

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



Assemblée  
législative  
de l'Ontario

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## **Official Report of Debates (Hansard)**

IN-9

## **Journal des débats (Hansard)**

IN-9

### **Standing Committee on the Interior**

### **Comité permanent des affaires intérieures**

#### **Estimates**

Ministry of Agriculture,  
Food and Agribusiness

Ministry of Natural Resources

#### **Budget des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Agriculture,  
de l'Alimentation  
et de l'Agroentreprise

Ministère des Richesses naturelles

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
44<sup>th</sup> Parliament

Monday 3 November 2025

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

Lundi 3 novembre 2025

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Chair: Aris Babikian  
Clerk: Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Président : Aris Babikian  
Greffier : Stefan Uguen-Csenge

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## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

## ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON THE INTERIORCOMITÉ PERMANENT  
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES

Monday 3 November 2025

Lundi 3 novembre 2025

*The committee met at 1301 in committee room 1.*

## ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD  
AND AGRIBUSINESS

**The Second Vice-Chair (Mr. Jonathan Tsao):** Good afternoon, everyone. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness for a total of two hours.

As a reminder, I will allow members to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make sure that the question is relevant to the estimates under consideration. The ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues the ministry undertakes to address.

For any staff appearing today, when you are called on to speak, please give your name and your title so that we may accurately record in Hansard who we have.

Are there any questions from the members before we begin?

Seeing no questions, I'm 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 for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness. The remaining time will be allocated for questions and answers in a rotation of 15 minutes for the official opposition of the committee, 15 minutes for the third party members of the committee and 15 minutes for the government members of the committee.

Minister Jones, the floor is yours.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Good afternoon, everyone. I am pleased to speak to you of the work of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness, and what we've been doing to strengthen Ontario's powerful agri-food sector and to support the one in nine people it employs across the province, including myself and at least one member of the opposition here today and one member of the government today.

Joining me today is Deputy Minister John Kelly, as well as assistant deputy ministers, directors and staff from my ministry.

It's no exaggeration to say that agriculture affects every corner of our province. From rural communities to cities, agriculture, food and agribusiness are essential sectors to our economy and to the quality of life here in Ontario.

For me, growing up on a small onion and carrot farm in Leamington, just outside of town limits, surrounded by fruit and vegetable growing operations, had a real impact on my understanding of my own community and our province. Agriculture has always been a central part of my life. It continues today, as I have the honour to serve as our Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

Ontario agriculture holds a reputation of excellence. People in our communities know they can enjoy safe, nutritious and delicious food that's grown and processed locally. This is a source of pride for all of Ontario, and we're truly fortunate to have around 48,000 farms across our province. These farms produce a diverse range of crops, from corn, soybean and wheat to carrots, onions, apples, wine grapes, livestock, poultry and, of course, beautiful greenhouse-grown vegetables.

The agri-food sector is a major provider of jobs in the province, again employing one in nine people here in Ontario. It contributes well over \$51 billion to Ontario's GDP annually and makes the province Canada's largest agri-food exporter and importer. In 2024 alone, Ontario exported \$28.1 billion in agri-food products. Farm cash receipts totalled \$22 billion, placing Ontario second only to Alberta. Ontario has led the country in primary agriculture GDP, reaching \$9.2 billion, the highest among all provinces. When it comes to output per acre and exports, Ontario ranks first in Canada.

Our government has been clear in our mandate: We'll continue to protect farmers, food processors and all of Ontario's agri-food workers. The Ontario-grown brand is globally recognized. You'll hear me say this all of the time, all around the world: "Ontario-grown" means safe, nutritious and delicious. It drives our government's action to build a stronger, more innovative and prosperous agri-food sector.

The focus of my ministry is to maintain one of the best food supply chains in the world, to keep the people of Ontario safe and to uphold the high trust that consumers have in the agri-food products grown and processed right here. Through responsible and strategic investments and rigorous oversight, we maintain the stability and resilience of the agri-business value chain. We actively prepare and plan for animal health emergencies, like African swine fever, that could threaten our food system, among many others, and we continue to work directly with people who work in the agri-food business, our partner ministries and other governments to develop comprehensive response plans.

Ontario has a robust animal health surveillance system and works with the CFIA—the Canadian Food Inspection Agency—and farmers to monitor animal health.

Another important way we protect Ontario is by administering food safety inspection. Food safety inspectors are critical front-line OMAFA staff who provide an important resource for protecting food safety across all communities and all commodities in the province. Our food safety system relies on a multidisciplinary team that identifies and manages food safety risks, preserves food security, and also improves and influences food safety outcomes in order to remain trusted by the public.

We all understand that farming is a complex sector, and the tariffs imposed by the United States have created additional challenges just in the past year. That's why our government continues to help Ontario farmers manage risks beyond their control through the business risk management programs. Ontario is a national leader in providing risk management—or insurance, otherwise—to support farmers to protect our food supply system.

Back in January of this year, Ontario announced an increase to annual funding for the Risk Management Program from \$150 million to \$250 million annually over the next three years. This investment builds on the \$50-million annual increase to the RMP in 2020 to \$150 million. Past reforms—again, led by discussions and meaningful input from around the province and around the chamber of this House—allowed unused program funds to be applied to future-year claims, allowing the program to be the most responsive in times of greatest need.

The \$100-million increase provides support to farmers in responding to market challenges, while increasing their long-term business confidence and competitiveness. This past summer, I met directly with farmers who were affected by the drought in eastern Ontario and central Ontario: farmers like Mr. Jeff Harrison, who's also chair of the Grain Farmers of Ontario. He expressed his gratitude and support for the whole suite of services that business risk management provides and the increased funding implemented by our government to the Risk Management Program.

Small farms like Jeff's—his home farm, as farmers will call it—are usually a showpiece. They're show-and-tell farms. They're the farms you bring tours to. They're picture-perfect. That's where the grandparents may have lived, and now the grandchildren are living and running that farm. Jeff's home farm was struck by severe drought, and to see a farmer, a stoic, solid young man who is talking through tears in his eyes, is heart-wrenching.

We talked a lot about risk management programs, the insurance providers, and all the network within our communities that have the ground-level reporting and access to these programs to provide that advice, that support, that encouragement and reassurance. I had similar discussions with many other farmers affected by drought, and that's why I'm so proud that the program continues to deliver relief for our farmers, as it was informed by our farmers.

I'm also working closely with my federal, provincial and territorial colleagues and counterparts from across

Canada, and program administrators too, including Agricorp, to plan improvements to business risk management programs.

We have to continually sharpen the blade, be more responsive and understand the complex and changing modern needs of today's modern farms. These improvements will ensure we continue to be responsive to the specific needs of our farmers. It guarantees succession plans. There are young people in our communities and young people on those farms that want to take over that farm. It has to be there some day for them.

#### 1310

In a time of tariffs and considerable uncertainty, it's important now more than ever that we support our farmers through every means necessary, including dialogue, including listening. Colleagues who know me know I'm an attentive listener. I'm more of a man of action than words, so to me, these words today and in our conversations today in this committee will be meaningful. They'll give us pause and reflection, and we'll be agile to respond to them.

To this end, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agri-business supports a sustainable, resilient and trusted agri-food system that drives economic growth. It's what we all want. Through our bold 10-year Grow Ontario Strategy, we will secure continued on-farm productivity growth, increase agri-food exports and drive further innovation to boost our competitiveness.

Grow Ontario: I was there in 2022 at the food terminal, just a short drive from where we are right now, to release this, and it was exciting. There was energy and electricity in the air. People knew there was a change coming, and it's a non-partisan change. It's something that a lot of people from a lot of backgrounds can get behind.

Grow Ontario aims to strengthen the agri-food sector; fuel economic growth; help ensure an efficient, reliable and responsive food supply; and incorporate new innovations—to me, most importantly, to bolster the capabilities within this sector. They're already there.

Agriculture and food research that meets the needs of Ontario's farmers and agri-businesses is a key sector for growth, ensuring our province remains competitive and sustainable on the global scale.

Research and innovation are crucial to leading to new discoveries, and are often made on the farm in concert with labs and with the people doing the research. Those conversations are immediate sometimes. When an idea is generated, it goes to be proven out and then delivered. I'm so proud of that.

Research and innovation are crucial to leading to new discoveries, as I said, and deliver real solutions to farmers, helping farmers increase productivity and helping businesses grow in the face of uncertainty and continued US tariffs.

Our commitment to advancing agri-food research and innovation is demonstrated by our ongoing investments, including more than \$343 million over five years through the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance, something that we're very proud of: a comprehensive partnership between the University of Guelph, our food school; ARIO,

Agricultural Research and Innovation Ontario; and, of course, OMAFA, our ministry. This includes specifically \$8.5 million in research and innovation projects, \$12.7 million on research infrastructure and maintenance last year, \$5.7 million to operate the Agriculture and Food Laboratory and \$9 million to operate the animal health lab last year. These are open and accessible to lawmakers. You're welcome to go in, ask questions, find out and get excited about the work we're doing.

We recognize the importance of innovation. We also invest in improving the province's research and innovation capacity and capabilities in a broader sense: creative disruption, things that we haven't even thought of, but I'll guarantee a farmer has thought about them. We want to put those thoughts and ideas into action.

As part of the government's bold plan to protect Ontario, investments just like this boost Ontario-led innovation and give farmers access to cutting-edge solutions that help Ontario's agri-food sector stay resilient and competitive.

And if you'd ever been on a tour of any agri-business, any farm, any processing facility, you'll know our Premier, when he's there on-site, gets excited and he asks questions. He asks questions from the workers on the line, from the people in the offices and the facilities and, more importantly, he looks at the equipment. The great food coming across the line—he knows where that's coming from, usually: my colleagues will agree, a very short drive's radius from where that facility exists.

The Premier asks these questions, and we should start asking these questions: Where does the technology come from? Where's the innovation? Where is the materials handling? Where are the business solutions coming from? Most oftentimes, because of scale and opportunity, they come from Europe. We're asking hard questions to say, "Wait a second. We have research and engineering might. We have growing know-how right here in Ontario." That's why you'll hear me talk very frequently about innovation: because that's our next value proposition.

For example, we've invested up to \$20 million for specific research and innovation projects through the Ontario Agri-Food Research Initiative and the Grow Ontario Accelerator Hub, including a recent commitment of \$4.77 million to 48 research-and-innovation projects in support of 20 companies. These are often times little start-ups for ideas that two friends have from undergrad work and grad school, or on-the-farm learning or both, and they hatch an idea. We're so proud to be there to support those ideas and hopefully commercialize them and put them into action, put them into place and create jobs.

We've invested \$3 million to help farmers implement projects to improve the energy efficiency of their farming operations. I've had the pleasure and privilege of seeing that all summer long, on the farm, in barns, sitting at picnic tables, drawing plans up on the back of napkins and at people's dinner tables, talking about the serious questions about sustainability, succession planning and what innovation means to farmers. This funding, through the third intake of the Agricultural Stewardship Initiative, supports

the province's plan to protect Ontario, which enables local agriculture, agrifood and agri-based businesses across the province to enhance their competitiveness by saving on energy. This represents a total investment of up to \$15.5 million.

This year, also through SCAP, or the Sustainable Canadian Agriculture Partnership, the governments of Canada and Ontario are working together to help small businesses in the agrifood industry grow their businesses and enhance their food safety and traceability systems. Funding for Ontario's food safety and growth initiative is supporting over 90 projects all around the province, from every corner, helping them to expand export opportunities and increase food safety from Toronto through the Don to Timiskaming-Cochrane; to Windsor and right down to Leamington and beyond. By adopting innovative technologies, we've enabled small businesses to continue meeting the highest standards for food safety and quality, which is what Ontario is known for around the world.

A few examples, and you may know them, include:

—Vision Greens in Welland: \$75,000 to purchase and install water-filtration systems that will treat water reaching the plants, increasing food safety;

—Shefa Meats, right here in Toronto, receiving nearly \$75,000 to hire third-party consultants—experts in the field—to improve their traceability program, install a barcoding system and increase traceability of products to expand their customer base, hopefully throughout Ontario and eventually around the world; and

—West Grey Premium Beef Inc. in Durham received \$75,000 to purchase and install new clipping and packing equipment and third-party services, to update food safety programs, to increase traceability and food safety to meet customer demands.

That's the thing: farmers grow for the audience. Our audience is all of us, consumers at the store selectively picking up and looking at a product. Where it's grown, how close to home; how fresh, how trusted and safe it is: This is very responsive to what customers want.

Ontario also has—of course, as you know—some of the best wines in the world. We continue to support Ontario wineries and cideries. In recent years, we've enhanced the VQA wine support program, which is designed to boost competitiveness and innovation, while increasing sales of Ontario VQA wines at the LCBO and beyond. Through this program, wineries receive funding to grow their businesses, whether it's expanding new markets, enhancing tourism experiences or strengthening their presence across Ontario and Canada.

But in order for our program to be comparable to what's offered, say, in British Columbia, payments under the VQA support program have grown from \$10 million annually to \$45 million in the last fiscal year alone.

### 1320

Up to \$4.8 million per year supports marketing, tourism and export development of Ontario VQA wine and grapes through the marketing, tourism and export development initiative delivered through the Wine Marketing Association of Ontario. They're the experts. They know what

they're doing. They know what their customers want and what their growers want.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** One minute, Minister.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Sure.

We're also making significant progress in achieving the goals of the Grow Ontario Strategy—again, launched in 2022—and I was proud to be alongside that launch. Increasing food exports by 8% annually through 2032 is just one of the strategy's key goals.

There are lots of great things in here talking about our friends, about farms and businesses we know, and hopefully that'll come out in some of our questions and answers later on today.

But I want to thank the Chair, thank the committee and our staff for taking some time to be here today for meaningful discussions. As mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, to help protect Ontario, we need everyone. We need everyone to get behind a safe food system and a thriving agri-food sector. To drive forward our sector, we have to do this together.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Thank you very much, Minister.

We will begin with the official opposition. Just before I start, I remind all members, just on a very friendly basis, that questions should be directed to the Chair, and if you should have a follow-up, please also come back to the Chair.

The floor is yours, MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you very much, Minister, and everyone from OMAFA.

I think you will find, from all sides, incredible support for your ministry. I think you will be challenged—very few people get the short form right because the name changes on a regular basis, so for me it will always be OMAFRA, but for some people it's OMAF.

But I think, for your work, not just farmers and not just agri-food—everyone in Ontario thanks you for your work, because those of us behind the scenes know what food safety entails. It's a tough job, and although agriculture and agribusiness are number one and number two in Ontario, it's not number one or number two on people's minds. Sometimes that's a good thing, because you don't have to worry too much about food safety in Ontario, and that's because of the work you do.

I'm starting out friendly and I'm going to stay friendly. I'm hoping that we have a really fulsome two-hour discussion about agriculture, because it doesn't get discussed enough, honestly.

I'm going to do all my thank-yous first. I'd like to thank you for your support for the SPUD unit in New Liskeard. For those who aren't aware, the SPUD unit basically takes seed, mainly potatoes and garlic—and I'm not going to do scientific—and cleans it to the tubers, so when it goes back out to the farms, it has no diseases in it. It's very important and it's been there for a long time. It was questionable for a while where it was going to be replaced in this announcement. It was placed in the right place in the first place and it's still the right place, and I'd like to thank you for that.

The second point I'd like to bring up is on the business risk management suite of programs. There are several, and I don't think I have to explain this to the ministry or to the minister, but just in general: There's crop insurance where you can insure the actual growing crop, and there's business risk management where you can insure against market risks.

I'd like to thank the government for raising the amount and offer my support for—we have long advocated for eliminating the cap, because the way it works right now, regardless of where the cap is, it's pro-rated. So once enough people reach the cap, then—my example is: If we all insure our house for \$400,000, but just through bad luck, half of our houses burn down at the same time, although you're insured for \$400,000, because there are so many houses burnt down, you're only getting half or a quarter. It's not really true insurance, and I don't have to explain that to you, Minister. You know that.

We are in full support if—the higher you can raise that—when that program was created, it was created by agriculture organizations, by government without a cap. A previous government put the cap in, and we have all been advocating to raise it. You have raised it, and I'd like to thank you for that.

I'm a dairy farmer by trade, or was a dairy farmer by trade—a very big supporter of supply management. Let's be honest: We face risks with supply management with the current—we have always faced risks from our larger friends to the south, but now we face even greater uncertainty, largely because of the President.

Supply management is a great system. One of the chinks in our armour on the dairy side particularly is our processing sector hasn't been able to keep up with innovation in technology, I would say. So our dairy farms are as modern, are as innovative as anywhere in the world, but the processing sector has had some troubles. And I would hope that you would agree with me, Minister, that the processing sector could use some help so that they can be as competitive as possible, to face whatever risk supply management may face from the American government. Would you agree with me on that?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thank you for the introduction. Thank you for all the background. That's important, because these words stand in posterity. They stand the test of time and they're true.

I've joked with my staff that if I could add a few lines to my business card, which is already long enough—it's agriculture, food and agribusiness—I would add "processing, technology and innovation."

Processing is our value proposition. That's our future armour. That protects us. By being close to the producers, you get exponential benefits and then you don't have to worry about the vulnerabilities like the trained people that deliver, say, milk products from farm to processor. We're working very hard to bring those investments to fruition, to reality.

So I would agree: That's our biggest opportunity. That's our biggest challenge. And now it's putting it on record, saying in a non-partisan way that we agree. This also helps



us safeguard our precious system, both for the grower or producer and the processor. It brings it close to home. It safeguards it.

And we're strong supporters of supply management; that'll never change. I've said that coast to coast in my meetings at FPT, locally, at dairy farms in your neck of the woods in eastern Ontario and my backyard, and most recently in Mexico.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Okay. So just to move along, and sticking to supply management: The province does have a program to help plants retool. I'd like to know—and I don't expect you have this answer right now; I just want to know. So we had a plant, Lactalis in Sudbury, which moved from milk to other sources for processing, and now they've closed. And I just want to know if they got money from that program, and how does that work once the plant is closed? I don't expect you have that answer right now, but I just want to know how it worked in the Lactalis plant.

I understand market forces are market forces, so you can't produce something that people aren't consuming—100%, I get it. I'm not criticizing that. I just want to know how that program works, because we really, in the opposition, I think everyone wants—supply management cannot survive unless the processing sector is very strong.

I'm going to just switch gears just a little bit, about some issues that are happening. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on farmland preservation. I know the government is focusing on innovation. In previous committee hearings with the former minister, we had some spirited debates about farmland preservation. I still think it's a big issue. We can argue about the numbers, but we can't argue about the fact that you can't recreate farmland.

1330

Ontario has a unique opportunity. I come from northern Ontario. We have the opportunity to clear more farmland, and it's happening on a daily basis. But it's not an even trade. You don't pave an acre here, and even if you clear three acres in northern Ontario, it's not acre for acre.

I would just like confirmation that the government is concerned about preserving farmland in all parts of the province.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Great question. It's on my mind. I had to see the 10-million-acre opportunity myself, and I saw it when I was visiting you near your riding. The Clay Belt in Ontario contains about 10 million acres, as you may know, of arable land. It's incremental because of technology, because of favourable weather conditions and precipitation and really good drainage. A farmer told me, "Minister Trevor, if you add three things, this opportunity can be realized—confidence. You need programs to loan money to new farmers and people that are leaving southern Ontario who want to stay in Ontario to farm—the confidence to clear that land, harvest that wood and then drain it."

