

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

IN-25

Journal des débats (Hansard)

IN-25

Standing Committee on the Interior

Comité permanent des affaires intérieures

Estimates

Ministry of Northern Economic Development and
Growth

Ministry of Rural Affairs

Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks

Budget des dépenses

Ministère du Développement et de la croissance
économique du Nord

Ministère des Affaires rurales

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

1st Session
44th Parliament

Thursday 1 October 2026

1^{re} session
44^e législature

Jeudi 1^{er} octobre 2026

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Président : Aris Babikian
Greffier : Stefan Uguen-Csenge

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Hansard Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Journal des débats et services linguistiques
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 2816-7279

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE
ON THE INTERIORCOMITÉ PERMANENT
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES

Thursday 1 October 2026

Jeudi 1^{er} octobre 2026*The committee met at 1002 in committee room 1.*

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF NORTHERN ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good morning. The Standing Committee on the Interior will now come to order. The committee is set to resume consideration of the 2026-27 estimates. Up next for consideration is the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth, for a total of two hours.

As a reminder to any ministry staff appearing today, when you are called on to speak for the first time, please state your name and your title so that it may be accurately recorded in Hansard.

Are there any questions from the committee members? Seeing none, I am now required to call vote 2201, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Northern Economic Development and Growth. The remaining time will be allotted for questions and answers in rotations of 15 minutes for each of the recognized parties.

As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

Minister Pirie, the floor is yours.

Hon. George Pirie: Good morning, everyone. It's a pleasure to be here once again to address the Standing Committee on the Interior. I look forward to speaking about the important work and the key initiatives of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth and answering questions from the committee about how we are working towards our commitment to supporting a prosperous northern Ontario.

I would like to introduce the ministry officials who are here with me today. Joining me is Deputy Minister Drew Vanderduim. I'm also joined by two assistant deputy ministers: Richard Scott, assistant deputy minister of the northern development division, and Scott Mantle, chief administrative officer and assistant deputy minister of the corporate management division. And lastly, I am joined by Liam McGill, executive director of the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. I want to thank my senior officials for joining me today before the committee.

Northern Ontario: As you know, the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth is dedicated to un-

locking the full potential of Ontario's vast northern region and the people and communities that call it home.

Northern Ontario spans roughly 806,000 square kilometres and accounts for approximately 88% of the province's land mass. It is one of the largest northern regions in Canada and has unique opportunities and challenges for economic development, infrastructure and service delivery.

The north has a distinctive combination of assets and strengths that set it apart. It is home to some of the world's most significant deposits of critical minerals and precious metals. It plays a vital role in supporting Ontario's manufacturing, construction and clean technology sectors. It is a global leader in mining expertise and innovation, helping to position Ontario as a world-class mining jurisdiction. Its forests support an evolving forestry sector that contributes to local economies and provides materials used across Canada and around the world. It is rich in freshwater resources, with thousands of lakes and rivers that support communities, industries, tourism and clean energy generation. Its strategic location provides access to domestic and international markets through road, rail, air and marine transportation networks. It is also home to a growing agriculture sector, with millions of acres of arable land supporting crop production, livestock farming and opportunities for agri-food growth. Together, these assets position northern Ontario to play an increasingly important role in strengthening Ontario's supply chains, attracting investment, and supporting long-term economic growth and prosperity across the province. And northern Ontario has never been better positioned to help advance our government's plan to protect Ontario for the long term.

These strengths also make our mandate clear: to advance economic and community development across northern Ontario through partnerships and solutions that reflect the unique needs, opportunities and priorities of the north. We are committed to building a stronger, resilient and more self-reliant north by supporting businesses, communities and industries across the region. Our ministry continues to deliver programs and services that create jobs, attract investment and increase competitiveness in northern Ontario.

Through a network of regional offices and integrated area teams located in 21 communities across the north, we support business growth, innovation, trade, investment attraction and economic diversification. We are also working to ensure all northern communities are well positioned to benefit from emerging economic opportunities and long-term growth. At the same time, we continue to make stra-

tegic investments in critical transportation infrastructure, helping people and goods move safely and efficiently. Through close collaboration with municipalities, northern communities, industry partners and stakeholders, we are ensuring northern Ontario's priorities are reflected in government decision-making, and helping unlock new opportunities across the region.

We are promoting the north's strengths to domestic and international investors, attracting new investment and helping northern businesses pursue opportunities across Canada and around the world. And we continue to lead trade missions and participate in major mining, agriculture and innovation events in Canada and internationally to attract investment and connect northern businesses with new markets.

Together, these efforts strengthen northern Ontario's position in domestic and international markets and lay a strong foundation for long-term economic growth and prosperity across the region.

Northern Ontario has extraordinary, untapped potential that can help drive Ontario's economic future as we respond to changing global trade dynamics and strengthen domestic supply chains. We have the capacity to be a true economic powerhouse.

That is why I'm pleased to share some of the ministry's programs and initiatives that help create strong, healthy and connected northern communities where hard-working Ontarians can live, work and do business. Northern Ontario is a beautiful, immense and diverse region and one whose tremendous potential is only beginning to be realized. It truly is a vast and incredible piece of the province.

When it comes to building a stronger and more competitive northern economy, the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp., or NOHFC, remains one of our government's key tools. The NOHFC fosters economic growth, job creation and workforce development throughout the north, benefiting communities of all sizes, both rural and urban, including Indigenous communities.

Since June 2018, the NOHFC has invested more than \$1.1 billion in approximately 8,940 projects, leveraging more than \$3.4 billion in investment and creating or sustaining over 13,850 jobs in the north. This includes 650 jobs in the agriculture sector; 1,490 jobs in the forestry sector; 1,560 jobs in the advanced manufacturing sector; 1,500 jobs in the tourism sector; and 1,450 jobs in the mining supply and services sector. As we address trade challenges, these investments are more important than ever.

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In fact, in June 2025, our ministry announced the refocusing of the heritage fund to prioritize investments that protect northern industries and jobs, mitigate the impacts of unjustified US tariffs and trade disruptions, and secure new opportunities for the long-term prosperity of the north.

Here are a few examples of recently announced projects funded through our refocused NOHFC programs:

The Peninsula Harbour Port Authority received \$2 million to repurpose unused commercial docks in Marathon, at the site of the former Marathon pulp mill, to create a marine terminal for shipping regional materials such as

critical minerals, forest products, road salts and components for pipelines and wind turbines to southern Ontario and customers across the globe.

Koch Grain Elevator Inc. received \$1 million to build, in co-operation with Ontario Northland railway, a grain transloading facility on its property in Earlton, helping northern farms improve operations and boost competitiveness in domestic and global markets.

With responsive programming, the NOHFC continues to serve as a catalyst for economic growth across the north. We are proud of the work we have done to refocus its programming on protecting northern Ontario from economic uncertainty, and we'll continue to build on its great success.

The Veterinary Assistance Program: To better support large animal veterinary services in northern and rural communities, we have modernized the Veterinary Assistance Program, or VAP. By improving access to veterinary services in underserved areas of northern and rural Ontario, VAP helps strengthen animal health, safeguard the food supply and support the economic resilience of farmers. The program provides conditional grants to designated large animal veterinarians to help offset costs associated with delivering on-farm care, including travel, locum assistance and continuing education.

As part of the first comprehensive review of the program since 2004, we engaged veterinarians, agriculture producers and other stakeholders to identify opportunities to better meet the needs of today's livestock industry. Based on that feedback, we launched a redesigned VAP in April 2026. Key enhancements include expanded eligibility, streamlined administration and updated compensation. Previously, vets applied to a local committee, which recommended them to a central committee, which then recommended them to the ministry. Now vets can go straight to the ministry to access the program. These changes strengthen veterinary service delivery, support the livestock industry, and help create conditions for continued agricultural growth across northern Ontario. We will continue working with veterinarians and agricultural producers to ensure the program evolves to meet the changing needs of the sector.

NORDS: Another important issue is the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund, also referred to as NORDS. Resource development, in sectors such as mining, forestry and agriculture, is critical to achieving economic prosperity in the north. However, to enable resource development, we must ensure that communities have the capacity to manage the increased use of local infrastructure.

NORDS was established to help municipalities maintain and enhance their municipal infrastructure, creating more opportunities for sustainable long-term growth and development. Launched in 2021, NORDS provides \$15 million annually for northern municipalities to support investments in municipal infrastructure projects. All 144 northern Ontario municipalities, as defined under the Places to Grow Act, 2005, are eligible to receive funding under this program.

Since its inception, NORDS has provided \$75 million to fund municipal infrastructure programs across the north. In 2025-26, all 140 municipalities received NORDS funding to advance key projects, including the town of Kapuskasing, which received \$196,000 to reconstruct its King Street water and sewer main. The city of Greater Sudbury received \$400,000 for its Elm Street CPR overpass. Sioux Lookout received \$97,000 for its Sioux Narrows landfill project. The municipality of Greenstone received over \$150,000 to rehabilitate the main road in the Geraldton ward.

Initially established as a five-year program set to expire in 2026, I was proud to announce this past April that NORDS will continue as a permanent annual fund. By making NORDS ongoing, we are providing northern municipalities with greater certainty and predictable support for the infrastructure that underpins resource development.

Berens River bridge and roads project: We're also proud of the progress on the Berens River bridge and roads project, a joint initiative with the federal government that will establish an all-season road and permanent bridge across the Berens River, connecting Pikangikum First Nation to Ontario's highway network and improving winter road access for six neighbouring First Nation communities. The Whitefeather Forest Community Resource Management Authority, a not-for-profit corporation established by Pikangikum First Nation, is leading the project.

The project will create new opportunities, including sustainable forest management, improved transportation safety, enhanced access to essential goods and services, and strengthened conditions needed for long-term investment and economic growth. Once complete, Pikangikum First Nation will have year-round road access, while Poplar Hill, McDowell Lake, North Spirit Lake, Keewaywin, Sandy Lake and Deer Lake First Nations will benefit from improved winter road connections. The bridge and road network will eliminate the lengthy and potentially hazardous ice crossing currently required to access Pikangikum First Nation and the broader winter roads system. I am proud to say that construction activities have begun, with the official start beginning this past spring. Once complete, the bridge will be the first of its kind in Canada to incorporate mass-timber structural components into major transportation infrastructure. The project will showcase innovative wood construction techniques while creating new opportunities for sustainable forestry activity in the Whitefeather Forest.

Our government and Indigenous Services Canada are jointly funding this landmark initiative through agreements with the Whitefeather Forest Community Resource Management Authority and Pikangikum First Nation, reflecting a strong partnership in support of northern and Indigenous communities. This initiative reflects our government's commitment to ensuring that residents in every part of the province, including remote northern communities, have access to safe, reliable transportation infrastructure and the opportunities that come with it.

Northern highways program: One of our most important pieces of infrastructure in the north is our highway network. Our government is investing in highways in the

north to improve road safety, connect communities and unlock economic opportunities. Through the northern highways program, the ministry continues to make strategic investments to expand the northern highway network and rehabilitate critical infrastructure, including roads, bridges and culverts.

For the 2026-27 fiscal year, we are investing \$468.5 million towards the northern highways program. Our ministry establishes and manages the budget of the annual program, and the Ministry of Transportation is responsible for highway construction and maintenance in northern Ontario. Some ongoing projects include:

- widening Highway 69 from two to four lanes between Parry Sound and Sudbury, with four of six remaining sections expected to be under heavy construction by the end of next year;

- widening Highway 11/17 from two to four lanes between Thunder Bay and the Manitoba border, including construction recently commencing to widen the route from McGuire Road to Coughlin Road;

- rehabilitating Highway 17 from south of Echo Bay to Highway 548, supporting the safe and efficient movement of people and goods along a vital transportation and trade corridor; and

- upgrading the provincial rest area network in northern Ontario, providing more year-round truck parking.

We're also replacing the Hearst truck inspection station, with the scope of work including demolition of the existing structure, which is currently under way, scale replacement and the addition of a new pre-engineered building.

As these examples demonstrate, the northern highways program is connecting people, goods and essential services, while supporting economic development and ensuring that northern Ontario's highways remain safe and reliable.

Winter Roads Program: For communities without year-round access to the provincial highway network, the ministry's Winter Roads Program provides critical seasonal access. The winter roads network enables more than 24,000 people living in remote communities to transport essential goods and supplies, including food, fuel, medical supplies and construction materials. We recognize the importance of a reliable winter roads system, which is why we continue to invest in improving the safety, reliability and resilience of the network. Having recently travelled on the winter roads, I gained a deeper appreciation of the importance of these connections and the work required each year to keep them operational for northern residents. This past winter, we supported 32 remote First Nation communities and the town of Moosonee in the construction and maintenance of approximately 3,200 kilometres of temporary snow and ice roads.

The Winter Roads Program consists of two funding streams: the base funding stream, which supports the construction and maintenance of winter roads; and the bridges and culverts stream, launched in 2023, which supports the installation of pre-engineered bridges and

culverts to improve safety and help extend the winter roads season.

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The Winter Roads Program enables First Nation communities to lead project planning and delivery, reflecting our commitment to Indigenous reconciliation and community-led infrastructure development.

We are also currently implementing changes to the program to encourage the use of Canadian steel in eligible bridge projects, where feasible.

Algoma Steel: Beyond supporting community connectivity and infrastructure in the north, our government is also focused on supporting the industries that help build and sustain that infrastructure. This includes promoting the use of Canadian steel in infrastructure projects and supporting major northern manufacturers like Algoma Steel, a key contributor to northern Ontario's economy. We recognize that Algoma Steel is a significant part of the economy in northern Ontario and a major private sector employer in manufacturing.

In September 2025, in partnership with the federal government, we announced \$500 million in support to help Algoma Steel maintain operations, pivot away from our reliance on US markets and support economic growth in the north in response to changing market conditions and tariffs targeting Canada's steel sector. The investment reflects a coordinated effort to safeguard Ontario's steel industry and ensure long-term competitiveness.

This past February, we announced that Algoma Steel shipped its first plates of Ontario steel to Davie in Quebec, where they will be used to build the Canadian Coast Guard's new icebreaking vessel, the Polar Max.

My ministry continues to champion northern Ontario's strengths in advanced manufacturing, critical minerals and steel production to strengthen domestic supply chains, unlock trade within Canada and position the province as a trusted partner ready to meet growing global demand.

Let me conclude by saying that I hope today's discussion will provide a clearer picture of the important work our ministry is undertaking to support communities, businesses and workers across northern Ontario. In the face of ongoing economic uncertainty and external pressures, including US tariffs imposed without any rationale, we are taking action to build the north's economy and ensure greater resilience for the future. The programs and investments I have highlighted today—

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

Hon. George Pirie:—demonstrate how, together with our partners, we are creating opportunities, supporting economic growth and strengthening communities across the region and pivoting away from our reliance on the US.

We remain committed to making northern Ontario one of the best places in the world to invest, work and raise a family.

Thank you. I look forward to continuing our discussion.

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

We will start with the first round of questions. We will go to the official opposition. MPP Mamakwa, the floor is yours. You have 15 minutes.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch, Minister, for your presentation.

I know you talk about “rich in resources” up in northern Ontario—but first I'd like to acknowledge the government for yesterday, being National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, also known as Orange Shirt Day, having very minimal business here at the Legislature, and the government business, that pausing it was a good thing. So thank you for that.

Again, you speak about being a prosperous northern Ontario. You speak about “rich in resources,” and I think when you talk about resources, one of the things, being from where I am, in the riding of Kiiwetinoong—I know we are rich in culture, we are rich in language, we are rich in our ways of life, we are rich in the animals and the fish that live in these forests and these waters, we are rich in the trees and the things that we do. And I think that's a very different perspective for us when we talk about that type of thing.

One of the things you talk about—prosperous northern Ontario. I'm going to share some costs for flights from three First Nations to Thunder Bay: Sandy Lake to Thunder Bay is \$1,480.59; Wunnumin Lake to Thunder Bay is \$1,849.02; Fort Severn, the most northerly community in the province, to Thunder Bay is \$2,404.11. You talk about prosperity when you talk about First Nations. What money or resources is the ministry spending to support the efficient movement of people living in northern, fly-in First Nations, who face extremely unaffordable prices to fly in and out of their communities?

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for the question.

I've outlined a little bit of what we're doing on the Winter Roads Program. I touched on the Berens River bridge and roads project. That has a significant impact on the transportation of people and materials into that section of the world. We have an active file on establishing and expanding those roads—

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I'm not talking about roads. I'm talking about the flights. There is always going to be a need for flights. Roads take hours to get to Thunder Bay. It takes two days from Fort Severn to Thunder Bay, because you've got to go to Manitoba—but that's only two, three months out of the year. I'm talking about flights.

Hon. George Pirie: As you know, it's not our ministry's responsibility for that. That's another ministry that handles the transportation, so we have no direct investment or funds available for the flights.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Okay, that answers my question. Thank you.

Minister, one of the things that happened in Manitoba is that they will no longer be switching their clocks come November 1 and they will be observing a permanent daylight time. This means that several months of the year, people living in northwestern Ontario will be awkwardly, I guess, so to speak, in their own isolated time zone come November 1. Manitoba will be on Eastern Time, and then Thunder Bay and the rest of Ontario will be on Eastern Time—you have this island of Central Time that

Kiiwetinoong and part of the Kenora–Rainy River riding will be in. We have heard concerns regarding challenges it would cause for communities, First Nations, municipalities, hospitals. It has an impact, when we talk about business, when we talk about trade.

I'm wondering if your ministry has done any projections or planning on what the impact of Manitoba's decision might be on northwestern Ontario.

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for the question.

I agree with you; it's a serious situation. The solution has to be a national solution. I think the Premiers and the Prime Minister really have to get together and determine what's the best solution. Having two hours' difference between Dryden and Winnipeg is untenable. But that solution rests at a higher level.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I'm going to go to northern highways. One of the ministry's key performance indicators is its progress towards the outcome that "northern economic and social development is supported through the safe and efficient movement of people and goods in northern Ontario." That's on page 26.

I know that the ministry tracks the percentage of highways in good condition in northern Ontario, but the briefing book does not explain what "good condition" is. I drive those highways quite often. The briefing book does not show how it is tracked. The target value is listed at 67%, with the current value being 72%, above the target.

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Minister, too many people in northern Ontario are grieving for their loved ones who died on these northern highways.

Why is the target value of 67% of northern highways in good condition acceptable to this ministry?

Hon. George Pirie: The first thing I'd like to say is, I extend my condolences to anybody who has lost their life on any highway across any part of Ontario.

I can tell you that the ministry is totally committed to improving the safety and the condition of these highways. When we talk about safety across the north on these highways, this truly is non-partisan.

We deal, and we've got tremendous partnerships, with the Indigenous communities, but NORDS—or FONOM and NOMA, and the two mayors who lead those two associations that represent all of the cities across northern Ontario.

You know that, with the Minister of Transportation, myself and the head of FONOM and NOMA—we made a presentation to the federal government to ensure and ask that the federal government designate these highways of national importance. We all supported it. When I say this is a non-partisan issue—the next day, we supported MPP Vanthof's resolution to that same effect. So I'd have to say that we're on the same page regarding safety and highway safety across the north. That includes the Premier of Ontario, who's adamant that these highways get improved.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch. Thank you for the answer.

I'm going to continue on with northern highways, but specifically on transportation infrastructure.

In looking at the briefing book, pages 70 and 71 show a chart for the capital assets account for the northern development program, which supports provincial investments in northern highways. The table shows that the amount spent on asset costs for transportation infrastructure has been decreasing, from over \$600 million in 2024-25 to \$529 million in 2025-26, and now with an estimated \$468.5 million for 2026-27.

Minister, can you explain why this government is cutting expenditures to northern highway transportation infrastructure while there are too many people continuing to die on our northern highways?

Hon. George Pirie: Let's correct that misconception: That's the difference between invested and actual expenditures. You'll see that we're committed to over \$600 million. It's a matter of timing between fiscal years, but we're committed to over \$600 million. So our commitments continue to increase.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Also, on page 70, it says that a function of these expenditures is the "continued implementation" of the government's northern highways strategy.

Can the minister share how much money is being allocated to improving safety on our northern highways?

Hon. George Pirie: Well, I'll tell you, every dollar we spend on highways is spent to improve the safety of those highways. When we talk about over \$60 million committed, we're talking about passing lanes; we're talking about paved shoulders; we're talking about expanding—we just had an announcement in Thunder Bay. That facility is about a year old. That's a \$30-million facility for truck inspection that will be manned 24 hours a day, and that will save lives.

We've announced, as I said in my opening remarks, the areas in Hearst that will have areas big enough—when you have a storm, the trucks have to be pulled over. Hearst will have a large parking lot capable of holding those trucks; Matheson will have another one.

Those are the types of investments that we're making on a regular basis to ensure the safety of our highways is guaranteed.

I drive the highways all the time, as you do. And quite frankly, I don't know how you could get another paving contractor involved, because everybody is busy, whether it's in northeastern Ontario, northwestern Ontario. There's more paving going on now than I've ever seen in my life.

Without a doubt, the highways from Cochrane back over to North Bay have never been in better shape. We saw significant increases in spending on those highways themselves.

Obviously, every single dollar that we're spending is to increase the safety of our highways.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: You spoke about the announcement that you made in Thunder Bay last week—how many kilometres of that is that announcement?

Hon. George Pirie: I can pull it out here.

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

Hon. George Pirie: It's multi-million—and I can get back to you with the exact figure, on the monies that were spent on that section of the road.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I was just going to say that Highway 11/17 is at least—what we talked about earlier—about 2,000 kilometres, right? I just wanted to know how many kilometres were announced for the million dollars that was announced.

Anyway, I'm done my 15 minutes.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We'll move to the third party. MPP Smyth, the floor is yours.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: It's nice to be here with you all today.

Minister, if you could tell us—and we heard your opening remarks—what is your impression right now of the success of the mandate of your ministry for northern Ontario? If you were to say northern Ontario's economic development is going gangbusters and where you want it to be and is firing on all those cylinders, do you believe we're seeing the best improvements in northern Ontario economically, from a broad perspective? I know we can drill down. But the impression you have—is it where you want it to be right now?

Hon. George Pirie: I'll tell you that northern Ontario's economy is booming. The minerals sector—precious metals and critical minerals and base metals—is booming. The exploration sector is booming. The agriculture sector is booming.

We've got farmers in northeastern Ontario and northern—well, I'll talk about northeastern Ontario. They're developing 6,000 acres as we speak. The Great Clay Belt contains 10 million acres of arable land. That's equal to the arable land in southern Ontario, and it's more than the arable land in Manitoba. The Lesser Clay Belt in the New Liskeard area is absolutely booming. It looks terrific. The crops are amazing. The investment that we've secured through tile drainage and ensuring that the agricultural sector is expanding is exactly what we would want achieved. Northwestern Ontario has clay belts, as well, that are being expanded. Quite frankly, we have the ability to feed the world in the agricultural sector.

The forestry sector, under 51% tariffs, of course, is in a different status. However, I strongly believe in the future of the forestry sector because of the quality of the fibre basket in northern Ontario. It is actually the best.

When we look at a level playing field—and we'll take a look at Georgia-Pacific in Englehart. That company, by themselves, on their own dollar, spent over \$200 million to expand that facility. That's a US company, and they've got rival facilities in the States, but they will tell you that they're expanding there because of the quality of the fibre in that facility. Because they're value-added, they don't have any tariffs—but on an equal basis, we are the best in the world.

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The other area, of course, we're expanding is in the value-added sector. The biodiesel, the pilot project that's happening right now in Thunder Bay—that's being led by one of the Irving family, Jamie Irving—has the potential to provide the diesel and the aviation fuel from a fibre mass. That's an incredible opportunity and it's, as you know—nothing new about biomass, but it's the new tech-

nology that they're using that makes it profitable. It will be a boon to every single small community we have in northern Ontario, because you have to have an economic radius around that biofuel diesel. It's not one big project—it could be Thunder Bay, it could be Chapleau, it could be Timmins, it could be Cochrane. But that's the beauty of that facility—to be self-sufficient in fuel.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Your messaging is that everything is going gangbusters and it's fantastic in the north. Having travelled the north several times and been in many communities—they wouldn't say the same thing. There are problems economically. There are problems with jobs, health care. There are the jobs that—people just don't want to go there to work, necessarily, which is problematic.

I think my colleague touched on another huge issue in the north, which is—and we can go through to others as well—the highways. We know that drivers on the northern highways in this province are three times more likely to die in an accident than in southern Ontario, with some stretches having a fatality rate nine times higher. That comes from FONOM. The statistics are frightening.

I want to drill down again about the investments into the highways.

Minister, people are dying on Highways 11 and 17, we heard over and over again, yet your ministry has cut northern highway investments by \$150 million since 2024-25. So how do you justify that to the families who have lost loved ones?

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for the question, but I think we covered that already.

We have commitments for over \$600 million. That's the highest amount of dollars invested in highways, forever. As I said, this is explained by a timing difference between investments and commitments. We are spending over \$600 million and committed on the northern highways, and it's all designed to make the highways safer.

Obviously, you understand fully that the highways have never been busier either. Three years ago, four years ago, "mining" was a dirty word. Because of our government's policies is why the northern economy is booming. That's why the truck traffic has increased by 100%. There are trucks that are travelling across northern Ontario that won't cross in the northern states. Our government is responding—and you must also understand, our government is the only government that has ever built four-lane highways in the north.

Our government is making the investments because they believe in the future of the northern economy and the people of northern Ontario.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: We know, and you've just talked about, how important those corridors are in the north for the east-west trade. And you've talked about reducing the provincial trade barriers. But you're still not fully committed to twinning the highways so we can get people moving and goods moving. Why?

Hon. George Pirie: It's interesting that you phrase it that way. Again, this is a non-partisan issue.

We've travelled with FONOM and NOMA because they realize, and we realize, that they represent all of the

mayors and all of the municipalities in northern Ontario, working together. They're great partners working to help advance the safety of the roads. We made a joint presentation with the federal Minister of Infrastructure so that the federal government would designate these highways as of national importance. As you know, this is a vast and magnificent land. There are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of kilometres of roads. We need a partner, and the partner has been the federal government. As I said, the next day after we met the minister in Ottawa, we all supported Mr. Vanthof's resolution.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: What's the timeline commitment?

Hon. George Pirie: We got the timeline commitment for Highway 69. We've told you that the heavy construction will be happening in 2028, and we've got the priorities designed. It's not going to be built overnight. We're constructing passing lanes, we're putting in paving shoulders, and we're putting parking areas. We're also putting in more stringent enforcement, so that the bad actors will be eliminated off the roads.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So what's the timeline for Highways 11 and 17?

Hon. George Pirie: Pardon me?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: The timeline for Highways 11 and 17—a lot of the funding is committed over 10 years, but do you know what? They need better highways now, not 10 years from now.

Hon. George Pirie: They are getting better highways right now. We're spending the money to make those highways better. We're also putting in these portable signs and permanent signs that will advise the drivers exactly what the conditions are—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So—

Hon. George Pirie: —that they're driving in.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Sorry, what were you saying?

