: Oh, we've talked for a lot longer period than that.

Anyway, I would like to start with a bit of a follow-up to the last question. I'd like to first commend OMAFRA staff for doing all the behind-the-scenes things that consumers never really appreciate. As I was listening to the explanations on meat inspections—meat inspection is one of those things; all inspections are. As there were backups, we all know nothing happens in a meat plant without a meat inspector, and the fact that they stepped up to the plate—as did other OMAFRA staff; I'm just using it as an example—I would really like to commend the whole organization.

The one thing that I've noticed—and perhaps you could comment on that—is that because of the lockdown there was a significant increase and interest in the services of provincial plants, local abattoirs. Many are booked for months and months. The ministry has recognized that and has put forward programs for that. Again, that's a good thing. But do you foresee that this trend continues? And do you see foresee that we're going to have to, not just over time, increase the complement of inspectors to accommodate more business at local abattoirs and perhaps at bigger meat plants too?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question, John. I think it's one of the real challenges we faced right at the onset of COVID-19—capacity in our meat processing system. What's strange about it is that the challenges that we're facing now and that you referred to, in the smaller abattoirs being able to expand, or you can't find them or there's too long a wait-list—it's a very important issue, but they are, shall we say, not really part of that challenge we faced with the capacity issue when you shut down the main line of Cargill or Sofina. The two are different issues.

One of the things we did do almost immediately is put a program in place to support them. We were doing some of this already. You and I have had some discussions about some of the meat packing places in northern Ontario, about the audits and challenges they were facing with getting it approved as the plant was getting older and so forth. We put programs in place to encourage people to ask for our help in supporting some changes they could make to improve the plant to meet the standards. I know as a ministry we're not prepared to look at reducing the standards because it's a small meat plant. Everyone needs to have the security and our inspectors are expected to set the standard for everyone, regardless of where the meat comes from.

But at the same time, we wanted to make sure that we aren't, because of strict guidelines—or red tape, you might say—almost putting people out of business because they can't meet that standard. So rather than lower the standard, we decided to put forward a program to help meet the standard where they were lacking, with support through a fund to help do that.

The other thing that we've been doing is that we put that program in and there was a lot of take-up. It was kind of interesting. We talked about it a little bit this morning in the LEADS program, about how when it came to government grants some people are never in the right place at the right time to know that the program is there, and by the time they need it, it's been closed and so forth.

In that first intake for the meat packers we actually contacted all the people who showed an inadequacy in their audit. Through our ministry we contacted them to say, "We have this program that we can help you do what you need to do." There is nothing better, in leading people to where you want them to be, than to entice them to come along rather than to push them from behind. It worked really well. Almost everyone that was in that discussion stage about improvements took advantage of the program to do what it is they needed to do.

Again, we strengthened that program, under the partnership, to ask any abattoir that could do something to advance their capabilities—they could not necessarily build a new plant but they could put in new technology or new equipment, or strengthen the equipment—to be able to produce more, to try and deal with that capacity.

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Also, I organized a round table, a group of people to come together to talk about what we should be doing to increase the capacity in meat-packing. One of the questions, of course, becomes—we have certain parts of the province that have a great shortage, and in northern Ontario and eastern Ontario, where the distances are greater, there are fewer places as time goes on where they could take their abattoir. But again, the reason that we don't have as many is because when we had a lot more, they went out of business because they didn't have enough to do. So we have that challenge and we are working our way around—what do we need to do to build the capacity where and when we need it and get the type of assistance where people will be encouraged to provide those services?

The other thing is, the question becomes, how do we increase the capacity of mainstream processing? I think we all learned—I'm not sure we learned the lesson, but we all saw what happens when you have—in the beef, we have two operators that do almost all the beef, and if one of them shuts down, what are you going to do? It's the same with pork. When we have two main pork processors, if one of those is not in business, what do you do with all that pork, a new crop of which is ready to be processed every week? We're working on that to see how we can make sure that, going forward, we have capacity. We live in a competitive world, and we want capacity that's competitive, not that the producers are at the mercy of the provider because that's the only place we can get it processed. That causes some challenges in the system.

I think we realized the problem, and I'm here to say that we have some work to do in finding the solutions yet. We have been working very diligently on putting programs in place to upgrade and to expand the present system we have, but I don't think that that's going to be enough to be the total answer to where we need to be going forward in the meat processing business.

Mr. John Vanthof: It bothers me to agree with you so much.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I think we could, just for a moment—I wanted to make sure I clarified your statement earlier. Did you invite me to your house?

Mr. John Vanthof: Any time, any time. But just from my perspective, often we have a lot of talk about meat processing and small abattoirs and big abattoirs, but at the end of the day, one of the reasons why we have so much fewer—and you said the same thing, that they're not busy enough. It's a tough business, right? At the end of the day, they need to make a living from that business, and part of it was regulation—there should be a ratio between regulation and risk.

I'll use an example. In a small mom-and-pop abattoir, I'm not sure they need his and hers washrooms. Maybe now with COVID, they do. But there are certain things—the risk at Maple Leaf Foods and the coverage is much bigger than at Creative Meats in Markstay. We have to be careful always and never want to sacrifice food standards, but just making uniform regulations for all sizes doesn't help because, at the end of the day, a small abattoir or any small business has to be able to stay in business, and they need help, but they also need to be able to be self-sustaining and stay in business.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I just want to speak to that a little bit. I don't disagree, but we have federally inspected plants and we have provincially inspected plants, and I'm here to say that the standards of what is expected is not the same in both plants. That's why some stick with provincial and some go into federal. The reason they switch to federal is because they can export out of the province.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Having said that, I'd be the first to say that I don't believe that there is a safety difference for the meat coming out. I think we have as high a standard of meat coming out of our provincial plants as the federal plants.

I also want to make sure that we don't get a division between the size of the provincial plant and the food safety protocol in place when we have a ministry inspector—and I have nothing but respect for those inspectors. I want them to be just as stringent on a smaller operation as a larger operation.

Having said that, if we go back, we'll find out that a number of years ago, when we had the greatest exodus of our small packers, we had a challenge with some suggestion that we needed to have the same standard for federal, provincial, then eventually, we could have one system.

Ideally, if it's a safety issue—we all agree we've got to be equally safe, but the standards that they had were different. The size of the floor drain was different, those types of things. We did lose some people who didn't want to get to that high standard. Then, later on, the requirements weren't lowered, but the standards were adjusted to make it so, provincially, it was adequate. It's no longer there, but I use the floor drain size—there's no reason to have a four-inch drain if you only have a one-inch pipe bringing the water in, and those type of things. I think, over time, the ministry

has done a good job of bringing that in line with what we need, but that still doesn't mean that we can have plants that do not meet a standard we've set.

The other thing that happened—and I think that was the real detriment that I want to correct, and that's why we're putting programs in place to help people upgrade—when they set the standard, they give everybody a period of time to accommodate. They'd say, "You've got this much to do. We're going to give you three years to get it done." That would mean you should do a little in each of the three years. They waited until the end of three years and then said, "If I have to do that much, I'm going to have to shut down." So I think that's where we're working from now—to make sure that we don't have people shutting down because they can't afford to meet the standards that are there. We want to make sure that anybody, going forward, if they're going to be in the meat-packing business—that is a standard we want to meet.

I would agree with you—see, now I'm going to do it too—that there's a reason why, when someone wants to retire, they can't find a buyer: because you can't buy it and make money.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, it's a tough thing.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: We need to do some work on that.

I can tell you, as a ministry—since we're talking about estimates here—that we are working diligently on trying to do what we can to not only increase our capabilities within the sector that we have but also to encourage the improvement and expansion of our processing capacity.

Mr. John Vanthof: I fully agree that we need to keep safety standards. We have confidence in the industry, confidence in our consumers, and that's because we have a good inspection system, and we need to keep that. Your example of the floor drains may be a better example than mine; I will give credit where credit is due. I think we need to do that, because the flip side—and we know this is happening—is, if we're going to go back to the old ways, where it's done behind the barn in some cases, that's not safe for anyone. It can be done safely—wild game is done safely—but there is no guarantee it's done safely. That's what people need: They need the guarantee that it's done safely.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I think it's reasonable to say that if we put two packages of meat in the store, "This one was done out behind the barn" and "This one was done in an inspected abattoir," the out-behind-the-barn doesn't sell.

Mr. John Vanthof: I agree, but the out-behind-the-barn one doesn't end up in the store either. It doesn't happen a lot, but it's something we have to be cognizant of, that it can happen. Often we get in trouble with—I'm saying the greater "we." When you realize there's an issue, you can't just look the other way and pretend it's not there. That is an issue.

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I'm going to switch gears a little bit. You brought it up in your opening statement, and since we talked a bit about pork—because I saw a picture on Facebook a little while ago close to my riding—where are we with wild hogs?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I don't know.

Mr. John Vanthof: I just thought I'd change it up.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I think it's fair to say we're working on that, but the actual issue of wild hogs, of course, is under the auspices of natural resources. Once you domesticate them they become part of agriculture, food and rural affairs. But, having said that, there is also no greater risk right now to our hog industry than swine fever. I can assure you that we are watching very closely as to what we're going to do and working collaboratively with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry in their process of what they're trying to do to make sure that we do everything we can to reduce the number and keep our stock safe from those wild hogs. Because if it gets here and gets into the wild hogs, we could have a real problem.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: On the African swine fever, of course, we have been working with the federal-provincial-territorial ministers' group to develop a plan. Ontario, and our ministry, is one of the major players in the plan to develop a plan of action that's required should we—and we're not using the word "if," we're using the word "when." We want to be ready for it, not if it happens but when it happens.

There was very little time between the time we identified one case of COVID-19 and when we had the shut-down and had a lockdown because of the speed of the spread. That can be the same with the African swine fever. If it arrives, we aren't going to have time to sit down around the table with the federal-provincial-territorial ministers to talk about what we're going to do now. We have to have a plan in place to get it done and to do what it is we have to do.

The wild hog population is a direct risk to that happening, so I'm glad you brought it up. It is an issue that we're dealing with, and like I said, we're dealing with it regularly as to how we're going to try and control it. I think right now we're in the position of trying to figure out how many we have and where they exist.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That is our time for the opposition side.

We will now go back to the government side. MPP McKenna, you have 20 minutes.

Ms. Jane McKenna: I first of all want to say I used to carry a little notebook, as you remember, Minister, for Ernie-isms. I've written down all the ones said today. I absolutely miss them. I just wanted to say, "If you don't know where you're going, every road will get you there." I'm writing furiously because I don't have my little notebook.

You were a critic at the time and we were in opposition, and I've learned more from you, I can say—and I hope I'm not talking too loudly—about agriculture, almost as much as I have from Hugh Loomans. I told him today I was going to be speaking to you. He has the picture of you and him in his office, and he's very proud of that picture. He said to me just to say that he's been in agriculture 40 years now—obviously he's federally regulated, but he said, "Can you please tell him he is a phenomenal minister and he has done a phenomenal job in the position that he has." Thank

you so, so much from him and from me as well for all that you've done.

Anyway, I really appreciate you bringing up Sofina—obviously, it's formerly known as Fearnans in my riding—because you were very instrumental and very helpful with all that. I just want to thank you for that.

But I also wanted to talk about how it's amazing how much the technology in farming has advanced up to this point. It has come leaps and bounds, and you were obviously instrumental in that. I know one of the largest projects you've been working on since coming into office is technological innovations for the agri-food sector, and working to ensure that future farmers of Ontario are leaders in technological advancement within the sector. Can you tell us more about what your ministry is doing to advance technological innovations in the agri-food sector?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for the question, and thank you very much for the positive comments. You can tell Hugh that the cheque is in the mail.

In the big picture, I think it's so important to recognize: I'm really happy to hear the question about technology, but I'll start from the beginning and say that one of the biggest challenges right now in our agriculture community, both in agriculture and food, is the lack of labour. You being PA at the Ministry of Labour, I believe, obviously we blame it all on the Ministry of Labour, because we haven't trained enough people to work in our agriculture community. But having said that, I think it's so important to recognize that the reason we haven't trained enough people to work in our agriculture community is because we haven't been able to sell, or we haven't worked hard enough at selling, the opportunities in agriculture, food and rural affairs as far as a career.

It's amazing how many people, if they know anything about agriculture at all, have it envisioned as—some of you may remember that Foodland Ontario had a calendar a few years ago with a little red tractor under a shady tree, and that was a representative sample of what goes on in agriculture. Nothing—well, I shouldn't say “nothing could be further from the truth;” it was about 50 years or 60 years behind the times. That little tractor in that picture no longer exists on our farms. That tractor is now a \$500,000 piece of equipment that's pulling a 50-foot disk across the field, with a 24-row planter following behind, and everything is run electronically, and some of it even runs virtually from the kitchen table. With all this technology we have, we have a greater shortage of tech people in our agriculture and food community than we have of labour.

I have to tell this story: It was rather interesting; just after I was appointed minister, I got a call from an individual who wanted to talk to me, and he was very angry. It sounded like he and I were on different wavelengths on our beliefs in the world. He had called me a number of times, and I hadn't been able to even get a handle on what he wanted. He wanted the Farm Implements Act changed in some way, but I couldn't figure it out. Finally, I had answered him and I had really told him all I could, but it didn't satisfy him. So he then called the Premier's office, and then the Premier's office called me and wanted to know

what was going on, and said I should call him because he was quite upset. So I called him again and set it all up.

When we got through with the discussion, what he wanted was the implements act changed to say that any implement dealer in the province of Ontario that was selling electronic equipment on the equipment had to have a licensed technician on staff to fix it, if it needed fixing. He said that too many farmers are buying this equipment, they get it home, it won't work and they can't find anybody to make it work. I said, “Well, isn't that interesting? Where do you expect that farmer or that implement dealer to find that technician that he has to have on staff before he can sell the equipment?” He said, “You'll have to train him,” and I said, “Yes, we will. Now, if you could tell your grandson or granddaughter to apply to be trained, then they could be that technician,” but, so far, we don't have enough young people knowing or understanding that those opportunities are there.

