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(Hansard)**

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(Hansard)**

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**Standing Committee
on the Interior**

**Comité permanent
des affaires intérieures**

Estimates

Ministry of Northern Development

Budget des dépenses

Ministère du Développement du Nord

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Monday 23 September 2024

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43^e législature

Lundi 23 septembre 2024

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE
ON THE INTERIOR**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES**

Monday 23 September 2024

Lundi 23 septembre 2024

The committee met at 1400 in committee room 1.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good afternoon, everyone. The interior committee is about to begin consideration of the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Development for a total of two hours. Are there any questions for the members before we start? I see none.

Minister, the floor is yours—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay. Just one second.

I am now required to call vote 2201, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Northern Development.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I feel like we're playing peek-a-boo, Mr. Chair. I can only see you—there you go. There you are.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Yes, we have to do something about these cameras.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes.

All right. Good afternoon, colleagues, and thank you for this extraordinary opportunity. It's great to be addressing the Standing Committee on the Interior. Today, I'll be discussing the work of the Ministry of Northern Development, one of two portfolios that I hold, and answering any questions that you may have—in fact, inviting them.

I'd like to introduce my colleagues who are joining me today:

—of course, the deputy minister, Dave Corbett—thank you for joining me today;

—Helen Mulc—I think she is virtual; I don't see Helen—the assistant deputy minister of northern development;

—Scott Mantle, the chief administrative officer and assistant deputy minister of corporate management; and

—David McLean, the assistant deputy minister for strategic policy, as well as some very talented young people who work in my minister's office. Some of them are watching here today. Hello, everyone.

Listen, I just want to start by saying that our ministry's mission is to support economic and community develop-

ment in northern Ontario, reflecting the region's unique opportunities. We focus on the positive aspects of northern development. We know there are challenges out there, but the economy, job creation and building strong communities are threaded and embedded in each of the at least four heads of state, as I like to call them, or pillars within our ministries. We focus on opportunity.

Oh, there's Helen. I see her there on the screen. Hello.

One day, I'd like to get us all to a place where we could refer to this ministry as the ministry of northern prosperity. That's not just about economics, as some of my colleagues have reminded me in the past, but something that moves us away from the notion that we're always in development. We've got a lot of cool things to talk about when it comes to northern Ontario, and I'm going to unpack a few of those things for you today.

I might start with the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp., as its chair. The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund has fast proved to be a key tool for economic development—and other things, I would say, when you take a look at the projects that we've approved. Certainly my parliamentary assistant can attest to the fact that not only do we endeavour to go everywhere in that beautiful 800,000-square-kilometre stretch of land known as northern Ontario, but it isn't just about creating economic opportunities. Many of the projects that we fund and form partnerships with deal with—address, if you will—and help support culture and tourism. That's different from just economic development; it's a celebration of the things that our communities reflect, in particular the small towns, townships and First Nations communities—and I'll elaborate on that more, hopefully, at least by way of questions—that give life and vibrancy to our bigness and our smallness in many respects. The jobs that we create are across various sectors. They are no longer confined to the traditional ebbs and flows of the commodity markets and resources but rather include dynamic investment in agriculture as one of the fastest-growing regions for agriculture in the province of Ontario—of course, forestry and mining but tourism, local businesses attracting young people to come and stay in our communities and keeping the young people that we have in our communities today.

Let me give you a couple of examples. The Kenora chamber of commerce was hiring a marketing intern using the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund internship program. We're very proud of this. We have a very exceptionally high retention rate for these interns. They're typically

young people from the communities or communities nearby, and as a component of that we have an exclusive Indigenous program that represents an opportunity for young Indigenous youth who may face certain barriers in the job marketplace but who also come from opportunities in their communities or communities nearby that create an important link, if you will, to prosperity, especially when there's a small town surrounded by First Nations communities. The opportunity for them to work in local businesses either in their community or in the township, municipality, town or city that they're in has proved to be in high demand and very rewarding for all of us.

So, Indigenous-owned companies like Ramco First Nation expanding their operations and creating 40 new jobs; Minodahmun Development—we're developing a commercial plaza with NOHFC, and this is going to create 28 new jobs. It's just literally off the Trans-Canada Highway, as if you were to turn into Geraldton—or Greenstone, as it's called right now—and head up to Aroland and parts beyond.

Of course, I've spoken to this committee before about the modernization of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. It was one of the largest consultation exercises certainly I'd ever been involved in. Who am I? I don't know—just a guy who has two chapters of a political career and attended many round tables and many consultations, but I've never seen more input than what we received from the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. More than 1,000 inputs from people, businesses and communities across the north showed us the way and represented a program that would focus on rural projects and Indigenous work opportunities in addressing skilled labour shortages.

Some of the key initiatives have proved to be highly well received in their communities: the \$2 million to Algoma University to build a centre of cultural excellence; \$1 million for Walden Welding and Mechanical to expand and upgrade equipment; \$500,000 for the Kenora Chiefs Advisory to renovate a youth wellness hub.

There are countless other examples, colleagues, and perhaps I'll save the rest for your questions, but suffice it to say, the two most notable things that we could all take away if we looked at the estimates are, first, the uptake from municipalities, townships and First Nations communities that we had never seen before. Certainly, that's something that I am tremendously proud of. That has significantly increased the uptake for the program as a second key goal.

I want to talk about the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund. The Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund helps municipalities to deal with the impact of resource development on infrastructure. It was launched in 2021, and it provides more than \$15 million annually to support infrastructure projects. All 144 northern Ontario municipalities are eligible.

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In short, colleagues, what this endeavours to do is to reconcile the impact of resource industries on local infrastructure. If there's anybody that's got major forestry operations surrounding their town or their city, the big

machinery, whether it's on the back as a payload or in and on a transport truck, can have a significant impact on the conditions of those roads. If you go to Kapuskasing or you go to Sudbury and out my way in Keewatin, those trucks have a real impact.

I mentioned Kapuskasing—oh, the member from Kapuskasing is here today. He'll know that we received \$393,000 to improve its Highway 11 connecting link, which is very much impacted by forestry operations. Dryden, in Kenora—Rainy River, received a much-needed \$358,000 for asphalt rehabilitation on Highway 17, vital for forestry and mining sectors. Indeed, the machinery, in a short period of time, can really impact the quality of that road. Parry Sound received \$328,000 to repair roads damaged by heavy machinery, heavy traffic.

We're committed to continue to support sustainable growth and prosperity in northern Ontario through the NOHFC and the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund. We continue to invest in jobs and infrastructure and community development across the north.

I want to pivot to the Northern Energy Advantage Program. This is a strategic initiative straight-up designed to support large industrial companies in northern Ontario by reducing their electricity costs, which can constitute a significant portion of their operational expenses, particularly in sectors like mining, forestry and manufacturing, and particularly significant as many of these sectors, and most notably mining, convert to almost or completely 100% electrification. The costs can be extremely high, and we want to make sure that they're globally competitive. Launched in 2022 and operating through March 2027, the Northern Energy Advantage Program builds on earlier efforts to assist northern Ontario's largest electricity consumers. It does this by providing rebates of \$20 per megawatt hour to eligible companies with the aim of promoting competitive, stable and predictable energy rates.

Let me highlight some of the dimensions of this. From a budgetary perspective, funding will increase from \$120 million per year to \$206 million by 2025-26. It's not just going to help existing participants but new businesses, particularly as we anticipate, certainly beyond 2025 and 2026, a ramp-up to processing capacity in northern Ontario for critical minerals and, frankly, more and more in base metal processing.

We have a rebate flexibility. It's a significant change in the removal of the \$20-million-per-company-per-year rebate cap. It allows larger rebates that reflect actual consumption levels for major facilities.

It has new streams. The introduction of an investor class stream encourages companies to invest in clean technologies and emissions reduction, supporting the transition to greener industries.

Support for critical sectors: New operations, especially those involved, as I said, for critical minerals and the electric vehicle battery supply chain, will also be eligible for assistance.

Since 2010, its previous version, the Northern Industrial Electricity Rate Program, now the new, improved and modernized Northern Energy Advantage Program, has

provided \$1.627 billion in relief, improving industrial resilience, sustainability, competitiveness, and again, fostering job growth and investment in northern Ontario.