Hon. George Pirie: You've travelled in the north, so you've seen the signs that tell the oncoming traffic what the conditions are that they're facing. We're expanding that, as well, so people will know what the conditions are that they're driving into.

As you know, it takes 10 hours to go from Timmins to Thunder Bay, and the weather changes between highways—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: We've heard the horror stories of the weather changing and the roads being shut down—absolutely.

Hon. George Pirie: The ministry can't control the weather, but we can control how much advance notice we have for the individuals who are driving on these roads.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Again, can you give northerners a firm date on when the four-laning between Thunder Bay and Nipigon is going to be finished from end to end?

Hon. George Pirie: We've made a commitment that we're improving the highway standards, and we're spending more every single year to make that happen.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I was listening to my colleague speak about access to the north and the cost of

flights, which was astonishing to me. We always know it's a little bit more expensive to travel in this country domestically, but to be in the thousands of dollars in northern Ontario, for more remote communities, is unthinkable. And you said, "That's not my ministry."

Would you ever think to advocate on behalf of the people in the Far North with the ministry you see—transportation, what it might be—to do something about the costs?

Hon. George Pirie: It's kind of surprising that you ask me that question. As an individual who has lived in the north, raised in the north—to insinuate that I don't support less-cost transportation is, quite frankly, stunning to me. The fact that you don't know that the vast territory that we have to cross together is going to cost some money stuns me, as well. It's a great, big, broad province. It costs money to go across. It costs money to transport goods. It's surprising to me that you don't know it costs money to go across northern Ontario.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I think we all know it costs money to travel, period—

Hon. George Pirie: You said it surprised you.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: But the amount that was for flights—in terms of accessibility for people to move within the province, it seems like it could be something that could be prioritized. Given that you know so much about it and you care so much, I would think that you would want to advocate and see that happen. That's all I'm saying. Is it not something that you could see would be reasonable—to say, "What can we do about this?"

Hon. George Pirie: As a private individual, everybody advocates for that. But it's not in my mandate—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I understand it's not in your mandate. Absolutely—

Hon. George Pirie: The way I advocate for that is within the other ministries and with the federal government.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Understood. It's not your mandate. I was just commenting that \$2,000 for a northern flight—anyway, when the highways are always a concern.

Let's move on and talk about the winter roads and remote access.

You spent about \$18 million on winter roads last year, and you budgeted only \$11 million. So, this year, can you explain the reasons behind the drop in the funding for the winter roads?

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Hon. George Pirie: It's not a drop in funding. We've got two streams of winter funding; one is building the roads, and one is enhancing the winter roads.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Sorry. Say that again.

Hon. George Pirie: There are two streams in the Winter Roads Program; one is building the roads, and one is a separate stream for culverts, that is designed to enhance the winter roads, to extend the life of the winter roads and extend the season of the winter roads.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: In your briefing book, there's an admission that climate change is shortening the winter roads season.

How many ice crossings still have no permanent bridge, and is there a timeline to replace them?

Hon. George Pirie: Our budget is set up so that the winter roads are controlled by the Indigenous communities, and they choose the priorities in relation to the bridges and the culverts that they want to be replaced.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: What work does the ministry do to assess the conditions and the safety of the winter roads and evaluate where the needs are? What kind of performance indicators do you use?

Hon. George Pirie: I drive them. I'm the only minister who drove the winter roads. I was up in Moosonee in the wintertime. I'm the only minister who ever did that.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: If winter roads happen to fail this year, what would you say is the plan to get the food, the fuel and the medical supplies into remote First Nations?

Hon. George Pirie: They have to be flown.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: With the temps rising—we're talking about climate change—do you expect that winter road maintenance costs will increase significantly in coming years? What plans are there?

Hon. George Pirie: You only have to maintain them if you can build them.

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

Hon. George Pirie: If the season is shorter, of course the cost of maintenance is going to be less, but that's not the case—that's not what you're talking about. You're talking about the ability to get permanent road infrastructure into the First Nations communities. That's what you're talking about. Winter roads are the only way the majority of First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario have an opportunity to travel into the remote communities and a large part of northeastern Ontario as well.

You talked about climate change. The biggest factor in climate change here is going to be El Niño, and it's going to be a super-El Niño. No ministry can control that.

If the ground isn't freezing, you can't build a winter road.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We'll move to the government side. MPP Gallagher Murphy, the floor is yours.

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, Minister, for being here today, and thank you for your remarks this morning and your responses so far.

My question will be related to northern tourism.

After having just returned from being in the north—well, the Sault Ste. Marie area—the colours are absolutely phenomenal, and Lake Superior is beyond words in description.

When I think about tourism in the north, I'm thinking about fishing. I know a lot of people, even Americans, who come up to fish in our great north. There's hunting season, as well.

Minister, with ongoing trade tensions and economic attacks from the US currently, many Canadians are choosing to spend their tourism dollars right here at home, which is a great thing.

Tourism, as we all know, is a vital part of northern Ontario's economy. It supports local businesses, and it

creates jobs. In your remarks, I noted you mentioned 1,500 jobs in tourism in the north, which is amazing. It also strengthens communities across our region.

I know you've often said that northern Ontario is home to some of the most beautiful landscapes. I haven't been in the Far North, but from what I've seen thus far, yes, I would agree with you.

Given the region's incredible opportunities to attract more visitors looking for that outdoor experience, can you share how your ministry is helping make northern Ontario that destination of choice while supporting continued growth of the region's tourism sector?

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for the question. It is a very important question.

I would also like to say that in our announcements, in our conversations with all people across northern Ontario, we welcome the visitor from the US as well. It's a very important part of the tourism industry in northwestern Ontario—and northeastern as well—so although we're having a trade war with President Trump, the visitors from the US, we welcome.

I don't think there's a more beautiful place in the world than northern Ontario. Of course, I'm biased because that's where I'm from.

I often have said that Thunder Bay is the most beautiful city on the Great Lakes, and I've said that publicly. I said it one time in front of the Premier—"Sorry, Premier, but Thunder Bay is the most beautiful city there is on the Great Lakes."

I'll talk a little about that trip on the winter roads from Abitibi Canyon back into Moose Factory and Moosonee. When you get in the expanses of the plateaus in the James Bay frontier, there's a beauty there. It's vast, it's surreal, and it's in the frontier. If you travel further up into Fort Albany and Attawapiskat and you experience the vastness of those river basins, I think you would have to be a person without spirit not to be moved by those locations.

We have a number of things that we've invested over the number of years that we have been involved—not just me, but in the investment in tourism. And we're making those investments on a regular basis.

You know that we've got destinations like Kakabeka Falls in Thunder Bay, the swinging bridge in Little Current, the polar bear habitat in Cochrane, and the wolf habitat in Timmins. Thanks to the contributions for many of our 35 municipalities across northern Ontario—my own and ministry social media highlight the incredible tourism experiences, destinations and natural beauty that make the north such a unique place to visit.

Quite often, we just don't step off the path normally taken, step off the highways and look at these phenomenal falls that exist just off the roads. You can travel from Gogama up to Timmins and you're going to see the Kenogamissi Falls. Unless you step in there and take a look at it, you're not going to see the vast beauty of that set of falls. The Grassy River in Timmins has High Falls. We've got trails to get there. The Kamiskotia River has got a set of 32 rapids and falls that we're working to get—to

see the municipality build trails, to fund these natural experiences that we have.

Again, we want to ensure that the tourist dollars stay closer to home. We recognize the important role tourism plays in the local economies across the region. That's why we made strategic investments in the fund to ensure that the experience is rewarded.

We spent \$178,000 for the township of Ear Falls to improve safety and accessibility along its walking trails and waterfront areas.

Another investment of \$200,000 to the snowmobiling club in Moonbeam, in the Kapuskasing and Hearst area—I'll tell you, we've been there, and it's probably the best snowmobiling trail that you're going to have in Ontario. It's really a fantastic experience. Again, this is a facility that's an important stop along a beautifully maintained top A trail between Hearst and Cochrane. It gives visitors a warm place to take a break, enjoy a meal from its newly renovated kitchen, and experience the hospitality that northern Ontario is known for.

Science North: The heritage fund has invested \$650,000 for the new Woven by Water exhibit in Sudbury, which is expected to open in 2028. They've done it right, because they have increased the numbers of tourism from the States into that facility. So their marketing is spot-on. And that science facility is, quite frankly, world-class. Projects like this help create new reasons for families and visitors to travel in northern Ontario. They highlight the region's natural environment and cultural heritage.

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In Sault Ste. Marie, we invested \$900,000 through the NOHFC to expand local trail networks. This project will create new trail connections that link parks and green spaces throughout the community with the broader Algoma trail network. These trail systems attract outdoor enthusiasts. People want to get out to enjoy themselves, and investing in these trail systems is incredibly important to ensure that people from Ontario and Canada have a place that is unique. It's truly unique because a lot of what we're doing is investing in areas that are truly the frontier.

Again, we invested \$2 million in the heritage fund to support the redevelopment of the community centre in Sault Ste. Marie. So sports tourism is a big part of what we're doing, as well. We invest in those facilities. We had one in Constance Lake, as well—a recreational facility that we built there. Those facilities will be used by generations of people.

We used to talk about summer being the tourism season. Well, tourism now is 365—because in the winter-time you have hockey teams and broomball teams and ringette teams all travelling across the north, and having first-class recreational facilities for them is very important.

Sports tourism contributes a factor of about three to one to the community, because a family comes in, they spend their money on the restaurants, they take in a show, they take in a local attraction.

So, really and truly, the north doesn't have to take a back seat to anybody in tourism. It is a vast and

magnificent land, and the more you get up there, enjoy it and experience it, the more you're going to love it.

We did a trip with my team, not this summer, but last summer, from Sault Ste. Marie back up to Thunder Bay—the first time they had gone up north of Lake Superior. Amazing scenery. It was interesting; we were looking at a stop and looking at Lake Superior—and there were a couple of individuals from Europe, and they were remarking on the scenery. At the very same time, I've got a couple of nieces who were in Ireland, studying to be doctors, and they were sending a picture of the North Sea. I looked at the picture of the North Sea and Lake Superior and said, "Which is the better picture?"—and it was Lake Superior. We don't talk about it enough. Again, we've got to talk about it more often. We don't know what we have right here in northern Ontario. As I say, it's a vast and magnificent land.

And we haven't even talked about Lake of the Woods and Kenora.

We haven't talked about the beauty of the Timiskaming area. It's a gem. Timiskaming really is one of the world's best kept secrets.

So we've got those attractions from western Ontario to eastern Ontario and all through the whole area.

Go up to Abitibi Canyon. If you do have a chance to jump on that winter road, take a look at the Abitibi Canyon. It's a natural treasure. Again, we produce a lot of electricity there. You have to see that canyon and see it for what it is. It's created by nature, which man can enjoy. It's truly phenomenal to see it.

I don't know how much people really realize what's happening in the Manitoulin—that's why that swing bridge is so important. It's an incredible place to take a look at the sandy beaches. Take a look at the extension of the Niagara Escarpment through Manitoulin Island.

Travel on Highway 29 from Blind River back up to Chapleau. Take a look at the river systems there.

As I say, it's nothing but natural attractions for the visitor who really wants to enjoy a unique experience that they'll treasure for the rest of their lifetime.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: I appreciate your comments about sport in the north.

I will note the beautiful picture of the gold Olympic champions—the curling champions. They're from Sault Ste. Marie. So, yes, we have all kinds of sport champions from the north.

Chair, how much time do we have left?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Two minutes and 20 seconds.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: I'm going to hand it over to my colleague MPP Pinsonneault.

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

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you, Minister, for being here, along with your staff, to answer questions.

My question is on the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp.

Ontario is facing unprecedented trade challenges, including unjustified and unpredictable tariffs from the United States. At the same time, the global economic environment continues to shift rapidly, creating uncertainty for workers,

businesses, and communities right across northern Ontario. This instability can discourage investment and make it more difficult to maintain existing jobs and create new opportunities throughout the region.

The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. is a critical tool your ministry has to support economic growth across the north.

Can you explain how your ministry is using the NOHFC to protect the people of northern Ontario from the impacts of global economic uncertainty and unjustified tariffs, while continuing to support investment, job creation and economic development in the region?

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for the question. I appreciate the question.

The NOHFC has played a vital role in—

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

Hon. George Pirie:—developing northern Ontario for decades. It has helped businesses expand, supported municipalities and Indigenous communities, strengthened local infrastructure, and created jobs across the north. It remains one of the most important tools available to our government to support economic development and respond to changing economic conditions.

Recognizing the challenges created by ongoing trade disruptions, our government announced a strategic refocus to the heritage fund in June 2025. That renewed focus prioritizes investments that protect northern industries, jobs, and mitigate the impacts of US tariffs. We're looking to create tariff-proof jobs and trade disruptions that create new opportunities that will support the long-term prosperity of northern Ontario. We're ensuring the NOHFC investments are directed towards—

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

We move to the second round of questions. MPP Vanthof, it's your turn.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much, Minister, for being here. I thank you and your staff for all the work you do.

I will never question your allegiance to northern Ontario. We're both from northern Ontario. We disagree often on policy, but not on our love of the north.

I'd also thank you for shouting out that, in your opinion, the road from Cochrane to North Bay has never been in better shape than it is now. You're welcome; I'm the MPP for most of that road.

Having said that, why are highways so important—and you know this—to northerners? It's because they are our main streets. We're not getting to school; we're not getting to the hospital; we're not getting to the airport—people in remote northern communities aren't getting anywhere unless they can get to a highway. That's why they're so important. But the fact remains that they're much more dangerous in northern Ontario than they are in the south. And the fact still remains that if your car is registered in the district of Timiskaming and you are involved in an accident, it's four times more likely to be fatal than anywhere else in the province. You've identified some of

those issues. It's getting much busier. There's a lot more cross-country traffic.

In your opening statement, you said that although the Ministry of Transportation is responsible for much of the work of how the highways get built, your ministry is quite involved in the strategy of what and where gets built. How is that decided?

Hon. George Pirie: Can you repeat that? I didn't hear the last part of your question, John. Sorry.

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Mr. John Vanthof: The Ministry of Transportation is responsible for the construction, but in your opening statement, you said that the strategy part—because you're a big investor in northern highways. How is it decided? What is decided? What is the priority?

I'll give you an example. There's a section of Highway 11 in Timiskaming that has the highest crash rating index in the province. That's how the MTO figures out how to fix things. If something has a high crash rating index, that is where they point to put money. That section of road has had the highest crash rating index in the province for years.

If you're not using the crash rating index, what is your ministry using to decide which pieces of road get the most attention?

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for the question.

I just want to back up a little bit on your question. You mentioned the roads never being in better shape. Our government, this ministry—we govern for all of northern Ontario and all of Ontario. In fact, in the last round of funding, not a bit of it was held in a PC riding. We are responsible for governing all of Ontario.

The priorities are set through the ministry staff, and we're following the same priorities that were set a few years ago which focus on the junction of where Highway 11 and Highway 17 meet, where you have both streams of highways meet. That's in Thunder Bay up to Nipigon. That had perhaps the highest crash index at that particular time, so we're fixing that. We're spending an incredible amount—not an incredible amount; we'll tell you exactly how much—on that section of highway. You've heard us talk about the 2+1 strategy from Sand Dam Road, in that particular area. We're clearing the highways there as well. When we get that built, that will be unique. It will be one of a kind in North America—

Mr. John Vanthof: I really appreciate that, Minister. And I'd like to start my second by thanking you for when—the NDP put forward a motion under my name regarding making Highway 11 and 17 a national priority. I thank you for your support, because this is a non-partisan issue, 100%, right?

And I'm not trying to be partisan here, but I'll give you another example. When MPP Mamakwa, MPP Bourgouin and I, last March—we did the tour too. We drove to Manitoba and back and we did it in one shot. In that time period, do you know what? The highway from North Bay to Cochrane was pretty good. But when you turn and you go west, it's like you're in another country. There's no place for trucks to park—and granted, there's going to be

a parking lot in Hearst. Great. But there's a big stretch of nothing for trucks, so again—

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Or washrooms.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, or washrooms.

I'll give you another. We're building an all-season washroom just outside of Earlton. Great. I really appreciate it. But that's just outside of New Liskeard, where there is lots of truck parking; go another hour and a half or two hours, and there's none. So, again, thank you very much for that—whether it's the MTO or whether it's you, we're very thankful.

Who makes the strategic decisions? How? Having done that trip, there are places on 11 and 17—11, particularly—that were not safe to drive on. When we held those public meetings, people were really angry, and they have a right to be. Again, your ministry is part of the strategic—all I'm asking is, what is the process, Minister?

Hon. George Pirie: We do it in co-operation, of course, with the ministry staff and also with the communities. As I said, we've got partners, FONOM and NOMA. When we talk about a parking lot in Hearst, that's with direct consultation with the mayor of Hearst. When we talk about the parking lots in Matheson, we're all very familiar with them—because I drive back and forth to Thunder Bay on a very regular basis. So it's in true partnership with the municipalities and the ministry staff.

For a detailed answer, I'll pass it over to my deputy minister.

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: Thank you, Minister.

Drew Vanderduim, Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth.

Just a bit of an overview: Priorities are determined through a combination of MTO's engineering assessments, safety considerations, traffic volumes, economic considerations, as well as stakeholder input. Traditionally, as MTO builds out their highway plan, those decisions are informed by the condition of the existing highways, bridges, culverts, safety considerations, collision risk reduction opportunities, traffic volumes, freight movement on key corridors, as well as the importance of routes for resource development—mining, forestry etc.—as well as community and municipal and Indigenous input through consultation and engagement.

Highways 11, 17 and 16 have been prioritized because of those major transportation and trade and economic impacts. It's also a reason why you get into opportunities like the innovative approaches such as the 2+1 highway pilot projects and safety flow and traffic flow.

Mr. John Vanthof: That's a fulsome answer. I appreciate that.

Can anyone give me a number, when the 2+1 is actually going to be completed? We've heard about it for five years. Minister Mulroney announced it. You've cleared the trees. Great. But talking about 2+1 and actually having it implemented as a pilot project so we can actually see whether or not it's going to work as well as we hope—is there a timeline? Does your ministry know when the Ministry of Transportation is hoping to have the 2+1 completed—the pilot project?

Hon. George Pirie: As you know, you'd have to do the economic assessment first. You'd have to do the—not the economic assessment, but you'd have to do the environmental assessment. You'd have to go through the process of bidding—detailed design and bidding. So it's going to be a few years, John. We're clearing the trees.

Deputy Minister, are there any specific designs that are put in place for that stretch?

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: We can get back to you on a timeline, on a date.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd really appreciate that.

I'm going to switch gears to something that's, I think, near and dear to both our hearts, because you mentioned it in your opener as well: agriculture in northern Ontario.

I farm in the smaller Clay Belt, the Little Clay Belt, but what we're focusing on now is the Greater Clay Belt. Timiskaming is one of the greatest places in the province, and there is an awful lot of potential in the Greater Clay Belt. I'm just wondering, has your ministry thought—and I've asked the same to the Ministry of Agriculture. You mentioned tile drainage, but there's an infrastructure part of tile drainage that goes beyond the farm: municipal drains, stuff like that. In much of that 10 million acres, there is no vehicle, no way to deliver that. So even in organized townships in my riding—we have organized townships that are close to going bankrupt because they can't deliver the things that agriculture needs. I agree with you that there are all kinds of opportunities there. It's great for us to all talk about it. But who is looking into providing municipal drainage, providing the roadwork that's needed, providing all those things? There's going to be a massive cost, because in southern Ontario and in the Little Clay Belt—this was developed over 100 years, and what is being proposed now is being developed much quicker. And we're going to run into problems if we don't have that infrastructure. You come from mining, and you know that you have to have a lot of planning for the infrastructure before you start the actual—who is doing that? Everyone is talking about the Greater Clay Belt, agriculture—but whose team is actually looking at who is going to provide the infrastructure that's provided by municipalities in the rest of the province?

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Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for the question, John. I'm glad you recognize the potential of the Great Clay Belt.

As you know, the tile drainage has opened up farming for the first time. That was never possible, and that was largely supported by my ministry that's doing this. It's a consortium of operators that decide what farms are going to get invested and not, and they knew the land. So it's a partnership with the ministries, both agriculture and energy.

Mr. John Vanthof: If I could just break in to thank you, Minister—

Hon. George Pirie: The other part about this, John, if you'll allow me to finish: There are farms in the Iroquois Falls area and north that are in unorganized territories. They're developing these farms, and they're putting in their own

infrastructure. They're driving the roads. They're clearing the land to develop 6,000 acres, as we speak.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to break in. First, I'd like to thank you and thank the ministry for their support of tile drainage. We cannot farm in northern Ontario without good, systematic tile drainage. Your ministry and your government have been a big supporter of that, and I'd like to put on the record that I thank you for that.

As far as municipal drains, it's a bit different. What you just said, that some farmers are willing to do that themselves, put in the roads themselves—basically, you're saying the big, corporate, industrial ones. So what a lot of people are thinking is, "Northern Ontario is going to be a place where people can start," but the people who are going to replace infrastructure that is formerly municipal or provincial and do it themselves—

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

Mr. John Vanthof: We're not talking about helping young farmers—not at all. That's something we also have to talk about. Who is going to be the future of agriculture? I've got nothing against big farms. I'm friends with Norm. I do have a problem when it's huge corporate investment that is running out—the Ministry of Agriculture is talking about foreign investment right now, with Bill 109. I challenge whether big Bay Street investment is any less dangerous.

Hon. George Pirie: John, I have to disagree with you. You say there's no room for the small farmer. We've got a family—and others, but I'll speak of the Rogers family in Kapuskasing. They're bringing their family over from Saskatchewan. They're bringing their sons and daughters because they want to farm. It is not a big—

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

We'll move to the third party. MPP Smyth, go ahead.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I want to ask you about the \$100-million loan to Algoma Steel. We're all concerned about the trade war and everything with jobs. We know that 1,000 Algoma workers were laid off last March—the biggest layoff in the company's history—and then there is that support federally and provincially for the people who were laid off. Is there any new money to support these workers who were laid off, to retrain or anything, or to protect any jobs there? And are you still confident, a year later, that it's enough money to help support the workers at Algoma?

Hon. George Pirie: Yes. We have funds in place, but we also have the fund that was set up for workers who are affected by the tariffs. Hopefully, you support the loan to Algoma Steel that was part of a \$500-million financing. The federal government provided \$400 million, and Ontario provided \$100 million to support Algoma Steel. That's Canada's—I won't say "only," but certainly, it's Ontario's only Canadian-owned, Ontario-owned steel mill. It's central to the economy in Sault Ste. Marie.

As you know, we have to pivot quickly to reduce our dependency on US markets. Algoma Steel produces the only Arctic-grade plate in North America. That's why that plate came from Algoma Steel into the Davie shipbuilding

to build the Polar Max. The federal government is going to build eight or nine icebreakers; hopefully, they'll use Algoma Steel to build those as well.

If you're going to have a First World economy, you have to have steel production, and Algoma Steel is a first-class steel-producing facility.

Our investment in the electric arc furnaces was to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels and transform into electric, so it's green steel at the same time. We support that with our NEAP, northern energy program, that supports the large energy consumers. Yes, we have the supports and we've—what's the name of the firm that works with Sault Ste. Marie? Tenaris—and they're building pipe.

So we're actively involved in supporting Algoma Steel and the workers. The best way to support the unemployed workers is to provide jobs for them, and that's what we're doing in the rest of northern Ontario as our economy booms in the mining sector. The other part of the manufacturers—Wabi; that's a flourishing manufacturing project in New Liskeard as well. There are jobs that are looking for homes all across northern Ontario.

But the primary supports are already in place to support the workers.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Do you know how many of the thousands of laid-off workers might be back on the job? And what might be there to help the families in Sault Ste. Marie whose EI is going to be running out in the coming months?

Hon. George Pirie: I don't have the detailed answer you want. We can certainly get it.

Do you have it, Drew?

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: Through the Canada-Ontario Workforce Tariff Response initiative, Algoma Steel will receive almost \$1.5 million to support about 250 workers who are there, just to give you a sense of the numbers.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: The payment is called a loan in the briefing book, if I'm correct. So would Algoma be charged interest to pay back that loan, on the payment? Do you expect to see it paid back? Is that how that works?

Hon. George Pirie: Well, it's designed to be paid back. There is interest on the payments. We can get the details of the loan, if you wish.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay. Are any other companies receiving any support right now through this loan, anywhere else in the budget? Have you had any other requests from other companies for support?

Hon. George Pirie: Drew?

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: Specific to the \$100 million for Algoma?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Yes, and/or any support anywhere else in the budget for other companies that might have requested it at this point.

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: I would say the answer to that question would be, northern economic development and growth works very closely with, for example, the Ministry of Natural Resources, who do program funding for forestry, in collaboration with MEDJCT as well, so forestry investment programs there. We've got softwood chip pro-

grams there as well that are supporting economic growth in response for multiple industries, not just steel.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: We do see that sawmills and pulp mills have been closing. So while we're seeing many mills close down, is there a line in the budget that's dedicated to saving the forestry jobs—Ignace; there's Nairn; Gogama; Terrace Bay; the Kap Paper mill in Kapuskasing.

Hon. George Pirie: That's a forestry question, if you want to—

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: There are a couple of things I would say to that question from the member. One is, for NOHFC, we've invested about \$64 million in over 350 forestry projects, leveraging about \$289 million in additional investment. That's specific to northern economic development and growth. The other programs that are available to industry would be with the ministry of economic development and growth as well as the Ministry of Natural Resources. Specifically, Ministry of Natural Resources owns the forest sector road map, which specifically speaks to investments for the long-term health of the forestry sector.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Is there anything this ministry can do to get the mills in northern Ontario restarted and workers back on the job?

Hon. George Pirie: Well, again, we have invested, through our fund, in support programs to ensure that these mills would be able to stay operating. As you know, it's a very difficult situation, when the tariffs are at 51%. The real issue, I think, is how quickly we pivot to value-added products—and that's the biomass strategy that's already in place and the biodiesel strategy that's already in place.

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We've seen the investment with the Dryden pulp mill. I think they're going to be in very good shape with the investment that they have. You see Thunder Bay—they no longer produce paper, but they've enhanced the pulp production, and they produce dry pulp that they export to the States.

Again, you have the NEAP program, which is designed to support the larger consumers of electricity.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I want to ask you about recruiting people to the north. Many of us know how wonderful it is—yourself, our colleagues—but I'm hearing in meetings that I've had and travels that it's hard to get people to go north to fill some of those jobs. It's about building communities, and communities are based on having good health care, doctors—communities that are there to support new communities.

What I want to ask you about is the health support program. What has happened to the \$3-million northern community health support program?

Hon. George Pirie: Well, let's talk about a ministry that I have direct input on—and that's the NORDS Fund. That is a \$15-million fund to improve infrastructure in the local communities. Our economy is booming. If they're going to stay in Ontario, then the communities have to have the infrastructure to support it. We've put money into—Kirkland Lake is a good example—sewage and

waste water facilities to ensure they have capacity to build the homes.