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I think we need to do much more to make sure that we have those people, that they understand that computer savvy is a must in agriculture today. Right now, we have farms where they used to have about five people running the farm, help doing all the chores and raising the cattle and bringing in the crops. That's all now run by a single farmer or maybe the son is home working in it too. There's so much technology. We can buy an autonomous tractor that I can sit in the house and run the tractor—I can't do it because I'm not tech savvy, but you can run the whole thing sitting at the kitchen table.

We have technology when they decide to do—and we talked earlier this morning about the nutrient management plans. We have equipment now in precision farming that maps the field, takes different soil tests in different parts of the field and then you can send the equipment across the field, putting on the fertilizer or whatever, and it will start and stop exactly where it's supposed to to put it only on the areas the way the soil was tested. But all that technology needs somebody that can look after it and needs someone who can run it. It's no longer the one with the largest muscles on their arms. It is now the one with the most matter between the ears that's going to make the person be able to run this equipment on the farm.

I think that's the first thing we have to do, bring those people in and understand that agriculture has changed immensely from when I was a kid—and that's a long time ago—but it is totally different today when you look at the technology that's out there.

In doing that, part of it as it relates to COVID I think is important. The intake we have now for—I forget what it's called, but the program that we have put in place now for support, is based on increasing technology to help reduce the amount of contact that labour has to have with each other. If you have something that can do some of the farm chores, you can buy equipment. The University of Guelph actually has a robot that picks vegetables in the greenhouses.

Agri-tech Innovation Program—it's \$22 million, and people, if they have technical advancements, if there's new approaches to doing things, new prototypes they want

to test, they can get help from that \$22-million program to reduce the risk of COVID but also to help them become more efficient. That's our latest help of trying to make it work better for them, and obviously it's going to help us all because where we're going in the future is more technology because the only way we're going to stay competitive in this world is to be highly technical.

Ms. Jane McKenna: Thank you so much. I just want to go on a bit more. So, Minister, I know before the last election, I was talking to farmers, and obviously to you as well, and I understand there were issues that just added more expenses to the work. They felt like the government didn't understand their issues and just added more expenses to their work. What has the government done to make life better for Ontario farmers? Could you elaborate a bit on that, Minister?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: As you mentioned about the dissatisfaction of our agriculture community with governments, I think the number one thing that we have done—my first action in office was to contact all the agriculture people and food people and ask them what they thought we should be doing. I guess it's fair to say that of the number of things we do to try to reduce red tape, to try to make us more efficient and so forth, when I was moving along, six months or a year later, everybody seemed to be quite enamoured with what we had done. I remember saying to them, and I'll say it to you today, "The reason you like what I've done is because I've not done a single thing that you didn't ask for." I think that's really what it was all about—not that they wanted more from government; they just wanted to be part of what government was doing to make sure that we're working with them, not them working for us. I think that has been one of the biggest positives that I've seen of it.

I'm a little bit—what's the right word for it—conceited. But I have to say that I've been amazed. My number one thing that I liked the best, the greatest thing that I appreciate in my term so far as minister, is the support I've received from my stakeholders. It's quite regular that the presidents of the different commodity groups will just call up and they want to talk to me because they have something they wanted to talk to me about. Comments coming back: "I'm so pleased. I didn't know you could just call a minister." Oh, yes, you can call this one. I think that's one of the things we learned, but that's also one of the things that our farming community wants to see: somebody who works with them, not them working for them.

Ms. Jane McKenna: I'd just like to say I appreciate all that you're saying. You are very accessible and very knowledgeable, because you are in a ministry where you understand the stakeholders and understand all the things that are going on around agriculture. I do appreciate all of that. I mean it sincerely when I say I have a lot of stakeholders—as I mentioned, Sofina Foods—that feel that you have been like that. And so from myself to you, thank you very much for all your hard work that you've done. You've made lots and lots of changes.

I guess one quick other question that I have is, what was the first job at hand when you got into the Ministry of

Agriculture that you really wanted to make a big dent in? As you know, we just talked about how people in the last election felt that government didn't understand their issues, so can you just tell me what you dove into right away with that, please?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I think it's simple things. The number one issue—you heard it during the election; I heard it during the election—was red tape, government bureaucracy getting in the way of them doing business. That was true in all ministries. We immediately started reducing the red tape with simple things like, in the drainage, we eliminated all fees below \$50. Now, one would say, "Well, that's giving up money." No, because it cost us more than \$50 per fee to collect it. It was a bother to them and a bother to us, and nobody was benefiting.

We changed the rules for the Agricultural Products Insurance Act and eliminated, on average, 45 pages of unnecessary paperwork that farmers had to fill out.

We put farm business registration online. It is now through Agricorp, and they can do it online. They don't have to fill out papers.

We changed the Livestock Medicines Act. The distribution is done differently and also, we don't need the act, because the federal government already does that—again, removing red tape.

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We sped up the payments for wildlife damage and made it easier for people. If wildlife has killed some livestock, we pay for that. We made it simpler for them to get paid, and we looked at that. They no longer need to wait 20 days for the appeal period. When we pay the money, they don't have to wait for the money for the extra 20 days to appeal.

We removed a lot of regulation—and I think we've heard quite a bit from the opposition, and there was some question when I did it—we eliminated the need to review the licence for abattoirs. I hate to point, and I hope John is listening, but there was some talk at the time that that somehow was reducing our ability to monitor the abattoir. Well, the truth is, nothing could be further from the truth. It was there. Not renewing it, but it was still licensed. We still knew who they were, and it had nothing to do with our inspections because they get inspected when they use the abattoir, not when they have a licence on the wall. It was things like that that were so out there, and yet nobody was paying any attention.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: We work diligently every day trying to find things that we could eliminate to make life simpler and consume less time so they have more time to run their business and try to make a living rather than trying to follow government regulations and red tape.

Ms. Jane McKenna: Thank you very much. I say to you, Minister, about Hugh Loomans, with his company, Sylvite, I wasn't joking when I was saying that about his comments to you, because he really felt that the ministry wasn't listening to him prior to our government getting in, and there was so much regulation and red tape.

As you know, some farmers don't have a lot of people. They do all the jobs, right? They've got to figure out those regulations themselves.

But I want to also just quickly comment, because I know we only have a few minutes left, the other thing that I'll bring up—because Burlington, obviously, is urban, but I do have rural in my area, as you know. What I've heard from the stakeholders there is they were very grateful that each ministry got out of their silos. I heard you mention you were talking with the Ministry of Labour—obviously, I'm the PA—but you talked about regulation and red tape. I'm just saying, it must be a breath of fresh air, because you were the critic for agriculture before and now being a minister, to be able to see the hand-in-hand collaboration, with each ministry working together instead of in the silos. That's probably why things weren't getting done at all, because no one was speaking to anybody else, or had the knowledge that you have in agriculture.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: You're totally right. I do want to say, I guess most of our meetings today and yesterday include somewhere in there about COVID. I want to say that COVID, and our reaction to it—there is no greater example of ministries needing to work together. The program is actually under the auspices of the federal government. The Ministry of Labour is responsible for health and safety on the job site. The local board of health is responsible for the—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): I'm sorry, Minister, but that's time.

The remaining time is going to be apportioned equally, split as 22 minutes and 30 seconds to the official opposition and 22 minutes and 30 seconds to the government. Once that is finished, if we do not see anyone here from the independents, we will split the remaining 15 minutes.

We will now go back to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: In response to the minister, I can assure you that, although I don't always agree, I always listen to your opinions, and I respect your point of view.

Specifically on the regulation changes for abattoirs, I distinctly remember us having a discussion. I think we both saw eye to eye on that. There was a bit of—as is our job in opposition, but I think we understood that.

It's very true that agriculture is short on people to get the job done. You brought up the example of the little red tractor under a tree. In some ways, it's a marketing campaign that has been too successful. Often, in agriculture, we market the little red tractor under the tree because that tugs at people's heart strings. That's how we market. But when you're marketing yourself for people to come in the industry, it's not a good way to market. The 24-row planter doesn't turn people on the same way as Mom and Pop and two little kids in the field. That's something we have to overcome.

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce held an event with a round table and they asked the participants if there's one thing they could do tomorrow to change how people viewed an industry. My answer was—and I think this would help us all, and I'm sure this is already being thought of—that guidance counsellors in school should take a tour of modern farms and, in my area, modern mills. My kids came from agriculture and were discouraged from entering

it because—“You belong in university.” I think a lot of people who are well-meaning but who have an uninformed bias—and I'm not blaming them—don't really understand the sector and that a career in agriculture is not cleaning out pigpens anymore. I've cleaned out my share of pens; I don't look down on anyone who does that, but it's not something that you're going to entice someone who is technologically—students these days know a lot about, a public school kid knows more about technology than I likely ever will. We need to show exactly what you've said, but we need to get that to young people earlier, and we need to stop the unconscious bias towards—and it's not just agriculture; I know it's towards the trades too, but I really think agriculture suffers from it a bit more. I know the government is talking about food literacy in schools. I think that's a good example, but we also need to increase the literacy of what the industry is about.

Has the ministry thought about that? I know you're talking about—the other ministry, the Ministry of Labour is talking about skilled trades. Is there an agricultural component to that?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Specifically about if there is an agriculture component—I don't believe that there is within the ministry, because it has taken the main lines of the apprenticeship program forward to make it more useful and in greater demand. We have been working in round tables and so forth with our agriculture community to try to figure out how we can get agriculture as part of the program.

Having said that, the challenge becomes that, when you're looking at a mechanic—it's part of the program, and it could also be a farm implement mechanic, and that should be the same type of program—only once we get people in there, unless that's what they actually are going for, we will never see them in an implement shop. So I think we need to work together.

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Like I say, we have been working with the industry to work on how we can deal with the shortage and how we can deal with the training. In May, we announced the development of a labour strategy and two initial projects during the virtual round table with the leaders of our agricultural food chain. We're providing \$670,000 to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture for a program I'm sure you've heard about, Feeding Your Future, a platform that helps fill the labour shortage through a job-matching service and provides free virtual career fairs, webinar series and specialized training opportunities. Again, that's a similar type of activity, rather than the training colleges for the trades.

We're also investing \$195,000 for Food and Beverage Ontario to implement a strategy that will address critical challenges facing the sector, such as talent attraction and retention, and skills and development innovations.

Recently, we announced a \$22-million agri-tech innovation cost-share program that will be helping farmers' operations and processes for businesses to adopt innovative and new technologies. The intake will support implementation of sector-specific, unique and innovative technologies in the

workplace that enhance protection of workers against COVID-19, lead to increased business efficiencies and productivity, and help build sector resilience.

So we are pushing, trying to make it happen, but again, it's a big challenge. As far as we've come—we've come a long way in recognizing we have a problem—we haven't got very far into the stream of trying to find how you fix it. We're doing it, in a way, with our stakeholders, to try and get there, and obviously these ones that we've funded are working, but we need to be working faster and longer and broader going forward, so that means we haven't stopped. We're going to keep going in that direction, and we are coming along.

Feeding Your Future is actually an extended program. We've already extended it once financially, because we do believe it is working, but we have a fair bit of work to do yet in that area. It's a funny thing, because it is difficult. You mentioned it: How do we convince people to recognize agriculture for what it is without giving up, shall we say, the comfort we have and reconsidering the little red tractor?

Laughter.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: It's true, because we're at fault for both of those. I think they are very counter-productive, the two of them, because really, for the people we're talking about, we don't want them to see it as a place of comfort. We want them to see it as a place of opportunity, and we're not telling anybody about the opportunity in our messaging.

I think that's very good. It says here, "Ontario is also working hard to stimulate jobs and investment for farmers and food processors by easing the burden on business, such as cutting red tape and reducing regulatory burdens, while still protecting our public health and safety." Like I say—

Mr. John Vanthof: I agree, Minister. I agree that there is an issue that we're still—I'll give a local example. Someone who is in this area, someone who is technologically minded and looking where they're going to spend, gets training. They get common core, and they can walk into a mine and make more money than I do as an MPP, starting out.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes, but anybody can make more money than that.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay, but—and I'm not complaining about it, but are they going to look around unless we show them where they could go? There's not too many people starting out in agriculture, regardless of where they are. We see it every day. The people in our area, and I'm sure every area is the same—we have different competing industries. Our competing industries are mining and forestry.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: On the issue, I think it's very important to recognize—and I know it's a challenge. The agriculture and food industry, though I believe it's the number one and the best industry in the world, has not been considered the highest-value place to get big money, unless you were a dairy farmer and sold it—not to mention any names, of course.

You talked about competing interests, and I talk about that too. I'm not saying that our food processing industry is not paying fair wages, but I know in my community, with the two automotive plants, they can go and work on the assembly line there and make considerably more money than they can working in one of the food processing facilities. The extra money is the difference between the two. If the one was a nicer job, would that be the one that is the lowest pay? I think that's something that needs addressing.

But the big thing we need to do is we need to find a way to have more people to work, because we just haven't. Right now, we're not so much worried about where they are working. We need to find people that aren't working so we can get them working in our agri-food sector.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, but having said that, some of the people we need the most, like the tech-savvy people, the people who are working with computers, are already working. There's not very many people who are really into that who are wondering what their next—at least not in northern Ontario. They can get a job pretty quickly. So we need to find people early and, I think, long term, we need to—someone once told me, and I'm not going to credit it to you because it wasn't you, that there is lots of money in agriculture, but not all of it is on the farm. We need to find ways to actually make sure that, in the whole sector, we have the opportunity to get enough money so we can have quality people working in the system or people with the required skills working in the system, because if we continue with the labour shortage, we're going to have—

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I did want to mention, I think for you in particular, but for everybody that's listening, I did have a meeting with the John Deere people, and actually, they have the same problem with getting technical people. They have a program now where they are providing technical training for young people who want to get into and be trained as a John Deere technician.

I think working together with the private sector is the first step in getting to that solution, where we have qualified people for the jobs we have being trained by the people who want to hire them.

In our community, I know two or three young people who were working at home on the farm, and then when they needed to get a job off-site, they went and worked for the tractor dealership. Now, one I know for sure is the head of the shop. He started as a young technician there. And so I think the industry will help us get to where they're going, if we can just find the people and bring them in.

