

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



Assemblée  
législative  
de l'Ontario

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**Official Report  
of Debates  
(Hansard)**

IN-4

**Journal  
des débats  
(Hansard)**

IN-4

**Standing Committee  
on the Interior**

**Comité permanent  
des affaires intérieures**

**Estimates**

Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks

Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs

**Budget des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Environnement, de la Protection  
de la nature et des Parcs

Ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation et  
des Affaires rurales

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament

Tuesday 15 November 2022

1<sup>re</sup> session  
43<sup>e</sup> législature

Mardi 15 novembre 2022

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Chair: Aris Babikian  
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Aris Babikian  
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

## ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON THE INTERIORCOMITÉ PERMANENT  
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES

Tuesday 15 November 2022

Mardi 15 novembre 2022

*The committee met at 0900 in committee room 1.*

## ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT,  
CONSERVATION AND PARKS

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** I see that MPP Smith has raised his hand.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Yes, Chair. I'd like to move a motion.

I move that after the completion of the consideration of estimates for the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, the committee recess until 3 p.m.; and

That the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs be asked to present at that time.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Do we have the motion on the screen?

*Interjections.*

**Mr. Dave Smith:** I'll speak to it, if it's okay, Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Yes.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** The reason behind the motion is that we'll be finished at about 9:30 this morning. I think that to have a better process for us with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, it would make sense to have them do their complete presentation all as one block, rather than starting it at 9:30, stopping at 10:15, then coming back again at 3 o'clock. We have the time, so let's have them come in at 3 o'clock. We can do it as one complete block without any interruption.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Is there any further debate on the motion presented? No? Okay.

All in favour of the motion? Any opposition? The motion carries.

We are going to resume consideration of vote 1101 of the estimates of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. There is now a total of 21 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

When the committee adjourned yesterday, the independent members had two minutes remaining.

MPP Schreiner, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** When we ended yesterday, I was commenting on the fact that the 10-year review of the Lake Simcoe Protection Act was part of the work plan. I was just wondering if the ministry had done any analysis on the impact that the Bradford Bypass would have on Lake Simcoe. Regardless of whether you support the highway or not—I'm wondering if the ministry had done any impact analysis.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** I could talk about the importance of the highway for the people up in the area of Lake Simcoe, but because you only have two minutes, I'm going to turn it over to Deputy Minister Imbrogno.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I appreciate that.

**Mr. Serge Imbrogno:** I'm going to ask Chloe to come up and talk to you about what we're doing on Lake Simcoe protection and some of the work we're doing on road salt in general, which might help answer your question.

**Ms. Chloe Stuart:** I'm Chloe Stuart, the ADM for the land and water division.

Yes, MECP is focused on the health of Lake Simcoe, and we have recently undertaken the 10-year review. We recently published, just a few weeks ago, online, the minister's annual report for Lake Simcoe. We're continuing to do water-quality monitoring, and we have funded a number of projects in the watershed. For example, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority is looking at best management practices for road salt application.

As part of this year's budget, we've also initiated work on the Lake Simcoe phosphorus-reduction facility, which is an innovative project to remove phosphorus from the west Holland Marsh. The drainage water flows into Lake Simcoe. We're looking to remove 5,000 kilograms of phosphorus per year.

In terms of MTO, they have confirmed, as part of their streamlined environmental assessment process, that they will assess the potential impacts with respect to the Lake Simcoe Protection Act and the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan, so that's through consideration of water quality and quantity, stormwater management, groundwater management, landscaping and ecological restoration—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much. The time is up.

Now we'll move to the government side. You have 19 minutes. MPP Leardi, go ahead.

**Mr. Anthony Leardi:** Good morning, Chair. Through you, to the member: In your opening speech, you briefly mentioned working with industry partners to create emissions performance standards.

To build on what you said: Transportation is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in Canada and Ontario. Furthermore, our province is large, with residents spread across a geographic area that is bigger than most countries.

Transportation of goods and services is vital to our economic prosperity, but it's also important to protect our air quality, for both human health and the environment.

I understand that the ministry has recently worked to make fuel more efficient and to emit fewer greenhouse gases, and to create Ontario-specific emissions performance standards.

Can you please elaborate on what the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks has done to reduce emissions from transportation?

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** The transportation sector is the largest contributor to greenhouse gases—32% of our total emissions in 2020. Transportation sector emissions have decreased by 16% since 2005.

The ministry regulates the amount of renewable content in gasoline and diesel fuel used or sold in Ontario.

In November 2020, we announced that the Ontario government is making the gasoline that drivers use every day cleaner, by becoming the first province to require fuel suppliers to increase the amount of renewable content in regular-grade gasoline to 15%. That is game-changing—15% renewable content in gasoline. The change is expected to result in an annual reduction of up to one megatonne of greenhouse gas emissions in 2030, the equivalent of taking 300,000 cars off the road. This change will also attract investment in ethanol production and create jobs in rural communities. This regulation will have long-term benefits to rural communities. Most of the ethanol produced in Ontario is made from locally grown corn. By increasing demand for biofuels like ethanol, this regulation will benefit local farmers, attract further investment in the industry, and support Ontario's competitive advantage as a clean-fuel province.

The federal requirements for carbon pricing were something quite different. This is unlike the federal government's output-based pricing system, which moves the goalposts further and punishes businesses. Ontario's Emissions Performance Standards program helps achieve emission reductions without driving away business and job creators, and at a lower cost than the federal program. These regulations include a tailored approach appropriate to the specific regulated industry.

Stakeholders across most sectors have consistently indicated a preference for the current Emissions Performance Standards program over the federal program—and we know what our stance was on the federal program since we became government in 2018. In fact, we challenged the program.

Our view on emissions standards is going to do more to reduce emissions from fuel and, at the same time, support businesses. We do not want to see what happened under the previous Liberal government, when 330,000 manufacturing jobs left the province of Ontario. It doesn't have to be mutually exclusive. Unfortunately, the previous government felt that ideology came first. If you don't have people working, you can't keep a standard of living in any way, shape or form. Our government's mantra, from day one, is that we're going to see that we can protect the environment but ensure that the economy that is required to fuel Ontario—no pun intended—continues to be properly supported by this government.

As you know, the growth projected for this province is astronomical. We know that of all the immigration—

500,000 people scheduled to immigrate annually—60% of those are going to come to Ontario, so our growth is going to be substantial over the next number of years. As the population grows, it becomes challenging. It's just the reality—more people; more impacts on the environment. So we're going to make sure that those impacts are lessened by having an emissions standards program for our fuels here in the province of Ontario that will continue to get us closer to making sure that our goals are met and the commitments that we've made for 2030 are met.

Thank you very much for that question.

**0910**

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Flack.

**Mr. Rob Flack:** I ran out of time yesterday, so if I could, Mr. Yakabuski, follow up and ask the same question again—the Great Lakes—

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Could you repeat it for the purpose of Hansard, sir?

**Mr. Rob Flack:** I will, indeed.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** For me, too.

**Mr. Rob Flack:** MPP Leardi and I share the Great Lakes, especially Lake Erie—

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Just the two of you?

**Mr. Rob Flack:** No—well, just about. Yes, we run it.

It's an amazing lake, as all Great Lakes are. They're a treasured resource that are integral to the health and well-being of millions of Canadians.

As I always say, because of the land we have, the lakes we have—the Great Lakes—we get wonderful weather and we grow an abundance of food for Canadians. In fact, we're a net exporter of food in Ontario.

In May of last year, the government of Ontario and the federal government signed the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health.

Can you please share with this committee some initiatives the ministry is undertaking to keep our Great Lakes healthy and thriving for us and future generations?

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Thank you very much, MPP Flack, for that question. Boy, you're bang on when you talk about the importance of the Great Lakes.

As Canadians and Ontarians, we take the Great Lakes for granted sometimes because they're right there. If I'm not mistaken, somewhere between 20% and 25% of the world's fresh water is right in those Great Lakes. How blessed we are to have that right at our doorstep. Of course, ensuring the health of that resource that no other country in the world, save for our neighbours to the south, which is a much bigger population, obviously—but no other place in the world enjoys that kind of a natural resource that we have with the Great Lakes. So it's incumbent on us to make sure that resource is protected.

I'll continue with more information provided to me by the ministry.

Healthy Great Lakes are vital to Ontario's economic prosperity, social well-being and ecological health, supplying water to our communities, supporting Ontario's economy, and providing healthy ecosystems for recreation and tourism.

Ontario's families depend on healthy Great Lakes, and we need to keep the Great Lakes healthy now and for our

children, grandchildren and all future generations. We need Great Lakes that are drinkable, swimmable and fishable.

Ontario has over 10,000 kilometres of Great Lakes shoreline—10,000 kilometres—the longest freshwater coastline in the world. These waters underpin Ontario's high quality of life, supporting more than 80% of Ontario's power generation and 50% of Canada's manufacturing sector.

Our government, along with many partners, has been taking action to protect, conserve and restore the Great Lakes.

For more than 50 years, Canada and Ontario have coordinated efforts to address Great Lakes issues through a series of Canada-Ontario agreements on Great Lakes water quality and ecosystem health. Through collaboration with Canada and many partners, the Canada-Ontario agreements on Great Lakes have been instrumental in driving improvements to the Great Lakes, including:

- reduction of PCBs, mercury and dioxin by 90% from regulatory requirement;
- investment of millions of dollars in municipal sewage treatment plant upgrades;
- restoring areas of concern—for example, areas that were severely degraded by human activity; and
- seeing a return of imperiled species like the bald eagle and lake trout.

Ontario invests approximately \$14 million per year in actions to protect and restore the Great Lakes, including projects that support commitments in the Canada-Ontario agreement, the Great Lakes Protection Act, and Ontario's Great Lakes Strategy.

Ontario invested \$10.9 million in 2020-21 in multi-year funding in 98 projects run by conservation authorities, environmental not-for-profits, universities and Indigenous organizations across the province that are working to address commitments in the 2021 Canada-Ontario agreement. These projects focus on improving fish and wildlife health and habitats, rehabilitating historically degraded areas in the world's largest freshwater lake system, helping farmers and landowners adopt green infrastructure projects and best practices that improve the efficiency and sustainability of their operations while reducing the amount of contaminants and nutrients like excess phosphorus entering the Great Lakes.

To further protect and restore the Great Lakes, Ontario introduced the Great Lakes Local Action Fund to provide funding to local projects that have a positive environmental impact on the Great Lakes as well as social and/or economic benefits for their communities.

Through the first round of the Great Lakes Local Action Fund, Ontario invested \$1.9 million in 44 projects led by community-based organizations, small businesses, municipalities, conservation authorities and Indigenous communities to protect and restore coastal shoreline and nearshore areas of the Great Lakes and the rivers and streams—so important—that flow into them.

The second round of funding for the Great Lakes Local Action Fund is under way, with up to an additional \$1.9

million committed to continue supporting communities in taking action in their local areas to protect coastal shoreline and nearshore priority areas.

