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(Hansard)**

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**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

P-10

**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

2022 Annual Report,
Auditor General:

Ministry of Natural Resources and
Forestry

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Monday 24 April 2023

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comptes publics**

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vérificatrice générale :

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Lundi 24 avril 2023

Chair: Tom Rakocevic
Clerk: Tanzima Khan

Président : Tom Rakocevic
Greffière : Tanzima Khan

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Monday 24 April 2023

Lundi 24 avril 2023

The committee met at 1231 in room 151.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Good afternoon, everyone. In the absence of the Chair and the Vice-Chair this afternoon, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations? Mr. Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: Today, I would like to pick on member Crawford.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Are there any further nominations? Seeing none, Mr. Crawford, you are duly elected as the Acting Chair for this committee. Kindly come and take the seat.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): Good afternoon, committee. We're now going to go into closed session to get a briefing from the Auditor General.

The committee continued in closed session at 1234 and resumed at 1347.

2022 ANNUAL REPORT, AUDITOR GENERAL

MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND FORESTRY

Consideration of value-for-money audit: management of invasive species.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): I would like to call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order. We are here to begin consideration of the value-for-money audit, management of invasive species, from the 2022 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General.

Joining us today are officials from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. You will have 20 minutes collectively for an opening presentation to the committee. We will then move into the question-and-answer portion of the meeting, where we will rotate back and forth between the government and official opposition caucuses in 20-minute intervals, with some time for questioning allocated for the independent member.

Before you begin, the Clerk will administer the oath of witness or affirmation.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Good afternoon, everyone. I will read out the affirmation, and then if you can all individually just let the committee know that you do affirm.

Do you solemnly affirm that the evidence you shall give to this committee touching the subject of the present

inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I do affirm.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

Mr. Jamie Stewart: I do affirm.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

Mr. Stephen Casselman: I do affirm.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

Mr. Jeremy Downe: I do affirm.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

Our Zoom participants should do the affirmation right now so that we don't have to do this later on. Again: Do you solemnly affirm that the evidence you shall give to this committee touching the subject of the present inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

I will just call out names, and then you can individually say that you affirm. Ms. Barton, if you can go ahead, please?

Ms. Jennifer Barton: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

Ms. Westman, please go ahead.

Ms. Trisha Westman: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

Mr. Watchorn, please go ahead.

Mr. Rick Watchorn: I affirm.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

Mr. Brown?

Mr. Craig Brown: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

Ms. Holmes?

Ms. Amanda Holmes: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): And Mr. Saunders?

Mr. Jim Saunders: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Tanzima Khan): Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Thank you all very much.

I would invite you to each introduce yourselves for Hansard before you begin speaking. You may begin when ready.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Good afternoon, Chair and members of the standing committee. I'm Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark. I was here a few weeks ago; you may remember me from my long, long name. It's nice to be in front of the standing committee once again. I'm the deputy minister for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

As I begin today, I would like to thank the Auditor General for her observations and recommendations from her value-for-money audit of invasive species. Ministry staff are considering the Auditor General's report and recommendations. I'm pleased to be here to address the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and provide more details on the mandate of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry and our work in managing invasive species.

I also want to thank ministry staff who are involved in this important work. With me here virtually today are three of our ministry's assistant deputy ministers, so I'd like to introduce them. You will see virtually we have Craig Brown, who is our ADM of policy division; we have Jennifer Barton, who is our assistant deputy minister of MNRF's regional operations division; and Amanda Holmes, who is our assistant deputy minister of corporate management and information division as well as our chief administrative officer.

We also have on hand, available for questions, Rick Watchorn, our director of enforcement branch, and Trisha Westman, our director of science and research.

I'm pleased to also introduce, within the room here with me, Jamie Stewart, to my immediate right, who is our director of fish and wildlife policy branch; Stephen Casselman, who is our manager of biodiversity and invasive species section; and Jeremy Downe, our senior invasive species policy adviser.

Today, you will hear from us on a number of topics relating to invasive species and how our ministry is fulfilling its mandate in several ways. Before we get into your questions, I'd like to take this opportunity to tell you more about the great work being done at the ministry to manage invasive species and help stop their spread in Ontario.

Ontario is one of the most biodiverse provinces in Canada. It's home to more than 30,000 species and multiple ecoregions, from the Carolinian forest in the south to the tundra in the northern Hudson Bay lowlands. However, invasive species can cause biodiversity loss in Ontario. Current and future pressures such as globalization and climate change are exacerbating the problem.

Invasive species impact many industries, such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, recreation, tourism and even health care. That is why invasive species awareness and control is such an important part of the work the ministry does.

MNRF is on the front lines of managing invasive species and has made significant strides to prevent, detect

and respond to the threat they pose. The Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan was launched in 2012. It provides a comprehensive framework, including more than 20 actions and 90 tactics, to guide the management of invasive species in the province.

The province has achieved success through this plan, including passing the Invasive Species Act; supporting key partners in invasive species communications, education and management; and supporting and implementing research on invasive species surveillance and control.

The Invasive Species Act regulates the prevention and management of invasive species in Ontario. Under the act, 22 species are prohibited. This means it is illegal to import, possess, deposit, release, transport, breed, grow, buy, sell or lease these species anywhere in Ontario. An additional 11 species are restricted, which limits or applies conditions to their use in Ontario. Species are chosen for regulation under the act based on their invasive characteristics and their potential impact on the environment, the economy and societal well-being.

Working with partners to control the spread of invasive species is critical. No single government or ministry can do it all on their own.

I'd like to share some examples with you of the impact of invasive species. Phragmites, for example, is a type of invasive plant causing damage to Ontario's biodiversity, wetlands and beaches. This perennial invasive grass has been damaging ecosystems in Ontario for decades. It is aggressive and spreads quickly. It out-competes native species for water and nutrients, and it releases toxins from its roots into the soil that kill surrounding plants.

Through our ongoing partnership with the Invasive Species Centre, we have supported the efforts of the Green Shovels Collaborative, which includes leaders in conservation like the Nature Conservancy of Canada and Ducks Unlimited Canada. With funding provided by MNRF, these partners are developing a strategic framework for the management of phragmites in Ontario and have supported local management of phragmites through the provision of grants to various organizations. This has resulted in the restoration of more than 1,500 hectares of coastal wetland habitats on private and public lands that have been degraded by this invasive plant. They are also supporting efforts to advance the use of new technologies such as biological control in the management of phragmites and other invasive species.

Another example is water soldier. The ministry has collaborated with partners, including the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters and Parks Canada, to eradicate water soldier. Water soldier is an invasive plant which has been found in locations including the Trent River, private ponds and the Bay of Quinte. This plant forms dense mats of floating vegetation which crowd out native plants, resulting in decreased plant biodiversity. These dense mats can hinder recreational activities such as boating, angling and swimming. Its sharp, serrated leaf edges can cut swimmers and individuals who handle it. The ministry has recently expanded efforts to address new occurrences of water soldier in the Bay of Quinte and is

building new partnerships with members of the Bay of Quinte Restoration Council to monitor and develop a management plan for this high-risk threat.

Collaboration and funding are so important to controlling invasive species. Our long-term partnership with the Invasive Species Centre has been central to the ministry's efforts to prevent and reduce the harm caused by invasive species to Ontario's environment and economy, and we are working with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters on the Invading Species Awareness Program. To ensure the efficient and effective use of funds, the ministry will continue to use a risk-based approach to invasive species prevention and management. We will do so in collaboration with the federal government and key partners to maximize the effectiveness of current and future resources.

In 2022, the ministry established three-year agreements with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters and the Invasive Species Centre. This funding enables thoughtful planning and delivery of key management actions supporting education and awareness, research, management and control of invasive species by partners, or through agreements they establish with other organizations that have relevant experience and expertise or local knowledge.

The ministry will continue to collaborate with partners who can help us to identify and prioritize high-risk invasive species for regulatory consideration that are within the ministry's mandate and jurisdiction. Public engagement is also very important. Dealing with invasive species requires all parts of society to get involved, and that includes awareness among and support from everyday Ontarians.

One of the great successes we can point to in Ontario has been with wild pigs. Wild pigs are not native to Ontario. They can have a negative impact on native wildlife and ecosystems, including preying upon native plants and wildlife; competing with native wildlife for food, water, and space; and spreading disease to wildlife. Wild pigs also pose a significant risk to the agricultural industry. They damage crops and pasturelands and spread disease to livestock, pets and humans. They have high reproductive potential, which means they can increase in number and spread rapidly, making their impacts more severe.