Mr. John Vanthof: We're also, in a way—and we didn't do this on purpose; the industry didn't do this on purpose. As the industry becomes much more mechanized, we have less of our own to fulfill the jobs, right? When farms were a lot smaller and every farm family had some kids and some of those kids wanted—but now, there's not as many farm families, there's not as many people working in agriculture, so our own pool of labour, of skilled labour even, isn't as big as it was in the past. That's why we've got to look more outside of our own pool—and this isn't unique to agriculture, but it is something—and I'm

glad that you brought it up because it is an issue. We are losing capacity. I'm sure it's happening across the province if it's happening here. We are losing capacity because we do not have the capacity to service modern equipment.

1450

Just a personal story: I stopped eight years ago, I guess, but my last tractor was one of the modern ones where everything was wired—everything—and I was in the field and the tractor stopped. I called our local dealer and he said, “Well, just leave it off for half an hour and maybe it will reboot itself.” That happened a couple of times, and I thought, okay, I'm going to start looking for older ones because there's no one here to fix this thing, right? That's a real issue.

There's a reason, just anecdotally, if you look on—and as minister, you're too busy to recognize these things, but talking about John Deeres, the last generation of John Deeres before they went totally electronic are soaring in value. Why? Because people can fix them; people with old-school skills. That's a sign. But as we get everything more and more digital, and especially because farms are widely separated—we're getting bigger, so we're getting farther—your customer base is farther and farther apart, and that is becoming an issue. It's not a political issue, it's not a blame-the-government issue. It's something that's happening and something that we are all going to suffer from in the future.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I think you're right. I just want to conclude this part of the debate, shall we say, by saying that recognizing the challenges we face with our workforce, our Agri-tech Innovation Program is partly to address that issue, which is to be able to meet the demands of labour by being able to do it more with technology than with labour.

One of the things that I want to re-emphasize is that this isn't about taking people's jobs away, this is about getting the job done where we can't find people to do it. My objective is that it will have a positive impact on what we can do to protect people from COVID. If we can find electronic ways of reducing the number of people on the sorting line, it means that people will be further apart and less likely to infect each other. I think there's a real positive opportunity available to do that by having the agri-technology improved.

As we were designing the program and the communications, I was surprised, looking around, at some of the innovation that presently exists, like autonomous tree pruners. Who would have thought that you could do that? Because it's out there. There are sorters now—I've actually seen that—where they can sort vegetables going down the line based on the quality and colour of them. They can electronically sort them out, pick the bad ones out and the different ripeness can go in different streams, and that can all be done without people. So I think there are some opportunities there that we can try, and that's why we had that tech program: to try to see if we can look both towards reducing the amount of labour that is required and, secondly, by making sure that everybody on the line is as safe as we can possibly keep them.

Mr. John Vanthof: Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): You have a minute and a half, but we are also in the middle of a bell, so we will discuss that once you're finished your round.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. In my minute and a half, because I don't know if I'm going to have any more time after, I would like to thank the minister and certainly thank everyone at OMAFRA for all the work you do every year, but specifically during the COVID-19 epidemic that no one had any idea at the start how to handle. I think the sector has done very well. There have been problems, but all in all, OMAFRA did their job and then some. Although sometimes I disagree politically with the minister, I'd like to thank him for his work specifically during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much, John. With that, I think we'd better get a—you don't have to go and vote, but I do.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Minister, there is no vote yet.

You have 30 seconds left, MPP Vanthof, if you want to use it to, I don't know, share family photos.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I would just say that this may be the last time I get the chance to say thank you to you too, John, for—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Oh, no, you have another seven and a half minutes.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: No, but not talking to him.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Oh, maybe. It depends. We could hear some old family stories, maybe.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Exactly. But I do—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That is time.

We're going to go to the government side. We have 22:30, and MPP Cuzzetto, you are up.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I know John Vanthof brought up the issue of wild hogs earlier on in the conversation. I'll tell him a little story about when I was in Italy about three years ago, when I was chased in a little Fiat 500 by a wild hog. It's pretty scary, late at night, to see a 300-pound pig chasing a car. I just wanted you to know about that story. I brought it up the other day at the other committee meeting with Minister Yakabuski.

My question is for Minister Hardeman. You mentioned earlier on about business modernization through the Agri-Food Open for E-Business Initiative targeted intake and helping establish and expanding the online marketing capacity. Could you talk about the projects that we have in place and how this is helping the farmers in this sector?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for that question, Rudy.

I think that program was likely one of the very first programs we put in place when we started on with COVID-19 and started reducing the ability to go shopping, shall we say. A lot of places closed. Even though the ag and food sector was considered essential and everything stayed open, there was a lot of concern about being able to market the products. One that comes to mind is our flower industry and the greenhouses. They could harvest their crop but they couldn't sell it because the supermarkets were no longer selling flowers. The people who were selling things at the

roadside and the fruit stands and so forth could not do that, because people were not coming to buy. We put a program in place that we would help them pay for setting up an online selling program. We had two streams: One was for larger investments, where, we'll say, the association of farmers' markets wanted to get together, working on behalf of all farmers' markets, and they set up something like that. That was a larger investment. The smaller investments were people who just needed to get a computer with a program on it and get online so they could sell their product. It was amazing, the uptake we got, and the people who all of a sudden could connect. The world was now their customer. It really worked well. I think it's fair to say that we will likely see a lot of them staying online with their products, even though when we get through this they can go back to marketing their old way too. I think a lot of them, going forward, will continue with their online service, because they could carry on.

1500

We spent \$3.2 million on the Agri-Food Open for E-Business Initiative. That's the total cost, which included support for 650 projects with farmers' markets, food producers and retailers—garden centres, greenhouses, nurseries and agricultural associations—expanding their online sales and providing Ontario families with a greater access to a wide variety of food and agricultural products. I mentioned the two streams; one stream was \$5,000 that we would invest and the other was, I think, \$1,000. I can just give you a list here:

- \$5,000 for Académie du Gourmet Academy Inc. in Auburn, for online ordering, marketing, website and design training;

- \$5,000 to McGregor's Orchard, online out in Renfrew;

- \$5,000 to Battaglia Food Markets Ltd. in Mississauga to create online grocery shopping; and

- \$4,500 to create an online e-shop presence for 2X4 Jam Co. in Niagara Falls.

Projects approved under stream 2—that was the bigger one—were eligible for cost sharing of up to \$75,000:

- \$75,000 went to Farmers' Markets Ontario to get farmers' markets online—again, you go online to Farmers' Markets Ontario and they would direct you to the right farmers' market;

- \$31,045 for the Ontario South Coast Wineries and Growers Association to create and promote an e-business platform supporting their members. Again, it's the same thing: That would be one-stop shopping at the different wineries from the association;

- \$36,000 for Wagener's Meat and Delicatessen Ltd. in Etobicoke for an e-commerce launch, integration and marketing, increasing access to Wagener's products. Again, that was an individual one for one business to market; and

- we spent over \$6 million on the agricultural and horticultural societies. We wouldn't have a lot of those, I expect, in your riding, but particularly in rural Ontario the agricultural societies and the horticultural societies all raise their money with community activity.

The agricultural societies generally hold a fall fair or that type of function. Horticultural societies do it through

selling boxed plants and working on behalf of the city or the town or the village to do the gardening for them, and from that they get the returns to run their organization. All that dried up during the start of COVID, so we put a program in place to help them survive the pandemic. They all generally get subsidies or help each year, and it's usually based on their gate receipt or their fundraising abilities, for the horticultural society, but because they couldn't hold the fair, they weren't eligible for that, so the first thing we did is change the rules: We would pay them on the previous year, rather than on that year, to get that first million dollars. When we got through with that we decided that was going to be sufficient, and so we then put in another bunch of money—I think it was \$5 million—for the two together to put in place funding to keep them going for the year. Hopefully we can get back to holding a fall fair sometime this fall, but obviously we will be keeping a very close eye on it as to whether we need to do something more for those going forward.

We also did an equine hardship program for horses: not racehorses or things like that, but people who had riding stables but no customers, or people who just boarded horses but couldn't pay for the hay, and so forth. With that type of activity, we put a program in place for them. Then, of course, there's the winery agri-tourism fund for our wineries.

All these organizations we helped stay in business, but it all started from when we started the program of e-commerce. That was, shall we say, our flagship to start with, and it was amazing for the investment, and \$1,000 doesn't mean much in the big scheme of things, but it meant the world to a lot of people that needed to buy a computer and get online to sell their product out of the garden.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Ernie, this is a great idea. Online marketing: I agree with it totally, especially on the shopping aspect of it. Not only that, it reduces the carbon footprint too of people travelling around the province to do some of this shopping.

Would the deputy minister like to add anything to that?

Mr. John Kelly: There have been many, many supports that have happened as a result of COVID. The online one is but one of several that have happened. So many of these supports have come through our CAP projects, and CAP is the Canadian Agricultural Partnership. It's the agreement that we have with the federal government, which is a cost-shared program. We've been supporting various businesses, either on the innovation side, on the marketing side, like the e-business one, or supports for individual businesses either directly from Ontario funding or through CAP funding.

What I'd like to do is give my ADM Randy Jackiw a chance to describe some of the CAP projects that have come forward to support the sector, because when we've been going through COVID for the past year and a half, but also pre-COVID, the innovation space and the ability to do new things, as MPP Vanthof indicated, is going to help us going forward for the future of the sector.

Over to you, Randy.

Mr. Randy Jackiw: Thank you, Deputy. I'll cover a couple of things here. The minister covered the e-business

intake very well, as expected. On the Canada Agricultural Partnership funding, it's a program that's negotiated under the federal-provincial-territorial agreements, which were mentioned earlier, that the minister is actually co-chairing, which will be the next framework in a couple of years. But, in that, there's \$417 million over five years that is shared federally and provincially with 60% federal and 40% provincial.

The overall outcomes that were negotiated are around making sure that agri-food and agri-based products and resources are safe, healthy and sustainable, and also that the agriculture, agri-food and agri-product sector adapts and grows. So there's a number of other intermediate outcomes that are part of that. They range on everything from soil health, the loss of phosphorus, market and public demands are met, productivities increased and addressing markets and market volatility.

What I want to emphasize is that prior to COVID and then in through to COVID, the minister's direction on these were very clear in that he gave us direction to make sure that, number one, we focused on the priority, the most important things to address, and he's made some comments about his ongoing consultations with the sector to ensure that was done. Also, the funding really focused on incremental benefits, and what we mean by that is that these are generally not things that would just happen on their own or things that people would do as a regular part of business or would do anyway, but what are the things that could be incentives that would further the ability for businesses to go further than they would otherwise, and to, of course, leverage as much funding as possible.

1510

The other thing as we got into COVID was that, collectively, the direction was to have an abundance of caution and be careful about not overcommitting too early so that we could make sure that there were resources for the priorities as they evolved. As the minister said, one of the first ones was around this e-business, which was very popular and really got the ball rolling in a number of areas.

We've had intakes on everything from abattoirs; the right to eat foods, vegetables and fruits; programs focused on dairy; the e-business, which we've mentioned; labour intake specific to processors; funding for sectors as well; the strategic solutions which are focused more on these innovations; and the Equine Hardship Program etc.

Not all were capped because, again, the direction was, let's figure out the most important things that need to be done and as we go we will figure out whether that's best funded under a cap, whether it's best funded under the grassroots program which is also available, as well as the workplace safety, the different intakes that we had through-out COVID that covered everything from incremental costs on farms and processors to make sure that people were safe and that there was PPE available, that housing costs when people were ill were covered, and all those sorts of incremental costs.

So I just wanted, again, to give a sense of how we went about this and how we made sure that the programming was the most impactful. Then of course there was a lot of

information that was collected through the minister's advisory committee that he put together. That was the genesis of the 35-point plan that we also discussed earlier, and there were a number of funding streams that were the result of that as well. But how we went about setting those priorities and making sure that they were the most impactful—and the concern around value for money.

Okay, I think I can pause there, unless there is a follow-up question. I see Cordelia here as well, who might want to get into more specifics around the COVID aspect of it.

Ms. Cordelia Clarke Julien: Thank you again, MPP Rudy Cuzzetto, for the question and thanks, Randy and Deputy Minister, for setting it up quite well. I'll try not to repeat any of the pieces, but in terms of business supports, what I would say to you, MPP Cuzzetto, is that they sort of fell between programming, transfer payments and risk management.

Several business supports were provided and continue to be provided to our agri-food sector to make sure that we can continue to maintain and move forward in terms of keeping food on plates. I won't go too much into all of the various pieces, but as the minister mentioned, it was the e-business piece that we did. There were supports that we provided to our agriculture and horticulture societies and investments of around \$6 million.

There were also supports that we provided, which you've heard us talk about before, in terms of enhanced agri-food workplace intervention, as my colleague talked about, in terms of supporting health and safety. That was in the amount of about a \$36-million investment. We had things in terms of agri-food prevention and control innovation programs, and that is where we looked at innovations, as the minister spoke about, in terms of the automated harvesting and pruning and those types of things. So we put an investment of \$25.5 million into that as well. We've also looked at other things in terms of our winery agri-tourism piece, in which you see another investment of \$10 million, so quite a few in terms of some business supports to ensure that all the various aspects of our agri-food businesses can be supported and maintained.

We did also go and do some transfer payments. One of the earlier ones was we did provide an investment to our Ontario Food Terminal in the amount of \$546,000. Ontario Food Terminal is the largest in Canada and the third-largest in North America, in case folks did not know that, in terms of those pieces—as we've heard in other sectors, “too big to fail”—so we wanted to make sure that a primary distribution mode and hub was able to be supported as we went forward to that.

We also partnered with the Workplace Safety and Prevention Services group. That is a group that is out of the Ministry of Labour. We partnered with them at \$150,000, where they would be able to go in and provide resources and supports to businesses on how to put together a safety plan, what do you need to do, what do you need to be putting in place for that and those types of thing.

We also supported things like the Culinary Tourism Alliance with small amounts of investments, just to ensure that they are able to be maintained.