I hope that helps you with your question, MPP Flack. You can see just what we are doing to protect the Great Lakes, the great natural resource that we're so fortunate to live near.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** It's the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, and we've spent a fair bit of time talking about the environment side of it, the conservation side of it, but we really haven't touched on very much with Ontario Parks. I think the parks encompass everything about the environment and conservation. They're a great place for people in Ontario to go hiking, to go swimming, to just wander around in the outdoors.

One thing most people don't recognize is that Ontario has, in one of their parks—actually, here in the GTA, in Oakville—one of the largest pools in the entire world, at 1.8 acres. Imagine a pool that big.

I can't speak highly enough of Ontario Parks. Of course, it is a little selfish of me to be saying those things because, in our last term, I was made special adviser to Ontario Parks. I'm very happy with a lot of things that we have done, and I'd like to touch on some of the great things that we have with Ontario Parks.

The parks report that I did had some recommendations, and the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks has implemented a number of them.

Could I selfishly get you to expand on some of the new initiatives that MECP is doing with our world-class experience that you can get at Ontario Parks?

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Thank you for that report that you conducted in your time as the czar of parks here in Ontario.

I could go on for days about Algonquin Park, our busiest park in the province of Ontario. I actually worked in Algonquin Park in 1976. I know that sounds like a long time ago—

**Mr. Dave Smith:** I guess it was.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** I was a canoe ranger for a summer there, and what an absolutely amazing experience that was. We'd be in the bush for 10 days and come out for four days, then in the bush for 10 days and come out for four days. It was a different time—you were allowed to take cans into the park at that time, but you had to haul all that stuff out, and that was something that we were very, very religious about. Of course, working for the Ministry of Natural Resources at the time—it wasn't Ontario Parks—we were very, very certain that we were doing everything right. We would be building privies on campsites and mowing trails and making sure that the trails were cleared and stuff like that. You'd be in the interior for a long period of time, so you got to see some of the best parts of Ontario parks.

Jim Mountain—it makes me think of you, MPP Sarrazin—was a canoe ranger, actually, before I was a canoe ranger. He's now writing a book about canoe rangers in Algonquin Park and the work that they did over the

decades. I'm looking forward to it. I did speak to him several weeks ago because he's looking for input from everybody he can think of who was a canoe ranger. I gave him a number of names of people I worked with who he wasn't aware were canoe rangers, so he's going to be interviewing them as well.

**0920**

So Ontario Parks is pretty close to my heart too.

I just want to add, before I move on—because I see MPP Sarrazin sitting here as well—that we talked about opening the first operating provincial park in over 40 years, but we're also going to be designating a non-operating provincial park in your riding, in Alfred, the Alfred Bog, which is the largest peat bog in southern Ontario. We're going to be commissioning a non-operating provincial park there to ensure that land is protected as well.

Also, we're opening an Ontario Parks Christmas store very soon so that people can get that much-wanted gift for someone special.

Ontario Parks is a system of 630 provincial parks and conservation reserves that operates facilities and services for a variety of outdoor recreation activities related to camping and day use in over 115 operating provincial parks across the province where fees are collected. We are currently increasing the number of electrified campsites at provincial parks and adding new roofed accommodations while refurbishing existing ones. These accommodations include cabins, yurts and other soft-sided structures.

Ontario Parks has introduced a new service that responds directly to the rise in popularity of provincial parks and ensures that Ontario Parks has the tools it needs to conduct its business, provide the best customer service, and create a better park experience for all visitors: Visitors are now able to plan their trip ahead of time and obtain a daily vehicle permit in advance at 33 participating provincial parks.

Ontario Parks has been running an award-winning outdoor education program for over 75 years, enriching the experience of Ontario families when they visit the outdoors. If you've been to Algonquin Park and you've been to the outdoor education centre—it is really something.

I want to give a shout-out to the friends of our parks. Algonquin Park, for those who don't know, is basically on the doorstep of my riding. My riding actually goes into the park. The Friends of Algonquin Park, the Friends of Bonnechere Parks—we have friends attached to so many of our provincial parks, and they do a tremendous job as well in making sure that the health, the safety and the history of the park continues to be protected and conserved. So we're grateful for the work that they do.

We are so proud of our provincial parks system, and we know it's lauded throughout the world as something very, very special—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, MPP Yakubuski. Time is up.

**Mr. John Yakubuski:** Thank you very much, Chair, for the time.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Shall vote 1101, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1112, environmental policy, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1114, environmental sciences and standards, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1116, environmental compliance and operations, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1118, environmental assessment and permissions, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1119, climate change and resiliency, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1120, land and water, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall the 2022-23 estimates of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2022-23 estimates of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks to the House? All in favour, raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Thank you very much. Now we will take a recess until 3 p.m.

*The committee recessed from 0926 to 1500.*

## MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Good afternoon. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs for a total of two hours.

I am now required to call vote 101, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with statements of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. The remaining time will be allotted for questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 10 minutes for the independent members of the committee, and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I appreciate this opportunity to meet with the members of the Standing Committee on the Interior because it's an opportunity to tell our OMAFRA



story, which is a really good one. We're working so incredibly hard to support the province's agri-food industry as well as our rural communities.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the team at OMAFRA, who work with us day in and day out and who are helping with the proceedings today. To my right, I have Deputy John Kelly, and he has a great team behind him as well. ADMs Kelly McAslan and David Hagarty are here with us in person. And I believe Greg Wootton, Randy Jackiw, Heather Cassidy, Laurie Adrien and Jennifer Kidon will be available to us online or virtually.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm very pleased to speak with you about the work that we're doing to strengthen Ontario's agri-food sector and rural communities as we continue to build up our economy. Ontario's overall agri-food sector is the largest in Canada, and it is an important economic driver for the province.

Not too long ago, I had the opportunity to speak to the Toronto Global Forum, and the focus for that conference was the new economy. Some of the very first messaging that I shared with them out of the gate was the fact that Ontario's agri-food industry, respectfully, always has been and always will be a driver of our economy, and as they look to the new economy, we will be there in full strength. There's no denying how we prove to be a cornerstone of the provincial economy.

One in every 10 Ontarians are employed by the agri-food sector, and it contributes more than \$47 billion to the province's GDP. Ontario farmers grow over 200 varieties of crops and food, and 65% of that production goes to Ontario processors, who create delicious and nutritious products that we buy locally—and they're available across the globe.

It's very interesting; at the independent grocers trade show held at the airport just a few weeks ago, there were people from around the world really interested in our baked goods. Again, that shows how diverse our value chain is in terms of growing wheat in the field and, ultimately, producing baked goods that are wanted worldwide.

Food processors represent the second-largest manufacturing sector in Ontario. Our government is committed not only to Ontario farmers' success, but we're committed to our manufacturers and our processors' growth as well, and that includes stability as well as prosperity.

Our government knows that a complete, strong agricultural sector means a strong province with good jobs, thriving communities and a safe and secure food supply. We are proud of the work that we have accomplished this year, and we continue to strengthen the agri-food supply chain and bring it closer to home. We're being responsive to the challenges beyond the control of the farmers and of the processors, and we're working side by side. We've made strategic investments in programs and projects that help our farmers do what they do best: grow fresh, nutritious food and agri-food products that ultimately work their way through the value chain, through to processors and manufacturers. Ontarians need to be proud of that. We have developed programs that protect soil health, all the while helping farmers to be more efficient and profitable.

Just downstairs, Ontario Pork hosted a reception, and one of their provincial directors from eastern Ontario was absolutely over the moon, because this year he was producing 120 bushels to the acre of corn. That's because we've been responsive. Our technology and best practices are enabling that type of production.

But a big reality is, we continue to address labour challenges.

Our rural communities have also been boosted through regional economic development projects and digital solutions that connect communities faster through broadband. Of course, that connectivity is going to continue to be realized through 2025, because we all know that the speed of business these days is in a blink. Everybody needs it. It drives not only production in the barn, but it also drives efficiencies in the field and helps our processors and manufacturers be more competitive and, ultimately, profitable.

It isn't always easy for farmers and food processors in Ontario, especially when weathering the pandemic. It impacted our labour shortages, for sure. We also have geopolitical challenges that we have to navigate. But day in and day out, 365 days a year, farmers continue to step up and provide the food and products that Ontarians want to put on dinner tables every evening.

I think it's safe to say we all agree that Ontario's agri-food sector—that includes our farmers, processors, manufacturers and distributors—was stable and reliable throughout the pandemic. We can't lose sight of that. I would dare say, over the last year, its market share has even grown. I want you all to join me in making sure that they know they have a provincial government that always will stand side by side with them.

In 2022, we looked at the whole sector to find opportunities for growth and ways to strengthen the supply chain so that when future challenges come, we will be stronger and better equipped to overcome them.

Now let's talk about stewardship. Ontario farmers know how important protecting soil health is for our agri-food sector. It supports Ontario's economy as well as hundreds of thousands of jobs. That's why we've made important investments into soil health through research and cost-share programs. Ontario-led research helps farmers adopt new tools and techniques that can lead to innovative solutions to soil health. It also helps to identify the seed variety and the vigour that we need for the different soil types in growing seasons across this province.

As part of the Ontario agri-food alliance agreement with the University of Guelph, soil health research for 2022-23 focuses on cover crop diversity, nitrogen dynamics with long-term cover cropping, and soil carbon response to biomass inputs from cover crops. The research outcomes from these projects could change production practices and help keep more nutrients in the ground.

The action that we are taking today on soil health is enabling farmers to be more productive on the acres that they have, just like I cited with the example of the provincial Ontario Pork director citing his bushels per acre for corn this year. By taking strong action and farmers being more productive on the acres that they have, we are allowing them to expand their markets, increase their

competition, and continue to feed Ontario, Canada, North America and around the world.

We continue to protect our lakes and waterways from farming-related phosphorus through cost-share programs like the Lake Erie Agriculture Demonstrating Sustainability initiative. It's better known as LEADS. That is a beacon of absolute best practice. I really applaud everyone and every ministry involved with that. LEADS is a program that supports farmers to implement on-farm actions to enhance local soil health and reduce the risk of nutrient losses on farms located in the Lake Erie watershed. Since 2018, under our government, more than 1,220 projects have been approved under the LEADS initiative, with over \$12.5 million committed to support farmers in taking action to improve soil health.

**1510**

Other government efforts to support the sector to be leaders in sustainable growth include environmental farm plans that have been in place—the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane probably had an environmental farm plan back in the day—as well as nutrient management plans and, most recently, the 4R nutrient stewardship. That's about identifying the right product and identifying the right time to apply it in the right place and at the right time.

Our government is taking a responsible approach to promote best environmental and sustainable practices in agriculture, enabling growth and prosperity. This has led to increased yields and productivity on Ontario farms that we need to celebrate. Ontario farm-level production has increased by roughly 47% and cash receipts by over 134% since 2001. Again, these are very important figures to share, and I want to repeat that: Ontario farm-level production—that means the crops growing in the fields and the animals coming through the processing environments—have increased by roughly 47% and cash receipts by over 134% since 2001.

