



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 12, 2025
9 a.m.

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Loyola, Rodrigo, Edmonton-Ellerslie (NDP), Deputy Chair

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Participants

Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade

Hon. Matt Jones, Minister

Suzanne Harbottle, Assistant Deputy Minister, Labour and Workforce Strategies

Liam Stone, Assistant Deputy Minister, Economic Strategy and Investment

9 a.m.

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

[Mr. Getson in the chair]

**Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Welcome, everybody. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade, also known as JET, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026.

I'd like to go around the table and have the members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, if you can introduce yourself and then your officials. Just a note, folks, that *Hansard* is taking care of the mics for us, so we don't have to reach for those. To get things started, I'll do that myself. I'm Shane Getson, MLA for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland and committee chair. To my right.

Mr. Wright: Justin Wright, MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wiebe: Ron Wiebe, MLA for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Ms de Jonge: Good morning. Chantelle de Jonge, MLA for Chestermere-Strathmore.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA, Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Jones: Matt Jones, Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade and MLA for Calgary-South East. Joining me at the table are my ADM for child care strategy and policy, Tanis Liebreich; my deputy minister, Chris McPherson; my senior financial officer, Andre Rivest; and my assistant deputy minister of labour and workforce, Suzanne Harbottle.

Member Hoyle: Good morning. I am MLA Rhiannon Hoyle of Edmonton-South and shadow minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade. With me here is my staff and assistant.

Member Batten: Diana Batten, MLA, Calgary-Acadia, shadow minister for Children and Family Services and child care.

Mr. Ellingson: Court Ellingson, MLA for Calgary-Foothills.

Member Loyola: Rodrigo Loyola, Edmonton-Ellerslie.

The Chair: Excellent.

Even though he needs no introduction, I have a clerk to my left who shall remain nameless until we need him in the room.

Microphones: we already talked about that. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcript of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. We don't have any members participating remotely today, so that's good to see. Also, please set your cellphones to the least disturbing setting as possible during the proceedings.

Speaking rotation and time limits. Hon. members, we have the main estimates for Jobs, Economy and Trade that should be considered for six hours. So buckle up. This is going to be a long one here today. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website. Hard copies were provided to the ministry officials at the table.

For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to six hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to be considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding the speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk, the gentleman to my left, about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee, I would love to have a bio break about halfway through the first three-hour segment, if that works for everybody. Is anyone opposed to that? I appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Ministry officials who are present may at the direction of the minister address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery and are asked to please introduce themselves before commencing. You can see the podium over there. Pages are available to deliver notes and other materials between the gallery and the tables. However, attendees in the galleries may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members. However, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. However, the block of the speaking time, the overall three-hour meeting for the first segment we have, will continue to run. Any written materials provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members. Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both the questions and the answers without interruption during the estimate debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times including instances when speaking time is shared between the member and the minister.

A word of caution. The way we run the meetings here, I'll try to keep it as cordial as possible. We want to make sure that decorum is here so that, God's honest truth, everybody can get their questions asked, and, God willing and the creek don't rise, get them answered here, unlike question period sometimes. With that, the chair will try to maintain decorum and will conduct this more like a business meeting than we sometimes conduct ourselves in the House, if that makes sense for everybody.

We also had another member who just may have transferred from being online to in person. If you could read yourself into the record, please.

Ms Ganley: Kathleen Ganley, Calgary-Mountain View.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you.

With that, I would now like to invite the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade to begin your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. Jones: Thank you. Good morning. It's my pleasure to present the 2025-26 main estimates for the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade.

I've already introduced those at the table with me, but also behind me are a number of people, including Jerry Bellikka, my chief of staff; Laura Lowe, assistant deputy minister of child care delivery; Jennifer Jabs, assistant deputy minister of trade; Liam Stone, assistant deputy minister of economic strategy and investment; Sylvia Lepki, assistant deputy minister of economic development and business supports; and Myles Morris, assistant deputy minister of safe, fair and healthy workplaces.

Jobs, Economy and Trade enhances Alberta's competitive advantage by creating the conditions to help more Albertans and

our businesses prosper. This includes developing policies and delivering programs that grow and diversify our economy; attracting and developing a highly skilled and resilient workforce; promoting safe, fair, and healthy workplaces; and ensuring Albertans have access to high-quality, inclusive, and affordable early learning and child care.

Alberta has been and continues to be the economic engine of Canada, helping to drive economic growth from coast to coast to coast. We continue to see billions of dollars of top-tier investments flow into our province thanks to our low taxes and highly educated workforce. With affordable housing, job opportunities, and diverse communities Alberta has so much to offer.