So CDL: confidence, drainage and lime. You add lime to that fertile soil, and now it sparks the nutrition value in it for all the grains, for your vegetable crops. And again, if you look with satellite imagery across the imaginary border of Quebec and Ontario, you see a jurisdiction that

invested early on. You see green patches of arable, productive land in Ontario, swaths of scrub bush and jack pines and birch and little squares of opportunity and promise. That's what we're seeing there.

Protecting land comes at what opportunity is out there using technology, and our controlled-environment agriculture is the finest in the world. I'll put Canadian greenhouse and Ontario greenhouse up against anyone—16 times the yield, the value. So you have an acre of tomatoes, an acre of tomatoes protected: 16 times the yield; 90% less water; strategic inputs for nutrients, for pesticides, herbicides, if you need them at all; bumblebees, as you've seen, do the pollination; and you have a real stable, consistent, reliable, highly nutritious, safe product.

The second piece: the value proposition in the Clay Belt, a controlled environment. And of course, the stuff we do—this Legislature, debate, policies and regulations—like agriculture impact assessments, are real. They have teeth. You have a minister behind them that believes in them that has his heart in agriculture.

Those impact assessments are now province-wide, where at one time they were just clustered around the Golden Horseshoe. Now, we felt it prudent to expand that province-wide to any project for any size of development. If it takes productive—if it's actually productive—farmland out of production, we have to balance that: the growth needs of the population versus the need to feed our population and the world. That's a balanced approach we're looking to take. Those three things are our priorities on my mind, and I think they are on your mind as well.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm going to come back to that, but you gave me a segue.

Was there an agricultural impact assessment done on the land in Wilmot that's being taken out of agriculture and being put into who knows what? Did the ministry do an ag impact assessment there?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** At the time, I know the municipality gathered their best minds together to realize an opportunity. But for specifics, I'm very blessed to have technical expertise and specifics with me. Let me first defer to my deputy minister, John Kelly. He may have a little more insight on that specific case.

**Mr. John Kelly:** I'm John Kelly, deputy minister for the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness. Thank you, Minister. You're 100% correct surrounding the Wilmot land assembly process. That was done by the local jurisdiction, if you will, who had the lead for that.

I am going to pull in one of my ADMs to give the specifics of what happened there. David Hagarty, I think you're the one I'm going to bring in for that one.

I think the real story is how critical land use is and that there has to be a balanced approach to the use of land. You know very well that we're under a lot of pressure from different uses, whether it's municipalities trying to expand their borders, whether it's companies trying to find new places to do their work.

The minister is correct with the agricultural impact assessments, that when they were brought in, they were brought in so that the agriculture use was a strong con-

sideration in any decision that was made there for these types of things. We've gone further, I think, in some of these things. If you look at how—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** One minute remaining.

**Mr. John Kelly:** One minute?

If you look at how various ongoing land use has been done in specialty crop areas, it's been quite restricted—because we know that that land is very, very restricted. It's very small areas.

The second area is, the agricultural impact assessments are done on prime agriculture areas, not prime agriculture land here and hither. The idea there is to not have the Swiss cheese impact on land use.

But, David, do you want to come forward and finish that discussion?

**Mr. David Hagarty:** David Hagarty, assistant deputy minister, policy division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness. We did talk about this last year, as well: that it is the responsibility of the region of Waterloo to—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** That concludes the time for the official opposition. We'll move on to the third party.

MPP Tsao, go ahead.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Thank you very much, Chair. I want to start by thanking the minister for taking the time to be here today as well as thank the members of the Ontario public service, specifically from OMAFA, to be here. I know how much work goes into preparing for meetings like this, so thank you for everything that you do every day for the people of Ontario.

I have a small introductory statement and then some questions that have been prepared—actually, given to me by our agriculture critic, who is unable to be here, the member for Kingston and the Islands.

Minister—through you, Chair—the challenges facing our farmers today are unlike any we've seen in recent memory. As farmable land continues to shrink due to urban expansion and competing land use pressures, producers are also contending with increasing severity of climate-related events, more intense storms, prolonged droughts and unpredictable growing conditions that threaten both yields and livelihoods. At the same time, our producers are facing new trade barriers with our largest export partners south of the border. For many small and medium-sized farms, these combined pressures are threatening the very viability of their operations.

So, Minister, when Ontario farmers struggle, every Ontarian feels that impact, including in my own riding in Don Valley North, from rising food prices, disruptions in local supply chains and the erosion of rural economies that have sustained this province for generations.

Minister, farmers are calling for stronger, more direct supports to stabilize the sector, protect Ontario's food security and maintain the resilience of our agri-food system. A resilient, competitive agricultural sector is essential to ensuring that Ontario families continue to have access to affordable, locally produced and sustainable food.

Minister, my first question would be: Given the disruption in global trade, including both agricultural inputs and outputs since January 2025, when you announced a three-year phase-in of an increase to Ontario's Risk Management Program, will you implement the full increase immediately?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Through the Chair to the member opposite: Can you repeat the last couple of words there? You drifted off; I didn't hear what you said.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Yes: Will you plan to implement the full increase immediately?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thank you very much. Again, this is a nice segue from the last topic of conversation. So you have some information on land use and planning, a balanced approach and then that cap we were talking about. For those who may not be aware, that's something that we take, one, farmers' input in; two, market futures and conditions; ground-level reporting, and then the whole network of people that work in the whole suite of services in business risk management, those local farm reps that may be a farmer, a seed dealer and a local rep—we take that ground-level reporting to make the most prudent decision.

In the event of an emergency, I will tell you, I would go to treasury; I would go to the Minister of Finance and say, "We're in dire need. Release it." Right now, with actuarial evidence—ground-level evidence, the real conditions of what's happening—I think it's a prudent approach to phase it in to where we're at now. The fund's not exhausted; it's responsive to the needs of the farmers.

**1340**

Again, I want to provide more insight, because it's a brilliant question. Farmers love that question too. So I'm again going to ask for assistance and support from the technical experts to give a more fulsome answer to your question. I'll turn it first to Deputy Minister John Kelly.

**Mr. John Kelly:** What you're asking about are the different supports that are available for producers. And you're quite correct: RMP, the Risk Management Program, is an Ontario-based program, but it complements other ones, and I am going to call David Hagarty up because he is our specialist, if you will, in BRM programs.

The Risk Management Program supports many, many different parts across the sector, and it does have relatively different amounts going to different sectors.

David, maybe I'll throw it to you and you can talk about RMP and then the regular BRM scenarios.

**Mr. David Hagarty:** Sure, I'd be happy to. As you were going through, you mentioned a number of risks that farmers face that result in production loss: market volatility risk, extreme weather etc. As the deputy mentioned, we do have a full suite of programs in place to help stabilize the income of farmers and help ensure their long-term viability—put them in a position where they can invest in their businesses.

There is a national suite of programs under the Sustainable Canadian Agriculture Partnership with the federal government where the federal government pays a 60% share, the province a 40% share. That includes the AgriStability program, a whole-farm margin-based pro-

gram for large income declines; AgriInvest, which is a savings account where government provides matching contributions; production insurance was mentioned previously for yield losses; and, as the minister said, there's a framework in place called AgriRecovery to deal with disasters. Where those other programs don't provide support, that program can be put in place to address those supports.

But, as you mentioned, Ontario is actually a leader on the business-risk-management programming side, because we do have the RMP program, above and beyond the national suite of programs. That program began as \$100 million—the minister mentioned this in his opening remarks—and went to \$150 million, and now there's a commitment to increase that to \$250 million, beginning with \$30 million this year. So it will be a \$180-million program this year to assist farmers with a commitment for the remaining funding to come in place in future years.

I'll mention also, very quickly, with the AgriStability program, a number of enhancements were made to that program to deal with exactly some of the risks that you mentioned over this past year: extending the enrolment deadline a few months until July 31; increasing the compensation rate so when farmers do trigger, they get 90% support rather than 80%; doubling the payment cap for very large operations from \$3 million to \$6 million; and including additional allowable expenses to deal with some of this so that you don't have to wait for the AgriRecovery program. It would be built into the actual suite of programs to provide that support sooner.

And at the national level, they're looking for additional enhancements they can make to the national suite of programs so it can be more responsive for farmers.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Great. Well, I appreciate that, and I think those programs that you mentioned are essential. The more programs and supports we can have for farmers—I think we all would agree it's a good thing.

I wanted to hone in a bit more specifically on the Risk Management Program, not the rest of the suite of services and supports available, because from what I'm hearing, from what I understand, this is a three-year phase-in, so it's tiered. Since the farmers are in need, as you stated, why is the government not looking to do this immediately rather than having this three-year phase-in? Get rid of the phase-in and just do it immediately.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thanks again for the question, through the Chair. Again, we've kind of discussed that. We got input from farmers. We check ambient weather conditions, growing conditions, precipitation levels. We check the whole geography and the climatography of Ontario, talk to the people doing the programs, and we assess the need based on those needs.

If we have to activate something—again, you can put measures forward to enable access to that money, but it's there anyway for posterity. It's there and can be accessed.

It's a phased-in approach because you want to commit smaller dollars to potential. Again, in a time of dire need, with a snap of a finger and some conversations in our chamber, that can happen.

But again, to hone in on this, the RMP thing—to make sure we're crystal clear, again, I'll defer to my assistant deputy minister to laser-focus in on the RMP portion and the reason for the phased-in approach. I have to introduce my assistant deputy minister.

**Mr. David Hagarty:** Sorry. I thought I thought you had meant “deputy minister.” David Hagarty, assistant deputy minister, policy division, Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

Yes, I think it really was based on need. We're making a number of enhancements to those other programs. You'll recall that that is a program above and beyond the national suite. Quebec is another province that offers support, but we're the only two provinces that offer support above the national suite, so pretty significant support, bringing it in as the demands increase. The support will increase in subsequent years as well. I think that it was intended to be a very measured approach to bring in the support over a three-year period to address need as it increases.

The one thing I'll mention re: trade is that the farmers have been, I think, somewhat fortunate that most of our products are CUSMA-compliant. The 35% tariffs by the federal government—recognizing they're having some challenges on the input side, as well, in terms of the products they produce, they've been fortunately, for now, somewhat insulated from those tariff impacts.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** I know right now that the grain farmers themselves have called for the immediate bump-up, to forgo this three-year phase-in. If I'm hearing correctly, if there are enough demand and requests from the agricultural sector from farmers who need this help and say, “You know, we can't wait three years. We want the bump-up now,” would the government be willing to commit to that?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thanks again for the question. Through you, Chair: This is a work in progress. We're making progress as recent as this fall at the federal-provincial-territorial tables.

Ontario is a model for what this suite of services could become and almost the envy across the country, because Ontario and Quebec are the only ones that have additional supports over and above what's guaranteed federally. We've had very candid, frank and non-partisan conversations with every member at the FPT table, including Minister MacDonald federally. If we don't have the expertise, we get it.

I know this is a sincere interest of yours. I'm going to offer my deputy minister an opportunity to hone in on that phased-in approach and why we're doing what we're doing to be prudent, first to balance the taxpayer's dollars—it's not our money; it's the province of Ontario's money—to make sure it's deployed strategically when it's needed and how it's needed. Thank you.

Deputy Minister?

**Mr. John Kelly:** John Kelly, deputy minister of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

The one thing I will add is that these are joint programs with producers. Producers do have a stake in the game; it's not just government money that is there. So we've been

getting the producers up to a consistent level across all different production types, and we're slowly getting there.

By having a phased-in program, (1) you're not shocking the system, (2) you're increasing the supports that go back to producers, and (3) you're also helping those producers as they phase into the program.

It's more than just, "Well, here's \$100 million," because they have to put some money into it as well.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Thank you very much. My next question I want to ask with the remainder of my time is to focus in now on the shortage of abattoirs, specifically in eastern Ontario. That's not just because these questions come from my colleague from Kingston and the Islands, but because there is a real shortage out in that part of the province.

1350

What is the ministry doing to address this shortage, and what can we expect to be done?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Outstanding question again. Processing is part of my business, and also—through you, Chair—processing capacity is critical. It's a critical investment we need, and now we have to try and garner the support to get that. We're working very hard on that.

Part of it is building the scale, understanding what the market can sustain, who the customers are and then that throughput: close to the farm, close to producers, less transportation miles. But knowing against the backdrop of a system we've had, we've had 30, 40, 50 years or more of unfettered trade between our network of customers, processors and growers.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** One minute left.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** You'll see cattle or you'll see hogs being grown in Ontario, processed in Michigan and maybe on to customers both for Ontario and Michigan and beyond, because we have those strategic investments and that know-how there.

President Trump changed that. I think it's a very noteworthy question because now that dialogue has changed. There's a sense of urgency. I want to share with you, through the deputy minister, a few of the things we're doing to increase site capacity now and to make it a clear and present opportunity to do that now.

So, without further ado: Deputy Minister.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Thank you, Minister. John Kelly, deputy minister, Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

Certainly, the challenge of food processing around the province is something that we're focused in on. The food processing sector is the largest manufacturing sector within the province. So it's a key one for us to work on.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** And that concludes the time.

Before we move on to the government side, I just wanted to let the staff know that once you've made your introduction, you're good. Hansard is able to record it, so you don't need to reintroduce.

Also, just a reminder to the members to direct your questions through the Chair and then, for follow-up, I will give you the floor. It should just go through the Chair.

I will start the government side with MPP Vickers.

**MPP Paul Vickers:** Through the Chair: \$51 billion-plus is a large number for GDP in the province of Ontario, and it's a large number for the economy. Those kinds of numbers don't happen by accident. There are many ways to help keep increasing the agri-food sector.

Minister, I had the pleasure of joining you at the announcement at the agricultural research and innovation centre in Elora. We were there to announce a \$41-million investment into agriculture research and innovation. These investments, plus our overall strategy when it comes to agriculture research and innovation, are helping to protect farmers in this time of uncertainty. Could you speak to our overall strategy when it comes to research and innovation?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thank you to my colleague for the question—through you, Chair. It's probably the most impactful announcement I've ever had the privilege of delivering and participating in, and a lot of good work from around the province went into that announcement. I'll tell you, ARIO, as it's known—Agricultural Research and Innovation Ontario—was recently modernized, and I had the pleasure of debating on that. We had really good conversation in the chamber about that. Actually, to clarify the fine lines of what that new version should be, that new vision: It's a shared vision. It's a non-partisan, shared vision.

I have the honour of sitting in cabinet and educating my colleagues. More than half of my job, I think, is education. We educate the community about what we can do. We educate our colleagues about what agriculture is and what it can be. To offer \$41 million in one shot to the 14 separate research stations, the ARIO stations, around the province—New Liskeard to Emo, to all the way down to Ridgetown and Cedar Springs in my backyard and all around—these are the people doing the work. But the people in the building: That's the gift that keeps giving to Ontario, because they have staying power. They're connected to the land, and they're connected to the work.

At a research station visit at the muck research station in the Holland Marsh—you have that beautiful black loam field. It's special to me, because that's the field I was born on; that was in my backyard. I didn't actually see other dirt until much later in life. I thought it was all black loam.

The people in that research station—it's humble trappings. It's an older building that's beautifully maintained, and I don't think it's changed from the furniture in the 1970s that were there, but I'm telling you, the people there take pride in it. But the people there have staying power.

The tour guide that day had more than 30 years' experience in Ontario's public service. He was teasing the rookie member at the muck research station who was not even close to his 20th year yet—just on the verge of his 20th year. That goes to show you that the people there are doing the best research. They're bringing in master's-level and PhD students not just from Guelph, but from around the

province and around the world, doing research that matters to Ontario.

We're investing in the minds and the people and the infrastructure that supports them, and the facilities and the capital expenditures that are necessary to have a greenhouse that looks like a modern greenhouse; a research station that has the facilities, the trappings and all the devices, machines and instruments to make research modern into 2025 and beyond, so that next generation of researchers can enjoy that. It's the honour of a lifetime to invest in both the people and the facilities.

But to break it down a little bit, it's diversified research. I talked about the muck research station. New Liskeard is doing some brilliant work, as well, for the soil types and the climate types in the near north, but that includes \$10.5 million for the Ontario Poultry Research Centre and \$15.5 million in funding for the Ontario Feed Innovation Centre at the Elora Research Station, which is a campus of excellence.

If we can determine throughout a purpose-built feed mill, that can—with the agility that may not have that same flexibility in a modern, open and private feed mill, we can put the recipe in to feed our livestock and our poultry the most nutritious and the most cost-effective feed to make sure we have the healthiest flocks, the healthiest livestock and the best output.

More specifically, I would like to pass the few moments I have left to the deputy minister to highlight a few of those components of the research that are really exciting, really unique and really world-changing.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Thank you, Minister. I don't have to introduce myself, so that's good.

This is a really cool thing that we do with our research here, and I'm going to call Greg Wootton up shortly, who is our managing director for ARIO and our CAO.

The Elora campus, which the minister has referred to, is world-renowned. It puts us on the map and compares us to places like Wageningen in the Netherlands or Cornell University in the United States, or maybe Adelaide in Australia. These are all world-class research institutes.

Because of the work that ARIO does—Greg, if you can come up, that would be good—it allows our researchers, not only from the University of Guelph but from all over the province, to support Ontario's position in research and innovation and commercialization.

Greg, if you could just talk a little bit about that, that would be great.

**Mr. Greg Wootton:** Sure, and maybe I'll build a little bit. I'm Greg Wotton, Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness, CAO and ADM, research and corporate services division.

Maybe I'll build on some of the minister's comments around research specifically and ARIO. For those around the table here, you may be interested to know that ARIO was first started in 1962 and has a long history of providing research and innovation for Ontario's farmers and producers over that period of time.

One of the advantages that Ontario has through ARIO is the longevity of that capacity and that research asset.

Just an example of that is the decades-long soil research that we are able to do—this is unlike other areas—where we are able to track nutrients, available nutrients, productivity etc., on specific pieces of property in different locations under different weather conditions etc. That's a major advantage.

**1400**

The other thing to note, particularly in Ontario, given the impact of the Great Lakes, is that we have a number of micro-climates. This is one of the reasons we have so many research stations across the province, not simply one. Ontario producers have to deal with a variety of weather and climate conditions, as well as soil conditions. And of course they're growing different products—as you may know, as many as 200 different commodities are produced in the province—within those various environmental states. Again, the number of assets we have across the province is quite helpful.

I'd also share—and this is, actually, from the estimates briefing book—that it's estimated that actual farm production has risen by 60% between the years 2000 and 2024. That's quite amazing, but I would also make the point that ongoing research is crucial. Agriculture is one of those places where investment in research is required not just to increase yields, but to maintain yields. Because of changing weather conditions, invasive species, new diseases that arise etc., if you aren't investing in that research, you actually run the risk of yields starting to go down. Staying ahead of disease, staying ahead of changing environmental conditions etc. is critical to the success of producers in Ontario.

Maybe the last point I'll make—and, again, it kind of builds on some of the comments by the minister and the deputy minister—is on tying research to risk. It has been noted previously—these are not my thoughts or words—that agricultural research is actually a form of pre-emptive risk management. In other words, having that capacity to do research in the field and understand what the implications are for Ontario farmers is a form of risk management. Again, without it, there's greater risk and the potential of reduced yields over time.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Next, MPP Pinsonneault.

**Mr. Steve Pinsonneault:** Thank you, Minister, for being here, along with your staff. I believe all parties here appreciate the effort and dedication you've put into this portfolio.

Through you, Chair, to the minister: Southwestern Ontario, as you're aware, is home to the largest greenhouse sector in Canada. This sector feeds millions of people and supports thousands of jobs in your community, as well as mine. Our government is a huge supporter of this sector. Can you please talk about the investments that we've made into the greenhouse business to support them?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thank you, MPP Pinsonneault. Through you, Chair: It's a badge of honour to have the opportunity to learn about this sector that was kind of in my backyard growing up my whole life. As many of you know—I won't bore you with the details—I left a long

career in public service because I really believed in and had a passion for food security. It was mostly my experience in the Far North, in our most remote areas and some of our Indigenous communities, where I didn't see whole communities' access to fresh food, when we have such an abundance. That was always on my mind.