I want to provide some real examples to put this in perspective for members of the committee. If you look at corn, the average bushel per acre in 2003 was 123; in 2002, it was 113, on average; and in 2004, it was 131. Last year, bushels per acre for grain corn was 175, and in 2017, it was 167. Just upstairs, we heard that farmers are bringing in over 200 bushels to the acre this year. We're doing well because of the technology and the innovations that we're employing and adopting.

We are increasing some of our productivity through best practices, and precision agriculture is leading to increasing yields and a more sustainable agricultural sector. Through research, we are producing quality seed that has been adapted to soil types and growing seasons. The list could go on and on when we talk about our soil commitment and the health of the soil.

I can just assure all of you, though, because of the work that has been done through the years and the commitment of our farmers across this province, the future for Ontario farming is bright.

As we continue to strengthen our agri-food sector by helping farmers be more efficient and profitable, we will

also continue to take a balanced and thoughtful approach to enhancing stewardship initiatives. We know that building the right infrastructure in the right place will help Ontario's rural communities be more resilient now and in the future.

We're having good conversations. For instance, Koch Farms in northern Ontario, near Earlton—when we talk about the right infrastructure, they're saying, "We want to grow so much more that we need to be taking a look at containers on trains, as opposed to running trucks down the roads." That is another beacon of hope—that even in Earlton, which is north of New Liskeard, farmers are excited by the increased yield that they're going to be realizing.

Whether it's for transportation of agri-food products or broadband connectivity, building infrastructure requires a measured approach. In southwestern Ontario alone, more than 18,000 farmers, families and business owners have received access to fast, reliable broadband through the \$63-million Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology program. But I can assure you, ladies and gentlemen, we are not done yet. All families and farms will be connected, as per the directive from our Premier, by the year 2025.

Building strong infrastructure in rural Ontario is a priority. The 2021 population data revealed that more people are moving to rural communities, and they expect that connectivity. With an increase of almost 1% of people moving specifically from cities to rural areas, we need to make sure that there's equity. We saw a real spike during the pandemic, when urban residents saw the real potential and quality of life in rural Ontario and started to leave major urban centres for small-town Ontario.

At the beginning of 2022, we launched a new intake of the Rural Economic Development Program to help build rural Ontario by investing in projects that boost economic opportunities in rural and Indigenous communities and ultimately create jobs and grow the labour force. We all know in small-town Ontario there are too many "help wanted" signs. The projects that our government invests in through the RED Program, the Rural Economic Development Program, strengthen rural communities by helping businesses become more competitive so that they can diversify and grow, delivering real economic benefits. It is essential to the health and strength of our province that we continue to build up thriving rural communities.

Now I'd like to talk about economic recovery and development.

From soil health to strong rural communities, farmers are at the heart of Ontario's agri-food sector. By helping farmers to grow and strengthen their businesses, we are strengthening the economy, creating jobs, and ensuring that Ontarians can choose locally grown and homemade local foods that are available on grocery store shelves.

It was heartening, at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair this past year—and Mr. Schreiner was there with us. It was awesome to see the second and third generations of a family promoting a recipe that a grandmother had shared along the family tree. There were buyers there wanting to talk to them. It increased their productivity. That's what

makes me smile. On one hand, we celebrate the crops and animals, the best of the best of genetics, at the Royal—and then you see it right through to fruition, where you see that tomato paste or a new wine or a new honey mead marketed. There were over 80 buyers there, through the course of the first days, talking to these people about how to get their product on their shelves—and that's what we need to continue to do.

When we talk about growing business, we'd be remiss if we didn't touch on new innovations as well. To help the agri-food sector implement new and unique ways to grow and succeed while strengthening the food supply chain, creating safer workplaces and making operations more resilient to future disruptions, we have invested \$22 million through the Agri-tech Innovation Program to support 159 projects that are now being implemented across Ontario. Again, our government has invested \$22 million in the Agri-tech Innovation Program that has seen 159 projects be implemented. These are projects that have benefited farmers. Coming out of this program, for instance, we're looking at automated systems that include GPS and data collection. Ultimately, that leads to the decreased need of inputs, meaning a fungicide or a herbicide, on the crops. We've seen an automated colour sorter machine for grading and sorting of soybeans. When we have labour shortages, this type of technology is incredibly important. We've seen all kinds of innovative uses of technology and robotics in our greenhouse sector. One of these projects out of the Agri-tech Innovation Program is looking at a new technology that is creating a non-plastic material for use in horticulture and food packaging.

The investments we are making today are building a stronger Ontario, through the adoption of new technologies that improve our productivity, increase our yields per acre and address labour challenges.

It's interesting; in Bruce county, back in the summer, I was talking to a dairy farmer who had just put in a brand new robotics system. I asked about payback, and he said, "Oh, the horizon is out there." But what he didn't anticipate straight away was the fact that his dairy cows became more productive because they were less stressed. That's good news that we need to be talking about as well.

Some of these robotics, ladies and gentlemen, enable a cow to decide when she wants to eat, and she gets told, through a computer chip that feeds through to the mechanized system, when she's had enough. If she's off her feet, there will be an alert sent to the farmer so he can tend to herd health. And some of the robotics have gotten to the point where a cow milks when she wants to milk. Again, it's leading to increased production from an animal perspective, as well as a solution to the labour shortage that we realize throughout Ontario.

I grew up on a beef cash crop farm, and I live on a cash crop farm now, with a small herd of purebred Boer goats that I'm very proud of.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Two minutes.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Two minutes? Aw.

One of the biggest issues that I hear about to date is that there is not enough processing in this province, so we need

to continue to come forward with programs, like we have. The \$25-million strategic processing fund is going to continue to add more value closer to the farm, cutting down transportation and helping farmers realize more opportunities.

There's so much to be said, but I'm sure we'll cover it over the next hour and 10 minutes or so.

**1520**

I believe this province is well-positioned for the future. We're investing in programs and initiatives to support our farmers and our agri-food businesses. We're going to get the job done and be the best in the world. Thank you very much.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** You still have one minute, Minister, if you want to continue.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I do? Okay. Let me tell you, I love this.

I would like to conclude by sharing with you that our government has listened, and we understand that farmers need to realize processing closer to home if they're going to continue to increase yield per acre. And then, once they have that raw commodity processed, they need good, solid markets.

Through the pandemic—I repeat myself, but I think it's important—our agri-food sector proved itself to be reliable and stable. Ontarians never had to fear that there would be a shortage of good, nutritious Ontario food on the shelves.

Now I can tell you with absolute certainty that the world, as well as the rest of Canada, quite frankly, is looking to Ontario, because we lead by example in so many different ways. Most importantly, they're looking for that product that ensures that while geopolitical issues and uncertainties around the world abound, they can count on Ontario.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, Minister, for your presentation.

We will start the first round of questioning with the official opposition, for 20 minutes. MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you, Minister, for your presentation. And I would like to thank you for your work over the last—since you've been minister, it hasn't been easy. I'd also like to give a shout-out to everyone at OMAF.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** A bit of history: My first interaction with OMAF was when I was seven years old. At that time, the dairy inspector was an OMAF employee. He came to inspect our farm—I was his inspector—and he taught me a lot, at seven. Years ago, I attended his retirement party, when I was still a dairy farmer.

I am always amazed at the work that OMAF does. They just did a briefing a little while ago on another dairy issue.

I know this is a fractious place, but on the agriculture side, our hearts are all in the right place, and I say that from the bottom of mine.

I'm also amazed every time I go on a farm or in a processing plant, or anywhere, at the advances that have been made in agriculture in the last few—even in my career, the advances that have been made are incredible.

We are all proud of having one of the best agri-food systems in the world, bar none.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Absolutely.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I can't say enough about our system, but as amazing as it is, I would be remiss if I didn't bring up a few issues.

I'm going to read something from the briefing book: "OMAFRA worked with MMAH"—municipal affairs and housing—"to update the provincial policy statement ... to maintain and strengthen policies to protect farmland and support the viability of farming."

I fully understand that the productivity per acre is going up in Ontario. No one is going to deny that. But you also can't deny that we are losing acres every day. We might disagree where the tipping point is going to come, but when you're losing 320 acres a day—and you mentioned the productivity with wheat. If you take 100 bushels of wheat, that's 1,400,000 loaves of bread—capacity—you're losing a day, day on top of day on top of day.

The briefing book said you were looking at systems to protect farmland, given that we're losing 320 acres a day—or perhaps you disagree with that number; I would like to hear the reasoning behind that, as well. What, in your opinion, can be done, should be done? Or, in your opinion, is that sustainable?

I live in northern Ontario. I've farmed my whole life in northern Ontario. Northern Ontario is a great place to farm. I know Norm Koch in Earlton very well. He has a great operation. But I'll tell you, if I could trade my acres in Timiskaming–Cochrane for acres in Oxford county, I would.

Why do we continue to pave over places like Oxford county or places like the greenbelt? How long is that sustainable, Minister?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I would just like to point out that the previous government went into the greenbelt 17 different times, and I don't recall hearing the third party at the time, the NDP, raising concerns. So I think it's really important that there's consistency there.

When I first graduated from the University of Guelph, I worked for OMAFRA, in Peel region. At that time, there were a number of farms that were finding it difficult moving machinery on busy, busy roads. It wasn't viably safe to be farming in the manner in which one would think.

I encourage everyone to take the time to talk to farmers in the GTHA. Tom Dolson, president of the Peel Federation of Agriculture, has been out publicly, talking about the fact that he understands the need for expansion. He notes that the 413 is a good thing. It takes a lot of traffic off the arterial, secondary, roads, if you will, and farmers are welcoming that. That's just one example.

A name you might recognize is Ari Ekstein. I was speaking to him just last week at the Royal. You might remember his dad, Bill. He's in York region. He, too, understands the need for expansion.

So it's important to get the perspective of the local farmers in the area and make sure that we're not painting everything with the same brush.

You referenced the number of loaves of bread—but there are parcels of land out there being considered, completely adjacent to serviced lots and areas already under development, that no one would farm.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I agree—and it's not the country way, to interrupt, but I'm going to.

The basic question is: We're losing 320 acres a day already, so is that sustainable?

*Interjection.*

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I understand. I'm going to get to that part.

There are places where I'm not sure the farm—it's capable, if you're surrounded; if you're an island of agriculture, it's really hard. But by allowing unchecked development, you're creating more of these islands.

The question is: We're losing 320 acres a day, so is that sustainable? And is that something your ministry is worried about?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think it's really important to recognize that, together, with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, working with the rest of our ministries in this government, we're making sure we're taking a balanced approach.

As the Premier and Minister Clark have said, we're actually adding a net 2,000 new acres to the greenbelt—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm going to challenge you. When you take 7,000 acres and pave it over, even if you make the greenbelt 2,000 acres bigger, you're still at a net loss of 7,000 acres of agricultural land. Just moving the belt up doesn't create more land.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** With all due respect—I want to call you John—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Go ahead, Minister. We've worked together and known each other a long time.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** We go way back, so that's the tough part.

