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**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

IN-34

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

IN-34

**Standing Committee
on the Interior**

**Comité permanent
des affaires intérieures**

Estimates

Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs

Budget des dépenses

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

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Tuesday 8 October 2024

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43^e législature

Mardi 8 octobre 2024

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE
ON THE INTERIOR**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES**

Tuesday 8 October 2024

Mardi 8 octobre 2024

The committee met at 1002 in committee room 1.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD
AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good morning. The Standing Committee on the Interior will now come to order. The committee is about to begin consideration of the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs for a total of two hours.

In the past, members have asked questions about the delivery of similar programs in previous fiscal years, about the policy framework that supports a ministry approach to a problem or service delivery, or about the competence of a ministry to spend the money wisely and efficiently. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make the questions relevant to the estimates under consideration.

The ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has made arrangements to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly. If you wish, you may, at the end of your appearance, verify the questions and issues being tracked by the research officer.

Are there any questions from the members of the committee before we begin?

Mr. John Yakabuski: Not here, sir.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): None. Okay. That's a good sign.

I am now required to call vote 101, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from both the Minister of Rural Affairs and the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness. The floor is yours, Ministers.

Hon. Rob Flack: Good morning, everyone. I am pleased to be with you today to speak about all things agriculture and food in Ontario.

I want to specifically recognize PA Jordan, who is working with our ministry and got in very early this morning and met the Toronto traffic and did well.

I'm pleased to speak about the work my ministry has been doing to strengthen our nearly \$51-billion agri-food sector and to support the over 871,000 men and women it employs across the province. Agriculture and food touch

every corner of this province and every dinner table. The fundamental underlying focus of our ministry is to maintain one of the safest and value-added food supply chains in the world.

With that said, I am pleased to share some exciting stats with the committee. As mentioned, agri-food now employs over 871,000 people—that's one in nine jobs in this province—up almost 30,000 people since 2018. It generates almost \$51 billion in GDP annually, up almost \$3 billion since 2018. In 2023, farm food and beverage manufacturing represented almost 18% of Ontario's goods-producing GDP. We are bigger than tech, bigger than steel and bigger than auto. Most people don't realize the breadth and scope of this industry. We exported \$26.2 billion in agri-food products last year, up 65% since 2018.

Recent trade missions to Japan, Vietnam and Mexico led to stronger ties with hundreds of businesses, and we look forward to more in the months and years ahead. More missions and opportunities for Ontario-grown products to reach new markets, helping create the environment for our farmers and our food processors to forge new market opportunities, is a key priority of my ministry.

Ontario ranks second in output per acre compared to the largest US states, behind only California, and we're ranked first in Canada in output per acre and exports.

We have worked with our federal partners to secure \$569 million to flow through our agri-food sector by 2028 through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, or SCAP. Some 1,500 Ontario agribusinesses have already benefited from these dollars. I am confident our bold, 10-year Grow Ontario Strategy will secure continued on-farm productivity growth, new exports and more innovation.

As a government, we have not raised a single tax since we were elected in 2018. In fact, we have lowered taxes and WSIB premiums, boosted our risk management program, and cut red tape for farmers and food processors. As a result, significant investments have poured into Ontario and into this sector.

For example, Mississauga's First Choice Beverage will be investing almost \$50 million in existing facilities, creating 20 new jobs and preserving 91 existing jobs. In Dryden, AgriTech North received half a million dollars through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund to expand production, with a brand new, state-of-the-art greenhouse. And Tillsonburg Custom Foods is making a \$35-million investment to create 70 new good-paying jobs in its Trenton

and St. Marys facilities. We are providing \$5 million to support this initiative through our Regional Development Program.

Our government will continue to create the conditions for our agri-food sector to reach its full potential, to help rebuild Ontario's \$1-trillion economy.

I won't take time to brag about the investments in my own riding, but Maple Leaf Foods, Dr. Oetker, Aspire foods—we are becoming a food powerhouse in southwestern Ontario.

Our ministry has made significant progress in achieving the goals of our Grow Ontario strategy launched in 2022 by Minister Thompson. It includes the goals of increasing the production and consumption of Ontario-grown food by 30% by 2032 and growing exports by 8% annually. One important component of the strategy was a \$25-million investment to our strategic agri-food processing fund to enhance and modernize food processing capacity. This includes supporting investments from companies like Kellogg's in Belleville, Parkhill Meats in Middlesex county and a new investment in London, Ontario, Andriani foods, a gluten-free pasta maker.

This strategy also has a goal to build our world-class research infrastructure. Back in November, our government introduced the modernized agriculture research and innovation act, or ARIO Act. It passed the House unanimously, and we should all be proud of that. Thanks to the good work of Minister Thompson and now-Minister Trevor Jones for making that possible—a great deed indeed. They took the time to consult and listen to industry needs to modernize this piece of legislation and truly got it right. So much potential exists with this agency as we grow our agri-business footprint.

These reforms will strengthen the role of ARIO in supporting the future of agri-food research, innovation and, yes, commercialization in Ontario. We are going to continue intensifying our focus on promoting the latest agri-tech and agri-food research to ensure our farmers can compete not only in North America, but globally.

Now let me touch upon SCAP. During the last round of negotiations, we worked closely with our counterparts from other provinces and territories to secure a 25% increase to overall agreement funding from the previous deal which expired last year. The \$569 million I mentioned has already supported a huge host of programs, including \$56 million for a resilient agricultural landscape program for long-term farm sustainability, \$12 million for our Grow Ontario Market Initiative to help agri-businesses reach new markets, and \$13 million for our Meat Processors Capacity Improvement Initiative, and so, so much more, with many new initiatives set to be launched.

1010

Let's talk about people and skills, the most important resource and asset we have in Ontario. For every graduate from the University of Guelph, there are four jobs waiting for them, waiting to be filled. We are investing to help connect more people to agri-food careers, and we know that northern and rural communities experience the greatest challenges in accessing veterinary services. Therefore, our

government has launched the Veterinary Incentive Program. This program provides grants of up to \$50,000 to new vet graduates to practise in these under-served communities.

For our international agricultural workers, we launched our virtual welcome centre in 2023, a web page with resources in different languages to provide support to workers to better adapt to life here. Just two weeks ago, we invested \$1.5 million over four years to create our international agri-food workers welcoming communities initiative to attract and retain more workers by supporting them with translation supports, transportation services, and funding for cultural activities. IAWs are an integral part of our agri-food success, and we depend on their significant contributions to build our robust and growing agri-food sector.

From the farm gate to the consumer's plate, Ontario agriculture has so much more promise and potential, and I look forward to working with all stakeholders to build it and grow it. That is why Premier Ford added agri-business to the name of our ministry—because the government understands that agri-food in Ontario is such a key economic driver.

I've had a very rewarding career in agri-food, and I look forward to using my experience and passion for this industry, along with PA Jordan's, to work closely with all stakeholders as we strengthen and build all things agriculture and food in Ontario.

Thank you, Chair. I'll now pass it over to Minister Thompson, who will speak about our supports for rural Ontario.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I'd like to thank everyone for the opportunity to listen to where we're going with this brand new ministry, a stand-alone ministry dedicated to rural affairs and rural economic development. This is a government that has listened and understands that rural Ontario matters, and we're walking our talk in that regard.

Joining me today—I'd like to welcome Deputy Minister Martha Greenberg, ADM Randy Jackiw, and director Scott Duff, who have worked with me in standing up this ministry.

Rural Ontario has always been an important piece of our fabric throughout our province, and to our government. Over 80% of the province is classified as mostly rural communities, and we're growing. Some 17% of the population in 2021, according to census Canada, StatsCan, were living in rural Ontario; fast-forward to 2024, and when you listen to AMO and organizations like that, they're suggesting, respectfully, that that population is growing to upwards of 25%. This is a period of transformation, carving out a new profile across diverse communities with new people moving in, businesses opening, opportunities developing. All the while, our existing manufacturing base and businesses are continuing to grow as well.

I'd be remiss if I didn't give a shout-out to a couple of new initiatives, like Stellantis in southwestern Ontario. Let's take a look at the incredible rural economic development in terms of a ripple effect of the expansion of nuclear

power at Bruce Power specifically. And then, of course, there's business like Blommer, a chocolate factory in Campbellford that is expanding as well. The list goes on and on.

I want to share with you that we recognize that while challenges exist, the future looks extremely bright, and we are here as a government to ensure that all of our communities are ready to seize emerging opportunities.

The other thing I want to share with you is that in 2022, it was noted that the GDP generated from businesses, manufacturing et al. represented \$99.7 billion in GDP. That's an important part of our overall provincial prosperity.

Our government—specifically, my Ministry of Rural Affairs—is dedicated to a strong and continued, dynamic rural community, if you will, throughout this province. Each rural community has its unique strengths and challenges, and we're poised to work with every one to understand what those challenges are, what the opportunities are, and how our communities and small towns want to be part of that economic opportunity and horizon that lies ahead of us.

Ontario is committed to expanding rural economic opportunities, creating and retaining jobs, and supporting economic growth in both rural and Indigenous communities right across this province. That is why we are listening to better understand their needs and to explore how government can better work with them.

At ROMA, I was honoured to announce our government's intention to deliver a rural economic development strategy. This strategy is going to focus on the themes that emerge. We've been across the province already with our consultations, and there are three key ones that continue to percolate to the top, if you will: business development, workforce, and strong rural economies.