I'm going to pivot to a special little announcement we made in northern Ontario: the Little Current Swing Bridge and the Berens River Bridge. My ministry, of course, is heavily involved in a partnership with the Ministry of Transportation Ontario. We are advancing and prioritizing new transportation infrastructure projects in northern Ontario aimed at improving accessibility, safety and economic growth.

The two key bridges that we've announced recently are the Little Current Swing Bridge and the proposed Berens River Bridge. The Little Current Swing Bridge, on Highway 6, was over 110 years old and is the only roadway access to Manitoulin Island. The replacement project will improve both vehicular and nautical traffic operations. It will modernize safe passage and benefit residents, businesses and emergency services, importantly, not to mention tourists.

The proposed Berens River Bridge is an exciting larger initiative—and high time, I might add—to construct an all-season road in collaboration with the Whitefeather Forest Community Resource Management Authority and the federal government. The infrastructure will benefit seven remote First Nations communities north of Red Lake, including Pikangikum First Nation, by providing safer year-round access and eliminating the need for dangerous ice crossings. The road and bridge have the potential to support economic development in harvesting wood sustainably from perhaps one of the most quantitative and qualitative baskets left, I would argue, in this country, in the Whitefeather Forest—and Pikangikum First Nation is the sole holder of the enhanced sustainable forestry licence for that—but, as importantly, to connect more than 10,000 people living north of Red Lake. Their message is loud and clear: “We want road access, and this bridge is an important, if not the most important, piece of infrastructure to get those roads developed.”

That's a good pivot to the northern highway programs, a key initiative aimed at expanding and maintaining the extensive northern Ontario highway network, which covers 10,775 kilometres and constitutes about 60% of Ontario's total highway system. Some recent achievements in this fiscal cycle include the rehabilitation and expansion of the Magnetawan River Bridge on Highway 69, resurfacing Highway 101 near Foleyet and the four-laning of eight kilometres of Highway 11/17, from Ouimet to Dorion.

In 2024, our fiscal year commitments can be profiled as such: a total investment of \$677 million for this fiscal year; \$479 million of that will be accounted for in rehabilitation projects, and almost \$200 million to fund highway expansion projects. We have a number of ongoing—how much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Three minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Three minutes—ongoing projects, including twinning of the highway from Manitoba to Kenora, resurfacing Highway 144 from Highway 560 to 661 near Gogama, 2+1 highway pilot programs, culvert

replacements from Thessalon to Iron Bridge and, of course, our winter programs. The Winter Roads Program is a crucial initiative for First Nations communities in the Far North, offering seasonal access for essential goods and services. As I said, the communities farther north are fast asking for all-year road access for a variety of reasons.

I'll just finish by mentioning a couple of other neat programs: the Veterinary Assistance Program, designed to support large-animal veterinary services in northern and rural communities, playing a critical role in sustaining a robust livestock industry and developing our food security—and, hopefully, food sovereignty—programs moving forward.

So I'll just finish there, Mr. Chair. I'm confident that the initiatives and programs shared today—and there are others—offer a clear perspective on the actions of the Ministry of Northern Development and are spurring growth and unlocking opportunities across northern Ontario writ large. I'm now in a position to take any questions or comments.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now begin questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition, 10 minutes for the independent members of the committee and 20 minutes for the government side. As always, please wait to be recognized by myself before speaking. All questions and comments will need to go through the Chair.

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For the deputy minister, assistant deputy ministers and staff, when you are first called on to speak, please state your name and your title so that we can accurately record who we have in Hansard.

Now we will start with the official opposition. You have 20 minutes. MPP Mamakwa.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation on this estimates briefing on Ministry of Northern Development.

Certainly when you define “development,” it's very different from my understanding of what development is. I was up in Sandy Lake on Saturday, two days ago. I was at the airport. It's not one of those visits that, you know, are very favourable for the community. I was there for a funeral. Chief Delores Kakegamic, Councillor Russell Kakepetum—I was there for the funeral for their son. They've lost two of their children in the last two months, so I know they're struggling.

But that's not my question. I think more of my question is, when we talk about development—when I was at the airport, the airport facility there is one of the probably worst waiting rooms I've seen in the north. And when we talk about development, when we talk about not just roads—airports are lifelines for people when we talk about development.

I don't know if there are any transfers from MTO, Ministry of Transportation, with regard to when we talk about the northern highways program, but also airports are very critical. These roads will not happen as soon as possible.

My question is, what has been done or are there any plans to upgrade these facilities such as the waiting room in Sandy Lake?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thank you for the question. It's one that's near and dear to my heart as well. I've passed through many of those airports over the years, and I appreciate the question. It's not squarely within the estimate profile that you see today, and I know you understand that, but I don't think either one of us wants to miss an opportunity to mention and acknowledge that, as the Winter Roads Program, which I can expound upon later, is what we are primarily seized of, there is no question that the Sandy Lake airport in particular is in need of some serious rehabilitation. I've made communications to the Minister of Transport to that end, and I'm hopeful that in the very near future, at least some upgrades will be done to the airport. There are other airports, as well, that may be in a little better shape but are a little undersized, and so I take your point on the need for that—no question about it.

The good news is—okay, sorry.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch for that. I know that I want to, kind of—what you mentioned about the winter roads. I know that your report says that the government has invested \$6 million for winter road building in the Far North in 2023-24 and another \$5 million for new bridges and culverts addressing dangerous crossings. I think when we talk about \$5 million, it's, again, a drop in the bucket for the ministry's \$762 million in spending.

I just want to ask this question: Winter road funding has increased at a rate of 0.06% per year, compared to the 2022 inflation rate of 6.8%. I'm just wondering, will this government commit to winter road funding levels that reflect rising inflation and the increasing impacts of climate change?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The short answer would be yes. There is a significant event, if you will, going on in and around winter roads, and that is the requests by either a given First Nation community or the regional organization that they belong to to develop all-season roads. The priority and the impressive statistics that you just rolled out reflect some reactive work and some proactive work.

You'll remember, up near Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, we sought to create a more stable bridge over a culvert there, in anticipation that it would break down in an untimely way given the effects of things like climate change. In other instances, we've been developing certain parts of roads—I'm thinking extensions from Anaconda and Painter roads north of Aroland First Nation; of the calls from the Matawa communities, increasingly, to improve the existing road network they have, but with a view to more permanent roads.

Indeed, I mentioned the Berens River Bridge. That was a call—you mentioned Sandy Lake and four or five other communities. We also met with a number of communities in the more central part of northern Ontario and its isolated communities in an effort to talk about a proposal that they have.

So I think if we were to build in the costs, for example, of the bridge, just that one bridge for Berens River, the

statistics you mentioned, the percentages, would be much higher. So I think that as it stands, in this fiscal year, we will, of course, have new initiatives to take—real rehabilitation. But we'll spend as much or perhaps more time than we have in the past, and rightly so, on considering all-year road access and the kind of infrastructure that would support that before the roads could actually be built to link them. Bridges are an important first part of that.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know that I mentioned about the drop in a bucket of an increase for the crossings and the bridges, the culverts. In fact, the Northern Energy Advantage Program received a \$26-million increase, whereas the winter roads funding was not increased at all.

I know for the north, the fly-in First Nations, the 39 communities in northern Ontario, winter roads are absolutely vital. You know that. I know that in 2016-17, the winter roads facilitated 17 million litres of fuel and 1,500 truckloads of goods to be transported to the northern First Nations in the town of Moosonee.

Last fall, Roy Moonias, project coordinator for Neskantaga First Nation, spoke to CBC News about the inadequacy of Ontario's winter road funding. He said, "That's peanuts. That's not even a crossing."

This winter, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation chiefs declared a winter roads state of emergency because of unseasonably warm winter weather which threatened the safety of the winter roads. This is not a one-time issue; I know you know that, Minister. Climate change is disproportionately impacting First Nations people. The NAN Chiefs-in-Assembly called on the Ministry of Northern Development, along with others, "to immediately facilitate the required ... subsidies to the affected NAN First Nations for fuel and essential" non-perishables.

My question is, will this government commit to conducting a comprehensive assessment of Far North transportation system vulnerabilities that integrates both scientific and traditional knowledge in collaboration with First Nation communities?