As you know, it was our government that created stand-alone facilities for NOSM, for the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, both in Sudbury and Thunder Bay. We're graduating northern doctors who want to live in northern Ontario.

We're investing in the infrastructure in all of our communities, to ensure that people will have a place to live.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: It's great that they're going to be graduating. But how is the ministry recruiting more to the north, to go and settle there—and to retain the health care workers who are in the north as well?

Hon. George Pirie: Are you talking about medical—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Yes, medical.

Hon. George Pirie: Well, they are graduating from northern facilities. They are committed to working in the north as part of the conditions of their enrolment and graduation there. Again, the full description of that would be better had through the Ministry of Health.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So are there incentives or things that you're doing, working with the other ministries—health or education—to get that other investment in the north to help build those communities, so people thrive up there and grow the north because the opportunities are there?

Hon. George Pirie: That's interesting, because the first part of that is, you've got to build capacity and the educational facilities. I was a member of the Northern College board for six years—the last two, I was chairman. It's all about building capacity, building the ability to attract the individuals to higher education. We're doing that through NOSM in both Sudbury and Thunder Bay.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I was at Discovery mines in Timmins. They said that the Ring of Fire is right there; it's right where they are. They need investment. They need employees; they have the jobs for them. They need the housing, the schools, the access to health care. I assume that you would have met with them and you understand what's needed. I understand you have the funds for this and funds for that, but how can we see immediate—somewhat immediate, or as immediate as can be possible—investment there to get those things for people to create the communities, to create and take advantage of the opportunities?

Hon. George Pirie: When you were at Discovery—what city were you in?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Timmins.

Hon. George Pirie: Do you know where I'm from?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: No.

Hon. George Pirie: I'm from Timmins.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Great.

Hon. George Pirie: Discovery has just announced a \$5-billion investment from this year to the turn of the century.

You can take a look at how busy we are in Timmins with infrastructure. You'll know that we've expanded the hospital facility by over \$100 million. You'll know that our government has given—we've tripled the funding for the housing allocation in the local DSSAB. You'll know

that we have spent about \$700 million to improve the infrastructure, homes, hospitals, recreational facilities—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So how do we get the people up there to work?

Hon. George Pirie: They are coming up there.

You have to understand, I am from Timmins. I'm very proud to be from Timmins.

I don't find that there's any lack of people who want to live in northern Ontario to participate in the jobs that we're creating, which are high-paying and good family jobs. They're being recruited to Discovery. They're being recruited by Agnico as we speak. They're attracting people to Kapuskasing. They're attracting people to Hearst and Kenora and Ignace—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: How quickly can housing get built to house all the people who want to work there?

Hon. George Pirie: Well, they're building a subdivision right now in Timmins as I speak. There's a number of innovative housing solutions that are available.

When you talk about attracting people and you talk about health care, surely you realize that there's a \$3-billion health care facility in Moosonee that's being built right now. It's a \$3-billion facility—\$1.7 billion from the province and \$1.3 billion from the federal government. It's over 620,000 square feet; 230,000 feet are, in fact, the wellness centre around it.

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

Hon. George Pirie: That's what we're doing to incentivize people to stay in the north. That's a \$3-billion solution.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And what about going north? Staying in the north is one thing, but heading north—because in this part of Ontario, in southern Ontario, we hear so much that there aren't jobs. So what is stopping someone, and what could be the incentive to get them to go up and take advantage of the beautiful north and work in those jobs that are there? What might be stopping them? That's what I'm getting at. When it comes to health care, it's great that there are the schools and the opportunities for people to become doctors and, hopefully, stay in the north. But let's get them moving. Let's give some reason to go.

Hon. George Pirie: Well, the reason to go there, of course, is the jobs. We're doing our part as we invest in our—

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

We'll move to the government side. MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you, Minister, for being here.

Minister, I know with the arrival of NextStar in our community back home—we know that investing in the resource sector is critical to the prosperity not only in northern Ontario, but also the continued strength of Ontario's economy. The mining that happens in northern Ontario directly benefits industry in the south.

However, I realize that the growth associated with resource development does place significant demands on local infrastructure and municipal services. That's why it's important that, especially northern municipalities, but

municipalities across the province have the capacity to support growth, manage development responsibly, create new opportunities for their residents and ensure that communities are sustainable for years to come.

I'm hoping you might be able to explain how renewing the Northern Ontario Resource Development Support Fund beyond 2025-26 and establishing it as an ongoing program will help our northern communities manage economic growth responsibly, while supporting the infrastructure needed to accommodate future development.

Hon. George Pirie: Well, that's a program that, quite frankly, our government is very proud of. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, that was supposed to be a five-year pilot project, and it has now been renewed; it's an ongoing program. It's supported by all 144 municipalities across northern Ontario. It's a \$15-million annual fund that's designed to invest in local infrastructure, whether it be sewer and water or culverts or sewer mains—whatever you want. But the other more important part of this: It's stackable over four years or five years. So if a community gets \$400,000 for four years, you get \$1.6 million towards improving infrastructure. As I said, northern Ontario is a vast landscape, and it's really a community of communities. There are a number of small towns between the major places like Timmins or Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury, or Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay, or Thunder Bay to Kenora. There are a plethora of small communities, and all 144 participated in that funding. The testimonies of support and the appreciation of our government for renewing it, making it a permanent program, speak for themselves. We've got a number of testimonies here that speak to this.

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Melanie Pilon, mayor of Wawa: "On behalf of the municipality of Wawa, I am sincerely grateful for the province's continued support through NORDS. This funding has been essential in helping us maintain safe, reliable infrastructure while positioning our community for future growth and economic development."

Fred Mota has a quote, but it mentions me and my advocacy, so I won't say that.

We'll talk about Wayne Taipale, mayor of Moosonee: "The continuation of NORDS is excellent news for the town of Moosonee. By investing in infrastructure that supports resource development and safe communities, Moosonee can plan for future growth that benefits our people and local economy."

Sally Hagman, mayor of Blind River: "Thank you to the province of Ontario, under the leadership of Premier Ford, our municipality is currently supporting nearly \$250 million in construction-related growth, along with plans to create approximately 300 new homes by 2030. Programs such as NORDS play a critical role in ensuring these projects can move forward and that the economic spinoff benefits remain in northern Ontario."

It goes on and on and on.

Doug Gervais, mayor of Espanola: "We are grateful for NORDS and the partnership and support of the ministry. This program helps to move our community forward and

is essential to replacing aging critical infrastructure. We look forward to the continuation of this program and the strengthening of our northern communities.”

We don’t want our communities to be fly-in and fly-out. We want the people who are working there to live there. That’s what this program is all about. It’s investing in communities that had been ignored by previous governments for decades. We’re putting money back into those communities so they’re sustainable.

You all know that the ONR was built in 1902. It started in 1902, but it was to join up with Cochrane. Cochrane was going to be the Winnipeg—it was the agricultural centre point of northern Ontario. They found the mines, of course, but they continued to develop the agricultural sector as well, and they flourished.

Over years of neglect in spending on infrastructure, a lot of those communities fell on hard times. We’re renewing them. Putting the infrastructure back into those communities allows those individuals to live in those small communities. That’s where they work. That’s where they play. That’s where they have the recreational facilities. There’s where, in fact, they want to be—experiencing life in northern Ontario, in facilities that actually work and people are happy to be there, that provide a safe family life in small towns. That’s what we’re doing here in northern Ontario through the heritage fund, through the NORDS Fund.

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

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Thank you very much, Minister. I’m very happy to hear all of those updates about tourism, agriculture, transportation, jobs, health.

I would like to emphasize two items—one of them the Thunder Bay port facility in which the government is investing to open trade for northern Ontario internationally and domestically. Also, I would like to touch on our government’s mandate to build the infrastructure needed to support the economic growth, strengthen communities and create opportunities across Ontario. In northern Ontario, that includes major transportation infrastructure that can improve access to essential goods and services while supporting economic prosperity for the First Nations and remote communities.

With that in mind, can you speak to the importance of the Berens River bridge project and similar projects, as well as Thunder Bay—because I think this is an important project to unleash northern Ontario trade and contribution to the GDP of Ontario.

Hon. George Pirie: Thank you very much for the question.

Let’s talk about the port in Thunder Bay. We made that joint announcement with the Premier perhaps a couple of months ago—again, it’s to renew that port facility. It was underused. As you know, that port at the head of the Great Lakes in, quite frankly, central Canada is incredibly important for both domestic and international trade. Putting money back into that port and employing people and ensuring that—as we pivot quickly away to reduce the dependency on the US markets, we have to get our goods to market. Putting money in the Port of Thunder Bay is incredibly important to ensure that our goods move out to

international markets. In excess of 100 jobs are going to be created. But most importantly, we’re expanding the trade—we’re also expanding the ability with the tourism industry there. We can’t say enough about putting money back into our facilities. The other one that I talked about earlier is in Marathon.

The Berens River bridge is a special case, because the Berens River bridge is incredibly important. I’ll give you some stats as I flip through the pamphlet here. I talked about it in my opening remarks. Again, with the support of federal partners, this transformational project will provide Pikangikum First Nation with a year-round connection to Ontario’s highway network. This will all support improved transportation access to the following First Nations through a realigned winter roads network—and we’re talking Poplar Hill First Nation, McDowell Lake First Nation, North Spirit Lake First Nation, Keewaywin First Nation, Sandy Lake First Nation, Deer Lake First Nation. So this project is much more than transportation infrastructure. It’s about improving the quality of life and creating new opportunities for people living in those communities. By improving access and connectivity, the bridge will help facilitate economic development, support investment and create new opportunities for local businesses and workers. Just as importantly, it will help ensure residents have more reliable access to essential goods and services. That includes health care, emergency services, education, and supplies that many people across the province take for granted. These are necessities, not luxuries, and our government is committed to ensuring northern Indigenous communities have the infrastructure needed to access them safely and reliably.

I’m also pleased to provide an update on the project’s progress. Ground was broken on the permanent bridge earlier this year, marking a significant milestone for a project that has been sought by local communities for decades. Construction is now under way, and the project remains on track for completion in 2028.

Throughout the process, we have worked closely with our First Nations partners to ensure this project is being delivered in a way that reflects local priorities and supports community leadership. The project is being overseen by the Whitefeather Forest Community Resource Management Authority, a corporation established on behalf the people of Pikangikum First Nation. The Whitefeather Forest Community Resource Management Authority is ensuring that local First Nations play a leading role in key decisions throughout the development process, including the bridge’s design and implementation. This community-led approach is helping ensure the project delivers lasting benefits while respecting local knowledge and priorities.

The Berens River bridge is exactly the kind of lasting infrastructure project our government was elected to deliver.

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Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Thank you very much, Minister. How much time do we have?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Three minutes and 10 seconds.

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Perfect.

I would like to ask you to touch on the Northern Energy Advantage Program and how that energy program is transformational to industry in northern Ontario and the rural areas.

Hon. George Pirie: Well, as you know—energy, energy, energy. That says it all about the economy in northern Ontario.

The Northern Energy Advantage Program: Our government is supporting northern Ontario's industrial sector by providing businesses with competitive, stable and predictable electricity price rates through the Northern Energy Advantage Program. NEAP helps sustain over 21,500 jobs and maintain operations in sectors like forestry, mining and manufacturing, ensuring that northern businesses remain competitive in global markets.

Last year, our government expanded NEAP from \$120 million per year to over \$200 million, to protect Ontario and support northern businesses as our economy continues to be threatened by market uncertainty and unjustified tariffs from the US. Through impactful investments in NEAP, our government is expanding economic development in the north by improving industrial companies' competitiveness and helping them secure investments, while supporting good-paying jobs.

Additionally, the NEAP investor class stream is encouraging companies to undertake transformational investments, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to clean technologies.

Since its inception, NEAP has provided over \$1.83 billion in relief on electricity rates for industrial customers in northern Ontario, working to ensure industry and jobs remain in Ontario in the north—\$1.212 billion in rebates to mining companies, \$517 million in rebates to forestry companies, \$187 million in rebates—

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

Hon. George Pirie: —to manufacturing companies.

Now, more than ever, we must ensure that our government creates a stable environment for investment and supports good and high-paying jobs in northern Ontario. As we continue to face threats to northern industry from the US, our government remains committed to protecting jobs and advocating for our northern industries.

I think it's an incredibly important program that the government is expanding to meet the challenges and needs of an expanding economy in northern Ontario, to protect jobs, and to ensure that our economy is well positioned to pivot on our dependency on US markets. As you know, energy is key to do that. Ontario is energy's superpower, and we need that energy to ensure our manufacturing facilities, our high-energy consumers, remain competitive and produce the goods that they will be able to sell and market globally. It's an incredibly important program that all—and again, it's not under renew; it's in effect right now. It will be there—

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

We have 10 minutes to conclude the two hours allotted for the estimates. According to the rotation, we will go to the NDP. MPP Mamakwa, you have 10 minutes.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch, Chair, for the time.

The Minister of Northern Economic Development and Growth spoke about a prosperous northern Ontario at the beginning of his speech. One of the things that I'm quite aware of is that there continue to be significant job losses in the north—an example could be Ear Falls sawmill. The question on that is, what amount does this ministry, this minister estimate spending for the retention of workers, so that the north does not continue to see its population decrease?

Hon. George Pirie: Again, we've put money back into the operations, in forestry operations. The specific funds that are available to help the dislocated workers have been, again—and I'll hand it over to the deputy minister to give you the actual dollar values that are there.

You mentioned Ear Falls, but we've got a mining boom just north, in Red Lake.

You know that Frontier Lithium is just north of Ear Falls as well.

I expect that there will be, as we expand our economy—again, with the type of economy that we have in the north that is so strong, whether they be rare earths, whether they be precious metals, whether they be lithium, there will be jobs available, and they are transferable jobs.

The individuals who are working in the forestry sector should be able to find jobs in the mining sector, in their backyard.

That's what we're doing as we develop the economy all across northern Ontario.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: When you talk about Frontier Lithium—I don't think it's a given. This government has failed, continues to fail, with respect to the free, prior, and informed consent of the First Nations that are impacted in that. I don't think it's moving forward yet.

I want to go forward to page 29 of your estimates briefing book. It lists a key performance indicator as creating jobs in Ontario, with the goal as 1% but the current value as negative 34%. Can the minister explain what this shows?

Hon. George Pirie: Go ahead.

Mr. Drew Vanderduim: Thank you.

To the member, I would say that the ministry's job growth targets for this year are about 2,000 jobs, and right now we're at about 2,400, which is positive.

What you're seeing here is last year's number, and it's a reflection of the economic downturn that was generally felt across every space—so it shows that we're under target of less than 0.34%.

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

Mr. John Vanthof: Once again, thank you to the minister and for the staff for being here. I really appreciate the work you're doing.

The minister would be more in tune with the concerns of northerners—we talked about jobs—than probably anyone else in the government, and I appreciate that.

So I'm wondering if you're as concerned or as disappointed as we are that the government's commitment to have full high-speed Internet access to everyone in the province by the end of 2026 is not going to happen in

northern Ontario—unless you sign up to Starlink, an American company. We're very concerned about that.

Something else that a lot of people don't know that's happening in northern Ontario—and this isn't directly in your ministry, and I acknowledge that: Land lines are being phased out. And as we move to 5G—in sparse areas, 5G goes faster, but it doesn't go as far. I have residents in my riding who are losing cellphone service—not gaining, losing.

I would like to read something into the record from the deputy chief of the Savard fire department, who just wrote us: “As an emergency service provider, we cannot accept the status quo where corporate cellular coverage gaps dictate the survival rate of our residents or endanger our firefighters.”

We are losing cell service in northern Ontario and not getting the Internet that we were promised. How are you actually, seriously going to get people to come to the north, when what are basic, basic services that are—anyone in this room would not be able to operate without high-speed Internet. Yet people in the north—not just in the north; all parts of rural Ontario, but in the north it's especially troubling. Minister, are you as disappointed as I am that that is not going to happen, as promised by your government, by the end of 2026?

Hon. George Pirie: Obviously, the Ministry of Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Infrastructure have a broadband strategy. So if you want specific answers on that strategy, they're the ministries that should be called.

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I will tell you that as our mining companies grow and prosper, they are putting in that infrastructure up to Detour Lake; they're putting it up into Chapleau to ensure that they have it. So we again—

Mr. John Vanthof: If I can break in, Minister, you said that farmers are bringing in their own roads—

Hon. George Pirie: We have got the perfect partnership—

Mr. John Vanthof: —and mining companies are bringing in their own Internet. What exactly is the province doing?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Please.

Hon. George Pirie: We have the perfect partnership between private industry and government. And you saw that strategy unveiled just two weeks ago when the Prime Minister and the Premier hosted that event in Toronto, looking for private capital. That is part of the solution.

Mr. John Vanthof: I don't disagree totally, but the province also has a responsibility to provide basic services that it promised.

Today I have heard for the first time that it will soon be up to farmers in northern Ontario to provide their own roads—and it soon is a thing. Well, if there's no Internet, then the company—in Kirkland Lake, the company is going ahead and building a subdivision and putting the water and sewer in because the government can't do it. At what point do we actually have public services?

Hon. George Pirie: Well, it's interesting that you said that's what you heard.

Again, we've got the perfect partnership between public and private investment.

I'll tell you, when we built Musselwhite, Placer Dome built the road, and we built the transmission line. That was the way it was done, quite frankly. There's nothing new about this partnership.

Mr. John Vanthof: I don't disagree with that at all, Minister. If I'm a farmer and I need power to my farm that other people don't use, I've got no problem with that. But what I'm hearing is that services—general public services. What used to be township roads in new areas might no longer be township roads—might no longer be service boards, might be private roads.

Hon. George Pirie: I didn't hear that at all.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm not saying that's the case—

Hon. George Pirie: I have to disagree with you fully on that.

Mr. John Vanthof: —but that's something we need to discuss before we go through much further.

Hon. George Pirie: I have to disagree with you 100% on that. That's your interpretation, John. That's not what's actually happening.

Mr. John Vanthof: That very well could be, so that's what we need—

Hon. George Pirie: I don't want that remark just left out there, because that's wrong—

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

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That's something that we disagree with each other on.

Hopefully we can work together, because I do appreciate working with you, Minister.

I asked the question: How is the Greater Clay Belt going to be developed? And the answer I heard was, “Well, some farmers can put in private roads.” That has not been the case in Ontario before. So we need to work on that.

Hon. George Pirie: They are existing concession roads that they're clearing—again, with the full partnership with the ministry to get it done.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): There's 15 seconds left. Any takers?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): That concludes this committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth.

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?

Shall vote 2201, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 2202, northern development program, carry? All in favour, raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Economic—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): My apologies. There is a typo. I will read it again.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): I have to go back to the previous vote and make a correction because there was a typo.

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition? The vote carries.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth to the House? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote carries.

Thank you to the minister, deputy minister and staff for coming and sharing your valuable input, insight and time with us.

The committee is now recessed until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1206 to 1300.

MINISTRY OF RURAL AFFAIRS

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good afternoon, members, witnesses, Minister. The committee is set to resume consideration of the 2026-27 estimates. Up next for consideration is the Ministry of Rural Affairs, for a total of two hours.

As a reminder to any ministry staff appearing today, when you are called on to speak for the first time, please state your name and your title so that it may be accurately recorded in Hansard.

Are there any questions from the members of the committee? Seeing none, I'm now required to call vote 5001, which sets the review process in motion.

We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Rural Affairs. The remaining time will be allotted for questions and answers, in rotations of 15 minutes for each of the recognized parties.

As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Lisa Thompson, and I'm honoured to serve Ontario as the Minister of Rural Affairs.

I want to thank the committee members for the opportunity to speak with all of you again this year. I am proud to discuss our government's vision for protecting rural Ontario by highlighting our accomplishments and the work that's under way at the Ministry of Rural Affairs.

Joining me today is my deputy minister, Martha Greenberg, as well as Assistant Deputy Minister Burke Christian. With their support and the support of our teams, we look forward to answering your questions.

Rural Ontario has always been a priority for our government, in part because rural Ontario is home to so much of what powers this province. From small businesses and world-class manufacturing to in-demand tourist at-

tractions, rural Ontario is home to a wide range of economic drivers, including deepwater ports, nuclear energy facilities, greenhouses and farmers' fields—and that's enough about Huron-Bruce; you know that extends right across rural Ontario, from south to north and east and west as well. It's clear that big things are happening in rural Ontario.

At the same time, rural communities are navigating significant economic uncertainty. We need to be mindful of this. Changing global headwinds, including tariff-related pressures and evolving trade conditions, continue to affect businesses, workers and local economies.

At the same time, our small, rural and northern communities are also growing. New residents are choosing to call these communities home, and new businesses are creating opportunities. That is why our government is focused on helping rural communities attract and retain workers and families, while creating opportunities for more young people to build their futures close to home.

There is tremendous opportunity across rural Ontario, ladies and gentlemen. Our natural resources; our agriculture and food capacity; our manufacturing expertise that shone last week, for example, at the International Plowing Match and Rural Expo; and the skilled workforce that we have throughout this province are in demand around the world. This is reflected in significant investments from companies looking to expand their operations in rural communities to better serve Canadian and international markets. I look forward to speaking to that in more detail later.

As the global trade landscape continues to evolve and as communities face uncertainty arising from changing headwinds and tariff pressures, our government is focused on protecting Ontario by helping rural Ontario businesses and communities remain resilient, competitive and, most importantly, prepared for the future. By strengthening local supply chains, supporting Ontario-made goods and encouraging investment in rural industries, we are helping build a more resilient economy that can adapt to changing market conditions, while creating good jobs in communities across the province.

Our government continues to build and expand roads, bridges and highways to better link rural areas with larger cities. We're investing in major infrastructure projects that are improving the quality of life for rural residents and creating new opportunities close to home.

Those are just a few of many examples of the positive change and growth that we are seeing right across this amazing province.

A big part of my role as Minister of Rural Affairs is to ensure that rural communities are well positioned to seize the current and emerging economic opportunities and thwart off the headwinds that we're looking at. I want to speak today about how we're meeting and exceeding this goal, and how our rural strategy, Enabling Opportunity, is working in tandem with innovative ministry funding programs, training sessions, webinars, one-on-one coaching opportunities and other tools to drive economic growth.

Our government has a vision for how to best support thriving rural communities and small towns. We're con-

nected, we understand, and we're listening. So in order to pull everything together, we felt, to make sure we had a strong foundation, we needed a guiding document to lay out that vision for all of rural Ontario and northern Ontario—a strategy to detail how our ministry and the entire provincial government together can provide the best possible resources to rural businesses and municipalities.

As I alluded to, we started by listening. In 2024, we travelled across the province to hear from Indigenous community leaders, elected municipal officials, and those who proudly call rural Ontario home. We worked with partner ministries across government to identify a range of programming to support rural economic development. And most importantly, we connected directly with stakeholders to better understand the challenges they face each and every day—concerns about economic uncertainty, labour shortages and changing market conditions. We also learned what they needed from our government to support economic growth.

I was honoured to launch Enabling Opportunity, Ontario's rural economic development strategy, in January of last year at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association conference in Toronto.

Our government's strategy for working collaboratively to strengthen and protect rural communities is spelled out across three key pillars: supporting business development and attraction, growing a dynamic rural workforce, and creating safe and strong communities. These pillars of our rural strategy are designed by rural Ontario for rural Ontario. They also reflect what we continue to hear from rural communities today: that governments must be responsive, practical and ready to support communities as economic conditions change. Our ministry understands these concerns and continues to work closely with our local partners to ensure rural Ontario has the tools it needs to navigate uncertainty, emerge stronger and support the government's efforts to protect Ontario's economy. Together, these pillars also support a broader goal: ensuring rural Ontario remains a key driver of the province's economic resilience. From manufacturing and resource development to tourism and local services, rural communities play a critical role in Ontario's supply chains and contribute to the goals and services that people and businesses rely on every day.

It has been well over a year since we first rolled out Enabling Opportunity, so I'd like to take this opportunity to discuss how our rural strategy is helping guide a whole-of-government approach to investing in rural Ontario. Since launching Enabling Opportunity, we have been putting those priorities into action in communities across this province.

We know that strong rural communities need strong local economies, and that is why our government continues to support business development and investment in sectors that are critical to Ontario's economic future. From investments in the critical mineral supply chain to support for tourism development and downtown revitalization projects, we are helping communities diversify their econ-

omies, create jobs and attract new opportunities—key word there.

Partnerships with municipalities such as the town of Wasaga Beach are helping build destinations that draw visitors, support local businesses and strengthen regional economies.

I'd also like to point to the fact that cruise ships are going to start arriving in Goderich, Ontario in 2028. And municipalities are rubbing out, erasing their traditional boundaries and working together to capitalize on this economic opportunity, just right up north and south the coastline of Lake Huron.

At the same time, we recognize that economic growth depends on having a skilled and available workforce, no matter what the sector is. Our government is working to ensure nurses, skilled tradespeople and other professionals can build rewarding careers in rural Ontario. Programs such as the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant are helping address workforce shortages by providing incentives for eligible students to live and work in the rural communities that need them the most after graduation.

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We are also helping build the strong and resilient communities that people want to call home. Through collaboration with municipalities and partner ministries, we are supporting investments in local infrastructure and services, including transit, road repairs, pothole prevention, and winter maintenance. We have also made it easier for communities, businesses and organizations to access government supports, through ontario.ca/myrural as a dedicated online hub for rural funding and capacity-building programs.

Taken together, these efforts demonstrate how Enabling Opportunity is helping guide a coordinated whole-of-government approach to strengthening rural Ontario. By supporting local businesses, growing the workforce and investing in strong communities, we are ensuring rural Ontario remains a vital contributor to our province's economic resilience and long-term prosperity.

I am proud of how Enabling Opportunity is being implemented, and I look forward to seeing it help guide future government-wide investments in our rural communities.

Now I want to take a few minutes to highlight a program that is helping us deliver on each pillar of our strategy, a program that emerged directly from the consultations we held across Ontario. I'm speaking, of course, about the Rural Ontario Development Program, known as ROD, as we call it. The modernized Rural Ontario Development Program expanded who can apply, helping more communities and organizations access the support they need, which is cost-shared, to move their priorities forward.

To better support our small local businesses, we opened a new opportunity for rural brick-and-mortar businesses with between one and 20 employees to apply for funding through a business-specific application stream.

We also recognized that some rural communities exist within urban boundaries for larger cities. In response to

feedback we received from affected communities, we expanded our definition of rural to be more inclusive of rural spaces within larger urban areas.

I'm so proud of what we've accomplished on behalf of the advocacy from the city of Ottawa. We've heard from the city of Thunder Bay and also cities like Hamilton.

We've also opened the program to new kinds of projects, including future planning for long-term economic growth. Municipalities, not-for-profits, and Indigenous communities and organizations can now access funding to develop strategies and plans that help position their communities for the future.