Through our consultations, we are demonstrating that everyone's voice matters. Since January of this year, in collaboration with our officials, our government has led 10 consultations, in addition to having a presence at ROMA and AMO. In February of this year, I held a virtual Rural Economic Development Summit with approximately 250 participants. That summit included speakers in breakout sessions where participants provided input on how to attract and retain workers, how to grow businesses and revitalize downtowns, and how to leverage local strengths for economic growth.

Just last month alone, along with my parliamentary assistant, Steve Pinsonneault, the Ministry of Rural Affairs held five round tables in Clifford; Vineland Station; Wallaceburg; Guelph, including the school of rural development; as well as a virtual round table with class 20 of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program. Earlier in the year, we also held round tables in Smiths Falls, Casselman, Douro-Dummer, Kingsville and Thunder Bay. Of course, we are continuing to make sure that everyone's voice is heard, and we're going to continue our round tables across this province.

The ministry has an online consultation as well, and a web page that we encourage everyone to visit and submit

their ideas to. I believe that we have had over 240 submissions on that site alone.

These ongoing consultations are asking several key questions, with the goal of receiving input that will help inform the strategy. Questions include: What is the most pressing economic obstacle or opportunity in your community or across rural Ontario? How can communities and government work better together to improve local economies or better support local businesses? And how can the province help you take advantage of these opportunities?

To date, in addition to the input from the numerous round tables, as I mentioned, we've had over 240 responses, and that includes feedback from ROMA participants. We also have additional input from over 250 individuals and organizations that have been engaged since we hosted the rural summit earlier this year.

Supporting the renewal and economic growth of our rural opportunities is part of our government's plan to create jobs, build opportunity and boost prosperity in every region of Ontario. Our government is not working in silos in this regard; we are working across ministries to achieve that. The future is promising, as I've mentioned before, for rural and Indigenous communities, especially when we work together.

I'd be remiss if I didn't touch on the Rural Economic Development Program, otherwise known as RED. It provides cost-share funding to rural municipalities, Indigenous communities and not-for-profit entities. This funding supports activities that create strong rural communities and promotes economic development opportunities across the province. The RED Program better positions rural communities to attract, retain and see investment that enhances economic growth. The funding helps build community capacity as well to support economic development for continued growth and prosperity.

1020

This year, we've committed \$5.7 million to rural Ontario through this program, and this is based off the last RED Program intake. In total, we're pleased this fall that that \$5.7 million is enabling 85 rural economic development projects to be realized. These strategic investments through the RED Program help diversify and grow local economies, making economic growth more inclusive, so ultimately rural Ontario can continue to share in the overall economic prosperity of the province. Some incredible recent examples include Belleville's downtown district business improvement association; they received over \$57,000 to launch a new program that will support the business community. The corporation of Prince Edward county is also receiving \$65,000 through the RED Program for their Workforce Development Training for Community Benefit. The Nuclear Innovation Institute has received funding from the RED Program to rehabilitate buildings that were just not in use, and that's good news from a rural perspective as well. The list goes on and on, but trust that this funding will support the development of community benefits—a framework specifically to address the need for a skilled local workforce. We also recognize

we need to look ahead to provide employment opportunities in the regions.

Overall, since 2019, the RED Program has invested more than \$27.4 million in cost-shared funding, enabling 473 projects, including projects like in Huron county delivering information to farmers on transition and succession planning—very important. The Aboriginal Labour Force Development Circle in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory was modified. They modified their current facilities to run a training program on building modular homes for local First Nation communities. It's all good news.

One other example I'd like to share is the Haliburton County Development Corp., which established a business hub that brings together business and community economic development services to foster collaboration and provide events in training.

We need to take a look at true positive economic development in our small towns and across rural Ontario, but we also recognize the importance of broadband. Our commitment is seeing everyone receive broadband through to the end of 2025, and Minister Surma is doing an amazing job. We finalized agreements worth approximately \$2.5 billion for 270 projects to enable high-speed Internet access and improve cellular connectivity across the province.

Just in September, we were in Minto with the member from Perth–Wellington to announce an agreement of \$34 million to bring reliable high-speed Internet access to more than 3,000 homes and businesses. I'd like to give a shoutout to SWIFT; they're great partners in achieving this very thing.

Over 99,000 homes and businesses have been connected to high-speed Internet to date, and about 450,000 additional premises will be connected, as I mentioned, by the end of 2025. We hear time and again the importance of connectivity, so our government is delivering.

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

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Ladies and gentlemen, I'm very proud of the work that we've done. There's more to do, whether it's bringing new economic investments, such as providing \$9.2 million to support economic development in Indigenous communities; funding critical infrastructure through programs like the housing-enabling water systems and waste water infrastructure fund; or providing support to northern workers impacted by layoffs with the services and training they need to find new jobs. We will continue to fight and support all of Ontario.

Of course, through my ministry in particular, we're going to work across government to demonstrate that we continue to listen. The voices of rural Ontario and northern Ontario matter, and we'll always work together to seek new ways to continue to grow, because when rural Ontario is succeeding, ladies and gentlemen, the rest of Ontario benefits as well.

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

We will now begin questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 10 minutes for the independent member of the

committee, and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee for the remainder of the allotted time. As always, please wait to be recognized by myself before speaking. All questions and comments will need to go through the Chair.

Additionally, as a general reminder to members on points of order, I would like to remind the committee that a point of order should be used to draw the Chair's attention to any departure from the rules or practices of the House, or to raise concerns about unparliamentary language.

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

I will start the questioning with the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to start off by congratulating you both on your ministries and thanking you both for your work, and thanking all the staff of both ministries. Our job is to hold the government to account, but I think, on agriculture and rural affairs, we have agreed more often than we have disagreed. I think that's a testament to how near and dear we all hold the backbone of our economy, and that we all come from rural Ontario and we understand rural Ontario.

I would like to first wish everyone a happy Agriculture Week. The week before Thanksgiving is Agriculture Week. I would like to also take a minute of our time, which I would have done in the Legislature, had the government not chosen to shut it till October 21, and recognize someone you know, Minister Flack, who passed, who was a testament to agriculture: Bruce Leis, who I bought feed from, who worked for you when you worked with Masterfeeds. Someone like Bruce, although we did not share political views—I think he was much closer to your political views than mine, but it's people like Bruce who are the basis of the agri-food industry in this province.

With that, I would like to switch to some of the issues of the day. I think we can all agree that the foundational building block of our agricultural agri-business, agri-food sector is farmland. I believe, Minister, you said that we are second in output per acre in North America only to California. That's a great stat. I think we can all agree that every acre is important.

Mr. Cuzzetto said that people complain when we build on brownfields and people complain when we build on farmland. You can't grow on brownfields; let's make that point.

The issue of the day is the land in Wilmot, and I don't want to go deep into that, really. I have a couple of specific questions, though. Did the Ministry of Agriculture do an agricultural impact assessment on those parcels of land before the province or while the province was embarking on the process of trying to assemble it?

Hon. Rob Flack: First of all, thanks for recognizing Bruce Leis, a great friend, a great colleague and, most importantly, a champion for northern Ontario. He was a character, to say the least, but a great friend and going to

be missed. As I always said to Bruce—we used to tease each other about a lot of different things, but his passion was worn on his sleeve, and you never had to guess what he was thinking, never for a second.

With regard to agricultural impact assessments, our ministry does not do them; third parties do them. With respect to anything related to Wilmot, I hope you understand that that is also under the purview of the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, working with the region. It's a ground game there. The region does their work to assemble the land. We support them in the purchase of the land. So anything with respect to agricultural impact assessments can be deferred to that ministry.

Mr. John Vanthof: Minister Thompson said that, particularly, this government does not work in silos; the ministries work together. So what I'm hearing is that the Ministry of Agriculture had nothing to do with the process regarding whether or not keeping that land in agriculture is important or not.

Hon. Rob Flack: Again, the region runs the ground game. They assemble the land. We're looking at billions of dollars of investments in this province. We're a growing province, as you know. Since you and I were in high school, the province has doubled in size, basically—and they're living everywhere. I grew up in a little town called Streetsville, as you know; it was 6,000 people. It's now part of Mississauga. The farm I used to drive my bike to and milk cows and bale hay and do regular farm chores is now covered in housing, right along the Credit River.

1030

That being said, it's a balance, isn't it? We need to balance between a growing economy, bringing in billions of investments like we've never seen in the history of Ontario, and everyone needs a job to be able to afford food, to be able to afford a home. I think this government has proven that we're doing a good job of that—again, it's with a balance, to make sure we protect our best farmland where possible.

Mr. John Vanthof: I don't disagree with the balance, but part of the balance is actually looking at the importance. What I have heard so far is that no one actually, in assembling this project or future projects—and let's be clear: A lot of the financing didn't come from the region. So we're talking about balance, but if you're going to talk about balance, you're actually going to have to look at both sides, and I didn't hear this. Just because we built on farmland before—that isn't the balance that I'm hearing.

So—and I'm going to leave it at this one—has an impact assessment, at any time, been carried out, or will it be carried out, on class 1 farmland that we are losing for other uses? We'll use Wilmot as an example. You just said, Minister, that there's a balance. Well, to decide what the balance is and if the government is balanced or not, you actually have to conduct some kind of assessment. So if such an assessment has been conducted by any ministry regarding the land in Wilmot, could you please produce it?

Hon. Rob Flack: Again—and we'll use the word “balance”—in this whole process, the ground game was run by the region of Waterloo. They put their hand up.