With all due respect, you can't paint everything with the same brush. I think municipal affairs and housing has done a very thoughtful job in coming forward with the package that they have.

We need to recognize that the people in Peel region, for instance—when I was working there—they've moved to Wellington county; they've moved to Bruce county. They have moved where it's almost, one could say, the breadbasket of Ontario, and their yields are just going to be going through the roof.

It's important to recognize that what we're doing in OMAFRA is bringing forward programs, bringing forward research, bringing forward innovation that's going to enable greater production per acre. I think that's the message here. That's what we need to celebrate—because we are producing as much as we ever have. I know you know the numbers. We are producing so much more.

1530

I think, at this time, I'd like to ask the deputy to talk about some of those programs that we've brought forward.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Minister, if I could just go back to the basic question—is 320 acres a day a valid number, in your opinion, and is it sustainable?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Well, at the end of the day, I think what we need to be focusing on is productive acres and how we can increase our yields. We're doing such a

wonderful job, just like the director of the Ontario Pork organization said earlier today.

I think it's really important that, with stewardship and with precision agriculture and with programs that are entertaining opening up new lands, we are going to continue to move forward. Ontario will continue to be reliable and stable.

For instance, I want to talk about an initiative that we kicked off in the Clay Belt between Timmins and Matheson. There's an economic development initiative under way right now—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** That's in my riding?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Yes—that is taking a look at what we need to be doing to make a cash crop viable and—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Again, I'm going to do the non-country thing. I 100% agree that there is potential there, and I've farmed in northern Ontario my whole life. But, farming in northern Ontario—you're not going to replace an acre here with an acre in northern Ontario and be equal.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** That's not what I'm saying.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm not disparaging northern Ontario; I have done very well farming in northern Ontario and I am very proud of it.

But the question remains: Regardless of productivity, and we all know that the productivity in Ontario has gone up manyfold—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Yes, that's the real message.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** It is part of the message. We also know, and you mentioned it, that soil health is a building block. But the amount of soil that you have long-term, as the world is going to need more food, is also important.

So is it sustainable to continue to pave over land at the rate that we're going?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think the programs that we're introducing make agriculture—today, 10 years from now, 20 years from now, 100 years from now—absolutely sustainable.

I am so proud of the research that is happening at our research stations from one end of this province to another. Again, that should be the focus. We have, at the Emo research station, hops being grown, and that is just amazing. Think about the opportunities that will be derived from that.

More importantly, with the technology in seed, with the adoption of technology that enables farmers to manage growing seasons better, I think our future is bright for Ontario agriculture. We have a number of programs that complement that. At this time, I'd like to pass it over to the deputy to talk about some of those programs so we get it on the record—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm going to interrupt once more, but not on the same subject. You mentioned the station in Emo. I would just like to, again, thank you and the previous government for what they've done to maintain the research station in New Liskeard. At whatever point it's officially opened, I hope you come. Please give us some advance notice, and we will treat you as a minister of the crown should be treated.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Of course. Yes.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** It has happened lately in my riding that people have showed up—not from your ministry—and told the press not to alert the local member, not to alert the local press. Just to let members know, that is not how you gain votes in rural Ontario. You know that, Minister, and I know you wouldn't do it.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think we've been good to you.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** But just for the other people who do this—specifically, a ministry that has something to do with agriculture in Ontario, northern development and mines—it's not appreciated when you do that, because we hear about it and people feel really uncomfortable. When I go to those events at the Matheson agricultural society and the president comes to me and says, "John, I really felt awful because I was told not to invite you"—do you know what? It's not your money; it's the public's money. It was the Ministry of Northern Development that did that.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Vanthof, for the sake of saving your time, because you're running out of time, I would like you to focus on issues related to the ministry.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I appreciate that, Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** That was deserved, Chair. Thank you.

So I'm going to go back—but once again, if we're going to have an official opening in New Liskeard, please, you're invited, and we will make sure of it.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** You bet. I think we've reached out to you already on New Liskeard.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Okay. But I'm still not giving up on: Is 320 acres a day sustainable?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think the future is incredibly bright.

So we can get it on the record, I'm wondering if the deputy could touch on some of the programs.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Thank you. I'm John Kelly. I'm deputy minister for the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Before I start, MPP Vanthof, I'd like to thank you for your shout-out to my staff, because it's very much appreciated. They do work incredibly hard.

We've got some great programs. I will agree with the minister, certainly, that productivity and modernization are the way to go, and we are seeing some amazing leaps and bounds with the different systems that we have going. Our sustainable programs, whether it's through things like the LEADS program, which you mentioned, Minister—we invested \$12.5 million. We had 1,220 projects, 210,000 acres of land that were protected, and it was protected from soil loss—30,000 acres due to cover crops. I know, MPP Vanthof, you know the advantage of cover crops and why we do that. It's to rebuild soil.

Another part is that we spent a lot of time with soil health, working with the sector on the soil action working group. Through that soil action working group, there are

many, many different areas that we've worked with. We have committed stakeholders who really understand this. They are looking for the type of technology that we can bring forward.

I'll give you one other example. The On-Farm Applied Research and Monitoring system is a system for monitoring soil health and monitoring runoff, and part of that is to ensure that we maintain a vibrant and resilient soil health system. If you build from the soil, then you're going to build the rest of it. Being able to present situations where we strengthen our soil and we can actually add productivity to this soil is a great thing, and it allows our farmers to be productive.

One other thing that was mentioned was stewardship. I'd like to call on ADM Kelly McAslan to come up and talk about some of our stewardship initiatives, because it's related to how we work with our soil action working group.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Before you start, if I may: You mentioned soil a couple of times. Again, we are losing 320 acres a day of that soil. As good a job as you're doing with the soil—no, actually, as farmers are doing with the soil, right? I was at a conference where David Phillips said that the agricultural growing conditions in southwestern Ontario, because of the way it's nestled in the Great Lakes, are unique in the world and need to be protected. Is it sustainable? Twenty years from now, 50 years from now, will people look back and say, "Why did they pave over the best land in North America"? That's the question I'm asking.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** John, if I may—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Of course.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I hope I don't tick off too many of my friends in Peel region, Halton region, York region etc., but the best land really is in southwestern Ontario, and that's the most productive. I was overjoyed to hear—

*Interjection.*

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** That includes Guelph, yes.

I was overjoyed to hear about the production in eastern Ontario, as per the Ontario Pork director's comments earlier today. But we also need a balance.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Two minutes.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** We just had a stakeholder round table last week here at Queen's Park. The number one priority was labour. We're hearing it from members of Food and Beverage Ontario. We are hearing—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I agree, Minister.

I'm going to do the un-country thing once more. I hate doing this, but—a simple question: When you pave over that 320 acres every day, is it ever going to grow a crop again?

1540

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** The fact of the matter is, the more worrisome part is that you can grow all the crops in the world, but if you don't have processing capacity and if you have processing held up because they don't have labour, then we would lose so much economic opportunity. That's why I applaud Minister Clark and his ministry.

They've come forward with a very balanced approach. They're talking about land adjacent to already serviced lots. People are begging for labour. How are we going to attract labour? By having housing.

The fact of the matter is, the bulk of processing and manufacturing in terms of our agri-food sector is located in the GTHA. So we will be best served to make sure the abundance of crops and livestock produced in this province—it's going to increase, growing season after growing season—have a place to go to be processed. That's the number one ask that I'm hearing.

I feel that the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has been very thoughtful, and he's bringing forward a very balanced plan.

In terms of stewardship—in 30 seconds or less—ADM Kelly.

**Ms. Kelly McAslan:** My name is Kelly McAslan. I'm assistant deputy minister of the food safety and environment division for the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Thank you very much for the question—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Regrettably, the time is over. You can stay there.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** We'll come back to you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Yes.

Now we will move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, you have 10 minutes.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** Thank you, Minister, for being here today. You're welcome to call me Mike, if you'd like.

I, too, grew up on a cattle and cash crop farm. I'm going to preface all my questions today by saying that I've literally spent my entire career either running businesses or non-profit organizations promoting Ontario food and farmers, so your ministry is near and dear to my heart. As the MPP for Guelph, I just want to say how much I deeply appreciate the great work that folks at OMAF do.

I'll tell you a quick story, even though my time is limited, and then we're going to get to questions. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was buying a coffee down the street, on Stone Road. I always have my trillium on my suit jacket. Somebody asked me if I work at OMAF. I said, "I don't work at OMAF, but I deeply, deeply value the work that people at OMAF do." So thank you so much.

When I talk to farmers across the province, what I always hear them say is that they would like more extension agents, they would like more OMAF employees out there working with them to help improve productivity on-farm.

That being said, I, too, noticed in the briefing that it said the ministry has been working with MMAH on the provincial policy statement changes "to maintain and strengthen policy to protect farmland...."

So I'm curious what policies the ministry is putting forward to protect farmland right now.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think it's really important to recognize that there are a number of different ways we can move forward.

Deputy, through you, to ADM McAslan—maybe we can invite her back up, because in terms of soil health, in

terms of moving forward, I think we should touch on something—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I don't want to interrupt; maybe we can talk about stewardship and soil health when the government is up—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Because that's protecting, as well, right? Do you not agree?

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I agree that is protecting. It absolutely is vital. I don't want to dispute that.

I just want to say that right now we're losing 320 acres of farmland every day. Only 5% of Ontario's land mass is suitable for growing food, and only half a per cent is prime farmland.

With all due respect, southwestern Ontario—absolutely, some of the best farmland in the world. The Peel Plain is also some of the best farmland in the world. The Holland Marsh is some of the best farmland in the world.

What is the government doing, what is your ministry doing right now to stop, to halt, the loss of 320 acres of farmland a day? Regardless of what we think about highways, greenbelts—any of those kinds of things—what is the ministry doing to stop the loss of that farmland?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I'm going to kick off my remarks by asking you: Have you been in Peel region lately? Have you been in York region, talking to farmers about the realities? They want the people heading to their cottages in Muskoka off their back roads so that they can move their machinery safely. The president of the Peel Federation of Agriculture welcomes this. We have to listen. There's no denying the fact that farmers are welcoming this.

In terms of those acres that you're talking about—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** With all due respect—because I know my time is so limited. I used to be on the GTA Agricultural Action Committee 15 or 20 years ago, and back then they were saying, “The encroachment of sprawl”—this was a previous government—“is making it harder and harder for us to move machinery and equipment around.” The connectivity to farms—I get all that kind of stuff; we had 2,000 acres when I was a kid. But the more you encroach, you just expand that problem out, and then you expand it out to a point where there is no more farmland left.