And on the ministry side: our hard-working economic advisers, who are amazing. They have stepped up to help applicants put their best foot forward, through English and French webinars and hundreds of one-on-one coaching sessions, to make sure that every project coming forward has the spirit of protecting Ontario and fulfilling our goals in Enabling Opportunity, the strategy for rural Ontario.

Since 2019, through the two intakes of the ROD Program, formerly known as RED, we committed over \$38 million to support 747 economic development projects in rural communities.

And, of course, I would like to give a nod right now to amazing parliamentary assistants Bob Bailey and Steve Pinsonneault, who have also played an important role in this work, connecting with rural communities, bringing their perspectives back to our ministry.

Over the last year, we have spoken with hundreds of stakeholders about their local priorities and how the ROD Program and our ministry can support their work. This summer, I had the opportunity to build on those conversations by visiting successful applicants from the first ROD intake and to hear first-hand how their projects are making a difference in their communities.

In June, I travelled to Peterborough to announce funding for five local ROD projects from across the county. From planning for future economic growth and examining rural transportation needs, to helping entrepreneurs compete and advance rural innovation and develop community farm initiatives, these projects demonstrated the range of local priorities the ROD Program supports, helping communities respond to local priorities and lay the groundwork for future opportunities.

From Niagara West to Prince Edward county and Pembroke to Southampton, PA Bailey, PA Pinsonneault and I continued connecting with recipients and seeing first-hand the opportunities taking shape across rural Ontario.

Most recently, parliamentary assistant Steve Pinsonneault was invited to join the Hastings County Plowing Match and Farm Show to recognize five local ROD recipients, highlighting local initiatives from across the region aimed at strengthening rural economic development.

I'd like to pause here for a moment and recognize an amazing member of our rural affairs team, Chris Dopking. We'll be celebrating his life tomorrow. He played a huge role in that Hastings plowing match.

Back to my script.

Last year, when the Rural Ontario Development Program closed its first application period in September, over 100 businesses and approximately 230 communities, not-for-profits and Indigenous communities and organizations submitted requests for nearly \$17 million in ROD program funding. The interest and enthusiasm for the renewed program was significant. After reviewing applications very, very carefully and selecting successful recipients, 160 community and business development projects have received nearly \$6 million in funding.

Enthusiasm for the ROD program continued when the second application period closed in February 2026.

And there's still time—the third window closes today. So for those of you watching, if you haven't submitted your application, you have a few hours left to get it in.

The Rural Economic Development Advisory Panel takes their job very seriously. They met in May to review over 300 applications that we received from communities and businesses across rural Ontario, as part of the second application period as well. These projects sought more than \$17 million in ROD funding. But after very serious review and after all applications were taken into consideration, 100 community and business development projects met the criteria that had been slated and were selected to receive up to \$4 million in funding.

I want to pause for a moment to thank all the members of the Rural Economic Development Advisory Panel. These volunteers do amazing work evaluating hundreds of projects to determine which will best support rural communities. I want to thank the REDAP chair, Michael Barrett, for his leadership of that panel. Michael has brought his endless expertise to guide the panel's work. They will be making the recommendations to my office from applications received from the third application period soon, and recipients will be notified accordingly.

What it all comes down to is this: It's no exaggeration to say that the changes we've made to the ROD program are indeed making a difference. Strategic investments through the ROD program will help diversify and grow local economies, making economic growth more inclusive.

At a time when many businesses are confronting changing headwinds and uncertainties in global markets, these investments help communities strengthen their local economic foundations, create new opportunities closer to home, and support our efforts to protect Ontario's economy. They are also helping communities strengthen local and regional supply chains—incredibly important at this time—expand value-added production, and create conditions for businesses to grow and compete in an increasingly dynamic economic environment. This will help ensure rural communities can continue to contribute to the province's economic prosperity. What does that look like on the ground? It looks like:

- \$50,000 to enhance defence and aerospace investments in Simcoe county;

- more than \$70,000 across two projects to improve main streets in Gravenhurst and Russell;

- more than \$111,000 across three projects to strengthen and promote opportunities to work in rural health care;

—\$143,000 to support community groups in Smiths Falls working to assist neurodiverse individuals; and

—\$264,000 to the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation to upgrade the Virginia Beach Marina to increase year-round use and tourism opportunities.

Now that's an impact. Again, we need to keep in mind, it's cost-shared dollars, and for every government dollar, we see a 4-to-1 ratio. So it's money well-invested, leveraging other investments as well.

Ladies and gentlemen, the ROD program is one of many ways our ministry supports sustained economic growth through rural Ontario. We are funding eligible projects, yes, but we are also investing in the skills and knowledge behind the people who deliver these projects in their communities.

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That's why we have launched our rural summit series—to bring regional, rural voices together, identify priorities, and explore different possible approaches to addressing them. Following the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities conference, leaders gathered at the first rural summit in Timmins to continue important conversations about regional priorities. The summit created an opportunity for municipal leaders, economic development partners and provincial representatives to build on relationships and identify shared opportunities. We also brought together rural leaders in Georgina. Again, participants shared ideas, highlighted local successes and explored new ways to work together to support economic growth and community resilience.

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

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: We are also proud to work with local municipalities, with our ministry's program known as Teeny Tiny Summits. But don't be fooled by the name, ladies and gentlemen: These in-person and virtual gatherings are huge opportunities for hundreds of local businesses and municipal leaders to talk about their work, learn from outside experts and find new ways to collaborate. Our ministry staff work with local municipal leaders and the Rural Ontario Municipal Association to host these in-person and virtual gatherings. Over the past few months, rural leaders have met in Clifford, Burleigh Falls and Manitouwadge to host their summits.

I want to talk about Manitouwadge in our dying minutes. This activity that happened at this community reflects our commitment to ensuring that rural and remote communities, especially those that are geographically isolated, have equitable access to tools, networks and knowledge that support economic growth. Manitouwadge is a strong example—

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

Now we'll move to the first round of questions. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you, Minister Thompson, for coming to committee today. Thank you to your ministry staff.

I don't think anyone has got more cred than you on caring about rural Ontario, so any of my questions—although they may be prying, I am not trying to diminish

your cred. That showed with the recent IPM close to Walkerton. It was one of the best ones I've ever attended—not better than Verner, I'm just going to say, but it was good.

I have to admit, I don't disagree with anything you said, but I'm struggling to see where the ministry—are you an advisory to other ministries? Because, quite frankly, the ROD Program—I've got no complaints; it should be 10 times as big. But if you look at the big picture of what government spends, this government probably spends as much money trying to get bike lanes out of Toronto as it's putting into the ROD Program. That's not giving me a warm, fuzzy feeling about how much it cares about rural Ontario.

Again, I'm not criticizing you, because I know you care, but I'm having troubles equating the words of your opening statement with the actual program funding that your ministry is dealing with. Perhaps if you could give us an outline of how you work with other ministries, because in your statement, a lot of the stuff you talked about was Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Transportation—I could name the ministries, your partner ministries. I need to understand; I think many people in rural Ontario need to understand what talking to the Ministry of Rural Affairs—where that goes.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I appreciate that question incredibly much because it does give me an opportunity to shine a light further on how I extend the rural voice around the cabinet table.

I'd be remiss if I didn't start off by recognizing that in the province of Ontario, we have 388 rural municipalities, and I certainly have shared their voice with the Ministry of Finance. As a result, we've seen the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund double to \$600 million over the last couple of years, and I'm really, really proud of that. We've done good work together, so much so that the Minister of Finance asked me to make the announcements on his behalf. That funding is incredibly important because it recognizes a clear message that, as Minister of Rural Affairs, I've shared time and again: Sometimes the best thing we can do is get out of our municipalities' way. Through the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund, we actually enable funding to go to rural municipalities for their own local priorities. Those local priorities are deemed priorities by the local communities, by the municipality themselves. I'm incredibly proud that that additional \$600 million goes to where municipalities need it most.

And then if we want to talk about additional funding, I'd be remiss if I didn't touch on HEWSF funding, the housing-enabling water and sewer funding. We work very tightly with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and I'm very proud to sit at the table at AMO and at ROMA along with my colleague Minister Flack. We ensure that they understand how well we're working together and that, if necessary, I'm a conduit to share additional messaging with regard to how we need to continue to take into consideration the realities that rural communities have.

I'm going to go to a perfect example of how our work has made a difference. I'll never forget meeting the mayor

of Sables-Spanish Rivers, Mayor Burke, and it was on a trip across northern Ontario that I was taking in 2025. I met with him and his council, and he said, “Lisa, we can’t even begin applying for some provincial funding because we don’t even have the money to apply for strategic or feasibility plans.” That fed into a key message I sent back immediately with regard to modernizing the rural Ontario development fund—because, for the love of God, we need to help municipalities have the tools to substantiate, not only to the ratepayers but to my provincial colleagues, that they need the funding as well. I think that is a perfect example—

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay, if I could just—I’m not trying to cut you off; I just need to clarify. I was a municipal councillor for a long time. Rural municipalities in my part of the world, and I think in the rest, are super, super cash-strapped right now. Several of them are close to bankruptcy. I’ve told them to hand in the keys. Do they have to talk to you or to the—I’m trying to figure out who is the conduit, because we’re always talking about one-stop, one-door shopping. Are you the door—or is the Minister of Municipal Affairs not listening? I’m sincerely struggling. I’m not knocking anything you’re doing. I like the consultation process. But the level of funding in some areas is not matching “protecting Ontario.”

I just talked about, with the Minister of Northern Economic Development and Growth, how there are big parts of Ontario that still don’t have Internet unless they buy Starlink, that that promise is not—we are actually losing cellphone coverage in rural Ontario, because as you go to 5G, it’s faster, but its range is much less. I have fire departments that are losing cellphone coverage—losing it. Where do they raise the flag? To you? To the Minister of Finance? I’m struggling. Where do they go?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: In terms of the team approach and the whole-of-government approach, people need to trust that if something is shared with me it immediately gets shared with my colleagues as well, not only at ministerial levels, but within our MOs and within our official teams as well, and that effects change. I could go on and on about some of the changes that we’ve seen and some of the investments that have been realized because of that.

The other thing I want to share is at another level—I’m the first one to stand up and say, “We need to take a look at this.” You brought cellular up, so I’m going to go there. That’s what I’m hearing in rural Ontario—concern over cellular connectivity. When I was at my federal-provincial-territorial meeting, it was right on top of my list to bring up to be addressed. It was interesting to see my provincial colleagues stand with me and agree to it. We are advocating incredibly hard at the federal level to make sure our collective provincial rural voices are heard so that cellular can be addressed—to your point exactly.

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Mr. John Vanthof: As an opposition member, I think one of our roles—we suggest where we think the government’s policy perhaps disagrees with ours, we criticize, and

we also have the ability to hold the government to account, when the government sits.

Again, on an issue that’s rural, is it you I hold to account? Is it the Minister of Infrastructure I hold to account?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Come to us together.

Mr. John Vanthof: Coming from you, I really appreciate that. We have worked together in the past many times, before our political life as well.

The ROD program—I don’t think we’re going to disagree; it’s a good program. Why is its funding so limited? Because \$38 million since 2018—\$38 million is a lot of money, but in government speak, it’s not. So to say that rural Ontario is so incredibly important to us—\$38 million doesn’t equate to that if you’re just going by dollars, right? If you go by how much other ministries—that’s a line item in many ministries, not their flagship program. So what’s holding it back?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Again, with all due respect, I’d like to remind you that it’s a cost-share program, and the return on one government dollar is—I feel it’s stunning. It’s a 4-to-1 ratio. So when we talk about a \$38-million investment through the rural Ontario development fund, take that up—I think the number is around \$120 million in actual realities. I think that’s being responsible with taxpayer dollars. We shouldn’t be giving handouts, but truly evaluating the projects based on really stringent criteria—that is, driving economic growth to protect Ontario—and based on that criteria, making sure that it’s sustainable, because we’d hate to see programs fall off. So it has to have that cost-share element.

So when I’m talking about a \$38-million investment on one side, you need to know that it’s actually over \$120 million that is being realized in investment. I think that’s good news for everyone.

Mr. John Vanthof: I 100% agree; we don’t want to throw money away—100%. And we’re not going to get into what we view some of your government colleagues are doing.

By the same token, if that program was more widely used—because some of the things that you mentioned, some of those projects could be repeated in other parts of the province too. So if that program was \$100 million, it would be \$400 million. So that still leads to the question, what’s holding it back? Because there is a need. I don’t think anyone here is going to deny that there are needs in rural Ontario. We all know that. They all can’t be fixed in a day; I 100% get that. But again, what can we do to increase that budget?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I’ll remember you asked that, and I’ll keep thinking about that—

Mr. John Vanthof: Hey, I’m not out to destroy your ministry. I’m out to help your ministry.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I’m going to reflect on that a little bit and follow up with you on that. How’s that?

But in all seriousness, John, I think we need to take into consideration as well that this is a brand new ministry and we’re getting our feet under us. I’m truly conservative in my approach. I want to get it right. I’m walking before I run. We had a little thing called an election last year, and

we're finalizing and putting the final strokes on our strategic plan for rural Ontario. So we're just nicely coming into our stride. We've built a foundation that is trusted, and people look forward to what is generated from that foundation. I look forward to continuing to grow; trust me on that. And that will be realized through collaboration with my fellow ministries as well.

Mr. John Vanthof: I appreciate that answer, because you need to walk before you run, but there are so many needs—and you know them too—in rural Ontario that aren't being met by current programming, like the water fund. There are a lot of systems close to falling apart. Rural Ontario is another one—I bring this up at every meeting; I'm going to put it on the record again. One thing I noticed when I drove to Bruce—my family is in Woodstock—rural Ontario and southwestern Ontario look much different than rural Ontario and parts in northern Ontario. We have rural townships in northern Ontario where the population is collapsing, and those townships are going bankrupt. There's lots of farmland there, but when a farm is sold, the buildings are bulldozed.

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

Mr. John Vanthof: Something that we need to look at is: How do we change the tax structure so that those townships can still survive? That's something you understand. I know you understand it. But I would like to put that on the record. Hopefully I can work with you in the future on that.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, very good. I will say that in the future, maybe Minister Pirie and I could get together and have a conversation with you about that and dive into it a little bit deeper. Ideally, we're not plowing over the houses, because we need people to be living on our sideroads and our concessions, recognizing the opportunities to call those areas home.

I think the work that Minister Pirie is doing with regard to Clay Belt development and things like that, and amazing people like Koch elevators and whatnot—and now that the Northlander, through our government, is running again, maybe we will see that prosperity move along the tracks when that train is rolling as well.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We'll move to the third party. MPP Hsu.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I want to start off by thanking Minister Thompson for coming today.

I'm reminded of a meeting that I had with Minister Thompson two years ago now, where I pressed her about the rural part of Kingston, which is a population of over 100,000, not being eligible for rural economic development funds. I'm very glad that the new rural Ontario development fund now has an extra condition which allows much of the rural part of Kingston, the part that's in the K0H postal code, that forward sorting area, to become eligible. There are rural areas in Kingston, like around Clark Road in the west or Abbey Dawn Road in the east—they're not part of that postal code; they still aren't covered and are not eligible. But I appreciate that the forward sorting area, the postal code solution, is clean and simple and fixes most of the problem. So thank you for that.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Most. Yes, I can speak to that in a moment.

Mr. Ted Hsu: After listening to my colleague from the NDP, I just can't resist saying that I also believe that there's a lot of new economic potential in rural Ontario to be tapped, especially during this time when tariff wars are hitting traditional heavy industry jobs in urban areas. I think you agree with me. You said that there's tremendous opportunity across rural Ontario.

Just before I get into my questions, I can't resist remembering yesterday, when Minister Harris—I was challenging him on the under-budgeting for emergency wildland fire-fighting. The budget is \$150 million, but it's way below what we've been spending in recent years—the minimum was \$171 million, so \$21 million more than what was budgeted, and the minister called that “gosh darn close,” which would mean that your operating budget would be gosh darn close to zero. I want to mention that point.

But I think the more important point here is that I agree with my colleague from northeastern Ontario that there is more economic potential, and I would support an increase in the rural Ontario development fund.

Let me get to my first question, which is just on understanding what's in the estimates a little bit better.

Your ministry had \$5.57 million budgeted for salaries and wages. Can you tell me how many full-time equivalents that supports in 2026-27? And what was it the previous year?

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Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: This is where I'm probably going to pull in our deputy, because from day-to-day operations, she's responsible for the operational side of the business.

I want to share with you that our ministry is traditional in the sense that much of our strength is realized because we have an amazing field team, and that amazing field team is chunked down into regions throughout rural Ontario. Alex was probably your closest adviser. He has moved on to another position—and I don't know whether that has been filled or not.

I want to really emphasize that we're a brand new ministry, getting our feet under us, building our foundation of trust from which we're going to grow. And with that, we'll have specific numbers.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Since you say that, Minister, I will challenge you a little bit. I'm not just here to praise everything you do. You were the minister of the whole OMAFRA before we took out the R, so it's not totally new. You're pretty experienced as a minister.

If I could just put in a little supplement before the deputy minister answers, I just want to get an idea of how many employees, how many of those full-time equivalents, work on the Rural Ontario Development Program and how many are just minister's office, issues manager, corporate services, whatever—if the deputy minister could break it up that way.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: If I may, I'd be remiss, before I handed it over—to share that my very first job was a rural community adviser for the Ministry of Agriculture

and Food. And I can tell you the field staff is stunning. They multi-task and they cover off many, many different areas of specialties. I'm really proud of the work that they continue to do on behalf of the province of Ontario.

When we stood up this ministry, of course we had to work through what made sense—what FTEs made sense staying with OMAFA and what FTEs made sense coming over to the Ministry of Rural Affairs. And I can tell you with absolute certainty that we have a huge punch and the foundation we're building is setting us up for great growth.

Over to you.

Ms. Martha Greenberg: My name is Martha Greenberg. I am the deputy minister for the Ministry of Rural Affairs.

As of March 31, 2026, the Ministry of Rural Affairs had 35 FTEs. I'm not going to have the number right at my fingertips in terms of how that compared to the previous year, which was the first time the ministry was a ministry; it was probably closer to 20-ish, but we were sort of pulling out of, as you noted, what was OMAFRA.

I would note that there are some shared services as well. In terms of the breakdown of the ministry you were looking at, I would say—and again I'm going to have to use “ish.” I don't have the breakdown right at my fingertips. It's probably about six people on the policy side, maybe about 15 people who serve all of our economic development programs—so not just ROD, but we offer a number of programs in-house in terms of that. There are shared legal, shared communications and shared corporate with another ministry as well, so those are not full-time assigned to rural affairs.

I'll be pleased to get you a map of Ontario that shows exactly who's working in what region. We have a dozen to 15 amazing people.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you very much.

I also give credit to my colleague from Timiskaming—Cochrane again for motivating this question.

Minister, you are, shall we say, a conduit for rural Ontario to other ministries, and you've said, “Talk to me, and the information will get to the other ministries.” So I've got to ask this hard question. I'd like to see programs like the Rural Economic Development Program increase—it's \$10 million a year. When you were at the cabinet table and people were talking about how to spend money, did you stand up and say, “You could spend a dollar on these Protect Ontario advertisements, but you could get a 4-to-1 ratio on the dollar you spend on rural economic development”? Did you have that conversation? I feel we would get much bigger bang for our buck on something like an economic development program compared to one of those Protect Ontario ads.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I think we need to be very thoughtful with our questions, because we don't want to demonstrate what we don't know.

I'm sure it's just an oversight, but you need to understand as well that the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade has a huge responsibility that Minister Fedeli and I are always talking about, in terms of the southwestern economic development fund and EORN—the funding for eastern Ontario as well, which I know you have

to be familiar with. Those particular funding programs used to be facilitated through rural affairs in the historic days. But I think there's a really nice fit in terms of the economic development, job creation and trade portfolio for that funding. Minister Fedeli and I are yet another example of how two ministries are working together to make sure that—and I used this example not too long ago—viable projects that are small businesses with one to 20 employees come to the rural Ontario development fund to get moving, cut their teeth, to scale up. And then, when they grow and they're ready for bigger, larger investments, they go to the economic development, job creation and trade ministry. It's a really nice partnership that we have in that regard.

I'm sure that people around the province can point to projects that are funded through the southwestern economic development fund or EORN, and the list goes on and on—FONOM, NOMA. Minister Rickford and I are another example of a pair who work together. The list goes on and on.

I look forward to making sure, in the future, when I have a chance to stand in the House and debate, that I'm going to make a purposeful point of sharing exactly how our ministries are working together to support rural Ontario.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you very much.

Just to get it on the record: I think it would be better value for money to do less advertisements and more economic development programs.

I want to talk a little bit about, again, this interaction or integration or how rural affairs was separated from agriculture. There's a Grassroots Growth Program that's with the Ministry of Agriculture, and that's about economic development in agriculture. But in many ways, agriculture is the backbone of the rural economy; it's very hard to separate the two. I was just wondering why you didn't get responsibility. Why aren't we considering that in the estimates today? Why didn't you get responsibility for that economic development program?

I'm motivated because I went to talk to a very entrepreneurial farmer in the Kingston area named Charlie Forman. I asked him about rural economic development—“What would you do if you were eligible?” He's eligible now, by the way. Thank you. He had all these ideas about what kind of growth he could have in his farming business, but it was all about adding value to his agricultural operation. So when I think about him, to me, it doesn't make sense that the ROD program is in one ministry and the Grassroots Growth Program is in the other. Shouldn't you just be responsible for both, so that you could coordinate it a bit better? You said that your government is coming out with a strategic plan for rural Ontario.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It's already out.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay. So one of them should be, I think, a coordinated economic development between agriculture and other parts of the rural economy.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Just to clarify on the record, Enabling Opportunity, a strategy for rural Ontario, has been out for a year. I'd certainly be pleased to get you a copy of that strategy, just FYI.

With that said, though, I am a farmer's daughter. I am proud to call rural Ontario home. But I think people take a misstep when they assume that if we take care of agriculture, we take care of rural Ontario. Rural Ontario is so much more—so much more. And manufacturing and value-added processing, energy generation, energy storage—the pillars that are driving our economy in this province—are actually being realized as well. And people needed to see themselves in a ministry that wasn't necessarily agriculture.

Last week, the Premier toured two amazing manufacturing facilities in Bruce county, and not one of them was geared towards primary agricultural production—it was so much more. This one particular manufacturer shone in the sense that their success was based on targeted, customized manufacturing, as opposed to high-production, in terms of mass production of widgets. That's what we can realize in rural Ontario.

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Mr. Ted Hsu: Time is running out, so I need to get in at least another question.

Can you just tell me—maybe this is a question for the deputy minister—what performance measures you are going to use to judge whether the Rural Ontario Development Program is working—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Oh, I need to answer that first.

Mr. Ted Hsu: —whether the money is generating the return that you expect? What key performance indicators are you going to use? Maybe you could just give me a couple of the big ones.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I want to see the investment that we attract and leverage continue to increase—

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

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: —that's going to be a good measuring bar. I also want to see more interest—every intake window that we present open, to continue to grow.

Having over 700 applications to be considered in the first and second intake alone is phenomenal.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Do you know what the combined value of those was?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, it was over \$17 million—that was just the first intake alone. And it was over \$17 million for the second intake.

Again, we are a brand new ministry. We're walking, setting up a foundation that will never crumble, and we're growing on that foundation.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Given that that's more than the \$10 million per year, it seems like a good argument for why less money should have been spent on the Protect Ontario advertisements.

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

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you, Minister, for being here along with your staff.

Congrats on running a very successful IPM. I know you did a lot of work in the background. A lot of people don't see that. You've set the bar quite high for Bob and I when it's in Lambton next year. The IPM doesn't get any more rural than that. That's rural.

You mentioned the ROD Program in your opening speech. As your PA, I've made a lot of announcements right across the province, and that truly is a really great program.

Remember, today is the deadline to get your applications in.

My question will be on rural summits. As your PA, I did a lot of round tables—I chaired a couple of them. And I do realize how important it is to get feedback from community leaders. The reality is, priorities change, region to region, in this vast province. What matters in southwest Ontario is totally different in northern Ontario.

Through you, Chair, to the minister: You brought municipal, community and business leaders together in Timmins and Georgina. What came out of those rural summits? What opportunities emerged from those discussions, and how will the ministry build on them?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Thank you very much.

The first thing that I would want to share—and it is in the spirit of accountability: You don't know where you're going if you're not measuring, so I very much appreciated how the ADM, Assistant Deputy Minister Burke Christian, shared a report card on behalf of the ministry, on behalf of me. It outlined everything we had accomplished during the first year. I certainly would be pleased to share those stats to the table—through you, Chair—if that's of interest to everyone. It kind of set the tone; it set the reality check in terms of our achievements in that first year.

From there, we embarked upon panel discussions. We heard from the experts who are local to the ground and respected by the municipal, not-for-profit and Indigenous community leaders who participated in the summit. Each summit had a very different flavour, based on the panellists who participated, and I really appreciated that, because it allowed that local flavour, that local reality, to shine through and demonstrate how we threw the cookie cutter away.

My biggest take-away is that never before had rural municipalities and not-for-profit organizations felt connected—and understood, more importantly, that there was more to the rural communities in addition to primary agricultural production, and that, in some cases, those priorities mattered as well.

I hope the modernization of the Rural Ontario Development Program and the way we're shaping our Teeny Tiny Summits, as well as our First Impressions programs, starts reflecting what exactly the priorities were coming out of those summits. But most of all, I have to say—and I don't mean to sound like I'm blowing my own horn, but the participants felt heard, and we're building a very important level of trust from which to build on.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: That's great. I love your theory that cookie-cutter doesn't fit—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: No.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: —because it seriously does not fit. This province is very much different from one end to the other, so—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: If I may, to give a supplemental: In Georgina, we focused on artificial intelligence. It was stunning to hear what was happening at the local level. The panellists we had shone a light on what was happening locally and what potential policy considera-

tions we needed going forward—which, of course, you share right away with our colleagues. And in the north, it was still about making sure that they have the right cornerstones on which to grow, from a prosperity perspective. From having Mr. Cook through to a construction company and the mayor of Timmins participate in that discussion, it was very eclectic as well, and I think the more eclectic-ness we can build into a conversation, the healthier we'll be when it comes to rural Ontario.

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

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you, Chair, and to the minister and her staff.

Congratulations on being here and on a very successful IPM last week. Was it a week ago?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It's hard to believe.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Only a week ago. It went by very fast. I spent four days there. I'll have to tell you about that sometime.

I'm looking forward to a lot of advice before IPM 2027 in Lambton county; you're all welcome.

Anyway, last year, Minister, when you were at estimates, you spoke about the development strategy of enabling opportunity, which, you said then, would set the direction for rural economic development in the province of Ontario. With that strategy now guiding your ministry's work, can you in some way share what progress, in your opinion, has been made and how the rural communities across Ontario are benefiting?