The ministry has been working hard to understand how many wild pigs are in Ontario and is taking decisive action to prevent their establishment. The ministry developed and implemented a plan to educate people about wild pigs and how they can help us manage this particular invasive species.

As a result of the ministry education campaign and information from other organizations, the public has become increasingly aware over the past few years of the potential damages that established wild pigs can bring to an ecosystem. Because of this, we have seen an increase in the number of publicly reported sightings. When there was a sounder—a sounder is a multi-generational group of wild pigs—spotted in Pickering a year ago, MNRF

officials worked hard to find and eliminate them. What helped us to do that was receiving tips from the public.

Last year, ministry staff investigated sightings at 35 locations across southern Ontario. These site visits are effective public education and awareness opportunities. Over the past two years, these investigations have resulted in improved pig containment and the successful removal of 16 invasive wild pigs from the natural environment.

In addition to engaging the public on wild pigs, we have put in place a number of action plans to help people understand what they can do to help keep invasive species from taking hold in Ontario. For example, the anglers action plan offers information about handling bait, what to do if an angler catches an invasive species of fish, cleaning drywells and avoiding driving their boat through aquatic plants. It also reminds anglers that it is now illegal to move their boats or boating equipment from one lake to another without first making sure they are cleaned, drained and dried.

The cottagers action plan reminds people to burn only local firewood, to groom pets before heading to or leaving the cottage to remove any invasive plants or seeds that may be attached to their coats, and to check their property and report any invasive species. As well, it asks cottagers to pass this information on to renters.

The gardeners action plan lets people know they should choose native or non-invasive plants for their garden, to avoid introducing or spreading invasive species, and that they should avoid relocating plants from their home to their cottage garden. It also contains advice about the best way to remove invasive plants, should they be found.

Finally, the hikers action plan focuses on making sure people stay on paths, clean their hiking gear and, as with cottagers, ensure their pets are groomed so they can't move invasive species from one location to another.

Looking to the future, the ministry maintains and updates a list of invasive species to support future decisions. This includes completing a risk assessment for 17 species identified as posing a risk to Ontario's natural environment. The ministry will continue to pursue opportunities to detect invasive species during the delivery of its monitoring programs.

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To effectively prevent harmful invasive species from entering and establishing in Ontario, the ministry participates in federal-provincial committees to support ongoing and improved collaboration on the prevention and management of invasive species. In addition, the ministry works with federal departments and agencies to develop responses to specific threats.

Despite these efforts, invasive species continue to be an issue, not just in Ontario but worldwide. That's why we are launching a review of the progress of our Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan. Through this review, we are assessing actions taken to date as well as taking stock of new opportunities.

By applying the outcomes from this review, we will develop a renewed strategic plan for the province. The renewed plan will ensure relevancy today and into the

future. It will build on the solid foundation already in place, foster collaborative approaches and leverage new opportunities to guide meaningful invasive species management in the province.

The ministry is also committed to the ongoing development, implementation and enforcement of the Invasive Species Act. With respect to monitoring and enforcement, in 2020, the province finalized Ontario's Sustainable Bait Management Strategy, which establishes a new approach to the management of baitfish across the province. Ontario's approach aims to reduce the spread of invasive species and diseases and protect Ontario's vibrant fisheries and the industries that rely on them while also providing flexibility and certainty to the bait industry and anglers.

The ministry is taking a number of additional steps to help prevent the introduction and spread of invasive species. This includes taking a look at the current risk assessment and regulatory development process to identify opportunities for improvement.

To help effectively monitor invasive species, we will continue to apply Ontario's response framework to assess the risk of new invasive species either entering the province or spreading from one area to another. Where possible, we will continue to identify and implement actions to promote effective control. And where appropriate, we will continue to review risk assessments from ecologically and geographically relevant jurisdictions such as Great Lakes-adjacent states and neighbouring provinces.

We're also taking a number of actions on the enforcement front. The ministry is providing its conversation officers with information and tools to support detection and identification of invasive species. We're coordinating food, fish market and baitfish inspection blitzes in our southern region. This is in addition to routine fisheries checks and boat launch visits throughout the province.

This is in an example of our risk-based approach to priority-setting, which includes identifying enforcement operational plans based on geography. Provincial, regional and local enforcement work assignments are set out through the ministry's annual planning process. Conservation officers' hours are tracked and reviewed through the annual plan, including time dedicated to invasive species work.

We routinely conduct sport fishing inspections, including at boat launches or on roads leading to or from those boat launch sites. Bait management zone enforcement includes checking for compliance of invasive and fish species movement. Licence conditions make it illegal for commercial bait harvesters and retailers to be in possession of fish that are not legal baitfish species.

In summary, Ontario's approach aims to reduce the spread of invasive species and diseases and protect our province's vibrant ecosystem. We know that there are always new threats of invasives that may pose challenges here. By investing now to prevent and manage invasive species, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry is protecting our natural resources, mitigating damage to our economy and saving tax dollars over the long term.

Thank you very much. I'm happy to take any questions you may have.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): This week, we'll proceed with the following rotation: 20 minutes to the government side, 20 minutes to the official opposition members and three minutes to the independent member. We will follow this rotation for two rounds.

Let's start with the government side right now. We have 20 minutes. MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm going to talk about a couple of invasive species in particular. It seems my colleagues have decided that since I seem to have a lot of invasive species in my riding, I should lead the charge on this.

I'm going to back up just a little bit. I really want to talk about hydrilla and some of the challenges that we have around it. There has been a thought that hydrilla and milfoil have been able to crossbreed. I know that hydrilla is not really seen very much in Ontario. It's one of the invasive aquatic plants that we have been diligently trying to keep from invading Ontario.

I'm going to go back a number of years, back to 2013: On the Trent Canal, between locks 20 and 21, it was thought that we had some of the hybrid hydrilla and milfoil, and the city of Peterborough embarked on a harvesting program to clear that out. If you're not aware of it, that section of the canal is used as a public skating rink in the winter, and the seaweed beds got so thick that we weren't getting good ice. The Trent-Severn system lowers the water depth in that area between four inches and eight inches because of the hydraulic lift lock. If the water goes above eight inches, it gets into the towers on either side of the hydraulic lift lock and can cause catastrophic damage if it freezes. And if it drops below four inches of water, then the seals around the cylinders of the hydraulic tubs freeze, which can also cause catastrophic damage. So they manage the water very well in the winter, but the seaweed bed got so thick that we weren't getting very good ice. They harvested it. We weren't seeing that same growth happen above the lift lock; we were seeing it, though, from lock 20 south, down to about lock 7 on the Trent-Severn with that.

Knowing how invasive hydrilla is and how difficult it can be to deal with and how it really drowns out or smothers out a lot of the other aquatic life, it makes it a challenge, then, for small fish to swim through. We know it's in New York State. It's fairly prevalent in New York State.

What steps are we taking right now on the preventive side to ensure that we don't have hydrilla come into Ontario—specifically, into Lake Ontario—and work its way up through the system that way?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you very much for the question.

As you mentioned, it has significant ecological, social and economic impacts, and we definitely are concerned about it continuing to spread.

I do have Craig Brown, our assistant deputy minister of policy, who can provide some additional details in response to your question about what we're doing to prevent the introduction of this threat into our waterways.

Over to you, Craig. And if you need any assistance from our panel as well, just let us know.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you for the question.

I'm Craig Brown. I'm the assistant deputy minister for policy here at the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

You're absolutely correct; hydrilla is an aggressive aquatic invasive plant. It does outcompete native plants, and it negatively affects the biodiversity of aquatic ecosystems. As you suggested, the plant forms dense mats of submerged vegetation that severely impacts navigation, recreation and in-water infrastructure.

Luckily, hydrilla has not been reported in Ontario. As you said, though, it is widely established in many locations in the United States, including New York and Ohio. The ministry acted pre-emptively in 2016 by regulating hydrilla as a prohibited invasive species under the Invasive Species Act. This means it is illegal to buy, sell, release or possess hydrilla in Ontario, including for things like aquariums and water gardens.

When hydrilla was found recently on the American side of the Niagara River, the ministry implemented a surveillance program last fall to search for it alongside Ontario's side of the river. We surveyed over 50 sites and collected samples for what's called environmental DNA analysis at our laboratory in Peterborough. Environmental DNA is a tool that detects microparticles from living or dead organisms in the water. This approach allows us to get fast results. The good news is hydrilla was not found or detected in any of the surveillance sites or in the environmental DNA samples. The ministry will continue to monitor for hydrilla in Ontario waters, and we are working with local partners to heighten public awareness of this invasive species.