Then, with the support of my family and my community, I took a leap of faith and I left a rewarding career in law enforcement, in public service, to move into fresh food production, because I thought I could make a difference. After 20 years of watching people and understanding people, developing empathy, connecting people to resources and solving kind of wicked or very complex problems, I thought, "Here is a problem I can contribute to."

Through that leap of faith, I did that, and I learned from some of the best. I learned that it starts with policy. It starts with a dream, kind of an entrepreneurial vision of a farmer saying, "I'm going to grow field crops. I'm going trust myself to propagate those little plants in a protected environment and replant those little crops in the field. I'll follow the beautiful Ontario growing season, and with a little bit of luck and some ingenuity, I'll have a good yield and a good harvest and do it again for 30 or 40 more years."

That grew to a few people having a vision, saying, "Wait a second; let's continue to nudge Mother Nature." We have a nice, flat environment. We have close access to the international borders of the US and the 401 highway system to connect all of Ontario—and Canada, really—and we have the Great Lakes microclimate. It's a special climate that kind of tempers the cold and the hot and makes it more viable. So through great risk and their own money, growers started growing year-round. They started growing in structures—again, nudging Mother Nature in doing it.

This is something I learned and grew up with, because a lot of my high school friends would leave football practice after high school and go home and work on their family farms. Sometimes my ability to see them in the evening was, "I'm going to have help out at their farm for a couple hours and do some chores, learn that and learn the science and the sorcery that is greenhouse growing." I would simply ask a farmer.

As a high school kid and as a university kid, I did that in the flesh on real-life farms. And then I got to do it professionally. All I did to learn that trade: I asked a farmer. I said, "Tell me what you're doing here. Explain the technologies. Explain how these tomato plants grow, these cucumbers grow. Tell me about their yields. Tell me about pressures, about diseases." I learned it from farmers.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** One minute.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** I would go to the greenhouses and the warehouses and learn from the shippers and the receivers and the seed reps and all these different people.

And now, as your minister, when we had a chance to concentrate—again, scarce money and scarce investment to move the needle, I looked to irrigation in Niagara. Moving the needle: a special climate, special growing conditions, a special market in southwestern Ontario for

greenhouses. The same conditions: special high-value products doing it well, leading the world, with \$41 million for southwestern Ontario for very important but maybe non-sexy sewer separations to bring water and waste water to allow those farms, houses and employment lands to grow and to allow Niagara to do what we all know Niagara does best.

That's the value proposition. It was my privilege and honour to announce that just recently.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** That concludes the government's time.

Now back to the official opposition. MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you for your comments, Minister.

When we left off, we were talking about ag impact assessments, and I'm going to go back there. But when I asked about farmland preservation—and this is just a comment—you did a really good job about the greenhouse sector and a good job about northern Ontario. But I drive every week from Timiskaming to Toronto, and every week, I can count acres that we're losing, acres that will never grow 200 or 250 bushels of corn again—every week. We need to take that into account.

My question on ag impact assessments: I understand that they're done by the ministry. They're not done on individual parcels; they're done on areas. What triggers an ag impact assessment? When does the ministry do an ag impact assessment?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** I've never done that drive, or at least not in this life I've not done that drive, to see that live. I know our former Minister of Agriculture, a friend and mentor to me and colleague and friend of yours, saw that live. He saw it happening live when he was growing up as a kid in Mississauga–Streetsville. He saw some of the most productive land in Ontario for a whole range of specialty crops and everything under the sun. But we're a growing community, and that land was needed.

I'd like to think that we now have sober second thought to learn from some of the good things we did back then when Mississauga–Streetsville was wide open, beautiful, fresh farmland. Now it's high rises, employment lands and housing. We can do that better, and that balanced approach is, to me, that sober second thought, that safeguard.

How it's triggered—I want to do your question justice, because I know it's sincere and it means something to you because you see that. To explain that balanced approach, I am going to tap on my deputy's shoulder to explain a little bit of that, so it's on record and so we have a fulsome understanding.

Deputy?

**Mr. John Kelly:** MPP Vanthof, a really good question. One point of clarification is that the AIAs aren't actually done by the ministry; they're done by the proponent. They are the responsibility of the proponent to bring those forward.

Rather than me trying to waffle through this—and I can—we've brought in Andrea Martin, who's the director who's responsible for this area, so I would like Andrea to come up and give a discussion on that.

1410

This is a really important area for us and, again, as you mentioned, talking about prime agricultural areas rather than prime agricultural land is something that we really believe in, and trying to avoid taking a little pocket here, a little pocket there.

Andrea, over to you.

**Ms. Andrea Martin:** Andrea Martin, director of food safety and environmental policy, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness. I'm happy to provide a little bit more information on ag impact assessments.

As the deputy mentioned, these are things that are done by proponents, and they're done any time a non-agricultural use is going to happen in a prime agricultural area. They look at things like how to avoid—are there ways to avoid prime ag areas? As the deputy mentioned, you have prime ag areas and rural land designations; is it possible for it to be on rural lands instead of prime ag? Then it goes through and looks at both minimizing impacts: Are there ways to minimize? If you can't have it somewhere else, how can you minimize those impacts and how can you mitigate those?

Recently, we just had the energy procurement. There was a long-term energy procurement that happened, and for the first time, we had a requirement for an ag impact assessment to be done on that. You need to look at, "Can you avoid?", and then can you look at ways to minimize and mitigate.

They have to be done by a professional and they go forward to the municipality to make an evaluation of how those have been done. The ministry doesn't do them, nor does the ministry—just to the deputy's point—approve them. Those are the municipalities that look at those.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you. That clarifies a lot.

Under the bill that's before us, schedule 10 of Bill 60, it basically exempts—the minister can overrule the Ontario provincial policy statement. So, really, is there any value in—

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Point of order.

*Interjections.*

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Okay. I appreciate that. I withdraw.

My question, then, regardless of legislation: It goes to the municipality; at any time, does the Ministry of Agriculture look at the bigger picture and say, "This is of provincial significance"? Does the ministry have the capacity to say, "We get it, municipality. You need this and this and this, but this is an area of provincial significance." Does that exist?

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Point of order.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Go ahead, MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** We are discussing the estimates of the 2025-26 budget. I fail to see anywhere in the estimates from this ministry where that is actually a topic that they are reporting on here.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** If I may, Chair—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Yes, go ahead.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** In the estimates briefing book, one of the ministry priorities is securing sustainable and resilient food supply for Ontarians. Since that's in the estimates briefing book and the minister's salary is paid for in these estimates, I think it's a legitimate question.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** I would concur. Continue, MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** I know this question comes from a great place. Through the Chair, again, I want to continue on and allow our colleagues with the technical expertise.

I would say, as an elected official and a lawmaker, you have those conversations. You have the trust in the government to say that, "Wait a second. Are there unintended consequences? Is there a loss of high-value land?" Your guiding document is the provincial planning statement, right? So, as a guiding light, you go there. We have the experts in-house, through several ministries, to consult and to share information and insights.

With that, if I can please refer to my colleague to expand a little bit on that—the PPS portion.

**Ms. Andrea Martin:** As the minister said, we have the provincial policy statement that sets the guidance for municipalities to do things like their official plans. Those official plans go through what's called the one-window protocol into MAH, and then out to partner ministries for their review.

We at the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness review the staff, review those official plans and the designation of the lands and what the plans are for growth. We report back and provide our assessment on whether or not those official plans meet what the PPS says regarding agricultural impacts.

So that goes beyond the agricultural impact assessments. It also includes the other thing that has changed with the PPS, the new one: that there now is a requirement province-wide that municipalities must take an ag systems approach. Similar to ag AIAs, ag impact assessments that were only within the GGH before, now they are also required to take an ag systems approach. That's beyond just the land; it includes the mapping and the land, but it also includes all the other infrastructure. Whether that is transportation, processing or inputs, there's a need to take an ag systems approach in the official plans as part of the PPS.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I appreciate that. Thank you.

I'm just going to switch gears to an area I know very well, so northern Ontario. I appreciate that there is a lot of potential in northern Ontario. I would challenge a little bit that that land is unused now, because there will be people in the forestry sector who will take exception to that. I'm a farmer by trade, but most, and specifically crown, land, is all under forest management plans, so there will be some controversy.

But I have specific areas in my riding, townships, where previously the farms were all small and people had jobs off the farm. The vast majority of the land—and I'll use one township in particular—has been bought by two hedge funds or pension funds, and basically—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Please ensure that the question is directed towards ministry operation.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Yes, this is very well ministry, because it has to do with the sustainability of agriculture.

The population in that township has gone from 500 to 100, and the township is coming close to no longer being able to sustain infrastructure for agriculture, because agriculture needs roads.

I'm not bringing this up as a—this needs to be on the table somewhere. This is going to be, as northern Ontario is developed—there's not a lot of people there. People have this idea that it's going to be little start-up farms that are going to take this land over and that isn't proving to be the case, and it's something that we're grappling with seriously, Chair.

When I travel down here, there is much more—it's part of the problem too. There's much more multi-use and there are factories. But where we are, where agriculture is developed, there are miles with nothing but agriculture, and you're having this in other areas too. I think, long-term, we have to think about how we sustain services for that.

I'm just wondering: Has that come up on the ministry's radar? I know it's municipal affairs, but it's very layered. It comes from the fact that whole areas are depopulating, because an investment firm buys the land, drains it and tears the buildings down, because they don't want to pay taxes, and they rent the land out. That is stripping municipalities of their ability to provide those services. It's just a point I'm bringing up that I haven't been able to bring up anywhere else, and I just want to put it on the record.

Another one I'd like to bring up: We have other areas that Mennonite and Amish communities are buying, and they're doing a lot of work. I think you've seen it, Minister—it's incredible. It's incredible. But they face challenges because, similarly, municipalities aren't able to keep bridges open, so it's forcing them onto Highway 11. We've had accidents on Highway 11 with horse-and-buggies that shouldn't have been there.

Again, I appreciate, Chair, that it's not directly, perhaps, this committee's purview, but it is the minister's purview in serving a sustainable and resilient food supply for Ontario, because those communities are very much—I know how much the minister cares about local food. There is no one who's more local food than the Mennonite community.

**1420**

Again, it's a municipal problem that they can't afford—when you close a bridge and someone has to go 10 miles around on Highway 11 with a horse-and-buggy on the Trans-Canada Highway, that's a problem.

Now I will go back. I know I'm testing you, Chair, and that is not my intent.

This morning, the Premier said in question period that agriculture faced challenges from the agriculture sector in China. I'm not going to ask what the Premier meant about that, but I know the government is concerned regarding foreign ownership of key resources. Is the Ministry of

Agriculture concerned at all about foreign entities buying agricultural property? Or are you monitoring it?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thank you for that. I think it's a work in progress. Through you, Chair: A whole suite of exceptional questions are on the record. These are conversations we have improvised in the hallways and in the chamber sometimes—all good points.

To go back to your point on China specifically, the world is our market. The world should be our market. I've never had the opportunity to travel to China. My son who's in agribusiness has travelled to China. He sees the opportunity, the high concentration of people, and the fact that as the quality of life improves and as the earning potential of a family anywhere in the world improves, one thing holds true: What changes first—it might be the member asking the question that told me this one time; he'll take credit for it—is your diet. Your diet improves immediately. As soon as your standard of living improves, your diet improves. What improves with your diet is, usually, lean proteins are introduced, or maybe a grain-based diet. Suddenly, it leaps forward in the future, and it includes beef, pork, poultry and all the wide range of meats. So that holds true.

China is an important market for all of Ontario's commodities. We're feeling the impact most because of the trade—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Thank you, Minister.

We will move on to the third party. MPP Tsao, go ahead.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Thank you, Chair. Through you, I wanted to come back and give the deputy a chance to finish his thought on abattoirs. I think that's where we left off earlier, about the lack of abattoirs in eastern Ontario. Please feel free.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Thank you for the question. I will follow up on what we're doing with meat processing in the north. Renée, I'm going to pull you up here for this one.

There are a number of things that happen in the north. One of the challenges we have within the north is the great distance: the distance that people have to move their commodities, move their animals, to get to an abattoir. One of the things that we have been working with at the FPT level is trying to find ways to become more efficient across provincial borders. In the Timiskaming area, for example, we have some Quebec producers who currently have to ship their animals eight hours or more to get to an abattoir, when there's an abattoir within about 45 minutes of where they're going.

Federal and provincial laws challenge us in that these are provincially inspected facilities on either side of the border. Renée, if I get this wrong, you'll correct me, but the rules are that for provincially inspected products, meats and animals, they have to stay within the borders. They're not federally inspected, so they're not done by CFIA. We're trying to address that with a program called—trying to find a way to fix the border issue, because it's really just an imaginary line in that case.



Renée, maybe you can talk about that, and also some of the things that we're doing to support food safety inspection in the north.

**Ms. Renée Bowler:** Absolutely. Good afternoon. My name is Renée Bowler. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the food safety and environment division at the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

Yes, as the deputy mentioned, we do have a pilot program that we are working with the federal government on to help provide slaughter services in border regions. We are working on a framework that would, as the deputy mentioned, allow for inspections to happen in Ontario for the slaughter portion of processing and for that meat to move back across to Quebec for sale. This is a pilot that is in development, but we have a lot of support from our federal counterparts at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to explore this as an opportunity to advance into provincial trade.

We have done a number of things we have done a number of things to help ensure that we can support the sector and enable and ensure that there are inspection services available. Some things that we have done include increasing the number of food safety inspectors that we have available to conduct inspection. You may be aware that in Ontario, in order for slaughter to occur, a food safety inspector does have to be present in an abattoir. So that was a really important investment that we made in terms of increasing food safety inspectors by about 30% in the province.

In addition, we've really focused on trying to make it easier for businesses to become licensed, so we've reduced and eliminated some licence fees. For example, a renewal of a licence fee at an abattoir has been eliminated.

We've worked hard to streamline the licensing process. We work really closely with new businesses that want to open abattoirs, and help them understand the regulatory requirements and expedite that licensing process so that they can enter the marketplace quickly.

We've increased our focus on industry education and outreach to make sure that there's a strong food safety culture, because, of course, while we want to have access to slaughter services, it's ultimately very important that we have safe food. So a proper approach to food safety is imperative.

We also have a food safety and growth initiative that helps existing plants deliver their services more effectively and efficiently. This is funding that allows plants to increase their overall capacity.

I would say that while we're always trying to support the sector and ensure that there are slaughter services available, I can confirm that for red meat alone, since 2020, we've seen an increase of about 15% in the number of animals moving through slaughter plants in Ontario. So we have been able to keep up with significant increase in demand over the past five years.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Wonderful. Thank you.

For the next part of my questions, I want to focus on cost and shortage of services. We know that pressures on farmers are causing increases in terms of costs, and they're

looking for ways to simply make ends meet on a farm here in Ontario. Given right now that we're going through significantly turbulent economic times, what exactly is the government and your ministry doing—through you, Chair—to keep the cost of safety inspections for farm vehicles in particular, which need to go on the road from time to time—what are you doing to keep those costs down for farmers?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thank you for the question. Through you, Chair: It's not specifically under the purview of my ministry for the—I think you're referring to the—let me see if I can remember the acronym: PMCMVI, periodic mandatory commercial motor vehicle inspections. It's a regime that I have a little bit of informal familiarity with, but it will be under the purview of the Ministry of Transportation how that schedule is maintained, what the schedule looks like, what the parameters are and who does what. It would be an excellent question for the Minister of Transportation; he would know.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Absolutely. Let's focus, then, on the shortages of services on farms. Specifically, here, we're looking at a shortage of services when it comes to dead stock removal companies, large animal veterinarians, farm machinery mechanics. This is a reality that farmers are facing around the province. What is the government and your ministry specifically doing to address these shortages?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Certainly. Through you, Chair: It's like the member sits at my dinner table, because these are the things that keep me up at night. These are the real-world problems that we're facing. It's a challenge and an impact felt around North America and around the world. I heard it in Winnipeg at the FPT table. I heard it in Mexico City and in Morelia at the Tri-National Agricultural Accord. These are the wicked problems that we have to put our minds to to solve.

**1430**

Let's talk about vets first, because you have a bunch of competing interests: different trades, different expertise. The vets are kind of related to high technical expertise—definitely a necessary component on any farm with live-stock and issues that are exacerbated in the north in remote areas. This is something we're taking head-on.

So, first off is making critical investments through the Grow Ontario Strategy, which was announced in 2022: investments in the education and the professional training and incentives to train veterinarians in the north and to hopefully have them retain their services, build their practices and stay practicing in the north. It's a partnership launched through the University of Guelph to Lakehead University, again bringing expertise, know-how and awareness.

First of all, increasing the number of seats: It's a highly competitive and highly specialized program that only takes the best of the best. First is increasing the number of seats through that second cohort in Lakehead.

Second is taking a more holistic view of applicants. It's talking to the college, saying, "We want the best of the best. They have to be life sciences experts. But let's look

at communities that are under-served.” There are applicants from those communities. They might have a 93% undergraduate average in health sciences, biochemistry, you name it. Let’s look at these applicants from northern communities. Perhaps they want to stay and study and develop that expertise in northern communities and stay practicing in northern communities, hopefully, on large animal health.

So again: increase the number of seats; increase the partnership with a stellar university. We saw the launch up in Thunder Bay, so it will hopefully keep those people there. And then they’re the ones who are going to help out with identifying business opportunities for something like dead stock removal, which people from outside the farming community won’t know much about. But when an animal expires on a farm, there’s a protocol. What did the animal expire from? Was it a disease? Was it an injury? We need a vet here to, first of all, almost pronounce the death, to give the information back to the farmer to say this is what’s happening. It could be old age, it could be a parasite, it could be an injury or it could be a disease.

And then to get the company involved, which is normally a private sector company—again, under the purview of many different ministries as far as regulations and operating a licence to remove that animal safely and dispose of it safely—is it something that could be rendered and used for animal food for by-products? Is it something that has to be just simply buried and taken care of? Incinerated? All these different variables.

You’ve identified a number of different opportunities. This is the stuff we’re working on right now to make those investments in because it’s the stuff keeping me up at night, and probably the member to your right as well.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Well, thank you very much for that response. It’s greatly appreciated.

To your point about being at your dinner table, I would love to be there. But I would say that credit has to go to my colleague from Kingston and the Islands, who spent the entire summer speaking with farmers, so the questions I have here today are coming directly from the feedback that he’s gotten from farming communities across the province. I’m glad we’re able to be here today as a committee from all parties to bring forward questions on behalf of farmers across this province, to help to advance their cause and hopefully make life a little bit easier for farming families across the province.

Minister, with my last remaining bit of time—through you, Chair—I wanted to touch perhaps a bit on processing. I know we talked about food processing already a little bit, but I wanted to get more thoughts on fruit processing. What exactly is your ministry doing to increase fruit processing in Ontario, given the current situation with the United States? We don’t want to see those things going south of the border anymore. So what are we doing in Ontario to increase capacity?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Just to clarify, through you, Chair: You said “fruit processing?”

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Fruit, yes: fruit.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Okay, perfect. I’m going to feel really good about this because it’s very close to my heart and it’s something that, as a lifelong learner, I’ve had, again, the privilege of touring, like your colleague did, and speaking and meeting with, getting insights and learning.