Our province faces significant uncertainty due to the actions taken by our neighbours to the south. Tariffs pose a real threat, and my ministry takes these threats seriously. We will respond strategically, fostering a resilient, diversified economy that can withstand external shocks and ensure Albertans' long-term prosperity. I am confident that Budget 2025 will support these efforts and help us to navigate these challenging times ahead.

For the upcoming fiscal year the ministry will employ roughly 1,300 staff to undertake our activities. These activities will be financially supported by \$2.3 billion in operating expense, \$8.15 million in capital investment, and another \$8 million in capital grants.

Although the U.S. is Alberta's and Canada's largest trading partner, we must prepare for any outcome. This is why it's more important than ever to promote trade opportunities with other provinces and territories and build access to new markets for Albertans. One way we do this is by showcasing our province to the world through targeted trade missions. We will continue to build on the success of recent trade missions to South America and the Middle East, and we look forward to telling Alberta's story in Germany in the coming weeks.

We will also continue to work with the federal government to make sure Alberta's voice is heard loud and clear on the world stage. Closer to home, Alberta will continue to be a leader in internal trade and labour mobility. We will work with the federal government and other provinces to reduce internal trade barriers and barriers to labour mobility. These activities will help to foster a strong, growing, and diverse economy.

Along with expanding our trading partnerships, attracting investment, and supporting regional economic development, we will ensure that Alberta's economy continues to prosper. Alberta's government is investing approximately \$138 million for these activities in 2025-26, which includes \$15 million for the investment and growth fund. The investment and growth fund is a deal-closing program that has encouraged capital investments of more than \$770 million and supported more than 2,000 jobs since its launch in 2021.

Alberta's government is also investing \$95 million in '25-26 to the film and television tax credit program to ensure Alberta remains a sought-after destination for film and television productions. The ministry will also continue to support regional economic development and small businesses through a variety of programs and initiatives. This includes supporting regional economic development alliances and pathfinding, coaching, and training so that small businesses can continue to grow and succeed.

Business and labour force development go hand in hand. The ministry is investing close to \$89 million in '25-26 for skills and training support programs, workforce development, and labour market information in Budget 2025. Just like the rest of Canada Alberta is seeing workforce challenges in a number of industries, and looking forward, this government intends to tackle these head-on. These investments will help to address our labour and workforce needs now and into the future by providing Albertans

with the training and labour market information they need to succeed. We will continue to make efforts to attract skilled professionals from out of province to help build the homes, schools, and health facilities we need to support our growing population and economy. Budget 2025 provides \$10 million in '25-26 to fund a \$5,000 moving bonus for up to 2,000 eligible skilled trades workers.

In addition to attracting and training workers, the ministry helps ensure they are healthy and safe at work. Budget 2025 provides \$70 million for education and enforcement of occupational health and safety, or OHS, and employment standards laws. The ministry hired 33 additional full-time front-line staff last year and is hiring five more in the coming year to improve education and enforcement of OHS laws. The additional staff and investments in OHS operations account for the \$4.2 million increase from '24-25. Additional staff allow for more in-person inspections of work sites and greater monitoring of employers, industries, or situations where there are higher injury rates or higher rates of noncompliance.

9:10

Budget 2025 also supports the ministry's work to efficiently respond to employment standards complaints, effectively enforce the rules, and protect vulnerable workers from being exploited. The ministry through transfers from the WCB is allocating \$20 million to support the Appeals Commission for Alberta's workers' compensation. The Appeals Commission helps ensure injured and ill workers are being treated fairly by the workers' compensation system and receiving the benefits they are entitled to.

Speaking of fairness, the ministry continues to support the fair and equitable application of Alberta's labour relation laws through providing \$5.4 million in '25-26 to the Alberta Labour Relations Board to support its work.

The final area I will touch on in my opening remarks is child care. A sustainable and high-quality child care system empowers parents and caregivers to participate in training, education, and our workforce. Budget 2025 provides nearly \$2 billion to support the child care system, which is an almost \$484 million increase from Budget 2024. As we announced in January, we are implementing a flat \$15-per-day fee starting on April 1. This accounts for the majority of the funding increase, as changes to compensation for child care providers are required to enable the new flat fee.

Our total investments in '25-26 also include approximately \$324 million to support the recruitment and retention of certified early childhood educators. The ministry will continue to support the inclusive spaces grant program, which helps licensed child care providers ensure their facilities and programming can include all children.