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We've also taken action to lower the chances of watercraft inadvertently transporting aquatic invasive species between water bodies. The deputy minister spoke a bit about this in her opening remarks. In January 2021, the ministry regulated watercraft under the Invasive Species Act. The regulation requires watercraft to be free of aquatic plants, animals and algae before they are placed in an Ontario water body.

We're also working closely with partners, including the boating association of Ontario, the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations, the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters and the Invasive Species Centre to heighten awareness of this important regulation.

I hope that answers the question.

Mr. Dave Smith: I want to pick up a little bit on something you had talked about, and that was the eDNA. I know at Trent University, we're using the eDNA to track and monitor chronic wasting disease in deer and in moose. For those of you who don't know, what they kind of do is they look for droppings and then they check the droppings and so on. We pay a scientist to play with poop. It's kind of funny, actually, when you think of it. But I wasn't aware that we were also using that to do some of the monitoring on some of the other aquatic invasive species. Do you mind elaborating on that a little bit for me? That's something I didn't see that was in the Auditor General's

report. And any time that we have an opportunity to talk about my alma mater and the university in my riding, I love those opportunities to talk about the great work that they're doing. So do you mind elaborating a little bit on that partnership and what it is you're trying to do with it, how it is being effective and what might we do to expand upon that?

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you for the question. I might ask one of my colleagues online to address that question.

Deputy, I was thinking of perhaps Trisha Westman.

Ms. Trisha Westman: Hi there. I'm happy to jump in. Thanks, Craig.

My name is Trisha Westman. I'm the director of science and research with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

And that is correct: The process of using environmental DNA is a really exciting new technology that we are working really closely with our federal partners to develop for application in not just aquatics but terrestrial as well. So on the aquatic side, in addition to hydrilla, we're using it to detect invasive carp species, and then another example of its utility on the terrestrial side is it's showing really great promise for detecting forest pests such as hemlock woolly adelgid.

The interesting application here of this technique is that, sometimes, to look for invasive species, you have to climb to the top of trees to take field samples, where, in the forestry context, using eDNA, you can sample samples around suspected stands which might be impacted by invasives. It's much safer and more effective to collect those ground samples, look for this shed DNA in a lab to detect its presence or absence, and then you can follow up with the more difficult field sampling of trying to target the exact species.

I hope that helps.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you very much for that. And if memory serves me correctly, this is a program that we didn't have in place when the audit was going on; this is something that we brought into place as the audit was happening or just prior to the audit being completed. So I thank you for expanding upon that.

I want to touch on something else that is an invasive species that's actually not in my riding, luckily. We did a pilot project, I believe in Haldimand-Norfolk, on phragmites and the effective removal of it. The previous member for Haldimand-Norfolk was fairly vocal about it. There's a fair bit on social media about—I'll refer to it as a harvesting, although it was more of a burning of it. Is that something that we saw positive results from, and is it something that we have any plans of expanding upon as we move forward?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): We're just past the halfway mark, with nine minutes remaining.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you for the question on phragmites. Yes, we have a lot of challenges with phragmites. It causes a lot of impact to wetlands and beaches, and it threatens over 25% of our species at risk in those wetland areas. I can certainly provide a little bit more detail in terms of some of the work

that we've been doing around phragmites. I can ask Craig Brown to provide us with a little bit more information about that, and we can certainly hand off if you have some specific questions to others on the panel.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you very much, Deputy.

Thank you for the question. As you're aware, phragmites is an invasive plant. It does spread quickly and it outcompetes native species for water and for nutrients. It is pernicious—it releases toxins from its roots into the soil to poison plants—and while it prefers areas of standing water, its roots can grow to extreme lengths, and that does allow it to survive in relatively dry areas.

To provide a bit of background on some of the effects that phragmites can have: It can crowd out native vegetation, resulting in decreased plant biodiversity. It provides poor habitat and diminishes food supply for wildlife, including several species at risk. Rapid growth can cause lower water levels, as water is transpired faster than it would be with native vegetation. We have seen increasing fire hazards, as stands are composed of a high percentage of dead stalks. It can negatively impact agriculture, road safety and recreational activities such as boating, swimming and fishing.

Without action, phragmites will continue to expand and harm biodiversity, and the associated costs will continue to increase. So in response to the threat, we have taken action on a few fronts to regulate, for example, phragmites under the Invasive Species Act. We're also investing in ongoing education and awareness in collaboration with many partners. We've also taken direct, on-the-ground management, and we're also undertaking research, working with others, to develop new management tools, and you identified a few of those in the question.

In addition to the efforts that we're undertaking, the Ministry of Transportation has spent over \$7 million since 2017 on efforts to reduce the presence of phragmites in provincial highway corridors. These efforts contribute to the broader efforts to reduce invasive phragmites in Ontario, given that highways and other transportation corridors can facilitate the spread of phragmites through the province.

Over the past decade, the ministry, in partnership with the Canadian Wildlife Service, has led the control and management of phragmites from the Long Point Walsingham Forest Priority Place in southwestern Ontario. This has resulted in the restoration of over 1,500 hectares of coastal wetland habitat on private and public lands that had been degraded by this invasive plant.

We've also leveraged the capacity of the Nature Conservancy of Canada and Ducks Unlimited Canada to rally hundreds of private landowners in collective efforts to address phragmites across the entire region, for example the Big Creek watershed in Norfolk county, and again working with landowners to further biodiversity conservation on lands.

Another example that we have undertaken is we have provided funding to the Green Shovels Collaborative to support the completion of a cost-benefit analysis for the prevention and management of phragmites in Ontario.

This was followed by the development of a strategic framework which proposes targeted phragmites management in key landscapes, and again, working with other levels of government, government organizations and stakeholders to work together to address the threat.

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I'm also happy to share that in 2023, the minister will be providing \$500,000 to the Green Shovels Collaborative to initiate the implementation of this strategic framework. This funding will enable program development, stakeholder and partner engagement, priority-setting, multi-year work planning and site assessment as well as Indigenous and public engagement in the preparation for broader landscape-scale management of phragmites in Ontario.

It might be a bit more than you asked for, but I hope that does answer the question.

Mr. Dave Smith: It's all good, thank you. I appreciate that.

I'm going to shift again just a little bit; I'll bring up something anecdotal on it. I want to talk about spongy moth, LDD moth, gypsy moth, depending on how old you are—what you refer to it as. I know that there have been different areas of the province where it has been rather highly invasive, I'll say, where it has done significant damage to the canopies of our forests. In North Kawartha and Trent Lakes in particular in my riding, they ate through all of the leaves and started eating the pine needles on different pine trees. It didn't seem to bother with the spruce, but they very much liked the white pine. When it takes pine trees and eats the pine needles, those trees don't recover, but the others do. In particular, it liked chestnut and black walnut, but it seemed that the following year, those trees would recover from it.

I'm bringing this up because I know that we did a program a number of years ago with an insecticide to kill the gypsy moth—or sorry, the LDD spongy moth infestations in different areas, and what we saw as a result of it was that there was a significant decline in the turkey population in that area. One of the thoughts was that the insecticide that was used to kill the gypsy moth actually poisoned some of those turkeys.

Now, again, I'm going to bring it back to something anecdotal in my area: I have a flock of about 50 turkeys now on the property. I did not have a problem with LDD spongy moths on our property in the past two years. There is a research project that is going on by Trent University, by a master's student, on turkeys, and they are using my property as part of it. Part of their belief was that because there was such a prevalence of the LDD moth, the turkeys had a great deal to feast on. Actually, the researcher described it as “LDD moth larvae are like crack cocaine for turkeys. They just can't get enough of it.”

It has also meant that I have a very large coyote population and—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): One minute remaining.

Mr. Dave Smith: —surprisingly, I have a large deer population, and we think it's because there's so many

turkeys that the coyotes are able to go after the turkeys rather than the deer. My question, then, is when we implement something that does affect the invasive species, are there times where we have an unintended consequence of also doing damage to something native in the area?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Really good question, and I know we only have so many seconds. We can pass that over to Trisha in terms of science and research and she might be able to give a little bit of that answer, or we can wait for your next round if you'd like us to come back to that.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Twenty seconds.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: We can certainly start if you want.

Ms. Trisha Westman: Thank you, Deputy. In my brief time, I would say that when we do consider control options, it's very much in the forefront of our minds to look at the impacts on other parts of the ecosystem, other systems of wildlife. So it's a very, very important consideration before applying control measures such as something—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Okay, thank you. We're out of time.

We're now moving to the official opposition: 20 minutes, beginning with MPP Shaw.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you for being here this afternoon. This is an important subject.