In terms of transfer payments, we provided some supports there. As you heard my colleagues already speak to, we did provide some pieces with respect to risk management, so there were things through our AgriRecovery programming for the beef and pork sectors to ensure that they were able to continue to move through the supply chains. Those were in the amounts of \$10-million investments in terms of those pieces. We also had our hog sector support program, which was up to about \$5 million.

As you can see with all the various numbers I'm throwing out at you, the ministry has put together what I would call a robust quilting of programming to ensure that we are able to hit all corners of the sector and make sure that we are all still moving together in the right direction so that we're able to respond quickly if we see any crises coming on-board, but at the same time, to avoid the crisis of what we see now in terms of the pandemic. I just wanted to highlight some of those pieces for you, and I'm happy to answer any further questions.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Going forward, do you see any crisis that could happen here?

Ms. Cordelia Clarke Julien: Minister, are you—I'll give it to the minister.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I'm not sure who is supposed to answer the question. I suppose whoever sees a crisis on the horizon. But, no. I think it's a very good question. What do we look at going forward? I think it's very important to recognize that the ministry, including the secretariat, is very well positioned to deal with the issues.

As I mentioned earlier in one of the questions, in pointing out where we are today in COVID cases in food processing and on the farms, one is nine and the other is five people infected in those two industries. If that were to change next week or even at the end of this week—if that were to change dramatically, we're prepared to look at what got us this far and how we can change what we're doing to make sure that we can correct that to keep it from getting worse.

I think if we look back at the past, which is what this is all based on, looking at the past, then how did we get from where we were to where we are? We would be looking at that and saying, "Okay, now, if we were to slide back, what do we need to do to get back on the right track?" I think we're prepared and ready to do that, but hopefully don't need any of that.

On that issue, I just want to point out, all of these programs that have been instituted based on COVID were all part of our—I shouldn't say "all," but a lot of them were part of our normal ministry operations. One of the first decisions I made when COVID started was—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's time.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Sorry.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): We'll go back to the members of the opposition. It looks like the time for the independent member will not be used. Therefore, the remaining time will be divided equally, with seven minutes and 30 seconds for the official opposition and seven minutes and 30 seconds for the government, beginning with the opposition.

1520

We will go back to MPP Vanthof. I believe you're going to take this on again?

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Do you want to share some Christmas stories or maybe what happened over Thanksgiving? You've got pictures you can bring out?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much, Chair, but before I do that I would like to say, if it's between a Fiat 500 and a wild hog, you're lucky to be with us. I don't wish that on anyone. That's one of the best stories I have heard in the Legislature.

I have already said thanks, but I don't think we can emphasize it enough—the agriculture sector is a resilient industry. They face challenges all the time. They deal with weather. They deal with markets.

I think you can safely say that the just-in-time delivery system was invented in agriculture because everything in agriculture has to be delivered just in time, because it's all perishable.

There are so many things that the agriculture sector does well.

OMAFRA people would know this better than anyone: You are probably more in tune with health risks, other than, perhaps, the Ministry of Health, because of what the minister talked about—African swine flu. We deal with animal disease, communicable disease among livestock. It's something that is always in the back of your mind, and I think that's one of the reasons you were capable of dealing with it. You all did yeoman's work, and I can't commend you enough—despite the minister. No, I'm just kidding. He gave me a couple of shots about my former dairy career, so I am just returning the favour.

On a personal note, I've always been incredibly proud that my uncle was the Minister of Agriculture. I never thought I would ever be here. I never thought I would ever be his critic. If there's one ministry, I think, that we have always done—we try hard to work for the people we represent and express our views. We disagree sometimes, but where we do agree, we work together, and I'm very thankful for that.

Just to show that I do know the minister quite personally: One of my fondest memories as a child is Uncle Ernie taking me to, I believe it was a Dairy Queen, and he ordered—the question I'm going to pose to the minister is, do you still eat banana splits without the banana?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Yes.

Mr. John Vanthof: I will never forget that. I'm sure this is a question that has never come up at committee before: Who doesn't put a banana in a banana split? I'll leave the rest to the minister.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: That's it?

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, I'm done.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Okay.

Mr. John Vanthof: Unless you want to get to the real—

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: No, no.

Mr. John Vanthof: How about the reason I'm NDP? Also, because of the minister.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: No, I like the banana split one better, John.

I do, first of all, want to say that it's fair to say that the rest of the banana split, without the banana, is quality dairy products. There's no reason I shouldn't like quality dairy products because I don't eat bananas. That's true. I didn't know what you were going to say. I still love banana splits without a banana.

Before I go to the final remarks, I do want to quickly go back to the comment I was making in answer to Rudy's question about, what do we see as the risk going forward, or do we see any risk going forward? I really think it's important to recognize that. I'm an eternal optimist, and I don't see a real risk. But I'm also a pragmatist, to make sure that we are ready for eventualities. After I got the first notice that we had a case of COVID, I didn't really believe that there was going to be a pandemic. But when it became a pandemic, I wasn't surprised, because that's what the eventuality was. When we went through the first lockdown, I didn't think we were going into a second one or a third one, but when it happened, I wasn't surprised, because we have to be ready for these types of things.

I think that's the position we're in right now. I'm quite confident, because I am an eternal optimist. I'm quite satisfied that, with our ministry all working together and particularly with the secretariat that deals with the COVID issues, if we should take a turn going back somewhat, we're ready to do whatever we can to keep that backward slide to a minimum to still get out of this. I would not be shocked if the numbers that I mentioned in the chart were to go up slightly or, because they're so low, that they were doubled next week. That doesn't mean I would throw up my hands and say, "Oh, woe is me. All is falling apart." No. We have a plan for what we have to do, to go and see what the people are doing.

The other thing I want to point out that we haven't talked about at all during these seven and a half hours is—and I shouldn't say that you should have; it should have been me saying it. But right from the start, I said that everything we do, we want to look at and make sure that what brought us there is being identified, so if we happen to be in exactly the same place again, we will know what got us there both times. Don't let all the information that becomes available—if we have someone that has a second outbreak, let's find out what it is that they're doing different from others that's causing that so that if we have to deal with it in the future, we can use the information we've gathered. I think we heard them during some of the—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And that is time. Minister, thank you.

Just for your consideration, if we choose not to use the remaining seven and a half minutes, it can be used to debate all of the options during our vote. Otherwise, we can just carry through the vote without debate. It's up to us: Do we want the remaining seven and a half minutes for the government side? Or it can be used to debate during the vote. MPP Pettapiece?

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: I was just going to say a few words and let the minister say a few words, and that was going to be it.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): That's fine.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: So I think we could end it that way. Is that okay?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): We can do that, and then we could—

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: I just want to thank all the members—

Interruption.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Madam Chair, the bells are going. We've got to go and vote. We'll be back after the vote.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Hang on, Minister; just one moment. We can vote. We have 30 minutes. We're going to recess and then we will resume after 30 minutes. Do we need 30 minutes? We can also shorten the time. Minister, can you make it to the Legislature within 15 minutes?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I don't know. I hope so.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): We will resume in—I'm deferring to committee. When would you like to resume? In 15 minutes or 30 minutes? Fifteen minutes: a show of hands?

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: I'm not sure we could get back in time for the vote.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): It will have to be for the duration.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Chair—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Sorry; MPP Pettapiece?

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: I don't think we can do that, Chair. I think we have to take more time than that. The bells are going to ring for 30 minutes, so I would suggest at least 30 minutes.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): MPP Pettapiece, for 30 minutes—we will recess until the vote is concluded.

The committee recessed from 1530 to 1604.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): We're back in session.

MPP Pettapiece, I believe we left off with you. You will have seven and a half minutes remaining on the government side before our vote.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: There is a question I'd like to ask about drainage, Minister, but before I get there: It's interesting that all the subjects we've been over today and yesterday, or at least a good deal of them, have to do with the connectivity. Education is certainly something that's very important, not only in our industry but in other industries, and what we're doing for the environment: We heard from MPP Barrett on his work on the Great Lakes, mostly Lake Erie. This crosses a lot of different ministries that have to work together and try to figure some of these things out.

I agree with MPP Vanthof on education in our public schools with agriculture and maybe getting these young folks interested in a life of working on tractors and machinery that uses very high technology. We're not in the era of my grandfather where we could fix the old Farmall tractor and keep it going. Now you have to call somebody who has quite a high degree of education and knows how to use a lot of diagnostic equipment that we never had to use.

This has been an interesting exercise to see how ministries have to work together. I know you're doing this with different ministries—MNR is one, with the wild hog issue—and I think that says a lot about this government in that the ministries have not tried to keep away from each other or have not tried to protect their own little kingdoms. I think we should be grateful as MPPs. Also, the people of Ontario should be grateful for that too, because it looks like we're trying to get things done, and we are. I think businesses overall, taking away the COVID business, are very happy with the direction we've been going in how to reduce red tape and all this kind of thing.

I guess I'll get to my drainage question. Minister, I have heard frustration in the past with red tape and the complicated processes concerning drainage in my community. I actually used to work for a drainage contractor for a little while, and certainly our farms are tiled. Sometimes that cost is a substantial part of the project, which really limits how much drainage we can accomplish. I understand the changes you are making are enabling in nature. I wonder if you could elaborate on the importance of the changes and how it will help them deal with the challenges they have raised.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much, Randy, for the question. Yes, we are making some changes to the Drainage Act. We've talked about earlier in our presentation about where the province is involved in financing municipal drains, the process of getting the money to them in time and how we put more money in place to make sure we can keep the accounts paid and up to date, rather than 18 months before they get their money.

One of the other things we have done is, we have made it so that what the municipality and the landowner consider a minor repair on a municipal drain will not necessarily require the input of new engineering and new processes to allow that work to happen. If they request of the municipality, and as long as it's on one farm and they need the change and it doesn't change the makeup of the drain, and the municipality considers it a minor repair, then it can be done without all the extra paperwork. They can look at it, ask for the right to fix that municipal drain, and then get it done.

That's going to save a lot of time and cost and a lot of aggravation. A lot of times they realize this needs to happen when the contractor is there already working on some other part of the job and they can get this done without undue delay. That's one of the main things to help reduce red tape and also reduce the time it takes to get it done. In that change, we've also put in place more time limits on how long a municipality can take to make a decision and so forth, so that they can get it done when it needs doing, and I think that will be a great help.

As I said to earlier questions about drainage, it's an awful important part of keeping agriculture going. It's a big part of our soil health programs. It's a big part of making sure that we protect our water—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: With that, I just want to take a minute—first of all I have a note here. I think it must be

from John's wife because it says, "Say nice things about John."

1610

Madam Chair, I do want to say thank you to MPP Vanthof for his involvement in the last two days of estimates and the great job that he has done in questioning the estimates of the province and our ministry, criticizing where necessary—that was very limited and thank you for that—and also pointing out where more needs to be done. I can assure him we will take it upon ourselves to look into what he suggested needed doing to make sure we do the best we can for the people of Ontario. I just want to echo his comments that we're all in this together and, end result, we all want the same thing: what's best for our agriculture and food industry. We want to work with him to get that done.

I also want to extend a strong thank you to my two PAs, MPP Pettapiece and MPP Barrett, for their hard work during the preparation for the estimates and also running the estimate program and questions going through.

I want to thank all the members of the party—Rudy and Jane and you, Madam Chair—all the people who are here on behalf of our party to ask questions and to also get the message out about the things our ministry is doing and even to point out to the ministry what we believe needs changing or needs doing to make our industry an even better industry.

I want to thank everybody for taking the time to be part of this committee hearing. I appreciate particularly all those that I can see on the screen. All the others, they may not even be with us. I suppose that's one of the things that we—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): I'm sorry, that's time, Minister. I'm sorry. Thank you. Thank you all.

Before we continue, I just wanted to make sure we acknowledge MPP Armstrong who's joining us. Would you like to confirm that you are indeed MPP Armstrong and where you are?

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I've been sitting on committee the whole time. It's Teresa Armstrong here in Toronto, Ontario.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And MPP Gretzky?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Hi there. I'm in my office, in Windsor, Ontario.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): And MPP Roberts?

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Hi, Chair. Present and in Ontario.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): MPP Pettapiece, are you raising your hand? Yes?

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Just a point of order: I just wanted to point out that everyone loves the member from Timiskaming-Cochrane.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): A lot of love this afternoon.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Standing order 69(b) requires that the Chair put,

without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 101, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. Carried.

Shall vote 107, better public health and environment, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. Carried.

Shall vote 108, strong agriculture, food and bio-product sectors and strong rural communities, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. Carried.

Shall vote 109, policy development, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. Carried.

Shall the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed, please raise your hands. Carried.

Thank you, all. We will now recess before the start of the next ministry.

The committee recessed from 1615 to 1620.

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services for a total of 15 hours. Are there any questions from members before we begin?

I'm now required to call vote 701, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 30 minutes from the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, followed by a statement of up to 30 minutes by the official opposition, then the minister will have a further 30 minutes for a reply. The remaining time will be apportioned equally between the two parties, with 15 minutes allotted to the independent member of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours

Hon. Todd Smith: Good afternoon to the members of the committee. I'm really pleased to be here with you today to discuss the 2021-22 estimates for the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, as well as our ongoing efforts and investments to modernize and improve services for Ontarians.

First of all, I'd like to start by recognizing my colleague Associate Minister Jill Dunlop, who is joining us here today. With the creation of this associate ministry, Minister Dunlop has been able to focus her attention on the transformation of the child welfare system. She has brought incredible awareness to human trafficking, worked diligently to increase the economic empowerment

of women, and she's been a strong advocate in the effort to end violence against women. For years, these issues weren't getting the attention they deserved and Minister Dunlop has done a great job at bringing them to the forefront here at Queen's Park.

I would also like to introduce Deputy Minister Janet Menard, Deputy Minister Marie-Lison Fougère and all of our ADMs who are joining us virtually. Should they be required to provide further insight, we'll be calling on them throughout the next 15 hours. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank each of these individuals and all of the staff across the ministry for their hard work and professionalism, especially as we work to address the challenges that have been posed by COVID-19.

The 2021-22 estimates include approximately \$17.9 billion—that's almost \$18 billion—for the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. This represents a net increase of \$111.8 million compared to last year as we continue to make investments to improve services for our most vulnerable people in Ontario. This makes MCCSS the third-largest ministry by investment, just behind the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education.