1430

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think one of the key initiatives, and you alluded to it, was the stream bridges and culverts as part of the broader winter road program and this kind of annual commitment to provide funding to remote First Nations communities for projects involving the installation of water-crossing infrastructure. These would be pre-engineered bridges and culverts—I mentioned one of them in the previous question—as well as repairs to existing structures along Ontario winter road networks.

I think that beyond this fiscal year the question is going to be—and some of the reasons would be part of the question that you had—what requirements would we be looking at in the future that would move certain corridors to a place where they could prospectively have all-season roads? Let's face it: You and I both know that that is the clarion call from the isolated communities. I think both of us landing in that place is important, because it sets out a much bigger discussion with our federal government partners on an issue that you raised, and that is climate change. The federal government has spent a lot of time and taken a lot

of people's money for things that have not really improved climate change per se, but what they haven't done is recognize the real impact of climate change on infrastructure and future infrastructure that would be required to address it.

So I think, in the not-too-distant future, that some important discussions will go on with, for example, the NAN territory, the federal government and the provincial government on looking at how we would fund and get some corridor started for all-season roads. Of course, the appeal of that is impressive. Not only does it provide safer passage that's more reliable; it reduces the cost of goods shipped to the community, and it improves dramatically the prospect of better overall infrastructure with road transportation as opposed to some of it being brought in by air. Tremendous pressure under this shrinking winter road season is really what we're seeing.

To the extent that these would require, in my view, traditional knowledge, I'm pleased to report that that is built into much of the environmental assessment processes we're already seeing, and we've been most appreciative of the traditional knowledge that is embedded and indeed a mandatory part of the environmental assessment process as a precursor to building any and all kinds of infrastructure.

And I might add, and finish with this, that increasingly—and I'm thinking of the Berens River, but there are other examples where First Nations communities have contributed significantly to the concept and then the technical elements of a given piece of infrastructure that's based on traditional knowledge of land and waterways.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: How has the ministry implemented the recommendations of Nishnawbe Aski Nation's input into that 2003 Northern Ontario Transportation Task Force report? How have you done that? How has the ministry done that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Turning the heat up—I love it.

Look, the fact of the matter is, as I have said before—I mean, I'm happy to refer back, too. I'll be happy to take a meeting with the Grand Chief to revisit elements of that report. But I can assure you that the processes that support the development of major and critical infrastructure require input from First Nations. I know there are a number of examples, but one in particular was with respect to Cat Lake and some of the communities surrounding there, a desire to lead those initiatives. We've agreed to take a look at an opportunity to combine the inputs of traditional knowledge with the existing processes we have already, and I think that would be a good idea. It helps build capacity for the communities to contribute around infrastructure that accesses their communities.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you.

I just want to switch gears. When I spoke about the Northern Energy Advantage Program—can you confirm whether or not the Dryden paper mill is one of the annual recipients of funding through the Northern Energy Advantage Program?

The second part is, can you tell us exactly how much funding the Dryden paper mill receives through the NEAP and what conditions are attached to the funding?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The Northern Energy Advantage Program has a number of participants across northern Ontario, and I'm going to say to you that the thrust of the Northern Energy Advantage Program is to move industries to a cleaner and greener way of doing their work. It sustains local economies. It isn't just about the facility in Dryden. In fact, there are a number of woodland operators, some of them First Nations businesses and people whose livelihood depends on it. And, of course, you would consider in your thoughts around this question the fact that the forest in many parts of Treaty 3, which are part of the supply chain for that mill, at least, and others, are Treaty 3 communities.

I take your point on the interests of one specific community, but I think you can agree that there are other First Nations communities who are invested in a sustainable and responsible path forward on the care of our forests, and to the extent that any operator takes advantage of that program, it is designed explicitly with the intention of creating a cleaner and greener way of doing their business.

So I'm confident that the businesses that take advantage of that program and the new ones—so, for example, Borden mining operations on the other side of the province are now 100% electrified. I'm sure you would agree that electrification of mining operations is an important policy initiative to advance, and so that's where we're going with that program.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know, as you know, that Grassy Narrows First Nation members have been suffering from impacts of polluting the Wabigoon River from the Dryden mill for over 50 years. I know it used to be from the dumping of mercury into the Wabigoon River, but now it's because of the effluent that is released by the mill, which exacerbates the effects of mercury poisoning. Ninety per cent of the Grassy Narrows population experience symptoms of mercury poisoning, and it gets passed between generations. Youth suicide attempts in Grassy are also three times higher than other First Nations in Canada.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know Grassy Narrows were here last week.

Will you commit to making NEAP funding to the Dryden mill conditional on an end to the release of the effluent that creates high levels of methylmercury into the Wabigoon River? This would mean the end of the exacerbation of the mercury poisoning crisis in Grassy Narrows First Nation by the Dryden mill.

1440

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, we're committed, all participants of this program, to ensuring that they deliver a safer, greener, cleaner product. That's exactly what has gone on in Dryden and forestry mills, steel mills and mining operations across Ontario. With those kinds of results, we're very encouraged—

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

We will move to the government side. You have 20 minutes. MPP Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: I appreciate being here today and being able to speak with the minister about some of the issues before us in estimates.

Having recently taken the role, coming from south-western Ontario, my joke when I go into the north is that, for a lot of us, we always thought the north started when you got past Canada's Wonderland. The reality is that you can drive 22, 23 hours from here, get up to Kenora–Rainy River, and, really, you haven't even touched the north yet because there's 800,000 square kilometres up there.

What I've so appreciated about the visits that I've been able to make into the north—I think I'm at five right now, with a couple more coming—is the level of excitement that you see from stakeholders on the ground about the work that's being done in the north. They seem so excited to have a government that actually sees the connection between whatever is good for northern Ontario is good for all of Ontario. So much of the wealth that we see down here is a direct result, both historically and ongoing, of the moves that are being made by the province in northern Ontario. Whether that's Indigenous communities who are partners with us on building travel centres in Geraldton or our partners in gold mines, seeing that stuff going forward in the north is really, really exciting for me. It's been an absolute pleasure to be able to take some of those trips.

Minister, you touched on it both in your comments and in response to questions from the opposition, but I wanted to focus a little bit on something that I don't know as much about yet, but just reading about it in the folder. Since you've taken office, your ministry has expanded the Northern Energy Advantage Program, or the NEAP, from \$120 million a year to over \$206 million for 2025-26. That program specifically is to help northern Ontario businesses compete and grow, and not just in the north but in Ontario and indeed across the entire global marketplace. So I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about how this program is helping the industry maintain its global competitiveness and keep well-paying jobs in northern Ontario.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Thanks for that question. It is a program worth knowing about and understanding some of its key objectives. To the member's question earlier, I would submit that I think the most important aspects of this particular program are two. There may be more, but, principally, for these electricity-intensive—or let's just step back here: an energy-intensive sector that would benefit from electrification because it's a cleaner and greener way to operate. I happen to think, given the history of some of these sectors' energy usage, that natural gas should be read into that as a cost mitigation and a cleaner carbon.

But the bottom line is that if this is going to incentivize a mining operation to be 100% electrified, so not using any kinds of fuels, that's a good thing. So at the heart of it, I think, is a genuine interest in seeing that kind of conversion happen.

Sault Ste. Marie: Algoma Steel, in its current version, converting to an electric arc furnace—you don't do that if the cost of electricity isn't going to put you in a position to

be more competitive and, frankly, have a significantly reduced footprint on the environment, so cleaner and greener and less expensive. When it becomes less expensive, of course, it makes us competitive.

I guess if there's an equally important emerging opportunity for NEAP, then that would be for it to be the platform from which other energy-intensive, electricity-intensive operations like processing, particularly for critical minerals, could and would occur. Those conversations are live in northern Ontario right now. You can't get out of Thunder Bay or Red Rock, where I was last week, without them talking about being a competitive processing location for critical minerals. The same conversations are occurring in places like Cobalt, Ontario, and Sudbury, obviously. But regardless of the location, the message is clear: Northern Ontario has a unique opportunity to deliver, as a sub-sovereign government, one of the greatest environmental policies ever advanced the world over, and that is through critical minerals.