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

I immediately, for some reason, went to Port Hope—Port Hope is working through a BR&E initiative, business retention and expansion. Again, it's doing your homework up front—understanding what it is the community needs and what it is that is within reach that will help shape the direction and the policy and, ultimately, the projects that will be realized in that community of Port Hope. There's a lot of change afoot in that area of the near east, I'll call it. Whether it's better embracing our H₂O highways along to the St. Lawrence or capitalizing on the new energy production that is being realized to the east of the GTHA, I think that walking before you run, as I've mentioned before, and taking time to work through a BR&E exercise to understand strengths and weaknesses and how to attract the right investment speaks tenfold. Maybe in the House someday we can elevate that and talk about that shining example some more.

In terms of our strategy, I'd like to revisit our three pillars: safe and strong communities, as well as retaining workforce, and attracting and retaining businesses. I think about projects that are happening, made available to happen through the Rural Ontario Development Program investment, to strengthen our communities in terms of making sure that—for instance, there are some communities that, through the ROD program, are taking a focused look at, in terms of a strategy, how to attract more health care into the region.

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Just on Tuesday, I participated in a conference that our ministry hosted in Stratford, and it was all about taking the

next steps to build prosperity in the province of Ontario. A gentleman spoke—and it really resonated with me—about the need to start planning now, not for tomorrow or next month. We need to start planning now for opportunities 10, 20, 30 years down the road, so that when the door gets knocked on, we're ready to go, as opposed to scrambling and trying to catch up. That really hit home with all the economic development officers and municipalities that were in Stratford participating in that program. That's really what our strategy is all about as well. In the spirit of business retention and expansion, in the spirit of strong workforces throughout rural Ontario and ensuring that our communities are safe and strong, we need to be planning—and nobody should underscore the importance of making sure you get those planning stones in place. I have gone off on a tangent a little bit on your question. But, ultimately, that's what our strategy and that is what all of our programs at the Ministry of Rural Affairs are striving to achieve.

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

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: How much more time, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Five and a half minutes.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, Minister, for being here today and for all your work on rural affairs.

I quite enjoyed the plowing match myself.

In your remarks earlier, you mentioned one of the projects funded through the ROD Program being \$264,000 to the Chippewas of Georgina Island. Thank you so much, because that is the rural Ontario program initiative closest to my riding of Newmarket–Aurora. I'm excited to hear about that, because that will indeed increase their tourism. On that note, my question is with regard to projects and local benefits, when I think about that one right there—because behind every ROD investment is a local idea that will strengthen a business and/or a community. With projects now approved through the program, could you please highlight some examples and explain the difference this funding will make for the people who actually live and work in those communities?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: There's so much to talk about when we think about the individual projects.

You mentioned the IPM and Rural Expo, so I want to go there first, and then I'll come back.

I haven't lost sight of the one question that was asked of me earlier, and I think this year's IPM and Rural Expo is a perfect example of how our rural communities are evolving. Absolutely, primary production and agricultural companies were represented in the over 500 exhibitors that we had in the tented city, but there was also an energy alley for the first time ever, recognizing how energy plays a role in this particular—in that, I'll say—Bruce county, that particular region of Ontario. We also had so many small businesses that were shining a light on what they brought to their communities. I think that's a reflection, as well, of how our rural communities have evolved.

Only one in nine people in the province of Ontario are directly involved in agriculture or primary production. We need to recognize that our rural communities are evolving, as well. When the project came forward recommended for approval, for the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation—I was over the moon to see that recommendation, because it's investing in a lifeline for them, the Virginia Beach Marina. Think about what could be realized in terms of additional businesses, as supporting that growth in the marina, and what that means for jobs and more people calling that particular area of Ontario home in the future. It bodes so incredibly well.

There's another example. I'm going to go back to Sarnia-Lambton, actually—it was a \$50,000 investment in a strategic road map.

I think it's interesting; Sarnia is known as Chemical Valley, but it could be so much more than that. So kudos to the chamber for coming forward and bringing community members together to say, "Do you know what? We have a moment ahead of us that we can embrace. What is it we need to continue to grow our expertise in certain areas, but be open to new developments in others?"

So they received \$50,000—"they" being the Sarnia-Lambton Industrial Alliance—to develop a strategic road map to strengthen industrial competitiveness in the Sarnia-Lambton area. We have the 402 corridor that we need to be capitalizing on, plus our ports, quite frankly, in Sarnia and in Windsor, that could be put to—I'm sure they're ready to be put to even more use, and I really smile at that. We can't be prescriptive.

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

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: We need to be open to exercises like that strategic road map, to see what else evolves out of discussions at the community level.

Another one would be the town of Pelham. They received a sizable amount of money to upgrade buildings in their downtown core to improve the attraction of businesses, and that's smart as well. It's business investing in business. It gives people hope and it gives people confidence that they can call small-town, rural Ontario home—whether it's living there or running a business.

There's so much more I could talk about. I think about a community that received \$250,000 as seed money to start exploring a medical centre. That medical centre now is a clinic for the local doctor. It now hosts a pharmacy that the community never had before. It also has a—

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

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: A great business.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We'll move to the second round of questions. MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: The projects you just mentioned, like to fix up a downtown, to look for possibilities for a medical centre—those are prime examples of things that should be much more widely done. This is why this has to be either bigger or opened or—that's just a comment.

I'm going to go back to something that my colleague talked about. Minister, you explained how it works between the two ministries more succinctly than I—you

were talking about economic development. If you're rural and you're not quite big enough, you're rural ec dev, before you go to the—that was succinct. But no one knows that. I, like the rest of the province, am bombarded by Protect Ontario ads. And yet, I have never heard, "You're in rural Ontario, you've got an idea for a small business, but maybe you don't fit? Here's a number to call." How come we don't hear—those are public service ads, but Protect Ontario isn't, in my opinion. I'm not asking for comment on that. But we're missing that. Years ago, when I almost went broke on the farm and I got a government program—I bought the farm, and I got my interest fixed for 13% with a government program. I heard that on the radio. I didn't hear, "Everyone is going broke. Protect Ontario." How come you're not advertising those—why wouldn't one municipality be applicable for downtown rejuvenation when another one might be just as deserving and unaware?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It's in that spirit that I'm pleased to share with you that that was a large driver of why I introduced the rural inspiration recognition program at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association conference. It's all about the inspiration. If we share some of the shining examples of what's happening in small-town, rural Ontario on that stage, where there are thousands of people watching and in attendance—I'm genuine of heart when I say I hope the recipients inspire other people to say, "Do you know what? We could be doing that." It's interesting; since we first launched last January at ROMA, I have seen more people reach out to me directly saying, "We're here and this is what we're doing"—and it's like, "Fantastic, let's talk about you."

1410

The other thing is, you're talking at macro—I have to tell you that a focus of mine is making sure that small-town Ontario papers are telling our story as well. When we were in Prince Edward county a few weeks back, we got great coverage of what the impact of the Rural Ontario Development Program was realizing in that community. We had a great afternoon celebrating the recipients, and as a result, we generated a lot of local coverage.

I was humbled on a tour that I did in early August in eastern Ontario. The media that were coming out to celebrate in Pembroke, in Metcalfe, in Williamstown—it was amazing. Again, it's local newspaper coverage; it's not at that macro level.

If I'm the Minister of Rural Affairs, I want to be making sure that my message is granular and it's getting into the rural communities. Quite frankly, that has been a target of mine.

I hear you, and I'll take that back, but I've been really focused on making sure that our small-town radio stations and our small-town papers actually get an opportunity to tell the story of rural Ontario, as well. I smiled because there was a radio station represented at an initiative that was hosted in Pembroke. I was sharing more story ideas with the reporter. I said, "Oh, my goodness, you need to give some coverage to MPP Denault, who introduced a private member's bill that had all-party support to introduce Rural

Ontario Week.” It proved to be a great story as well. So I take your message.

The other thing is, we have a really good website. That came out of our strategy, as well—ontario.ca/myrural. Again, we’re telling our story there, and we’d like to direct everyone to that—

Mr. John Vanthof: I don’t disagree with a thing you said.

I’m going to put a plug in for my local radio stations, who have never played anything about the Ministry of Rural Affairs.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I’m going to have to talk to them.

Mr. John Vanthof: No, no.

I don’t think anyone is going to deny that if I walk up to a person on the street in rural Ontario, there’s a good chance that they don’t know what the Ministry of Rural Affairs does.

Councillors, ec dev people, great—I was councillor for a long time, and MPP now—but they are not necessarily the ones who have actually got the really good ec dev ideas. I don’t know how you’re dealing with that.

A big part of this province, especially in my area, is populated but doesn’t have municipal government. There are businesses there, and there are opportunities there. How is this program delivered? Is it delivered through municipalities? Do you have to be connected to a municipality? So a tourism initiative in an unorganized township—how does that go forward?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: As a not-for-profit or a community organization, they can bring it forward. Certainly, we can make sure that when we start promoting our next round, we clarify that. But it has been known right from the first intake that municipalities, not-for-profits, community organizations, Indigenous communities—all of those sectors represented on the list I just shared with you are eligible to apply. That has been clear.

Mr. John Vanthof: I’m not disputing that. I’m just saying you’re very focused on municipalities; I get that, 100%—I get the 444, and the 380 and change are rural, but there’s a big portion of this province that isn’t. It’s a big portion of the province that your government keeps talking about as the future of the province, and this program doesn’t really seem to be focused on that—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I would respectfully disagree with that.

Mr. John Vanthof: You can disagree. We don’t disagree on much.

Everything I have heard hasn’t really focused on places with no municipal infrastructure—but places that do have the potential and it’s not that hard to reach.

When I looked on your website, too, you had to go fairly deep to—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Okay.

Mr. John Vanthof: The ec dev part has to be more prominent.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: We’ll make sure we clarify the good things that are happening through the program.

You need to keep in mind, as well, that in northern Ontario we’re very blessed to have great representation through Minister Fedeli, Minister Pirie, Minister Rickford. I’m really proud to stand beside them and work with them. So I think we’d be remiss if we didn’t recognize that there’s so much more available in northern Ontario through their respective ministries, as well. I think we give a great one-two-three-four punch when it comes to supporting northern—

Mr. John Vanthof: I’m not going to criticize any of those ministers.

But if they call up the ministry of northern development and say, “I’ve got this little idea for X and X,” are they automatically going to say, “Oh, talk to Lisa”? I don’t know if that’s the case, and that’s what I need to know.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I hope the right answer is, “Talk to Pierrette.” She is an amazing regional—you know her.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, 100%.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: That’s who they should be reaching out to. She’s our feet on the ground, and man, she’s effective. I’m really proud of all the work she does.

Mr. John Vanthof: If you could just, because you can do better than me—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Clone her?

Mr. John Vanthof: No, no, just lay out exactly what your staff could do in—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, absolutely. They actually meet with businesses and not-for-profits and rural organizations. They’re there as an ear to listen and a shoulder to lean on, in terms of identifying projects and funding programs and initiatives that could be realized in support of growth in rural and northern Ontario. They also do one-on-one consultations. So if there is a particular funding program that a particular not-for-profit or community organization would like to apply to, they work hand in hand to make sure—in both English and French; I’m very proud of that as well. They work really hard. If you were at the NOMA or FONOM conference, which you were, they are just so well received—the work that those ladies do in the north. Furthermore, they really help co-ordinate the sharing of ideas.

I think that’s one of the strengths in rural Ontario—that, again, so many communities and not-for-profits, in the spirit of sustainability, shouldn’t be 100% looking to the government to sustain them year upon year. I think part of our success that can be measured, as well, is how we give them a hand up to realize their potential, realize their opportunity for growth.

I think about some of the businesses around Thunder Bay. All of a sudden, a tour that I did there not too long ago was incredibly showing how the timber and forestry industry was pivoting to biofuels—and they had help in having early discussions, saying, “What else is down there? What else can we be looking to in terms of driving value for forestry in a changing global market?” Just being available to bounce ideas off of sounds pretty simplistic, but there’s a lot of value in that as well.

Mr. John Vanthof: How many officers would you have in the field?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: We have 15, but there are ebbs and tides. I know we have a vacancy in eastern Ontario right now. When you come back in the House, I will make sure there is a map on every desk, because I'm so proud of them—upwards of 15.

Mr. John Vanthof: I think it's pretty clear that I'm not opposed to the ministry—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, I know. I'll make sure you have them.

Mr. John Vanthof: How many minutes do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Two minutes and 20 seconds.

Mr. John Vanthof: I cede it. I'm finished.

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

1420

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'd like to ask whether in vote 5001—is there any funding in this vote specifically targeted at tracking rural job losses or companies that are at risk, linked to this tariff war that we're in? Is that something that's part of this vote?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Well, actually, I need to speak to that a little bit too. We can't muddy the waters, because a lot of our programming is based on applications that had been already submitted through the fall of 2025 and winter of 2026. The second window closed during the summer—

Mr. Ted Hsu: I understand about the programming, yes.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes. So we need to be careful about that.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'm just wondering, outside of the program, which is a good program, is any time going to be spent tracking?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes. Actually, the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade will be taking the lead. They're working really hard—oh, my gosh—because we have businesses throughout rural Ontario and northern Ontario that are feeling pressures from this tariff situation.

I just want to take a moment to shine a light on Minister Vic Fedeli. Back in August, I started sharing some things in terms of headwaters I was hearing about in rural Ontario. He was right on it, and he said, "Send it right through to my team." As recent as this past week, I had outreach from another company, and again—boom.

Mr. Ted Hsu: That's good to hear.

I have limited time, so I'm going to move on to a question.

I'm wondering about rural broadband. I'm wondering, is there a speed standard that the government is going to be using this year to decide whether a rural household is connected sufficiently or not? The second question is, will the ROD Program—will any of that funding be available for local projects that fill in these last-mile gaps? As you might know, sometimes it can just come down to individual roads where somebody wants to build a facility, start a company, hire people—sometimes it can come down to individual roads that don't have coverage. Is that going to

be covered with ROD funding? And again, do you have a speed standard that you're going to use?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: The quick answer is no.

The rural Ontario development funding is geared towards growing economic opportunity for small business, not-for-profit organizations, community organizations and Indigenous organizations.

I'm so incredibly proud of the \$4 billion our government, through the leadership of Premier Ford, has dedicated to the expansion of broadband across Ontario. I believe, as of today, 96% of all of Ontario has broadband access. I know the goal is 5G. Again, I understand what you're saying—road to road. I live in rural Ontario. I see it. What makes me most impressed is the doubling up of smaller telecoms, coming back to make sure that that strength is being realized, as well. I really tip my hat at some of the small telecoms throughout rural Ontario that have stepped up. They have partnered and worked so incredibly well to help our government achieve what needs to be done.

Mr. Ted Hsu: My next question—perhaps it's a little more detailed; maybe the deputy minister might be able to answer this. I'm just wondering, in this particular vote, 5001, how many dollars would be dedicated to attracting and keeping skilled trades workers in rural communities? That can be a struggle sometimes. Is there a rough sense of how many dollars in the vote goes to that?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I want to first comment that that's a bit of a stretch, with all due respect—in terms of pinpointing an exact number of how many people are needed. We should be taking a look at: What are the opportunities? Where are we going to really see growth in terms of businesses and manufacturing, and therefore, where do we need the workforce?

Again, that's why our rural strategy, Enabling Opportunity, is such a good foundation to work from. It's about attracting and retaining businesses. It's about making sure our communities are safe and strong, most importantly, to attract workforce. I can tell you that as we look to grow, there is some thoughtfulness around exactly how much is going to be needed to realize expansion at Darlington, Pickering, Bruce Power. Those industries, those sectors in and of themselves, are doing great work as well in terms of identifying how many employees they will need, in terms of realizing that future growth. We're working very closely with them.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I want to ask another question about where the money in this vote will go.

I want to ask about the government's plan to consolidate the 36 conservation authorities into seven, which will move watershed decisions further away from rural residents. I'm just wondering whether, in the previous year or in this year—whether any of the money from the vote is going to do a rural impact analysis when it comes to that consolidation, or, maybe beyond analysis, find ways to ensure that rural communities keep a meaningful voice in the year to come. I understand that that consolidation will be being completed in the year to come.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: First of all, I think it's safe to say that across Ontario, there was a recognition that

there needed to be a modernization in the manner in which we manage conservation priorities in the province.

I think that the chief conservation officer has a huge wealth of experience that he brings to the table.

And in terms of facilitating the evolution to the seven conservation authorities, I'm sure you would remember that in the budget there was an additional \$3 million dedicated to that evolution of conservation authorities. They're working diligently in terms of bringing all areas of the province together into their respective new regions. I have every confidence that, going forward, while we need to adapt to change, rural Ontario's voice will not be diminished.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Just to be super-duper clear, that \$3 million is not in the vote that we're going to be voting on?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: No, not the one—but I wanted to draw to the point that there's already been dollars dedicated.

Mr. Ted Hsu: So the study of how this consolidation will affect, say, costs for rural municipalities—is that being done by Minister Flack's ministry, or is it your ministry?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I trust you know that the conservation authority responsibilities fall under the Ministry—

Mr. Ted Hsu: The environment ministry?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes. They fall under the Minister of the Environment.

Mr. Ted Hsu: So it would be that ministry that would be studying the impact on the rural municipalities.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, thank you. I'm glad that you know that.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you.

I'm wondering if, in this vote—just so I can understand what the ministry does a bit better. Does the ministry track rural population and school enrolment trends? You have some communities where schools are finding that enrolment is decreasing and population is decreasing. In my riding, Marysville Public School is a school in a rural area. That's still listed on the board website, but this year, it's not operating. Last year, they had two students who were going to sign up, so it didn't operate. Do you track that? Is that something your ministry does for rural Ontario?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I think, on an as-needed basis, we have the stats that really help inform the overall wellness of a community. We can have access to that information, absolutely.

I'd be remiss if I didn't take the opportunity to share that, to date, our government, over eight years, has not closed a single school; it was the previous Liberal government that closed 600.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I kind of expected that comment to come.

If I could just follow up on Marysville Public School, which essentially ceased operations last year—one of the reasons for that is the lack of a reliable transportation link. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to help advocate for a more reliable transportation link.

1430

And I'm wondering if you'd be willing to help advocate for more reliable ferry service to Wolfe Island going forward.

That has been one of the reasons why, in the last few years, families have moved off the island—so that kids could get to school earlier. It's why a primary care clinic closed and why a lot of contractors are reluctant to take the risk of losing time if they go do work on the island. It's why many tourism jobs were lost on the island. So would you be willing to advocate for more—and this is within cabinet. I'm not asking you to stand up in the House and say this. But within cabinet, behind closed doors, would you be willing to advocate for more reliable ferry service to Wolfe Island?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I advocate for everything rural.

We're going full circle here through the two hours. We were talking about the IPM and Rural Expo. One of the very first provincial directors for the Ontario Plowmen's Association I met when I was a summer student and helped build those tented cities was a gentleman from Wolfe Island. So you just made me think of him, and what a full-circle moment I just had.

Wolfe Island is very important, and it's precious in and of itself.

Pelee Island is another example of another gem that we have in the province of Ontario.

To answer your question, I just want to share with you: This year, at the IPM and Rural Expo, I actually hosted a round table to talk about rural transportation. And I'm not going to stop there. Certainly, I would love to continue my conversations.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you very much. That sounds like a yes to me.

I'll just note that Pelee Island does have a ferry service.

Another thing about Pelee Island—which it has because it's a much longer ferry ride than Wolfe Island—is it also has two 24/7 paramedics. Is that something that you'd be willing to help push for? What happens on Wolfe Island is—it used to have paramedics on the island, but now, if there's a paramedic call, the ferry gets turned around and it disrupts ferry service. It would be nice if this government could potentially consider funding a 24/7 paramedic service, maybe even if it's just during the summer, when the demand on the ferry is bigger. Is that something you'd be interested in?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I certainly will take that back.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I'll take it back because—I trust that you know that that would require an all-of-government approach as well, right?

Mr. Ted Hsu: Yes. I think that's pretty obvious, because the problem probably would have been solved by now if it were simpler and involved fewer parts of the government, shall we say. Great.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute and 40 seconds.

Mr. Ted Hsu: That's not a long time to ask a question, so I will just cede the rest of my time.

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

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Minister, thank you for being here with us today.

Minister, it wasn't too long ago that MPP Denault put forward his private member's motion to recognize the third full week of September as Rural Ontario Week. If I remember right, that motion received unanimous support in the Legislature. And I know that just the past week—it has really given us all an opportunity to celebrate the communities, the leaders, the businesses, and the truly hard-working people who help move this province forward. So, Minister, my question for you is: How has your ministry supported this recognition? And what other initiatives are you undertaking to recognize rural Ontario and rural Ontarians?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Well, it wasn't an accident that, through MPP Denault's private member's bill, it was the third full week of September that was recognized as Rural Ontario Week. It just happens to coincide with the hosting of the International Plowing Match and Rural Expo—so in and of itself, there's a huge platform right there to celebrate at the local level. In 2027, it will be in Lambton county, and we'll be able to shine a light on the amazing stuff that's happening in rural communities in that county. I have to tell you, we have a stellar team, and I look forward to seeing the stats. But I have to tip my hat to everyone in this government. I saw some effort, through a couple of the opposition, that actually embraced the opportunity to shout loud and proud about their rural communities by posting what was happening or talking about events and why rural Ontario matters, in terms of what we're driving—in terms of 13% of the province's economy that translates into \$117.8 billion. We have 275,000 businesses that call rural Ontario home. It made me really proud to see, across social media channels, how people were celebrating. Our stakeholders were celebrating too. It was a chance for rural businesses and rural not-for-profits and rural communities to stand up and say, "Hey, we're here too."

I would have to say that I was very busy during Rural Ontario Week, the inaugural week. I hosted a round table to discuss rural transportation. I also recognized amazing women who were making a difference in their community, in the spirit of 2026 being the International Year of the Woman Farmer. And I just happened to host this little thing called the 2026 International Plowing Match and Rural Expo. Again, if you take a look at that exhibitor list—I have to tell you that it was so eclectic. I think that's one of our strengths, as rural Ontario. Yes, the foundation cornerstone is agriculture and food, but rural Ontario has become so much more. Everything we do in our ministry is reflective of the fact that we're very eclectic. We're good with being eclectic, and we're stronger because of the other businesses that are looking to rural communities to call home.

I want to thank MPP Denault for coming forward with this PMB. I'm not kidding; when we were in Pembroke just a few short weeks ago and I was being interviewed for a local radio station, I planted the story with them—that they needed to profile MPP Denault's success in bringing forward Rural Ontario Week. I look forward to seeing how this grows and continues to be embraced in the years to come.

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

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Minister, since being elected in 2024, I've been your PA, and I've seen this ministry is forever evolving.

Since we last met for estimates, your ministry has moved forward with additional intakes to the Rural Ontario Development Program. Can you share what the response has been and what it tells you about the demand for economic development support right across Ontario?

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

I appreciate that the members opposite have also recognized, when I shared some stats earlier, that there is a significant opportunity to continue to fan growth throughout our rural communities in Ontario.

The first intake, just to repeat, received 330 applications, demonstrating strong demand from communities, not-for-profits, businesses, to strengthen their local economies. And, honest to goodness, I was personally really thrilled with the number of small businesses that actually came forward to apply. That resulted in 160 projects receiving right around \$6 million.

In the second intake, we also had a number of projects—140 municipal leaders and industry representatives revelled in the fact that the applications have been facilitated, reviewed and responded to, in a timely fashion as well.

The 160 people I just referred to were at the Georgina summit.

I really pride myself on how well our team at the Ministry of Rural Affairs receives, reviews, shares with our third-party review committee, REDAP, and forwards recommended approvals to us. It's a tight timeline, and we're moving at the speed of business.

I hope we can continue to demonstrate that to continue to support business, whether it's in rural Ontario or downtown Toronto, our government needs to continue to move quicker, faster, immediate—like we hear from the province. Our ministry has embraced that as well.

The second intake, as well, received over 300 applications, and we saw \$4 million support 100 projects. The program, in and of itself, is highly subscribed and therefore very competitive. In the second intake, the cut-off mark for approvals was 85 out of 100. In saying that if there were some projects that just needed that extra effort—I asked our regional rural advisers to reach back out to some of those applicants, to talk about why they didn't score as high as 85 this last round and what they could do to do better if they choose to apply again. That's another great credit to the amazing field team that we have across this province.

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Again, I want to underscore the point that all told, through the Rural Ontario Development Program, we've seen \$38 million invested, but we have a 4-to-1 ratio in terms of leveraging government dollars to attract greater investment. Altogether, we have seen over \$120 million invested across the province in our small businesses, in our rural communities, in our Indigenous communities and not-for-profits. And when I talk about this, quite frankly,

my colleagues across the province marvel at it. They wish they had programs like the Rural Ontario Development Program.

I just reminded myself, I was a keynote speaker at a conference in British Columbia back in June. And through my presentation and talking about not only what we are doing within rural affairs but how we are approaching supports from a whole-of-government approach, somebody told me I got five ovations. That just blew me away, because I was just humbly trying to talk about what we are doing in the spirit of inspiring more investment across Canada.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: It is always fun to give money away, for sure.

I know when we were at AMO, the delegates that came in—it was something else. They bring their case for what their need is going to be. We had one group of delegations that came in, didn't reapply, but just wanted to tell us what they did with the money and how it benefited their community. Seeing the program work that well was amazing.

Anyway, keep up the good work.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I'm glad you had those experiences. It makes it all worthwhile.

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

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Thank you, Minister, for all the work you have been doing.

I think it's a big benefit for rural and northern Ontario to have some representatives who have grown up in the community, who know exactly what the nature of the challenge is and how you can think out of the box about solving those issues. You had grown up there. You are a part of that community.

As you know, I am the PA for the Ministry of Labour, so my question will be about jobs.

What is the plan of the ministry to attract more businesses, especially in opportunities to benefit from crossing some industries like energy, aerospace, defence, data centres—how the ministry is helping communities prepare for those opportunities and position themselves to attract some of those investments to rural communities.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I appreciate that question very much because it takes me immediately back to the Business Retention and Expansion Program that my ministry facilitates. Port Hope comes to mind again—because they are one of the most recent initiatives that I've learned about. They're taking an all-of-community approach to making sure that as they're seeing interest in their area come together, they're taking a look at their businesses—how they retain it and how they grow it.

Part of that BR&E is taking a look at the workforce. In my area, we have a four-county labour market board, and they do great work in terms of pulling together stats on behalf of all the municipalities and economic development officers, to demonstrate exactly what sectors are being well supported and where we need to be thinking in terms of ramping up particular initiatives. I have to share with you that the Premier toured a manufacturing facility, just last week, in my riding. They have invested in a training centre right within their own manufacturing facility that they're willing to open up to the rest of the community.

Again, a government dollar invested is going to leverage so much more involvement. The BR&E program is just one example of how we're taking a look at workforces.

It's important to work with the Ministry of Labour as well. I look forward to working with Minister Jones and whoever are his PAs going forward, and continuing to make sure—if we're going to support a west-east pipeline, if we're going to support additional energy production, if we're going to support growth in particular communities—that we're targeting how to sustain, grow and attract.