In the response, I would really like to hear, perhaps, from the manager of the biodiversity and invasive species and the senior invasive species policy adviser to understand what's happening on the ground, because that's what we're talking about here.

Let's talk biodiversity law, shall we? We know that we're facing a depressing loss of biodiversity in the world, in Canada and in Ontario. You would know more than I that this is driven by habitat loss. We had a report last time here on the unchecked flooding that's happening in the province. We have, I would say, very unwise planning policies—policies that will allow us to build on protected lands, green spaces, wetlands. We have climate change. So there's a lot at stake when it comes to protecting biodiversity in our province.

You would probably know that the COP15 UN conference tabled a motion to protect 30% of lands and waters by 2030. A lot of legislators, including myself, have tabled motions asking the province to do what they have to do to protect 30% of Ontario's lands and waters by 2030.

Unfortunately, this report is not good news when it comes to our work in protecting further loss when it comes to biodiversity. I just hope that we are not losing the battle.

The report details that Ontario has the highest risk in Canada for new invasive species, and I think we have the most invasive species, so far, identified. There may be some that are not identified, given the current status of your work. What is the number—441, maybe? Have I got the right number for how many invasive species we have?

We know that this costs the province of Ontario about \$3.6 billion. We know that from the Auditor General's work. We know that this impacts all aspects of our economy. Farmers, cottagers, all kinds of people are impacted by this. But we spend \$4 million in this province—so \$3.6 billion worth of damage; we're spending \$4 million.

My question is quite straightforward. Do you feel, from the front lines, that the ministry has enough resources, has enough staff to effectively administer the Invasive Species Act, which you are charged to administer?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you very much for the question.

We certainly have our resources that are within our ministry that have been maintained through the various many years in terms of managing our portfolio and our work. We continue to work on our strategic plan. We've continued to work on an invasive framework that can help us to deal with these situations, and a risk management approach.

I'm happy to pass that along to Jamie to see if he'd like to add a little bit more details in terms of some of the work that we're doing to prioritize our work on invasive species management.

Mr. Jamie Stewart: I'm Jamie Stewart, the director of fish and wildlife policy.

As the member has pointed out, invasive species are a major concern for the province. As the deputy mentioned, we do have a strategic plan in place to help address and take action on these things—and specifically, the Invasive Species Act, introduced in 2015. We are planning to update and review, in response to the auditor's recommendations, the Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan. But we have had a lot of successes, I think, over the short term.

The question around resources, time and effort—we certainly appreciate that question. We do have to prioritize in terms of invasive species risks and the risks of particular invasive species; we do need to prioritize what we spend our time and effort on and the highest-priority items.

As you mentioned, Ontario, just geographically where it's located, makes it prone to invasive species introductions through the Great Lakes. We border with multiple jurisdictions, so that is a true factor there.

I'll pass it over to Stephen Casselman to see if he has anything to add.

Mr. Stephen Casselman: I'm Stephen Casselman, manager, biodiversity and invasive species section.

I do think that there are some great examples of where we have had success on the ground working towards eradicating and controlling invasive species. Some of those we have already touched on here in our time this afternoon: efforts that are under way to address the spread of water soldier in the Trent-Severn Waterway and the Bay of Quinte, European water chestnut in eastern Ontario and the Welland River and phragmites. Certainly, we work very, very closely with a number of different partners—federal government, municipalities, CAs and partner organizations—on the landscape. So I think it really is a very strong collective of working together to try to address

this threat. Recently, we've regulated an additional 13 species under the Invasive Species Act as well as regulating watercraft as a carrier of invasive species, to deal with aquatics.

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Ms. Sandy Shaw: I appreciate that answer. I just would like to talk about who is on the front lines. You mentioned the work that you're doing. I think people in the province need to know that on the front line is the ministry and the work that you're doing in the province.

Also, you mentioned municipalities and conservation authorities and other program partners. But this report details that not only is your ministry struggling with having sufficient staff to effectively administer the Invasive Species Act—we know that municipalities are struggling with huge infrastructure deficits and they are now going to be faced with additional costs when it comes to Bill 23 and the government's waiving of development charges, which municipalities use to do this kind of work so that they don't have to increase taxes and taxpayer dollars.

I also noticed in the Auditor General's report that one of your program partners has been essentially cut off of funding. I was surprised to read—in fact, it seemed like it was rather abruptly that organizations were cut off. If I have the right name of the organization, the federation of Ontario cottagers was cut off of funding, and also the office of invasive species, if I got the names of these organizations correct.

So it takes everybody rowing in the right direction. You guys are doing the best with what you have. I acknowledge that, and I acknowledge your successes, and I do acknowledge your concern and care for the environment; I want you to know that. But as it flows downhill from the province, which is struggling, to municipalities and conservation authorities, whose biggest job now from the government—they have been charged to identify lands that they have to sell. So they're struggling to play their part when it comes to invasive species and biodiversity loss and program partners that understand local conditions.

When you talk about cottagers, they know what's going on. We've heard the MPP here talk about what's happening in their community. So it's really disappointing to see people that are on the ground, understanding what's at stake and understanding local conditions and having a role to play in this, that have been cut off of funding.

So I will ask the question again: Do you feel that this ministry or your program partners like municipalities, conservation authorities and other groups have the resources and the support—really, just to say, the backing—of this government when it comes to doing the important work that you do?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: This is collaborative work that's undertaken when you're dealing with invasive species. It's really important for us to work collectively. We all have different roles and responsibilities. We work really closely with Canadian/US counterparts. We have a number of committees that we're on. We

work with conservation partners. We work with CAs and local organizations. Key to this is the Invasive Species Centre, who has become, for us, a focal point for a lot of the funding and working with other groups.

I may ask Jamie to just step in and speak a little bit to some of those things that I just mentioned in terms of how we leverage those different resources and are able to work with others.

Mr. Jamie Stewart: Maybe I'll point out the need for working together with partners—conservation authorities, municipalities and others—to improve some of that collaboration, shared priorities and really building that capacity to deliver upon invasive species management in the province with just a couple of quick examples. The ministry has been working with Quinte Conservation, for example, monitoring water soldier in the Bay of Quinte. The ministry is collaborating with the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority on the management of water chestnut in the Welland River and has also been working in collaboration with the city of Burlington on the dewatering of a municipal stormwater pond in response to a report of marbled crayfish and subsequent confirmation through the eDNA sampling, which Trish Westman spoke about earlier.

As the deputy points out, and I think this was pointed out as well in the audit report, invasive species is a significant challenge—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): We're at the halfway mark, 10 minutes.

Mr. Jamie Stewart: —and the ministry does need to prioritize the use of its available resources. The ministry is focusing on preventing the introduction and establishment of new invasive species. As noted, Ontario is in that position where those introductions may occur and is working with our partners—municipalities, conservation authorities and the federal government—to try to achieve this.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you. One of the things that you mentioned is that you are trying to prevent introduction of new invasive species. Clearly we know from the Auditor General's report, and I guess it's sort of common sense in some regard, that preventing the problem in the first place is the most cost-effective way of preventing the problem. This is a value-for-money audit that we're looking at, so we're looking at the best way that we can use taxpayer dollars so that they're the most effective. As we all know, there's really only one taxpayer, there's only one pocket for the taxpayer, whether we're looking at provincial dollars or whether we're looking at municipal tax dollars, when we're looking at people who are paying increasing property taxes. But unfortunately, when this doesn't get caught at the first stage, at the preventive stage, the problem is that municipalities and conservation authorities are now struggling with the management of invasive species, and that is the most expensive and probably, I would say, the most ineffective way of addressing invasive species.

So my point is—and I appreciate your answers. But it seems to me if we could prevent this upstream, if we could

make sure at the provincial level that this doesn't fall now on the cost and the coffers and the burden of residential taxpayers in our community, that would be the best way to go about that.

To that end, the Auditor General's report also identifies the concern with conservation officers and, really, essentially that there is a dwindling number of conservation officers. It was described that your organization, the ministry, is doing the best with what they have. But I have heard from conservation officers who are feeling overwhelmed and burdened with the responsibilities that are being put on them—in fact, they've written to me and many of the people in our caucus—who are feeling that they are under-acknowledged and under-recognized. They don't get paid the same amount as some of the people who work in protections across the province. They're asking to have parity in their work. Again, this unfair compensation and this lack of conservation authorities is contributing, in my opinion, to essentially not a great report card when it comes to addressing invasive species and biodiversity in the province.