We can't offer critical minerals if we can't process them responsibly. If you don't eat your meat, you can't have any pudding, so how can you have any pudding if you don't eat your meat? Well, we want to be able to make sure that the critical minerals that we are mining, we're also processing in northern Ontario at an affordable, competitive price point, as opposed to what's being currently done in places like communist China and Russia, and, obviously, with a much keener eye to the environmental aspects that processing requires. NEAP, then, becomes an important flank for that to occur, and that's what the program is intended to do.

Mr. Will Bouma: If I can go on, then, on that, what you're saying then is, historically, the north has been used to extract resources from. Those resources are then shipped south or across the world, processed, and then we end up buying them back. But what you're saying is, with a program like this, we can actually guarantee, then, that the investments that we're making today, as we open up the Ring of Fire, will mean that processing can also happen there, that wealth can be distributed in the north, and then Ontario can be a supplier of processed metals, rare earths and everything else from the Ring of Fire for the entire world.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, the Ring of Fire certainly holds tremendous potential, but there are other sites across northern Ontario that are coming to a theatre near you very quickly. I mentioned Berens River, but we're talking about the opportunity for lithium there. The question is always going to be, "How can we get that resource to a place in northern Ontario for processing—efficiently, effectively, safely, in an environmentally responsible way—another one or two or three corridors; for example, road, rail and shipping, which we saw in Red Rock in spades last week when we visited there—and get it to southern Ontario and parts beyond for a fully integrated supply chain in the critical mineral space?" I believe we have that opportunity. I don't believe we can do it unless we're prepared to make electricity rates competitive for those potential processors.

Electricity is all the rage, especially in northern Ontario, right? I know, the member for Kiiwetinoong, every time a new community gets switched on, why he's there with a smile on his face because he knows that the electrification of the north is the right thing to do. In the future, some of those vast transmission lines would be enhanced if they had some other kinds of business or economic activity attached to them to fortify how electricity is transferred from different communities. They're recognizing that.

So I see a tremendous opportunity for an electrification of northern Ontario that includes connecting communities with electricity, but also, in terms of economic development, for improving the competitiveness of existing forestry, mining operations and those that will include processing capacities down the road.

1450

Mr. Will Bouma: Still on that question then, and maybe travelling a little bit further away, from what I've witnessed—and you keep talking about the importance of these investments for far-flung First Nations communities also, but what you're suggesting, then, is that investments that we make in the NEAP actually somewhat play a critical role in reconciliation and to be able to see growing prosperity in northern communities, especially remote northern communities. I was wondering if you could expand on that a little bit more.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, absolutely. Increasingly, for example, First Nations communities and/or economic development corporations who reflect them are now full partners in forestry and mining operations, including, increasingly, through the supply chain. So it makes perfect sense that electrification as a policy objective covers the areas that we just discussed in my last answer—connecting communities.

One of the things I think we could all do better at is ensuring that when we build out an electricity corridor, we do that with a forward-looking view to not just the corridor for electricity, but also for broadband capacity and road access. If you take a look at Watay Power, there are some really long corridors there that don't have road access. I think in the future—we're looking at a couple right now that aren't just about the crow's flight. Sometimes that's the most important and right thing to do, to get electricity to an operation and/or surrounding communities that may or may not be at least rural, but perhaps completely remote, but obviously to step up to the opportunity now that is reflected by, in some instances, a majority ownership of First Nations communities.

Our policy decision through Hydro One alone, that those corridors be owned and operated at a 50% threshold by First Nations investments, saying, "We want this. We want it now, and we want to be involved"—that has economic development and prosperity written all over it.

Mr. Will Bouma: If I could, just moving on from that, I think something that goes along hand in glove, from what I've seen in my trips to the north, is the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. Being on site at an Indigenous small industrial park, with investments that we're making in that, to see prosperity going on with Indigenous people

was absolutely thrilling. But it's so much more than that, the NOHFC. I would say the NOHFC has done an exceptional job of promoting economic prosperity across northern Ontario by providing financial assistance to projects that stimulate growth, that stimulate job creation and community development.

I was wondering if you could go into that a little bit more too. I know you already spoke about that too, but I have been so struck by even just the internship program, where we teach people, through the NOHFC funding, to take a new job, a good job where they can stay for the rest of their lives. I don't want to steal any of your thunder on that, but I've so appreciated what that does. It made me a little bit jealous, actually, that we don't have anything like that in southern Ontario, but of course there are unique situations up there. But I was wondering if you could talk more about the NOHFC and the great work that's being done through that.

Hon. Greg Rickford: We're pretty proud of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. Even my opposition colleagues in northern Ontario—they may vote against the investment, but they're always at the announcements. I think that it's something that they appreciate very much.

Interjection.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Not all of them, yes. I've got a few in the isolated communities that are in need of Sol and I flying up—Kasabonika, and there are several other examples. But no question about it: It's a tough but fair question, just the same.

I don't know how much time I have, Mr. Chair—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Five minutes.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Five minutes? Maybe I'll just, because I'm certain it will give rise to more questions about the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, highlight the four pillars. You mentioned one of them. The Community Enhancement Program is my favourite. I know when you came north—although don't sell yourself short on your northern experience. We were up in a couple of communities that knew a younger—

Mr. Will Bouma: I'd like to have the mikes turned off now. Can we go in camera?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Okay, he wants the mikes turned off. It turns out he planted trees up there for a time and was pretty doggone good at it.

The Community Enhancement Program—look, these are communities, townships, small towns and First Nations communities with populations of less than 1,500 people. We're in for 90% of the program. It's no wonder southern Ontario folk want to know more about the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. I'm a bit nervous about telling them all about it because I don't want you to get any ideas. It's our program and we're very proud of it. It fits northern Ontario like a glove.

The Community Enhancement Program repairs those curling clubs that are 100 years old, the Cochenour rink foundation, or building a new rink—the countless times we've been in communities whose tax bases are virtually non-existent or so small that it's enough for them to hold on to the most basic kinds of infrastructure. We're now

turning those old outdoor ice rinks we used to play hockey on to concrete pads with covers on them. We're seeing people in Stratton and Chapple getting married there; having farmers' markets; throwing up a nice new set of boards in the winter and having some good hockey and community fellowship.

The Cultural Supports Program celebrates culture, geography and talent in our communities, and it has supported film and television. We now boast some of the biggest film and television productions outside of Hollywood and Toronto. Go to North Bay; go to Sudbury. They're producing major—and it's not just a silly little tax credit that you see on the thing at the end of the film. You were there, sir. You took the opportunity to see first-hand the kind of film and television production that's going on.

The Invest North Program is attracting new businesses and supporting existing ones with expansion.

Finishing on the internship program—the People and Talent Program is what it's called. It's giving us an opportunity to ensure our young people have meaningful opportunities in local businesses, in local administrations that serve their communities. It keeps young people there.

Of course, I mentioned the stream specifically for Indigenous young people—and they're not all just young people. They are people in workplace transition where, for example, a mill may have shut down or there's a community learning about a new business or sector that's evolving in their community. The internship program has served it very well and I can't say enough about it, frankly. I hope you can tell.

Mr. Will Bouma: Time?

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

Mr. Will Bouma: Two minutes; wow.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I can go on.

Mr. Will Bouma: Take the time, Minister.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, at the risk of repeating this again, there are so many different examples. But the internship program takes on so many different forms. It's giving young people and, as I said earlier, not-so-young people a chance to get exposed to new sectors.

I mentioned agriculture. There are First Nations communities—I know Treaty 3 is engaged lock and stock into food sovereignty and food security. I am hopeful that more communities will engage this, but the ability to mobilize and familiarize young First Nations people with new-age agricultural technology—I mean, food production for the purposes of food security and food sovereignty has been around for time immemorial. But learning and taking advantage of the opportunity for concepts like micro-farming, especially in some of the isolated communities, is now for serious discussion.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Then, of course, the example I like to use is an internship program at a welding shop in northern Ontario where it's called a "mock shop." They give people the opportunity to weld and make products that the factory that they're in is actually making, and, at the same time, giving them the skills they need to move towards a Red Seal and fast becoming some of the most

talented welders in northern Ontario. Almost all of them, so far, are women. So we think that's a pretty incredible internship program, and we'd like to continue to build on it.

1500

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You have 18 seconds.