Food processors everywhere, including in the Chair’s literal backyard, at Nortera, which you might know as the famous Green Giant facility—we talked with 30-year employees there. They’re doing basically fruit and vegetable processing. That day we were there, this summer, was a hot day. The Premier was there, the Chair was there and a number of other members were there. We learned about sweet pea processing, corn processing and how timely it has to be. Again, your colleague to your right will say that if you’re harvesting sweet peas, it’s time-sensitive. It’s got to be fresh; it’s got to be fast. You’ll see these processors working oftentimes in the middle of the night.

Then you get a little closer to my backyard, which is a lot of tomato processing, at the historic Heinz plant, which is now Highbury Canco Corp. Basically, their book of business is bigger than Heinz was. They’re doing the same things. There will be more diverse customers. If you’re getting Tostitos salsa at a Costco near you, it’s made in Leamington, with tomatoes from Leamington—not California, not elsewhere; local products. Local peppers, hot peppers, jalapenos, local onions, local tomatoes: All these things are local and close to home.

So, we have to open up our opportunities for funds. Through the OTTF and similar funds like that, we’ve actually increased that awareness for these fruit and vegetable processors to compete, expand their book of business, expand their processing capacity and invest in the technology. Sometimes one small machine that upskills labour—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** One minute.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** —will be a million-dollar price tag. So giving them access to, again, that processing capacity, the speed of business, to expand their book of business, to expand their market segment: These are all things we’re doing right now. Nortera, Highbury Canco Corp., Weil’s Food Processing and Sun-Brite Canning—all absolute mavens in the food processing area with 30-year and 40-year expertise—have asked us, “What can we do better? What can we do more? What funds might we have available?” Which is now my job and your job collectively, to say to your government, “We have to do this now.”

So I’ve had these talks with Minister Fedeli, saying, “Food is good. Food can be sexy. Food can be innovative. Food is for what’s next.” Electric vehicles and auto manufacturing—definitely a very important piece of the pie. I’d argue that at \$52 billion—

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** That’s all the time we have for our third party.

We’ll move on to the government side. MPP Kanapathi.

**Mr. Logan Kanapathi:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister, for that presentation, and thank you for your leadership. You and me share some information about

agriculture in the House most of the time, and really, thank you for your leadership and passion for the agriculture industries, not only in Ontario; in Canada. Also, thank you to your staff. You have amazing staff: the ministry staff and political staff. You are a good team to talk about agriculture.

The agriculture industry is the heartbeat of our economy—not only the economy; it's the heartbeat of our country and the province. Food inflation, the food price crisis, all are big things these days—affecting.

So my question to you, Minister, is—I love wine. I promote Ontario wine, even though some of the restaurants in my riding, they use American wine. Now, they don't have any American wine anymore. I go around and tell them, “Why don't you sell Ontario wine? We have the best wine in the country, second to none.”

Minister, people in the province are proud of the amazing wine that is produced here in Ontario's backyard. The wine sector employs thousands of people across the province. Our world-class wine is also why so many people go to Niagara: to try Ontario's amazing wine. However, wineries are facing challenges from external threats through trade, drought.

So please, Minister, tell me about supporting the wine program that we have to help wineries get through this difficult time.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thank you very much to my colleague for that question. Again, as a lifelong learner, this is something I'm learning about. We know about our industry. Ontario's beverage alcohol sector is the largest in Canada. It contributes billions to the economy. It supports the 200 wineries and 500 grape growers.

I spoke earlier about the strategic irrigation investment in Niagara, which was \$41 million directly benefiting tender fruit, grape growers, the wine sector and the whole of agriculture in the Niagara region. That's one big investment we're making. Again, I can only make that because we have a collective voice in the House. It's a very non-partisan voice; it's a voice—

*Interruption.*

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Excuse me, Minister. I'll have to pause you. It looks as if there's a vote that will happen in the chambers shortly, with the bells ringing and the lights going. We will adjourn at this point—

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** We'll talk more about wine—through you, Chair.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Yes.

We will adjourn until following the vote on opposition day number 1.

*The committee recessed from 1440 to 1459.*

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** We will resume the meeting following the adjournment.

I will pass the floor back to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness to continue his response to MPP Kanapathi.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Through you, Chair. Thanks for everyone's patience and participation in the democratic process.

Carrying on where we left off: The wine and the alcoholic beverage segment is very complementary to what we do in food, so a lot of it comes from the producer. It's the producer—or, in this case, the producer and the bottler and distributors. With their insights, they lead us into the decisions we make. When they talk about targeted and strategic investments, again, we take their advice on their experience. We consider it. We have our experts do the math and work backwards on what types those investments can yield, and we listen.

We talked just before the break about 200 wineries supporting 500 grape growers and some of the investments we've made. That's all investing in a brand that is now competitive worldwide: a brand on quality, on taste, on purity and on really good supply chains that support it. So, part of supporting grape growers and the wine industry is the financial tools, the financial investments.

**1500**

But I want to share with you something that came up from a farmer, from a grape grower. It was a grape grower in Ontario, in concert with our research experts from University of Guelph and elsewhere, who said there's a pest on the horizon that could threaten our crop. So here we are, working together, being led and informed by the producers and by the bottlers. Here we have a pest called the spotted lanternfly, a pest that could wipe out an entire grape crop and change the dynamics of the entire industry. So who would we go to? The experts in the field.

I'd like to say that I'm a work in progress and a lifelong learner, to be a very good generalist, to know enough people that I can pick up the phone and call a friendly dairy farmer, a member of the opposition, and ask him a question and get a really good answer—or a neighbourhood greenhouse grower, or a grape grower, or someone else, or a dairy farmer who happens to be an exceptional parliamentary assistant.

But here we have—this is how farming works. This is how crop production, how agriculture works. You phone a friend, and you get good candid advice with no BS—no disrespect meant for Hansard, but no BS. You're going to get an honest answer from an honest person. If they don't know, collectively, we'll find someone who knows.

So enter the spotted lanternfly. Again, if it was a dairy issue, I'd have lots of colleagues to call. You call the grape growers and they say this pest could wipe out the crops, so we're making strategic investments. At the same time, we're increasing our intelligence-led reporting and those safeguards to make sure that we don't have a pest come in from the southern states that's been seen as close as Pennsylvania and the New York border. If it crosses the Great Lakes, our precious grape crops are vulnerable.

And so, for some of these things, you talk about research and intelligence-led investments based on some of the support programs to grow and strengthen our sector. That includes awareness. And, again, I said earlier, half of my job is education, educating my colleagues from non-farming families or non-rural communities.

And there's fewer and fewer of us in the House. I think we can do a straw poll sometimes when we're in late

debates, and we do a straw poll, and the former ministers of agriculture—I have three of them around me—former Minister Hardeman, Minister Thompson, Minister Flack. We talk about the people. Of the 124 seats in the Legislature, who comes from a farming background? Who has that awareness? And there might be a dozen of us that have a direct awareness, and maybe a dozen more that have a loose association, an awareness per se. That's maybe 24 of 124.

Back 40 or 50 years ago, that number might have been 100 out of 124. So we're fewer and far between, which means something like a program, a financial tool, that can give Ontario wineries and grape growers an edge—we've got to seize upon that. We've got to share that information and share the exponential benefits, the potential that could realize.

When it comes to a pest that can wipe out a crop, just ask a pepper farmer about pepper weevil. I saw that live. When I left my long career in public service, I entered in the fray of the pepper weevil. I saw peppers from Ontario greenhouses and Ontario fields where these beautiful peppers were falling from the sky—like, raining peppers. You see a beautiful pepper with one small spot in it. The farmer cuts open that pepper, full of these evil little beetles from the Southern US that, because of supply chains and shared economies and trade, comes here. So again: intelligence-led investments, both for financial tools and to safeguard our crops against the next wicked disease or pest that comes in from some unknown place.

But I really want to give an opportunity for my deputy minister to introduce one of those subject matter experts when it comes to the financial investments we're making and the pest management we're making when it comes to wine producing, because we can't just give money without that return on the investment. Deputy Minister, I'd like you to introduce one of our colleagues who can speak a little bit more specifically about some of the investments we're making to safeguard and expand Ontario wine and grapes.

**Mr. John Kelly:** So, one of the privileges that I have for working in this ministry is being able to rely on the expertise that exists in the ministry.

Randy Jackiw is the ADM for economic development. He has just an amazing team that he can call on for anything to do with agriculture. So, Randy, over to you.

**Mr. Randy Jackiw:** Thank you very much, Deputy.

Can I ask, Chair, how much time?

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** We have five minutes and 20 seconds remaining.

**Mr. Randy Jackiw:** Okay, great. The name is Randy Jackiw. I'm the assistant deputy minister for economic development in the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

Just building on the points the minister and the deputy have already touched on, I would re-emphasize that a successful wine industry has a very large and complex supply chain and touches a lot of areas. So this is very much multi-ministry, and working with the federal government as well.

To explain some of that: We've touched on things like irrigation. In the Niagara Peninsula, in the Niagara-on-the-Lake area especially, there's a really sophisticated infrastructure that's integrated with the Welland Canal. They're building on that and looking to expand that across the whole peninsula. So we've got our eyes on that, but it's not necessarily our ministry, other than helping to identify and advocate for that type of project to be done.

I've got the privilege of having a number of experts in the division that work on agriculture development and are experts in these areas. One specific that I would give is on the spotted lanternfly, which is one of about 50 different diseases and pests that staff are constantly tracking, concerned about and working on to make sure that we stay on top of these things.

But most recently, we've been working with the federal pest management regulatory authority out of Health Canada, which has a responsibility for approving pesticides and other control products for use on these pests. We zoomed in on a couple that were not currently registered and we're using the emergency process with them to make sure that they have the data, the information, and putting restrictions on how that would be used.

So we're set to go with a couple of key tools if and when this does happen. Most of the experts believe that it will. There have been a few sightings, but there hasn't been an establishment, which is really good. So I would sort of emphasize that work and then all the other work that staff are doing on best practices.

The next part that I would emphasize is the importance of the trade side of this. My colleague David Hagarty could go into detail around all of the work that's been done with the Ministry of Finance, which has had the lead on driving all of the changes in the province relative to how alcohol, including wine, is sold in the province. There have been a lot of resources that have gone along with that to help with those efforts.

But securing those markets is just critical. Certainly, we've benefited in the last little while with the restrictions that have been put in place with stuff coming from the US and California specifically, which has really helped with those markets and the LCBO. But our staff on the trade side have been working with the industry for years, touting the benefit of all the high-quality products that we have. So at conferences like Grocery Innovations Canada that we just had here, as well as things like Restaurants Canada—and making sure that the people in those areas understand where they can get these products—and then some of these types of efforts to put a spotlight on how good this stuff is.

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** One minute remaining.

**Mr. Randy Jackiw:** Okay.

And then maybe the other thing that I would mention is just the broader thing around biosecurity. The minister talked around some of the things that can happen and how devastating they can be. Key on all of those is the wine grape. It is all integrated, right from field right through to the processor. But having good biosecurity protocols in

place, making sure that things are clean, making sure that the plantings and things that are brought in—and we did recently have a program where we spent \$8 million to help producers take out some older varieties of different grapes and reinvest in some things that are more in-demand by the markets and more modern from the standpoint of disease resistance etc.

1510

**The Acting Chair (Mr. Andrew Dowie):** Thank you very, very much. That's it for the government side.

We'll move back to the official opposition for the remaining time.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** In the few minutes I have, I'd just like to thank the minister and staff for answering our questions. I only have two questions left, so I will just ask them.

My first: It came up in a previous round of questioning about cross-border movement of meat products of animals and of lack of abattoir capacity. I'd like you to expand a bit on that pilot project, because it's a big issue.

And the other one: We've talked a lot, I think, about commercial agriculture and not so much about people who are starting out—not from a succession plan from another farm, but people who have started out. I wondered if there's any programming thoughts about how we start up the next generation who don't come from a farm.

Again, I'd like to thank you for your time. I really appreciate this time to talk about agriculture.

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Thank you. Through you, Chair: If I can beg your indulgence, I'm going to start with the second question first, because it will rely on technical expertise. One of the lessons I've learned from this summer, from meeting farmers on their farms across Ontario, is succession planning and the opportunity for new people from non-farming families that don't own the land to get into farming.

The conversation started close to home, at Ridgetown Campus at the University of Guelph. The dairy program is exceptional. It's small, and from dairy farmers like yourself and like MPP Vickers, you'll say that this is an example in a time capsule. It's a really well-run dairy program with a healthy herd, all the creature comforts. You walk through that place and that herd is calm and tranquil—great airflow, good air exchange, a clean environment, a healthy herd. That's all good.

However, when you move onto education, you can't replicate that. The head herdsman told me his brightest pupil this year and in successive years has been a city slicker—that's a technical term. So three kids, three young people from the GTHA have navigated their way down to Ridgetown Campus and they went to the dairy herds program and they're the best students. None are from farming families. That instructor asked me: "What can we do? We now have the stimulation. We have the interest. We have the expertise. You're making the investments. How do we get that kid to come on and establish a farm? Because it's price-prohibitive."

I'd say the secondary project of mine, in and around the farm—a second farming family, bee farmers from just

north of Thunder Bay, came from eastern Ontario. They met at agriculture college, and they got married in eastern Ontario. Their families are from eastern Ontario. They moved to where they could afford to start a farm, and now their daughters, both daughters—one is exploring Ridgetown; one is exploring a small college in Alberta. "How do we get on? It's so price-prohibitive. If we don't have the land, Minister, how do we get on and get these investments in?"

As far as succession planning, those investments, it starts with education in the classroom at the very earliest of ages. These are questions I'm asking my colleagues. How does Nova Scotia do it? Apparently, they have an exceptional curriculum from farm to table, from the classroom, and they get these questions answered early on.

We have AgScape. AgScape is exceptional, but as you probably agree, it's ad hoc. It's a patchwork. It's really good here. There's a similar program here, but it's not there. So how do we move that education component from those stories I heard in Ridgetown, in Thunder Bay and in farms elsewhere from my colleagues in Nova Scotia, my colleagues in Arizona?

I think it's an exceptional program embedded in the classroom from elementary school through high school. It gets people interested, asking questions. I would argue that when you have those questions being asked and those interest sparks, then you get the broader community of lenders, post-secondary education opportunities. You get more wherewithal.

I want to talk a little bit more in detail about succession planning. I want to share the mike with my deputy minister, who has another few suites of ideas that we can maybe embed and move forward, because to propel that forward, we will need everyone's thoughts.

**Mr. John Kelly:** This is a really great question, so thank you for it.

Just a couple of stories: One is, I know of an apple producer in eastern Ontario. This was a concern of his: What does he do with succession planning? In his family, they had some that wanted to go into the processing side of things, but not really anybody wanted to stay in the production side of things.

He ended up bringing in—it was really like a co-op student, but he was already graduated. He started working on the farm for probably three, four years, and his commitment was there. It became the producer who became the mentor for this person and then, you know, time to buy in and time to learn the ropes of the business. That's one of the ways that we can do it.

There are other examples, even for groups that have gone up into your area, MPP Vanthof. You know the Gwillimbury farm, right? They're also another great example of bringing people from outside the family to learn the business so that they can expand. So there are ways to do it.

The minister talked about the education systems that we have. The University of Guelph now has 700 first-year students. That's the most they have ever had. I thought our class was big; this one is massive. This goes to show you

that there is still a lot of interest in people coming into the business. What the University of Guelph will tell you is that there are three or four jobs for every graduate still. So getting into primary production is not easy, but there are paths to get there.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** The pilot program for meat that you're talking about in Timiskaming, where the border—it's been a contentious issue for years. Producers are on the wrong side of the border, or the meat's on the wrong side of the border. How is this going to work?

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** Through you, Chair: We have to re-shore this investment. We have to safeguard it. This is our greatest opportunity.

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

**Hon. Trevor Jones:** It's the very best time to do just that.

I don't want to waste time; I want to be very efficient—if I can pass to the deputy to talk about some of those investments. But realistically, we've seen the Conestoga facility, learned from them. The Domingos facility is working right now. Those supports are in the pipeline. It's about educating our colleagues and strategically getting those investments secured for those areas, because it's generational.

Without further ado, Deputy, just finish that off.

**Mr. John Kelly:** Yes. Thank you. I'm going to bring Renée Bowler up really quickly—

**Mr. John Vanthof:** She's going to have to be fast.

**Mr. John Kelly:** She is going to be fast.

But there are really three pilots that we're talking about. There is the Timiskaming one. There is the ready-to-grow pilot we have, where we have about 10 companies interested in expanding and working with CFIA to eventually, perhaps, get a CFIA licence through what this is doing. The third part is some work that we're doing up on the Manitoba border—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much. That concludes the time allotted to the ministry estimates.

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

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

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

Shall vote 108, strong agriculture, food and bio-product sectors and strong rural communities, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? The vote carries.

Shall vote 109, policy development, carry? All in favour? All in opposition? The vote carries.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? Seeing none, the vote carries.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness to the House? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? Seeing none, the vote carries.

Thank you very much to the minister and the witnesses for coming and sharing your estimates with us and answering the committee's questions.

Now the committee is going to take a short recess until 3:30, and we will be back.

*The committee recessed from 1522 to 1530.*

## MINISTRY OF NATURAL RESOURCES

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Good afternoon, everyone. The interior committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources for a total of two hours.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. For any staff appearing today, when you are called on to speak, please give your name and your title so that we may accurately record in Hansard who we have.

Are there any questions from the members before we start? Seeing none, I am now required to call vote 2101, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Natural Resources. The remaining time will be allotted for questions and answers in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 15 minutes for the third-party members of the committee and 15 minutes for the government members of the committee.

Minister Harris, the floor is yours.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Good afternoon, colleagues. It's an absolute pleasure to be here with you today to address the estimates for the Ministry of Natural Resources for the fiscal year of 2025-26.

I am joined today by my colleague, whom you will all know: the Associate Minister of Forestry and Forest Products, Kevin Holland. Together, we will provide you with an overview of the ministry's accomplishments to date and our goals for the year ahead.

I also want to thank my ministry staff for their hard work in helping get everything prepared for us today. My Deputy Minister, Drew Vanderduim, is here to my left. We also have our assistant deputy ministers Craig Brown, Amanda Holmes, Jennifer Barton, Sean Maguire and Christie Curley here to provide any technical questions that we might have come up today.

The programs and services that are delivered by my ministry, the Ministry of Natural Resources, touch the lives of millions of people across the province. Our core workforce of about 2,900 staff is on the ground in communities across the province at more than 100 different ministry facilities, including head offices, regional and district offices, fire bases and research facilities that are scattered across the province.

We protect Ontario from natural hazards, including wildland fires and flooding, and we work with businesses and communities to responsibly manage Ontario's resources, helping build a competitive economy. We help people enjoy the outdoors safely and responsibly, whether they are hunting, fishing, boating or just out for a lovely trek in the bush.

This includes our fish and wildlife licensing service, which is accessed by over 1.5 million anglers and hunters each year. More than 500 hunting and 700,000 fishing licences are issued annually, and we are pleased to offer convenient, accessible digital services to make it easier for people to enjoy the time-honoured traditions of hunting and fishing here in the province.

Ontario's resource sector is an important contributor to our province's GDP, and the responsible development of these resources is an important part of our plan to protect Ontario by building a stronger economy.

We continue to step up in support of Ontario's forestry sector to help stabilize and strengthen forestry operations.

Our updated policies for the aggregate resources industry are helping to enhance compliance and build the infrastructure needed for growing communities.

Investments to protect Ontario from invasive species are helping to avoid high economic and environmental costs caused by the spread of these invasive species themselves.