The 2025-26 fiscal year marks the final year of the current federal-provincial child care agreement. The reality is that this agreement is failing Alberta families, which is why at this time we declined the federal government's rushed offer to extend it for another five years. This rushed offer, which came after they refused to meet, continues to discriminate against private providers, family day homes, and family day home operators, which represent the majority of our market. It would do nothing to address the 100,000 children in Alberta on wait-lists, it would result in a \$5 billion funding gap for the province to backfill, and it does not allow for the targeting of benefits to households that need them most. Equally disappointing was the federal government's complete unwillingness to negotiate any aspect of the extension.

I remain hopeful that we can negotiate a new agreement with the next federal government that will meet the needs of Alberta's market, a mixed-market system, and families. Child care

investments in the ministry's business plan for '26-27 and '27-28 reflect the uncertainty of those future negotiations.

Budget 2025 is meeting the challenges facing Albertans with responsible decisions to fund the priorities of today and prepare for tomorrow, it addresses the reality of a changing economic landscape due to U.S. tariffs, and it reflects the optimism I have that Alberta will rise to the challenge and remain a land of opportunity and prosperity.

Thank you, and I'm now happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Perfect. I appreciate that, Minister.

Just a couple of housekeeping items here for members. If you've been on my committees before, you kind of know the routine. Government estimates: that's fair game. The 2025-26 ministerial business plans: that's fair game. Strategic plan: that's fair game. Meeting the Challenge, the fiscal plan '25-28: that's all fair game. There are going to be points where there might be some collaborative or some crossovers between ministries. Members, ask those questions if you need. If the chair needs to draw it back in a bit in that regard to keep it focused more on this, that's great. Then, back to the minister, if there are those areas where you've got crossovers, just please try to answer as best as possible, and then the chair will try to moderate that as best as possible with that.

Then the other one, too, is for the folks following at home. If you read the reference document, the page number, that's awfully handy for everybody to keep up as well.

With that, the first 60-minute block goes to the Official Opposition. It can be 10 minutes combined, or it can be block time, but no speaker can speak longer than 10 minutes during this period. Also, in this section you can cede your time to one of your fellow members on your side. If you're going to get the chair's attention, whoever's going first, just raise your hand in the room, and then I'll know to put you on the list.

With that, we're ready to go. Who wants to go first?

Member Hoyle: I'm happy to go first.

The Chair: Perfect. The floor is yours.

Member Hoyle: Thank you to Minister Jones and the chair, all staff, and committee members for being here today and providing this opportunity to ask some very important questions.

The Chair: Member, just for the clerk at the front, are you looking for block time or shared time?

Member Hoyle: Sorry. I thought you had said you made that call.

The Chair: No. It's up to. You just have to ask.

Member Hoyle: I'm happy to do block time or shared time. Minister, what would you prefer?

Mr. Jones: Blocks, please.

Member Hoyle: Block time. Okay.

The Chair: Thank you. Now the shot clock will read accordingly on the wall for you.

Member Hoyle: No problem. Thank you.

Thank you to Minister Jones, the chair, and all staff and committee members for being here today and providing this opportunity to ask some questions around this budget in relation to the very important work of Jobs, Economy and Trade. The budget is a road map for our future, and I'm looking forward to discussing

how this government is preparing for our economic future in this province. Albertans are having a tough time right now, and more than ever we need to come together in these uncertain times and search for ways to make sure that Albertans have good-paying jobs, the ability to remain employed and have an excellent quality of life and to create a prosperous province, because better is possible. I would like to emphasize that the questions I bring forth today are coming from stakeholders, experts, leaders in various industries that I've met with over the last several months.

To start, I'd like to focus on the recent introduction of the U.S. tariffs and their potential effects on Alberta's economy. We know that many Albertans are hurt by the threats to our economy and sovereignty from the unpredictable U.S. President, despite the U.S. being our closest ally and trading partner. And it's clear that although this government knows this is a grave issue, I'm finding difficulty in seeing a comprehensive plan in this budget to insulate Alberta's economy from these tariffs. On page 23 of the 2025-28 fiscal plan it states that "the volatile landscape of the Canada-U.S. trade relations and softening global demand will weigh on both domestic demand and trade." Alberta's trade with the U.S. totals \$188 billion each year and will affect businesses in both Canada and the U.S.

Page 107 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan, key objective 1.4 states that the ministry will "promote Alberta's trade interests on the global stage in collaboration with key partners and support Alberta businesses to diversify into new international markets." Mr. Chair, what is the minister's plan to specifically ease the pressures that U.S. tariffs will inevitably place on small and medium-sized business owners in this province, and how will the ministry support local businesses and entrepreneurs in its procurement plans?