That's why I'm asking this: Can you point to any concrete policy that you've put in place to put a stop to the loss of 320 acres a day?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think that you really need to take some time to drill down on what Minister Clark has brought forward, because another really important aspect of us moving forward and being responsive is the fact that we are being measured. I'm sure you both welcome the opportunities to realize that we've defined a window, as well—Minister Clark has defined a window that, if a parcel of land that has been identified has not begun to be developed by 2025, that window closes. I think that's a safety measure we all need to be embracing.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I just want to say that the president of the OFA—you know Peggy Brekveld, of course. Here's what she said about opening the greenbelt for development: It puts “farmland under concrete, and once

that land is lost, it never comes back. How do you feed those cities? Putting more houses onto farmland is not appropriate or acceptable.”

There have been numerous studies, including by former Conservative cabinet minister David Crombie, saying that there are 88,000 acres of developable land for housing right now within existing urban boundaries that would accommodate population growth and help us deal with the housing crisis.

Where do we draw the line and say, “Losing 320 acres a day is no longer sustainable, affordable, economically or financially”? Does the ministry have any policy you're putting forward that says—whether it's greenbelt or not greenbelt—“Hey, we're just going to stop losing all this farmland”?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think the fact of the matter is, we have policies and programs, quite frankly, that are in place that will protect our soils and move towards greater yields.

Another thing that we need to be mindful of: We have to get out of our old, traditional boxes and think—you mentioned the urban growth. I look forward to working with institutions like Durham College. They have an urban agriculture program—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** It's great.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** —and they have vertical initiatives whereby they're growing lettuce from the ground up, and that needs to be celebrated; to expand it even further, they're flavoured lettuces. And over and above that, we have greenhouses that are growing up vertically. So that's what we need to be thinking about. We've got to get out of that old, traditional framework and think about new ways of producing food as well, and adopt technologies that will enable us to realize that. We have—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** Excuse me, Minister. I agree with you on that, absolutely. I've been a big fan of urban agriculture, vertical growing—there's all kinds of innovation that's happening. But you and I both grew up on cash crop farms, and when it comes to grains and cereals, you're not doing going to do that vertically, and you're not going to do that in greenhouses. You're going to have to do that on land, and we're losing that land.

So let's get past—we're going to disagree on the greenbelt. We're obviously going to disagree on highways—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** But you agree we're increasing yield like there's never—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** Oh, I agree that farmers are increasing yield. Farmers are—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Technology and innovation—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** —and I would say, with the help of the great researchers at the University of Guelph, who are helping farmers do that.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** You got it. Yes, 100%.

1550

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** You know Mark Reusser, vice-president of the OFA. He talked about the wonderful work that has been done in Waterloo region. Would you agree that Waterloo region has some great farmland? They've done fantastic work creating—

*Interjection.*

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** Yes, not too far from—it's in between the two of us, between Guelph and Bruce.

They've brought in a countryside line, and some of the planning changes in Bill 23 will wipe out that regional planning. The fear is that they're going to lose all the protections that farmers in Waterloo region have fought for to protect farmland.

If we get past greenbelt and highways—is there anything the ministry is doing around helping those farmers, let's say, in Waterloo region who have done so much work around protecting the farmland in that region?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** You bring up a really good point. We need to recognize that we're currently in a consultation period for this particular initiative. I would encourage Mark Reusser and his neighbours, if you will, and colleagues from the Waterloo region to make sure their voice is heard. That's one thing that I'm really proud about in terms of our government—we listen, and we're responsive. In this consultation period, if they want to invite us—all of us—out for a tour, I'd welcome that, and we can talk about it more. Certainly, he needs to make sure his voice is raised properly through the consultation process as well.

We can't lose sight of the fact that the number one issue is labour.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I'm going to get to that in my next 10 minutes.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Okay. We need to be doing everything we can to make sure our processors have confidence so that they can be investing in the spirit of efficiencies and developing the best nutritious products possible.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, Minister. Time is up.

Now we move to the government side, and you have 20 minutes. MPP Jones, go ahead.

**Mr. Trevor Jones:** Through you, Chair: Thank you for the opportunity. As you may or may not know, I have some expertise in agriculture and in greenhouse technology. So I'm happy to share that experience with my colleagues from across the floor or my colleagues from within government.

As we know, agri-food contributes over \$47 billion to the provincial economy. Two-way trade—over \$51 billion. It's more than 6% of our provincial economy. While food security in our province is a priority, to grow the sector, we need to open new markets to farmers, growers and processors. What is this government doing to grow this critical part of the economy? Can you provide concrete examples, Minister?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Absolutely. First and foremost, the greenhouse sector is just a bright light in our overall agri-food sector. In terms of trade, it's important to put on the record that 70% of all produce grown here in Ontario actually goes south of the 49th parallel, and I congratulate you for that.

In terms of trade, we're doing some amazing things, and I really am proud of the work, again, of our OMAFRA teams. Just last week at the Royal, we were walking through

a pavilion that was showcasing Ontario-made products, and time and time again, there was a common theme amongst those exhibitors: “Thank you for the OMAFRA programs. Thank you for the support that we've got to realize new markets and opportunities.”

We have things like the OMAFRA trade unit that prepares people to participate in Ontario pavilions, like we had at the independent grocers retail show. Right now, we have 20 Ontario businesses in Chicago, participating in the private label opportunity. That's when we're at our best.

Deputy, I'd like for you to jump in on that with a bit more detail.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Thank you, Minister.

This is a great question, and it's one that is near and dear to my heart. I have a lot of interest in this area.

Not only do we develop markets through trade investment, but we do it in a number of different ways. Think about in-person retailer engagement. You mentioned the PLMA in Chicago. There was a global showcase 2022—44 Ontario food companies going to that, exposed to international markets like the US, Mexico, United Arab Emirates. We have, certainly, participation in those—160 face-to-face meetings over two days. That's real business that's being conducted. We like to get an idea of how people have done in these shows—and this one, they said, had potential sales of up to \$13.8 million. That's pretty substantive, just in one opportunity.

We've also done virtual retailer engagement. Because of the pandemic, we've had to modify the way we interact with a lot of different companies or different countries. We've had 58 Ontario companies meet virtually with retailers from the US, Mexico, Singapore, China, South Korea, Japan and other countries—again, just through virtual interactions, up to \$1.7 million in sales, and these are just the start of these types of relationships.

Another way that we like to interact with our producers is through webinars, whether it's showing our producers and our processors how to get into markets—we'll have specialists come in and talk about really high-quality markets for us, like the US, Mexico, the Middle East, the EU, the Philippines, Korea, to take advantage of some of the trade agreements like the CPTPP, those types of things, so that our growers can expand their export markets. Those webinars typically get 250 participants, and then those processors will engage with retailers in-market, or further virtual—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr. John Kelly:** —and we'll be successful that way.

We also do it in our localized markets, our local export markets. The US Midwest, New York and other states like that are very, very important to Ontario. The minister mentioned that 70% of our greenhouse exports go to the US. Well, they go to a lot of those states which are close, as well as the eastern seaboard. We held a seminar this month—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** In Buffalo.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Yes, in Buffalo. It's called PROFIT. We had 25 companies—they went across and they interacted with folks on how to learn to export to the US. When



I started my own company years and years ago, that's one of the things that we had to do—we had to figure out how to export to the US and how to make those relationships. It's hugely important that we do these things.

We also work with in-market promotions. We like to work with our colleagues across the provincial government—certainly, MEDJCT helps us, with their in-market folks—but we also work with the federal government on a number of different initiatives.

There are some very large shows around the world that we participate in. If you know about food trade shows, you'll know about Anuga in Germany. It's a massive trade show. SIAL Canada is related to the SIAL show that's in Paris, but we have it in Montreal or in Toronto; it varies every year. We always have Ontario companies participate in these shows.

It's super important that we support our processors to be able to export and trade their commodities, but we also have to be able to have them be able to produce and process those, and the government of Ontario has certainly gone forward and created a way to do that.

I'm going to ask my ADM Randy Jackiw to talk a little bit about our Strategic Agri-Food Processing Fund, which, Minister, you mentioned.

You've heard that Ontario—we're either the largest or the second-largest manufacturer in the province. We are a significant jurisdiction internationally. Agri-food is the backbone of our economy.

If you look at how farm, food and beverage processors, retail and food services—they all create that supply chain link. Over the past three years, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown some of the vulnerabilities. To address some of the challenges that were exposed during the pandemic, the government created the \$25-million Strategic Agri-Food Processing Fund. I could talk about it, but it's better to have ADM Randy Jackiw talk about it, because he is the specialist in this.

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**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** As he's coming on, I want to share with everyone that it's a \$25-million initiative. We're absolutely overwhelmed with the people interested in investing, in adding value to Ontario's agri-food sector.

Over to you, ADM Jackiw.

**Mr. Randy Jackiw:** Thank you very much. My name is Randy Jackiw. I am the assistant deputy minister with OMAFRA for economic development. That sort of spans the supply chain, from production through to processing, and funding programs as well.

As far as the Strategic Agri-Food Processing Fund, as the minister said, it's \$25 million. We're in the middle of administering this right now. It has got two angles to it. One is looking at new production capacity and companies that are looking at major expansions. We've had 73 applications that we're working through. The second part of it is in modernization, so people who are applying for the newer technologies, improving productivity—although both of these would be a productivity place for sure.

To also illustrate the point that the minister and the deputy were making, Ontario has—the challenge and the opportunity are the same, and the opportunity is huge. On

top of what a big deal this is in Ontario, you may or may not know that we're also one of the most diverse as far as the things that we can grow in all the various microclimates and soils and access to fresh water across Ontario—over 200 different things that we can grow. So to make sure that we capitalize on this and that we're doing the things with the biggest economic jobs and food security outcomes, there's a whole bunch of things that have to happen concurrently.

I'd like to take a second to talk about the things that we're doing along the whole supply chain. Number one, I believe, as the minister mentioned, you have to have a market, you have to have a processor. One of the problems farmers can get themselves into is when they grow something without having thought that all the way through, as far as where that's going to be sold at a profitable level. So there's a ton of things, as the deputy said, that we're doing around both expanding domestic and looking for export replacement opportunities.

Another thing that you may or may not know is that this is a story that's never done, because retailers across North America basically replace about 10% of their shelf space every year with new stuff. So every time you think you have it nailed, there's something new that comes along. That really emphasizes the importance for us to have some of our most innovative, newest products and things in front of those retailers. That's a unique role that government can play, in that we can pull a number of those companies together for almost a speed-dating type of event with major retailers in Ontario, and these people would get an audience that they would never get otherwise. The minister is there as the chief spokesperson and has heard from lots of people just how important that type of thing is for their business. Then, once you have those markets, we can really focus in on the types of things that we can grow.

A couple of other things that I would mention there are that the infrastructure in the province is so important—having drainage so that those risks are managed and production optimized—and the labour access and capacity. There has been a whole slew of intakes that we've done in the CAP program and other things, and even more through COVID, to help get the word out there relative to the labour opportunities, working with universities and colleges etc.

There has been lots mentioned around science and research. We have a whole staff of specialists on commodities, soils, integrated pest management and environmental practices who are working on the best information of the day so that producers have access to that, especially newer producers that may not have as much experience or are running into things they've never run into before. We're educating the people who give information to farmers and major events like those held in Ridgeway, Guelph and different areas throughout the province.