I want to give a nod to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities as well. We have rural campuses of colleges in our communities throughout the province, and I'm really impressed that some of the colleges that I have visited are absolutely tailoring their programming to the jobs and the vacancies that we're experiencing today. My job, as Minister of Rural Affairs, is to shine a light on that great work that is happening. Is it coming directly from my ministry? No, but it behooves me to shine a light on showing how responsive colleges are to the good work that Minister Quinn is doing to make sure that we have mariners as we look to expand and embrace the activity on our Great Lakes, which includes Lake Ontario, Lake Huron, Lake Erie, Lake Michigan, as well as Lake Superior. We need more people wanting to work on boats. We need more ECEs. Georgian College is doing a great job on both of those fronts, attracting students to good-paying jobs.

I could go on and on, but you have just lit a spark in me. A big responsibility I have, as Minister of Rural Affairs, is shining a light on the great work my fellow cabinet ministers are doing.

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Thank you very much, Minister. It's great to hear of all this going on in rural Ontario, when we've heard that for years, they felt that they were disconnected, nobody was listening to them, nobody was hearing what their challenges are.

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

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: What's your plan to try to make sure that the youth, the new employees and the new graduates know that there are opportunities, there is a future and there are communities there? How can we help them, to sustain them in the north? How can we make sure that it's lucrative for the youth to go for those opportunities and know about it?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I think the Ministry of Health's Learn and Stay program is a perfect example. You learn and you stay in the communities in which you train in. I believe now, as a result of that Learn and Stay initiative, there are over 3,800 nurses working in the communities in which they trained. That's phenomenal news.

And I'd be remiss if I didn't note that just this past Sunday, there was a celebration welcoming the 2030 class of veterinarians to school—

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

We have 13 minutes remaining to conclude the two hours allotted for these estimates. I'm going to rotate the time between all the members. If there are no takers, we will move to the voting process.

MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm a taker.

Previously, Minister, we were talking about making people aware of your programming—you said one of the things that you like to do is in newspapers, which is great. I would just like to let you know, as it was announced yesterday, that Postmedia—the Sudbury Star, the North Bay Nugget, Sault Star, Timmins Daily Press, Elliot Lake Standard and Espanola's Mid-North Monitor are all going digital; no more newspaper. And the one in my riding, Cochrane Times, is done. You maybe are going to have to rethink some of that policy.

You said that you are very proud of the government's record on Internet infrastructure and that, I believe, 95%—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It's 96%.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay, 96%.

I looked it up: 6% of Ontario's population lives north of Lake Nipissing. I'm willing to bet that a lot of those people are the ones without Internet access. And we all know that the last mile is the most difficult.

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Are you going to advocate, as well, that, actually, the promise that the government made, that everyone would have usable high-speed Internet by the end of 2026—I don't think that's possible. But are you going to be as forceful as we're going to be to make sure that everyone in Ontario has the same opportunity—because that's just a non-starter. I heard the minister of northern development and mines say, "Well, mines—they put in their own Internet." Should people have to depend on their employer, or should that be available to everyone, as your government promised?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I can tell you, I'll be standing with the Minister of Energy, Minister Lecce. I believe that with everything in him, he is going to work diligently for that remaining 4% connectivity.

Mr. John Vanthof: We will hold you to that. Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I take your point about the papers going digital, but there will still be local reporting to be had, so it behooves everybody to develop good relationships with those reporters.

Mr. John Vanthof: It has been our experience in the north that when papers go digital, we slowly lose our reporting. And in rural areas, it—we'll get from Sudbury, we'll get from North Bay. But it has been our experience—when Kirkland lost, all our news came from other places. That is not the experience in northern—and I'm not trying to criticize you in any way, Minister.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Okay. Thank you for sharing that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We will move to MPP Hsu.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I have a couple of questions; I'll just ask them both and I'll stop, and then I'll let the minister answer.

The first one is about how the minister will use the money in this vote, and I want to encourage the minister to use it in these two particular ways—the first way is about rural infrastructure. This is an idea—I have to give

some credit to the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus. It's about rural infrastructure. It's about standardizing the asset management plans of rural municipalities—standardizing in terms of methodology, of valuing those assets and how much money will need to be spent to replace them in the years to come, and also standardizing the format. I want to give a reason for why even just standardizing the format would be good. The idea is, right now, you can't add together the infrastructure needs in different sectors, in different areas—buildings, roads, bridges, vehicles, whatever; you can't aggregate it across municipalities. I think that if rural municipalities had a standard format, a standard methodology for their asset management plans, you could sort of add up everything that rural municipalities need, and there would be a more unified, articulate voice for rural infrastructure needs. So that's the first thing.

The second thing I want to suggest to the minister is that some of the staff time that we're going to be voting on in a second—if that could go towards looking at LCBO convenience outlets, which are kind of like centres of the retail and commercial life of a really small community. You've got the gas station with the LCBO convenience outlet—and maybe a store and a couple of other things. They are having some problems when it comes to the rules that LCBO puts on them when they order their inventory. They have some problems with the rules that they need to follow when it comes to recycling. One of these outlets in the rural part of Kingston was telling me, "Now we have to sort the alcoholic cans from the non-alcoholic cans." Another LCBO convenience outlet was saying, "We've got to do all this recycling, but we actually don't have the room to do that." It's a convenience outlet that's in the middle of Marysville. So they have this space that they've had for decades and decades, but they don't have any more space.

So my request to you—and I invite your comments—is that perhaps some of your staff time, some of the money we're going to be voting on, could be devoted to studying these issues and then giving advice to other ministries that have the resources to implement some changes.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: This is like hosting a round table in and of itself—getting suggestions from the members opposite in terms of ideas, which I certainly welcome.

I need to make sure that people understand that when you're talking about the convenience outlet stores—that's under the purview of the Ministry of Finance.

But I'm going to be very candid. I'm always an open book. You can trust 2,000%—and you can talk to Minister Bethlenfalvy about it—that when I have a convenience outlet owner come to me with something that's working amazingly or something that could be improved upon, he's the first one to get a text.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'm counting on that.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I'm already doing it, and that won't change. Again, it underscores the importance of how we work, as a whole-of-government—if I can be a conduit, I welcome that.

In terms of infrastructure dollars, I think it's really important that we touch on the fact that our government

has been making historic investments in infrastructure as well and taking time to understand what's needed.

We've never built an upside-down bridge, but just recently we celebrated the opening, in Algoma-Manitoulin, of the swing bridge that was really needed and valued. Thank you, Mr. Vanthof, for getting that.

With that, I think it's another example of how, when we're attending the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and taking deputations, or ROMA or NOMA or FONOM—we're showing up at NOMA and FONOM, because it matters. I'm a brand new ministry and—I've attended NOMA for two years in a row now. FONOM was my first one, and it's certainly not going to be my last. When I hear, through deputations, what priorities are for communities with regard to infrastructure as well, of course the first people we're going to be reaching out to, from a three-tiered effect, for all intents and purposes—ministers, officials, and MO to MO. That's how I operate, and we're stronger because of it.

So I think your question comes around—"How connected, how impactful is MRA?" I would like to respectfully suggest to you that we have had a huge impact over a short amount of time. We're working incredibly well with our fellow cabinet ministers. And I look forward, later this fall, to demonstrating how we're continuing to work together to make sure priorities for northern and rural Ontario are met. It will be a demonstration of how we're continuing to listen and lay down cornerstones for no other government to ever walk back on rural affairs.

Mr. Ted Hsu: That's great.

My last question is kind of related to what you just said.

When the province announced that it would take over the costs of the Gardiner Expressway and the Don Valley Parkway from Toronto, those of us who don't live in Toronto—and I was speaking with the outgoing mayor of Tweed about this. They only have 6,000 residents, but they're responsible for 57 bridges from its own tax base.

Do you plan to ask cabinet to upload or share the costs of rural infrastructure like bridges or some of these arterial roads that rural municipalities—and I'm thinking of certain arterial highways in eastern Ontario that South Frontenac, Central Frontenac or North Frontenac are responsible for the upkeep for. Do you plan to ask cabinet to upload some of these other costs of rural infrastructure? In fact, Ottawa is going to get some money, too. What about rural Ontario? Maybe that's a question you need to ask.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I think it's important that you do not forget about how we have invested nearly \$400 million in infrastructure; specifically, for rural bridges and roads. We stand with our municipalities—

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

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: The dollars being awarded through the gas tax as well as Connecting Links—gas tax, via Connecting Links—has just been phenomenal in terms of upgrades in our rural communities.

Again, it requires an all-of-government approach to make sure we're realizing efficiencies, to make sure that our ministry knows what priorities are at the local regional level and, most importantly, that our local communities

know that they have a government that understands, is listening and doing the best they can to make sure priorities are being realized. I'll put it that way.

Mr. Ted Hsu: There's less than a minute, right?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): It's 17 seconds.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'll give that to the government.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Does anyone want to take it? No?

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Rural Affairs.

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?

Shall vote 5001, rural affairs program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Rural Affairs carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Rural Affairs to the House? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Thank you, Minister, Deputy Minister, staff, for coming and sharing your input, your insight and your time with the committee.

The committee is now recessed until 3:30 this afternoon.

The committee recessed from 1503 to 1530.

MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT, CONSERVATION AND PARKS

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good afternoon. The committee is set to resume consideration of the 2026-27 estimates. Up next for consideration is the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, for a total of two hours.

For any ministry staff appearing today: When you are called on to speak, please give your name and your title so that it may be accurately recorded in Hansard.

I am now required to call vote 1101, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Minister McCarthy, the floor is yours. You have 20 minutes.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Good afternoon, Chair. Through you to the members of the committee: I appreciate this opportunity to appear today before the Standing Committee on the Interior to present the expenditure estimates for the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks for the fiscal year 2026-27. Our Ontario government is committed to transparency and accountability. The estimates defence is a key part of this process.

As you can see, I'm accompanied by Acting Deputy Minister Brandon Chaput and several members of this ministry's staff, all who are here to help answer any questions you may have. I would like to begin by first

thanking them and all of the government officials in the ministry and my staff for the dedication and work that they have put into preparing for this session, as well as for the hard work that is done each and every day on behalf of the people of Ontario.

This year's budget for the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks provides important funding so that we can continue to deliver on our commitments. These commitments include protecting and conserving air, land, and water; protecting species at risk and their habitats; reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and climate change adaptation planning; diverting waste to create valuable resources; and managing Ontario's provincial parks and conservation reserves.

Before I talk about the budget estimates for 2026-27, I would like to give you a brief overview of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, who we are and what we do.

We are responsible for ensuring that Ontario has clean and safe air, land, and water—resources that we share together. We aim to help create healthier communities and economic prosperity. To achieve this vision, we set clear policies, standards, rules and regulations to protect the environment and to encourage conservation activities. We monitor the environment, and we enforce the rules. We are on the constant lookout for innovative approaches to complement and improve legislation and regulations. We accomplish all of this and more through our seven divisions.

Our ministry recently underwent a small transformation in our organizational structure. In June 2026, we brought together related functions to strengthen partnerships, create clearer accountability and improve service delivery across the organization. These changes were focused on how work is organized. Ministry priorities, programs and services remain unchanged.

To help you better understand the work that we are doing, I will give you a brief overview of what each of the divisions actually does, along with a few examples of the types of projects and programs we are currently undertaking.

The first is the conservation and parks division, formerly known as the land and water division. This division protects the diversity of land and ecological resources in Ontario, including species at risk.

The conservation and parks division is leading a significant innovation to improve Ontario's conservation authority system, working closely with the new Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency—that's OPCA—to lead the transition and the consolidation of the existing 36 conservation authorities, to create nine regional watershed-based conservation authorities. The consolidation enables a more streamlined, consistent and improved service delivery, while maintaining strict environmental standards. To support this transition process, the province is providing \$3 million annually in new funding to OPCA, and that has begun this year. Following the transition, this annual funding would go toward helping regional conservation authorities achieve program improvements. Regional conservation authorities will continue to operate as independent, municipally governed organizations and to

fulfill their provincially mandated programs, such as managing flooding and other natural hazards, drinking-water source protection and the management of their lands and recreational trails, ensuring public access to local natural areas and outdoor activities.

The division also supports conservation efforts to protect Ontario's rich biodiversity. One excellent example of this is the work delivering the Species Conservation Program under the new Species Conservation Act, 2025, proclaimed in force on March 30, 2026. Ontario is investing up to \$20 million each year through the new program to help protect species at risk and their habitats across the province. That's a quadrupling of the previous funding. The new program was created to encourage people and organizations to get involved in conserving species at risk and their habitats through local and on-the-ground stewardship activities. Last year's funding supported 46 community-led conservation projects, protecting a wide range of at-risk species such as monarch butterflies, Blanding's turtles and butternut trees. This year's funding will support dozens of new projects and recipients to protect the rich biodiversity of Ontario for generations to come, and also to support healthy, more resilient communities presently.

Another important focus of the conservation and parks division is that it oversees Ontario's 344 provincial parks and 306 conservation reserves, which currently cover a total land mass of approximately 9.8 million hectares. That equals 9.1% of our province—that's more than three times as large as Vancouver Island—and Ontario continues to grow this number every year by continually expanding our protected areas.

Ontario Parks is the largest outdoor recreation opportunity provider. Last year alone, Ontario Parks received more than 13.7 million visits. That's a record for Ontario Parks' attendance, and we hope to exceed that again this year. Because of the huge demand, we are not only expanding Ontario Parks, but we're upgrading existing facilities. We're adding up to 300 new campsites and bringing electrical service to up to 800 existing campsites across our provincial parks. That's the largest expansion of new campsites we've seen in more than half a century. Once fully implemented, the expansion and the electrification initiative are expected to generate more than \$2 million in additional revenue for Ontario Parks. And 100% of Ontario Parks' revenue is reinvested directly back into the park system to maintain and improve facilities, services and our natural spaces. It will also help boost our local economies, because Ontario Parks' visitors are a vital part of the province's tourism economy, particularly in the rural and northern communities of our province.

The next division I want to highlight is the compliance and regional technical services division; it was once known as the drinking water and environmental compliance division. This division works to protect and support clean air, land and water, including safe drinking water and conservation of species through provincial oversight and the delivery of compliance and enforcement programs.

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Through this division, we are working to strengthen the province's compliance and enforcement programs to hold polluters accountable and to ensure compliance with environmental laws. They plan and carry out risk-based compliance and enforcement programs to protect the environment and human health, including taking action to address non-compliance and to provide transparency through mandatory public reporting.

One excellent example of what this division does is carrying out our ministry's responsibilities for responding to reports of pollution, spills and adverse drinking water quality events to protect human health and our shared environment. The ministry's primary role in the event of a spill or related emergency is to assess any environmental impacts and to ensure the responsible parties clean up the spill and restore the environment.

This ministry's environmental drinking water and emergency response services are coordinated by the Spills Action Centre. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. The ministry's 22 district and area offices provide field response and carry out enforcement activities. In the event of a spill, the offending party is required by provincial law to file a report with the Spills Action Centre, and the spiller and owner are required not only to clean up the spill but to restore the natural environment as well. The ministry has real-time air and water quality monitoring, drone surveillance and laboratory testing to assess required cleanup and to support agencies such as fire, police, and public health.

The ministry also has an online reporting portal for public reports of pollution incidents.

The ministry maintains an emergency response plan that guides the overall response to significant spills and drinking water emergencies. This includes other types of emergencies led by federal, provincial or municipal partners and Indigenous communities.

To give you an idea of how busy they are, in 2025 alone, the Spills Action Centre handled 45,715 calls, and that resulted in 6,872 reports of spills, 4,198 reports of pollution incidents and 2,510 adverse water quality incidents.

Next is the environmental assessment and permissions division. This division leads the delivery of Ontario's environmental assessment and permissions programs. It includes the issuing of environmental permissions such as environmental compliance approvals, municipal drinking water licences and permits to take water—approvals that support housing, infrastructure, resource development and other government priorities while maintaining strong environmental protection across the province.

The division is also responsible for the province's environmental assessment program. It's a program which recently facilitated timely decisions on the Webequie supply road and the Marten Falls community access road—comprehensive environmental assessments that allowed groundbreaking activities to commence for each of these projects this past summer.

The division issues approximately 1,600 environmental compliance approvals, or ECAs, and 650 permits to take

water each and every year. This supports projects that strengthen our communities, our critical infrastructure and overall economic growth.

Through its client services branch, this division provides a one-window point of contact for proponents who seek guidance on environmental permission processes.

The division also supports Ontario's priorities through a dedicated concierge service team to support issuance of permissions for priority projects. We co-operate with partner ministries such as energy and mines to support timely issuance of permissions for mining and electricity projects.

The policy division leads the development of policy that protects air, land and water and addresses climate change in our province, including operational policy. This includes everything from ensuring a smooth transition of the Blue Box Program to producer responsibility and to enabling housing and infrastructure through greater reuse of excess soil and brownfields redevelopment to administering the Environmental Bill of Rights to allow for public participation in environmental decision-making and to building and maintaining strong relationships with other governments in Canada and internationally.

I would like to briefly touch upon our transition to producer responsibility and the Blue Box Program, which is being administered by this policy division.

Ontario is shifting to a waste management approach where producers are responsible for the waste generated from their products and packaging. This means expanding blue box recycling services to include more communities and more materials, which will improve waste reduction and diversion by providing more opportunities for Ontarians to recycle materials. Transitioning to a producer-run system provides producers with the flexibility to decide how blue box services will be delivered.

Since producers such as brand holders, importers and retailers are the closest to the design and production of products and packaging, we believe they are best positioned to make decisions that reduce waste or increase the recyclability of these materials at end of life. This approach was developed in consultation and with support from producers, municipalities and the waste management sector, and it means greater savings for municipalities, which no longer have to pay for residential blue box recycling. In 2022, the last year of full program data available, municipalities paid \$171 million for blue box services.

Making producers responsible for the delivery of Ontario's Blue Box Program will ensure that our recycling program is viable over the long term, while also ensuring consistency across the province about what can be recycled.

We created the new program delivery division, and this is our centre of program delivery excellence. This new division incorporates functions from the former climate change and resiliency division, the environmental sciences and standards division and the land and water division, including the climate change programs and partnerships branch, the financial instruments branch, the lab services branch, the environmental monitoring branch and the Great Lakes and inland waters branch, which now also includes source protection.

Chair, let me give you just one quick example of what the program delivery division does regarding air monitoring. Air quality for the Air Quality Health Index is monitored at 38 different stations across Ontario. The Air Quality Health Index is based on the combined health effects of three common air pollutants known to be harmful to human health. These are ozone, nitrogen dioxide, and fine particulate matter. This information from these 38 stations is reported to the public every hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, through this ministry's Air Quality Ontario website. The website is mobile-friendly, accessible and very easy to navigate. It is helping the public make decisions in real time to protect their health by limiting short-term exposure to air pollution and adjusting activities during increased levels of air pollution, like during wildfire smoke events, as we saw last summer.

The corporate services division, formerly the corporate management division, provides various business supports to the entire ministry. This includes business and fiscal planning, financial management and controllership; agency governance; French-language services; strategic human resources; facilities services; information management; emergency management; and support for the development of corporate and capital projects.

And finally, among these divisions, we have the protect Ontario priorities division. This new division is focusing on modernization of permissions and environmental assessments and is taking a forward-looking approach to the new science complex and the role of science in shaping our future work. This division includes a combined environmental assessment and permissions modernization branch, a new science renewal and integration branch, which is providing strategic leadership on initiatives to modernize the ministry's science operations and to promote the effective integration of science across ministry business.

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

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Transforming, then, is a very large part of what they do.

Ontario is reviewing all permissions as part of the government-wide, permit-wide permit review program. This is to help speed up important projects such as critical infrastructure, mineral exploration, manufacturing and housing, all to support economic development and to make Ontario more competitive while continuing to protect human health and the environment. Ontario is committed to becoming the most competitive place in the world to do business, by reviewing all provincial permissions by 2028, eliminating unnecessary permits and making any remaining ones simpler and faster.

This division is reviewing all environmental permissions and environmental assessment processes to determine whether permits can be eliminated, moved to a registration-first approach, or otherwise transformed in other ways to keep important projects moving forward—

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

Before we move to the question period, I would like to kindly ask everyone in the committee to address their

questions and answers through the Chair, and also to keep decorum of the meeting and make the Hansard people's lives easier. Please don't get in an argument with each other—side arguments—and overspeak each other. That way, we can have a smooth hearing and answers and questions.

I would like to start with the official opposition. MPP Tabuns.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Thank you very much, Chair. Good afternoon to you and to the minister.

Through you, Chair: Page 117 of the estimates briefing book—we're looking at the Emissions Performance Standards Program. This is a small one, but I'm quite curious. There's a bad debt expense line for the Emissions Performance Standards Program. Can the minister tell us, are there any bad debts that have been recorded in this budget year?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, through you, Chair: I'm glad the member asked about specific figures. I should answer by saying this first and foremost: that the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks' 2026-27 allocation is \$1.19 billion. That's one half of 1% of the total provincial budget.

But I'd also like to point out that, with the funding of the Ontario Clean Water Agency—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Mr. Chair, to you: I had asked a specific question about a number. I don't need to know about the Ontario Clean Water Agency in this question.

I want to know, are there bad debts that have been budgeted for? Right now, we have \$1,000 allocated, which I gather is a placeholder. What's the expectation for bad debts this year? We're eight months into the year.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Minister?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: As I stated earlier, as I'm trying to answer the member's question, we have a total ministry allocation of \$1.19 billion. That's a net increase of \$149.3 million. The increase is due to a number of factors, but our purpose is to protect our shared environment.

My acting deputy minister—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Mr. Chair?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: —is beside me, and he might be able to provide the specific details that the member is looking for.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The deputy minister is going to answer your question.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I asked for a number. I don't need a—

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: That's why I'm asking the deputy minister.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Wait to see his answer, MPP Tabuns.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: If I may—Brandon Chaput, acting as deputy minister for the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

The amount that's reported in the 2026-27 estimates is strictly a placeholder.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I understand that, which is why I'm asking. We're here; we're far into the budget year. Mr. Chair, what is now, either the experience or the projection—when we're a good chunk of the way through the

year—for bad debt expense, or is the ministry saying they don't have any idea as to what the bad debt expense is?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay—either the minister or deputy minister.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Again, through you, Chair: I would defer to the acting deputy minister, Mr. Chaput.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Deputy Minister?

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I can confirm that the estimates are strictly a placeholder, and we don't have any other bad debt expenses to report at this time.

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

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Okay.

Next question, then: Page 118, the Emissions Performance Standards Program—total statutory appropriations are \$216 million. This is a very large amount of money. It's one of the largest chunks in the ministry, a ministry that is worth about \$1.1 billion. So \$216 million is of consequence. What is the breakdown of the payment or the expenditures of those funds? That \$216 million without a breakdown is a black box. So what is the breakdown? How are those funds allocated?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Mr. Chair, if I may defer to the acting deputy minister to my left—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Go ahead.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I've invited Patrick Fancott, our director of climate change policy, who will support us with a response to that question.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Go ahead, please.

Mr. Patrick Fancott: I'm Patrick Fancott. I'm the director of climate change policy at the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. I'm happy to attempt to respond.

The number in the estimates was an early, obviously, estimate of how much we might be allocating to transfer payment agreements under the Emissions Performance Standards Program. We take in money through compliance payments from different facilities, as per the regulation, and then every year we have to estimate how many transfer payments we will be putting together. A lot of that depends on the response we get from specific industries and whether they're ready.

We have a very active program through the Emissions Performance Program, talking with industry and encouraging them to bring projects forward, but we don't control the rate at which they bring them forward. Those are internal discussions for the specific industries. It's up to them to decide when they're ready to make the capital investment and then come to us and ask for that money.

I can say that we've allocated about \$77 million committed through transfer payments agreements to date. I don't have a breakdown for you, MPP Tabuns, about what is on the dock right now and which ones are in the system moving forward, but we'll revise that estimate at the end of every cycle to do our best to let Treasury Board know how much we expect to spend in that year.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: So if I heard correctly—through you, Chair—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The acting deputy minister needs to add some additional comments.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I have some additional comments to offer.

Given the broader context, Ontario's industrial sector continues to face heightened economic uncertainty, particularly in the steel, aluminum and auto subsectors. As a result, it has taken the industry time to develop and execute their projects—further to the comments of our director of climate change policy.

Once facilities receive their next round of EPP notional allocations in 2026, we do expect that a significant number of them will be applying for funding, and we anticipate that about half of the proceeds received to date from industry will be committed to eligible projects this fiscal year.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: So roughly half of the \$216 million will be going to industry, for them to do energy efficiency and energy transformation work? Is that correct?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Chair, if I may, I didn't get the first part of the question.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Can you repeat your—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Roughly half of the \$216 million will be invested in industry, for them to reduce their energy consumption. Do I understand that correctly?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I would defer to the deputy minister.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: Patrick?

Mr. Patrick Fancott: Thank you.

No. The intent is that all the funds will go back to industry for investments in their facilities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Some of those projects may be related to energy efficiency, as you mentioned, but we don't know where those projects are going to land at this stage. We have a variety of different types of facilities and sectors, and it's up to them to decide which ones to bring, but energy efficiency projects would certainly be part of one of the categories.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I appreciate that.

Through you, Chair: I understand some of the funds were intended to go to the Future Clean Electricity Fund. Is that correct, and if it is, how much?

Mr. Patrick Fancott: Yes, you're right.

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Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I think we have the figure or the answer specifically on that.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Director?

Mr. Patrick Fancott: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My apologies; you are absolutely correct. We've taken funds from two large sectors: industry and the electricity sector. The funds that are collected from the electricity sector go back to the Future Clean Electricity Fund, which is managed by the Ministry of Energy and Mines, and they will invest that funding back into the electricity sector.

The industrial proceeds that are collected through our EPS system get managed through our Emissions Performance Program and would be going back to industry-specific projects that they would bring forward.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I think I understand that. The question then is, how much money goes to the Future Clean Electricity Fund?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: What we did say, Chair, when I did outline the increase in funding—a net increase of \$149.3 million specifically, or a 14.3% increase—that’s due to a number of things: funding projects that support greenhouse gas emission reductions, and to help sectors of the economy remain competitive through the Emissions Performance Program. That’s an important part of why we make this investment and why the increase is associated with it.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That, actually, is not my question. My question is, how much goes to the Future Clean Electricity Fund? Does anyone know?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Chair, how much goes to—which did the member say?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: The Future Clean Electricity Fund, which was just explained by your deputy.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: To that specific fund?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Do we have that specific figure?

Mr. Patrick Fancott: I don’t have it at my fingertips. You’re about right—about 50-50; we expect a little bit more to industry. Sorry—I don’t have the number at my fingertips for this fiscal.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Could I ask, through you, Chair, that the ministry provide in writing the numbers, so that we know exactly what money is going where?