Mr. Will Bouma: I appreciate the testimony, Minister. I think it's really good to talk about the great things that are happening in northern Ontario, even just the classroom that we were in, that Indigenous college where half of the classroom was there, half of the classroom was—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Bouma. The government time is up.

We move to the second round of questioning, and we will start with the official opposition. MPP Mamakwa.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch. Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister. Thank you for mentioning me attending the Watay celebrations. Every now and then, I'm able to visit those communities. But I think I'm there—it's very basic—because communities are just happy that they can turn on and have Christmas lights. That's it. And they can actually build more homes. For years, as long as a decade, they were unable to build any homes. I remember when I was living on a reserve as well, we built no homes for eight years; it was just extensions. That's why I attend those celebrations.

But going back to the questions, I asked some questions with regard to the NEAP. I know that my question with regard to the Dryden mill—you did not answer my question. My question was, did the Dryden mill receive funding from the NEAP or any other Ministry of Northern Development funding. If so, how much?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I want to just reflect for a moment on your comments about the electrification of the isolated communities. Of course, as somebody who has spent a great deal of time living and working in those communities, obviously, and you said so—it's not just about Christmas lights. I hope that a \$2-billion investment is not just for Christmas lights. It's about the fact that as the original stewards of the land, it never made any sense to me that the communities themselves were on diesel generation—not a clean fuel, bro. You know what I'm saying? The ability to convert them completely to electricity, I think, is one of the most extraordinary policy achievements of the government of Ontario, even historically here. Let's break down those partisan bridges.

I was part of the federal government at a time when this kind of investment made perfect sense. I alluded to the fact that it would be probably in the development of future electrification corridors, particularly the isolated communities. To build them with a view to include road access as well was just a smart way to do work. But the electrification of communities and existing and future businesses in northern Ontario is the way. Our government stands ready and committed to the kinds of investments that will ensure cleaner and greener communities; cleaner and greener development of our resources, forestry and mining; the new investor class, which includes creating an opportunity for steel fabrication and, as I mentioned, the opportunity for

processing critical minerals to ensure that those builds are for the net benefit of the environment, not just economic prosperity.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: My question again: I asked a question with regard to—did the Dryden mill receive funding from the NEAP or any other Ministry of Northern Development funding? If so, how much. That was my question.

Hon. Greg Rickford: I can only speak to my ministry. Of course, that's what the purpose of this committee is, and I'm here to communicate clearly the activities of this ministry and tell you that the Northern Energy Advantage Program has a number of participants, past, present and future. We are committed to ensuring that their participation in this program is for the goal of contributing to a cleaner and greener economy in northern Ontario.

In that sense, the fact that you talked about the Dryden operation—when I was the federal member of Parliament—of course, Dryden is in the Kenora–Rainy River riding provincially and/or federally. The opportunity there to do a conversion of their liquor production—it's a residue of pulp production—gave them net positive electricity production, which they were able to put onto the grid. It involves some policy changes, but to the credit of provincial and federal governments at the time, the goal was to ensure that these large forestry operations optimized any by-product in their production to ensure, again, not just that they would operate more efficiently and effectively in economic terms, but also environmentally.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Is that a no or a yes?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'm sorry?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Is that a yes or no?

Hon. Greg Rickford: You'll have to go back to the original question.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Did the Dryden mill get funding from NEAP?

Hon. Greg Rickford: The Dryden mill is a participant in the Northern Energy Advantage Program.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: How much?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It can fluctuate from year to year, but the important part of it is, of course, that like all of the other facilities that are profiled in the participant list, they ensure that they're making every effort to be a cleaner and greener operation. In the case of the Dryden operation, like so much forestry, and now more so mining, they have an opportunity through this program to exceed certainly any other standards that would be comparable around the world.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Maybe what I can do is I'll ask your ministry staff to get a written response with regard to how much the Dryden mill is receiving in funding from the ministry, and then also if they are getting a resource from there.

But I'm going transfer it to my colleague MPP Bourgouin.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bourgouin.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: My apologies. I came in and I was in another committee asking questions.

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's a busy day, busy times.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Minister, you know I come from the forest industry—

Hon. Greg Rickford: Now, you don't want the NEAP shut down, do you? Is that what you're—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: No, no. Let me ask the question, and then you can answer.

Hon. Greg Rickford: All right. I get excited about—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I can see that.

I come from the forest industry. Every time we see a paper mill, as you know, there is a big domino effect that affects the whole industry. A short time ago we saw Terrace Bay close, and also Espanola, but mostly my questions are around Terrace Bay. I guess my question would be, what has your ministry done to try to save this mill? Because it affects a single-industry town. You know you've seen a single-industry town, and it does affect the surrounding areas. So what is your ministry doing to get this mill started again? Because we know some of these paper mills throughout our province need a lot of investments, especially if our paper mills are old. There are programs out there, but what is your ministry doing to try to save Terrace Bay and this community?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I want to step back there because—I'm sorry, Guy, but I come from a region where two forestry assets shut down some time ago under the watch of an NDP government. I guess the question is, what could they have done to save it?

1510

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Minister, I'll stop you there. Kapuskasing is running because of an NDP Premier, and it's still running—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think you know that—

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Please answer my question. All I'm asking is, what is your ministry doing to save Terrace Bay?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bourgouin, please—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think you know—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Minister, just one second.

Please direct the question through the Chair, and let the witnesses and, at the same time, the committee members do their turn in asking the questions and allowing them to answer. Thank you.

Minister, go ahead.

Hon. Greg Rickford: We have a number of ministries that are seized with supporting these mills, Espanola and Terrace Bay. I can say that it is unfortunate that, as a private sector activity, the owners—past and present, but particularly present—have, I guess in their view, maximized the output of the mill and not probably invested in the asset as they perhaps should have. What we have come across have been mills in some degree of deterioration. That is and was the case with those two, and efforts were made to support the companies that owned and operated those.

I'm going to speak about Espanola and Terrace Bay because I was involved in those activities, and certainly, I worked jointly with the Ministry of Natural Resources to

do anything that we possibly could to save those, even if and even though those assets were not in very good shape. You talk about Kapuskasing; there have been investments in that mill to keep it going, and there's been a lot of discussion that has been involved in what kind of support we can offer for that mill. Those numbers are going to come up at some point in a budget, sir, and the question is going to be, how will you vote?

I know this committee is for you to ask questions of me, but I can't help myself when I say time and time again, we made an investment in the Kapuskasing mill in the last fiscal cycle.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Chair, can he answer the question?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I was there to announce it, Mr. Chair, and the member voted against it.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Ask him to answer the question, or I'm going to start—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bourgouin—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I don't vote against things that are not—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Minister, answer the question, please.

Hon. Greg Rickford:—part of my community and its economic activity.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Chair, if you don't mind—I vote against bills that—they're not being investigated for criminal investigation. I have no lesson to learn from you, Minister, on which bill I vote on.

To get back to my question, the industry is struggling, as you know, because of the situation. But paper mills are at the top of the pyramid, with every industry around the industry that it's supporting—the feller bunchers, the grapple operators. A lot of them are small business owners, as you know. Then, when these mills go down, they hurt also.

Sawmills hurt also. As you know with sawmills, what did they do with their chips? All of a sudden, it can impact somebody's sawmills. This is why I'm asking the question, because we are concerned. I know some of these announcements will come, and it's good for Kapuskasing and good for the investment, because we need to save these paper mills as much as we can—help these paper mills as much as we can, which will help the rest of the industry.

That's why I'm asking for Terrace Bay and Espanola. Other private companies have stepped up and said, "We might be interested." Was your ministry involved with that? If they were, what could have been done to help? Because I know the unions were willing to do something. They were willing to participate. The municipality was there. So this is why my question—to find out, is there anything else that could have been done to save these mills? Because when we spoke to the mill manager, he said it's estimated that it would be \$250 million to restart that mill because it was at 600 tonnes a day before it shut down, and they would have to get closer to 1,000 tonnes per day. I'm sure you were aware of that. It's just funny that it's the same as what we spent on the deal for beer, but

not to get into that. I'm just saying that if this is the \$250 million to bring back an industry that could help a community go through and have an investor, is that something that's been considered?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, it is. Government, of course, has a couple of responsibilities in this; first of all is to make best efforts to support a community and the entire supply chain that's impacted by it.