On page 107 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan, key objective 1.6 states that a focus is to "promote the free flow of goods and services across Canada." However, I was unable to find any specific regulatory changes related to this objective in the budget. Stats Canada noted that barriers to interprovincial trade added 7 per cent to many costs. Further, Nova Scotia's government implemented new regulations that reduce interprovincial trade barriers by spurring the mutual recognition of goods, services, and labour mobility across all sectors of Canada's economy. Mr. Chair, can the minister share why the ministry didn't consider implementing regulations to reduce barriers even further to interprovincial trade?

There doesn't appear to be any mention of strengthening our internal economy by further getting rid of trade barriers, buying local, plans of working directly with other provinces, and increasing Canadian-specific procurement. Mr. Chair, can the minister share: what is the plan, and why is this the case?

On page 105 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan it states that a key focus for the ministry is to advocate "for Alberta's interests on the international stage, working to increase trade, support businesses' ability to access new markets and attract job-creating investment." Mr. Chair, can the minister share specific plans to build more and stronger trade relationships across the world and diversifying our markets outside of the U.S.?

Likewise, page 11 of the 2025-28 fiscal plan states that the contingency fund "will increase to \$4 billion in 2025-26 to provide government with more flexibility to address unforeseen implications of increased economic uncertainty as well as compensation expense for collective bargaining currently underway." How much of this \$4 billion will be allocated to supporting small and medium-sized Alberta businesses? What would be one of the first industries the minister foresees needing the support, and how much for further skills training since a cut was made in this budget?

9:20

I must say that I'm quite surprised by how little this budget talks about the use and purpose of the contingency plan. Albertans deserve to know what's potentially coming and how this government will responsibly be handling this crisis. So, Mr. Chair, can the minister explain what's being done to work with other ministries like Seniors, Community and Social Services to figure out the potential number of job losses coming? How much of this contingency fund is needed to cover these job losses? What's the plan for protecting existing jobs as well as new jobs created?

Alberta needs to secure trade agreements and advance policies that open doors to international markets, helping local businesses grow beyond our borders. Page 105 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan states that the ministry provides "concierge and pathfinding services [to] help businesses gather the information they require and navigate approvals so they can confidently invest in Alberta." While the tariffs will undoubtedly affect Alberta's job market, this is an opportunity for Alberta to be the leader in interprovincial trade in the face of looming market uncertainty. Our urban centres, mid-size cities, and rural communities have the potential to be a global powerhouse for trade. Alberta needs to secure trade agreements and advance policies that open doors to other international markets, helping local businesses grow and stay afloat.

To focus this from a rural perspective, stakeholders have asked me to bring forth the following questions. Mr. Chair, can the minister share what specific support will there be for sectors vital to rural Alberta such as agriculture, tourism, local shopping, and land preservation? Recent estimates show that nearly 60,000 jobs are at risk in Alberta due to tariffs. Can the minister share if there is any regulatory work being done with other provinces to reduce the effects of tariffs on Alberta jobs?

Building off this, page 15 of the 2023-24 annual report indicates the ministry provided pathfinding services to more than 114 companies to support their investment decision. Through the chair, of these 114 companies, can the minister explain how many companies set up operations or invested in Alberta in alignment with the goals of these pathfinding services and promoting Alberta's interests on the global stage?

Supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs should be at the forefront of the government's procurement plans. Now more than ever we need to be positioning Alberta as one of the most attractive places to move to and invest in. On page 8 of the 2025-28 strategic plan, it stipulates maintaining Alberta's tax advantage compared to other provinces for both individuals and businesses. Chambers of commerce across the province have called for the elimination of the 2 per cent business tax as a step that start-ups, Black-, and Indigenous-owned businesses have also asked for. Mr. Chair, can the minister indicate if he has advocated for the removal of the small business tax to the Minister of Finance? And if not, why not?

I'm mindful of how these tariffs will impact Alberta's agriculture industry, as we are very exposed to international trade relations, particularly with the U.S.A. and China. This will be difficult for farmers and ranchers because their industry relies on rules-based, predictable trade.

A little dry in here this morning.

In 2023, the U.S. was the destination for 49.8 per cent of Alberta agriculture exports, followed distantly by China at 17.1 per cent. So, through the chair, can the minister elaborate on what the plan is to ensure our farmers are insulated in the face of these tariffs? What will the ministry do to help stimulate agricultural trade interprovincially with different global markets?

The Chair: There's 20 seconds if you're . . .

Member Hoyle: That's okay. I'm good.

The Chair: Perfect. Okay.

Member Hoyle: We could save that time.

The Chair: Then gold star, MLA Hoyle. That was excellent. The chair couldn't ask for anything more from my perspective.

One housekeeping item: we did have a member just join us online. MLA Bouchard, if you could turn on your camera, and read your name into the record.

Mr. Bouchard: Good morning, everyone. Eric Bouchard, MLA for Calgary-Lougheed.