The Auditor General's report identifies that there are—one of the things I found is that—rather than get additional funding, the ministry has been asked to find the savings within the ministry, to do what they can with what they have. I don't have the numbers in front of me, but there are certainly fewer conservation officers working in the province, and the problem is only getting worse.

So my question is, has the ministry recruited additional conservation officers, and how do you know what the appropriate number of conservation officers is to effectively administer the Invasive Species Act, with which, again, you're charged?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: There's a couple of points that you raised in there. I'm happy to speak to some of the early detection, but it sounds like you want us to go straight to conservation officers.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Sure. Let's do that. Let's get them on the record.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay, all right. Yes, certainly, no problem.

Rick Watchorn, who is our director of enforcement, is here and available, so he can speak to our number of conservation officers and the recruitment and training that we've been doing, as well as some of the specific ways that we work with them in terms of helping to address invasive species.

Over to you, Rick.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: While we're waiting for Rick, I'm just going to—

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: He's right there. I don't know—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Okay, yes.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Can you hear us, Rick?

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Yes. Thank you very much. Thanks for the question, and thank you, Deputy. Rick Watchorn, director of enforcement branch, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

The ministry has 209 front-line conservation officers that provide service out of almost 50 locations across the province. Those 209 officers are what you would typically encounter in the field, at a boat launch, at an outreach and education session.

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What each officer receives as they are recruited and onboarded, and our existing officers, is a full suite of training that we have been collaborating on within the ministry, being informed by partners at the same time, on identification of invasive species, detection of invasive species and then, within the ministry, collaboratively working on the educational element when it comes to compliance, the targeted operations when it comes to those risk-based activities and ensuring that every year we do devote a specific number of hours in terms of effort when it comes to the work our officers do.

The work our officers do out of the number of locations is quite wide when it comes to invasive species. There is specifically the Invasive Species Act. There are also rules under the Ontario fishery regulations when it comes to bait and other aspects of invasives, and officers invest a number of hours each year, whether it's at boat launches, on-the-water inspections, fish food, retail—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I guess my question, very specifically—maybe I'll rephrase the question so that we're clear. It's my understanding, and in fact in the Auditor General's report, that the number of conservation officers has decreased from 281 to 238; I heard you say there are 209, so that may be a further decline. And since 1998, the number of environmental laws that conservation officers must enforce has increased. So there are more laws, which is a good thing, but there are fewer people, fewer officers there to address that.

And conservation officers are clear that they get paid a lot less than most enforcement officers and inspectors in the Ontario public service. Conservation officers have put in many formal requests to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry for reclassification and higher pay in line with similar positions inside and outside the OPS.

So I guess my question, very specifically, is, given that conservation officers are charged with this important work, addressing invasive species, that protects our environment, protects our property, prevents taxpayers from being on the hook for things that end up at the municipal level—my question is, do you feel that you have enough conservation officers to adequately enforce the act?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: So, at this time—

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Thanks for the question. Rick Watchorn, director of enforcement branch—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes, thanks. Back to the deputy, I believe. Or you—

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Sorry, Rick—

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Okay. Go ahead, Deputy.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I have a little bit of a lag in here. So maybe I'll just start off, and then you can answer in more specifics around the number

of conservation officers, because I know there was some difference of opinion in terms of numbers.

Certainly, we do see ongoing recruitment as people leave positions. We actually hired in the last year over 50 new conservation officers. I think we have about 15 more that are training this month.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Just under two minutes, a minute and a half.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: But certainly, Rick can speak in terms of our numbers and that clarification around numbers and making sure that we do prioritize our work across our conservation authorities in terms of the priorities of the ministry. And invasive species certainly are one of our top priorities.

Over to you, Rick.

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Thank you, Deputy. That's right. In terms of numbers, there are 209 front-line conservation officers, which include our investigators and include our canine officers, include our field officers. In addition to that, all of our managers within enforcement branch are also appointed conservation officers, which does make up that broader number. So 80% of our staff within the branch are appointed conservation officers.

Over the last couple of years, we have increased—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Rick—oh, sorry. Carry on. I heard the word “increase.” Let's hear that. I like the sound of that.

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Over the last couple of years, we have increased the number of officers, specifically increasing the number of positions by 25 in the branch, and as a result of our recruitment efforts, last year, hired 50 net new officers to fill those 25 brand new positions. Those were additional positions that we didn't have before plus some vacancies that we'd had. Our latest recruit class, those 50 officers from last year, are out delivering service today and—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Rick, I just want to end—thank you. I appreciate it. I'm out of time. I do appreciate it. I just want to say how important I think your work is. While I know that algae bloom is not exactly an invasive species, I think it needs to be noted that when we mess up our biodiversity, these algae blooms are affecting all of us and our cottages and our trailers. But more importantly, I think it needs to be noted, four reactors were shut down at Darlington because of invasive algae blooms blocking the cooling water pipes. So what I want to say is, your work is very important, and I think as much resources—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): We're at time. Thank you.

We now move on to three minutes for our independent member. MPP Collard, please begin.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you for the presentation. Following the Auditor General's report and your presentation, it's always great to learn so much more about this specific expertise.

I do have a simple question. The deputy minister mentioned that you were undergoing a review of the strategic plan, which is dated back to 2012. I'm just curious about your timeline for completing the review and

if it is your intent to really take into consideration the recommendations of the Auditor General in this strategic plan review.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you very much for the question. Yes, we are just initiating the start of that review. We are looking at all of the recommendations from the auditor as we do this and working with a number of our partners.

You asked about the timeline, so I will have Jamie just speak a little bit in terms of how we see that work that we're undertaking. We'll try to fit that in within the three minutes.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Two minutes.

Mr. Jamie Stewart: Yes, sure. The ministry already has committed to undertaking the review of the Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan. The ministry has already initiated that review, so we've taken the first steps in terms of developing a plan and beginning to engage with some of our partners on the review.

We're still in the early stages of this, of course, and so I think the timelines at this point—I can't say definitively. We want to continue some of the engagement with our partners to confirm timelines for that. But it is certainly something that the ministry has begun working on already.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. Thank you. You also spoke about the importance of public support and public awareness in fighting these invasive species. I would like to know, what is the ministry's strategy to increase the awareness in the public and also to allow the public to report on what they observe and link to the awareness?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Yes. Actually, it's very—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): One minute.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: —important in terms of public support and awareness in some of the work we do. We do a lot of it not only ourselves but with our partners, like the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters and the Ontario Invasive Species Centre.

I will pass that over to Stephen, and he can just elaborate as quickly as he can for you in terms of some of that work.

Mr. Stephen Casselman: Yes, great. On the reporting side, as the deputy mentioned, we have a partnership with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, who operate the Invading Species Awareness Program. Part of that is operating a central avenue. It's called EDDMapS, Early Detection and Distribution Mapping System. That allows members of the public—whenever they detect a species that they're not familiar with, they can go onto this platform or phone a 1-800 number and speak with somebody at the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, talk to them about the sighting of a potential invasive species, and then that organization can confirm that, and then the ministry is notified if it's a high-risk species. We're able to be brought into that loop and talk about potential actions that could be undertaken.

To your point, partnership and communication—certainly, education and outreach, I think, is one of the key

priorities in dealing with invasive species. As we've talked about, early detection and addressing them before they become established is of the highest priority, so we—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Thank you. We're at time.

Twenty minutes—on to the government side again. Who will begin? MPP Smith, I recognize you.

Ms. Laura Smith: I'd really like to have an opportunity to thank all of you for being here—we appreciate the work that you do—and for informing us about the species. There are 30,000 species from the Carolinian forest to Hudson Bay lowlands, and they are threatening our way of life.

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I'm just thinking back to about two short years ago, when I was walking through a forest right beside my home. I think we all recall how the spongy moths—and I apologize; I'm going to go back to that, just because it's a point of reference for me, because that was a point in time where I realized how relevant what we're discussing today is. There were literally caterpillars dropping from the trees, and of course we all looked up and what was normally a lot of green was not. It was no longer there, and it was very disconcerting.

I'm also very fortunate to have a number of people in my neighbourhood—arborists—where we actually go through the community on a regular basis and we scrape the spongy moths, lovingly, as best we can—because he educates us to that effect, because that's the most effective way to eliminate them. I think I've got a few pictures, if anybody is interested.