But also, in the scenario or event where the asset in question may not return—and we've seen that in Fort Frances; we saw that in Kenora, out in my riding, under the previous governments, that it made significant investments in some updated technology, only to see the private sector partner pack up and walk away. We understand how disheartening that can be. That's why we mobilized very quickly with supports for both communities.

The new action centre in Terrace Bay is designed to help support laid-off union workers, and we have maintained AV Terrace Bay's position as a participant in the Northern Energy Advantage Program. I hope you think that's a good idea. I'm not sure, based on the line of questioning from your colleague, that it necessarily is a program that you support. But I know many forestry operators, and I can list them for you, know how important this program is, and maintaining that position sets out one of a number of value propositions for that community to return to forestry operations.

The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund also supports many people in the supply chain, woodland operators and the like, and I know in that area, we've continued to do that—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Minister, MPP Bourgouin needs—

Hon. Greg Rickford: I was only getting to the second part of his question, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay.

MPP Bourgouin, please.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: We have a different understanding on that.

Let me ask you, then: How much has AV Terrace Bay received from your Ministry of Northern Development last year?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, first of all, this is a question for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. The Ministry of Northern Development supports joint initiatives. So if there was a proposal from a private sector partner for some kind of—I don't want to call it a bailout, but some kind of support for modifications and upgrades—I can tell you, through the Northern Energy Advantage Program, I think we're talking several million dollars. Then, of course, other ministries have participated in the new action centre. So a significant resource has been there to provide them with financial support, if you will, and the value proposition of it continuing should a private sector participant step up. There has been some interest, and we're keenly engaged in that.

So it's not just about the financial aspects; it's as much about the policy discussions that are taking place across ministries—and they do involve mine—to try to under-

stand how we can support the good people of Terrace Bay and Espanola as their forestry operations have, at least for now, stopped.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Sous notre—gosh, I tried to say it French. Our understanding is there was a group of First Nations that was willing to look at buying the AV Terrace Bay plant. It hasn't materialized, but is that an option that could be worked on with your ministry and MNR and the group? Because—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: The job banks—fine, but it doesn't help. People want to stay. They want to work in that mill. They want to continue working there. Has this—comment est-ce que je te dirais ça? Is it “fondé”? “Fondé” is “funded”? Est-ce que c'est fondé, ce qu'on entend?

1520

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, I mean, look, everything is on the table, right? We've been through this before. I mentioned Fort Frances. Some suitors came along and found out that the asset was unsalvageable for any further forestry operations.

These ones are obviously only recently shut down, and I think if there's a business case from private sector participants, we're willing to take a look at it. But our responsibility moves beyond just the reality that that operation could come back or not. We have to ensure that there are other options—

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

We move to the government side. MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank the minister for being here, and I want to thank him for the great work he's doing in the north.

I noticed the member across there mentioned that a decade ago, in the north, they couldn't even turn on their lights, but because of your hard work and your commitment, they're able to turn on the lights in northern Ontario.

When I was on the finance committee going around the north, I learned a lot about the north. I'm amazed at the importance of the north for the south down here. My younger son is in mining engineering. He's been telling me that without the minerals of the north, we can't really go over to what we're trying to do with electricity in the province and build the cars of the future in the south here.

Can you explain to us about the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund and what the commitment is to that, and some update on that?

Hon. Greg Rickford: NORDS, as it's called by its acronym, is a program—well, first of all, it was a campaign promise, and we've delivered. I was just at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario. I think just about every mayor and/or councillor by proxy approached me to talk about the benefits of this program.

I'm thinking of a little stretch of road. See, I live in Keewatin, which is only five to seven minutes—depending on traffic; it can get heavy up there—to Kenora. But we call Kenora the “city folk” because we're in the beautiful town of Keewatin, as we like to say.

But until recently, when that sawmill shut down—shut down by a company that operates the Kapuskasing mill, and who has benefited from some of the equipment from that site. There's a little stretch of road between Norman and Keewatin, and a bridge, and you can literally—when the mill was operating at full capacity, the toll that those big logging trucks take on it.

Maley Drive in Sudbury was built almost exclusively to circumvent some of the heavier machinery traffic that is required to support a resource-based industry town or city or region. And so the municipalities have been able to tap in—and stack, most importantly, because there are infrastructure programs federally and provincially—to a proposal-driven process to fix those little stretches of road that I am talking about, to have the resources that under normal wear and tear, so without that industry operating—oftentimes the livelihood or part of the livelihood of that community—to upgrade them.

We're talking about investments that flow to 144 municipalities and support the capital costs that are associated with the impacts of the kinds of damage to a road that could, in some instances—so I mentioned the Trans-Canada Highway, a segment of it—to a road within a town or city's municipal limits. In the case of a number of towns and cities right on the Trans-Canada—account for the former.

So, I don't know; I guess I could give you an example. Shuniah, just outside of Thunder Bay, will apply \$130,000 in NORDS funding to rehabilitate Lakeshore Drive. It's a roadway that's shared by residents, mining and logging. You can imagine the toll that that takes on a road—and sometimes we're not talking about a big stretch of road; it just has a particular impact.

Our work with—oh, gosh, let me rattle them off—AMO and NOMA and FONOM and I think even the federal municipalities association have all said that these towns and cities need a flexible kind of program that helps to supplement upgrades to infrastructure that might not otherwise occur if it wasn't for the impacts of heavy industry and the machinery that goes with it.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you, Minister, for that answer.

I'm going to pass it on to my colleague here. Go ahead.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you so much, Minister, for being here. I can't tell you how much the work that you're doing is important for my riding and my community, particularly on our economic development potential, our might with electric vehicles and mineral extraction. The assembly plants in my community will not operate without materials to work with.

So I wanted to ask a little bit about the Ring of Fire. It's a matter that has been brought forward for the last number of decades. We hear a lot about it, but I'm wondering if you might have an update for us. I know how important it is. It's a generational critical minerals opportunity, and it's going to be a lifeline for the industry in my community. So I'm hoping you might be able to elaborate on your work to bring that project forward.

Hon. Greg Rickford: In my capacity as the Minister of Northern Development and certainly the other important ministry that complements the work we do, particularly, you mentioned, in critical minerals, is really a story about meaningful and real northern development. I mentioned in my opening remarks how I was hopeful that one day the north would not be thought of as just a place that needed development, as if we were behind. But there is no question, given our vast lands, that there's a lot of it that is in need of development and not just for the purposes of mining or, more pointedly, critical mineral extraction.

You can't do any of those activities unless you've got the foundational elements of key pieces of infrastructure in place. I mentioned earlier things like electrification or at least the corridors. Road access: I'm thinking of at least two mining operations in the very Far North whose durability over time has been impacted by a lack of road access to them. They were obviously attractive investments to proceed without a road because of, quantitatively, their exquisite—whether it's diamond and/or some other kind of base metal, and now, in the modern day, critical minerals—justified in developing it. I don't think that that's anything in the future that a government, federal or provincial, should be involved in.

And so the key is to have accessibility. And why not? Because many times we're talking about townships and small municipalities—well, let me say they're not small. I'm thinking of Greenstone municipality, the second-largest municipality in Ontario but the smallest in population, and other First Nations communities, particularly now, as we move to a new centre of gravity for mining activities in Greenstone and potentially farther north into the Ring of Fire. We want to get this right. You see, our responsibility—just like the Premier says, we create the essential elements, the important elements to foster and promote jobs. It's the businesses that create the jobs, so it's not going to be the government-of-Ontario mine site; it's going to be a company that has the confidence with their partners.

1530

Now, we're talking increasingly about First Nations communities who are full business partners, who are invested in the supply and service aspects of mining that play a critical role. Getting that right means making sure that those communities have electricity corridors, road corridors, particularly corridors that are built for modern broadband capacity, and taking care of the social, health and economic advantages that those communities can capitalize on. Then, you create the conditions for mining to occur.

I mentioned the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, but one of the key programs is the People and Talent Program, which has been highly beneficial and supportive of Indigenous internship programs that work on a variety of different aspects, not just pure mining activities but also the environmental aspects of this, being able to work in real time in real places with real companies in real communities who are invested in the macro dimensions, if you will, of mining operations.