They said, “We have lost billions of dollars in investment over the years.” They've lost, I think their estimate is, 14,000 jobs because it went to other areas, other parts of North America, the United States, to build these infrastructure projects. So Wilmot put their hand up, and what we say is, “You run the ground game. You know your area better than we do. You know your municipalities better than we do.” Think if the province came in and said, “Here's the land we're going to choose. Here's what we've said to do.” There'd be a hue and outcry. So we've said to the region, “Please run the ground game. You assemble the land. We'll help fund the land when you assemble it.” They know their area best, so they put their hand up. This is what they wanted to do.

Again, I would refer you to Minister Fedeli's statements when he was here, I think a week or two ago, and refer you to the comments with respect to the process at Wilmot.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you for that answer.

Both ministers—I respect you both. You both have farms. You both have agricultural legacies which your families are proud of.

We have all bought and sold land, but what the government is doing here is a bit different.

I have bought and sold farms. Just a few years ago, I sold the dairy farm that I built up over 25 years, but there's a piece of land across the road from that dairy farm I will never sell, because I watched my father die on that piece of land. Under the Wilmot process, you're saying that if that was my farm—“Either you sell it or the government is going to expropriate it.” You want to talk about a hue and outcry? There's a difference here between willingly buying and selling or you are forced to sell. And I get expropriation for public structures, but expropriation for basically—I get the economics for an industrial park or for a big industrial centre. Willingly sold or forced to sell are two different things. You want to talk about hue and outcry; if my farm was there and the land where I watched my father die, if you told me that for economic purposes—“You know what? You just go stand in the corner.” I honestly can't believe that is okay. I don't know how else to make this argument. You can say, “Well, that's not exactly how it worked,” but we've talked to those people, and this is a precedent across the province. You talk about balance. Owning a farm is a pretty personal thing. We've all sold farms and we've all bought farms, but I've never been forced off mine. You want to talk about a hue and outcry—and because maybe it's only one or two people. But I can't believe that the government is basically condoning and supporting this.

Hon. Rob Flack: I would just say a couple of things to reply to your statement. Number one, this whole concern really started at the region. The whole issue started when the region threatened expropriation—the province didn't—at the onset of the whole land assembly process. We have never approved expropriation; we were never consulted on expropriation, and the same remains today. The Premier made it clear last week at the plowing match that we just want to make sure that we treat the farmers

fairly. We all know at some point these deals come to our table.

I live in Elgin–Middlesex–London. We just did Volkswagen—I believe you folks supported that initiative, if I’m not mistaken—and guess what? Not one ounce of land was expropriated. It was done in a fair, equitable, negotiating fashion, and we’ve got 3,000 new jobs coming to our region, 30,000 tertiary jobs on a wonderful situation.

Yes, you and I both agree; we want to preserve as much of our best land as possible, absolutely. But at the same time, never, never once have we said we were expropriating. Again, we never approved expropriation, from the beginning. We were never consulted on expropriation. So the game—

Mr. John Vanthof: As the upper body of government, did you ever say that expropriation by the region—that you would not consider the deal if the region expropriated?

Hon. Rob Flack: Can you repeat the question, please?

Mr. John Vanthof: At any time, did the Premier or the government tell the region that you would not support this initiative if land was expropriated?

Hon. Rob Flack: I would refer you to Minister Fedeli, because we were not part of those discussions—Minister Fedeli and the region of Waterloo and the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade.

Again, I want to repeat: The region runs the ground game. We were not consulted about this. We were not asked—

Mr. John Vanthof: But you are a level of government above the region.

Hon. Rob Flack: We are not putting the land assembly together. We are funding the purchase of the land. I think we all understand—

Mr. John Vanthof: But those who fund also dictate the rules.

Interjection.

Mr. John Vanthof: Come on, let’s be serious. If you’re putting up the funding, you’re dictating the—anyone in any kind of business knows this. So you can point at another level, you can point at another level, but he or she who funds the process dictates the rules. If the funding partner said, “No expropriation. We get this. We want you to create jobs, but we do not condone nor will we support expropriation,” there would be no expropriation. This same argument can be used anywhere across the province—“No, it’s not us. It’s them.” This sets a terrible, terrible, terrible precedent.

Hon. Rob Flack: I would refer you to Volkswagen and St. Thomas in Elgin county. Never once was expropriation talked about.

Mr. John Vanthof: I agree.

Hon. Rob Flack: Number two, we never approved expropriation. We were never consulted on expropriation. Again, for specifics, I would refer you to the minister—

Mr. John Vanthof: And you never shut it down either.

I’d like to switch gears—totally different subject, I think one that we will agree on. I think we agree on a lot of things, actually.

Hon. Rob Flack: We do.

Mr. John Vanthof: Agriculture is a powerhouse; I think everyone in this room agrees on this. There are many sectors in agriculture, and agriculture markets go up and down, and we are on the cusp of a downward trend on the grains side. I think—

Hon. Rob Flack: On the what side?

1040

Mr. John Vanthof: On cash crop and grains. We’re on the cusp of a downward—John Deere is laying off people; Case IH is laying off people. This is not going to be a surprise, when major equipment companies see that people are buying less. We all remember the last time—if it gets as bad as it did—when crop prices went down, and the problems that farmers faced.

We all know that when farmers face economic hardship—it’s not just farmers, right? One thing farmers are really good at is—they usually don’t invest their money in the Cayman Islands; it goes throughout the community. We all agree on that.

Hon. Rob Flack: I agree.

Mr. John Vanthof: We have a pretty good system in Ontario—the risk management system. We’ve been pushing for an increase in risk management funding for a long time. I don’t see an increase in the estimates. I understand that. But are you considering putting forward a proposal to cabinet to increase funding for risk management, knowing that the grains sector is about—hopefully it doesn’t. Let’s be really frank with each other. They’ve gone through a few really good years. Because of Ukraine, because of COVID, prices have been unprecedented; costs have been unprecedented too. The price of everything has gone through the roof. But now the price of commodities is falling back to where it was before, in many cases—we haven’t hit it yet because those crops are coming off; they’re going into the bins now, but we could hit it, and we know this, and I’m sure you know it too.

So will you consider an increase to the Risk Management Program to—hopefully it doesn’t happen. If prices come back up, you won’t need the money, but if prices don’t, there’s going to be a lot of anguish in the country, in rural Ontario. Will you consider it?

Hon. Rob Flack: Thank you for the question.

You and I are kind of the same generation; through our careers, we’ve seen commodity prices go up and down. I always say, if you’re going to get a job in agribusiness, it’s like a roller coaster—strap on, because you know there are going to be ups and downs. When you’re at the high, never get too excited. When you’re at the low, you know it’s going to come back.

That being said—and I think you know this—in Canada, we have a suite of business risk management tools that we work with the federal government on, through SCAP. We also have a unique program called risk management in Ontario, much like ASRA in Quebec, but it’s unique in Canada. It’s a great program.

I think you also know that, in 2020—I believe, Minister—we increased the funding for the Risk Management Program from \$100 million to \$150 million, and it has

worked. And I believe I'm right; in 2021, under your leadership, we enhanced each commodity for holdover or rollover so they could—and I believe grain took advantage of that last year in a big way. It worked. It shows that it works. But not only is it a risk insurance tool; it also helps us remain competitive, especially, I might add, in the grain and oilseed sector—because, with that, we have to compete with the United States as well.

So, to answer your question, we are constantly looking at the entire suite of risk management tools that we have in the province, and we meet with our stakeholders. I've met, I think, with every major stakeholder thus far—

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

Hon. Rob Flack: —and we're talking at all times about the opportunity we can to increase it, especially with grain and oilseed in the province. So we are constantly in dialogue and looking at all opportunities to grow—

Mr. John Vanthof: I agree with everything you said. It's a great program.

I also had a meeting on the back of the grain farmers' pickup truck at the IPM, with the whole grain farmers board, and when I asked them, "What's the first thing you want me to ask the minister?"—risk management was the first thing.

Hon. Rob Flack: Oh, I've heard it.

Mr. John Vanthof: So you have our support in trying to get that—

Hon. Rob Flack: But it's also for hogs, for beef, for veal.

Mr. John Vanthof: I get it. But right now, beef is still—

Hon. Rob Flack: Beef's pretty good.

Mr. John Vanthof: Beef is up here, right? But we can predict that something is going to happen.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We'll move now to the government side. MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: I want to thank both ministers for the opening remarks. I think one of the things that we appreciate in rural Ontario is that this new structure really speaks to this government's focus on both agriculture and our rural communities—having a Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness and a Minister of Rural Affairs. I think that's a message that comes with that structural change.

Minister Flack, you've repeatedly mentioned the importance of ensuring that our agri-food sector reaches its full potential, and you've spoken to the over \$50 billion in our GDP, so that kind of says a lot. In my riding, Lanark county is known as the maple syrup capital of Canada, because it is—that's a way we very affectionately refer to it. The investments in the small maple syrup producers that were made were really a boost, and those small businesses grow as a result of that. So thank you for that, from Lanark county.

I also want to thank Minister Flack for travelling down to Henrydale Farms and making the announcement of the beef feeder program—another boost to the industry and very much appreciated within my riding, and across Ontario, I'm sure.

Our rural communities are very engaged, and Minister Thompson, you know this; you've conducted two round tables in my riding, and they were, all across the whole sector of agriculture, food, agribusiness and rural issues, very well attended. So thank you for doing that.