The responsible management of fish and wildlife will ensure that future generations will have the opportunity to hunt and fish here in Ontario.

My ministry also has an important role in protecting the public from risks related to natural resources. We protect against the risks associated with abandoned oil and gas wells by working with municipalities, technical experts and industry to plug abandoned wells and manage complex cases.

In June, we began our annual rabies baiting to vaccinate wildlife that commonly spread rabies, such as foxes, raccoons and skunks. This program distributes over 5,000 baits per year and protects people, livestock and wildlife.

I also want to recognize the expertise of our ministry's aviation, forest fire and emergency services branch and sincerely thank our wildland firefighters and the many staff who support them in their critical work that they do across the province to protect against the threat of wildland fires.

Ontario continues to be an internationally recognized leader in wildland fire management. This year saw a very active start to the beginning of the fire season, particularly in the northwest. But our fire ranger crews, pilots and fire management personnel responded immediately. We are also grateful to Quebec, New Brunswick, Alberta, British Columbia and our neighbours to the south for sending resources to support our response.

Ontario works with the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre. This agency enables the sharing of personnel and resources across Canada through the mutual aid resource-sharing agreement. Just as provinces across Canada support our wildland fire response in Ontario, we

have also sent fire rangers, pilots, fire management teams and equipment to Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick to assist their firefighting efforts. Our province is also a signatory on international agreements with the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Mexico. We are also a member of the Great Lakes Forest Fire Compact among Ontario, Manitoba, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

While fire season activity did normalize over the summer, 2025 did mark one of the most active seasons on record, with over 580,000 hectares burned. We know that the fire seasons are becoming more active due to climate and forest conditions, and that is why our government is investing to ensure that we are prepared to respond to wildland fires now and well into the future.

Keeping with the Canadian Wildland Fire Prevention and Mitigation Strategy issued by the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers, this strategy recognizes that suppressing wildland fires alone is no longer sufficient. We must do more to prevent human-caused wildland fires and to mitigate the impact of those fires that do occur. To that end, our ministry has proposed to amend the Forest Fires Prevention Act to modernize and strengthen its provisions. These changes are included in our government's proposed Resource Management and Safety Act, which is currently before the House for consideration.

When it comes to our approach to wildland fires, we will continue to dedicate all the necessary resources to ensure the safety and protection of Ontario's community and natural resources. To support this fire season and beyond, we added over 100 additional permanent positions to our fire management program. We have also worked with the federal government to invest tens of millions of dollars in training and the purchase of equipment to respond to those wildfires.

Additionally, since 2018, we have increased the base emergency firefighting budget by 92%. This provides us with the funding we need at the start of the season to ensure we are prepared for immediate response, and it allows the ministry to request additional funding for the contingency fund once the total costs of the season can be predicted. As I said, we will spare no expense to protect Ontario from wildland fires.

As I highlighted earlier, protecting against the risk associated with the legacy oil and gas wells is an important part of my ministry's mandate. Since the launch of our multi-year action plan in 2023, we are investing \$26 million to protect people and the environment from risks associated with oil and gas wells. This includes a commitment of \$9 million over three years to support municipalities to prepare for emergencies arising from legacy oil and gas wells through the oil and gas municipal transfer payment program, as well as research studies to increase our understanding and identify solutions to complex oil and gas situations here in the province. Funding under this plan is also being used to increase awareness among residents and stakeholders in southwestern Ontario.

We have also committed \$15 million in funding to the Abandoned Works Program over three years to help landowners with the costs of plugging oil and gas wells that propose a risk. To date, the province has invested over \$36.3 million to plug 454 wells across Ontario.

My ministry also leads the province's work to manage invasive species, guided by the Invasive Species Act and a strategic plan. Once an invasive species becomes established in our province, it is very difficult and costly to manage these species. The impact of invasive species on agriculture, fisheries, forestry, health care, tourism and the recreation industry in Ontario has already been pegged as high as \$3.6 billion a year. This makes it especially important to prevent the arrival, establishment and spread of invasive species in our province.

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In June 2024, our government announced a \$16-million fund over three years to support efforts across Ontario to respond to invasive species. This funding is distributed through the Invasive Species Centre, and I would like to thank Colin Cassin and his team for their ongoing collaboration with our government.

We are also investing in work to combat the spread of an invasive reed called phragmites, which I'm sure most of you have seen on your trips across the province. We are doing a very, very good job of identifying and eradicating this particular invasive species where we can.

In July 2024, a researcher discovered the highly invasive aquatic plant hydrilla in Canada for the first time, in the Hillman Marsh conservation area in Leamington, right next to Lake Erie. This one species alone has had an immense environmental and economic impact on the United States, where officials believe it may have entered the environment through an improper disposal of aquarium contents back in the 1950s. It has spread throughout the entire continental US, where it has impacted aquatic ecosystems; disrupted drainage; caused clogged water intake pipes; impeded swimming, boating and fishing activities; and has reduced water quality and lowered property values.

A team from my ministry collaborated with partner agencies to respond to this alarming event, helping to confirm the finding, contain the threat and prevent its spread. Now we are working on a long-term plan for this area. This single event in one corner of the province could have impacted Ontario's aquatic ecosystem for generations to come, and it illustrates the scope of the challenges involved. Every year, American states must spend millions of taxpayer dollars to manage this one invasive species alone.

We recognize the importance of preventing, detecting and managing invasive species that threaten Ontario's native species and our ecosystem. That's why we are investing an additional \$7 million this fiscal year to reduce the negative impacts of invasive species in our province.

My ministry is also responsible for the Aggregate Resources Act, which sets the regulations for aggregate operations on crown and private lands. Aggregate is essential to building Ontario, and I have a few facts here

for you. An average school needs 13,000 tonnes of aggregate, or 650 truckloads. One kilometre of a six-lane road uses over 50,000 tonnes of aggregate; that's nearly 2,600 truckloads. One kilometre of subway needs 91,000 tonnes of aggregate, or 4,500 truckloads. Over the next 25 years, it is expected that in the GTA alone, they'll need 2.5 billion tonnes of aggregate.

Aggregate production contributes, on average, about \$900 million a year to Ontario's GDP. Further, producers paid almost \$40 million in royalties in 2022, of which \$28 million goes directly to municipalities. Having a reliable supply of aggregate resources near to where it is needed reduces the environmental impact of transporting it. Recognizing its importance, we released a supply-and-demand study of aggregate resources for the greater Golden Horseshoe in the fall of 2025. This study reinforces the need for close-to-market resources and the importance of meeting demand for this vital resource in an economically and environmentally sustainable way.

Our plan to protect Ontario by building more critical infrastructure and our ambitious housing construction targets make it more important than ever to ensure Ontario has a steady supply of aggregate resources on hand. We're working closely with industry to ensure the province's needs can be met, as well as promote compliance, which is very important, manage community impacts and protect the environment. We're continuing our efforts to modernize the ministry's aggregate resources program, and we expect to be consulting on updates to our operational policies for pit and quarry applications very soon.

Despite seeing a 30% increase in the number of licences and permit applications, the ministry continues to deliver aggregate approvals effectively and efficiently, while also meeting legislative timelines associated with the approvals process. Our goal is to make the application process more efficient and transparent to support the industry's vital role in continuing to build Ontario.

We have also introduced the Geologic Carbon Storage Act, which is currently before the House. Around the world, 400 carbon storage projects have launched in the past decade. This includes projects in Alberta and Saskatchewan, which have attracted billions of dollars in investment. We want to unlock this new competitive advantage for Ontario, which is why we are proposing this legislation to enable a carbon storage framework. This would help energy-intensive industries manage greenhouse gas emissions, create local jobs and encourage investment while protecting public safety and the environment.

We will continue to take a measured and phased approach and collaborate with industry, municipalities, landowners and stakeholders to develop a commercial-scale carbon storage framework for the province that safeguards both our communities and the environment.

Now I'd like to turn it over to my colleague Kevin Holland, the Associate Minister of Forestry and Forest Products, to address the ministry's initiatives to support the forest sector.



**Hon. Kevin Holland:** Thank you, Minister Harris. Good afternoon, colleagues. I am pleased to be here today to discuss the work our ministry is doing to support growth and competitiveness in the forest sector.

This sector is a vital part of the economic well-being of many northern, Indigenous and rural communities in our province—many communities much like my own. The products being made are important to the provincial economy.

I'd like to break down the impact that this sector has had on our economy. Since 2023, the forest sector generated close to \$22 billion in revenue from the sale of manufactured goods and services, and it has supported 128,000 direct and indirect jobs in 2024. Our ministry is continuing to implement the forest sector strategy we have developed with input from industry, municipalities and Indigenous communities. This strategy aims to promote stewardship and sustainability, put more wood to work, improve the industry's cost competitiveness and foster innovation, markets and talent.

To put this strategy into effect, we are investing in three main areas. First, in July, our ministry finalized its Advanced Wood Construction Action Plan. This innovative construction method can be used to build both midrise and tall multi-family residential buildings, as well as commercial and industrial buildings. Building components are manufactured off-site in factories, speeding up construction and lowering costs. This makes advanced wood construction a cost-competitive alternative to traditional building methods, and it's a greener way to build.

Our ministry has invested over \$13 million in advanced wood construction projects and initiatives since 2018. This funding has supported research, demonstration projects, education and outreach, and included a total of investment of close to \$8.4 million in Element5, Ontario's first certified manufacturer of cross-laminated timber, a technology aiming to keep Ontario at the forefront of innovation in wood use.

We are working to build more homes faster, and on January 1, 2025, the Ontario building code was amended to allow mass timber buildings of up to 18 storeys and a greater variety of mass timber building types. We expect these changes to increase demand, helping to further our goal to put more Ontario wood to work.

Secondly, through our Forest Sector Investment and Innovation Program, we are helping to create new jobs, upscale existing jobs and leverage new investment. Under this program, the province is investing \$10 million a year to help companies develop and implement innovative technology. Since the program was established, close to \$72 million in funding has been approved, leveraging another \$300 million in investment, creating more than 320 jobs and helping to retain 2,900 existing jobs. These investments encourage innovation of products, services and processes to improve competitiveness in the forest industry.

Thirdly, through our forest biomass program, we're helping the industry realize the economic and environmental benefits of underused wood and mill by-products

called biomass. Biomass can be used in a wide range of products in landscaping, in building materials and in heat and power production. It's also used as a source of renewable and alternative fuels that can help to lower greenhouse gas emissions and support sustainability. Since 2023, we've committed over \$45 million to more than 55 projects, creating opportunity and spurring innovation.

In addition to these three areas of focus, let me briefly highlight the ministry's work and two other areas.

First, the government is sharing revenues with First Nation and Métis communities, helping them fund planned initiatives related to the forest sector. We are seeing increased Indigenous inclusion in participation in the governance of managed forests.

Second, by raising youth awareness of the sustainable way Ontario forests are managed and the many career opportunities the career offers, we're helping this sector to build a workforce of tomorrow.

Our ministry has reached thousands of students and teachers using interactive presentations and seminars, through webinars, workshops and events. By sustainably managing Ontario's natural resources, our ministry proudly serves the people of Ontario today and tomorrow. By promoting economic opportunities in the resource sector, we help to attract investment and create jobs where they are needed most. By working together with stakeholders and partners, we contribute to strong and cohesive and growing communities.

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I am beyond proud of the work we have done through this ministry to support our forestry sector this past fiscal year.

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

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** I look forward to working with our colleagues in the year ahead to promote an innovative future in this sector.

Thank you. Between myself, Minister Harris and our officials, we would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, Ministers, for your valuable input.

Now, we move to the first round of questioning. We will start with the official opposition. You have 15 minutes.

MPP Bourgouin, you are starting the questioning. Go ahead.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Thank you, Ministers, for being here and answering our questions.

The forest industry, of course, is struggling. And we expect it's not going to be better; it's just going to increase getting worse. If we think otherwise, then I don't think we're being straightforward and realizing what the industry is going through.

So my question to you, Associate Minister—Mr. Holland, MPP Holland, or Minister Holland—sorry; I apologize. Mr. Holland—

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** Just Kevin.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Yes, well, we're not supposed to—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** This is MNR estimates. We're a little more relaxed.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** It's all good.

So, how much will the government estimate to spend on transfers to keep mills operational this year? We've seen Ear Lake, we've seen Kap, we've seen tons—

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Terrace Bay.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** —Terrace Bay, and the list goes on. So, again, how much estimates did you transfer to keep mills operational this year?

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** Sure. So, through our forest sector strategy, as I mentioned, we have several initiatives and programs designed to support the sector as it navigates through these challenging times, from duties and tariffs coming from south of the border—

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Louder, please.

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** I don't know if I can, but I'll try.

So, as I said, we have a number of initiatives and programs designed to support the sector moving forward. We have seen in the past year, by example, that we've increased the roads funding program by an additional \$20 million. We have reinvested another \$10 million into the chip program. These measures are what we are hearing from my travels across the province, directly from the sector—and how these initiatives will help support them and help them navigate through some of the challenges we're facing, as I've said, from south of the border.

Through our FSIIP program and our forest biomass program, we have more initiatives and funding available to help support the industry deal with and invest back into their operations. We believe, to provide that sustainability and growth for the sector, it involves the sector actually doing the investments back into the mill. We're seeing that the mills that have invested in their operations are better able to navigate, so these programs are designed to help spur on and encourage those investments back into the sector.

I'll turn it over to Mike.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** If I may, as well: I think one of the key things to understand here is there's been well over \$100 million over the last year that's been targeted and directly invested into the forestry sector, whether that be through the programs that Minister Holland has alluded to—our CHIP program, our roads programs, our Forest Sector Investment and Innovation Program—on top of the millions of dollars that have been put into specific projects. I know Kap Paper, obviously—you and I have had the chance to talk about that as well—and there's been, I think, at this point, at the neighbourhood of over \$66 million has been invested into Kap Paper specifically.

One of the biggest challenges we have with this industry is that problems can often arise with quite short notice. We do understand that there are often some legacy challenges. We are always keeping an eye on what prices look like from a commodity perspective, energy costs, a lot of the different things that can fluctuate. But often what happens in industry will come to us very last minute, to be quite frank, and say, "Hey, we're really facing some challenge"—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** I'm glad you speak of last-minute, because we speak to the industry also, but they say they have been asking you for help for quite a long time here, Minister—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** If I may, Mr. Bourgouin—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** No, because I've got limited time to ask you questions—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** May I have decorum in the meeting, please?

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Just because we're limited in time—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I would just like to finish the one piece on that.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Let the minister answer your question, and you can follow up.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Go ahead, please.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** We are in constant contact with our municipal partners. We are in constant contact with our industry partners. As you and I had spoke earlier this summer, we know that sometimes the message gets lost a little bit in the communication of things. I want to make that very clear.

I'm happy to take some more questions.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** You did touch on biomass, and of course this is part of the plan. I know you've invested in biomass, and I have to be honest: Thank you for the investment in Kap Paper. It saved jobs, and they're back at work.

But now we're talking about a long-term survival plan. I know they're talking about biomass as a key. Have you given any purchase agreements since you've been in government to help for biomass, to be able to sell it on the grid and also help the industry? Because that's part of a solution that will help a mill like Kap that is struggling right now. That's part, I think, of their survival plan, to have a biomass plan so that they have a purchase agreement.

It was done in Thunder Bay with a different government, but are you willing to do the same thing to help Kap Paper go through these hard times? Because Kap Paper, we have to realize, is the heart of the region. Of course, we'd like to hear from you. Where are you with this, and have you given another purchase agreement?

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Point of order.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Point of order, MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thank you, Chair. We're discussing the estimates of the 2025-26 budget. The questions need to be based around what the ministry has spent money on or what they're going to spend money on specifically that has been listed in the estimates itself. So if you're asking a question about future spending that's not part of the estimates, it's not in scope.

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

Please, I will ask the committee members to focus on the estimates. Also, please direct your questions and answers through the Chair. Go ahead, MPP Bourgouin.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Thank you, Chair. The minister has brought it up, so we just want to know what the estimate is. How can we do that? It's part of the estimates, because they talked about the \$60-something million that was brought into Kap Paper, so it just goes to follow: What is the next step with the biomass, with what they're asking, as estimates?

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** It's part of our government's plan through the forest sector strategy. We are protecting the forest sector by investing in the Forest Biomass Action Plan to drive growth, strengthen regional opportunities and create jobs. Since its launch in 2023, the biomass program has provided close to \$50 million in targeted investments to more than 55 projects, creating forest sector business opportunity and accelerating biomass innovation.

Biomass programs support initiatives that maintain increased long-term utilization across the province, commercialize new uses for forest biomass and facilitate Indigenous-led projects and participation in the forest biomass sector.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Thank you, Minister, but my question was more to—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Please direct your questions and answers through the Chair.

MPP Bourgouin, you have a point.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Chair, my question was about purchase agreements. Has the ministry given any electrical purchase agreements since the biomass? They invested. We recognize it was great, and to be honest, it's part of moving forward also with diversifying.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** You're talking specifically about power purchase agreements, correct?

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Yes.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Okay. If we're talking specifically about Kap Paper, Kap has come forward to us with a couple of different proposals. The proposal that is before us currently does not need a power purchase agreement.

We are working with the federal government. Thankfully, they have finally come to the table and have promised some dollars to this project. We are working, again, with the local municipality from an infrastructure perspective. As you know, infrastructure in northern Ontario sometimes has a hard time keeping up with these very energy-intensive industries. We're also working directly with the folks from Kap Paper and GreenFirst, as well, when it comes to what the future of this mill and the potential products of this mill are going to look like.

As of right now, to answer your question specifically for Kap Paper, the proposal before us does not include a power purchase agreement. We're always open to looking at creative ways of doing things. I think that kind of answers the question that you're—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** But have you ever given another purchase agreement in the province of Ontario?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Since I've been minister, for the last eight months, we haven't done a power purchase agreement.

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**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Since you've been—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** There are some in place currently that will potentially be expiring or up for renewal over the next little while.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Okay. My next question would be, what support does the ministry estimate will be spent to mitigate the tariffs on Ontario lumber products?

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** All the programs that we've established through the forest sector strategy have been designed to help mitigate the tariffs that, as you know, the industry has been facing for a number of years.

We are currently at, between combined tariffs and duties, 45%. But the programs that we've put in place through our forest sector strategy and the different programs and funding have been designed to help position the mills to navigate these challenges better. We just have to look to what we're seeing happening in British Columbia, who haven't made those similar investments that Ontario has made. Their sector is struggling, and they are up against it out in BC.

The plans that we're putting in place—the increase in the roads program funding, the extension of the CHIP program funding—are things that the industry and the sector themselves have told us will immediately provide supports to their operations to mitigate the impacts of the increased duties and tariffs.

I've been all across the province this summer, talking to industry, community and Indigenous leaders about what it is that we're doing and what the impact is on the ground. They're saying that the programs that we're putting in place have been pivotal in helping them navigate the challenges they're facing. We continue to have the dialogue with them to ensure that the programs we have—if there are any other areas that we need to enhance, to ensure the long-term—not just sustainability of the sector, but the growth of the sector. Any mill that comes to us with a proposal and bringing a new opportunity can reach out to our office, and we'll absolutely have those discussions to engage with them to see what we can do to advance it.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** But when I was looking, trying to find in the estimates, we have—you know, the industry has changed considerably with time. Companies used to own pieces of equipment. Now it's all owner-operators, individual people who own expensive pieces of equipment.

So is there anything in the estimates that will help these small contractors? There are individual contractors who bought a truck or bought a feller buncher and they are not getting any help. They're telling me they're not getting any help. I know a lot of them personally; they were my former members.