At a high level, our investments are being made across four categories. This includes approximately \$10 billion for financial and employment services through the Ontario Works program and the Ontario Disability Support Program and associated supports, like the Ontario Drug Benefit; about \$4.6 billion for supports to individuals and families, which include support for adults with developmental disabilities, children and youth with special needs, women and children fleeing violence, Ontario's deaf-blind community, as well as help for youth and communities that are facing systemic barriers; approximately \$2 billion goes to support children and youth at risk, including child protection services delivered by children's aid societies, youth justice services as well as community and prevention supports; and about \$1.2 billion through the Ontario Child Benefit, which provides direct financial support for low- to moderate-income families.

These supports have been crucial over the past 15 months throughout the pandemic. We know that every person in this province has been impacted by COVID-19 in one way or another. For our part, our ministry has been working across all of our programs to support the province's most vulnerable people who have been profoundly impacted by COVID-19.

To support individuals in financial need, our government expanded access to emergency assistance for Ontarians in financial crisis, helping people who are not already on social assistance pay for food and housing. We also provided additional funding for emergency shelters, food banks, charities, non-profits and emergency services to help support vulnerable populations such as the homeless and low-income families who use social services.

To support children and families, we provided flexibility to the service providers who work with children with special needs and autism to implement innovative service models to ensure the continuity of care for children and

families, and we provided flexibility on eligible expenses for families receiving direct funding to support their children with special needs so that they could purchase things like technology that would help them stay at home and also help them physically distance.

We also provided interim one-time funding to new Ontario Autism Program registrants and are providing an additional payment to families that have received childhood budgets and interim one-time funding. And throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, youth in care who turn 18 and former youth in care who turn 21 will not age out of the supports and services that they are receiving from societies. We've also worked with our partners to keep emergency shelters open so those experiencing violence have somewhere to go.

To support our agencies so they can continue to serve individuals and families, we made a number of new investments, including the Student Nutrition Program to improve access to healthy meals and snacks for school-aged children and youth. We're also providing staff at developmental service agencies with enhanced testing, surveillance and PPE, as well as access to emergency child care and enhanced compensation.

Our ministry has been hard at work over the last 15 months taking every opportunity to address these and other challenges we know people and families are facing at this time, and I look forward to speaking more about these efforts during our time here at committee. At the same time, however, we have continued to move forward with the efforts we started before the pandemic to improve our programs for those that we serve. I'll begin on the important work that we've been focused on in the developmental services sector.

People with developmental disabilities and their families expect and deserve to enjoy all the rights and opportunities that other members of society take for granted, like going to school, having a job, receiving health care services and having real choices and control over the decisions that affect them. In my time as Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, I've had the opportunity to meet with many individuals and their families to discuss the challenges that they face in navigating the developmental services sector. What's been really clear to me is that many of these families are facing the same issues that they faced 10 or 15 years ago, challenges that were never addressed by the previous Liberal government.

To that end, we released a discussion paper back in November of last year, 2020, to seek feedback on the development of a draft reform plan for developmental services. Our ministry held virtual engagement sessions with more than 190 people across the province, including people with developmental disabilities, their families, service providers, academics and other sector partners, and we received more than 880 online submissions as well, so there really was a lot of interest in that consultation that took place.

What we heard was that people continue to face stigma, and they continue to face discrimination in their communities. We heard that it can be confusing trying to navigate supports from multiple government programs. We heard

that people want to have more choice and they want to have more flexibility in how they can use funding that they're receiving to address their specific needs. And we heard that many families want to know how their loved ones will be supported when they're no longer able to care for them.

So we listened really carefully to all of the valuable feedback that we received, and just a few weeks ago, on May 18, we released our plan for change. It's called Journey to Belonging: Choice and Inclusion. This plan aligns with our long-term vision that people with developmental disabilities are supported to fully participate in their communities and live fulfilling lives. Our plan focuses on people, and not the systems around them.

Our government is going to take swift action over the next year to make immediate improvements to the experience people have with the developmental services system, but we know that meaningful change is going to take some time. This isn't something that's going to happen overnight. We will continue to maintain significant investments in developmental services to ensure that individuals, families and agencies have the support that they need during this transition.

This year, our government will invest about \$1.85 billion to provide residential services for individuals with developmental disabilities. That's up from \$1.62 billion in 2018-19. That's an increase of \$228.2 million since 2018-19.

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Since 2018, our government has provided a minimum of \$5,000 in funding through the Passport Program for all people who are eligible for adult developmental services. As a result, over the past three years, the number of individuals receiving Passport funding has more than doubled to a total of over 54,000 recipients.

I should point out that funding for support services, which includes the Passport Program and other community participation supports, has also increased by \$200.2 million since 2018-19. We've seen residential services increase by \$228.2 million since 2018-19. We've seen funding for the Passport Program increase by \$200.2 million since we became the government in 2018-19, and we've seen the number of participants in the Passport Program who are receiving a minimum of \$5,000 in funding through that Passport Program double to a total of 54,000 recipients—so major investments in the developmental services sector.

From talking with our partners, I know they appreciate the partnership that we have with their sector and the support that we've shown to the developmental services sector as well. But there's a lot more to do.

As we work to deliver long-term changes, we're going to continue to work with people and families, service providers and other key partners to seek feedback and advice on what changes should look like and how they should be implemented to help all of these individuals.

So that's the developmental services sector. I'd now like to focus our attention on children and youth with special needs.

According to the early development instrument, when children in Ontario begin school, almost 30% have at least one developmental vulnerability that could pose a risk to their lifelong health, learning and behaviour.

Special needs can include communication disorders, physical disabilities, developmental disabilities, acquired brain injuries and chronic and long-term medical conditions. They can also include specific diagnoses such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, spina bifida, autism spectrum disorder and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

To improve outcomes for children and youth with special needs, our government is making the services as efficient and effective as possible. We're working to support children and youth with special needs and their families by, among other things, identifying needs early, supporting rehabilitation and helping caregivers cope with their day-to-day challenges.

The Special Services at Home Program—we refer to that as SSAH—is a great example of how our government is helping these children and their families. This program helps families caring for a child with a developmental and/or physical disability pay for special services in or outside the family home as long as the child is not receiving support from a residential program. For example, the family can hire someone to help their child learn new skills or improve existing abilities. Families can also use the funding to pay for services that will give caregivers a break or respite from the day-to-day care of their child. In the 2020 budget, we invested an additional \$70.3 million over three years in the Special Services at Home Program. This investment will result in almost 9,000 more children and families receiving support at home through SSAH.

Other investments to support children and youth with special needs and their families are making and will make a positive difference.

In 2019, we announced that our investment in the Ontario Autism Program would double to \$600 million annually.

We've also increased funding to better support children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and their families. In September of last year, we announced a \$3-million investment that supported the hiring of 26 additional FASD support workers who will provide information, develop care plans and connect parents to resources and support networks.

Just a few months ago, in March, our government provided an additional \$2.8 million annually to expand FASD diagnostic services across the provinces, funding 12 new FASD clinics, more than doubling the number of funded clinics in the province.

In this year's budget, we announced that we're investing an additional \$240 million over the next four years to ensure more children and families have access to critical early intervention and special-needs services when they need them, by increasing access to clinical assessment and rehabilitation services. Taken together, this is an increase of more than \$364 million since the start of our mandate. That's the largest increase to support children with special needs in our province's history.

Let's now take some time to talk about our ministry's plan to modernize the delivery of social assistance in Ontario. In reviewing how our social assistance system can better support those in need, we found many of its processes are often too bureaucratic, too paper-heavy and more focused on enforcement and technical aspects than actually helping people improve their lives. Today, we have 47 municipal delivery bodies in Ontario—that's in addition to the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services—replicating the same tasks and operating the same systems 47 times over. This structure takes away time from municipal staff, who could be spending time helping clients access the supports and achieve more independence. Meanwhile, the people who come looking for assistance must navigate a complex web of processes to get help. We owe it to those individuals and families to do better.

That's why we're undertaking the first meaningful reform of social assistance since the introduction of Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. We worked for months with municipalities to design our new vision for social assistance, and in February of this year, we introduced Recovery and Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation. Bringing this shared vision to life will mean connecting people to the supports they need and helping them get and stay on a path to greater independence and employment where possible.

At the core of this plan is a new provincial-municipal delivery model for social assistance that looks at roles not along the traditional program lines of Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program, but around which government can best provide the service to get the best results for the individuals. The province will focus on overseeing financial assistance, making it quick and easy for eligible individuals to access the system. At the same time, our municipal partners are going to use their expertise in delivering person-centred casework and their knowledge of local community supports to provide all of the activities that support people on a pathway to greater independence and employment. Our goal is to develop an improved social assistance program that takes the administrative burden off local front-line workers so they can spend more time helping their clients connect to community supports that are going to get them ready for jobs.

By providing recipients with a range of services and wrap-around supports that respond to their unique needs and address barriers to success, we'll be able to help them move towards employment and independence, and help the economy recover from the COVID-19 crisis.

Our vision is bold, but bold change is needed at this time. I'm pleased to share with this committee that we already are making progress on this new vision. Just last week, the Legislature passed Bill 276, the Supporting Recovery and Competitiveness Act, 2021, which included amendments to the Ontario Works Act that will enable improvements as we move through co-design with our municipal partners. This really has been a collaborative effort in working through the co-design process with AMO and our municipal partners in this sector. The

Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development has also launched three prototypes as we moved forward with our work to strengthen employment services for those on social assistance.

As the Auditor General has highlighted, the current system hasn't been working well for social assistance recipients. In fact, only 1% of people on social assistance were finding employment every month—1%. That's even before the pandemic. I hope we can get a chance to talk at committee about this new model, which will be easy to use. It will be more localized. It's going to create better outcomes for workers and communities.

1640

The members in the official opposition might be interested in the fact that in BC, John Horgan's NDP government also moved to an outcomes-based model, and their counterparts have had nothing but good things to say about this model. The NDP Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, Shane Simpson, said, the system will "make it easier for more people to find good, stable jobs so they can provide for themselves and their families."

I look forward to sharing more about the progress that we're making on these and many other initiatives, if we're provided the opportunity.

To support individuals receiving social assistance during the pandemic, our ministry provided \$111 million in emergency funding for social assistance recipients through a temporary emergency benefit that helped more than 250,000 Ontario Works and ODSP recipients with extra costs associated and related to COVID-19, like food, cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment. ODSP and OW recipients continue to have access to one-time funding for extraordinary COVID-19 costs through the government's discretionary benefit program.

As we move forward, we'll continue to work with our partners to bring our vision into focus. By working collaboratively with municipal and sector partners, we'll create a system that helps people move towards employment and independence, and participate more fully in their communities.

Another key priority for our ministry and our government is the Black youth action plan. We know that many young Black Ontarians face systemic barriers when it comes to achieving their academic and career goals. We also know that they're among those who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it's inequality or early life disadvantages, Black youth are statistically more likely to be unemployed and come from homes with lower incomes compared to their peers. They're less likely to attend post-secondary education and more likely to face punitive measures within the academic system. The Black youth action plan was created to combat these systemic issues and to build pathways to academic and career success.

Last year, the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity, along with our community opportunities advocate Jamil Jivani, held virtual meetings with families, community members, service providers and business leaders to

examine the effectiveness of these programs and where there's room for improvement in the Black youth action plan. They listened to experiences, ideas and recommendations for how this program could be improved. And we didn't just listen, we acted. Over the next three years, we're investing \$60 million to renew and expand the Black youth action plan. This money is going to go to renewing and refining existing programming. Based on what we heard from the community during consultations, it will fund the creation of a new economic empowerment stream, providing targeted investments aimed at improving economic outcomes for Black youth, communities and businesses. Through this investment, we can build a more inclusive economy and an Ontario where everybody has the chance to succeed.

As I mentioned earlier, Associate Minister Dunlop has brought much-needed awareness to the issues of violence against women and human trafficking and has led our government's commitment to preventing and addressing violence against women in all its forms.

Sadly, the incidence of gender-based violence and domestic violence has increased during the pandemic, so it's critical during this time that residential service providers that help people experiencing violence have the security they need to continue supporting vulnerable women. That's why we spent \$54 million in 2020-21 as part of our COVID-19 Residential Relief Fund to address increased residential costs experienced by service providers. This includes emergency shelters that support women and children experiencing gender-based violence and residential sites for survivors of human trafficking.

To further support victims of gender-based violence during the pandemic, including domestic violence and survivors of human trafficking, our government invested \$1.5 million in one-time funding to help front-line gender-based violence counselling agencies to adapt to remote service delivery and support continued operation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We're also working to increase access to safe and affordable housing and provide supports to women and children fleeing violence who are experiencing homelessness during COVID-19. In fact, our budget includes an investment of \$18.5 million over three years, beginning this year, in the Transitional and Housing Support Program, to help victims of domestic violence and survivors of human trafficking find and maintain affordable housing and then transition to independence.

Human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing crimes worldwide. Ontario is a hub for human trafficking in our country, and it has the most police-reported incidents of human trafficking in Canada. Every day, offenders are preying on our children and youth for the purpose of sexual exploitation, a crime that robs them of their health and safety and has a devastating impact on the lives of victims, families and communities across Ontario.

I'm really proud of the work that Minister Dunlop and Minister Jones and our government have done to create a comprehensive \$307-million, five-year strategy to combat human trafficking and child exploitation. This is the

largest strategy in Canada and reflects the valuable input that we heard from survivors of human trafficking, Indigenous communities and Indigenous-led organizations, law enforcement and front-line service providers. It's a comprehensive action plan focused on raising awareness through training and public awareness campaigns, empowering front-line service providers to prevent human trafficking before it occurs, supporting survivors through specialized services and giving law enforcement the tools and resources they need to hold offenders accountable.

We were also able to pass legislation that ensures that no matter who is governing, Ontario will have an anti-human trafficking strategy and will be fighting to end this crime. This is the first of its kind in Canada and shows our government's dedication to eradicating such a terrible crime from our province and, hopefully, our country.

Lastly, I will briefly touch on our ministry's plans to redesign the child welfare system in Ontario. Our vision is for an Ontario where every child and youth who is in care or who is receiving services from a children's aid society has the supports they need to succeed.