Given what's happened over the course of the last year—I noticed what was happening, and I apologize if I'm repeating something that my friend across the way has requested. But given the steps that spongy moths have had—they have come into the urban areas, and rural and urban are definitely meeting—I'm wondering about the tactics to help municipalities, and the training specifically that's required for our officers so that we can combat this, and what the prognosis is over the course of the next few years on this specific issue.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you very much for the question. I know a lot of people across the province, as they've been dealing with it on their property, have asked the same question. It definitely is a severe impact for the short term; it does feed on the trees leaves and weakens them. It usually starts in the spring and ends around late June and early July, and then those defoliated trees, I think, not only are aesthetically displeasing, but as well, people are concerned about the health of those trees—

Ms. Laura Smith: Can I ask a question? Sorry to jump in.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Yes.

Ms. Laura Smith: How long does that tree have once a spongy moth has decimated it? And a rebirth—it can come back, obviously. How long can it do that? I'm just curious.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: It depends on the amount of defoliation. You'll often see that

that whole tree is not defoliated, and sometimes if it's early in the season you will see it flush back out again. But it has to take successive years for it to really—

Ms. Laura Smith: All right. Thank you for clarifying that. Sorry to take your train away from you.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: No, that's okay. Certainly we can have our science folks give you a little bit more information on that. I know that worries people, but typically usually what happens is the caterpillars move on. They continue to spread out across the landscape, so usually the next year.

But this is a cyclical event that happens—it's part of nature—so about seven to 10 years is usually when they technically occur as an outbreak, and they will often just last a few years, and you will often see them start in one area and it shifts across the landscape. We do track it as a ministry and do look at where they are going and where those spots will be that will see larger infestations.

I think between Craig, who can tell us a little bit about what the forecast is, and then Trisha, if there are some other details that we want to get into, we can answer your questions. Maybe over to you, Craig, to just speak about some of the work that we've been doing in terms of forecasting and as well as communicating with people.

Mr. Craig Brown: Yes, thank you very much for the question. As you mentioned, outbreaks of spongy moths are cyclical. They typically occur about every seven to 10 years and they last for, on average, three to five years. The most recent outbreak of spongy moths, the one that you're referring to, started in 2017 and it peaked in 2021. It then began a decline in 2022. Most of the defoliation that we saw occurred in southwestern Ontario, in the Aylmer and Guelph districts. There were also areas of light defoliation detected in the Midhurst area.

The ministry conducts annual surveys to forecast what to expect for each spring season, and our ministry's field observations have shown that virus, fungus and high rates of parasites have contributed to spongy moth decline. This year, we expect to see a continued decline in the areas of outbreak and severity. Some areas, mostly in the southwestern part of the province, may still experience defoliation, but the large contiguous areas of defoliation that we had seen are expected to be limited. The ministry has taken action to help inform municipalities and members of the public about spongy moths and what they can do to help control them. For example, we have resources and information on our website, on Ontario.ca, and we distribute fact sheets to municipalities and stakeholders every year. On our website, you will also find data for the 2022 defoliation as well as our future forecast that I spoke to briefly. We continue to provide information, updates, conferences, meetings with municipalities, with sustainable forest licence holders, private landowner groups and others.

We're doing several things on the science front as well, and I might ask my colleague in science and research branch to provide more information on that. But I will say, before I wrap up here, that we are working with many of the partners, in particular the Invasive Species Centre, and

we do look at what other jurisdictions are doing, best practices for managing spongy moth. We're going to continue to monitor spongy moth populations as part of our Forest Health Monitoring Program. It is invasive, but eradicating spongy moth simply isn't possible. It's well established throughout North America, but we will continue to work hard to manage outbreaks as they happen.

Deputy, I'll pass it back to you. I hope that answers the question in part, at least.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Yes, and if you want any more details, Trisha Westman from our science and research can also offer maybe a bit of information in terms of some of the science behind it, if you're interested.

Ms. Trisha Westman: Yes, thank you, Deputy.

To add to what ADM Craig Brown has shared, I would add that, as noted, the field crews that work for MNR—we do help to forecast what the next season of outbreak is for a number of forest pests, including spongy moth. That involves going out in the fall and doing an assessment of what the egg masses look like, and we use that to predict the events for the season. So we are anticipating some outbreak activity, as noted, in the southwest.

The other science support that we offer is when we look at ways of controlling pests like LDD—or, sorry, spongy moth; I'm showing my age on the topic here—there's a number of different measures that people can use. Some are easy to do at home, and then others involve applying insecticides such as a biological agent called BTK. It's popular and available for use at the current time.

On the front of new and emerging insecticides, we are helping those sensitive receptors such as the city of Toronto to explore other types of control. The city of Toronto was looking at using a new insecticide called BoVir. They used it in High Park last year in 2022, and we supported them by helping them to apply to the Pest Management Regulatory Agency. That's the federal agency responsible for pesticide regulation. In order to test a new insecticide, we needed to help support them to get an emergency registration of that chemical. They were successful, and they are trying it. As ADM Craig Brown had said, that's a sensitive area, so we want to use the controls that have the most targeted response to the pest at hand.

Ms. Laura Smith: And how does that relate to training, specifically? I know the officers are out there and they're looking for this specifically and you're monitoring this and you're aware of the waves. Just judging by what you've just described, by my impression, you're seeing where something is going to happen in advance, even years in advance, and know how it's going to happen, where it's going to happen. Talk a bit about the training that would be put in place for municipalities. They would utilize the websites. Is that my understanding? Or the officers?

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Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Are you talking about for us to do our assessment, or for people to be aware of where—

Ms. Laura Smith: The awareness.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Oh, the awareness for the public?

Ms. Laura Smith: Yes.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay. Which site would that be available on, for people to see the information around where the locations of a lot of those species are and where their intensity is?

Mr. Stephen Casselman: For specific species: On Ontario.ca, we have an invasive species section, and if people go there and search for spongy moth, they'd find the reports and the forecasts that Trisha Westman was mentioning. So there are resources there, available for the public, in addition to that targeted outreach that was mentioned that occurs with municipalities.

Ms. Laura Smith: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

I'm going to move my questioning to another species which I actually find fairly interesting. I've actually only seen one in the province of Ontario, but wild pigs are considered one of the most damaging and invasive species in the world, and definitely pose a serious threat to Ontario's natural environment. Could we talk about what the ministry is doing to protect our land and people from this species?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay. Thank you very much for your question about invasive wild pigs. I mentioned this a bit in my opening remarks about the importance of prevention, early detection, early response and eradication of invasive species, and with wild pigs that's really, really important.

We've introduced a successful wild-pig-reporting campaign that continues today, calling on everyone who lives in the province to help support us in terms of working with us to identify any sightings, and then we proactively follow up on every sighting received. Last year, we engaged with people at 472 properties and at 35 locations across southern Ontario to try to again get ahead of the situation and work collectively and collaboratively with others to address the situation.

I'm going to ask Craig to just speak a little bit more about how we've been investigating and responding to sightings and then dealing with the issue of wild pigs in Ontario.

Mr. Craig Brown: Thank you again for the question. The province continues to work with our partners and connect with other provinces and other jurisdictions to better understand the issue and to learn from their experiences.

Now, just a bit of background for clarity: The term "wild pig" refers to any pig outside of a fence, that is not under the physical control of a person, and this includes pigs like domestic pigs, including pot-bellied pigs, Eurasian wild boar and hybrids of domestic pigs and Eurasian wild boar.

Invasive wild pigs, as I'm sure you're aware, are not native to North America, and certainly to Ontario. They are considered to be the most damaging invasive mammal right now in the United States, and they are an emergent

problem in some of Canada's Prairie provinces. They are a threat to Ontario because they damage natural and agriculture environments, and they do this through rooting and trampling. They prey on native flora and fauna. They carry disease that impacts wildlife, livestock and humans. They also have a very high reproductive rate, which means that it only takes a few pigs to become a big problem in a very short period of time, and they do prey on and compete with native wildlife for food and habitat, and they can impact water quality and quantity.

In many areas—and we've seen this in the US and some other jurisdictions—damages to the agricultural industry have been devastating. Wild pigs can destroy almost any crop, including stored crops. They can also impact private property and areas that are used for tourism, recreation and nature conservation.

One of the most concerning impacts of wild pigs is their potential to transmit diseases and parasites that affect wildlife, livestock, pets and people. Invasive wild pigs can impact the health of all of those by transmitting over 30 viruses and 37 parasites. In recent years, African swine fever has emerged as the threat to the global pork industry. Although African swine fever, thankfully, is not currently present in North America, a detection in Canada either in domestic or wild pigs would have a significant negative impact on Ontario's and Canada's export-driven hog industry. Outbreaks of African swine fever have occurred in many other countries in Europe and Asia, and wild pigs are a key reservoir and vector for the virus.