My question is to Minister Flack. How do we attract more investments, more jobs, more growth to the sector, and what's our competitive advantage? How do we create a competitive advantage and hang on to that competitive advantage?

Hon. Rob Flack: Thank you, PA Jordan, for the question and for all the good work you're doing in our ministry—ministries, really. When you take a look at agriculture and rural affairs—while we're separate ministries, we still have to ham-and-egg it together to make sure that our stakeholders are well represented, and you're doing a great job.

First, I'll talk about maple syrup. I was in your riding, and I brought home some maple syrup. It's amazing when you look at the production you can produce in your riding; it is truly the maple syrup capital of Canada. I was talking to some of your maple syrup producers, and they were explaining how, in the Ottawa Valley—MPP Yakabuski will acknowledge that I've got a bushlot and he was explaining how, with good south-facing geography, I can line up my spigots and start my own little process; not that I'm ever going to be there to do it, but I'll get Scott Schoenfeldt or somebody to do it. I think it would be a lot of fun. In a way, we're part of that region as well, growing good hardwood maple trees.

So what competitive advantage do we have to help us achieve the goals in agriculture, food and agribusiness? Well, I'll reverse my answer a little bit; I'll put it this way: We are blessed because we live in Ontario and we really live what I call—I didn't coin this phrase; it was Doug Kaufman from Oxford county, who told me 40 years ago, "We live in a virtual Garden of Eden in Ontario." We have the land. We have the Great Lakes environment throughout the province to grow 200 crops and commodities. We also have the labour force. We have the market to consume the food. We have the transportation highways and networks to get the food to people so they can get it to eat. We have a processing sector that is second to none in North America. So, really, when you ask about what we need to do—we need to keep doing what we're doing but even do it better.

I'm a great believer that government does a great job when it gets out of the way of business. What we need to do is create the environment for these businesses and our farmers to succeed, supporting them with the tools that they need but letting them do what they do best.

I'll give you an example: programs such as On-Farm Applied Research and Monitoring, where, on farm, a great deal of research on soil health is conducted, and on water quality. It's done across the province. We have an abundance of data on the state of our soils, and under the leadership of Minister Thompson, we are creating a whole new soil-mapping system in Ontario—updating it. It's

going to be used for our farmers and food processors in years to come. That's a tool that we're using to help.

1050

Another real opportunity—and I know that MPP Vanthof will agree with this: According to Professor Chapagain from the University of Guelph, northeastern Ontario holds, alone, 16 million acres of potentially fertile land, of which roughly four million acres could easily be converted into farmland. That is a huge potential—it's massive infrastructure to get it done, but we need to find a way to unleash that potential to continue to grow our sector, again, creating the environment for our farmers and food processors to succeed.

One of the things that we have that's an advantage for this province is, we have some of the lowest corporate tax rates in North America. When you take a look at our farmers and agri-food businesses, they can compete here.

We have one of the best food safety and food inspection systems in the world, and that's internationally recognized and appreciated. By the way, it's priority number one in this ministry.

We have another great advantage that's taken advantage of. Foodland Ontario is an iconic brand. I think it's over 50 years old, and over 80% of Ontarians recognize it, to help draw them to local products and food. Again, it's a wonderful tool that is being used by our food processors—fruit and veg, especially.

Our government has reduced the cost of doing business by \$8 billion with respect to red tape, through lower taxes, hydro costs and WSIB premiums, and we've boosted the Risk Management Program, as I said earlier, and cut red tape for farmers and food processors.

Again, I think the proof is in the pudding, when you take a look—I come from business; it's results that count. When you take a look at our results, 30,000 more people work in the agri-food sector today than did when we first got into government. So I would say that we're doing something right. We're creating that environment, we're growing our businesses, we're growing our agri-food sector, and the proof is in the pudding. Over 700,000—I think it's closer to 750,000—new manufacturing jobs have been created since we've been in government. The previous government lost over 300,000 jobs. Creating that environment for business to want to come, invest, grow and continue to grow in Ontario is paramount to what we think—\$51 billion in GDP. How many people really understand the size, scale and scope of agri-food in Ontario? We've talked about this, Minister, since we've known each other. It's the best kept secret in Ontario. It has grown by \$3 billion since 2018. These are great stats.

We need to create the right conditions for growth, to create the environment to continue our fast-paced agri-food growth. We need to continue selling the Garden of Eden concept to its customers and to all the world.

I've been in this ministry since the beginning of June, and it never ceases to amaze me, wherever I go—yes, there are always reasons to debate, to discuss, why we should improve or better, but the absolute enthusiasm and optimism throughout the sector from the farm gate to the

consumers' plate I don't think has ever been better. It's exciting to be here.

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

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much, Ministers, for being here this morning. In my 21 years here in this chamber, I've never had two ministers at an estimates table yet, so we've broken new ground, of course.

Hon. Rob Flack: It's time for a first.

Mr. John Yakabuski: There's a good reason for that, because our government decided that we are—it's such a huge sector. As Minister Flack is articulating, people just don't understand how huge it is. We're separating it to some degree, or splitting it in some ways, to ensure that the issues of rural affairs get their just attention. So here today at estimates we have both of you. I know from the perspective of questions, to be fair, they're mostly going to be to the Minister of Agriculture—because that's what we're used to asking questions on.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Lisa who?

Mr. John Yakabuski: Yes, yes, I don't want to—but I see you, Minister. It's great to have you here.

I do want to thank both of you for your opening addresses. They were very informative, even for people like myself who've been here for a while. To listen to those statistics and to hear those numbers in bold letters, in print, just the impact that agriculture has—I think it's a wake-up call even for us who live and work in this environment here on a daily basis.

1100

Minister Flack, you have had a career in the agri-business sector. Few people who have ever sat in this chamber would have more experience in that particular field, and then have moved into the chair of being Minister of Agriculture, Food—well, agriculture, period, but for you, agriculture, food and agribusiness.

I spent 15 years in opposition before you got here, so I was around when a previous government had the file and the hands on the wheel of the ship of government here in the province of Ontario.

I'm interested to hear your perspectives on the strategic challenges that our government faced in the agri-food file when we came to office in 2018. I know you weren't here in 2018, but you've had the chance to be here since 2022. You know all the history, and prior to being a minister, you were parliamentary assistant as well, so you've had all the experience.

The previous government, as I said, was in power for 15 years. What kind of an agricultural sector did they leave behind, and how did their carbon tax affect farmers? I think the carbon tax is an issue that we're hearing about more and more every day as we get closer to a potential federal election. Even the federal NPP is backing off on its support for a carbon tax. They're kind of wishy-washy or kind of—they're showing some ambiguity there. So maybe you can take that into consideration—all of the perspective on the previous government and how the carbon tax affected farmers.

Hon. Rob Flack: Thank you, MPP Yakabuski.

I might start off by saying our farm and summer property, our cottage, is in the Ottawa Valley, in his riding, and I affectionately call him my MPP of the Ottawa Valley, and I'm the junior member when I go up there. He's always going to be my senior—not because of age, I might add.

As you mentioned, I spent a lot of time in my career in agribusiness, in agri-food, both in Canada and in the US. The one thing you learn pretty quickly—and I know MPP Vanthof will agree with this: You'd better be cost-competitive if you're going to be in agribusiness, from the farm gate to the consumer's plate. If you're not cost-competitive, you're in trouble. I lived it first-hand, in the different provinces we did business, in the states we did business, in South America when we did business.

You asked about the carbon tax. I have the notion where a tax is a tax is a tax. I would call the carbon tax, personally, the most punitive tax affecting and hurting farmers, not only in Ontario, but throughout Canada as a country. The proof is in the pudding. Take a look at the results of what it has done. I think—and Minister Thompson, I think, would agree—if you listen to the grain farmers, they will tell you by that 2030, the carbon tax will have cost grain and oilseed producers in Ontario \$2.7 billion.

We are in the middle of harvest season right now. A lot of the beans are off or coming off. We're getting into corn, and what does corn usually need? It needs to be dried. What is the number one cost of drying corn? Fuel—propane, natural gas—and what hurts that the most? The carbon tax. It's punitive, and it's wrong. When you think about the scale of what it's going to cost us, it's scary. They estimate that it would raise \$8.5 billion over five years. Think about the scale. It has hit our farmers hard. It has raised the cost of gas, of diesel fuel, of fuel and energy. Input costs are a huge issue. Think about fertilizer. The big cost of fertilizer is energy—and that was the goal, and that's why it was implemented. Again, it's punitive, and it's wrong.

1100

What have we done? We've cut the gas tax. We've been fighting the federal carbon tax since day one, and especially with Minister Thompson's vocal support. A member at the time, throughout the last session, Minister Smith, did a pretty good job of vocalizing our angst, as did Minister Thompson. We need to make sure that we get that reduced where possible.

The other side of energy is electricity—and I know you spent a lot of time in the energy file, MPP Yakubuski. That's a big concern to us. The average Ontario family paid an extra thousand dollars in hydro costs between 2003 and 2008. By 2016, a large agribusiness—I'll get this point—manufacturer in the GTA paid three times what their competitors in Montreal and Calgary paid.

So I come back to cost competitiveness. How do you expect these processors, these farmers, to compete when they can't compete within their own country? It's not right.

That year, 2016, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce released a report which outlined that electricity rates had

increased almost 400% since 2004—I think that's about the time you got elected.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: The green scheme failed.

Hon. Rob Flack: It's amazing.