Mr. Patrick Fancott: Of course. My apologies for not having that.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: For that specific figure, we will provide that in writing, yes.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: And could you tell us, Chair, which unit within the ministry evaluates the effectiveness of the spending?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Is the question clear?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Which unit confirms the effectiveness of the spending—in general, or specific to that fund the member just mentioned?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: No, specific to the fund. If, in fact, the government of Ontario is giving industry money to do energy efficiency and reduction of emissions, is there a unit that assesses the quality of the work and gives a sense of what sort of reductions in emissions we are realizing from our investment?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Chair, I believe the acting deputy minister can advise in that regard.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Go ahead, Deputy Minister.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: Thank you. I appreciate the question.

The climate change partnerships branch within the newly established program delivery division is responsible for evaluating the effectiveness of the spending and proposals.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Thank you for that.

Again, through you, Chair: Is this the first year that we are actually going to be giving money to industry for doing this energy efficiency emission reduction work?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Chair, before deferring to the deputy minister and the answer to the question, I note

for the record—as I’ve said in the House—Ontario is leading Canada; in fact, it is ahead of all other provinces combined on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. So we’re more than doing our part—but over to the deputy minister on that specific question.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I will defer to my director of climate change policy for an answer.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Director, go ahead.

Mr. Patrick Fancott: Mr. Chair, this is not the first year we will have sent money. Money has flowed through transfer payment agreements already. The program has been in place for more than a year, so last fiscal we also flowed funds to specific projects.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Then we’ve flowed funds in the past. Companies have gotten those funds; they’ve made investments. Have we assessed the effectiveness of the investments and the cost-per-tonne reduction of CO₂ from those investments?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: We do an internal assessment on the progress in that regard—and again, to the deputy minister and to his colleague, in that regard.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I’ll defer to you, our director of climate change policy, to answer.

Mr. Patrick Fancott: There’s a rigorous process to evaluate the projects when they come in—which includes a percentage of GHG reductions from a baseline, absolute GHG reductions.

All those projects, I would say, are still in process, so we have transfer payment agreements instead of timelines over a period of time. We have not evaluated those projects yet—looking back to demonstrate the effectiveness and meeting the terms of the transfer payment agreements yet.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Each and every year, this ministry, on behalf of the government, reports progress, outcomes and results through the National Inventory Report, which is a public report issued through the federal government.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: My next question, again related to climate—

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

Mr. Peter Tabuns: What a shame.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You will have plenty of time. Don’t worry.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I know you’ll give me extra time, Chair. You’ve always been friendly.

I’ll just say in advance to the minister, I’m going next to climate adaptation and resilience. We put a lot of money into a climate adaptation report a number of years ago. It showed substantial threats to Ontario’s economy, our agriculture and our infrastructure. I will be asking questions, trying to find out what you’ve actually done with those recommendations to date. Have you actually been able to see implementation of recommendations? What did they cost? Are there areas that you are reassessing, given that we are seeing an increase, an acceleration in the heating of the world? That is going to change an awful lot of our calculations.

If, in fact, we are looking at a 2-degree world in the next 15 years, that's very different from looking at a 1.5-degree world. The German meteorological society projects the risk of going to a 3-degree world in—

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

Now we move to the third party. MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I guess I will have to do rapid fire to get all my questions in.

I'm going to talk about climate targets first. In October 2025, the Auditor General found that Ontario will miss its 2030 greenhouse gas target by even more than the 3.5 megatonnes the government projected. Meeting the target now would require removing about half of all fossil fuel passenger vehicles from Ontario roads within the next five years, which we know the Premier is not interested in doing because he's too busy removing bike lanes. The government has not released a climate progress report since 2021, and its 2018 emission reduction plan never moved past the draft stage.

My question here, Minister: Since we are missing our 2030 emission targets by even more than you knew, what is the ministry's current projection for Ontario's 2030 emissions, and which programs in these estimates will close the gap?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: First of all, through you, Chair, to the member: I want to say that Ontario is aligned with the federal Liberal government in fighting climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions while protecting our economy in this unexpected, unwarranted and unwanted trade and tariff war.

We know that the Auditor General's report was based on January 2025 projections. Now, in time, that's not that long ago, but it's worlds away from where we are now, because in that month, President Trump was sworn in, and the trade and tariff war was on. What we know is that policy assumptions from all levels of government have changed since that time. As the report notes, several of these policy assumptions have changed because of actions by the federal government—carbon tax repeal for consumers and the EV sales mandate pause. All levels of government implement new policies and adjust to evolving conditions—that's what we have faced. We're on a wartime footing.

At the same time, Ontario continues to lead Canada. Greenhouse gas emissions have been reduced because of the investments in clean green steel and a record investment in public transportation for North America and, of course—

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Will you publish the new assumptions, then?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP McMahon, order, please. Let the minister finish his answer, and then you can ask your questions.

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Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Thank you—and the investments in clean, reliable nuclear energy. With those investments, we're achieving real results. Theoretical targets, as

Prime Minister Carney has said, don't produce results. We are about results, as is the federal government.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And I would argue we can put the "eco" back in "economy" quite easily.

Why has the government not reported publicly on its climate plan for five years?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, in fact, as I indicated through the Chair to MPP Tabuns, there's an annual public report published by the federal government called the National Inventory Report. This ministry, on behalf of the Ontario government, reports our data and our achievements every year, and that is published annually, publicly, through the National Inventory Report.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Only \$16.3 million—less than 4% of the ministry's overall operating budget—goes to the climate change program. How many staff does that fund?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: You have to look at the estimates from the Ministry of the Environment in the context of our other investments to fight greenhouse gas emissions and to make sure they are reduced.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Can I just have a number, please?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: It's \$70 billion in public transit, \$10.9 billion—

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And how many staff?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: —for nuclear energy, and half a billion dollars for clean green steel—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP McMahon, please adhere to the rules. Let the minister answer his question, and after that you can ask any question you want.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much. I'm mindful of my time.

The question was, how many staff—

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You will have time. You will have a second round, and maybe a third round. So let the minister answer the question. We are wasting more time with the way you are pursuing your questions.

Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: With those investments in clean, reliable nuclear energy, public transportation and clean green steel—that's within the overall, across-government approach through different ministries. We've also achieved in this year a net increase of \$149.3 million in the investments, that are largely about funding projects that support greenhouse gas emission reductions.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: The question was how many staff, and I didn't hear that at all in the answer, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Minister, do you have an answer to her question?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Yes. I can defer to my acting deputy minister, in that regard, for specific staff figures.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: There are more than 90 staff within the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks dedicated to climate change initiatives. As the minister said in his opening remarks, those staff are spread

across two divisions: my policy division, as well as the program delivery division.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Maybe MPP Tabuns and I should apply.

How much of the ministry's budget is spent on climate adaptation as opposed to reducing emissions?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: That particular question I would defer to my government officials to my left, starting with the acting deputy minister.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I would reiterate the minister's comments that Ontario takes climate change seriously and we're taking a practical, results-driven approach. The commitment to climate action is backed by results, as the minister has said.

I think what's most important to keep in mind is that it is not strictly a function of the spending of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks that is ultimately going to inform the government's approach to climate change adaptation. It's an all-of-government approach, which is precisely why the adaptation team that reports to me is working very closely with our partners across the broader organization to support their initiatives and, for example, undertake risk assessment, which is embedded in the ministry's enterprise risk assessment process that is run by the Treasury Board Secretariat.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thanks.

Conservation authorities and flood protection: We know about the consolidation of the conservation authorities in Bill 68, and many of us were not happy about that, as well as the conservation authorities.

We know flooding is the costliest climate risk for Ontario's families, with an average of \$43,000 for a basement flood. I'm sure that your residents have had basement flooding. I know that some MPPs—your colleagues, and on our side as well—have had their own basement flooding. It is not only a financial burden. It's, I would say, a mental burden as well, as people suffer the loss of memories and their homes, their basements.

I'm just wondering, how will the ministry guarantee that the flood forecasting, warnings and flood plain mapping are not disrupted during 2026-27?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Through you, Chair, to the member: This conservation authority reform is all about making conservation authorities better at achieving their core mandate. Conservation authorities must and will continue to play a vital role in watershed management, flood prevention, protecting people from natural hazards, drinking water source protection and supporting resilience. That is not changing.

What we had was a fragmented system. We had inconsistencies. We had mapping that was outdated. We didn't have equal deployment of the most modern and best technologies.

By consolidating into nine regional watershed-based conservation authorities, we will have equal standards across the board, consistent protections across the board, reinforcement of front-line service, and that central guidance of the new Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency that has not existed until now. This agency will ensure that

every community currently served by a conservation authority not only continues to be served, but is better served by the consolidated authorities with the best mapping, the best technology, the best science and the best resources.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I know that one of our colleagues, the Minister of Rural Affairs, wrote a letter to you asking to save her conservation authority for her area. I'm wondering if other MPPs could write a letter to carve out their conservation authority and not have it merge.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, this process began with the appointment of the chief conservation officer, Mr. Hassaan Basit. He is now the CEO of the new Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency. It was all about listening and receiving submissions. We had 14,000 submissions across Ontario. We listened to municipalities, conservation authorities, MPPs of all party stripes; we obviously listened to local voices. We put forward a proposal of as few as six conservation authorities; we came up with nine based on those submissions. We enacted local watershed councils to reassure everyone that that local voice would continue, and that's not changing. Municipal governance continues. The funding model does not change, and in fact we've invested more—start-up capital of \$20 million and now \$3 million each and every year, starting this year, as we move from transition to the permanent operation of the nine new conservation authorities, starting on February 1, 2027. It was all about listening. There is no monopoly on a great idea. We proposed, we listened, we responded, and we've landed at what I believe are the right boundaries and the right makeup and the right plan.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I would argue that not all voices were heard or listened to.

Will the new single provincial permit system give the province the power to override a regional authority's decision on a development permit?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: The structure of conservation authorities was such that we had fragmentation and inconsistency. For example, in Hamilton, there were four different conservation authorities before this endeavour was undertaken, and that led to inconsistent outcomes on permitting, on process, even on fees. What we now have is an ability to have consistency with the amalgamation into nine. Again, no community currently served by a CA will not continue to be served better, I submit, by these new nine, but also the central guidance of the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, which has never existed before. That ensures that that independent agency directs and assists conservation authorities in fulfilling their core mandate; ensures consistency rather than fragmentation; ensures front-line service; and ensures better protection and flood resilience.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: That was a yes-or-no question on whether the province has the power to override a regional authority.

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Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Chair, the member should know that it's not about the province per se; it's about the nine amalgamated conservation authorities, which will be

operationalized effective February 1, 2027; the central agency, the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, OPCA—that's that central guidance, the ability to give direction from the centre to ensure consistency rather than fragmentation in process, in permitting and otherwise; and, of course, the local voice, the local watershed councils.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Of the 36 current conservation authority chief executives, how many have been redeployed so far, for what roles, and at what salaries?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: We are in the process of transition. But four months from today, we won't be fully operational with the nine. We do have officers in place who are assisting the transition process, directed and overseen by the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, its CEO and its board. And the specifics of what is happening in each conservation authority, I could probably take up the rest of the time here—

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

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: —if I went into that detail.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Please don't.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: But what I can say is that there are paid positions that are part of the budgeting process.

Overall, \$3 million has been made available to OPCA to assist conservation authorities in funding this transitional process, and it's being overseen by an excellent public servant, Mr. Basit, as the first CEO of the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency.

So not only did the funding continue, but additional funding was added, as I've indicated.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Will the ministry commit to a deadline for modern flood plain maps for every community at high flood risk?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Mr. Chair, through you to the member: This is why we addressed the problem as we did. We had outdated mapping, we had inconsistent use of the best technology and the best science, so some communities were not being served as well as they could have been—

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

We'll move to the government side. MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Minister, thanks so much for being here with us.

A lot of the questions that I had related to the estimates actually focused on some of the permissions part.

I know that in your introductory statement, you ran out of time, and you were just getting started with the protect Ontario priorities division. I'd like to see if you'd like to continue and resume your opening statement from that portion of it, because I believe the committee would be well equipped to be better informed on what the ministry's plans are ahead of us.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Through you, Chair: I do appreciate the member's question and the ability to give full and complete information to this committee. That's an important part of my responsibility as a minister and my team's responsibility as a ministry.

As I indicated, there are various divisions that I've outlined in my initial remarks.

I wanted to additionally point out that, as the member indicated, the corporate services division—formerly the corporate management division—is a very important division because Ontario is committed to becoming the most competitive place in the world to do business.

We are reviewing provincial permissions by 2028 to eliminate unnecessary permits and unnecessary duplication, trying to move everything forward simpler and faster, and to embrace, where appropriate, a registration-first approach. To do this, we must also bear in mind a fundamental core mandate, which is strong environmental protections and strong environmental oversight. And I think Ontario is among the best jurisdictions in the world in that regard. We continue to actively consult with the public towards this goal—municipalities, stakeholders and Indigenous communities—as we consider further opportunities to speed up the permissions process and to enable cost savings for regulated communities.

We're also co-operating with and listening to the Ministry of Infrastructure—I was acting minister for 11 months in that ministry—Infrastructure Ontario, an important agency of that ministry, and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development to advance the design and construction of a new MECP-MLITSD science facility complex in Oakville. Merging these two ministries' existing operations into a single modern science and laboratory facility will strengthen, I submit, Ontario's capacity to deliver on critical mandates while protecting the environment, public health and safety.

I would also like to point out that the \$1.19-billion allocation to our ministry in 2026-27 represents one half of 1% of the provincial total budget. This figure includes the Ontario Clean Water Agency and the Ontario Parks special purpose account. The Ontario Clean Water Agency is a fully self-funded agency. Their expenses are included in the ministry's allocation for reporting purposes only. Ontario Parks expenditure is mostly funded by its own revenue and is included, again, for reporting purposes only.

In 2025, just to give an example, Ontario Parks earned over \$151 million in revenue with those 13.7 million visits. Excluding OCWA, that funding of \$340.6 million, and Ontario Parks special purpose account of \$155.9 million, and the reduction due to the accommodation expense adjustment of \$39.6 million that's reported under the Ministry of Infrastructure, the ministry's core budget then is \$734.2 million in 2026-27. That includes salaries and benefits, employee benefits, direct operating expenditures and, specifically, transfer payments that support programs such as the Emissions Performance Program, the Lake Simcoe phosphorus reduction project, species conservation in Ontario, the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, the Greenlands Conservation Partnership program, and others. All of those transfer payments for those agencies total \$331.3 million.

This, overall then, for our ministry, is that net increase I mentioned of 14.3%, or, specifically, \$149.3 million.

I thank the member for allowing me to complete my remarks in that regard.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you, Minister. I believe MPP Pinsonneault has a question.

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

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you, Minister and staff, for being here.

My question is going to be on expanding campgrounds and campsite electrification.

Before life got so busy in the role I'm in now, I loved camping. One thing COVID did was, it brought a lot of new people to the world of camping.

Minister, as you know, demand for camping opportunities in Ontario Parks has increased significantly in recent years, with many parks reaching capacity during peak seasons. At the same time, visitor expectations are evolving, with more families and visitors looking for accessible amenities such as electrical service at the campsites.

I understand the government has committed to expanding campgrounds and electrifying campsites across the province as part of the largest expansion of camping infrastructure in decades. Can you explain why the government is making this investment now and how expanding and electrifying campsites will benefit park visitors, local communities and the long-term sustainability of Ontario Parks?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I appreciate the member's question.

Through you, Chair: I'm very proud of the fact that we continue to expand Ontario Parks and enhance the parks experience, whether it be for day visitors or overnight camping.

We know now in 2026, going forward, that families and visitors looking for accessible amenities, such as electrical service at campsites, that the member mentioned—the camping experience is evolving. So we've not only increased the capacity of our Ontario Parks for camping, but we've added more electrification because of this demand in the modern age. More families, seniors and first-time campers are looking to experience Ontario's natural spaces, and many are seeking campsites with modern amenities, such as the electrical service I mentioned and the member mentioned. This is to support accessibility, comfort and longer stays. And this is an investment, then, that responds directly to those changing visitor needs.

As announced in our Ontario 2024 budget, our Ontario government is delivering on its commitment to add up to 300 new campsites and to bring electrical service to up to 800 existing campsites across our provincial parks. This is the largest expansion of new campsites in more than 50 years. This expansion specifically includes new campsites at these provincial parks: Driftwood, MacGregor Point, Killarney, Presqu'île and Bon Echo; as well as major electrification upgrades at parks, including Sandbanks, Arrowhead and Bon Echo.

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These projects, of course, are being rolled out in phases, based on careful analysis of visitor demand, park capacity, site readiness and infrastructure considerations. Ontario Parks reviewed usage trends and visitor feedback. We listen, and we respond. This is to identify where additional

campsites and electrification would have the greatest impact, particularly in those high-demand parks that have the space and the infrastructure to support responsible development. This ensures that investments are cost-effective, well-planned and deliver meaningful benefits to visitors.

From a visitor perspective—again, 13.7 million last year, and I think we're going to be over 14 million when the data comes through for 2026. Expanding and electrifying campsites, from that visitor's perspective, improves access to outdoor recreation for a broader range of people. Electrical service can support medical devices. It improves accessibility for our seniors. It enables shoulder-season camping. And it makes camping more welcoming for families and first-time visitors.

At the same time, new campsites help relieve pressure on existing campgrounds, increasing availability and improving the overall visitor experience. Again, it is an investment—it's an investment that pays dividends because it has clear economic benefits. Ontario Parks visitors are a vital part of the province's tourism economy, particularly in our rural and northern communities. Campers support local businesses by staying longer, shopping locally, dining in nearby restaurants, and exploring surrounding attractions.

Once fully implemented, the expansion and the electrification initiative is expected to generate more than \$2 million in additional annual revenue, with 100% of Ontario Parks' revenue reinvested directly back into the parks system to maintain and improve facilities, to maintain and improve services and, of course, to protect and enhance our natural spaces presently and for generations to come.

Importantly, construction work is being carefully managed to minimize disruption. Most work is scheduled during shoulder or winter seasons when parks are not operating. Where construction must occur during the operating season, visitors are notified in advance, and work is always restricted to non-disruptive times.

Overall, then, expanding campgrounds and electrifying campsites is a smart, forward-looking investment. It helps to ensure that Ontario Parks remain a top destination for outdoor recreation, while supporting local jobs and tourism, enhancing accessibility and visitor experiences, and strengthening the long-term financial health of the parks system. That's so that these natural spaces can be enjoyed by all for many, many decades to come, and beyond.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: I do see this as a great step forward. It's a great way to get more people involved.

Our provincial parks are truly the crown jewels of Ontario. I have a big one in my riding and—you're exactly right—the economic spinoff has a ripple effect that is very far-reaching.

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

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Chair, how much time is left on the clock?

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

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Okay.

Minister, thank you for concluding your remarks earlier and going into some clarity on the permissions side.

We have such global economic uncertainty. I know a lot of businesses that are in my region have just said, "Tell us what we need to do, and we'll do it." Often, they don't understand what is expected of them, and they can't line up those things at the front end. They want to invest in their businesses, create jobs and really provide for families.

I'm hoping you might be able to share what the government is doing to speed up environmental assessments and permissions, while still being sure that our environment is thoroughly protected, so that important projects can get built faster and be done right.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, that's an excellent question—Chair, through you—from the member for Windsor—Tecumseh.

We're committed to making Ontario the most competitive place in the world to do business. That's why we're taking a comprehensive look at provincial permissions. We have moved to a permit-by-rule or registration-first system under the new Species Conservation Act. To deliver on this commitment, my ministry is doing its part in reviewing, overall, environmental permissions to determine whether permits can be eliminated altogether, as with registration-first, or transformed in other ways to keep important projects moving, support economic development and keep Ontario competitive. We can and must do both—we must protect our shared environment, but we must have a streamlined, non-duplicative system that gets certainty to the business world, makes sure that we can get to yes faster, or to say no where the answer should be no, but at least a certainty of a rapid response time, whether it is a yes or no. That's very, very important—certainty. That means streamlining, faster elimination of permits where appropriate and, at the same time, strong enforcement powers.

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

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: For example, the investigative powers under the new Species Conservation Program are stronger than they ever were before, because we won't tolerate breach of our strong environmental laws and standards. We will not tolerate bad actors who break the law.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I'll just leave with a comment. I want to thank all the staff of the Ministry of the Environment. Prior to being elected, I had to handle a lot of permissions from my side. The consolidated linear infrastructure environmental compliance approval was a game-changer for municipalities, and really, it helped us to concentrate on what mattered and escalate what we needed help and advice on. So I want to say thanks to the ministry staff for their work in bringing that forward.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: We appreciate this excellent parliamentary assistant's comments. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The time is up. We've concluded the first round. Thank you to my colleagues for their co-operation. I hope, in the second round, we will continue with the same spirit of co-operation.

MPP Tabuns, the floor is yours.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I will come back to my climate question shortly, but I do have a different question about the problem of black soot air pollution in Hamilton.

This summer, there was a very severe black soot contamination of Hamilton's east end and the mountain. This is something that has been going on for two decades. It appears that site-specific air quality standards have allowed industries in Hamilton to pollute above the standard for the rest of Ontario, and even those have now expired. Hundreds of Hamiltonians, this summer, complained to the Ministry of the Environment. The local MPPs, Robin Lennox and Sandy Shaw, have written letters for action, so the ministry is well aware of the problem.

Has the ministry budgeted for the work to eliminate site-specific air quality standards, so that the people of Hamilton and elsewhere in Ontario can be protected from fairly severe pollution events?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Chair, through you: I want to express how very concerned we were at the ministry, how very concerned I was, as Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, in hearing of the situation in Hamilton last July, with the reports of black soot impacts in Hamilton. As a result—and this shows you why our investments and our budgeting do make a difference—the ministry conducted inspections, collected and analyzed samples, and reviewed incident reports, complaints, event timelines, meteorological data and community observations. Based on this comprehensive assessment, the ministry did determine that emissions from Birla Carbon were a primary source of these reported impacts. As a result, the matter has been referred to the ministry's environmental investigations and enforcement branch for formal investigation into potential violations of Ontario's environmental laws, and to determine whether enforcement action, including charges, is warranted. The ministry has also issued an order to Birla Carbon requiring that company to retain a qualified expert to assess the facility's baghouse systems and related operations to identify causes of baghouse failures, and to determine whether equipment upgrades, monitoring enhancements or other improvements are needed.

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The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks has shared the analysis of sampling results with Hamilton public health, and they have shared their assessment online, so it's public and available for the public to see. The ministry will then continue to work in co-operation with public health officials as appropriate.

Residents with health-related questions or concerns should contact Hamilton Public Health Services with respect to this matter.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: If you don't mind, Chair, I'll go back to my question.

Are staff going to be assigned to eliminate site-specific air quality standards, which have allowed this problem to fester for 20 years?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, I'm certainly proud to confirm that the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks is committed to protecting Ontario's air quality and ensuring we have strong environmental standards that protect human health and the environment; we'll back that up with investments in the tools, the resources and the personnel to ensure it.

I can say, on a non-partisan basis, air quality in Hamilton has improved significantly since the mid-1990s. Since the mid-1990s, every government has been formed by a different one of the three parties—NDP, Liberal, Liberal-supported NDP, and PC. So, over that period of time, the ministry continues to focus on heavy emitters, in Hamilton in particular, to reduce air emissions and meet increasingly stringent local air standards.

The ministry's Hamilton Air Action Plan works to improve air quality through ambient air monitoring, data analysis, compliance activities and, importantly, communications tools. We continue to work with Clean Air Hamilton, the Hamilton Air Monitoring Network, the community, the city of Hamilton, and local industry to drive strategies that better protect air quality, manage industrial noise and address unique local challenges for Hamilton.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I'm going to go back to climate questions. We're dealing with pages 88 to 92 in the briefing book.

How many staff are assigned to track ongoing changes in climate risk, and do they issue regular reports to the minister or to the deputy minister?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Through you, Chair: I would ask the acting deputy minister to assist in answering that if he can.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: It's challenging, in the context of the flexible work that we do and the agile way that we operate, to define a specific number of staff who are working on tracking or engagement or things of that nature. As I mentioned in response to a previous question, I would just observe that the team does a significant amount of work.

The adaptation and resilience team, specifically—a branch within my division—does a significant amount of work with our colleagues at the Treasury Board Secretariat. They're trying to do these things in a consistent and enterprise-wide way, which is why it's really hard to give you a specific number of people who would be involved. We are very much leveraging the enterprise risk management system in order to effectively track those things in a consistent way through Treasury Board Secretariat.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: So is it the Treasury Board Secretariat that's assessing climate risk, or is it the Ministry of the Environment that's assessing climate risk?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, again, I think the answer is clear. The mandate of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks is clear—but again, over to the deputy minister for clarification with respect to that specific question.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: Adaptation and resilience is very much a critical part of our mandate as a ministry, but we do not work in isolation. We work in concert with our colleague ministries across the enterprise. This is not a Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks challenge. This is an all-of-government challenge. So it's really important that we are leveraging, rather than duplicating, processes. We are trying to leverage existing central agency reporting processes to make sure that we have influence on the risk assessments that are occurring through

the Office of the Chief Risk Officer, and that is work that they have a mandate to lead. We're making sure that a climate lens is being applied in that context. We've been working collaboratively with them for more than a year to better integrate climate risk into the enterprise risk management system.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Since I'm not questioning other ministries—I'm questioning the Minister of the Environment. How many staff from the Ministry of the Environment are working on the climate risk issue?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Again, with respect to a staffing figure, I know that one figure of 90 was indicated earlier, but that may not answer this specific question.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: That speaks very specifically to two divisions within the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. It's more than 90, because it does not include, for example, individuals in our corporate services division who support the work, individuals in our communications division who support the work, individuals in our legal services branch who support the work. It's extremely challenging to provide a specific number as to what individuals are working on any particular project on any given day, which is why I'm giving you the figures that we are, and why I think it's important to stress this is not a ministry-specific issue; it touches on every single ministry.

To the extent possible, we are trying to work with our central agency colleagues to leverage enterprise processes to support the broader objectives and the mandate of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Well, I'll just say it's an unsatisfactory answer. If you're working with a variety of ministries—I can't get the numbers on the other ministries. Those ministers aren't present. The only thing I can get is what the Ministry of the Environment has. They can't speak to their numbers.

I'll go to another question. What numbers are you using as projections for the global temperature increase over the next two decades? Do you expect that we will breach the 2-degrees-centigrade level? Do you expect we will breach the 3-degrees-centigrade level? Or are you expecting it will be a 1.5-degree increase? That is going to have a huge impact on how you assess risk. We need to understand what is the standard that you're using.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: First of all, what the member is suggesting is a worldwide problem. Climate change is recognized by this Ontario government and this Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks as a serious problem that we must do our part to address; we're doing exactly that. One important way to address it is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We're doing that by making those investments I already mentioned.

Ontario is part of a united Canada. It is one government within Canada.

If you look around the world—to address the member's concerns and questions—there are nations that are not doing their part. There are jurisdictions that are not doing their part, that are contributing to the problem and making it worse. There are those who deny that there is a problem.