So I think that this is a story much better thought about as a massive northern development initiative. The agreements that are fast becoming to characterize the critical minerals space are community development agreements that are focused on providing communities with road access in and out of their communities; that are leveraging their ability to buy into grocers to get a better quality of food, to participate in agriculture activities and daycare and the likes, as those communities pre-position themselves to not just be full partners in the business development aspects of mining—particularly in, for example, the Ring of Fire—but to mobilize a workforce that does that.

So what does that mean in real examples? Take, for example, the east-west tie. The east-west tie, of course, was an electrification corridor that mobilized close to 300 First Nations people. Thank goodness that I, as the then Minister of Energy, intervened on a board decision to revisit it and said no. This particular group, not just from a business perspective First Nations but from a human resource perspective First Nations, built that corridor, and now they're going to build other corridors. They have transferable skills, by the way, to work in the mining and forestry sectors. So our responsibility is to ensure that the region for development has all of the right things.

Take, for example, Frontier Lithium and the exciting play that they have in the far reaches of northwestern Ontario, in partnerships with First Nations communities. You've got to get a road built, man. You've got to build a bridge first, and that bridge is going to make sure that those communities are connected. That's what they're asking for. And then, things that can come with it, like Pikangikum—the Whitefeather Forest Initiative, designs on developing forest products from their mill, situated right in Pikangikum. Hopefully, a kiln or two will be in there in the not-too-distant future. Some 10,000 people will now have road access that they're all asking for. Oh, by the way, there will be a critical mineral mine established in the area as well.

Do you see the policy trajectory that I'm talking about, colleagues of all political stripes here today? This is exciting stuff. It's big-ticket stuff. And it involves thinking more than just about a mining operation whose footprint, as Dr. Forrest, the owner of Wyloo Metals, would say is but a small part of a bigger development opportunity for vast regions of northern Ontario that include municipalities big in size, small in population, and First Nations communities that are partners in existing mining operations, and every indication suggests in future ones as well. It's an exciting story.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bresee.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Five minutes.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I thank you again for your presentation today. It is exciting to hear all that's going on within the Ministry of Northern Development. As you've been speaking and answering some of the questions, I've taken note of the fact that you've mentioned work with the Ministry of Transportation and the roads networks that we are continu-

ing to expand, work with the Ministry of Economic Development, the Ministry of Infrastructure for the broadband, the Ministry of Energy for the electrical connections and all this. It really speaks to your efforts and the whole-of-government effort to bring that view to northern development and northern Ontario. I think of it in such contrast to our predecessor government, who literally said they were abandoning northern Ontario. So it is wonderful to see this co-operative effort across the board to continue that development from northern development to northern prosperity, as you put it.

Minister, my question actually, again, ties back to transportation; I am the parliamentary assistant to the minister of transport. As we're talking about roads, we talk about a huge network, and as you've mentioned quite clearly, there are a lot of areas where the roads simply don't go. We need to continue and work with—and again, I greatly appreciate your partnership with the Minister of Transportation towards expanding those roads.

But in the meantime, and I'll say in tangent to that, is our Winter Roads Program. These are absolutely essential, but, honestly, especially for those of us in southern Ontario, not all Ontarians are actually aware of the value that these roads hold for remote communities and our Indigenous communities. For most of us, highways and roads are easily accessible and provide a safe and reliable mode of transportation.

It ties into the marine strategy from the Ministry of Transportation as well. All of the modes of transportation need to work together.

Can you explain in more detail the province's work to support expanded and more reliable winter roads and why they're so important for us?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's a tough but fair question. We're talking about 3,200 kilometres of temporary road systems that link 32 First Nations and the town of Moosonee to the provincial highway network, which spans more than 10,000 kilometres. So that link is obviously important.

We understood that the Winter Roads Program as a stand-alone was simply not going to meet a couple of important emerging trends. First of all, the Winter Roads Program itself was primarily involved in maintenance activities for what were considered to be safe routes once the ice had frozen on a lake, or the condition of a road between, for example, a number of lakes.

But also, the condition of the culverts and some of the bridges needed attention, and that's why creating the additional stream of funding focused on specifically repair—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Greg Rickford: —and replacement of bridge and culverts became so significant. Somebody mentioned what they thought of as a small percentage. That's skimming off the top of the estimates, in a way, to suit the advantage of the question. The fact of the matter is, the bridge and culvert were pulled out and funds added to it significantly because they are parts of the winter road, but they're parts that are absolutely essential for the roads themselves to function—that is, in bridges and culverts. So

the addition of those kinds of resources has been the difference-maker.

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That said, the biggest difference now and moving forward will be the First Nations' call in the isolated communities to have road access, and that's a significantly different and bigger conversation.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you very much, Minister. If I have a few more seconds, a little bird has told me that tomorrow might be a special day, so I'll say happy birthday to you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

Now, we move to the third round of questioning. The turn will revert to the opposition, but I kindly ask you to keep decorum of the meeting and let the witnesses answer the questions as they may see fit. Thank you very much.

M. Guy Bourgouin: Monsieur le Ministre, je vais vous poser une question en français parce que je sais que votre français est assez bien.

C'est toujours drôle—ce n'est pas drôle, mais pour une raison quelconque, souvent on se pogne à pince-bec, moi et toi, pour des raisons que je ne comprends pas. Peut-être qu'on est deux de forts de caractère—peut-être que c'est une des raisons pourquoi.

Mais ceci dit, pour revenir aux biomasses, c'est de quoi que—vous savez, j'ai représenté l'industrie forestière pendant plusieurs années et que je demandais aux entrepreneurs, aux compagnies, qu'on devrait se diversifier. Parce que je voyais, dans l'Ouest, surtout dans le coin de Thunder Bay et tout ça, qu'il y avait beaucoup de « chippers » dans le bois, mais dans l'Est, dans ma région, à Kapuskasing, Hearst, tout ça, on en voyait, mais pas beaucoup. C'était très minime. Puis je suis allé à des rencontres qu'on a vues, sur la biomasse—puis on voit ce qu'ils font en Europe—qu'on utilise seulement 25 % de notre forêt quand on a les produits pour en faire tellement plus.

Puis vous m'avez confirmé un petit peu ce que je savais qui se passait chez nous, mais ceci dit, c'est un programme qui était—ça fait longtemps qu'il aurait dû être implémenté. Le gouvernement a annoncé de l'argent disponible pour ça et je pense que ça va venir aider l'industrie forestière, ce qui m'amène à ma question : est-ce que c'est de quoi que vous avez considéré pour les fermetures d'usines à différentes places—que de prendre ces usines-là, et peut-être qu'on n'est pas capable de les sauver, mais de diversifier dans d'autres choses, que c'est un produit qui est là, qu'on peut créer de l'emploi puis aider à l'énergie et tout ce qui vient avec ça? J'aimerais vous entendre sur ce point-là.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Merci pour la question. Je vais répondre en anglais.

But I can tell you that it's an important question you're asking. In fact, I was struck by it in Thunder Bay recently with the Minister of Energy and our newly minted Associate Minister of Forestry, having energy think about the importance of biomass. We were there, of course, with the full-throated support of Resolute Forest Products, or by-products in this case, making wood pellets that supply

and, in fact, are the livelihood—let’s face it. I don’t know if you’ve been out Atikokan way—

Interjection.

Hon. Greg Rickford: No, no—sorry?

Mr. Guy Bourgoïn: It used to be one of my mills that I represented.

Hon. Greg Rickford: Right, okay. So you’re very familiar with it. The whole town, arguably, depends on biomass. So it was, in fact, my ministry, working with the Ministries of Natural Resources and Forestry and Energy, that began the more serious conversation about the forest biomass program, the \$20-million program aimed at doing a couple of things. In fact, we can probably go back to your persistence around AV Terrace Bay. We’re actually looking at ways for sawmills affected by AV Terrace Bay’s announcement to use biomass production as short-term action measures to address sawmill chip backlog, which I know you’re hearing from a lot of them, as well as the future uses for chips and other biomass through that program. Of course, you’ll remember when I was the Minister of Energy, we were out in Hearst making an important announcement there as one of our key energy assets and the role that biomass plays in it.