To that end, last July, Minister Dunlop announced Ontario's strategy to redesign the child welfare system. The strategy was developed following broad engagement with youth, families, caregivers, Indigenous partners, front-line workers, lawyers and child welfare sector leaders, as well as an external review of the child welfare system. It focuses on transforming child and family services to strengthen families and communities through prevention, early intervention and seeking more permanent homes for children and youth when they cannot stay in their homes or communities. It's also aimed at improving education and employment outcomes for children and youth in care.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. Todd Smith: We want to make sure that children and youth know they matter, their opinions matter and their rights matter. That's why we created the children and young persons' rights resource to allow anyone, especially those impacted by the system, to learn about youth rights in simple and easy-to-understand language.

We're also reaching out to engage children and youth to hear what they have to say about redesigning how youth leave care. Their participation will be critical in helping to design a new framework to better support them as they transition from care to adulthood. Fundamentally, the changes we make are meant to lift up those who need help, without shame and without fear.

We want children and youth in care to know they're not alone, that we're committed to continue listening and collaborating with them and that we'll continue putting them at the heart of all that we do so that we can build the child welfare system that they and their families need and deserve.

That's why, to address the overrepresentation of Black children and youth, we invested \$650,000 last year into One Vision, One Voice, a project led by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. It supports culturally

appropriate service delivery for Black and African children, youth and families involved in the child welfare system.

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We've also invested an additional \$1.5 million annually in the Education Liaison Program, bringing the total program investment to \$5 million annually.

I'm really proud to say that Wabaseemoong Independent Nations is the first Indigenous community in Canada to have their customary care code come into force through the federal legislation, and while we're making changes to our child welfare system to benefit children, youth and families today, we expect the changes we make to positively impact generations to come as well.

I'm confident that our commitment to work with the communities we serve on each and every one of these efforts I spoke about today is going to ensure our changes have a significant impact for years to come. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you, and that is right to two seconds left. Would you like to use that two seconds?

Hon. Todd Smith: I'm good. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you, Minister.

And now over to the official opposition. MPP Gretzky, I understand you will be speaking on behalf of the opposition.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Yes. Thank you for recognizing me on the Zoom call.

This is a large file, so there are four critics from the official opposition. My colleague Joel Harden from Ottawa Centre, who is the accessibility and persons with disabilities critic, will be joining tomorrow afternoon. My colleague Jill Andrew from Toronto—St. Paul's will be joining next week to do some questions on women's issues. My colleague Teresa Armstrong is here today to be asking some questions on children and youth. My portion of the critic portfolio is the community and social services, so developmental services, family responsibility and social assistance.

While I'm going to leave most of my time today to my colleague Teresa Armstrong, I just wanted to start. I'm going to be doing questions tomorrow on my part of this portfolio. But I wanted to start by saying, in listening to the minister's opening remarks, if you are listening to the people living in this province, the families of individuals and the individuals with developmental disabilities, if you are listening to the people who are trying to survive on social assistance, whether that is Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program, what they are all telling you loud and clear is that this is not working for them, that they—especially individuals on social assistance—are not receiving enough money to live with dignity, the very thing that you say you are trying to empower people to have—dignity and the freedoms that many of us enjoy. They are telling you loud and clear that this program leaves them living in deep, abject poverty, and so while you are talking about a transformation of the system, you are actually leaving these people behind.

During this pandemic, the minister had talked about the pandemic and the extra support they have given to the individuals on social assistance. I want to be clear for anybody out there who is watching, who is not clear: with the Ontario Disability Support Program—these are individuals with disabilities—57% of them did not receive the emergency funding, because they were not notified that there was funding, or they did not qualify for the funding. They couldn't get hold of their workers during this pandemic, because often many of them were working remotely, which made it difficult—and that is not a slight on the workers; they need to be safe. But it made it very difficult for individuals to reach their workers. When we talk about modernizing the system and doing a lot of digital, many people in my community and across this province throughout this pandemic were not able to either afford a cell-phone or Internet access. They can't afford a TV. Some can't afford a phone, an old-fashioned land line. Many municipalities were shutting down public spaces where these individuals would actually be able to go to access a computer, such as libraries. And again, they did not have access to their workers. They couldn't just walk in and have their workers help them with this.

I just want to make that very clear to the minister, that while you're talking about transformation and you were talking like this is a fantastic thing that you're all doing, the people that system is meant to serve are getting left behind. While we hear them on this side of the House—well, I guess, in opposition; I'm not in the House today—but while we are hearing them, it's very clear to them that they're not being heard by the people who are making the decisions.

Also, if you were listening to the individuals with developmental disabilities or their families, you would know that with the well over two-decades-long wait-list for supportive housing, any investment that has been made so far has not been enough. I have heard from numerous families—and I know the minister has as well—whose adult children with developmental disabilities have spent two years or more in a psychiatric intensive care unit at a hospital because there was no housing for them, and if you talk to individuals on social assistance, they'll tell you the same thing. The reason that we have to invest in shelters and in food banks is because these individuals do not get enough income monthly to be able to keep a roof over their head, to be able to put food on the table for themselves or for their children. Again, I say to the minister, while we're talking about what a wonderful job you're doing, the reality on the ground is that this is not good enough, and I'll raise some concerns when I have my opportunity to do questions tomorrow.

If you talk to individuals with disabilities, whether that is a physical disability or a developmental disability—the government hasn't addressed the triage protocol that was brought in or talked about, floated, and has been implemented in some places where people with disabilities are being put in a position where they may not have had life-saving medical treatment because someone like myself, with more abilities, has been deemed to have a better

quality of life, that I am more worthy of receiving that life-saving care than someone with a disability. That's something that needs to be addressed.

Lastly, what I'm going to say before I turn it over to my colleague from London—Fanshawe, MPP Armstrong, is that when you are talking about people with developmental disabilities, they expect and deserve the same rights as everyone else. They have the right to be fully included in our community.

The visitor restrictions that were brought in at the beginning of the pandemic and are still in place—because I'm still hearing from families where they cannot access their children who are living in group homes, whether they are under 18 or over 18. They still do not have that safe, meaningful, consistent access to their children nor do their children have access to their caregivers, and that is wrong. They have a right to have that access to their essential caregivers. They were left off of the priority list. They were not a top priority to be vaccinated and therefore were often left homebound. They were left as shut-ins, unable to participate in their communities. I think those are all important points to begin this conversation with.

With that, I look forward to my time to be able to ask questions on many of these topics. I'm going to hand the floor over to my colleague MPP Armstrong.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you, MPP Gretzky. I also want to extend thanks to the minister, senior staff and other colleagues as well as the Legislative Assembly staff, who have been working so hard on estimates so that we can have the opportunity to hear presentations and ask questions of the government with regard to our portfolios.

As I'm the critic for children, community and social services, I wanted to focus on a few of the areas that I have been privileged to talk about with people who are experiencing some of these programs—specifically, autism. The minister did talk about autism, and he did mention the pilot project that they had invested \$600 million in just last year. Now, there are many, many questions that families have brought forward. We have tabled questions specifically on this program. We have met with the ministry before and asked for answers to specific questions and, unfortunately, we haven't gotten those answers for families. So I hope today, Minister and senior staff, that we're able to get to the root of those answers for families that are so concerned about what this is going to look like for them in the future.

My first question is that you had said that you invested \$600 million into the OAP program. Was all the \$600 million spent last year, and how much of that went directly into therapy? And one last question on this subject is, how much of that has gone into at least maintaining capacity levels pre-pandemic?

1700

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks very much. I'm happy to take your questions today, MPP Armstrong, on this very important file. We're supporting families during the transition to this new program. As well, I wouldn't call it a pilot project, I would call it a gold standard Ontario Autism Program that's going to meet the needs of families right across the province, something that clearly wasn't

happening under the previous Liberal program that only provided support to 25% of families that have children with autism. I can tell you right now 36,000 families are receiving support through existing behaviour plans and childhood plans, budgets and interim funding as well—that's more than three times, at any time, during the previous government's record on this file.

I do feel that we should remind the committee—and I thank MPP Armstrong for acknowledging the fact that we have increased the size of the Ontario autism budget from \$300 million to \$600 million; that's doubling, obviously, the size of the OAP. And the one thing that we're doing right now, and one thing that we have done since I've been on this file since the summer of 2019, is we've taken the time to work with those in the sector to develop the best program in the entire country.

Clinicians, academics, researchers, families with children with autism, advocates, members of the Ontario Autism Coalition were all involved in that summer of 2019, developing all of the recommendations—more than 100 of them—that are now forming the foundation of the new OAP and various pieces and various recommendations have been fulfilled. We're continuing to work on all of those recommendations from that panel. The implementation working group is one of the recommendations: that there be this group of clinicians, researchers, advocates and family members making the difficult decisions on this file. We're committed to spending \$600 million every year on this program.

Maybe at this point it would be a good time to bring in my assistant deputy minister, Jennifer Morris, on just why the autism program that has been developed—and I think it's really important to just drive this point home: This Ontario Autism Program has been developed by the autism community. All of those people sitting around that table in 2019, the people who are continuing to work every day with the implementation working group, these are clinicians, these are service providers in the sector. They're researchers and advocates. This is a program that has been developed by the autism community for the autism community.

I'll bring in ADM Morris at this time, and maybe she can pick up on where the money has been spent. As I indicated, there are now 36,000 families that are receiving support; at the height of the Liberal program there were 10,000.

So, ADM Morris, I can see you there, if you want to take over from there.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Excuse me, before—ADM Morris, I totally want to hear your contribution but I do want to just repeat the question: If all the \$600 million was spent last year, and how much of that went directly into therapy, and how much of that has gone into at least maintaining capacity levels pre-pandemic.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you for the question, MPP Armstrong. Jennifer Morris, assistant deputy minister, children with special needs division, Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

In 2019-20, the minister has noted the government invested an additional \$278 million in the province's

autism program, bringing the total amount of funding to \$600 million annually. And in December 2019, the government committed to providing interim one-time funding to all families who are registered on the autism wait-list as of March 31, 2020. That was a total of about 22,000 families at that time.

As a result of the impact COVID has had on families, the ministry took a number of actions over the last year to support families in accessing the funds. We extended the deadline to access to register and be eligible for that interim funding by a full year, to March 31, 2021, so that anyone registered by that date would have access to the interim one-time funding. We also extended the time frame that families had to spend their funding by six months to maximize the flexibility and the time available to spend their money.

In addition, we also contracted with Autism Ontario to support families directly and through workshops to help them register for the program and access the therapeutic services or program supplies they were seeking. We were quite committed to families being supported to access their funds so they could purchase the services and supports they needed, particularly during COVID, and we know they've been under incredible strain.

As the minister has noted, more than 36,000 children now are receiving support through behaviour plans, through childhood budgets and through one-time funding. We don't prescribe how families use that money. Families can choose how they spend the money based on the needs of their children. Some will use it on therapy; some will use it on program supplies. We won't have a view of that, MPP Armstrong, until those expense forms come in, so I can't specifically answer your question around how much of that funding to families has gone to clinical and therapeutic services, but we will know that over time as those expense forms come in.

However, despite the availability of the funds this year and our commitment and support to families to get it into their pockets so they could spend it on their children, there are several factors that influenced program spending in the past year. COVID obviously was number one. There was an impact on service providers. We know that to help contain the spread of COVID, some service providers had disruptions to their programming. To address those service disruptions and to continue to support families, the ministry provided additional clarity and tried to loosen the restrictions around eligible expenses, again to give families as much flexibility as possible during that period where they could not access services.

The spending was also influenced by the number of families who accepted or renewed their funding, and we've seen this across all of our direct funding programs. So while we assume when the offer was made that close to 100% of families would come and access the funds, the reality is it has been much lower than that. Only about 74%, 75% of families have come to access their funding, and that's despite the fact that we contact every single family three times, two ways, and the supports that we have available through Autism Ontario.

Even if the 90-day deadline period on a family's invitation to apply for one-time funding has expired, we continue to honour those invitations regardless of when families come forward—again, maximum flexibility and a lot of work on the part of the ministry and service providers to try to reach families so they could access this funding.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Sorry. Did you address how much of that has gone into at least maintaining capacity levels of pre-pandemic?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Last year, we provided service providers—essentially keeping them whole as they transition to the new service delivery model this year. This year, we have provided significant transition funding to both our legacy service providers but also their subcontractors. There's probably about 20 legacy service providers and about the same number of subcontractors that deliver services to children with autism and their families, and all of those agencies have been provided with significant transition funding to maintain/retain their clinical capacity, build their capacity to shift to the new service delivery model this year and to support their ongoing operations.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you so much, ADM Morris. As this is estimates committee, I wanted to ask if those numbers that you referred to were available, for that question.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: For the transition funding?

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: No. For how much has gone into maintaining capacity levels pre-pandemic?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: I can tell you that in 2021-22, about \$43 million is going to our legacy service providers to maintain capacity, and an additional investment is being made to build capacity in new providers. That would include public and private providers who will be delivering services in the new program. So it's two-part capacity-building in the coming year.

1710

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: So legacy was \$43 million, and I'm sorry, what was the new capacity-building amount?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: I believe it's close to \$20 million.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. How many centres that provide therapy have remained open since the pandemic came upon us?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: I think they're all operating now. They're operating typically now in a hybrid model, still delivering a number of services virtually, but I believe all of them are doing in-person visits now too, following all the public health guidelines and protocols.

In the initial period of COVID, in the first wave, most shut down for a period of time and then they ramped up their virtual and alternative service delivery models, which we supported them through financial flexibility to develop. They developed some extremely promising models, frankly, that we think have some real merit in continuing going forward, particularly as it relates to the services that can be delivered virtually and the opportunity we have to reach many, many more families, particularly in remote

and underserved areas, with virtual service delivery models. I believe they are all operating now, in person and virtual.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: In particular, as you mentioned, underserved and remote areas—I hear that from many families up north in remote areas and underserved areas, and they describe that they have to drive for hours, sometimes a day, and spend money on expenses for hotels, which then doesn't affect their child in a positive way because, of course, a child with autism, moving them from their home to different surroundings, it's a lot of work sometimes—actually, all the time. The parents or a parent has to book time off work to take the child to therapy hours or days away and spend two or three days there in a hotel so that they can get a benefit of having that therapy, because obviously, logistically, to drive that far for a few hours of sessions and back isn't a reality for them.