We accept that climate change is real. We are leading Canada in the fight to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and we're winning that fight by making those investments in clean nuclear energy and public transport.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That's not the question I was asking.

You're assessing risk. To assess risk, you have to know how big that risk is going to be. So I need to know, are you assessing risk assuming that the world temperature increase will only go up 1.5 degrees, I'll say between now and 2050—or are you assuming 2 degrees, 2.5, 3? What is the basis upon which you're doing a risk assessment? That's very different from the statements from the minister, and I thought I was very clear. What is the basis of your risk assessment—1.5, 2, 3—within the next few decades?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: The basis of our risk assessment is that we have to, in an across-government approach, do everything that we can to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, because we know that the risk of the harm of climate change is a grave one. That is our assessment of the risk.

We monitor air quality and report on air quality when we have events such as wildfires. We make sure that we take steps in areas where there have been particular challenges, like Hamilton. I've already outlined those.

We also have to keep in mind that if we don't have a strong economy while protecting our environment—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Mr. Chair, I think my question is very simple: What number are you using?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: —we're going to be in a great degree of difficulty.

The risk that we assess is a balanced approach to fighting climate change while making sure we have strong economic growth.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Minister, MPP Tabuns is asking about numbers, if you have the answer, or the deputy—

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: If there's a specific number on the assessment of risk that the acting deputy minister can assist us with, I'm happy to defer to him in that regard.
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Mr. Brandon Chaput: I think my counsel to the member would be that emissions projection inherently involves a high degree of uncertainty, and that uncertainty is certainly heightened by virtue of the current economic challenges that Ontario is facing. It would be challenging to anchor to any particular number.

I think what the minister's comments reflect is the fact that the government has a proven track record in terms of emissions reductions, and that's going to continue to be the focus of the government.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: If you ask someone the risk of an accident travelling at 10 kilometres an hour in your car or travelling at 90 kilometres an hour in your car, there are very different levels of risk assessment, very different levels of potential damage at 10 kilometres or 90.

If the government is making plans for flood plain mapping, if we're hitting a 2-degree world, then we're talking about a metre of water falling over four or five days in an area as opposed to 10 centimetres. You're talking

very different levels of risk. If we're talking about fires in Ontario, if we hit a 3-degree centigrade increase, then we are looking at a dramatic increase in wildfires in Ontario—at 1.5 degrees, we're going to have big problems anyway.

If you're actually doing risk assessment and making recommendations for policy-makers—

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

Mr. Peter Tabuns: —then you have to have an understanding of what the world is going to be.

What is the risk level that you are planning for?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Not just planning—we're acting. We're achieving results.

We assess the risk of damage from climate change, if it's not dealt with and addressed in any way we can, as a very grave and high risk. It's subject to so many factors, as the deputy minister indicated, that you can't put a specific percentage or number on it. What we can do is to accept that it's real.

But we live in a world where the President of the United States doesn't even accept that climate change is real; he said so at the United Nations last year. We're dealing with the very same individual who doesn't accept it, has brought about a trade and tariff war with our country that we've never seen before. That's an economic risk that we face. And we've got to grapple with both, but we're doing both. We're fighting the good fight to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while—

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

We'll move to MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for doing your job today. I appreciate it.

I'm going to start talking about extreme heat and climate resilience.

Does the ministry have a provincial extreme heat strategy?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, as I indicated, provides information for the public so that they can judge their particular needs and concerns, their particular health risks, against publicly reported information. I mentioned air quality during the summer months and particularly during wildfires, as we recently have seen. Emergency response and preparedness is a ministry that responds to that, along with the Ministry of Natural Resources. Environment's role is to publish data when it comes to conditions in the environment that might be harmful to certain individuals with certain health issues. That is our role. That is our mandate. That is what we contribute to getting information out to the public—just as we made available the information from our investigations to Hamilton public health, that's available online, for that specific challenge of the black soot in July.

When it comes to concerns about extreme heat or anything further than that, I would defer to the deputy minister.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I think extreme heat would be a good example of why we need to work across government boundaries—working with other ministries, including the Ministry of Health, for example, on these types of issues. Fundamentally, we're talking about a pub-

lic health issue, so I would suggest that we would have a role to play in the context of policy development in that regard.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Would the ministry support an annual extreme heat awareness week and a provincial heat preparedness website?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I think any online public information that can be made available in an across-government approach—perhaps, in that instance, led by the Ministry of Health; when it comes to air quality, led by the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks—is helpful. The more information that's out there for individuals and families to make an informed decision about whether or not to be outdoors during certain months of the year, or within their communities, depending on what's happening—it's very, very important that the public be informed, as we ensure the public is, when it comes to specific issues like I mentioned in Hamilton, or the air quality issues which we saw right here in the provincial capital, in the summer, due to the wildfires. So, as the deputy minister indicated, an across-government approach to these types of initiatives is the way forward.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: That's great. That's what my private member's bill, Bill 29, which I introduced last session and this session—

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I thought that sounded familiar.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Yes, so that's great. It looks like it's going to be successful and be passed this year. Thank you.

Ontario's climate adaptation work is spread across many ministries, as my colleague was just mentioning. Which ministry is accountable for protecting Ontarians from climate impacts like heat and flooding, specifically?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, the effects of flooding, of course, are specifically dealt with under the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks' mandate with respect to conservation authorities.

When it comes to management of watersheds and flood resilience, flood prevention, that is part of the core mandate of conservation authorities. We've improved, I submit, with our proposals, the ability of conservation authorities to deliver on that core mandate, to make sure that what can happen in extreme weather events can result in avoidance of harm to people or property. The ability of CAs to better fulfill their mandate in this regard is crucial to the mandate of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. The improvements include, of course, equal resourcing, more up-to-date technology equally available to all, and that central guidance from the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, now—the new agency that exists for the first time.

But, again, we don't work in isolation; we work across government. When it comes to what the member mentioned, obviously, emergency preparedness and response, that ministry, Minister Dunlop and her team, have an important responsibility and leadership role, as do Minister Harris and his team at the Ministry of Natural Resources, and we work closely with those ministries as well.

But the conservation authorities are the authorities that are responsible, obviously, for the flood prevention and the resilience associated with flooding. That is crucial to their mandate. That's why we've increased the funding, as we've indicated, over and above the continued funding model that already exists. That's also why we did the amalgamation process and created a central agency for the first time.

Beyond that, the deputy minister may be able to assist as well.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I can certainly provide, if the member is interested, additional examples specifically related to flooding and other initiatives.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I'm going on to the next question. Thanks.

Could you give me some details as to how the ministry is building climate-resilient infrastructure? We know prevention saves a lot of money, and I know the government is interested in that, as are we.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Again, this is an across-government approach.

I did have the privilege and pleasure of being the acting Minister of Infrastructure in the past 11 months, between October 2025 to September 2026.

The deputy minister may be able to assist in the specifics in answering that question.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I'll provide some examples where the ministry was more directly involved, and then I can provide some examples of some of those cross-cutting initiatives that the minister spoke to.

We are, for example, implementing Ontario's Flooding Strategy, released in 2020, to understand flood risks, strengthen long-term preparedness, enhance emergency readiness and guide investments in flood risk reduction.

We're supporting the Port Lands Flood Protection Project in Toronto through Ontario's sustainable bonds program, which is a \$400-million allocation to reduce flooding risk by creating a naturalized mouth of the Don River in the Port Lands.

The government is investing approximately \$41 million in projects, since 2020, to support wetland restoration and enhancement projects across the province.

The government is investing \$15 million between 2022 and 2025 to support improvements in waste water and stormwater management systems in 18 Lake Ontario basin municipalities.

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The government is also moving forward in implementing commitments related to the 2021 Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health. Specifically, annex 10 of the agreement is focused on building an understanding of climate change impacts on the Great Lakes and integrating this knowledge into adaptation strategies and management actions. The government is currently negotiating the next COA with the federal government as well.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: That's great. I might talk to you about that afterwards.

When was Ontario's provincial climate impact assessment last updated?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I would defer to the deputy minister on that.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: The PCCIA was last updated in 2023.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Will you act on its findings or update it more this year?

Mr. Brandon Chaput: The content of the PCCIA certainly informs the work that the adaptation and resilience branch is engaged in; in particular, as it relates to the work we're doing with other ministries in terms of better understanding the nature of the risks that are borne by different regions of the province across different lenses, including, for example, agriculture.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Now I'm going to go on to landfills. The Auditor General warned that Ontario's landfills could be full by the early to mid-2030s. We know about Toronto's specific landfill; Green Lane landfill will be at capacity in 2034, which is horrifying, actually.

What is the ministry's current estimate of when Ontario will run out of landfill capacity, and what is it spending in 2026-27 to extend that date?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: We do have a land capacity challenge—most definitely. Some 40% of our waste is diverted to Michigan and New York. That's particularly troublesome as we're in the middle of a trade and tariff war, and we could face increased fees associated with that. Michigan's budget of 2026 suggests that they could increase fees by as much as 1,000%.

We have to look at ways to divert waste. It can't be about relying on landfills or exporting our garbage south of the border. That's why we have the producer responsibility system that we've embraced, so that more packaging can be recyclable and that that packaging, as it's created by producers, is paid for in terms of the diversion of that waste by producers.

At the same time, we've invested and acted on the science-based waste to energy that is possible—the use of wells on closed landfills that can produce natural gas to heat homes. Other jurisdictions are ahead of us. In England, for example, because of the necessity of not relying on landfills, because they don't have the land that we do, they've embraced the new technologies that involve waste to energy. And we have that here. We can do more, and we should do more.

So we recognize the importance of embracing new technologies, of diverting waste from landfills to extend landfill life, to get off the reliance of exporting 40% of our waste south of the border.

We've continued to look at reducing and diverting food and organic waste and its associated greenhouse gas emissions, to turn food waste into clean alternative fuels to help power our province.

And we're committed to strong environmental protection and oversight when it comes to any new or extended landfills that we may need to have put into place.

We have to be able to deal with our waste. That's an economic necessity, and we realize that the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks has to lead that. I think we're achieving great results, because we're im-

proving the blue box system, we're improving what we can do with organic waste, and we're embracing energy from waste and technologies associated with that.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Has the ministry costed a beverage container deposit program like the one proposed in my Bill 32—a deposit return system—and will it consider one this year? We're one of two provinces without a bottle deposit return system. It doesn't make economic sense. In light of what you just said, it's a good way to extend our landfills.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: It's important to look at what other jurisdictions are doing. Some provinces in Canada have a non-alcoholic deposit return system.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Most.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: We, here in Ontario, have a deposit return system for wine and beer, and we have expanded the packaging that can go into the blue box, as I've indicated, through the full producer responsibility system.

The acting deputy minister can assist with respect to the question as well, I think.

Mr. Brandon Chaput: As the minister alluded to, Ontario has a long and successful history of recycling a wide range of materials, including non-alcoholic beverage containers, through their local municipal blue box programs, now the province-wide Blue Box Program.

The blue box regulation, as the minister said, makes the producers financially and operationally responsible for the design and delivery of that system, including collecting residential non-alcoholic beverage containers.

We will continue to work with producers and other stakeholders to make sure that Ontario's recycling system is effective and responsible.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I would just say that Ontario is at 51% for recycling of non-alcoholic containers versus British Columbia, 83%—I'll argue that another day.

Let's go to organics. Will the ministry commit to annual public reporting on organic waste in landfills, as mentioned in my Bill 134—

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

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon:—which is to phase out organics in landfill sites? That's such an easy win. That's low-hanging fruit. I'm wondering whether you will support that. It's quite logical too.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: So much of what we do at the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks—the mandate that our government officials are committed and dedicated to is measures of a non-partisan nature.

We all breathe the same air. We all depend on clean drinking water. We all depend upon land with integrity. The brownfields program, for example, and the reuse of excess soil is such an important aspect of the circular economy. All of this is above politics and partisanship.

The important thing to do is, as we did with conservation authorities, receive input from everybody—14,000 submissions were considered—not to come in to—

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: So that's a yes, I think.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): The third party's time is up.

We'll move to the government side. MPP Gallagher Murphy.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you very much to the minister for your remarks and your questions today, and to the staff.

My questions will have to do with Lake Simcoe today. Lake Simcoe is the closest watershed to me, in Newmarket–Aurora, so there's a lot of vested interest there. Lake Simcoe, as we know, is the largest inland lake in southern Ontario, and it does play a vital economic and ecological role in southern Ontario. It provides drinking water to seven communities, and it supports agriculture, as well as tourism and recreation, as well as urban development.

In my region of Newmarket–Aurora, we're very much a suburban area, but it's also very much a tourism area that my constituents love to visit.

My question to you, Minister: What is Ontario doing to improve the health of Lake Simcoe as well as its watershed?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I thank the member for Newmarket–Aurora for her question. Her advocacy for her community is top-notch.

I share her desire to protect Lake Simcoe; we all do. It isn't just a local issue—it certainly is, but I think it's a province-wide concern, given the location of Lake Simcoe in the province of Ontario. We call the Holland Marsh the breadbasket of Ontario.

I can assure the member that the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks is committed to implementing the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan. The Lake Simcoe Protection Act was passed in 2008, and Ontario has invested annually in the restoration and protection of Lake Simcoe and its watershed, as a result. We continue to do that in this government.

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Advancing the objectives of the Lake Simcoe Protection Act requires co-operation among key partners. Again, it's a non-partisan effort in this regard. The act was passed by a previous Liberal government; this Progressive Conservative government is acting to annually invest in making sure that we achieve its objectives. Key partners include our Indigenous communities; the municipalities affected; the local conservation authorities, including the ones to be amalgamated on February 1, 2027; and, of course, the residents and, in particular, the agricultural and commercial sectors.

Ontario and its partners are implementing the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan by funding research and by monitoring environmental indicators to track change over time, influencing action on the ground through partnerships and, very importantly, sharing information to support evidence- and science-based decision making.

Since our government was formed in 2018, Ontario has announced more than \$13 million in actions to protect and restore Lake Simcoe, including ongoing programs and projects that support the implementation of the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan. This helps to improve the ecological health of Lake Simcoe and the communities that depend on it.

We're also investing \$24 million in a new phosphorus reduction project owned by the town of Bradford West Gwillimbury. By treating runoff from the Lake Simcoe watershed and reducing the amount of phosphorus entering the lake, this project will be an integral part of Ontario's efforts to restore water quality and the ecological health of the lake.

Additionally, Ontario is supporting our farmers in the Holland Marsh. This is to ensure that they can use innovative produce wash water treatment technologies that reduce the amount of phosphorus entering the lake, through the \$3-million Farm Washwater Innovation and Stewardship Efforts—that's the Farm WISE Fund, and we're very proud of it.

This is an example where an issue like the protection of Lake Simcoe goes above politics and partisanship. As I said, a previous Liberal government enacted the Lake Simcoe Protection Act in 2008, and 10 years later, when our government was formed, we took up the cause and have continued to fund it in even more innovative ways to achieve the results that I just mentioned.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, Minister—and the community. In both Newmarket–Aurora as well as York-South Simcoe, as well as the municipality of York region, we truly appreciate that \$24-million investment. We know it's definitely going to make a difference. As you know, Lake Simcoe is a vital natural resource, and it does support local ecosystems, as I noted previously, with tourism and agriculture—it's really the overall quality of life for our families and our communities across the region.

I know our government has made protecting water quality a priority, and I'm extremely proud of that. It has really come with a commitment that has taken meaningful, science-based—and I appreciate that; science-based—action to reduce the phosphorus that contributes to algae blooms and environmental degradation.

With all of this in mind, Minister, please, can you provide an update on the progress that Ontario has made under the Lake Simcoe phosphorus reduction project? Specifically, how is the project advancing? That's number one. Number two, what partnerships have been established? And three, how will this investment of \$24 million contribute to long-term improvements in water quality and the sustainability of our communities surrounding Lake Simcoe?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, it's an excellent, detailed question, and it's focused particularly on the \$24-million investment that I mentioned in my answer to the member's initial question.

As I said, we're continuing to take action to protect Lake Simcoe by investing \$24 million in a new phosphorus reduction project. This is a new project funded by this Ontario government. In January 2025, the province reached an agreement with the town of Bradford West Gwillimbury to be the local partner and the owner of that phosphorus reduction project that we believe will improve the lake's water quality and create healthier, stronger communities across the entire region. Six months later, in July 2025, the

province and the town entered into a close to \$14-million transfer payment agreement to undertake the engineering and the design phase of the project, and that's currently under way. This important technical work, science-based work, is essential before construction can begin. The project anticipates reducing phosphorus discharges into Lake Simcoe by up to two tonnes annually once it is fully operational.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: I appreciate that update, Minister, and I understand the amount that has been transferred already to get this project moving off the ground. Thank you very much.

As we know—and you've already alluded to what I'm going to ask next—Ontario's farmers play a critical role in strengthening our province's economy. They're supporting rural communities, as well, and it's ensuring that Ontarians do have access to safe and locally grown food. Of course, the Holland Marsh is a big part of that in my area.

At the same time, our government has made it a priority to protect our precious natural resources—especially the water quality—while supporting innovation and long-term sustainability in our agriculture sector.

With this in mind, my question to you, Minister, is, could you please explain why Ontario is investing in the Farm WISE Fund, particularly in the Holland Marsh area? A follow-up to that is, specifically what objectives does this program aim to achieve, and how will it support farmers in improving our environmental outcomes while protecting our local watersheds such as Lake Simcoe?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I thank the member for the question.

There are so many acronyms, so I'll repeat: Farm WISE Fund is the acronym for the \$3-million Ontario government investment in the Farm Washwater Innovation and Stewardship Efforts Fund. It is designed to ensure that our farmers in the Holland Marsh, that breadbasket of Ontario, use innovative produce wash water treatment technologies to reduce the amount of phosphorus going into Lake Simcoe.

Our farmers do play a critical role in strengthening our province's economy, and the Holland Marsh area has both economic and environmental benefits. Ontario's fruit and vegetable sector plays a significant role in strengthening our domestic food security. This includes ensuring that our citizens and residents have access to responsibly and locally grown produce for as much of the year as is possible. More carrots, celery, lettuce and greens are produced through the Holland Marsh area than any other single region in Canada, and this contributes over \$400 million in value for the provincial agricultural sector.

The government is supporting farmers, then, in the Holland Marsh area with that \$3-million funding program, Farm WISE, that I mentioned. That will help to deploy the important science-based technologies that will reduce the amount of phosphorus that enters the Lake Simcoe watershed. The program, I submit, will help farmers to embrace and adopt these technologies to allow precious freshwater resources and phosphorus to be reused more efficiently. This will help protect local water quality while strength-

ening domestic food security and agribusinesses here in our province.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: That's great. Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate the thorough response.

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

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Mr. Robert Bailey: How long do I have?

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

Mr. Robert Bailey: Great. That's all I need.

Through you, Chair, to the minister and his staff: Thank you for coming today. I'm learning a lot from listening here.

One of the questions I was going to ask has been answered. It's to do with my riding, of course—GHG emissions and how the ministry works with industry, co-operates and everything.

I've got a more pressing issue, and I thought of this while driving home from the International Plowing Match, as I drove through communities like Listowel, a couple of others, Lucknow—you name it—through southwestern Ontario, back home. Beside these small gas stations, I've seen piles of used tires. I used to get a lot of calls about that from down my way, from the people who changed tires. They could never get anybody to come and pick them up, like they're supposed to. I don't know the name of that organization, but I know the government gave them a contract. They were to pick them up. Now the calls seem to have ceased, so I don't know whether people just gave up or you guys are doing a great job. But I'd like to know what our goal is—because I thought about these tires when I drove through Listowel or wherever it was the other day, and they were all piled up outside this gas station. I think it's a disaster waiting to happen. I was glad to hear you say that you're looking at energy from waste. I think these tires could be used for some of that.

Anyway, I'll leave the rest of the time to you.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Reusing end-of-life tires means we have to collect them and find a way to efficiently do so, and we're committed to that because, you're right, they're part of the circular economy.

The intent of the tires regulation and our recent amendments to it, I say to the member, is the government's expectation, as it has always been, that producers and producer responsibility organizations, PROs, should collect and manage all end-of-life tires as they become available, regardless of targets. In any event, we did increase the targets to 80% just recently. We announced that to be ahead of the winter tire changeover season and to get these tires collected, and we're making progress. So if you're hearing less about it, it means our regulatory change is working, and that's good news. There will be more tire sites available for collection early in the new year, by the hundreds, and that's also going to help.

I might say, he thought of this question coming home from the plowing match. The member is having it in his riding next year, I understand. That's very good news.

MPP Mohamed Firin: How much time is left, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You have 25 seconds.

MPP Mohamed Firin: I don't think I have enough time for a question, but I would just like to thank the minister and his staff for taking the time today to join us in estimates.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Now we have eight minutes left from the two hours allotted to these estimates. According to the rotation, we will go back to the official opposition. MPP Tabuns, you have eight minutes.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Going to page 64 of the briefing book, there's a line item here—"shifting funding to future years for the remediation of mercury in the English and Wabigoon river system to align with project timelines." What does that mean in terms of that cleanup? What year has the cleanup been delayed to with this entry?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: The cleanup of the English and Wabigoon rivers system is an essential priority of this government and the federal government. Our Ontario government is continuing to work with Indigenous communities toward the remediation of historic mercury contamination in the English and Wabigoon rivers. This goes back decades. In fact, there is an \$85-million trust that is in place already, that is being deployed in that effort in common cause with Indigenous communities and the federal government to make sure that remediation actually is taking place and is achieving results. Contamination in the English and Wabigoon rivers is a complex issue, and it requires detailed scientific work to determine various options for remediation, but remediation is being pursued and funded—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Chair, I asked, what year?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: The ministry is leading them in the next phase of—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I just asked, what year will—

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: If I may finish, Chair—the remediation process, and this includes the development of technically feasible remediation options, high-level costing, timelines and the development of a long-term monitoring plan.

I'd like to ask the acting deputy minister to expand on the work being done on this very important file, a very high-priority file for our ministry.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I just need to know the year. It has been delayed to what year?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Tabuns has a specific question. Deputy Minister, if you can answer—

Mr. Brandon Chaput: I would ask my assistant deputy minister Steven Carrasco to introduce himself and then provide further response.

Mr. Steven Carrasco: Thank you, Deputy.

My name is Steven Carrasco. I am the assistant deputy minister of the compliance and regional technical services division, as well as the program delivery division.

In our division, the compliance division, we work with the five First Nations—Grassy Narrows, Wabaseemoong Independent Nations, Eagle Lake First Nation, Wabuskang First Nation, and the Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation—co-operatively.

On moving the remediation forward, MPP Tabuns—we are not pushing that cleanup out. As the minister stated,

we are about to release a request for bids to bring in an engineering firm that is going to be looking at all the studies that have been done by the ministry and by the scientists for each of the First Nations around the English and Wabigoon rivers, which have been contaminated by mercury, to come in and assess some options for how the cleanup can begin. This is the next phase of the cleanup that we are beginning. It is being done in co-operation. As the minister said, we have an \$85-million fund that is being aimed at the kind of studies. We have a partnership with the First Nations, through the panel, to fund this next stage of the cleanup. We expect to have a successful vendor in place by the early part of the next calendar year. They will assess the studies to give us some options of what the cleanup would be. Our stages after that would actually bring in an engineering firm that would begin the design of that cleanup as we move forward for that cleanup.

This kind of contamination is unprecedented, and we are committed towards that cleanup. It will take a long time to do this cleanup, but the government is committed to do this cleanup as part of our reconciliation with our First Nations.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Just for clarity, then: This \$2 million is being shifted forward to be expended next calendar year. Is that correct?

Mr. Steven Carrasco: That's correct.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That's what I needed to know. Thank you. I appreciate the answer.

The next question I have goes to page 100, where there's a mention—"end of time-limited funding for the expansion of protected areas in Ontario," \$4.4 million, stemming from an agreement with the federal government. What is the Ontario government going to do to make up for that gap and ensure continued expansion of our protected areas network, given that Ontario is falling behind other large provinces in protecting its lands and waters?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: We have made the investments in expanding watersheds, expanding protected areas, expanding conservation areas and expanding Ontario parks. I touched on that, I believe, in my opening remarks and in some of my answers to questions. We're very proud of that. Some 700,000 acres has been added to protected areas alone in the past few years. The Greenlands Conservation Partnership program has been extremely successful since 2020 in this regard. We work with the Ontario Conservation Accelerator team. We work with private donors who are ready to donate land—some of it watershed enhancement. All of this is extremely important. It's a partnership across not only our ministry and other ministries, but also with citizens and organizations that are ready to work with government in common cause.

We've made the investments, we've facilitated the investments, and we've had fantastic announcements. And we've worked with—I shouldn't forget the federal government. We have a new program that I announced with Minister Dabrusin in the summer that expanded several Ontario parks and created several new spaces. We're very proud of that.

Wetlands expansion and protection is also important. That's critical natural infrastructure that we're investing in, maintaining and enhancing.

1730

Mr. Peter Tabuns: We're losing \$4.4 million. We're losing that—money that we could use for protected areas. How are we going to make that up? We're losing \$4.4 million that we could have had to expand protected areas. Now that's a problem the Ontario taxpayer alone is going to have to face. How is that going to be made up?

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

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I submit that the member doesn't have his facts straight or is taking numbers out of context.

What this government has done is engaged in unprecedented partnerships and investments toward expanding green spaces with the organizations that I mentioned, including the Greenlands Conservation Partnership program; the federal government, of course; Ducks Unlimited—watershed protection and wetlands expansion and protection. I mentioned, as acting infrastructure minister in the past year, wetlands are natural infrastructure in terms of resilience and flood prevention. So these investments are part of what is the mandate of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks—not in isolation, but in partnership.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: The context I'm taking is the estimates book, which says that—"end of time-limited funding for the expansion of protected areas in Ontario."

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP Tabuns. That's the time allotted for these estimates.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Are the members ready to vote?

MPP Tabuns.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I will not ask for a recorded vote. I'm not going to vote against or for any of the items. I think this is an irresponsible budget. I will vote against the budget as a whole at the end.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay.

Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 1101, ministry administration program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 1112, environmental policy, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 1114, environmental sciences and standards, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 1116, environmental compliance and operations, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 1118, environmental assessment and permissions, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 1119, climate change and resiliency, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 1120, land and water, carry? All in favour? All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall vote 1121, Emissions Performance Standards Program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. All in opposition, please raise your hand. The vote is carried.

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks carry? All in favour—

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Recorded vote.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We already started the vote.

All in favour of the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks? All in opposition? The vote is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks to the House? All in favour? All in opposition? The vote is carried.

Thank you to the minister, the acting deputy minister, the directors and the staff for coming and sharing your valuable input, insight and time with the committee.

And thank you to my colleagues who made my job easy today.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: You did well, Chair. Thank you.

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

This concludes the consideration of the 2026-27 estimates selected by the Standing Committee on the Interior.

There being no further business, this committee stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1735.

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