That same report emphasized that 60—that is a scary point, and this is why I think our government has created that environment for success. The Ontario Chamber of Commerce report emphasized that 60 food processing plants had closed because of those higher costs, representing almost 13,000 jobs.

Coming back to PA Jordan's question—what have we done? Well, we're creating the environment for those people to lower their cost to compete and get it done. Unfortunately, the carbon tax has been punitive. It hurts, and we need to do everything we possibly can to eliminate it.

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

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you for being here, Minister Flack and Minister Thompson. It's truly a privilege to have you.

My community is one that is a true mix. I live in the urban part of my riding, but a significant part of the geography of Windsor–Tecumseh is rural. A lot of my rural residents, particularly in Maidstone and Oldcastle, have reached out to me about energy costs and the challenges that they're running into as a result of the increase in those costs, whether it be the dairy farms that we have or some of the grain farms.

I know that the ministry has been working hard to make it affordable for agri-food businesses, particularly through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership program—I know that program has efforts to lower some of those costs. One notable way that the funding has made a difference is by enabling farmers to invest in more efficient equipment. I know that will help on the energy side. You won't need as much gas to power the equipment.

For example, a food processing plant in my riding received \$300,000 to purchase a new boiler, which will help lower operating costs for them. It's a very, very important food processor. I hope when you come down to visit my riding, we can have a little tour. It's a very historic place: Nortera. Sorry; not Nortera—not for this one. But please do visit Nortera. I'm thinking of the other one, which is actually in Maidstone.

Could you elaborate on the benefits of the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership program and share some of its positive impacts?

Hon. Rob Flack: Sure. I'll begin by thanking you for all your good work, for your question.

Again, it's about setting the table, right? This is one area where we have—and I think Minister Thompson would agree—worked well with the federal government to come up with a national program that benefits our farmers and the ability for them to compete in Ontario. Sustainable CAP—let's just call it SCAP for short-form purposes—is an example of how our government is advocating for our farmers.

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

Hon. Rob Flack: I want to emphasize that we secured a tremendous increase of 25% funding from the previous agreement; it's a big one we should all be proud of.

MPP Dowie, allow me to give you some concrete examples.

So, \$56 million through the new resilient agricultural landscape program to support the agricultural sector in better addressing long-term environmental stability—it's in place and it's working.

The \$10-million Agri-Food Energy Cost Savings Initiative to invest in new technology, equipment and building or facility modifications, like happened in your riding, to lower energy bills—last year, we saw 32 projects get approved through this funding, allowing agri-food businesses to lower their costs, again, to create that environment to compete.

The \$12 million in the Grow Ontario Market Initiative to expand markets for Ontario products, which is clearly working—we're seeing it in the numbers.

The \$13 million to—

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

We will move to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: I heard you mention, Minister, agriculture in northern Ontario—the Greater Clay Belt, the Little Clay Belt. I like nothing better than talking about the Little Clay Belt, where I've farmed my whole life.

I'd just like to say, because there are a few issues brewing in the clay belts, that northern Ontario is a great place to farm, but I need to put it on the record once again: You cannot go acre for acre—clear an acre in northern Ontario and that displaces an acre in southern Ontario. It doesn't work that way. This area, southwestern Ontario and eastern Ontario, due to climatic and Great Lakes conditions, is the best land in North America, and every time you take an acre—just bulldozing another acre in the north is not the same thing. I'm just putting that on the record. Having said that, northern Ontario is a great place to farm.

My farm is on the Little Clay Belt—most people know where that is—north of New Liskeard, and when you go over past and you go into the Greater Clay Belt, there are big things happening in the Greater Clay Belt. Most of them are good, but not all—and I'll give you an example.

I can't remember which one of you mentioned that you were very proud that you had never raised taxes—good—but you are downloading. Various governments have downloaded costs to other levels of government, like the municipalities. If you go from Highway 11 across to the highway that goes to Timmins—the number escapes me right now, but it's a municipal road by Iroquois Falls. There is huge agricultural development going on on each side, and there's a debate going on right now on whether or not they're going to tear up that highway and make it gravel. Do you know why? Because the Harris government downloaded that piece of road to municipalities, to Iroquois Falls and Timmins. Quite frankly, that piece of road has nothing to do with Iroquois Falls and Timmins, and they can't afford to fix it. So you can say it's great that

you've never raised taxes, but these municipalities—Iroquois Falls has had to close bridges. They have a large Mennonite community that only uses horse and buggy, and now has to go I don't know how many kilometres—I know how many miles, but I'm not metric yet—to go around, because, quite frankly, they, like all kinds of other municipalities in the province, can no longer afford to maintain basic infrastructure. We were just in Tweed, where they can't afford it. These are rural municipalities that service the agri-food industry. I think somebody, somehow—we need to just figure out, on this table or your cabinet table or somewhere, what's going to happen. That's a really good example. You've got booming agriculture on both sides of a municipal road, and yet it's going to go to gravel—it was a paved provincial highway, and it's going to gravel. Is that the rural Ontario that we're all so proud of? I don't think it is. So what can we do? I know the simple answer is to upload what the province downloaded, but how do we deal with that? How do municipalities serve those areas? Iroquois Falls has faced it many times. They had to close that bridge—no choice. So what does the Minister of Agriculture or the Minister of Rural Affairs have—what are they talking about or what can we work together on to try to alleviate that issue? It's a huge issue across rural Ontario.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I appreciate the question very much.

We've met with AMO this past summer, and we are working very closely with ROMA as well. The chair of ROMA comes from MPP Jordan's riding, and she's very open and willing to discuss priorities for rural Ontario as well.

This underscores the importance of what we're doing when we're going around the province with our round tables. Never before has a government, like we are doing with our round tables, been reaching out and understanding priorities.

1110

So I take your message very, very clearly, and I will take it back—because one of the sweet spots about this new Ministry of Rural Affairs is developing a very strong working relationship across ministries as well. I will take your example back to Minister Calandra, and we will talk about it. We will broach it at the appropriate tables, as well, to get their advice, whether at both AMO—we just met with AMO last week, and we will be reaching out to ROMA to clarify this situation, because, to your point, we need to ensure that the infrastructure is in place so that we can indeed get our goods to market.

Do you want to touch on that any more?

Hon. Rob Flack: Absolutely. I think MTO and the Ministry of Infrastructure—we'll defer to them for some of the specifics.

Having said that, I hope you would acknowledge that we have been investing in northern Ontario; specifically, the Ontario agri-food innovation special initiative program addressing food insecurity, under way with four Indigenous communities—or opportunities. It's a very important part of our agri-food continuum. And I agree about the

land—north versus south—but wouldn't it be wonderful if we could explore that great potential and take advantage? In the years to come, I think we would agree, they're going to be able to grow more crops in northern Ontario as yields, as research, as innovation. Let's turn to ARIO and use that.

Mr. John Vanthof: I fully agree, Minister, but I've just got to say, when we turn on the TV and hear the Premier talking about a tunnel under the 401, when our roads are going from pavement to gravel, we definitely know there are two Ontarios. The tunnel under the 401 is a dream; we all know that. But we used to have pavement. We used to have bridges. We used to be able to pay for them. And now we don't, or we don't—no, we don't.

Yes, the government is investing—I'm not saying that investments aren't being made. But basic municipal infrastructure in rural Ontario, at least in the part of rural Ontario that I'm in, is falling apart, and not due to the municipalities—because they just cannot pay for what they're being told to pay for. I think we all know this, so I'm going to switch gears again.

On agriculture in northern Ontario—I was wondering if I should go there, but I'm going to go there, on the crown land issue. There is land that belongs to the crown that could be used for agriculture, and maybe it should be used for agriculture, but if we go there, we need to make sure that we don't make the same mistakes that we made in northern Ontario. We made some mistakes in Timiskaming, where we cleared wall to wall, filled in gullies and didn't really care where the water went once it went off our farms. The same thing is happening—you're getting push-back from locals in northern Ontario because people are clearing wall to wall, ditch to ditch, filling in gullies. You can't do that. This is on private land. But crown land is a different story. It's everybody's resource.

If you're going to go to crown land, we need to make sure that we actually respect what the other users of that land—and I'm not trying to be critical. I'm trying to say that it's a different—and I've told other ministers this. If you think that clearing northern Ontario is, you just airlift 500 bulldozers and 100 tile machines and your problems are over—that's not going to work.

I just want to get that on the record, and I think you're sympathetic.

Hon. Rob Flack: When I was at the plowing match last week, I had a chance to meet with a couple of the OFA directors, and we talked about this very issue. Yes, there's a way to do it and a way not to do it. So I look forward to working with you and also with those stakeholders up north—I know Minister Thompson does, as well—to make sure when we do it, how we do it is done in the most expeditious and proper manner.

My humble opinion is, drainage is the big issue. Think about southern Ontario in the day, way back when. By the way, the Drainage Act was before Confederation took place—I think it was the first piece of legislation that ever came forward in this Legislature. The same is true in the north. Southwestern Ontario—I won't call it a swamp, but it was riddled with water management issues, and over the

decades, centuries-plus, we've had to manage it; it's not unlike the north. How we figure out how to drain this—because all the water doesn't necessarily flow south; it's flowing north. We need to figure out how to get that done and do it right from the get-go. So I agree totally.