But is there anything in the estimates—help for them, that they can see where to go and where to find help? Because, right now, they're struggling. The fuel cost is through the roof. Yes, we're looking at the sawmills and we're looking at others, but these small operators need help also. Is there anything in the estimates to help them?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** There are a couple of broader government programs that are available, that I believe run through the Ministry of Economic Development, Job

Creation and Trade. We can get you a little bit more information on it if you like, MPP Bourgouin. But they're really built out—I think it's the tariff-impacted industries fund, or something along those lines, where folks can then go ahead and apply, and if they, of course, meet the criteria, there's some money that's available for them.

I think one of the things to remember, too, is that we're actively engaged with the federal government to try and unlock some of this \$1.2 billion that they've pledged for the forestry sector across Canada. We don't just want to say, "Hey, Ontario, you're kind of on your own here, to figure out what to do." The federal government is solely responsible for negotiating the duties and tariffs that we have. Now we're up over the 40% or 45% mark. And we really expect them to pull a little bit more of their weight when it comes to being able to try and get back some of the two-odd billion dollars that Ontario companies have tied up in escrow with—what is the section?

**Interjection:** Section 232.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** —Section 232 duties that have been levied against the softwood lumber industry for many, many years. Obviously, you were part of that industry and know very well what it looks like. So I think there's a lot to do from that perspective.

Again, from a Ministry of Natural Resources perspective, we're always open to creative proposals and ways that we can help to stabilize the industry. I would say that there's a lot of work going on in the background currently, as of right now, which I know you have been privy to a little bit. But there's a lot of good things to come when it comes to forestry and framework of investment over the next little while.

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

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Tree planting: I'm a strong believer that forestry is just no different than a field, that we grow trees and we cut them—and we should—and forestry has done a great job of managing. But with everything that's happening now with the US—and they're strung for cash—are we still planting the trees that we should be planting in forestry to make sure that for the next generation, we have the trees there to harvest and to build communities? Because it doesn't seem to be planting as much as when we go a few years back. They used to be planting a lot more trees.

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** Our sustainable forestry plan is recognized the world over for how we're managing our forests and providing for that sustainability. As someone who spent a couple of summers planting trees, I appreciate the work that's involved in there. It's back-breaking work.

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

We move to the third party. MPP Tsao.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Thank you, Ministers, for being here today. I'd also like to thank the deputy and all the members of the OPS who are here with us for all the work that you've done to prepare for today. I know a lot goes into these meetings, so thank you for everything that you do. It's much appreciated.

Today, at estimates, going through the report, we can see that the ministry is facing many challenges: underprepared wildfire responses, aging and unsafe infrastructure collapsing, forestry operations that are in desperate need of our support in the north. At the same time, communities are still waiting for action on critical dam repairs, flood prevention measures and sustainable forest management.

Today, I'm looking to ask a number of questions that were actually provided by my colleague who is our critic for this ministry, the member for Kingston on the Islands. The first question is related to emergency forest firefighting. The year-ahead budget for emergency forest firefighting has been constant at \$135 million a year for the last three years. The average actually spent over the last five years, though, has been more like \$160 million. The question is: Don't you think it's prudent financially, then, to budget for more than you have been for future years?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Thank you very much, MPP Tsao. It's great to see you here today.

I would like to remind you that when we took office in 2018, we increased the base budget by over 90%, because we did recognize that it was too low and that we needed to be able to prudently manage for the future. So that number now, as I said, has increased to \$135 million—that's the 90% increase. That's only the base funding for wildland fire management.

What we then do is, partway through the season—and I might get the deputy to elaborate a little bit more—we start to then forecast out what things look like. Then we go and we ask for some in-year funding from Treasury Board; we say, "Hey, here's where things are moving. Here's what the forecasts look like," and then we unlock that funding envelope.

Forest fire season just ended officially on October 31 here in the province, so we'll be now going back and finalizing what the cost structure looks like for this year's fire season, and then, again, going back to Treasury Board for that final installation.

Deputy, maybe if you want to talk a little bit more about the granularity of how that budgeting process works, it might be beneficial.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Yes, I'm happy to do so. Thank you for the question. Every year, we are required—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Please identify yourself.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Sorry, Chair. Drew Vanderduim, deputy minister, Ministry of Natural Resources.

Every year, we do report regularly to the Treasury Board on the current status of the fire program, including costs that we're starting to see. This year was a busy fire season, so we would provide updates on a quarterly basis to the centre. We would actually use the opportunity to assess what the long-term costs are going to be throughout the year, based on the current fire load on the ground. We certainly make decisions operationally and cost-wise based on the needs on the ground of our teams, our aerial assets etc., so we will forecast based on what we need, not

necessarily on what is in the estimates, as noted here at \$135 million.

Throughout the year, we will update that number to the board and, as needed, make a request to fill out the back end of the budget. That's why, as you note, those numbers will potentially be substantially higher on actuals than what we started with throughout the year. That's an ongoing conversation we are required to update the board on.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** It's safe to assume, then, when I'm looking at that \$135-million number, that it's almost akin to a placeholder. And then based upon what's happening that year, it's almost assumed that you are going to have to adjust it based on what's happened.

1610

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Yes, correct. You have to have that placeholder in there, and I would say at this point, as costs go up, that number is always looking to be re-evaluated as well. But rest assured that that number is not set in stone, it's not just, "Here's the finite budget of \$135 million." As I said in my opening remarks, we spare no expense when it comes to protecting the province.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** The next question I have here is regarding carbon sequestration—jeez; they purposely gave me the hardest ones. The question here is regarding that issue. Does the Ontario government intend to allow it to qualify for credits under the Ontario Emissions Performance Standards Program? And does it intend to incrementally fund the carbon sequestration from the treasury beyond the value of any such credits generated?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** These are all very interesting questions, and I would say we're pretty early on in the discussions when it comes to what this framework is going to look like. The legislation that we have before the House right now, that hopefully we'll have an opportunity to vote on in third reading in the near future, is more of an enabling framework to actually allow underground carbon storage to take place, because currently, legislation and regulation in the province don't actually allow that to happen.

This is really kind of the first step in first allowing that, and then moving with expediency once that is done to try to figure it out from a costing standpoint. What credits will be available or what that framework is going to look like going forward will be all dealt with in due course after the legislation passes.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** I know then that this is pretty hypothetical, but from your point of view do you foresee this being able to qualify for credits under specifically the Ontario Emissions Performance Standards?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** A lot of that, from the way I understand it, is delivered from the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks and also from the Ministry of Finance, being kind of the money guys—so certainly something that we can take back and look at and see where we are from that framework perspective at this point. But our ministry just doesn't have enough visibility into—we're more the sort of boots on the ground, physically enabling it, and then a lot of the extra regulation and the

other little bits and bobs will get filled in by other ministries as we move forward.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Sure, that makes sense. Thank you very much.

I want to touch back on what I believe my colleague touched on earlier regarding pulp mills. I mean, we're looking at how the ministry can support the pulp mills invest in growth markets. I'm wondering: Can you provide us with any specifics around this, such as you supporting them when it comes to packaging, dissolving pulp for textiles, bioproducts? What's the government's plan here to help pulp mills to invest in these sides?

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** Again, as I had mentioned earlier, part of our forest sector strategy is about providing funding through those programs to help mills diversify their products, as well as diversify their markets. Any proposal that comes forward to our ministry with regard to enhanced operations, a change in product production—as I said, the investments in the mill are key to their survival. If they come to us with proposals on reinvesting into their mills, it's something that our ministry seriously takes a look at and works with them to see on that path forward.

But the programs—they've leveraged a lot of the funding available in the programs that I've announced to help that diversification in the product they're producing, to help that diversification in the market and reinvest into their operations so that they are in a better position—you know, streamlining their operations, becoming more cost-competitive and being able to compete better on the open market.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** There's a \$50-million program we call the forest biomass program, and what that does is unlock all of those potential opportunities that Kevin had spoken about. Specifically, some of the metrics in there are how will this help you serve new markets or how will this help you deliver a new product, so that you're not just kind of relying on what you've done forever and ever in perpetuity. You're able to modernize; you're able to move with the times and be able to produce a product that's in demand. There's been \$50 million alone just allocated for that specific program.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Great.

Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, MPP Tsao.

We move to the government side. Who is going to take the lead? MPP Ciriello, go ahead.

**MPP Monica Ciriello:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the minister and associate minister for being here today to answer questions about the budget. But I also want to commend you on your incredible job in leading this file over the last year, so thank you very much for that.

Ontario is home to four Great Lakes and countless watersheds that are vital to our province's proud fishing heritage. I recognize the important role the Minister of Natural Resources plays in protecting these waters and the communities that rely on them.

We know that infrastructure and equipment naturally deteriorate over time, especially in industries that have operated for decades. It is my understanding that Ontario

is home to one of the world's largest freshwater fisheries. In fact, commercial fisheries on Lake Erie generate almost \$200 million annually for Ontario's economy and provide for good-paying jobs in the surrounding communities.

But these jobs only exist if Ontario continues to have a healthy and sustainable fish population. I notice that the minister made an announcement about three days ago about a \$10-million investment in the Lake Erie Management Unit. I was wondering if the minister could tell us a little bit more about the investment and the important work that the ministry is doing to protect our fisheries. Any additional information that you or your ministry officials can provide to assist the committee in understanding the scope and scale of these investments would be greatly appreciated.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Listen, thank you very much, MPP Ciriello. We had a great, great time down in Wheatley—on Halloween, actually; Halloween morning—on Friday of last week to announce a \$10-million investment in the Lake Erie Management Unit, which essentially oversees mostly the commercial side, as you alluded to—the commercial fishery—on Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair, which, obviously, MPP Dowie has in his backyard, figuratively and almost literally. We've got two amazing lakes that we want to make sure we protect for the future.

This \$10-million investment is going to help bolster, again, that \$200-million industry here in the province. The Great Lakes fishery in Ontario is indeed one of the largest—if not the largest—inland freshwater commercial fisheries in the world, which is pretty exciting. We really love to be able to hang our hat on that and say that we are number one.

What this will do is, it's going to help modernize a facility that is about 60 years old on the shores of Wheatley Harbour, and also the adjoining facility in Port Dover that manages the eastern lake base. They sort of split it in half, so you've got the western side and the eastern side.

This is really going to be a quite monumental transformation for our commercial fishery sector. These folks help do research. They help set quotas. I actually had the opportunity to go and do some electrofishing with Minister Jones, who I believe was just here before us with the ministry of agriculture and agribusiness. We actually went out in the harbour to do some fish sampling.

I know we're here to talk about estimates, but I get really passionate about fish. It's kind of my thing. I always wanted to be a marine biologist when I was younger, which—here we are now.

We actually got to go out in a boat that dangles little electrodes in the water. Essentially, you press a button, it emits about a five-metre radius of electricity, just enough to stun the fish. They kind of rise up to the surface, you scoop them up with a big net and then we take them off to do various types of research. I think we ended up with probably about maybe—oh, gosh—10 or 15, certainly a dozen different species that will then go into looking for contaminants in the water. They'll age the fish. They'll look at stress levels. There's this little thing called an otolith that's like a bone that's right inside a fish's head,

and you can actually see its growth rate, kind of like the rings on a tree. It's very interesting to see the work that gets done.

All of that then feeds into two things: the quotas that are set for the lake for the following year and also any work that we need to do from a recreational fishery standpoint with fisheries management, whether that be licensable harvest rates, whether we need to look at seasonal adjustments, different things like that.

**1620**

It was a great investment, and it's great for the town of Wheatley. They've been through a lot over the last little while with some challenges around oil and gas wells, obviously. It was great to be down there and be able to give them some good news. So thank you for the question.

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thanks, Chair. How much time is left?

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thank you.

You were just talking about fish and talking about some of the Great Lakes. Ontario is home to some of the most diverse and beautiful ecosystems anywhere in Canada. We've got pristine lakes, we have wetlands, we have forestry—we have so much to offer that way.

Actually, you did mention some of the Great Lakes, but it's not always the big lakes that are the best—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Are you going to say something about Cordova Lake?

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Cordova Lake is quite possibly one of the best. And you know, the best way to get to Cordova Lake is through Fish Hatchery Road. So sometime when you're in the area, I'm going to take you down to Fish Hatchery Road so—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Point of order?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Point of order. Go ahead.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** We know MPP Smith likes to put us in order when it comes to estimates. He should stick to estimates also.

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

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Absolutely. And if the member would give me an opportunity to finish my question, he would see it would be appropriate for estimates, because it's about estimates.

*Interjection.*

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

Continue, MPP Smith.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thank you, Chair.

When we look at the wealth of that—wetlands, wildlife habitat and so on—we actually have a great responsibility to protect it. And that's where our conservation officers come in.

In my riding, as I had mentioned, we have some great, pristine areas. I consistently refer to it as “God's country” because of how beautiful it actually is. I'm hearing from some of my constituents—I'm sure others have as well; I'm sure all of us have heard this: They question whether or not we have enough conservation officers. When you

look at what the conservation officers have to do, the responsibility that they have, the gravity of some of the risk, especially when they're out in areas during hunting season—there is a significant risk to them at times when they're dealing with some of the challenges around chronic wasting disease that we're seeing more prevalently in Ontario.

What I have to ask is: Can you share with the committee the measures that your ministry is taking to address the concerns and to make sure that our conservation officers are given the recognition for the important work that they actually do?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** It's a great question, and we'll have to look back and see for next year whether the estimates will contain a line item for Fish Hatchery Road. You'll have to make sure that you pay attention for next year, and I look forward to that question.

But in all seriousness, I am a huge supporter of our conservation officers. Every chance I have an opportunity when we're visiting a region around the province, we stop into our district offices or our regional offices. I always make a point of trying to get together with the COs who are available if they're not out in the field, and/or actually get out in the field with them and hear from them directly what they view as some of the challenges that we're facing when it comes to protecting fish and wildlife across the province.

I'm delighted to say that since we took office in 2018, we have hired quite a few new full-time COs. We are always, always open to hiring more. That is something that I am a big proponent of and want to see happen as we move forward in this mandate. We just finished, I believe, a recruiting cycle not too long ago. We had an amazing badging ceremony; the deputy was in Thunder Bay.

Drew, do you want to touch on maybe a couple of more pieces as far as how the hiring has gone over the last couple of years?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Yes, I can do that. Just to answer the minister's question and the question from the member: Since 2021, we have posted over 114 conservation officer positions and received a total of 7,963 applicants. They're highly coveted jobs; we do not have trouble filling the roles at all.

I would say this year alone, as the minister mentioned, we've just finished 14 new conservation officer recruits who graduated this summer, which we're very excited about, and we are actually currently actively recruiting for another 23. So we are in pretty good shape.

I would say that since 2021, we've only actually had 22 officers leave, and most of those for retirement purposes. We've had a few others go on to other things at OMAFA and other ministries from a compliance perspective, but for the most part we lose our highly trained staff to retirement. So we're actively constantly trying to replace them, and so far numbers are pretty good. We're very pleased with the efforts so far.

**Mr. Dave Smith:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

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

**MPP Paul Vickers:** Thank you, Chair. My question is also for Minister Harris. We're kind of on the fishing go here, so I'm going to continue on it.

Ontario borders some of the largest freshwater bodies on the earth. They're offering world-class fishing across our lakes, rivers and streams. We have a clear responsibility to protect these ecosystems and ensure fish populations remain healthy and abundant for future generations.

Minister, I'm aware that Ontario is home to more than one and a half million anglers and that the Ministry of Natural Resources plays a vital role in repopulating our watersheds through fish stocking. I understand this strategy is designed to support healthy fish populations and sustain both commercial and recreational fishing.

Could you please explain to the committee how fish stocking has helped address ecological and economic uncertainties in our province and why continued investment in this program is essential to protecting Ontario's freshwater legacy?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** It's a great question. Just a little bit of an aside before I answer your question: When I was the previous Minister of Red Tape Reduction, I actually had an opportunity to stand up in the Legislature and talk about fish, which is a wonderful day for me. My staff actually printed out a little plaque—I still have it in my office—and it reads, "Any day I get to stand up in the Ontario Legislature and talk about fish is a good day," and then it says, "Mike Harris, MPP" underneath it. That proudly sits on my desk.

*Interjection.*

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I think MPP Ciriello obviously is very enamoured by the depth which I have in talking about fish, so I'm talking to talk about it a bit more.

When we talk about fish culture stations or fish hatcheries—not Fish Hatchery Road, MPP Smith; this is a little bit different—we look at ways that we can support the over 250,000 lakes and rivers that we have in the province, and we do that by helping to sort of augment the natural sustainability that we have for fish out there.

Obviously, there are many lakes that receive more pressure when it comes to angling in the province. I had a great opportunity to get out with you this summer, take advantage of the incredible resources in Georgian Bay and take part in the Owen Sound Salmon Spectacular.

We actually stock a lot of those salmon that folks catch during that tournament. I believe we stocked, last year, just a shade over 260,000 chinook salmon across the province. A lot of those, obviously, have gone into Lake Ontario and then the other remaining fish have gone into Georgian Bay and into Lake Huron to sustain those two populations. That's on top of 431,000—we'll call it 432,000—rainbow trout, as well, which also get stocked into Georgian Bay and other lakes across the province.

I'll just highlight a few of the different species: obviously chinook salmon, Atlantic salmon, rainbow trout, lake trout, brown trout. We also stock walleye. We also stock some more warm-water species.

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

**Hon. Mike Harris:** There's a great program, actually, in some of the GTA smaller lakes and ponds around the province where we actually stock things like bass, sunfish, bluegill—a put-and-take fishery, which is great for people that maybe have never had an opportunity to fish before. It's incredible that not only in the larger grand scheme of things with those larger game fish species, but we're really looking at ways to get people out to enjoy the outdoors in any part of the province.

**MPP Paul Vickers:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** You have 27 seconds. Any takers?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I can keep going on fish, if you want.

1630

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Time is up, Minister. You have 17 seconds.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Seventeen seconds?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One-seven.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I would imagine we can probably move on to the next round.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Okay, that's great. That concludes our first round of questioning.

We move to the second round. Who's going to start? MPP Vaugeois.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** As you know, we've been working very closely with wildland firefighters who are actually in the field, and we continue to have some pretty serious concerns.

I see that the budget for this year is about an \$18-million increase, but it's actually \$18 million less than the actuals of 2023-24. Now, I know that you say you adjust as the season goes on, but it does suggest there's not any intention to address the wage and retention problem that is there with wildland firefighters.

We know that we're losing the experienced firefighters, radio operators, administrative personnel, pilots, aircraft mechanics—they're all leaving en masse. We also know that there was a commitment made to reclassify firefighters in the same way that city firefighters are classified. Now, you didn't make that commitment—it was the Minister of Labour, who is still there—but it does exist in Hansard.

I'd like to know really what your plan is to address the need for very experienced people in the field, because we didn't even have enough crews to cover what was needed.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Obviously, wildland firefighting and the efforts that go into that truly represent a very large portion of what we do as the Ministry of Natural Resources, so much so that our Associate Minister of Forestry and Forest Products was actually a wildland firefighter himself, dealing with fires up in your neck of the woods, and as a volunteer firefighter with—

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** That doesn't actually answer my question. It's lovely, but—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I'd love to answer your question.

The premise that you put forward about people leaving en masse and us not having enough crews—honestly, I understand the narrative you're trying to drive, because

that's your job, but in actual fact, we have now hired and recruited through a retention program and have been able to keep more wildland firefighters than we've had in previous years. Not only that, but if you want to talk about reclassification, we have actually proposed to OPSEU those reclassification efforts, and they have not ratified the agreements yet.