Can you speak to how many centres remained open and how many centres are providing these services in the northern part of Ontario?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: I believe there are four primary legacy service providers in northern Ontario, and they would have a number of subcontracted agencies that would deliver services on their behalf. Going forward, we expect that number will increase as we roll out new streams of the autism program, including our early years services, our urgent response services. We will have more service providers engaged in those programs.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I'm going to go a little off topic and talk a little bit about the north specifically. I think the number is 41 families are under the pilot program in the north, if I'm not mistaken, and you can correct me if that's the wrong number.

For those 41 families, what kind of services are they able to access when it comes to therapy or rehab, and how are you collecting that data when it comes to the north compared to different regions? Because what I've heard is the capacity in the north is nowhere near what they need.

There is again the expense of travelling, the expense of a hotel, even meals, which then eats into a lot of their income. A lot of these families have said that the amount of funding received doesn't meet the needs of their children, and they stop working. They're also taking out lines of credit on their homes, if they're able to, in order to support their child's therapy needs. If you can speak to the north, about the 41 families that are in your pilot program and how you are going to collect that data when the capacity is definitely an issue there.

I want to add in, will you make those pilot project results public? Because a lot of these families that I've met with and the stakeholders want to see the information that was collected. They want to see the data and the evidence at the end of the outcomes and how the ministry got to that information before they roll out what the program is going to look like.

Hon. Todd Smith: Just before ADM Morris answers that, MPP Armstrong, I wanted to point out—and thank you, as well, for pointing out the fact—that we do have 41 families across the north that are participating in the

rollout of the needs-based therapy program in Ontario. The reason there are that many is because we wanted to ensure as we were rolling this out that we were reaching families and children with autism right across the province, so that we could get the information that we needed to then proceed to the next stage, and that is bringing in thousands of children into the new needs-based Ontario Autism Program.

At the same time, we took a lot of time with those who volunteered on the panel and members of the implementation working group in implementing those 100-plus recommendations to ensure that this is the most robust autism program in the country with all different services. You'll recall that the previous program under the Liberal government was really only about ABA. This now includes mental health supports; it includes speech-language pathology; it includes occupational therapy and behavioural supports and ABA. It really is the most robust program by far in the entire country, and we wanted to ensure that we had people and families represented from right across the province.

I will send it to over to ADM Morris to answer your question.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, MPP Armstrong. A couple of points I'd like to raise: There are three northern capacity-building pilot programs that we have been supporting in the north with legacy autism service providers in the north, and they've been doing exactly what you have described, which is creating new models of service delivery to maximize the clinical capacity that's available and to match children with that clinical capacity.

There is a new service delivery partnership that has been developed in the north. There are upwards of 15 service providers that are engaged in that partnership, so when children come forward, agencies can connect them much more readily with available clinical support. Those projects are continuing in the coming year, as well, and to your point around travel, they will be looking at different ways of getting services to families through mobile access and other methods.

I did also want to draw reference to a survey of the special-needs workforce that we conducted in 2020. It was intended to get out the information you are seeking, which is what is the supply of clinical capacity, particularly in the north and other underserved and remote areas, in order for us to very specifically target strategies that would address that.

There were some promising things we learned from that, however, that I would like to point out. It was a voluntary survey, but we had far more survey participants from the north than we had from other regions of the province, so we got a pretty good sense of where there is capacity and where we may want to address or target additional work. In particular, for behaviour analysis, which is probably the most sought-after clinical intervention for a family with a child of autism, 45% of the behaviour analysts in the north said they had some capacity to take on new clients.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Additionally, 25% of the speech-language pathologists in the north had capacity to take on more clients. Similarly, 25% of the occupational therapists in the north had capacity to take on new clients. So we are using this information to now determine where the clients are, where the clinicians are, what the strategies are that we need to support, what the work is that the service providers need to support in order to connect those services to those families. But it was a more hopeful starting point in the north than we had originally anticipated.

That workforce analysis is going to be an ongoing piece of work, and will be tied to modelling that we will do to determine how much clinical capacity we need in various parts of the province based on where children are waiting for service currently.

1720

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I know there's only a short bit of time, so I'm going to ask the question quickly about the north. I've also had families express that they need expenses covered when it comes to travel. Is that something the ministry would be entertaining separate from having funding directly for therapy so that families can access it? It's great to say that therapy is out there, but if families can't put that money out ahead of time, that expense to get to the therapy, it's not helpful. I would ask if the minister is even considering that kind of expense separate from what's already there so that they can serve the parents in order to make sure their kids get the therapies they need.

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks for that question. This really is why this 600-child rollout is really important as well, so we can ensure that we're getting the feedback we need from families and the clinicians who are working with these young people, and the supports they need.

I guess we don't have time to throw it to ADM Morris. I'm seeing the Chair give us the wrap-it-up signal, so I will wrap it up, and we'll pick this up later. Sorry, MPP Armstrong.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you, Minister. You will now have 30 minutes for your reply.

Hon. Todd Smith: While my earlier remarks provided a high-level overview of our ministry's efforts to respond to COVID-19 while continuing to modernize and improve services for Ontarians, I'd now like to highlight some more specific initiatives that have been implemented and key investments my ministry has made and will continue to make to support our province's pandemic recovery. Our focus has been on supporting the province's most vulnerable, who have been impacted by COVID-19. An important part of that response has been the hard work of social service providers across the province—work I've been proud to support over the past 15 months.

Our government acted immediately in March 2020 with the introduction of \$200 million in funding through the social services relief fund to support municipalities and social service providers and to help them cope with growing demands and the extraordinary circumstances posed by COVID-19. Since then, our investment in the social

services relief fund has more than tripled, to \$765 million. These funds have helped municipalities and social service providers such as shelters, food banks, emergency services, charities and non-profits continue to deliver their critical services, hire additional staff and find ways to promote social distancing and self-isolation and keep clients safe and healthy.

To ensure these funds were provided to those who were best equipped to help, social services relief funding was delivered to municipalities and service system managers who could distribute funding based on the needs in their community. This investment also provided additional funding for temporary emergency assistance for those in financial crisis who do not receive social assistance.

In addition to the social services relief fund, we've also made targeted investments to support those most impacted by the pandemic. Within a matter of days, our government provided Feed Ontario with \$8 million in additional funding. Feed Ontario stepped up to the plate, and they used this funding for their COVID-19 Emergency Food Box initiative, which produced and distributed pre-packaged hampers to food banks right across the province to support those in need.

We saw the Ontario spirit during this time as well, with the Retail Council of Canada providing the boxes and all the packaging materials Feed Ontario needed to get as many boxes out the door as possible. Every single box and roll of tape was donated by these companies, including Lowe's, Peavey Industries, Staples, Best Buy, Canadian Tire and Home Depot. Within days, hundreds of thousands of boxes were delivered to food banks across the province.

As a result of the province-wide school closures, the Student Nutrition Program, which falls under my ministry as well, also had to find new ways to support families and the students at our schools. By making new investments, we were able to help these programs adapt and introduce new local approaches to meal delivery, including distributing grocery gift cards or delivering food boxes.

I had the chance to visit one of the distribution centres in Peterborough last summer with MPP Dave Smith. The volunteers were working day in and day out, making sure they had hampers packed and grocery cards ready to go. I met teachers and principals who were volunteering their time throughout the summer months to make these deliveries themselves and check in on their students and their families. While this has been an extremely difficult time for many families, it has been inspiring to see people come together for the well-being of our neighbours.

We're also investing \$26 million to support Indigenous peoples, including emergency assistance for urban Indigenous people in financial need. This also includes \$10 million to support First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners and urban Indigenous service providers with COVID-19 and related emergency response initiatives that promote community health and well-being.

And through the COVID-19 Emergency Fund for Black Children, Youth and Families, the ministry is spending \$3.7 million to help Black communities address the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19. This funding is providing urgent supports to children, youth and families,

including housing needs, food security, access to technology and mental health supports.

Before I move forward, there is another group of staff that I would like to acknowledge, and that's the staff working at our congregate living settings, including those for children with complex needs and people with developmental disabilities, children and youth in care, and emergency shelters for women and families fleeing domestic violence, and survivors of human trafficking. These front-line staff have done and continue to do incredible work each and every day to support our province's most vulnerable.

We knew that we had to take immediate action to ensure both staff and those residing in congregate living settings were supported and kept safe. I have to say, our relationship with the developmental services sector has been an incredible one. Without their open and honest communication, we wouldn't have been able to act in the way that we did to get PPE into our homes, ensure staff were being supported and allow parents and families to communicate with their children or loved ones. Thanks to leaders in this sector, we were able to act quickly. Brad Saunders of Community Living Toronto, Chris Beesley of Community Living Ontario, Geoff McMullen of OASIS, Janet Noel-Annable of Christian Horizons and Bryan Keshen of Reena, just to name a few, have been outstanding resources over the last 15 months.

Last summer, I had the chance to partake in outdoor socially distanced visits with quite a few of these organizations, and the staff really are heroes with the way that they've kept COVID-19 at the door.

Our government, alongside these organizations, took immediate action to protect the residents in these settings and the staff who care for them through the introduction of the COVID-19 Action Plan for Vulnerable People. This plan builds on our investments, including spending \$54 million in 2021 through the COVID-19 Residential Relief Fund, the COVID-19 community supports fund and \$30 million in funding to support infection prevention and control measures over the next two years. This funding has enabled agencies to access additional staffing, respite for caregivers, personal protective equipment and supplies as well as funding to cover costs to support physical distancing, transportation and additional cleaning.

Our government has also built an incredible partnership with the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies to procure and distribute PPE for congregate living settings across the province. To date, the ministry has shipped more than 31 million pieces of PPE, including gloves, gowns, face shields and more.

Our government recognizes the essential role that front-line staff—the majority of whom are women—are playing during the pandemic in providing daily living assistance and care for those in need in these settings as well as part of day programming services and at-home care. Through our Temporary Wage Enhancements Program, our ministry is providing \$3 per hour for approximately 60,000 eligible workers in children, community and social services, providing personal direct support services for the

activities of daily living. To date, our ministry has invested more than \$426 million in additional funding for wages through the pandemic pay and temporary wage enhancement programs.

We're also taking action to support people with developmental disabilities and children with special needs outside of residential settings. Earlier, I spoke about Journey to Belonging: Choice and Inclusion, the ministry's long-term vision for developmental services in Ontario. During our engagement sessions, we heard that people and families want to see changes now while we build supports for the future. That's why our plan includes making immediate changes over the next year to improve access and reduce barriers for people and families. We want to make it easier for people to access services, so we're improving the application process by providing more information about what to expect during the application, the intake and assessment process, how and when they might receive service and who to connect with if they don't receive immediate support. We will also reduce assessment wait times by providing more training and supports for Developmental Services Ontario offices, and we'll continue to provide options for people to have assessments virtually or in person, and pilot tools to book assessments online.

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To support individuals during COVID, we introduced funding flexibility through the Passport Program. That has allowed people to purchase technology-related supports. We will review these elements to evaluate which of them to make permanent. We will also support people to make it easier to submit expense claims online for quicker reimbursement, and provide clear guidelines to help people better plan how they spend their funding.

Another area of focus has been the implementation of the needs-based Ontario Autism Program, taking advantage of our increased \$600-million investment. Together with the implementation working group, we're working extremely hard on the rollout of this groundbreaking program designed by the autism community, for the autism community. We're making significant progress with the launch of core clinical services. To date, we've already issued invitations to 1,000 children and families from all regions of the province, including northern Ontario.

This work builds on significant progress to date, including the launch of foundational family services and calls for applications for the independent intake organization, the entry to school program and caregiver-mediated early years programs. The implementation working group has provided significant input to the government on a number of key design elements. We continue to consider the vital feedback we receive from families as we move forward.

Under core clinical services in the new program, families will have access to a broad range of clinical services, as I was mentioning earlier: applied behaviour analysis, speech-language therapy, occupational therapy and, for the first time, mental health services and supports. As recommended by experts and the community, a care coordinator will work with families to understand their

child's strengths, needs and priority goals. This process will result in an Ontario Autism Program funding allocation for core clinical services.

The determination-of-needs process will be completed with each family at least annually to help ensure their child's profile of need is current and reflects their child's changing needs over time. Beyond core clinical services, children and youth will also be able to access foundational family services and urgent response services when required, as well as caregiver-mediated early years programs and the Entry to School Program for young children. We're committed to supporting families as we transition to this needs-based program, which I am confident will be the gold standard across the country.

In December 2019, our government committed to providing interim funding for all families who registered for the program as of March 31, 2020. We recognize that during the pandemic, families are spending more time at home and many don't have access to their normal supports as we all work to stop the spread of COVID-19. As a result, we extended this opportunity to access interim funding for an additional year. We're also offering families who received a childhood budget or interim funding additional interim funding to purchase eligible services and supports they feel are most appropriate for their child. To date, more than 36,000 children are receiving support through existing behaviour plans, childhood budgets and interim funding. That's three times more children than ever before.

Our government is also looking forward as we prepare for Ontario's economic recovery from COVID-19, including helping people get back to work. In December of last year, 2020, we released Ontario's new five-year poverty reduction strategy, Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario. Before developing our new strategy, the government received input from the public and stakeholders, including through an online consultation that received almost 2,600 responses and almost 300 written submissions.

Our strategy will help support Ontario's economic recovery by connecting people experiencing poverty with training, health and other supports, to help them on a pathway to jobs and financial stability, while helping people keep more of their hard-earned money. In the short term, it's about connecting people to opportunities and making life more affordable. In the long term, it's about empowering people so economic downturns are less likely to lead to poverty. The strategy recognizes the different experiences of poverty and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on certain populations, including youth, women, Black and other racialized communities, and Indigenous people. The strategy also emphasizes the collective need for collaboration between the province, federal government, municipalities, Indigenous partners, non-profit organizations and the private sector to address poverty. We're taking an all-of-government approach that breaks down silos, builds on the government's COVID-19 response and leverages initiatives already under way across government.