It's also important to emphasize things like the business risk management suite of tools. When you have a program like crop insurance and it's one of the best in the world, then farmers can actually make those decisions to invest confidently, because they've got some of those things like weather and disease and other things that are outside of

their control managed, and they're able to confidently invest for the future.

And then, of course, there are lots of different programs with investments.

I would finish off by saying that it's also not just our ministry—as the minister said, it's a whole-of-government approach on this. Certainly, we're playing a lead role, providing that lens and advocating when things need to be dealt with, whether it be transportation issues or environment issues and things in other ministries. But we work very closely with the Ministry of Economic Development and Job Creation in their regional programming, and we've been very successful with our staff helping companies be successful with a lot of that programming, as well as things like FedNor—and that's not even touching on all the work that we do with the federal government, as well.

Back to you, Minister.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Randy, you did a wonderful job outlining the direction that we're heading in, in terms of making sure that we have the right policies and the right programs in place.

This past summer, at an FPT meeting, a federal-provincial-territorial meeting, we had a farmer from western Canada speak, and I thought it was really interesting. It stuck with me. He said, "I can manage market fluctuations. I can deal with changes in consumer demand and trends." But what kept him up at night was bad policy.

I think it's safe to say that here in Ontario, based on what you've just heard from our ADM and from our deputy, we are making sure that we have programs in place that are progressive, enabling farmers to look forward with confidence. Some of the programming is very unique.

Just to expand on some things that we're doing with research and innovation—but before we get there, I'd be remiss if I didn't give a shout-out to our colleagues who enabled the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, because together with the federal government we have invested approximately \$1.1 billion for business risk management and \$417 million for strategic initiative funding. Since June 2018, both the federal and provincial governments have committed to cost-share support to more than 6,500 projects through the partnership.

One initiative I'm really, really pleased about is how we addressed the drought in northwestern Ontario last year. I remember sitting in our den on our farm and participating in an evening meeting with the farmers from northwestern Ontario. We tried to get up there as quickly as we could, and I appreciated the fact—we sat around the kitchen table at Peggy Brekveld's dairy farm and met with stakeholders there, and then we went on a tour. We were able, because of the dexterity and the commitment of the OMAFRA team, to get that drought assistance program in place and facilitated in what I would like to think of as record time. While I was up there—there's never a dull moment—it was suggested to us that the wells really had been impacted in terms of the water table, and that if they were going to have any hope, they needed to be drilling wells that fall, before the frost set in. By reaching out to my team

at MO and working with the DMO, we were able to facilitate very quickly—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Two minutes.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** —that responsive program as well.

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Another example of making sure that people understand the dexterity within our agri-food sector: We also developed, in response to farmers, the ginseng storage loan guarantee program. You don't think about this, but the pandemic really had a negative impact on the ginseng farmers we have in Ontario because, traditionally—how do they sell their product? People come from Asia; they like to touch it, feel it and smell it; and because of the pandemic they weren't able to travel. So ginseng growers were being left with a lot of inventory in storage, and that was really starting to be detrimental to their overall industry. After going down and meeting and being on-farm with these people, who give their heart and soul to the industry just like any other farmer, we came forward with a loan guarantee program. That was really well received.

I could go on and on about what we have done, since forming government and since being elected in 2022, with a couple of amazing PAs. I think our staff are going to be—

*Interjection.*

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Invigorated—how's that? They're going to be busy and invigorated, coming up with programs that absolutely are enabling farmers around Ontario to continue to increase their yields so that we're meeting market demand. At the end of the day, that is what we need to be doing as government.

Do you have anything to add, Deputy?

**Mr. John Kelly:** We have a lot of vim and vigour in our ministry, yes, a lot of activity happening. We have a lot of different programs. You mentioned—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much. The time is up. We have finished our first round of questioning.

We will start the second round, and we will go back to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm going to start—how do I put this? We like to ask questions that you don't like to answer. So I'm going to do something different and I'm hopefully going to ask a question that we can agree on and you can answer and we'll all be happy.

One of the shortages of labour—a very critical shortage—is the shortage of vets across the province. I know this issue is near and dear to your heart. One of the issues is that the number of vets being trained in Ontario hasn't increased for years and years and years.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Thirty-four years, to be exact.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** See? You know. I'm sure you have been lobbied by the University of Guelph. I'm sure you've talked to Lakehead and Thunder Bay about having a two-plus-two training program to get more vets in northern Ontario. But the fact remains that they are going to need

the funding to be able to provide more spots. Is that funding coming?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Can you see under my mask?

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm giving you an easy one. Can we, at the end of the day, say that funding is coming and we are going to train more vets in Ontario?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I can tell you with absolute certainty we are having very good conversations, because again—do you know what? When we first formed government, Premier Ford wanted us to work in an all-of-government perspective. So we're working with Minister Dunlop, we're working with Northern Development, and we're working with all the ministries that need to be involved in terms of addressing this need—and it is very much a need.

To your earlier point: We haven't increased the number of seats at the University of Guelph for 34 years. Meanwhile, I believe, Deputy, it was just in 2020 that the University of Calgary increased to 100 seats; they went from 50 to 100, I believe. So we know this is a need.

The other thing is, because of the number of seats, there are students—really good young people—who would aspire to be large-animal vets in particular, who are looking out of jurisdiction to go to school. You know what happens when they go out of province; it's hard to bring them back. We're very much mindful of this, and I can tell you that from an inter-ministerial perspective, it's a priority.

I can also tell you that we've had very good conversations with both the president of the University of Guelph as well as the president of Lakehead. I'm talking about it every day, and the Premier is aware of the need as well. We certainly will be finding the best path forward to address the need for large-animal vets in particular.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** See? There are things we can agree on, 100%. Anything that we can do to move that along—because the shortage of vets is critical, and you know this. Anything that we can—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I thank you for that. Certainly, I will take you up on that if there's anything that we can do as a whole of government.

I would be remiss if I didn't point to the fact that Minister Dunlop was very successful in attracting more students to nursing programs and PSW programs and things like that, so there's a template out there that we're looking at, at this time.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** We won't have a lack of applicants for the vet program, I can guarantee you that.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** That's good to hear.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Now that we're friendly again, in the briefing book—I read a quote from it before. The briefing book does mention a program to protect farmland: "The agricultural system supports the long-term viability of the agri-food sector and helps protect farmland across the greater Golden Horseshoe." What is that system and how is it protecting farmland?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Again, what we're doing is taking a look at the whole picture. In terms of soil resiliency and increasing yield, there are a whole host—and

maybe that's an opportunity, through you, Deputy, to bring ADM McAslan back to talk about—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm going to do the non-country thing again. It says "protect farmland." Farmland, to me, is not the soil. It's the farmland, its acreage. And the agriculture system to protect farmland across the greater Golden Horseshoe—we're not even talking about the greenbelt here, really. This was in 2020. You had a system to protect farmland, and now, for some reason, we don't even want to talk about the loss of farmland. Let's not deny that there's a loss of farmland. Every day there is a loss of farmland. I haven't heard anyone say that that's not the case. We're using the number of 320 acres a day; I believe the number is actually 319.6. And, Minister, with all due respect, if you're going to say, "That's not the case, it's 100," show me the numbers. In 2020, there was talk of protecting farmland, and now, for some reason, there seems to be a reluctance even to talk about it.

Quite frankly, as a farmer, with all due respect to Minister Clark—he is the Minister of Housing—who is the person out there talking about protecting farmland?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Well, we certainly are an all-of-government effort to making sure we have a balanced approach. Would you not agree, through you, Chair, to the member opposite—I have to ask. There's the fact of the matter that things are coming to our attention. For instance, just last week the Prime Minister of Canada said there are 500,000 new people coming in, and, through modelling and just the fact of the matter, a large percentage of those people will be coming to Ontario. This province is expected to grow by more than two million people by 2031. We have a housing crisis on our hands—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Agreed, Minister, but we have to feed those people too, and we have to feed the world. Once again, we have a finite resource that we no longer seem to be wanting to talk about.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** No, it's not that all. What I want to talk about is the innovation and the new best practices that are increasing yields and increasing production, because you have to agree that we are doing amazingly well in increasing our yields and production. So when we have a housing crisis and we look to the farmers who are on the land today, and they're increasing yield day after day and we have programs to support that, I think that is good news and we need to be celebrating that.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Study after study shows that we don't need to build the housing on farmland; there are other places. Even the housing task force didn't focus on farmland and focused on other things, including protecting the greenbelt.

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I understand that there needs to be a balancing act, but I don't see anywhere where the importance of farmland is part of that balance. In your—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** If I may then, please—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Sorry.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I would like to share with you that, actually, there are some concrete examples of

how we are moving forward. We're intensifying our housing along our transit corridors. That's something that was suggested by the Federation of Agriculture in Ontario, and that's what we're doing.

We need a balance. We have to have confidence, though. In terms of moving forward, we have to have a confident approach to our entire agri-food system—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I 100% agree, Minister, and I'm going to do the non-country thing again—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** If we don't have the processors, you can have all the land—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** But we also have to have confidence that there is someone sitting at the cabinet table and saying, "My first priority is to make sure that they've proven that there's a better use for that land than growing the food, fibre and fuel that we're going to rely on for generations." So we had something called—and it's mentioned in your book—an agricultural impact assessment.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Okay. So could you outline how an agricultural impact assessment could protect farmland if it was actually applied?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Yes, but before I go, we have to make sure that we understand, in terms of the parcels of land that have been identified—you would agree, I'm sure, that when you take a look at them, they're not primary agricultural lands today. They're not producing food today.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I think that leads into the agricultural impact assessment.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Thank you for that. Yes.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Will you agree that we are losing 320 acres a day now?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** No. What I'm saying is—for instance, there's one parcel of land that is actually a gravel pit; it's classified as a gravel pit. So we need to make sure that we're talking about the right things.

But let's talk about the farmland impact. Deputy, I will turn it over to you.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Thank you, Minister.

MPP Vanthof, your commentary is quite interesting. The agricultural impact assessment guidance document is available on our website, and we encourage people to take advantage of that. It's freely available. I think we're taking the time to get the guidance document right. It has to be done in a way that meets the province's needs. As the minister said, there is a certain requirement because of the immigration that we're having, and so there is a balance that we have to do with that. To help meet this balance, we have to help with the productivity of the land that we have in production. That's really where the ministry has focused a lot of efforts, whether it's doing things like research at the University of Guelph—MPP Schreiner mentioned that there was a lot of work on soil structures and soil productivity, the soil microbiome and those types of things; work on soil water and how to incorporate waste products like manure or something like that into soil. Working with agriculture stakeholders on the soil action working group—they understand that this is the only way that we're going

to really improve how we produce things. It's through research and innovation, as you've said, Minister—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Excuse me. I don't disagree with a word you've said.

So the agricultural impact assessment is on the website. Could you just explain, from your perspective, what an agricultural impact assessment is on a parcel of land?