The Chair: MLA Bouchard, if you need to get on the speaking list, then you can put your hand up on there or shoot a note to the committee clerk. When you're not participating or speaking we just ask you to turn your microphone off, if that works for you, sir.

Mr. Bouchard: Absolutely, will do. Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

With that, Minister, I turn over the next block to you for the next 10 minutes.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the member for the thoughtful questions.

JET does serve as the government's driver of economic policy and strategy, and we of course work with other ministries and partners across the province to foster economic growth and support the success of our entrepreneurs and job creators and really promote the development of Alberta's industries. Our government remains focused on diversifying our economy with strong business-friendly policies that will attract job-creating investments. Thanks to these policy choices Alberta is once again the economic engine of Canada.

In 2024 – I think it's useful to recap our tremendous economic strength before getting into the headwinds in front of us – our real gross domestic product grew by an estimated 3 per cent, employment grew by 3.1 per cent, exceeding the national employment growth of 2 per cent, and we continued to drive national employment, accounting for a remarkable 38 per cent of Canada's new private-sector jobs just in Alberta. More and more people chose Alberta as one of the best places to live, work, and raise a family: 200,000 people, 4.5 per cent population growth. Again, Canadians voting with their feet.

Similarly, more companies chose the province as the best place to set up shop because of our competitive tax system and other advantages. We welcomed several major investments to the province including a clean hydrogen and atmospheric gasses facility by Lindy, which will play a critical role in Dow's \$11.6 billion Path2Zero petrochemical project located in the Industrial Heartland. This particular project is a testament to the success of our concierge program, which I will reference later. This investment represents a significant economic boost and an important expansion of Alberta's natural gas industry.

Through the investment and growth fund our province closed the deal on four major investments including Fortinet's cybersecurity facility in Calgary, Logistik Unicorn's hemp processing facility in Elk Point, a new cold food storage facility in Coaldale, and Lufthansa Technik's aircraft engine maintenance and repair facility in Calgary, which was just announced recently. These four projects are projected to support a combined 336 permanent jobs and create

an additional 500 temporary jobs, boosting local economies across Alberta.

In 2024 Alberta's strong economy attracted people, businesses, and investors in record numbers, driving to a surge in housing starts and major projects, which directly translated into growing demand for skilled workers. In response, Alberta's government launched a third phase of the Alberta Is Calling campaign and a \$5,000 moving bonus specifically to draw skilled workers from Canada to build our expanding infrastructure. We also introduced the industry skills grant to tackle workforce challenges and skills shortages in sectors like aviation, aerospace, construction, and technology through a \$5 million grant program.

Last year was one for the record books. Alberta ended 2024 with high employment gains, record oil production, and increased investment in nonresidential. But we all know the situation we are facing given shifts in U.S. policy. There's no doubt that we will face headwinds as we seek to attract new investment and compete in the global market that faces substantial disruption. Make no mistake, this shift in U.S. policy will have far-reaching consequences. We've already seen investors delay decisions and companies look for alternative suppliers and customers. However, strong fundamentals like low taxes, a favourable cost of living, and high wages position Alberta better than other jurisdictions to weather this storm. Alberta will do everything in its power to convince the U.S. President, lawmakers, people, companies to repair our relationship.

We will continue to promote Alberta as a reliable partner in supporting North American energy security, but we must also rapidly diversify our economic strategy to reach new markets, both domestic and international. We will build on successful trade missions to Japan, the United Kingdom, Argentina, the UAE, Indonesia, and the Philippines to continue to drive global opportunities for Alberta-based companies. We will double down on strengthening ties for future business and investment growth with the world. Now more than ever enhancing international trade is vital to Alberta's economic success and resilience. Through the Alberta export expansion program, we will continue to support Alberta's small and medium-sized businesses, industry associations, Indigenous organizations, and economic development organizations that promote Alberta's exports at formal trade events.

We are also actively working with the federal government and other provinces to enable us to diversify our markets. As our Premier stated: we will support a Team Canada approach if the country fast tracks and builds oil and gas pipelines to the east and west to bolster our critical infrastructure. This is in addition to lowering taxes, reducing red tape, tearing down interprovincial trade barriers, and re-empowering provinces to develop our unique economies.

9:30

To successfully weather the storm, we must stop limiting our prosperity as a country. We must come together in an unprecedented effort to preserve the livelihoods and future of our people and expand our trade relationships across the globe. To that end, Alberta stands ready to build on its efforts to remove internal trade barriers.