Mr. John Vanthof: If I could just expand on that a bit, because I'm really enjoying this conversation: The difference between north and south and between Timiskaming and the Greater Clay Belt is—we came to Timiskaming in 1971, and my father was one of the first to tile. But now, the capability that we have just to do things—we can make mistakes a lot faster. So where in Timiskaming we tiled maybe 1,000 acres over two or three years the first few years—now we can tile 1,000 acres a week and create outlets. When I talk to people, they really don't have a lot of understanding of where that water goes. When you take a drainage area of four thousand or five thousand acres that isn't drained and it takes a month to percolate to where the water is going to end up, and you drain that and it takes a day to get there—there are a lot of things happening at the end of that pipe. I don't think we've really, really thought of that in northern Ontario.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: If I may jump in here, too, from a rural affairs perspective—I just want to remind everyone about the amazing showpiece that we have at the Murray Scott farm in my home municipality of East Wawanosh. It is a showpiece, whereby a farmer is leading by example, and the next generation, to be quite frank, where he's worked with the municipality in terms of drainage—it was a municipal drain—and he has worked with the conservation authority. Now it is a showcase for what farmers can aspire to, albeit in southwestern Ontario.

We heard Minister Flack speak about the resilient agricultural landscape program. Wouldn't it be something, maybe on a farm close to you—that we could develop a relative showcase in northern Ontario to demonstrate the importance of being the best steward possible? It's a challenge I put out to both of you.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd just like to put on the record: I am not opposed to tile drainage. You cannot farm in northern Ontario without tile drainage. I'm a big supporter of tile drainage and anything we can do to promote it, but we need to make sure we do it right and that we think about it beyond the outlet on each individual farm, because I see things happening there where you just go, "Ooh."

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It's interesting, because even in Central Huron, there's a demo area that shows the newest technology in drainage, the smart drainage—the list goes on and on. Again, in the spirit of rural development, maybe we need to be thinking about doing something like that specifically targeted to the Little Clay Belt as well as the Matheson area.

Hon. Rob Flack: If I could add—

Interjection.

Hon. Rob Flack: First of all, we're a growing province, as we've talked about, and we talk about infrastructure and the massive, massive undertaking we've got going forward, whether it's schools, hospitals, roads, highways, water, waste water, hospitals, policing, firefighting. In my

region alone, it's daunting, and it is in the north too. We have to make sure—and Minister Thompson, I know, along with your support, we'll continue to advocate. When you think of infrastructure, it needs to be in northern Ontario too—it needs to be towards our farming and agri-food potential in northern Ontario, working with our Indigenous communities, but also generally.

For instance—and I think you'll agree with this—fruit and vegetable opportunities in the north have arrived. We can do that now. Whether it's through greenhouses, whether it's through traditional farming practices, that opportunity is here now.

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Do you know Vern Burnett—Vern and Denise? I remember going to his farm—great cow-calf operator. We drove through these farms to look at cattle, and he had these windrows throughout the farms. I said, “What the heck are those?” When they cleared the land—what they did up there is, they just put them into big windrows, and they've rotted over 50 years. They're still there. It's amazing how the land was cleared in New Liskeard—just simply astounding. It was a great learning experience for me.

So think, if we did it today, how we'd do it today—the infrastructure dollars that are needed—but as you say, to do it right. We'll continue to fight for that and make sure we get that done.

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

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Congratulations to both ministers for your nominations.

For the 2023-24 fiscal year, the ministry approved 80 projects through the Rural Economic Development Program, totalling \$4.38 million. We know that it's more expensive to conduct business, buy and sell, grow and live in the north. Is this program funding allocated appropriately, with the higher costs of operation in the north taken into account when it is distributed?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I appreciate that question very much.

Full disclosure, the RED Program has been around since I worked for OMAFRA just a couple of years ago, Guy.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Five or six—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, five or six years ago.

One thing that I've been charged with that I welcomed with open arms is a review of the Rural Economic Development Program, with the eye to making sure that today, in 2024, and beyond, it's relevant and it understands the pressures of business. I do share with you that we're very proud whenever a northern and Indigenous project gets approved. And I do also acknowledge that we need to take this review very seriously, so that we recognize that it's a different world today than it was in the late 1990s.

I certainly look forward to working with you, as well as Minister Rickford, quite frankly, to make sure that when we come forward with a modernized version of the rural economic development plan, it reflects the realities of today and, ideally, positions ourselves to be relevant and

purposeful in the future. So I look forward to continuing to work with you on that.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I think it's Minister Flack who mentioned vets—and I know we were in favour of one of the bills that we were dealing with. Where are we with this program, specifically for the north? I don't think there's a week we go by we don't hear concerns about no—because there's a lack of veterinarians. We have one that is—there's one left, and he's thinking of retiring. It's problematic for all of Ontario. We're missing a lot of vets. But specifically for northern Ontario, where are we with this program, and how is it coming along?

Hon. Rob Flack: I should let Minister Thompson speak about this a little bit at the end too, because we were both very involved in the program.

As I think everyone knows, last year we invested just about \$15 million for the new DVM program, where more than 20 new vet students can enrol over four years, and part of that process is utilizing Thunder Bay—more capacity there, new capacity there for help training and, ultimately, getting people to move back to the north.

I think it's important to note, the big concern we have in agriculture is not small animal vets; it's the large animal vets. For instance, in my and MPP Yakabuski's riding—I have a vet—

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

Hon. Rob Flack: He's of the age and stage when he wants to retire, and he just announced that he's not going to service the whole area.

We've added grants—up to \$50,000 to new graduates to practise in underserved communities, which includes northern Ontario, and that, hopefully, will support about a hundred vets.

The important part of your question is—we need to continue to do a better job of attracting and getting more kids, students, smart, young Canadians to enrol and become large animal vets. That's the threat to animal agriculture in Ontario—and that's something that Minister Thompson has dealt with, that I'm dealing with, that we're going to collectively do together.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: I'll give you some experience that I lived in my riding: Two students—I was surprised, because I asked them, “What are your marks?” and they were way up there, yet they didn't qualify because their marks weren't high enough—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Bourgouin. Your time is up. Keep the thought for the next round.

MPP Cuzzetto.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank both the ministers for being here.

I noticed one of the ministers—I can't remember—I touched on the carbon tax, how it affects rural Ontario. I wish the queen of the carbon tax was here today to listen to you and take the time to hear the effects of the carbon tax on rural Ontario.

My question here today is for Minister Thompson on the rural strategy that we have, that we're going forward

with. I would like to know what the objectives are, what the methods are and what we are trying to do with that.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Well, I appreciate that question very much.

Success breeds success. Over the last few years, in the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness, there was a strategy developed called Grow Ontario. Grow Ontario was a strategy that was informed by constituents and stakeholders around the province. The sweet spot about that was, they could tell by reviewing the strategy when it was released that they were listened to, and they could see themselves in it. Therefore, they got behind it, and they're helping us not only facilitate the actions identified but, most importantly, driving success. Ultimately, that translates into prosperity from an economic perspective. So it's in that spirit that we're moving forward with a strategy for rural Ontario, as well.

Some people who know me from my very first job as a rural community adviser know that I never liked canned processes, and that's why I have appreciated so much the candour and the thoughtfulness and the preparedness of the people we have met with from across this province, when we go out to talk about what is working and what's not in rural Ontario.

So, with all due respect—we're just looking to host probably our final five, if you will, in terms of consultations, but there are some key themes that are percolating that I'm not afraid to touch on today, in terms of strong rural economies. The workforce comes up time and time again, as well as business economic development. So those three key themes that percolate time and again during our consultations are probably going to be pointing to where we go.

This strategy is going to be simple and clear and easy to understand and fashioned very much after the Grow Ontario Strategy, where we are demonstrating we listened, we've identified priorities, we've identified actions that all stakeholders, including government, can work towards, ultimately to achieve goals, because they need to be measurable as well. I commit, just like with Grow Ontario, there's going to be a revisit every year to make sure that we are meeting measures that were identified as priorities for our stakeholders.

With that, I look forward to seeing where we go when we take a look at the 250 submissions that were generated as a result of the rural economic summit that we hosted and the over 240 written submissions that have been received on our website. When you massage that all together with what we're hearing from the consultation, the result will be that it's going to enable me to work with our fellow ministries across government to work on priorities and make sure that a prosperous Ontario definitely is being built on success within small-town and rural communities as well.

Stay tuned. There are going to be good things coming.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Thank you very much for that.

I'll pass it on.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Gallagher Murphy.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Chair, through you to Minister Thompson: Thank you very much for taking on this great role. Even though I come from a riding that is much more urban, I do see great wisdom in having a specific ministry over rural affairs, because they deserve great attention from our government.

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This being the case, I also see how many projects that cross different ministries—how would that all work when it comes to rural affairs? When we are looking to execute a specific project in a rural area, it could fall under the jurisdiction of another ministry like housing, transportation, infrastructure. So could you explain to the committee exactly what is the role for the Ministry of Rural Affairs, and how does the existence of this ministry change the performance and the delivery of such projects?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I appreciate that question very much.

It's interesting; part of my role as Minister of Rural Affairs is to act as a conduit, so when we're travelling across the province and listening to priorities and understanding what's working well and what's not, one of the very first things I do after meeting with the president of ROMA, for instance, in Smiths Falls, or having a round table in Thunder Bay, or having PA Pinsonneault meet with stakeholders in southern Ontario—we're quick to report back to ministers.