Wild pigs rarely attack people, but when they do, the consequences can be severe, and motor vehicle collisions with pigs on roadways can also be very dangerous. There have been a number of incidents in Europe.

The ministry has been gathering data and evaluating options for addressing wild pigs. We've been doing this since 2018. Ministry staff respond to public sightings to investigate and, where necessary, remove wild pigs from the natural environment. At this time, there's no evidence that indicates that there are any established self-sustaining breeding populations of invasive wild pigs in Ontario, and the number of wild pig sightings in Ontario remains relatively small. They are generally isolated in location. Most sightings are of a single wild pig—and I think you mentioned that in the question that you asked as well.

Ministry-published research of on-site investigations has revealed that the main source of wild pigs in Ontario is escape by pigs in captivity.

We are taking a proactive approach to prevent wild pigs from becoming established in the province. This includes regulating pigs as a restricted invasive species under the Invasive Species Act, and in October 2021, the ministry implemented Ontario's Strategy to Address the Threat of Invasive Wild Pigs. In particular, the ministry is working to prevent the introduction of pigs into the natural environment. We are addressing the risks posed by Eurasian wild boar and their hybrids in Ontario. We use a coordinated, government-led approach to remove wild pigs from the natural environment, and we do leverage the expertise and resources of others by collaborating across

ministries, with the federal government, other jurisdictions, industry stakeholders and partners.

Ms. Laura Smith: Can I ask a quick question before you continue? How prevalent—my understanding is that wild pigs are pretty much here solely in Ontario, for the most part.

Mr. Craig Brown: No, that is not the case. Luckily, there isn't any evidence that indicates that there is an established self-sustaining breeding population of invasive wild pigs in Ontario. They are in some Prairie provinces, and they are in the US.

Ms. Laura Smith: Sorry. I meant within Canada—my apologies.

Mr. Craig Brown: Oh, okay. They are found in some Prairie provinces.

Ms. Laura Smith: Oh, sorry; Prairie provinces. All right.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: So the sightings we see are not evidence of a breeding population, correct. Yes.

Ms. Laura Smith: Okay. Understood.

I'm going to pass the remainder of my time to—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): There's just 50 seconds left. MPP Bouma.

Ms. Laura Smith: Oh, okay. Actually, I did have one question. I'm sorry. If you could—well, no, all right. I will pass my time to Mr. Bouma. There you go. It's all yours.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Stephen Crawford): Thirty seconds.

Mr. Will Bouma: All right. Quickly: The Invasive Species Centre—I'm intrigued—was established 12 years ago. What do we have today that we didn't have a decade and a half ago because of the Invasive Species Centre?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I'm going to pass that along to Stephen, who probably—Stephen, if you've got some quick thoughts—

Mr. Will Bouma: And the clock is ticking.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Yes—in terms of the Ontario Invasive Species Centre, that would be great.

Mr. Stephen Casselman: Sure. The Invasive Species Centre has a number of programs, such as the invasive species micro-grants program, which provides payments of up to \$1,000 to 27 organizations, resulting in the species removal of—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): Unfortunately, that concludes our time. I apologize.

We'll go to the opposition now. MPP Gélinas.

1510

M^{me} France Gélinas: My first question has to do with—the Auditor General talks to us about enforcement resources and activities that are insufficient. She goes on to say that your ministry “has twice recognized the need for additional human resources to administer the Invasive Species Act, 2015 ... and requested resources from Treasury Board/Management Board of Cabinet (TB/MBC).

“On both occasions, TB/MBC directed the ministry to reallocate resources to invasive species work, which it did not do.” How come?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you for the question. I think we'd mentioned it earlier on, but I will ask Rick Watchorn to just provide a little bit more detail.

When we hired the additional conservation officers, we actually were allocated an additional 25 officers. I believe it was two years ago, Rick, so maybe you can just clarify that for everyone on the committee. That was an increased number of complements to our count for our conservation officers that was given to us as part of our resources.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Was your budget increased at the time?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: That's correct. Was it two years ago, Rick? I think it was two years ago we given the additional 25 positions, plus the budget, and then we were permanently given that. I will check with Amanda. We were permanently given that as well.

M^{me} France Gélinas: So how by much money did your budget increase? Because when I look into the public accounts, your budget has stayed stable for the whole time that the government has been in place. What you're saying is that you got more money, but how come when we look into public accounts, we don't see more money allocated to your ministry?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Maybe I'll ask—I think Amanda Holmes is on, who is our CAO, and maybe she can help explain. But should it show up in our public accounts, Amanda, those additional 25 conservation officers that were hired in terms of the amount of money that was put forward through enforcement?

Ms. Amanda Holmes: Yes. Thank you, Deputy. Amanda Holmes, the chief administrative officer for MNR.

The positions that the deputy is talking about were provided to the ministry and were allocated. We were allocated salary for those positions and so it could be a question of where in the public accounts you would see it and look for it. We did receive it as initially temporary funding, and just in the last round of the budget we will now see that carried out on the go-forward. I don't have the public accounts documents with me, but we could advise where that would show up. There was an increase to the ministry's salary; it just wouldn't necessarily be tagged very explicitly to this business line because it sits under the program area that the enforcement branch operates out of.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Within enforcement branch, how much of it was specifically for the Invasive Species Act, specifically for you to administer the act? The need for more conservation officers—you've heard me say this non-stop, I fully agree. I'm happy you got 25 more. How many of those were for specifically the administering of the Invasive Species Act?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I'll start with that question. The 25 positions that were given to us and the salaries associated with it are given over to enforcement section to hire and train. I can hand it back over to Rick; Rick will explain what the priorities are.

They wouldn't have been given exactly like just for invasives. Conservation officers have a number of priorities that they'll do. So maybe I can have Rick talk about how we prioritize invasive species within that work.

Mr. Rick Watchorn: In terms of the way we deploy officers across the province, each officer is trained and equipped to enforce all of the full mandate that we have for conservation officers, which includes 25 pieces of legislation. Part of what that does is work that into our risk-based priority-setting exercise that we do annually.

Invasive species are a part of our four key targeted compliance activities across the province, included with hunting safety, compliance with moose hunting regulations and illegal commercialization of fish and wildlife. And so, as part of—

M^{me} France Gélinas: I'll interrupt you. I get this, that it is a priority, but how can we see that it is a priority? As of March 31, 2022, there have been zero charges laid, there have been zero warrants and there have been only 11 warnings, yet I will go through other parts of the report where we show clearly that things should have been picked up. So how can you tell me that it's a priority, yet there are zero charges, zero warrants and 11 warnings?

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Thanks for that. The work that we do annually involves training information for our officers. There has been, over the past number of years, the introduction of new rules, as well, to support work on invasive species.

A recent example of work that we've done in terms of targeted operations is looking for fish retail markets that service distributors, restaurants and so on. Over the course of the last three months, we've had 38 conservation officers, in collaboration with our federal colleagues at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, undertake 90 inspections across southern Ontario. There were a number of violations that we did detect through those inspections. A number of those are being considered for further enforcement action and/or before the court.

Progressively, as new rules are implemented through our compliance continuum, we do focus a lot of effort on outreach and education so that those impacted—whether they are retailers, anglers with bait or commercial bait harvesters—are aware of the rules and can comply with them. Then we are able to follow up in subsequent years.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Do you feel that your conservation officers are well trained to identify invasive species? Because the auditor tells us that you often required expert assistance that is not available within the ministry, and without the internal support for identification, it can take weeks to find an expert to accompany an officer on inspection. Have those things changed since she tabled her report four months ago?

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Something that we do work on is that partnership, training our officers on the identification. Just recently, as part of the food fish market targeted operations that I just mentioned, I had a specific training operation to show officers what they were looking for, fish-related, and what the rules were associated with that. Some of the species are more difficult to identify based on characteristics; often plants are difficult to identify, so we

seek advice from our colleagues in science and research and other parts of the ministry where we have that expertise. We're continuing to build out that roster of who we can contact as quickly as possible, to support the identification when we come across something like that.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you. The Auditor General also told us that your ministry took, on average, 46 months to complete the process of regulating 12 out of 13 species newly added to the list of regulated invasive species in January 2022. Is 46 months the best time frame that we can offer? Because delays increase the risk of the species' introduction and spread, and it certainly seems like a long time to me.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I'm sorry; can I ask you to repeat that question? You were wondering about the time it takes for regulating—

M^{me} France Gélinas: The ministry took, on average, 46 months to complete the process of regulating 12 of the 13 species that you added to the regulated invasive species list in January 2022. It took, on average, 46 months. Some were longer than that.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you for your question. I'll ask Stephen to just give a bit of an overview of what it involves in terms of our regulation process, so that you—

Interruption.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Stephen Crawford): Okay. We have an opposition day motion in the House right now, so we're going to have to pause the public hearings until the vote is complete. We'll come right back right after the vote, but in the meantime we will suspend until the vote is over. When we come back, the opposition will speak for another 10 minutes.