So, if I may, there is more that I would like to speak to in regards to wages and some of the different pieces. One of the first things that we did as government when some of these challenges arose, in particular around our pilots—who are OPSEU members, and they do a phenomenal job, and I just want to thank them for all the work that they've done, especially this fire season—

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** I'd like my time back.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** We actually went to Treasury Board and said to the President of the Treasury Board, "We need to do something about this." They then put forward what I believe to be a rather comprehensive package to OPSEU again. OPSEU, unfortunately, did not want to ratify that package.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Thank you. I'd like my time back.

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

MPP Vaugeois, go ahead.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Thank you, Chair, and through you: What we know is that classification package is within the context of the existing wildland firefighter system. It does not address the reclassification that they were promised, which was to make them equivalent and have the same kind of classification as structural firefighters.

But I'll go on to another question—although I would be curious about the amount of experience left amongst the people who are there, because we do know there were not enough crews this year; that the size of crews was increased, which is a safety hazard; that there were water bombers, planes on the ground, that weren't used because there were not enough pilots; and so on. We know that there have been significant problems.

But the firefighters are only offered standard first aid. They've been asking for many years for wilderness medical training. You think about if a helicopter goes down, somebody gets hit by a tree or cuts themselves on a chainsaw, bear attacks—standard first aid isn't enough. I can tell you, I have done kayaking guiding; we have to have a much higher standard of first aid to do that and I'm not expecting to encounter a chainsaw.

I'm wondering if you cannot offer wildland firefighters a wilderness level of safety training, first aid?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Thank you very much. Just on the previous point: Our recruitment and retention program last year—we were able to retain all of our crew leads, which is phenomenal.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Well, that can't be true, because I know some have left.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** If they left of their own volition and wanted to move on to a different job or a different industry, that's with them. But we were able to really, really put forward a quality team this year.



I'm going to have the deputy maybe touch on a little bit more of your question in regard to first aid training. Deputy?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Thank you for the question, MPP.

Certainly, before I answer it directly, having had the opportunity to go out and spend a lot of quality time with our crew leads, I would just say my sincere thanks to the teams that actually delivered a massive, massive mandate this year with a significant wildfire season.

I would say that any time our fire crews ask for additional training, supports, what have you, we will take those recommendations or requests exceptionally seriously. We will look at any option that includes increasing anything to do with health and safety, in particular. If there are specific needs of our crews, we will look at that. We don't shy away from those things.

In fact, Ontario generally is seen to be a lead in most of our crew prep across the country, and we will continue to do that. If there are additional things—and we talked recently with some of our crews in Sioux Lookout, about the needs for additional not just physical training, but actually equipment, to talk specifically to that issue that you raised. We will certainly look at those options anywhere we can to support them.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** I hope that means yes.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Yes.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Thank you.

I'd like to actually—how much time have I got?

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

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Ah, a luxury. Okay. I probably have more on firefighters, but I would like to take a chance just to talk about the mill in Terrace Bay. I recognize that it's particularly challenging because of the owner. The owners have not been particularly helpful. I hear from the workers a lot. They're very, very upset, and they really don't trust the government to be helping. You may be helping, but the trust is not there, because the communication has not been there with those workers.

I understand that White River has made a proposal to actually take over the mill and integrate it—I hope I've got the right name—with their existing things, and then there's another proponent.

People in Terrace Bay were pretty excited about the possibility, but then, as far as we know, nothing is happening. Is there something happening? I recognize that when negotiations are taking place—this is why I have tried not to go public with these frustrations, but I'm hoping that you can help.

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** Thanks for the question. The ministry, obviously, was very disappointed with Terrace Bay's decision in January 2024 to idle its mill. As you know, the integration of the forestry sector is vital to all operations across the whole sector.

We know the company has been actively looking for a purchaser of the facility. At the request of the company, our ministry helped support them with heating costs throughout the 2024-25 winter season to maintain it in a

warm, idle state for the winter, to allow the company that time to continue to look for a purchaser of the mill.

We expect that the company will continue its efforts to find a viable plan for the future of the mill.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Okay. Will it be heated this year?

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** We continue to engage with the company on the next steps moving forward.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Okay.

The old wells, the abandoned wells that the province is now paying to clean up: It's kind of the result of industrial policies when people didn't have to take responsibility, really. You know: "Take the money and run."

Now, we've seen that in the forestry industry. The province gave quite a lot of money to the Terrace Bay mill which they didn't necessarily put into the upgrades that people were hoping for. And at this point, if it's not heated or if it's abandoned, there's an enormous environmental cost to clean it up. I'm just wondering if—so, on the one hand, I'm worried that the province is going to be on the hook for that cleanup.

1640

And then I'm also asking, in a secondary way: When you make new contracts, as in the mining sector, is remediation built into those contracts so that they can't keep doing the same thing?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** It's a good question. Listen, when we when we look at the oil and gas sector, a lot of these wells go back to the 1800s and early 1900s, right? I'd like to think and hope that we've come a long way since that point and that, as government, we're always doing our best to hold industry to account. I know that there have been a lot of challenges with the operator in Terrace Bay, and certainly it's been challenging for the town and surrounding areas.

When you look at northern Ontario as a whole—and I know MPP Bourgouin always likes to give me a hard time because I'm from North Bay, which he says maybe isn't quite, quite, quite as far north as the two of you. But truly, it does embody the spirit of northern Ontario, and mining and forestry are huge sectors in and around that part of the world. So I've seen first-hand, growing up, what it means to a community when there's a downturn with either mining or forestry; how it does affect those towns and cities and small towns.

So to answer your question, I think one of the things that we always have to be mindful of as government is that we want to do the best we can to try to attract investments into those communities. Obviously AV Terrace Bay, the mill itself, hasn't had a lot of investment put into it by its operator for quite some time. And we're actively working with anybody. We've had conversations with a few proponents over the last couple of years to look at maybe coming in and either operating the facility as is or trying to revitalize it. We're always, always in the market for folks to come in and run those facilities, and—

*Interjection.*

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Sorry; go ahead.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Thank you. I'm just not hearing the answer to my question as to whether you're building

in that responsibility in new contracts, so that the province doesn't pay.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** We always have responsibility built into our contracts, whether that be if it's a grant or whether it's a loan. There are responsibilities when it comes to leaving the site in good condition, whether that be from a physical building standpoint or whether that be from an environmental standpoint as well.

I know, obviously, with the black liquor—

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Yes, it's an issue.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** —at Terrace Bay, again, working with the proponent themselves. But from an environmental standpoint, we also do have a pretty important partnership with the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks that does look after more of the industrial spill side of things.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Back to wildland firefighters: Does the ministry track the total cost of damages? For example, we had seven evacuations, enormously expensive. The cost of damages to homes and businesses, infrastructure, crown lands: Do you track that?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Yes, we always track the metrics, what's available. Sometimes from a crown land perspective, it's a little difficult to put forward an actual dollar value, especially when there's no buildings or critical infrastructure, like a dam or something along those lines. But we have a values protection team, which I'm sure you're well aware of, that sits within our wildland fire-fighting envelope—

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

**Hon. Mike Harris:** —that goes out and is able to protect valuable assets, whether that be homes, cottages, critical infrastructure, mines—all the things that help keep these communities running, airports of course being a big piece of that. So yes, to answer your question, we do track those metrics. If you're interested in getting a bit of a costing for this year, I'm happy to provide one. I just don't have the numbers right off the top of my head.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Thank you. I think it's harder to track the trauma of seven First Nations communities that were evacuated, and part of what I heard from firefighters on the ground was that it's possible that if there had been the water bombers that we thought there were or if there were people to fly the water bombers, at least one of those could have been prevented.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I don't think that's the case, but I appreciate your perspective on it.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** That's probably my time. Is it?

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

We move to the third party. MPP Tsao.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** I wanted to touch back, Minister, on something you mentioned earlier in your opening remarks about phragmites, specifically around invasive species. You mentioned that you go across the province, and it seems like it's a bit of a losing battle right now against these invasive species like phragmites.

I'm wondering, looking at the estimates—I'm bringing this back to our estimates—how, in this case, are you

deciding how much to spend to fight against these invasive species?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** A lot of what we do relies on the industry and our partners to come to us and say, "Here's our plan as to how we think we can deal with these certain pockets of phragmites," or different types of invasive species, like starry water-wort or water soldier, for example. I did have an opportunity to go see some of the work the Invasive Species Centre has done around that in—oh, gosh; I'm drawing a blank. Oh, my God—near Deseronto. Where were we? Come on, Deputy, you got to help me out here.

Anyway, it was good to be able to get out with Colin and his team and see some of the work that they were doing with some students, who I think were from Trent University; they were doing a bit of study.

A lot of what we do relies on them coming to us with proposals. Your sort of traditional invasive species—obviously, phragmites has been a big one; we've done a lot of good work around Long Point and some other parts of the province working with our rail partners, actually, which is a big way that a lot of invasive species, especially phragmites, actually get transported. You'll have spores or seeds that will collect on a train, and then, as that train travels, they'll actually blow off and you can actually see down the train tracks where some of the phragmites colonies have really taken hold.

I know that was kind of a long, roundabout way of answering your question, but we do set aside several million dollars a year. I think at this juncture we're somewhere in the neighbourhood of roughly \$20 million or so—that encompasses all of the different programs. I'm happy to get you some more specific numbers, if you like.

*Interjection.*

**Hon. Mike Harris:** You have the specific numbers? The deputy has some specific numbers for you, so we'll throw it over to him.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Perfect.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** The base budget for invasives is about \$4 million a year, and we've augmented it recently with \$16 million over three, so that's where the minister comes to \$20 million.

MPP, to answer your specific question on the plan: We work very closely with the Invasive Species Centre, as well as the Nature Conservancy of Canada, to actually help develop that plan, so we go to the experts to actually decide and help us administer those programs. It's province-wide, so it looks at regional management, site monitoring, and on-the-ground projects with municipalities, conservation authorities, environmental groups and our Indigenous communities to assess where that fight should happen on the ground.

The other thing that I would just say is that of the \$16 million that we provide funding to, those grants go directly to those municipalities, conservation authorities and Indigenous communities to help us in that plan. So the plan is established through the centre and Nature Conservancy of Canada and is delivered on the ground by those communities.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** For the record: Belleville. I kept wanting to say Peterborough, but I knew it wasn't right.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Staying on the topic of invasive species, I wanted to ask about poisonous blue algae specifically, because it connects back as well to climate change and, also, a topic that I think you like to talk about a lot: fish and fishing.

As we see rising temperatures, the chance of poisonous blue algae outbreaks in our lakes is increasing. Rising water temperatures can cause more outbreaks, even without excess nutrient runoff. Can you give us a sense of what the ministry is doing in order to protect fish and human health in the coming decades when it comes to climate change?

1650

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Listen, I fish a lot on Lake Nipissing, and for the last couple of years in Callander Bay, there have been some pretty substantial blue-green algae outbreaks, so I've kind of seen it first-hand over the last little while. The water temperature is warming up. A lot of it does, though, honestly, come down to nitrates in different runoffs in the water.

One of the things that we're constantly doing and evaluating is working with our partners with MECP, working with the Ministry of Agriculture and also working with local conservation authorities to put programs in place where we can help farmers, businesses, different types of organizations to actually look at ways that they can stop fertilizers and manure.

I'll tell you about a great program: There's a cattle fence program that that we've run with some of the conservation authorities on the Grand River watershed, to actually be able to get fencing built up where there are small creeks that then feed into things like the Grand River, Conestoga River and Thames River, that then flow out into Lake Erie. What it does is it keeps the cattle out of the rivers and keeps the manure from then adding extra nitrites and different things into the water.

They're really, really good programs. We're always, always looking for ways that we can continue to build those partnerships and get different ideas from community and from our partner ministries. It's always something that we're, I think, evaluating.

For blue-green algae specifically: I don't think there's a dollar value necessarily attached to it from an estimates perspective, as it's not necessarily considered, say, an invasive species. It's more something that that we work with MECP on.

Deputy, did you want to add anything specific?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Drew Vanderduim, Ministry of Natural Resources. To answer your question: We do partner with MECP, who has a dedicated program and communications specifically for control of blue algae, so if you're on their website you can see a whole bunch of programs that they actually have. So MECP would be the lead, and we certainly, from a natural resources compliance perspective, work with them closely.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Okay. Perfect. The last thing I have here is, I wanted to ask about—I was going through

the binder with the estimates, and I see a line here: \$34.4 million for Indigenous revenue sharing. I was wondering if you could please expand on that to give us a better understanding, specifically looking at how many Indigenous communities are part of the agreements and what metrics are being used by the ministry to assess their success.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Sure. I believe, as it stands right now, Ontario has 10 resource-revenue-sharing agreements: eight agreements representing 44 First Nations communities and two agreements with organizations representing the Métis communities. Those could be more so intertwined with the Ministry of Energy and Mines, obviously. We've done a lot in regard to being able to unlock potential in the north. We've also just announced some incredible power projects and roads that will help unlock economic development in many First Nations communities across the north.

Deputy, I'm not sure—do you have a specific number that you might be able to elaborate a little bit more on?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Drew Vanderduim, Ministry of Natural Resources. I would say, in total since 2024, we've shared approximately \$289 million in revenues with the 44 communities that the minister mentioned, as well as the two First Nations communities. Certainly, we see this as a critical part of our truth and reconciliation work with our communities on the ground. The revenues right now are tied to forestry and mining, in particular on crown lands, and we would look forward to further work with more communities as they need it, and they've asked, and we've suggested this. Yes, we'd be happy to engage with those.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Just on the second part of my question: Whenever the ministry has a project or a program, there are always metrics to judge outcomes, right? Is this a success? Is this not a success? Do we need to refine, retune? What are these metrics that you use to assess this?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** Drew Vanderduim, Ministry of Natural Resources.

So, I can get back to you. I would say we can get you some metrics on that, MPP. What I would say is, what we know of the investments right now—we know our communities are making investments in critical areas such as improvements and maintenance of roads and repair of community buildings. They use that funding for economic development initiatives, including workforce training and development, creating economic development corporations to increase business opportunities for their communities as well as community health initiatives and projects. We can get you some specifics on what that would look like, should you like.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Yes, I would appreciate that. Thank you, Chair.

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

Before we move to the government side, to the deputy minister, you don't need to mention your name and title every time you have to answer the question. The first time was good enough.

MPP Pinsonneault, go ahead.

**Mr. Steve Pinsonneault:** Thank you for the floor, Chair, and thank you to the ministers for being here. Thanks for the love you announced there at Wheatley last week. They have had a pretty challenging go there.

I want to start off with a bit of trivia for the members of this committee. For those that don't know, oil was originally discovered in Ontario in Lambton county back in 1858. Unfortunately, along with the legacy of the discovery come a number of abandoned oil and gas wells in southwestern Ontario.

As the minister mentioned in his remarks, the government has launched the legacy oil and gas wells action plan. As part of this plan, the ministry is helping eligible land-owners in the cost of plugging hazardous wells on their property.

Additionally, the minister is working with municipalities across southwest Ontario to enhance preparedness. In fact, the former minister was in Lambton county last year to announce funding for Lambton, Chatham-Kent, Brant, Elgin, Essex, Haldimand, Norfolk and Niagara.

Through you, Chair: I'm wondering if the minister could tell us a bit more about the work with municipalities and some of the projects this investment has helped support.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Sure. Thank you very much. I would venture a guess to say that it was maybe discovered in Petrolia, if I'm not wrong. Am I correct?

**Mr. Steve Pinsonneault:** Correct.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** The name is very apropos.

Actually, we've talked a little bit about oil and gas in some way, shape or form a bit here today. Going back to that legacy of the 1800s, I think there are somewhere in the neighbourhood of about 27,000 oil and gas wells here in the province of Ontario, many of them scattered across southwestern Ontario and also under the water in Lake Erie. The lake bed is very rich with natural gas opportunities.

We're very happy here in the province to be able to have a thriving oil and gas sector. Though small, it's well-resourced and delivers a lot of home heating, power and different things to augment our grid here in the province.

We've had a lot of challenges, though, with that said, in the last, I guess you could say, 160 years since it was first discovered. A lot of these wells have, through no fault of landowners or things changing hands over the years, really fallen into disrepair, some of them we've seen in the case of Wheatley, for example, where buildings have been built over top of them. Unfortunately, back a few years ago, we saw what can happen when one of these oil and gas wells finally decides that it wants to rear its ugly head.

Kudos to the community in Wheatley for doing such a great job of bouncing back. As I'd said, I was just there on Friday, and it was just great to see a bit of a buzz back downtown and lots of people out shopping. It was the morning of Halloween, so lots of people milling about, making final plans for the evening.

We've dedicated quite a bit over the last little while to a new framework and plan to look at ways that we can plug high-risk legacy wells: \$45 million has been allocated to

this since we've taken government. This is really just the dollar amount specifically just for those high-risk wells.

We've also worked with municipal partners and other agencies to look at ways that we can map where a lot of these abandoned wells are so we can start to get a better idea of how the system is interconnected. We're also looking at hydrology as a big piece of that puzzle, because what happens is, once the pressure builds up in a certain area, it will actually then move through into old abandoned water wells or different parts of the aquifer and, in the case of Wheatley again, that's what we've seen down there.

**1700**

We're consistently working with municipalities. We also just put—Deputy, was it on Forestry Farm Road in Norfolk county? What was the dollar amount that went into that? Can we defer to one of our fine officials? We'll get you the number in a second.

But we've been working actively with Haldimand and Norfolk county to look at some ways that we're addressing some of the situations that they've had down there. We've just provided some funding for the municipality to hire a project manager to look at ways we can better assist and come up with a plan to be able to cap some of the wells in an area known as Forestry Farm Road down there.

We're in the process of installing—at cost to the provincial government, which we'll get you a number here shortly—a degasser or sort of a scrubbing machine that then is able to take some of that odour out of the air. I'm sure down in your neck of the woods, every once in a while, you get a little whiff of something once and you're like, "Oh, that's not manure on the farm. What is that?" So it's also something that we're looking at really trying to bolster as things move forward.

As these wells get older, we really want to make sure that we're putting our best foot forward to do everything we need to do on top of that \$45 million that's already been put out the door for these programs. We'll get you a number specifically on Forestry Farm Road here in a second, but I thank you for the question. I know it's something that's pertinent for your constituents and folks across southwestern Ontario.

**Mr. Steve Pinsonneault:** Yes. Thank you for that.

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

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Thank you, Minister Harris, for being here, and Mr. Holland as well. It didn't escape notice for my friends across the border that a lot of television coverage was put towards the historic wildfires that we saw across the country. It certainly hit southeast Michigan, so it hit the Detroit news. Really, hardly a single province was left untouched by the combination of the prolonged dry conditions and the above-average temperatures that we saw, and some provinces, like Manitoba and Saskatchewan, declaring months-long states of emergency, but Ontario's wildland firefighters—it looked like they worked tirelessly and relentlessly to protect communities and really contain the spread of wildfires within our province and across the country.

I know the government has made strategic investments in wildfire response capacity, and I think this summer

really showed Ontario stood as a national leader in fire-fighting in wildlands, and that we were able to equip to help other provinces with their skilled personnel, sending equipment over and providing the essential resources to combat wildfires effectively.

Minister, I wanted to understand better as to how the ministry mobilizes those resources, such as personnel, equipment and expertise, to support our friends and colleagues in the other provinces in a time of crisis. I'm really interested in this cross-border collaboration that your ministry is part of to deal with wildfires and emergencies so that there's a coordinated, effective response across Canada and it really leads to the protection of lives, communities and critical infrastructure.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Thank you very much for the question. It's an interesting question, because I think a lot gets focused on what we're doing just here in Ontario, and I did sort of elaborate a little bit in my opening remarks on some of the partnerships that we have across Canada but also with our friends in the United States and with New Zealand, Australia, Mexico and also the US in that pact.