I'm reflecting on one thing that I heard in the Clifford round-table discussion. It was really well attended by municipalities. To an earlier point that we heard, municipalities—the cost of doing business is escalating, and it was interesting how one suggestion was made: Continue to bring support back to local municipalities. Of course, no one should be surprised when I say that one of the first things I did was reach back out to Minister Calandra, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and Minister Bethlenfalvy, Minister of Finance, and share with them what I heard, with the intent of making a difference, based on the time that people took to share their thoughts.

Another example would be how we need to work really well together. Associate Minister Tangri thankfully introduced a program whereby there are dedicated dollars for training in rural Ontario. I look forward to working with her and echoing that announcement as well—it was kind of a blended announcement for both urban and rural. I look forward to working with her to echo that great announcement so we can make sure that that program is understood and looked to as perhaps a source of funding for people to tap into.

Another example: I would have loved to have been with Minister Sarkaria today, Minister of Transportation, when he was announcing \$5 million in additional transit dollars for northern rural communities.

That's how we're working better together. It's making sure that, first and foremost, we have strong relationships with external stakeholders, but most importantly as well, you're going to see a minister in rural affairs really work hard to sustain and grow solid relationships so that when we come forward with ideas and feedback, critiques for

other ministers, it's trusted and valued, and we perhaps can move forward together to make a difference.

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

Mr. John Jordan: Minister Thompson, you mentioned standing up a new committee—a huge challenge, so I want to congratulate you and the ministry for that work, and I want to thank you for laying out the priorities and a deeper explanation of the Ministry of Rural Affairs.

The Rural Economic Development Program is an important program for rural. I'm wondering if you can tie that in—how does that align with your ministry?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Traditionally, there have been a number of programs that have been facilitated through the ministry known as agriculture, food and rural affairs. REDP was the beacon, if you will, of all the programming. The Rural Economic Development Program, for decades, has been a source of cost-shared funding that enables municipalities and not-for-profit organizations to come to the table and access funds that truly make a difference in terms of developing, repurposing and making sure small-town Ontario is an attractive place to invest and grow businesses.

For instance, I mentioned the Nuclear Innovation Institute. It was just announced last week that they've received funding to rehabilitate a vacant building into a more viable training and meeting centre. That makes perfect sense, because when you take a look at what's happening in that particular area of Ontario, the ripple effect of increasing nuclear generation is going through the roof. But we, again, need to demonstrate that communities as well as businesses are working together to be a home for new opportunities, new investment, new businesses, if you will. So that's a good-news example.

Another thing that I'd be remiss in not noting is the business improvement association in Belleville—albeit it was a smaller sum of money, the impact is just as great and just as important, because that particular project is looking to support, through the BIA, downtown businesses so that they can provide supports for homelessness and better understand the impact and the direction that we need to be going. I applaud the BIA in Belleville for recognizing that there needed to be supports brought forward—and the Rural Economic Development Fund is enabling them to do just that.

There are other programs, as well, that I'd be remiss if I didn't touch on. For instance, there's BR&E—it has been around for a very long time—business retention and expansion. Just in 2024, there were 163 applications for that particular last RED intake. Unfortunately, we always are oversubscribed, but it shows the interest, the commitment and the desire of small-town and rural municipalities and communities to drive opportunity, to attract business. We also, in terms of the RED program and then expanding over into BR&E—that particular tool, that particular program, is action-oriented and community-based. BR&E has been ongoing, and it recently completed projects in communities like Scugog, Belleville, Prince Edward county, Amherstburg, Southgate, Stormont. Again, it's all in the spirit of attracting business, based on the strengths of that

particular small town or community. There's a resource guide for communities, as well, in terms of agricultural economic development, and I'm really pleased to expand on that.

There's a program coming up soon—the week of the 21st, I think—in Renfrew county, where a municipality is coming together to host a seminar and workshop on economic development opportunities associated specifically with the agri-food industry.

First Impressions Community Exchange is one of my personal favourites, where a municipality in one area of Ontario will travel to another, and then they'll do an exchange and then comment on how the communities compare to one another and how they can improve and/or do things differently.

The list goes on and on.

When I hosted the rural FPT meeting this past June in Niagara-on-the-Lake, one of our guest speakers, one of our experts, was from Australia, and he was the founder, if you will, of an initiative called Teeny Tiny Summits. Our ministry has been facilitating that, as well. In fact, there was one, I think, recently in June, in Tweed, where 95 people attended to, again, think about, “What does our community have right here, today, that would enable us to attract new business and demonstrate that there is a viable future for the next generation to stay at home and find good jobs?”

It always seems like I want to go back to RED, but part of the rural economic development perspective that we bring to government is that we want to support pillars of our community.

Another significant project in a small town recently was celebrated, where significant funding went in to kick-start a capital campaign for a medical clinic. That community developed a tag line, “Community Building Community,” and together, that community raised \$2.6 million. Now not only do they have a community clinic, but they have a wellness hub. They attracted a physiotherapist. They attracted an aesthetician. They attracted a hearing clinic as well as a pharmacy and, of course, the local doctors. Now they've got a little pep in their step. They're thinking that they could possibly be in a good position to recruit a new doctor. They're going to be attracting young families because they've got viable schools; they've got a medical clinic. They feel, as a community, they're setting the cornerstones to attract young families, new business.

At the end of the day, as I said as I started, when rural Ontario prospers, all of Ontario succeeds as well.

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So those are just a few examples of rural economic development. I'm very passionate about it. I could go on and on, but I think I'm going to call it at that. How's that?

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

Mr. John Yakabuski: In this day and age, we live in a difficult, complex, complicated—life is hard these days. In every sector, and all across the spectrum in our society, we're recognizing the impact of mental health and how mental health can affect people's lives.

How much time is left?

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

Mr. John Yakabuski: Five minutes.

We tend to think of farmers as impervious to—“We work the land, and we’re a tough group,” and they are, because they’re so very resilient. But no one is immune and impervious to the pressures of a complex society. I’d like to know what our government is doing to assist farmers in that regard, and the mental health services that we’re making available to people in the agriculture and agri-food business.

Hon. Rob Flack: Thanks for that question.

I’ll particularly reference the hog industry because, in my career—growing pork in this province is a Herculean event. To get pork produced economically, profitably—yes, we talk about cycles; I’ve never seen anything so cyclical in my life. Being in the feed business and farm supply business, over my years I’ve seen a lot of mental health concerns on farm—not only on farm but within our own company. You’re dealing with farmers whose lives, whose livelihoods, whose heritage—generational farmers who have been impacted by mental health in a serious way because of the economic circumstances of the industry. It’s volatile—as I said, you strap on for the roller coaster ride—and it’s tough.

Our government understands that this is a major concern, not only in the province but throughout Canada. Both the governments of Canada and Ontario are investing \$8 million to support the mental wellness of farmers and their families, farm workers and their families, which is important. This investment will ensure that the Farmer Wellness Initiative, the Guardian Network and the In the Know program will continue to be available for those in need until at least the end of 2024—hopefully we can get it continued. We need to also look beyond that and look at the growing agri-food sector. It employs 871,000—that should be extended there, as well.

I was in London yesterday at the opening of the food bank—not opening; the recognition between Chicken Farmers of Ontario and Maple Leaf Foods—their donation is just unbelievable. Talking to people there in the food continuum, at the food bank—people who work in agri-food are affected with mental health and wellness issues. So it’s not just on farm—very important—but it’s right across our whole agri-food sector.

We most recently expanded the Farmer Wellness Initiative to all farm workers. That now includes support for the Spanish language, which obviously helps our international agri-food workers when they come to this country, which is an important—we have to make that transition to Ontario, when they come, seamless and welcoming and nurturing, and mental wellness and health is part of that.

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

Hon. Rob Flack: Funding for that suite of programs is one of several measures Ontario is taking to ensure our farmers, farm workers and their families feel empowered and supported.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Can I share my favourite program too?

Hon. Rob Flack: Absolutely.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Another is the Guardian Network. I’m thinking of small business when I bring this up, because that’s what our rural affairs program is there to support as well. We’re enabling businesses that go on farm, whether it’s delivering propane, delivering feed, picking up cattle, to—we’re training them to recognize the flags, where somebody might have a need to talk to people. The Guardian Network is in place to support business people who ultimately turn around and support farmers as well—again, it’s community helping community—and I’m really proud of that one too.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The government’s time is up.

Now we have 16 minutes left from the allotted time for this process. We will go to the opposition, and you have the 16 minutes. MPP Bourgouin.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Minister, I want to continue on the question where we were cut off. I was talking about two young veterinarian students. Their academics were high—when I was in college, I wish I had those that they had, because I know my parents would have been proud. That being said, they had to go to other countries—one, I think, went to Australia. I can’t remember where the other young woman—there were two young women. They came from the north. They wanted to practise in the north. Yet, they had no seats—or they couldn’t get a chance to get into the vet school in Ontario. I used to be a tradesman, and—you grow your own, they stay in our area; you come from the north, they stay in the north. They don’t want to leave, but once they leave, it’s hard to come back, because they meet, sometimes, their future husband; they meet—so they don’t come back, or they establish themselves elsewhere. This is why it’s important that we take that into consideration when we develop these new vets—that we have to look at where they’re from, so that we keep them in our regions; it could be rural southern Ontario or rural northern Ontario. They were both from Kapuskasing, and both wanted to practise up north, yet they had to go and study abroad. That blew my mind. That doesn’t make sense to me.

I’d like to hear you, Minister, on this. How do we fix this? We need to keep our own in this province, and in our region also—because a lot of times they’ll go study and then take a place for a northern student, and then they move back, and then we’ve lost again. So we need to find a solution to this, to fix the problem we have in northern Ontario when it comes to vets.