**Mr. John Kelly:** I'm going to pass this one to my ADM, David Hagarty.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** As ADM Hagarty is coming to the table—I think you would agree as well that this tool is not a cookie cutter, because the assessment has to be reflective of the realities from region to region to region in Ontario.

**Mr. David Hagarty:** I'm David Hagarty, assistant deputy minister of policy at the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

The current provincial plans, which I'm sure you're aware of, do require an agricultural impact assessment for settlement area boundary expansion, mineral aggregate operations infrastructure and other non-agricultural uses. And the goal—and this is specifically your question, "What is the goal of that?"—is to increase compatibility between agricultural and non-agricultural uses so that the agri-food sector remains resilient. As the deputy said, the draft guidance documents are available online.

There is a one-window approach to provincial planning, and it's through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. We do work very closely with that ministry to ensure that there is that balance in recognizing the importance of development and housing in a province that's increasing more quickly. I think we've increased our population by over 25% over the last 20 years, which is well above other like jurisdictions. So we need to accommodate that system, and we need to make sure that we're able to provide that balance.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Currently, is an agricultural impact assessment required on the agricultural land or on adjacent properties for other uses?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Well, the fact of the matter is, during this consultation period—we need to be careful we're not talking hypothetically here. The realization is, we're in a consultation period and we need to be making sure that everyone has their voice heard, but the fact can't be denied that we have a housing crisis on our hands, and, with that, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I don't think we are arguing about that.

I'm asking a simple question. The agricultural impact assessment was in the briefing book, so the simple question is: Is it currently suggested for agricultural land or for land adjacent to agricultural land? What does the current agricultural impact assessment cover?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think you're missing a point here: It's a draft document. We're still just working on it, so its applicability at this time—I think you're making more of it than—it's just a draft. Don't lose sight of that. Right now, we are addressing a crisis that we have on our hands today, and I really applaud the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing for coming forward in a very

thoughtful way. With the consultation period currently on, we certainly welcome people's comments. But we can't apply a draft document to the reality that we have on our hands, which is the housing crisis right here right now.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Just to clarify: The document that includes the agricultural impact assessment—that's a draft as well.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Do you want to touch on that a bit more?

**Mr. John Kelly:** Well, there's not much else to say, Minister. It is a draft document.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** In a way, that's perhaps even more concerning, given your reluctance to talk about the loss of agriculture—and yes, we know every piece of land is different. We both come from farms. But the avoidance of the issue—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I don't agree with your assertion one iota, with all due respect. I find it very curious that you're totally ignoring the fact that we have a housing crisis on our hands right now.

We are making sure that we are working with all kinds of solutions, from the intensification along transit corridors through to working with municipalities, because municipalities, quite frankly, have been asking for opportunities to expand as well.

We can't lose sight of the fact that we have built into this approach a two-year window, so if the land isn't developed by 2025, that window closes and the opportunity is gone. That's a good backstop, to my way of thinking.

What worries me is that you're not accepting the fact that we have a housing crisis on our hands. That's really concerning to me—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** With all due respect, Minister, I fully appreciate that we have a housing crisis on our hands. It's in my riding and across the province.

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I also fully appreciate that we've got a couple of other crises on our hands: the climate crisis, and we will at one point face a food crisis if we keep losing the capacity to grow food. So it's not an either/or. Let's look at them both—and I hope you are.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Two minutes.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Your reluctance to even talk about the loss of farmland suggests to me that you're not appreciating the gravity of all the crises we're facing.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I absolutely reject this premise as well, because the fact of the matter is, you're not accepting and celebrating the fact that, through best practices and soil conservation and moving forward with new technologies, we're adapting to our growing seasons and our growing conditions. And with developing the north, with opportunities there as well, we're actually increasing our capacity to produce food in Ontario. You're making a big deal out of it, but the Ontario agricultural stakeholders around the table last week actually said their number one issue is lack of labour, because it's inhibiting the expansion of processing. So we need to put our priorities in place. With all due respect, we need to make sure that if we're attracting workers, they have a safe place to call home at night. So you can't suck and blow here. If we're

going to move our industry forward, we need to make sure we have processing in place, and that is going to require some tough decisions. We need more housing in Ontario.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** With all due respect, Minister, we need to have the ability to look at several issues at the same time. There is a housing crisis which needs to be addressed and we have to look at, to make sure that—although technology and farmers have done a great job of increasing productivity, we also need to realize that agricultural land is going to be one of the most important assets worldwide at some point.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I understand what you're saying.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** So I think we aren't that far apart.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, MPP Vanthof. Your time is up.

Now we'll move to the independent member. MPP Schreiner, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I want to talk about processing, as a former food manufacturer myself—very small. But I have one more question before I get there.

I want to thank MPP Thompson for pointing out that the food and agricultural sector contributes \$50 billion to Ontario's GDP.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Yes, that's two-way trade.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** Yes. Thank you. Domestic and trade—so absolutely, it's a critical part.

I'm just a simple farm guy, a simple small business owner, but when I look at a balance sheet—if you pave over the assets that produce the \$50 billion of GDP, it seems like you're not going to have the \$50 billion. So at some point, we have to protect the assets.

I don't want to get into the greenbelt, I don't want to get into the housing crisis, and I don't want to get into highways right now.

The briefing book said, "OMAFRA worked with MMAH to update the provincial policy statement, 2020 to maintain and strengthen policies to protect farmland..." I'm just wondering, what were the policies to strengthen the protection of farmland—that way, we can at least publicly know what they are. We may disagree about them. But what were they?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I would call on Deputy Kelly to remark on that, because you were working on that. I only came into this chair in 2021. Through you, and to your ADMs, we certainly would look forward to expanding on the program for everyone's benefit—expanding the knowledge or the explanation.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Sure. Thank you for the question.

A big part of our role has been to maintain and try to enhance productivity within the province. Certainly, to MPP Vanthof's point, productivity has increased. We've done that, at the same time, trying to protect the land that we have. It could be through the different programs that we have—and I mentioned the University of Guelph program to enhance soil and productivity, but there are other ones that we have done. We've got, for example, a program called AgriSuite. This is an on-farm research and extension program. It's actually a computer program, but it also involves new tools for capacity building, and it's really

there to promote stewardship. We've invested significant dollars in this to support farmers so that they can enhance their own land.

We've also worked with groups like the Great Lakes and Lake Simcoe agreement—a big part of what the ministry does is promoting best management practices. On your cattle farm, you would have known all about best management practices in the day, but they've changed quite a bit since that time. I have my own farm, and our practices 20 years ago aren't the same as what they are today.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** Can I interject? I just want to leave some time for processing, and I don't want to—otherwise, we're going to lose all of our time here.

**Mr. John Kelly:** I'll be very rapid.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** Please.

**Mr. John Kelly:** So our health and water quality from the Great Lakes-Simcoe program—the minister has already mentioned the LEADS program; soil info and soil mapping using advanced technologies. And when I say soil mapping—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I know what soil mapping is.

**Mr. John Kelly:**—looking at the type of soil: What's in there, what's the phosphorus content, what's the structure, what's the water, and what's the productivity capacity of that land? It's quite amazing technology. We've got sensors, calculators, soil-test managers. We've got an app which you can put your information into and you can see what you should get out of yo., right? So there are a lot of different things that we're doing to promote those things, and it has the support of the sector through the soil action working group.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I appreciate the work the ministry is doing to enhance soil. We just need to make sure we have soil to protect and enhance.

I want to get to the manufacturing here. I appreciated the ADM's presentation. I used to do speed-dating for farmers and manufacturers myself, and supply relationships are still existing 20 years after doing that, so it's very valuable work.

One of the challenges that I know farmers and food manufacturers face is the concentration in our retail markets. We have three major retailers that control 85% of the marketplace. There has been talk at the federal level about a grocery code of conduct to protect farmers and local producers, and actually, there is some research that it could tamp down food inflation as well. From what I can see, there isn't as much progress happening at the federal level as there should be. Some people are pointing to the provinces now.

I wonder if you could comment on where the ministry is in developing a grocery code of conduct.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Certainly, it's a national initiative that we're embarking upon. We had the provincial election in Quebec, and Minister Lamontagne was chair leading up to the election, and Minister Popham from BC volunteered to step in while he was campaigning, if you will. So we have an FPT meeting coming up on December 1, and we look forward to our update at that

time. The deputy, in preparation for that December 1 meeting, actually had an all-deputies meeting.

I'm just wondering if you have anything to add to that. If not, it's something we could bring—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** As you're getting ready to do that—just really quick; sorry. If it does not succeed federally, would the province be open to picking the ball up and leading this initiative? As the province with the largest population and the largest food-manufacturing sector—

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I'm very pleased to share with everyone that people do look to the province of Ontario to take a leadership position, whether it's fighting for fertilizer solutions through to making sure that the right voices are heard.

With regard to the grocery code of conduct, I have every confidence that we're going to be moving forward, because when we met in July, I think it is safe to say the consensus was, we're done waiting.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** That's good to hear.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I think the best way forward is indeed a national approach to this—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I agree.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I look forward to seeing where we get to on December 1, and I'd be pleased to follow up with you after, Mike.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** So we've come up with two things now. We'll definitely follow up on this. I'm happy to work with you on it.

Before I run out of time, I've got to talk about the shortage of vets. I'll just pick up on what MPP Vanthof said. I don't want to speak for one of the parties, but it sounds like three of the parties would be very supportive of increasing the veterinary spaces at the University of Guelph and the partnership between Guelph and Lakehead. I've been told by folks at the University of Guelph that it's harder to get into vet school than it is to get into medical school.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** So let's work on fixing that together—then, if you want to follow up on your grocery code of conduct in the few minutes I have left here.

1640

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** With regard to vets, we are on the same page; there's no two ways about that. We're working very hard across ministerial responsibilities to find the path that makes the most sense. We recognize that there is a need for large-animal vets in northern Ontario as well, and that's why the synergy between Lakehead and the University of Guelph make so much sense.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Two minutes.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** We need to keep working on this. We recognize the importance and the timeliness of working together on a solution, and we'll get there.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** Do you mind if I ask an infrastructure question? I have a couple of minutes here.

One conversation I've had with farmers, especially doing on-farm value-added in vegetable crop—I'm thinking, in particular, of post-harvest handling in Holland

Marsh—is lack of electricity infrastructure for chillers and equipment.

I'm just curious if the ministry is playing any role whatsoever in working with the Ministry of Energy to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place for on-farm processing and on-farm post-harvest handling.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I come from the experience of being a general manager for a dairy goat co-operative. There was a lot of on-farm processing for dairy goat products, and it was very successful.

While I haven't had anything specific come across my desk regarding chillers and things like that—

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I'll bring it to you.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Yes, please bring it to me, and we'll address it accordingly.

I think we need to celebrate that, from a dairy-farm perspective, there are some wonderful things happening just north of London. I was contacted by a dairy family who is in the Hamilton area. They're looking to add value with on-farm processing as well. This is great news because, again, they're looking to see how they can continue to add value to their raw commodity. They're looking at that from a really hyper-local perspective.