To touch on the specifics of the questions, on internal trade Alberta has shown strong leadership. We've removed approximately 80 per cent of our party-specific exceptions under the Canadian free trade agreement. We've removed half of our exceptions under the New West Partnership trade agreement, from four down to two. The negotiation of a mutually satisfactory resolution with Ontario in regard to the liquor trade dispute and the successful conclusion of the negotiations to cover nonmedical cannabis under the CFTA were all positive steps. We're also

nearing the conclusion of a chapter that will bring financial services under the Canadian free trade agreement, and we continue to be an active participant in the Regulatory Reconciliation and Cooperation Table.

On mutual recognition we applaud the efforts of our provincial and territorial colleagues and the federal government. We're actually going to take it a step further. We're not doing mutual recognition only if there's reciprocity. We're just going to proactively engage in mutual recognition, so we're looking across government, across ministries at every area we can mutually recognize our provincial and territorial colleagues.

On trade diversification, as I highlighted in my opening remarks, we are going around the world promoting Alberta as a responsible producer of energy, of food, and other products, and we are looking to continue to diversify our trading partners. That doesn't mean we don't want to trade with the U.S. We absolutely do. We'd love to trade even more energy and food and manufactured products with the United States, but we also have a lot to offer the rest of the world.

In terms of the skills training cut, this was unfortunate. It was a decision by the federal government to reduce the labour market transfer agreement top-up. All provinces and territories were aligned that it was the wrong time for the federal government to pull away from skills training. Canada and Alberta are facing productivity challenges, and this was before the situation with the United States. We should be doubling down on training, so we continue to advocate alongside our colleagues for additional federal support for training while also standing up provincial initiatives. We've expanded union direct training, industry direct training. We're continuing with space creation grants for postsecondaries and other initiatives, all to increase the productivity of our workforce and the availability of training.

On internal trade we're also working on things like direct-to-consumer alcohol sales. We're encouraging provinces and territories to open up their wholesale and retail shelves as well, and we're working with the federal government and like-minded jurisdictions like Saskatchewan on supporting our agriculture sector. To your question, we expect this situation could have severe implications for our agrifood sector, our manufacturing sector, so the government of Alberta is going to collaborate with the federal government to ensure that the collective programs across the country best support the hardest hit industries and the hardest hit people.

As you can appreciate, the situation with the United States is ongoing. It's fluid, dynamic. It changes by the hour. It changes by the tweet, so we would love to have, you know, a road map for the next three years as to exactly what we're going to do, when, and to what degree, but the reality is we must be nimble. I can assure Albertans that all governments, including the government of Alberta, are working on various contingencies and potential support programs that will be ready to roll out when required. Again, we hope to not have to use these programs, but Alberta and Canada will be there for our hardest hit industries and people.

On pathfinding I wanted to highlight the incredible work that my concierge team has done in Jobs, Economy and Trade. I referenced the Dow investment. Another investment I'd like to reference is Lufthansa Technik. This took over a year. It required pulling in federal and municipal parties, the Calgary Airport Authority, and that's what my concierge team successfully did. They really brought five or six parties together to work on the same deal, and once we all agreed on what we were talking about, Alberta's competitive advantages really won us the day. We were competing with a U.S. jurisdiction throughout this entire process. We did not offer the same level of subsidies, yet Alberta still won the

investment, and I think that's a testament to the strength of the Alberta economy not just within Canada but within North America.

We should be optimistic that Alberta will continue to succeed even with these headwinds. There's a reason 200,000 people moved here. There's a reason we continue to win investment even after a trade dispute is initiated by the United States. It's because the fundamentals for Alberta haven't changed.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Minister.

Back to MLA Hoyle. You have the floor.

Member Hoyle: Thank you, Minister, for addressing some of my questions. I do appreciate you getting more specific than what I've been able to read in the budget there.

Businesses in Alberta and Canada now face further uncertainty in growth and investment, and we should be using the current situation as an opportunity to diversify our markets even further and grow Alberta's economy. The minister just mentioned that, you know, some investors are delaying their decision to set up in Alberta even though there are some who are investing. I'd like to talk a little bit further about that.

On page 107 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan it lays out key objective 1.2, to support economy growth, resiliency, and diversification across Alberta by delivering programs and tools that respond to the needs of communities, economic development organizations, and industry. Mr. Chair, can the minister clarify what specific programs are being put forward to help with the resiliency of Alberta's economy given the looming threats of tariffs? As the minister said, they change by the hour, by the minute, by the tweet. What is the plan? What other ministries are being worked with to expand these opportunities? What are the targets, and how will the ministry be measuring these outcomes?