Early this season, before our official fire season kicked off, we actually had a request come in from the state of Minnesota. They had, I think, somewhere in the neighbourhood of—it was almost 300 fires that were burning in Minnesota at the time, and they had requested, through that fire compact, some assistance from the province of Ontario, which we did send them graciously. Then, I did find it interesting that later on in the year there were a couple of federal senators, I believe, who seemed to complain about the smoke coming from Canada, but they neglected to talk about how we actually sent resources to their own state when it was on fire.

All kidding aside, we do work with a federal organization more colloquially known as CIFFC, which coordinates all of the fire efforts across Canada. All of the provinces and territories are part of this. Essentially what would happen is a neighbouring province would make a request in through CIFFC to say, "We need some fire crews, we need some hose lengths, we need some pumps, we need some chainsaws, we need some incident commanders, we need a bird dog aircraft"—that's a type of aircraft that goes out and scouts the fires initially. "Can you spare us a water bomber or a fire crew or a helicopter attack—a quick response aircraft?"

Then what we do is we go back, and we look at the demands that are being put on us at the current moment in time. Obviously, this year was a pretty strenuous year across, I'll say, central Canada. It seemed that Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario got hit the worst early on. Then we saw, obviously, our friends in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador—towards the end of what would be the traditional fire season is when things really picked up for them.

What we did is we did those evaluations, and we said, "Okay, province X, here's what we can leverage for you. Will this meet your criteria?" "Yes." "That's great. We'll augment those other pieces from other provinces if we need them."

I think one of the things that we really worked very hard on here in Ontario—and credit to our teams—is the standardization of equipment, so that if you're going to a fire in Saskatchewan or Nova Scotia or Ontario, your firefighters are going to be trained on either the exact same equipment or something that is extremely similar so there is no learning curve. Whatever we send to you, you're going to know how to operate immediately.

The other piece of it is our restoration and refurbishment. Every time a chainsaw goes out to a fire or every time a hose length or a pump goes out to a fire, it then comes back into a central repository, where it actually gets stripped down, refurbished—whatever needs to be done to it from a maintenance perspective. It'll then be placed in storage, it'll get palletted up and it'll be ready to go out to whatever fire base needs it, and/or we'll send it directly back into the field.

The standard of equipment is the highest, bar none, anywhere within—at least, this is my personal view, and I think most would share it. I had the chance to visit many fire bases through the summer and see the great work that's being done there from a logistical standpoint and I think, bar none, we have the best equipment, and we have the best operators out there to use that equipment.

When Ontario is sending equipment to another jurisdiction, they always know that they're going to get something that is in the best condition and will be ready to go for them at a moment's notice.

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

**MPP Monica Ciriello:** Chair, how much time do I have left?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Two minutes and 24 seconds.

**MPP Monica Ciriello:** Okay. I will keep it very short then. I was going to ask another fish follow-up, but I might pivot accordingly then.

This one's about forest biomass. Minister, you mentioned the importance of forest biomass as an area for forest sector innovation and growth. Can you explain why forest biomass is so important and how the forest biomass program is taking advantage of this opportunity?

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** Thank you. I can't do that in two minutes, but I'll give it a go.

For those of you that don't know, forest biomass consists of trees and parts of trees that can't be used to make lumber or veneer, as well as chips and sawdust from sawmill operations. It's a highly adaptable resource which can be used in a wide range of applications, from pulp and paper production to electricity generation, food additives and building materials.

Forest biomass also has many new and innovative uses, such as a sustainable alternative to carbon intensive products and fuels, including renewable natural gas, bioplastics and green hydrogen.

In our Forest Biomass Action Plan, we identified Ontario's biomass opportunity as a chance to build in the forest sector's strong business integration and leadership in sustainable forest management and demonstrated track record of continual innovation.

To meet this need, we developed the forest biomass program, which is investing \$20 million annually in projects that will expand our wood harvest, support forestry sector job creation and explore emerging uses for wood in collaboration with industry, Indigenous communities and stakeholders.

Finding new users for forest biomass is an essential opportunity to grow Ontario's forest sector. It will create new markets and trade opportunities, diversify product and revenue streams—

1710

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

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** —for the sector, make our business more cost-competitive and efficient, and create jobs in forestry-dependent communities. It also delivers many benefits to Ontario and Ontarians, including supporting heat and energy independence in Indigenous communities, reducing reliance on fossil fuels and meeting our growing consumer preference for green products.

To date, our government has approved investments of close to \$50 million and more than 55 projects, and I'm looking forward to making further announcements in the months ahead. The program is designed to support a wide range of initiatives matched to a variety of forest biomass opportunities in Ontario—

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

We move to the third round of questioning. We will go to the opposition party. MPP Bourgouin.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Thank you, Chair, and you'll have a chance maybe to finish this piece.

My question is, how much did the province of Ontario spend to bring foreign fire crews to Ontario during the 2024-25 fire season? How much did it cost the province to bring outside—to help us firefight the season?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Sorry, you're asking about outside—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Outside of the province. I think you mentioned Minnesota—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** For last year?

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** For us. That came to help us—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** We wouldn't have this year's final numbers in yet. But I don't know, Deputy, if you've got the ability to elaborate a little bit?

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** I don't have that number off-hand, but we can search back if the committee would like to see it.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Can you follow up and just make sure we get that information, because—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Yes. This year's numbers, obviously, won't be available yet as the fire season just wrapped up. But what we can do is look back historically and maybe see what we can get for you for last year's numbers, if that works, and we can certainly let you know once this year's numbers are in.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** That's fine. I'll get the information.

Has the government done any projection on local impact and regional economic impact from the mill closures this year?

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** I would have to, I think, defer that to the deputy.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** To answer your question, we will assess what we think the economic impacts are for Kap Paper, for example—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Kap Paper sawmill—there have been a bunch of sawmills and single-industry towns—talking of Ear Falls. Some have been temporary, some have been—Gogama, I'm thinking of. They curtailed to one shift, so there are a lot of people that will be losing their jobs throughout these mills. So what is—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** The short answer, I guess, is yes, but the extent varies case by case.

For Kap Paper, for example, when they had announced, "Hey, we're going to be looking at shutting down the mill and starting to reduce shifts," we worked with our partners at the Ministry of Labour to determine what those impacts could look like: How many workers are working at the plant and what does it look like from an economic development standpoint? If you have that many people losing their jobs, what are you taking out of the economy from a dollars perspective? Is there another industry that is within a certain radius that can help absorb those jobs? Then we work with the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth, the Ministry of Finance and business ministries to look at ways that we can stand up supports.

Again, it's kind of on a case-by-case basis. From a larger sort of scale level, yes, we do evaluate what's going—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Is there a number you can give us, Minister?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** On a specific town—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Take Mushkegowuk. What impact—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I don't have a number off the top of my head that I could give you. We'd have to go back and look at some of the notes and records, but it's not necessarily something that would be contained in estimates.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** So you have looked at it, but you don't—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Yes, we would have some data. I know for Kap Paper specifically that we do, because with the different proposals that have been put forward by Kap—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Just so I understand, there is some for each place that they had—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** We would have data for some, and I'm happy to get you the data that we have.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Okay.

This is to the associate minister: I know a lot of innovation products that are happening in forestry. In our province, which innovation products have we done so far? I know biomass is one of them, but there's more than just

biomass. What other projects are out there that is being done right now?

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** Again, as I was saying in my remarks earlier, under the forest biomass program, we have the four unique streams to support the sector.

First is the Indigenous bioeconomy partnerships, which support projects that will increase Indigenous participation in forestry operations and ensure that the development on Ontario's forest biomass drives added prosperity in Indigenous communities. Second is exploring biomass pathways, which investigates the economic and environmental potential of forest biomass. Third is the innovative bio-products manufacturing—

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Excuse me, Chair; just a second.

Like I said, with biomass, I know there's a lot happening, but I want other innovative products because there's more than just biomass. Are there any other innovation products that we've done, like biofuel? That's one example.

**Hon. Kevin Holland:** I had mentioned that in one of my remarks earlier. We have several strategies that help support the sector.

A tremendous amount of research has been done through organizations such as CRIBE, the Centre for Research and Innovation in the Bio-Economy. This year, we invested \$5 million into CRIBE to continue on that research. As well, we're looking for them now to take the research—the products that they've identified that can be advanced—and really start looking at how we get that commercialization into marketing.

We're seeing a number of projects coming forward through the different programs, the FSIIP and the forest biomass program, which are really now developing some of those pilot projects to look at the viability and sustainability moving forward. Things such as—heat energy, of course, we know is a big one. I mentioned in my remarks earlier that there's also, with regard to fuel production, green fuel. They're things that are going to help not just the forestry sector sustain themselves and grow but also help other natural resources industries across northern Ontario green up their operations and make their carbon emissions targets.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Lise, you can go ahead.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Okay.

When I first started interacting with wildland firefighters, one of the things I learned was that you need at least five to seven years to be a good, thoroughly prepared crew leader.

My question is, how many—five years is what I'm looking for—have you budgeted for? In other words, how many remain with that amount of experience of at least five years?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Are you talking about crew leaders specifically?

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Yes.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Okay.

I don't know, Deputy, if we have that information available to us right now, but it's—

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** I do not have that information available right now.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Okay. Is that something I can get?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** We can certainly look at getting back to you on that.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Thank you.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** No problem.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Another question is, do you know what the cost is to train a new wildland firefighter?

I'll give a bit of context: traffic enforcement officers. I understand it costs \$165,000 to train each traffic enforcement officer. They often don't stay; they often move into other kinds of enforcement that pay better.

I'm just wondering if you have a number of what it costs every time you bring in a new person, a new recruit.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** You allude to an interesting scenario where, often, MNR is the training ground for a lot of movement into other ministries, like the Ministry of the Environment or MTO. We see that. It was a problem that we had with our conservation officers as well.

I know that one thing that we have made a concerted effort to do over the last little while is to look at and evaluate what some of those discrepancies are so that from an MNR perspective, we can be a lot more competitive.

I can give you an example. With pilots, for example, one of the challenges we have is that our pilots will come in, get trained—everything is great—and then there are sometimes some more competitive packages that are offered from, say, Ornge or the OPP, for example. So one of the things that we're actively working on right now—and it is a little bit part of the labour negotiation, so we don't want to get too far down that road—is looking at how we can bring MNR a lot more in line with some of that.

I think from a fire management or a wildland firefighter perspective, it's certainly something I know—the team is working on getting you a number for specifically right now. What I can tell you is, we're always trying to be as competitive as possible from an MNR standpoint, because, to your point, that five-year number—you want to have those people be able to get to that point. So you've got to have a competitive enough package coming in where they want to stay and they want to train.

1720

The majority of firefighters that I met this summer, they're doing this job because they love it. I'm sure you've heard that too. They're connected to their communities. Often, they're from those communities. Maybe they're going to school somewhere during that school year, but they come back through the summer to be able to help protect their communities.

Team, do we have a rough number on that? No. So we'll get back to you on the five-year piece and that initial training cost for your first-year firefighter.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** I'm happy to hear that you're trying to get a competitive advantage there—also for conservation officers; we know that.

I'm going to pass it back to Monsieur Bourgouin.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Thank you. I know if I don't ask this question, my nephew's going to grill me forever.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Oh, here we go. All right.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Moose tags—we're into moose hunting and the moose tags—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I'm surprised it took you this long, Guy.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Well, I wanted to stick to the other stuff, but I know he's going to be more than happy that I asked this question.

The question is about how we have first draw, second draw, and both times we see people maybe return the tags. He brought to my attention that some of these tags sometimes will not be claimed, or we don't pass them right away to hunters that have applied. They didn't get one first in the first draw, didn't get one in the second draw, but yet these tags that were not claimed—is there a process? Do we give them back right away? Or no, we don't do it now—but this is an issue that a few hunters have brought to my attention.

I want to hear from the ministry. What happens in a situation where they're not claimed at second? What happens to this tag? Does it just not get used or is it just given to the applier where if you applied, you can get a tag right out of the mail?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** We instituted a new moose management policy about five or so years ago in the province. We're now at the point where we've been able to really see it in effect and how it's impacting various things from moose population to hunters to First Nations groups. We're at the point now where we've got a lot of that data aggregated and are actively in discussions as to what we're going to do to better modernize things to make it more efficient, more effective. We're also looking at now moose mortality rates and different things like that—predation, all of that. I won't bore the committee with all of the minutia of it.

I guess your question raises another interesting question: What do we do, going forward? As someone who also has heard from many hunters around the province, they like the system, but there's some little tweaks that need to be made.

To answer your specific question, I'd like to turn it just to the deputy. I think he may have a little bit of insight as to what happens with those final draw tags. The way that I understand it now, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, Deputy, but I think what happens is, essentially, once those final tags are not claimed, that they just go unclaimed for the year.

But you can correct me if I'm wrong, Deputy. You only get to do that once today.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** I appreciate that. Thank you.

Maybe just to add some additional clarity: the key changes to the moose tag allocation—the first one is points for forfeiture, and the second-chance allocation. So if a hunter is awarded a tag based on their first choice, they will lose their accumulated points even if they don't claim the tag. This is meant to encourage the hunters to apply for tags that they generally intend to use, because we see that a lot where they just don't use them.

The earlier deadline for tag claiming is another piece where the deadline to claim tags in the second allocation chance has been moved before the opening of moose season, so we can actually make sure that anything that has come back does go back out.

The third item I just mentioned, for the MPP, is the unclaimed tags—we have, we'll call it, the last-chance allocation, which means unclaimed tags and unawarded tags—as my notes top out here—will be made available for purchase by resident hunters. So tags bought in this stage do not affect points and will be sold using automated systems to avoid long wait-times. We're trying to put as many back into the system as early as we can, to maximize the use of any tags we possibly can.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Thank you for that answer, because you just highlighted another point I wanted to raise about the tags. We know there are people who are against hunting, and they apply to eliminate the tags. What are you doing to try to avoid that? It's hard to detect, but that is happening.

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

**Hon. Mike Harris:** It's not a narrative, I'll be honest, that I've really heard too much before. I'd love to chat with you about it if you have some specific instances. I can tell you, from my perspective and our ministry's perspective, we want to promote hunting. It is a long-held historical right here in the province of Ontario. We want to, obviously, do it in the most sustainable way possible so that we do have a resource that is here for years and years to come.

But it's a new thing that, honestly, I don't think I have heard of before, so I'd be interested to get a little bit more of your perspective.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** I'm just telling you that that's what I heard.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Interesting.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** How much time left?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Ten seconds.

**Mr. Guy Bourgouin:** Ten seconds. I can't wait to get another tag; it took me nine years to get a tag, so we've got to work on reducing the years to get a tag.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** That's it for the third round of questioning from the official opposition.

We have five minutes and 15 seconds, which is the privilege of the third party. MPP Tsao.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Sure. Moving from moose tags, let's go to fishing licences. I have a question about fishing licences. I'm going to ask this question from the perspective of a small retailer. I wonder if you feel the compensation that's given to a small retailer when it comes to a



fishing licence, when you think about the amount of work that goes into it versus the amount of foot traffic they might encounter to actually make it profitable and something that's worth doing—do you think that that compensation is enough for small retailers?

**Hon. Mike Harris:** It's an interesting question. Generally, what we've seen, not only here in Ontario but, honestly, any jurisdiction that I've ever had the opportunity to fish in or anywhere across the province, across Canada, the US or other jurisdictions around the world, is that I would say probably 90% or more of their fishing licences are now delivered online. It's certainly more convenient for folks to be able to do that. There are now very few retailers that actually issue fishing licences from a paper perspective—very few. I don't even think, Deputy, there are any hunting licences that are issued through any retailers anymore.

**Mr. Drew Vanderduim:** I don't believe so. I defer to my team, but—

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Yes. So we're really trying to make investments in pivoting to online systems and making better user interfaces—more user-friendly—so that anyone, whether they may not be as technically savvy as some folks, is able to get online and really be able to leverage those types of assets. We do still offer paper services. It is still there, ServiceOntario being the number one provider of that. I think most people know to go there to get their fishing licences now.

From a compensation standpoint, I would just say that there are so few that are actually issuing the licences, I don't even know what that number would look like. We'd have to go back and do a little bit more investigation for you. Everything is really driven online now, and you can even have your licence on your phone.

We're actually in the process too—I don't know if I'm supposed to talk about it, but I'm going to do it anyway. You just hit me; I do that a lot. We're in the process right now of working with some of our friends in government at MPBSDP to build out a new system where we're going to be able to have a lot more features built in, with an online program and an app and some different things like that that we're working towards, to just, again, make it more convenient for people.

We can take the question back and look, but honestly, I think the number is so small at this point that there may not even be any, to be honest.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** This question is actually coming from a small retailer in Kingston and the Islands who wrote to us about this concern.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Do you know the—you don't happen to know the name—

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** I don't have it off the top of my head, but I can let you know.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Yes, please.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Yes, absolutely.

I suppose, then, the gist is, really, everything is moving more or less online.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** Yes. We want to make it as convenient as possible for people so that they don't necessarily have to travel to a brick-and-mortar location. They might not be open, or maybe you got an invite to go fishing for the first time, you don't have a licence and there isn't a retailer anywhere near where you're going to be going. Being able to move those things online—I think everybody's looking for that, and we want to make it as convenient and as theoretically close to home as possible for people to access it as barrier-free as possible.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** So how far down the road are we to the point where we will eliminate paper licences, and is there a cost associated with that?

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

**Hon. Mike Harris:** I don't think it's something that we would necessarily really proactively look to do. Because there is always going to be a subset of the population that will need to have it delivered in some way, shape or form, where they would have to go into a physical location or something to either pick it up or have it mailed to them, depending on what the circumstance is.

So I don't think we'll ever necessarily fully pivot 100% online. But we're really trying, again, to make it as convenient as possible, but obviously still having those accommodations in place for people who need it.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Thank you.

Chair, how much time do I have left?

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Twenty-three seconds.

**Mr. Jonathan Tsao:** Then I'll take these 23 seconds to say thank you to you, Ministers, and to members of the OPS especially for being here today. I know I did that already, as I always do, but I think it's important to recognize members of the public service for the work that they do every single day. Thank you to everyone for spending your time here today with us. It's been lovely, and I look forward to seeing you again soon.

I'm done. Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, MPP Tsao.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Point of order.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Vaugeois, you have a point of order?

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** A point of order: There were a number of things that we were looking for additional information on. I just want to make sure that it's recorded by the Clerk and that there's kind of a formal way to follow up on those things.

**Hon. Mike Harris:** We also have the notes as well, so we'll—

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Okay. Thank you.

**Mr. Nick Ruderman:** There will also be a memo circulated by legislative research with a record of the outstanding questions to which the ministry has committed to provide a response.

**MPP Lise Vaugeois:** Thank you so much.

**Mr. Nick Ruderman:** You're welcome.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Okay. Thank you very much. This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote? Okay, here we go.

Shall vote 2101, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hands. All in opposition, raise your hands. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 2103, natural resource management program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hands. All in opposition? I see none. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 2104, public protection, carry? All in favour, raise your hands. All in opposition? I see none. The vote is carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources carry? All in favour? Any opposition? The vote is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Natural Resources to the House? All in favour, raise your hands. All in opposition? Seeing none, carried.

This concludes our business for today. The committee is now adjourned until 3 p.m. on Tuesday, November 4, 2025. Have a nice evening.

*The committee adjourned at 1734.*



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