It's certainly something that we need to address. If you have any specifics, bring them to me.

Deputy, do you want to add to that? I know you like this as well.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** And the grocery code of conduct too—if you want to add to that. You can have the rest of the time.

**Mr. John Kelly:** To address your energy question first: Stanton dairy is the largest dairy in the province—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Sorry, the time is up.

**Mr. Mike Schreiner:** I was trying to manage—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Unfortunately, I have to be the bad guy here.

Now we'll move to the government side. Government, you have 18 minutes only for your turn questioning. MPP Flack.

**Mr. Rob Flack:** The one thing I can say as a little preface here is that there's a lot of passion about ag and food in this room. I look at the member opposite talking, the two folks over there—Mr. Vanthof and Mr. Schreiner. What I like best is, I'm also a farmer, a beef farmer, and a former agri-food executive, and I even sold this man some feed throughout my years.

*Interjection.*

**Mr. Rob Flack:** We have a lot in common, a lot of great things.

I will say one anecdote that happened in the election. It speaks to a lot of—indirectly or directly—what we are talking about today. During the election, I got a call from my father. He said a former teacher—I'll not name his name; my father was an educator—said that he was upset about land going into highways etc. I said, "Where does he live?" He lives in Brampton. So I said, "Well, where does he live, specifically?" He said, "I'll find out." He phoned me back and I found out. I said, "Oh, I know exactly where he lives. Tell him I used to call on that farm when

I got started in Masterfeeds. I hope he's enjoying his nice home in Peel county." NIMBYism—it's a tough question. It's tough to do. It shut him up, anyway, for a minute—a really good guy, by the way, and a good teacher.

I want to talk a little bit about productivity, Minister, and I want to get to another subject that I think is misconstrued and not fully understood by people generally, and that's fertilizer. A lot of people hear the word "fertilizer" now—urbanites, I'll say—and they think, "It's got to be bad. Nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus—it's bad." In fact, it's really good, and it's needed. We need to feed the soil. In the conversations I've had with farmers post-election and in my life pre-politics, it's a big and growing issue—nutrient management throughout this province.

My question is simply this: What government investments in research and innovation are we doing to support application of good fertilizer, in the sense of being applied properly and tied in with nutrient management?

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I appreciate that question very much, and certainly the experience that you bring to the table as well.

I go back to that example that I used a little bit ago: that western farmer who said he can manage market fluctuations and he can manage changes in consumer trends and demand, but what he can't handle and what keeps him up at night is bad policy. People are frustrated with the fact that handcuffs are being placed on tools that, if used properly, can help enhance production and yields. No matter where the conversations have gone today, we need to celebrate the fact that in Ontario, we have farmers who are adopting new tools, best practices and every opportunity possible to increase yield per acre. That should be the conversation that we're having today—increasing yield per acre—because some of the conversations today were on land that hasn't been farmed for some time. So that discussion becomes moot, to my way of thinking, and we need to be really focusing on how we give farmers the tools they need to be better.

We know we have a Premier who celebrates made-in-Ontario solutions, so in that spirit, we introduced a fertilizer challenge. We're putting \$2 million into a fertilizer challenge that will absolutely incent, invite, encourage companies to come forward with alternative solutions, as opposed to importing fertilizer like nitrogen. You mentioned phosphorus and potassium as well, potash—the list goes on. In Ontario, the fact of the matter is that our soils need nitrogen, so I'm really pleased with the responsiveness that the ministry officials gave to us when I came forward with the idea of introducing a fertilizer challenge.

I'm wondering if the deputy can drill down a little bit more on the fertilizer challenge, to share where we're at and what we hope to accomplish on that.

**Mr. John Kelly:** The minister is referring to our fertilizer program that we introduced just this year, actually. It's really an accelerator program to help with the development of alternatives to fertilizer. We certainly recognize that fertilizer is a key ingredient to any production. For those of you who are not from an agriculture background: Think of fertilizer as the food for the plant. You need to

have a balanced system, whether it's NPK—nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium—but there are also biologicals. There are other things that plants require. To address some of the ongoing potential that happens from a global perspective, we introduced this program. It was really developed to support Ontario production. It's a \$2-million program. It will look at made-in-Ontario solutions and solutions that are applied in 2023, so people can say, "These are things that we're going to do to move this whole program forward." It's being administered through an organization called Bioenterprise, who are specialists in product acceleration—MPP Schreiner, you probably know them—and they are taking this to heart. They've been extremely great to deal with, and we're bringing this program forward.

1650

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** Again, it complements practices that have already have been embraced by Ontario farmers. We need to recognize that when you drill down to it, farmers are absolutely the best stewards of the land, and they want to make sure that they're applying the right product, in the right place, at the right time, at the right rate.

Over and above that, in terms of research and innovation, we have to applaud the work that's being done at our research stations across this province as well. From Ridgetown to Emo through to Huron research station and beyond, and even in our research corridor in Elora area, we're identifying opportunities whereby seed and product can sustain new growing environments. That's where the research in northern Ontario is really, really important.

In terms of innovation, we also had—and I'm not sure whether the gentleman here to my right visited the tent or not, but we also hosted an innovation tent at the outdoor farm show. That is something that we need to celebrate as well.

We would be remiss if we didn't talk about how we're working with the University of Guelph. I talked about the 167 projects that are researching how we do better. Down in Vineland, they're doing amazing work on hazelnuts and robotics to prune trees. The list just goes on and on, in terms of efficiencies that ultimately lead to better production.

Again, when you put all the pieces of the puzzle together in our agri-food sector, there's no denying that we can have every confidence in the farmers' ability to grow and realize greater yields on the land that they have in production right here, right now, and that we have processors wanting to embrace innovation and best practices for efficiencies to realize that complete experience through the value chain.

The deputy jotted down the Chapman's example. I'm wondering if you could touch on that right now, because I think it's a good story too.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Chapman's ice cream is in Markdale. They have a real desire to grow, but they can't, because they can't get people that affordable housing. That's part of the reason that we need to find these types of things. Chapman's has "help wanted," "open," "come and work for us"—and not just at minimum wage; they have good-paying jobs. Yet they can't get them because of the affordable housing.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** They're embracing innovation and robotics—as much innovation as possible—to offset that labour shortage. But again, it's a perfect example of how, because of the labour shortage, because of the lack of housing, we don't have a choice but through research to find the right innovations that will increase production on-farm that ultimately will lead to greater manufacturing processing.

If there's anything that people take away from this committee experience this afternoon, everyone should have confidence in Ontario farmers, because their yields are increasing year over year, and we have so many different examples of the value-add.

I wonder if, through you, Deputy, to ADM Jackiw, we could touch on a few more examples that cement the fact that no matter what we hear, people should have 200% confidence in Ontario's agri-food system.

**Mr. Randy Jackiw:** Thanks very much, Minister. It's a really important area and a big focus for the ministry.

I mentioned the complexity in Ontario of growing 200 crops, and I think the right question that was asked is: How do we make sure that this is actually optimized, that we're doing these things as efficiently as possible and as sustainably as possible? There are a lot of public concerns around nutrients, but you can't grow anything without nutrients. It's feeding the plants. If you haven't got that, things starve.

Again, with our crop specialists, in working with certified crop advisers and other experts across the province, this is very much a continuous improvement story, but it very much starts with an overall plan. Even things as simple as crop rotations are really critical. For example, soybeans use very little nitrogen, so they're a perfect crop to follow. They're good for the land. It's making sure that there's optimum utilization of the nutrients that are in the soil.

Genetics in the crops are improving on a regular basis as far as what they're able to use, and how quickly, in optimizing growth. Every crop is different as far what they need, and there are both the macronutrients and micronutrients. The deputy mentioned there are a lot of new technologies coming on as far as supplements that help these things to be taken up more efficiently.

There has been a full-court press over a decade by the industry, and supported by OMAFRA, around the four Rs. That's all about making sure you have the right things at the right time in the right amounts—and some really cool stuff that has been emerging relative to precision agriculture. That's really optimizing technology that you start from a very detailed soil test. The companies will actually come back with a prescription for your particular land so that you're considering the crop rotation, considering all of the factors in optimizing what you're doing. You can take that even further, because I do think that it's still important to talk about things like greenhouse and vertical agriculture. But when you get into prescriptions, those things are giving exactly the amounts, and no more and no less, in a continuous way to make sure that's done. This is, of course, complemented by the slew of environmental programs—how the land is managed, everything from



windbreaks to maintaining your soil, that you're not losing the nutrients along with the soil.

You're never done on this. You're always attending the different seminars at the colleges and universities to hear what's new, what the newest recommendations are.

One of the coolest things that I have seen in the last little while—I heard about our hay industry and how we actually export hay. Coming from southwestern Ontario myself, I found that odd, but it's a really big deal. One of the things that's emerging is that you can actually grow a cover crop with your alfalfas and timothys etc. in the fall. You're having the cover crop, and you're providing the protection. You're able to harvest that in the spring at a very high value that actually competes with grains and oilseeds. You're de facto double cropping, totally managing the nutrients in a sustainable way, and an order of magnitude increasing the profitability per acre. I think it's innovations like that that are really going to make Ontario even more cool in the years ahead.

Back to you, Minister.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I really appreciate that, because, again, it's showing how we're taking care of the soils in such a way that we're realizing greater productivity and turning crops over quicker. We need to celebrate that.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Two minutes.

**Hon. Lisa M. Thompson:** I would invite every single person in this room today to make sure that we are putting the right spotlight on Ontario's agri-food industry. We're an economic driver. We heard earlier that we generate \$47 billion for the provincial GDP. We have billions of dollars in opportunities in terms of embracing new technologies and innovations.

People are willing to invest. I'll tell you this: Our strategic processing fund attracted a huge number of applications. The total aggregate sum of the applications was \$1 billion unto itself. People are wanting to do business in Ontario, because we are leading the way in terms of making sure we're focused on the right things. It's about producing the best crops on the best lands, and it's about making sure that processors have the labour to add value.

In order to make sure our processors are at their maximum capacity, churning on all cylinders, they need labour. That labour will be encouraged to come to their region, if you will, if there's housing and if there's a safe place to call home at night. That's why I'm so buoyed. We have a Premier in this province of Ontario who absolutely stands, with all of us in government, side by side with our farming communities. Again, I can't impress it upon you enough: The number one priority that we hear about is the need for labour, and that labour needs housing.

I want to share, in closing, a quote from Chris Conway. He submitted a joint letter—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, Minister. The time is up.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair "put without further amendment or debate every question necessary to dispose of the estimates."

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

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

Shall vote 108, strong agriculture, food and bioproduct sectors and strong rural communities, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 109, policy development, carry? All in favour? All opposed? Carried.

Shall the 2022-23 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs carry? All in favour? All opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2022-23 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to the House? All in favour, please raise your hand. All opposed? Carried.

Thank you very much to the committee, to the minister and to the staff for being here today.

This concludes our business. The meeting is adjourned.  
*The committee adjourned at 1703.*





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