On page 107 of the business plan it also lists key objective 1.4, to promote Alberta's trade interests on the global stage in collaboration with key partners and support Alberta business to diversify into new international markets. I know Alberta has key international offices in the United States, Europe, Middle East, Africa region, Indo-Pacific region, and Latin America region. Mr. Chair, can the minister explain how consistently these offices have been able to make connections between small and medium-sized Alberta-based businesses and international markets? What key industries are the focus of these connections? Has the ministry seen an increase in trade for these sectors? Have there been any contracts secured, and if so, what is the return on investment?

On page 107 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan it states that "\$1 million is [going] to the Alberta Export Expansion Program to enhance access to international markets for export-ready organizations." To the chair: can the minister provide additional clarity into what these export-ready organizations are? Given the potential economic strain from U.S. tariffs how did the ministry decide that \$1 million was an appropriate amount?

The program's website says that grant recipients must submit a report one year after trade-related travel is complete. To the chair: can the minister expand on what the outcomes of the program have been? What has been the economic output of this program? How many applicants is the ministry seeing to this program each year?

Our oil and gas sector is now going to have to deal with a 10 per cent U.S. tariff. To complicate this, page 26 of the 2025-28 fiscal plan highlights that there are concerns about slower global growth, supply chain disruptions, and renewed inflationary pressures, all of which could weigh on oil demand. As a resource provider Alberta will be hit particularly hard by the U.S. tariffs since oil and gas extraction accounted for over 50 per cent of our exports. Canada is the U.S.'s number one source of oil imports. In 2022 60 per cent of

U.S. crude oil imports were sourced from Canada, and while this is lower than tariffs on other Canadian goods, the 10 per cent energy tariff will still have a negative impact on Alberta. Mr. Chair, what is the minister's plan to get our energy products to markets other than the United States? How will the ministry effectively engage the private sector to do this?

On page 27 of the 2025-28 fiscal plan it shows that government is anticipating that tariffs will result in a drag on Alberta oil prices as Alberta producers absorb costs associated with the U.S. tariffs on our energy products. Some of the following questions came directly from rural chambers of commerce I spoke to, and I'd like to make sure they get some clear answers on this topic.

9:40

How does the ministry plan to off-set job losses in oil and gas? Is there a plan for workers who will lose their job as a result of these losses? What comparable or transferable jobs will be available if oil and gas jobs decline or disappear? What alternative industries can rural Alberta focus on, industries that do not deplete their valuable land and water resources, to respond to the decline of the oil and gas industry?

Rural and mid-size cities are particularly vulnerable to U.S. tariffs, and Red Deer has the highest rate of unemployment of any city at 9.7 per cent as of January 2025. Page 107 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan, initiatives supporting key objectives, shows that \$3 million is allocated to the north regional economic development program to promote regional economic development. Mr. Chair, what industries are the key focus for this funding? Are there specific municipalities or jurisdictions that are being prioritized? This program funds initiatives led by Alberta municipalities, Indigenous communities, and nonprofit organizations that promote regional economic development and diversification. Mr. Chair, can the minister share how many applications there were? How many recipients of the funding will there be? We need a plan to protect small businesses, workers' jobs, and families from the impact of these tariffs.

I have some questions related to the Alberta jobs now program. Page 108 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan, performance metric 2(a), shows the ministry's success rate in assisting clients to transition to employment or further their education or training. In 2023-24 74.3 per cent of clients reported being employed or in further training. To this point, the 2023-24 annual report, page 44, noted that the program provides 9,101 payments to 1,835 unique employers to support the employment and training of new staff. Mr. Chair, can the minister share what portion of these clients came through the Alberta jobs now program? Considering that the ministry made overall cuts to skills and training support by more than 30 per cent in this budget, how many Albertans were able to gain employment through this program? What percentage of Albertans hired were still employed 12 months after they were hired? When the program started, the target for the number of jobs created was 22,000. Through the chair, can the minister share how many were actually created?

Page 107 of the 2025-28 ministry business plan, outcome 1, states that "the ministry promotes Alberta's interests on the international stage, working to increase trade, support businesses' ability to access new markets and attract job-creating investment." The ministry led 33 international outgoing missions for small and medium-sized companies from across the province. Mr. Chair, can the minister share how many companies were selected? Where can we find a list of these companies? Did this lead to significant investments in job growth? If so, can the minister explain in further detail how this has opened up new markets for Alberta and

increased trade? How is the ministry reporting and recording these outcomes?

Trade missions were made to Argentina, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines and the United Arab Emirates in 2024. To the chair: can the minister share in what industries did these five trips help Alberta businesses access new markets and attract job-creating investment specifically? What were the goals of each visit? How are the outcomes being measured? Has the number of jobs increased in Alberta as a result of these trips?