So whether it’s the flexibility that includes it becoming an increasingly bigger player, if you will, in energy supply, but importantly, for those of us—and there are more than just the two of us here who know a heck of a lot about forestry here at this committee today—oh, the Associate Minister of Forestry was just calling me; I should put him on right now so he can talk about the forestry biomass program because it’s in his ministry. But anyway, I digress—that it can play to keep the forest sector sustainable and have the value-added benefit of being a legitimate micro-source of energy; that is to say, for industrial and commercial operations local to a community and/or a region but also prospectively as having potential to serve the grid as well. I hope that answered your question.

Mr. Guy Bourgoïn: Just one more question before I hand it off to my colleague here. We see a lot of mining. You talked about mining also; it’s key to our province, of course. We’re seeing a lot of small communities like the town I come from, Dubreuilville, with two huge gold mines and a lot of employees, yet this community is really struggling. Has your ministry ever looked at helping these communities to—I understand there’s a shortage of employees, which does not help the process, but I’m thinking of Canada Nickel, who says, “No, we’re not going to build these big camps.” They can stay communities; they can stay that. When you see these like in Dubreuilville and Chapleau and you have these huge camps, and yet you have these communities that are struggling because they have brand new schools and arenas that are empty, when we could, as a province, help the municipality. The mine can be part of the deal and the government, like we did back then with Manitouwadge. So we’re not reinventing the wheel. Is that something that you’ve considered, helping these communities to thrive?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Yes, it’s a great question. It’s one of the key features of the Community Enhancement Program. It might not be obvious to others but it’s not always the case. You mentioned a new arena and a new school. Let’s face it, there are way more older schools and older arenas and other assets in communities that have put mining and/or forestry—but particularly mining in Dubreuilville is a great example of a couple of interesting things. First of all, the pace of mining, the construction of those sites and then the operations, has outpaced the ability of any municipality to stay at that rate. The modern workforce, especially in a post-COVID world, has meant that, some of it out of necessity but some of it out of reality, the workforce for a lot of these operations—it happened out in Alberta; it’s happening to a certain extent here in northern Ontario, where people want to stay in their homes in their homes, if they live in St. John’s, Newfoundland, and come in to do their work. So some of those camps were built out for that.

The opportunity, though, is that some of those families would ultimately want to live and settle in those towns. I’m thinking of Greenstone, in the same situation that you’re talking about. So we would like to attract them, and also a local workforce that has an expectation that they wouldn’t be living in an ATCO trailer.

So, on all fronts, especially around the work that the Ministry of Northern Development does, either through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund or others, it ensures that those communities have the kind of infrastructure for that municipality to actually support and sustain those kinds of big operations. It’s complex. We haven’t addressed every opportunity that’s there yet, but we’re chipping away at it so that we can ensure that the nearly 1,000 people who live on-site in a given camp, as many of them as possible would be able to live in places like Dubreuilville and Greenstone.

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The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Mamakwa.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch, Chair. I was listening to this podcast a few years ago, and they were talking about mining. They were talking about the mining lands administration system. I remember listening to this podcast, and they staked—they were doing the process. It took them about 30 minutes to do, and it cost 50 bucks to do a claim. They didn’t mention any addresses or whatever, but they did some staking at your house, they mentioned. You were Minister of Mines at that time. So there’s a mining stake at your place. At some point, you will have to do the free, prior, informed consent process. I think that’s the way the system works.

I know we continue to see that you fast-track the mining. I think that’s the issue that First Nations are faced with. I think, again, free, prior, informed consent is important. I come from a very—brought up on the land, where you were raised there, where you learned the history and identity and the teachings and the languages, and it’s so important. I think I would caution you that the mining

development is outpacing the municipalities, as you mentioned with his question.

But I want to go back to this: The estimates suggest that the government spent \$6 million to assist building the winter roads in the Far North in 2023-24. It's been about the same throughout the years; there's been very minimal increase in those. I don't know where that number was grabbed from. I don't know how they determined those amounts. I am told they just grabbed it out of the air and they just—"Here's your money."

Hon. Greg Rickford: I think you're talking about previous governments, but anyway.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Yes, but it's been the same like that. You guys have been in government for almost six years, and it's been the same. There's been no increase. I just said 0.06%.

My question is, what is the estimated allocation for 2024-25 for the winter roads?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Well, first of all, it's an interesting use of a percentage. I would respectfully submit that \$5 million for a bridge and culvert stream has two important effects on the manipulation of numbers. First of all—

Interjection.

Hon. Greg Rickford: —that \$5 million is in addition to the \$6 million, right? We can agree on that, right? Like, that's almost a doubling of it when you consider that that stream is dedicated exclusively to bridges and culverts.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: No, I don't think so. No.

Hon. Greg Rickford: So that has freed up more resources for that \$6-million figure to spend time and money on the state of those roads. There is no question that the quality of the winter roads, which include the bridges and culverts, has deteriorated over time.

But also, the impacts of a permafrost being not so "perma" and the impacts of climate change have certainly put the government in a position to realize that it isn't just about road surface; it's about the quality of the infrastructure that's there to keep those roads contiguous. That involves bridge and/or culvert repairs, replacements and/or, in some instances, new ones. So that's what our government has an eye towards. Because we've been able to put additional resources dedicated strictly for bridges and culverts, it's optimized the amount of money dedicated to winter roads' surface quality while they're actually operating.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Yes, thank you—

Hon. Greg Rickford: And that grows at a predictable amount. It's not just grabbed from the sky, as you'd suggest.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: It is, actually, because we could find no formula on how they determine those amounts. Say, for example, Kingfisher Lake gets \$291,000 for winter roads. That hasn't increased in years, and that doesn't include the \$5 million that you talk about. I think that's the issue, that we're finding that there's no increase. We need the increase.

My question goes back to, is there going to be an increase? Is there an estimated allocation for this upcoming winter? Because again, \$5 million is—people are calling it inadequate. That's just peanuts. It's not even a crossing. That's their definition of that \$5 million that you talk about. That's an increase but not for every community that's funded through the list of the winter road funding. I think what they're asking for is more of an increase on winter roads.

That's what I'm asking: Is there going to be an increase or is there not? That's my question.

Hon. Greg Rickford: The current investment projected for the Winter Roads Program base funding for 2024-25, which is the estimate window we're talking in, is \$6 million, and then the \$5 million in addition to that for the bridge and culvert stream. So that gets us through till the spring.

But I can tell you that in a number of different instances, we have recognized, for one reason or another, the importance of some kind of emergency funding being available for an unanticipated event specific to a culvert or to a section of road that, if repaired or upgraded, is the difference between the community being accessible or not accessible for a given set of circumstances.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: How much time do I have?

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

Hon. Greg Rickford: Perfect time for an NOHFC question.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Okay. How many municipalities or organizations or First Nations in Kiiwetinoong get NOHFC, and what's the total?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Mr. Chair, I want more than two minutes to answer this question because I'm really excited to answer it.

What I can tell you is this: We were averaging, as the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, less than 1% of the annual \$100 million going to First Nations communities, and there were structural reasons why they couldn't do it, whether it was a tax base, a priority for their infrastructure. Most of the communities I'm talking about have populations of under 1,500 people; in that case, we would support 90% of those.

I'll get the project list for Kiiwetinoong after this meeting because I'm so excited about it. All I want to do is for you to tell your communities two things: that you support these projects, because we've gone from 1% in some business quarters to 19% for First Nations communities and businesses—most notably, in the last quarter, several projects to the tune of a couple of million dollars.

I promise you, if you come with me and make those announcements, I won't tell people that you voted against them but rather that you support the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund in its entirety and that you stand shoulder to shoulder with this government for the important work we're doing, and that is significantly increasing the opportunity for First Nations communities to apply to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund successfully. In your riding alone, that has amounted to 24 projects or \$3.3

million from April 1, 2023, to March 31, 2024. In this fiscal cycle, it's even going to be bigger. I know I can count on you to support that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Thank you.

I wish you could answer our questions the same way you answered our questions before but thank you. I don't have any more questions. Meegwetch.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister. The time is up. This concludes the committee's consideration of estimates of the Ministry of Northern Development.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote? You're ready.

Shall vote 2201, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Shall vote 2202, northern development program, carry? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Shall the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Development carry? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Development to the House? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Thank you, members. The committee is now adjourned until Monday, October 7, at 2 p.m.

The committee adjourned at 1601.

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