The 2021 budget includes several investments that support the poverty reduction strategy, and these include:

- improving mental health and addiction services through the Roadmap to Wellness, supported by \$3.8 billion over 10 years to create a coordinated mental health system that supports people to reach their potential in all aspects of their lives. This includes \$12.8 million to expand and enhance community-based mental health supports and services for Indigenous peoples. This is being done in collaboration with Indigenous partners and through targeted programs focused on Indigenous children and youth;

- more than \$117 million for targeted employment and training supports to assist women, racialized individuals, Indigenous peoples, youth and people with disabilities who are facing the highest rate of unemployment during the pandemic;

- an additional \$2.8 billion in broadband infrastructure, bringing our total investment to more than \$4 billion, to help ensure that every region in the province has access to reliable Internet service by 2025; and

- support for local community initiatives, like our \$60-million investment in the Black youth action plan, as well as our Youth Opportunities Fund and our Resilient Communities Fund, which I'll take this opportunity to talk more about.

The Black youth action plan involves several prevention-focused initiatives specifically designed to support Black children, youth and families in target communities across the province. These programs are developed with community organizations to address the systemic issues that affect Black communities in a way that responds to local needs. This includes mentorship programs, career development and training programs focused on reducing income and employment disparities among Black youth and young professionals.

As I mentioned earlier, the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity held virtual consultation sessions with over 200 community stakeholders. The Premier's council consultations informed how our enhanced Black youth action plan investment of \$60 million over three years will support pathways for lifelong social and economic success. These pathways include:

- refining focus to better support Black communities to thrive and achieve economic success;

- expanding government partnerships, particularly with businesses in high-growth sectors, to increase economic inclusion and address systemic barriers;

- enhancing educational outcomes for Black children and youth; and

- increasing labour market participation through entrepreneurship and trades.

Additionally, we're working closely with community partners, including Black-led community agencies, and the private sector to strengthen communities and help youth to feel safe and supported in their neighbourhoods. Only by working together will we be able to provide the supports and services that Black children and youth need to help them be successful.

Another important and successful program that supports youth in our province is our Youth Opportunities Fund. This fund provides grants and capacity-building supports to local community-driven, community-serving and youth-led projects that improve outcomes for youth facing multiple barriers. The fund supports initiatives that help young people build the skills they need to stay engaged in school, advance their skills, build strong and healthy peer relationships and navigate resources in their communities.

The Youth Opportunities Fund provides funding through three granting streams. Through the youth innovation stream, we're empowering and supporting youth who are facing multiple barriers with the resources they need to design and deliver their own new and inspiring solutions to the issues that matter to them and their communities. Through the family innovations stream, we're supporting local, community-led groups delivering culturally relevant projects that empower and support parents, guardians and caregivers who face barriers. Through the system innovation stream, we support organizations that are strengthening the quality and responsiveness of systems so that they work better for young people facing multiple barriers.

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Last year, we invested over \$13 million to support 43 great community projects under these streams, including Black Moms Connection, which provides programs that build economic empowerment for Black mothers in Peel, Durham and Toronto; Earthling Art Collective, which helps youth leaving care and the justice system in Thunder Bay to access mentorship opportunities and develop new skill sets; and Miziwe Biik Aboriginal Employment and Training, which helps Indigenous youth in the GTA access employment and training opportunities in the skilled trades. I expect to announce the projects receiving grants this year in the near future.

I'd now like to speak about investments we're making to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place to serve communities across the province. I did talk very briefly, earlier, about our government's investment of \$240 million over four years for early intervention and special-needs services. We know that early access to rehabilitation services contributes to better outcomes, and we know that this investment will significantly increase access to clinical assessment and rehabilitation programs.

More than 110,000 children and youth received one or more rehabilitation services inside children's treatment centres in 2019-20. An additional 68,000 children and youth receive school-based rehab services each year. With the number of families able to access these services set to increase, we know that many of our facilities are not properly equipped to support the volume of children, and that's why we're supporting the building of new and modernized facilities that will increase access to critical programs and treatments for children and their families, such as the new, 106,000-square-foot Grandview Children's Centre in Ajax which is expected to be completed in the 2024-25 fiscal year, helping thousands of children in the Durham region.

We're also building new facilities at Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, or CHEO, in Ottawa, and at the Children's Treatment Centre of Chatham-Kent. The new treatment centre in Ottawa, known locally as CHEO's 1Door4Care, will improve the lives of thousands of children in the local community. CHEO currently receives over 500,000 visits annually, but clinical services for children and youth with special needs are spread across numerous locations in the region. The new 200,000-square-foot facility will bring services from eight locations under one roof, making it easier for parents and families to access a range of care and receive critical programs and services such as developmental care, autism services and occupational therapy.

Residents of Chatham-Kent will benefit from a new 55,000-square-foot facility that will also streamline services from multiple locations into one accessible facility. The new centre will provide services that will be available to nearly 30,000 children and families each year. These builds will not only support children in these regions, but they're also going to be an excellent resource for surrounding communities.

We've made investments to support community agencies, including over \$3 million in 2021 towards the completion of the Lou Fruitman Reena Residence in York region. The Lou Fruitman residence delivers services and provides housing for individuals with developmental disabilities and other vulnerable people. The provincial investment supported accessibility enhancements for 30 units and programming space for employment services and wellness programs.

Just as important as investing in new builds is investing in repairs, renovations and upgrades at existing sites so agencies can focus on helping children and families who rely on their services. Last year, we invested more than \$8.7 million in about 300 different projects at agencies across Ontario—an investment I hope we can speak more about during our time here at committee.

I would also like to take the final few minutes that I have here to discuss a few programs that aren't often talked about at Queen's Park but which provide key services for people right across the province.

I'll start with intervenor services for Ontarians who are deaf-blind—both hearing and vision loss—making them among the most vulnerable people in the province. Deaf-blind people face significant challenges with accessing information and informed decision-making. They also face tremendous difficulty pursuing an education, trying to get a job, and participating in social and recreational activities. They have challenges with basic activities of daily living that most of us take for granted. An intervenor is a trained professional who acts as the eyes and ears of a person who is deaf-blind, providing specialized communication services and supports. They help bridge the gap between the person they're helping and their environment. We're helping to make these services more efficient and accessible for deaf-blind people no matter when they become deaf-blind or where they live in Ontario. Ontario is considered to have the most expansive program in the

country. Currently, we spend about \$40 million a year for the Intervenor Services Program, which, among other things, helps deaf-blind people participate in their communities, receive rehabilitative training and access after-hours emergency support when necessary. However, we must address the fact that for years under the previous system there has been a long-standing funding inequity, where those born deaf-blind are prioritized over those who acquire the disability later in life. That's why my ministry recently implemented a needs-based approach to funding intervenor services so that all requests for new and enhanced services are considered equitably.

We're also working to make it easier for people who are deaf-blind to access the services they need through the creation of a new leading-edge digital portal designed specifically to be accessible for those who are deaf-blind. And we have streamlined service delivery so Ontarians who are deaf-blind can access all available intervenor services in one place.

These overdue and important changes were developed in partnership with the intervenor services sector, including service providers and those who are deaf-blind.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to talk briefly about something I believe in very, very much, and that's the Soldiers' Aid Commission. Last fall, the Legislature passed Bill 202, the Soldiers' Aid Commission Act, to ensure the Soldiers' Aid Commission is extended to all eligible veterans, regardless of when and where they served, and their families. The new legislation gives the commission a clear mandate to administer an expanded financial assistance program for eligible Ontario veterans and their family members.

Our vets have made tremendous sacrifices to make Ontario and Canada great, and we need to be there when our veterans need us. Veterans and their families can face many challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder, physical injury, unemployment and, in some cases, homelessness.

To support the enhanced mandate of the commission, I'm pleased to say that the 2021-22 estimates for the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services includes an increased budget of \$1.5 million for the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

We will never forget the bravery and sacrifice of the members of our Armed Forces, and our government and our Premier will always be there to support them.

Lastly, I'd briefly like to talk about the Family Responsibility Office. FRO is always working to increase efficiency and address client service issues, with the goal of improving services for families. FRO recently introduced a new service model that engages new clients in a proactive onboarding process, which includes reaching out to all parties, explaining what the office does and its mandate and how to work together for the best possible outcome for the family. It also provides a tailored customer service experience—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Two minutes.

Hon. Todd Smith:—rather than the previous one-size-fits-all approach. It targets collection and enforcement

efforts to increase the number of payments received on time and improves collection of arrears. And FRO proactively engages clients and guides them through the support payment process, rather than reacting when clients contact the Family Responsibility Office about issues. We're confident that this new model will improve services for both the payer and the payee so that more money can get to families and children when they need that support. The Family Responsibility Office has done a magnificent job in using their current budget to find efficiencies within and provide a better service for the families that require their services. I know that MPP Armstrong, who was elected with me back in 2011, used to field many, many complaints about the Family Responsibility Office in her constituency office, and I certainly did too. The number of complaints has really diminished since we've made these changes to the way that FRO delivers services.

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I hope that we've been able to give you a better understanding of the wide range of initiatives and supports that my ministry provides. Day in and day out, our staff have been hard at work to support some of the province's most vulnerable, and our government will continue to be there to support them. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about our work and for your time and just thank all of those who work in all of these various divisions within the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, because we really are making a difference in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our province. Thank you for the opportunity, and I'll wrap it up there.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Thank you, Minister. We now go back to the official opposition. MPP Armstrong, you have 20 minutes.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: When you were speaking, Minister, it took me back to your radio days. You sounded like you were quite the announcer in your time.

Hon. Todd Smith: I'm glad you stayed awake for it, anyway.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Yes, I did. I listened intently, actually.

I want to continue my questions on the autism program, and I'm hoping to get through some that can be short answers. I had heard that there are 36,000 families receiving support right now, I think—both the minister and the ADM, if that's the number. And I heard that there are 22,000 families that are receiving interim funding right now. What I'd like to ask is, if those 22,000 families are receiving funding right now, has this number changed in the last two years, and how many new kids have been added?

Hon. Todd Smith: I'll get ADM Morris to pick up on the exact nature of your questions, and I know you want to do a rapid fire here. But I will tell you that 11,073 childhood budget invitations have been issued to date, almost 32,000 interim funding invitations issued to date, \$370 million in childhood budget and interim funding payments have flowed to families. That allows them, of course, to purchase services and supports for their child. Almost

22,000 families are now accessing foundational family services, as well, by the end of 2021. There has been a real uptake in the number of children who are now able to get help, keeping in mind that at the height of the Liberal program, there were 10,000 receiving services. Now, 36,000 children are either getting funding support or they're able to access service through foundational family services while the rest of the autism program continues to be rolled out.

But I'll bring in ADM Morris at this point, if she wants to get down to the specifics of your question.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: Thank you, MPP Armstrong. Just to build on the minister's remarks on the invitations that have been issued, of the over 36,000 children who are receiving support now, about 8,600 of them are receiving a childhood budget, just over 24,000 of them are receiving interim one-time funding and just under 4,000 are actively engaged in a behaviour plan that has been in place for some time. That number totals over 36,000.

The 22,000 number you referenced was the number of children who were originally promised one-time funding back in December 2019, when the government agreed to provide one-time funding to all the children on the wait-list by March 31, 2020. That was the 22,000 number. That deadline was then extended by a full year. I'll have to confirm the number, but I think it probably equated to an additional 15,000 or so children who received an invitation for one-time funding because of that extension.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: The other question I wanted to get to, if I could, is, of the \$600 million, how much went to hiring and training new staff, care coordinators and establishing the new OAP?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: The \$600 million spent in 2021 did not go to care coordinators. The care coordinators are just being hired now for the launch of core clinical services. We partnered with two organizations, Child and Community Resources in the north and Children's Treatment Network in Simcoe region, and they are hiring care coordinators. I believe there's about 15 to 20 that have been hired for the launch of core clinical services, and that will grow over time, particularly when the independent intake organization is in place. A primary function of the independent intake organization will be to hire care coordinators and manage care coordinators for the functions that have been designed and prescribed with advice from the implementation working group.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: How much went into enrolling kids into the new OAP program?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: If I could clarify the question, MPP Armstrong, are you asking what is the cost to support the 36,000 children who received one-time funding childhood budgets and behaviour plans last year?

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I think what I'm asking is, the new children—you had the interim funding. I think you had said, was it 22,000—and again, if the numbers are incorrect, please clarify for me, no issue there. So 22,000 originally, I understand, are getting interim funding, and then my question was, had that number changed in the last two years and how many new kids were added? If you know that information as far as numbers, then the next

question I guess that would tie that in is, how much went into enrolling kids into the new OAP?

Ms. Jennifer Morris: I'll have to get back to you on the precise number. The total number of the cost of the childhood budgets and the interim one-time funding—that was about 8,600 childhood budgets and just over 24,000 interim one-time funding payments—is in excess of \$370 million, I believe, but I would like to confirm that.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Okay.

Ms. Jennifer Morris: If I could just add, that does not include the cost of the children that we are continuing to support in existing behaviour plans.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Okay. Thank you. One other question I have is—of course, I'm asking all the questions, so I do apologize, but I would love this information.

Can the minister confirm what the wait-list for the OAP is currently at?

Hon. Todd Smith: There are 36,000 children receiving support in the province, three times again at the height of

the Liberal government's reign here in Ontario; 36,000 children are either getting support through the legacy behavioural programs that ADM Morris just mentioned—no child has ever been cut off from receiving the behavioural services that they were getting under the previous program. Those have been extended while we continue to develop the new needs-based therapy program here in Ontario.

At the same time, we've introduced childhood budgets and interim funding. There are far more children receiving support in Ontario than at any time in the province's history, and at the same time, we're continuing to roll out this needs-based program: 1,000 invitations have gone out; 600 families are participating in all parts of Ontario.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Donna Skelly): Folks, that is all the time we have for this session. We will resume tomorrow, June 11, 2021, at 9 a.m.

Thank you all. Thank you, Minister. Thank you, members. We shall see you tomorrow.

The committee adjourned at 1800.

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