This session is now closed.

The committee recessed from 1520 until 1537.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): We are now resuming. We have 10 minutes left for the official opposition.

MPP Gélinas, please continue.

M^{me} France Gélinas: All right. So I had just asked that—the ministry took, on average, 46 months to complete the process of regulating 12 of the 13 species newly added to the list of regulated invasive species in January 2022. You had offered to tell me what needs to happen. I'm not a conservation officer—although I think I have the most retired conservation officers per square inch than anybody else. I'm more interested in how we shorten that time frame.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: For regulating the species?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Correct.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay, so Stephen, if you can speak to that, that would be great.

Mr. Stephen Casselman: Okay, thank you. I'd like to highlight that regulation of invasive species under the Invasive Species Act is one tool available to the ministry to support our objective of preventing the introduction and spread of new invasive species in Ontario, but there are certainly additional tools. Some of those include things

that we've talked about like education and awareness actions to promote behavioural change—

M^{me} France Gélinas: No, what I want to know is, when you do have to complete the process of regulating, why does it have to take four years?

Mr. Stephen Casselman: So there are a lot of factors that go into undertaking risk assessments for invasive species—

M^{me} France Gélinas: And any of this could be done in a shortened period of time?

Mr. Stephen Casselman: So, certainly, the ministry is and will continue to assess the current process for conducting risk assessments and—

M^{me} France Gélinas: Are you hopeful that it will shorten up the time frame?

Mr. Stephen Casselman: We will certainly continue to look for opportunities to.

M^{me} France Gélinas: And what are you aiming for?

Mr. Stephen Casselman: We don't have a specific target, but as indicated, we'll continue to look for opportunities to streamline.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. Something else that the auditor tells us is that in the Ontario Invasive Plant Council's Grow Me Instead guides, they identified 30 terrestrial plant species that could be considered for regulation. They found six of those 30 invasive plants—and she names them—are available for purchase at local garden centres such as Home Depot, Lowe's, Rona etc. What can we do to avoid this?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Thank you for the question. Stephen, if you can help address that question in terms of what we are doing to address concerns around local garden centres selling products that are considered invasive species.

Mr. Stephen Casselman: Yes. Thank you very much. Certainly, the ministry understands the importance of identifying and regulating terrestrial invasive species, which is what I think you're getting at, and the pathways associated with them.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Yes.

Mr. Stephen Casselman: In many cases, some of those invasive species that are being sold in horticultural settings have been sold and present in Ontario for many years; regulating them is not necessarily a solution, so we do focus on education and outreach.

I think one of the points that you mentioned there is around the Grow Me Instead guide. We worked previously with the Ontario Invasive Plant Council to develop that. We support best management practices to deal with some of those terrestrial plant species that have already been spread throughout the province, and we worked with partners and industry organizations to highlight the risks and concerns associated with this.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. So how come you don't fund the Invasive Plant Council anymore? They seemed to be doing a good job.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I'll have to check. Do we have that on our list that we fund, or through the Invasive Species Centre?

Mr. Stephen Casselman: Sorry, just one second.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: If you can just give us a minute, we'll check to see if we've got that, or we may have to come back to you.

M^{me} France Gélinas: While you're looking for this, I'll put my next question out. The Auditor General tells us that "ministry funding for invasive species work is neither sufficient nor timely." On the "timely" side, she goes on to say, "The ministry was regularly delayed in approving annual funding for transfer payment recipients, limiting the invasive species planning and work done in spring and summer, when many management activities are most effective."

So they wouldn't find out until June that they got the funding, when the work should have been done in May. And then, how come you don't offer multi-year funding? Did we find out why we're not financing those good people anymore?

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Well, while they're looking at that, I can answer your other question. We're getting much better at making sure that those transfer payment approvals do get out as early in the year as possible. We do try to make sure that they get that funding, especially pre-season, when they need it the most.

We've actually instituted, as well, some multi-year transfer payment agreements, so that some of our key partners don't have to wait every year. I think that there are two right now, if I recall, that we have—is it three- or four-year agreements that we have in place?

Mr. Stephen Casselman: Yes. We've now implemented three-year multi-year agreements to confirm funding with partners associated with the Invasive Species Centre and the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, so that takes us out to 2024-25.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. But the Ontario Invasive Plant Council: You're not funding them anymore?

Mr. Stephen Casselman: Over the last several years, we have had individual projects that we've worked on with the Ontario Invasive Plant Council, and have collaboratively worked with them.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. Just in case we don't get another round, I'm going to pass it to my colleague, Lise. I'll leave you a few minutes, just in case we don't get another round.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Sure. Okay, I'm still confused about the conservation officers and the numbers, because according to the report, the numbers are down considerably from where they were. I'm confused about the hiring of 25 new conservation officers, when that doesn't bring us up to the level that they were before. And I'm also wondering if the need was there because so many have left, because we have been hearing quite a few complaints and a lot of frustration from conservation officers about not being categorized correctly for their level of responsibility.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: In terms of the conservation officer numbers, I believe Amanda was on the line earlier on just to confirm that we did receive additional salary dollars last year, and it's been

confirmed this year again, for those additional 25 positions. We hired those additional 25 positions—was it last year, Rick, that they came on board and we brought them on board?

Mr. Rick Watchorn: We started our recruitment in 2021.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay. Thank you.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. So it doesn't really answer the question of why we're so much lower than we were. It was 281. Since 1998—let's see—the laws have increased, while the number of officers has decreased from 281 to 238; that's a cut of 15%. But then, during the same period, 25 were hired, but the total amount is only 209. So it still represents a considerable loss from a previous era of numbers of conservation officers.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: I will have to ask Rick again to clarify. Sometimes I think the counting is for officers versus all of our enforcement positions, which may include management. Rick, maybe you can help explain that one again for us.

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Sure. Thanks, Deputy.

You're right; in the count—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Two minutes left.

Mr. Rick Watchorn:—that we talk about, there have over many years been different staffing numbers involved for the conservation officers. Recently, we increased the field conservation officer number by 25, to have 209 front-line conservation officers. On top of that, we have to make up the number referenced by the auditor, 238. The remainder of that number is our managers, who are also conservation officers in the field. So we do distinguish a field conservation officer and then a manager, but they are both appointed equally as conservation officers. So 80% of our staffing are appointed conservation officers in the enforcement branch, out of 290 total positions.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. May I ask another question? Are you good with that? You talked about monitoring bait shops, and you've also talked about not being able to control the plants. A couple of things here: We know that there are plants that are being sold that are invasive, and yes, they've been sold at garden centres for years and years. But is that any reason not to say, "Let's put a prohibition on selling crabgrass," and many of these other things that you can get at any garden centre? That's a question: Is that not reasonable, to legislate that, since we have better knowledge than we had 20 years ago?

And then I also wonder about the process, the procedure, for monitoring bait shops, because there are thousands of them, and I'm wondering who is doing that work.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Twenty seconds.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: We'll start with monitoring of bait shops. Were you thinking from an enforcement perspective or a regulatory perspective?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes.

Ms. Monique Rolf von den Baumen-Clark: Okay.

Rick, I will take this one back to you in terms of how we monitor bait shops.

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Thanks, Deputy.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Give it to us in 10 seconds, okay? We're almost at time—we are at time, so 10 seconds.

Mr. Rick Watchorn: Monitoring bait shops is a regular patrol and work that conservation officers do across the province. They actively do it 12 months a year to monitor for bait harvesting, rules for invasive species and other requirements that bait harvesters are required to follow after the rules.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Okay. Thank you very much. That concludes the opposition side.

MPP Gélinas?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I was just wondering if we could have one more round.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): MPP Gélinas is asking for agreement of the committee to have a further

round. Okay, I heard a no. There's no agreement for an additional round.

M^{me} France Gélinas: So there's no opportunity for any more questions?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Well, the next is three minutes for the independent member, should she wish to take it, and following that, since we have completed two rounds and there's no consensus to move to the third round, then this would complete the hearing for today.

All right. That concludes the time for questions this afternoon. I'd like to thank all of you appearing before the committee today. Thanks again. You are dismissed.

We'll now pause briefly as we go into closed session, so that the committee can commence report writing.

The committee recessed at 1549 and later continued in closed session.

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