Hon. Rob Flack: Again, thank you for the question. Frankly, I couldn’t agree more.

What we have done is—and I talked about this earlier—we have 20 more vet students who can enrol over four years. So we’ve added capacity, supporting the University of Guelph, and through that whole northern initiative as well—again, \$50,000 in grants. When we get a vet, we want to keep the vet, so, hopefully, subsidizing their costs up to \$50,000 to stay—because they have to travel so far. When I was chairing the modernization of the vet act for Minister Thompson, when I was her parliamentary assistant—fascinating stories throughout the province, and

whether you're in southern Ontario or northern Ontario, east or west, that was the number one issue that came across our deliberations. So we've acted—\$50,000 towards those students.

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I'll give you an example as well. I know three cases—to prove your point—where they went outside of Ontario to get into vet school and they never came back, because they fell in love or they fell in love with their practice or they got a job in another country. One of them was in the Caribbean and never came back. They're good, smart, capable Ontario students who never made it back home. All three are large animal vets.

We have to create that environment for them to stay. I think we've got a great start, but more needs to be done.

I'll turn it over to Deputy Kelly to fill in some of the blanks and add some more narrative to the discussion.

Mr. John Kelly: Thanks, Minister Flack.

I'm John Kelly, deputy minister for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

Your question is really germane to what happens within this province. The University of Guelph has one of five veterinary schools across the country. It is the largest veterinary school in the country. It is also one of the top five vet schools in the world—so it is a very competitive space to get in there.

With the agreement with Lakehead University, what that allows us to do is to attract students from the north to go to Lakehead for a couple of years and then finish their degree at the University of Guelph. Part of the incentive for us to develop this program was to have people, as you say, come from the north and maybe work in the north once they're finished. That's a key thing.

We've also got a number of programs to help support vets in the north, like a Veterinary Incentive Program, which Minister Flack has talked about, and a Veterinary Assistance Program. There are a lot of different opportunities, but it's a very competitive process.

We're fortunate to have Dr. Greg Worley here. He is the Chief Veterinarian for Ontario, who is well versed at the University of Guelph. I'm going to ask him to come forward in just one second.

I'm a two-time grad at the University of Guelph, and I understand how competitive that process is. There are a lot of people who want to get in there—either in the program or not. I met with a veterinarian this past weekend, and when he started—he got into vet school after two semesters at the university in another program. Now most vets have two degrees—they start with a degree and then they have a second degree.

Greg, can I get you to come up?

Dr. Greg Worley: Thanks.

I'm Greg Worley. I'm the chief veterinary officer for the province.

As a former food animal veterinarian in rural practice, I think the conversation earlier identified the challenges of not only getting into the veterinary school, but the challenges of being a food animal veterinarian—long hours, calving season is exhausting, 24/7 on call. Hence, certain-

ly, attracting graduates to rural and northern Ontario is challenging.

The deputy has already referenced some of the programs we have. I'll also mention that we had the livestock veterinary initiative that provided funding to clinics to make their operations more efficient and limit some of the driving. As you can imagine, in the rural areas and up north, driving between calls consumes a lot of time and is certainly less productive as you're in the truck.

The Veterinary Assistance Program also provides funding to those northern clinics to help subsidize some of their travel time and to cover locums so that sole practitioners can actually get a vacation once in a while.

I'll also quickly comment that we are working with and consulting with some of the other jurisdictions. We just had the veterinary officer from Australia here; they are having the same problems down there. So this is certainly a worldwide challenge that is going to take a combination of industry and government to explore this further before we find solutions.

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: Thank you for these answers.

I will hand it off to my colleague for the last minutes left.

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

Mr. John Vanthof: How much time do we have?

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

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. I hate to bring this subject up right before lunch, honestly. Minister Thompson is well aware of this subject. You can call me out of order, because it doesn't exactly—it fits in rural Ontario. In my riding—and this could happen anywhere—we've got a former dairy lagoon now used to store untreated human waste. When you store and spread treated waste, it's non-agricultural source material, and there are strict rules. But when it's untreated human waste—and please correct me if I'm wrong—the non-agricultural source material rules don't apply; it falls under the Ministry of the Environment, under their certificate of approval. From our viewpoint, the Ministry of the Environment does not have the horsepower or the knowledge to actually handle this. Under their certificate of approval, crops aren't supposed to be harvested within a year, and soybeans were harvested and we don't know where they went. I'm not trying to put anybody on the spot here; I'm just saying this needs to be looked at, because we had problems right from the start, and there does not seem to be the "horsepower" from the ministry to actually oversee that the operators are actually following—they might be following the certificate of compliance, but the NASM plan has much stronger rules than the certificate of compliance, and yet with a safer material. If ministries are going to work together better, we need to look at that. I was on a Zoom call with one OMAF person and six or seven people from the Ministry of the Environment, and I had to explain how tile drainage works. They were applying raw human sewage on this field and growing crops, and it's going into the general system. We can ascertain that it hasn't gone into the seed system, because we looked into that, but we don't know

where it went. We've got a question to the Ministry of the Environment to see if they know where it went.

I know my colleagues dislike it when I bring this up in the Legislature, but I keep bringing it up because we need to get a handle on this. I'd really like your help on this, to see if we can tackle this one—and not just in my riding, but tackle it as a provincial issue.

Hon. Rob Flack: Thank you for the question.

Obviously, soil health is paramount to the success of any farming enterprise, and ultimately the food we produce and process in Ontario. Nutrient management is also key to that. I think we have some very good initiatives—obviously, working closely with the Ministry of the Environment—to make sure that's done.

I'm going to defer to the deputy here in a minute, because I'm not quite as up to speed—

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, I'm not trying to put you on the spot.

Hon. Rob Flack: No, that's fine.

I do want to point out a couple of things. We continue to invest in soil health; I think it's important that we get this on the record:

—SCAP, \$56.7 million;

—the resilient agricultural landscape program for planting trees, less tillage, reducing our carbon footprint—that is a very good program. Minister Thompson referenced it earlier; and

—the Agricultural Stewardship Initiative for soil health, water quality and modifications to machinery.

That being said, I'm now going to turn it over to Deputy Kelly—

Mr. John Vanthof: I fully appreciate that, but before we get to Mr. Kelly—and I really respect his view—I've just got to make it clear that right now we have raw human sewage going onto agricultural land in Ontario on which crops are grown, and put into the general system, as far as we know, with no testing.

We can talk about soil health—I agree with soil health, but we can talk about that until we're blue in the face. The fact is that raw human sewage is pumped into a lagoon and then pumped out, spread on the field, and crops are grown on it, and those crops go to elevators. We need to get a handle on that. I don't know how many times I have to say it. I'm not trying to put you on the spot. I just have limited opportunities—I would have said this in the Legislature a bunch of times already.

Mr. John Kelly: Thanks for your question, MPP Vanthof.

You're talking about a number of things that are sort of all encompassed here. One is nutrient management strategies, and there certainly is a lot of work that this ministry does on nutrient management. Sustainability of farmland is also a big part of it. You're also talking a little bit about the non-agricultural source material, which can go, right?

When we do nutrient management planning, we rely on AgriSuite as part of the way we're going into the future. Really, it gives recommendations and directions to producers on how to use these NASMs. We've had 500 NASM plans done about annually. With the nutrient management strategies, we get 600 of those done annually. So there are lots of different opportunities—

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

Mr. John Kelly: —for these plans to do. They all contribute to about 1,000 plan amendments annually. There are some variances. They have to have permits to apply these things—

Interjection.

Mr. John Kelly: Okay.

The minister wants to speak. But we do have an ag erosion program, which is kind of related to what you're talking about.

Minister, I'll throw it back to you.

Hon. Rob Flack: Bottom line: We'll follow up. I look forward to working with you.

I want to take the opportunity to thank, on behalf of Minister Thompson, all the ministry officials—all the great work in your departments and ministries. A lot of work goes into this. We appreciate everyone's questions. It has been a learning experience, but a good experience nonetheless. Thank you. Well done.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, Ministers. That ends our allotted time for the estimates.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 101, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Shall vote 107, public health and environment, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Shall vote 108, strong agriculture, food and bioproduct sectors and strong rural communities, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

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

Shall the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs carry? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to the House? All in favour? Any opposition? Seeing none, carried.

Thank you, members and ministers and staff.

Seeing there is no other committee business, the committee is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1204.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR

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Mr. Aris Babikian (Scarborough–Agincourt PC)

Vice-Chair / Vice-Président

Mr. Guy Bourgoïn (Mushkegowuk–James Bay / Mushkegowuk–Baie James ND)

Mr. Aris Babikian (Scarborough–Agincourt PC)

Mr. Guy Bourgoïn (Mushkegowuk–James Bay / Mushkegowuk–Baie James ND)

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto (Mississauga–Lakeshore PC)

Mr. Andrew Dowie (Windsor–Tecumseh PC)

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy (Newmarket–Aurora PC)

Hon. Kevin Holland (Thunder Bay–Atikokan PC)

Mr. John Jordan (Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston PC)

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Ms. Sandy Shaw (Hamilton West–Ancaster–Dundas / Hamilton-Ouest–Ancaster–Dundas ND)

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Mr. John Vanthof (Timiskaming–Cochrane ND)

Clerk / Greffière

Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna

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Ms. Amanda Boyce, research officer,
Research Services