The minister led trade missions in Abu Dhabi and Japan. Officials told us in the Public Accounts Committee a couple of weeks ago that the minister's total spend in the last fiscal year of '23-24 was \$1 million. I'm assuming there were some serious job-creation and investment opportunities after a \$1 million investment. Mr. Chair, can the minister share the total cost of these trips in this budget? What are the target goals for each specific trip? How many jobs will they create? Can the minister share examples of how these trips are helping us create new markets outside of the U.S. markets? If overseas trade offices are under Executive Council in the Premier's office, can the minister share: what benefit do we get from the minister's trips and trade missions, and what specifically is the role of the ministry in these trips and for these trips?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, Minister, the floor is now yours.

Mr. Jones: Yeah. Lots of great questions there. I will try to get to as many as possible.

On the programs that we have in place to support Albertans and Alberta-based companies in increasing their economic activity both domestic and abroad, those would include things like the Alberta export expansion program, the film and television tax credit, the investment and growth fund, the northern and regional economic development program, the northern Alberta development bursary, and also our site-selector tool and other economic dashboards.

I'm going to start with the export expansion program which was referenced. We directly support small and medium-sized organizations to export into international markets through the Alberta export expansion program, or AEEP. With a \$1 million annual budget AEEP provides funding to export-ready small and medium businesses to travel to global markets to promote their products, make business connections, and explore partnership opportunities. The program provides funding to help support costs for Alberta businesses and nonprofits targeting foreign markets. This includes support for international travel to trade missions for export-ready businesses, industry associations, Indigenous communities, and economic developers.

The AEEP program guidelines have been designed to allow stacking with other programs such as the federal CanExport program, with a requirement that total government grant funding cannot exceed 75 per cent of eligible trip costs. This ensures Alberta organizations can continue to take advantage of federal dollars while still receiving provincial support within reason. That said, it's incredibly frustrating that during this time when we should be focusing on export expansion, Canada has cut its export expansion programs and left the provinces to pick up the pieces. But rest assured that our government remains committed to supporting Alberta businesses as they seek to expand into global markets.

AEEP was fully subscribed for '23-24, so much so that we had to close the intake before the end of the fiscal. So the question: is a million dollars appropriate? I would say it should be higher. We'll certainly be advocating to increase that. But this is great news; it means that people are seeing value in the program. To me this

means that after a couple years of decreased travel and limited in-person engagements, there are Alberta exporters who are seeing a resurgence in demand for their products and services around the world. This also means that Alberta exporters see value in this program, as I mentioned, and that we are giving companies the boost they need to get their products out.

We've worked hard behind the scenes to implement changes to AEEP based on the feedback we've received from users. We relaunched the program in April 2024 with several key changes. These changes reduced red tape, clarified application guidelines, and streamlined the administration greatly, which has resulted in a more predictable and consistent experience. The program now operates on a per diem basis rather than requiring receipts. This helps offset the cost of flights, accommodation, intercity travel, and translation, and it also creates consistency in grant amounts and how the program is used.

AEEP now exclusively provides support for attendance at formal international trade events, like conferences and expos, to ensure taxpayers are supporting the right activities. Applicants can receive up to 50 per cent of their receipted registration fee.

We also removed the pretravel grant agreement step so companies can save time by only applying post travel. This has reduced administration of paperwork so they have more time to focus on growing their business. The one-stage post-travel process has sped up approvals for reimbursement of payments. Currently companies receive payment within 48 days of the submission of their complete application, compared to several months under the previous program.

We've included a budget tracker on AEEP to increase predictability of funding. With the new guidelines organizations can get up to on average five trade missions per year of support, averaging \$2,900 per mission for a maximum of \$15,000 per organization per year. This was reduced from the maximum amount of \$25,000 to ensure more participants could access the program.

I'm now going to turn to the investment and growth fund. We're supporting high-value and private-sector job-creating investments and diversification across our economy through our investment of \$50 million per year in the investment and growth fund. When it comes to Alberta, there are a lot of strengths we can leverage. We're business friendly, we've got the lowest taxes and among the lowest combined taxes in North America, we have a highly skilled workforce that enjoys exceptional quality of life, and we're building on that with supports like our investment and growth fund. The fund plays a valuable role in closing the deal on high-impact investments that create good-paying jobs in communities across our province. It's a targeted, invite-only incentive that helps us compete with other jurisdictions, including the United States, to attract and win high-value private-sector investments.

9:50

When companies are looking to establish or expand their operations, they look for jurisdictions with competitive tax rates, quality talent, economic and financial sustainability, and also quality of life. Additionally, they consider the incentives that each jurisdiction offers. With the investment and growth fund we are making sure that Alberta has the tools to effectively compete. In today's globalized economy businesses can locate anywhere in many cases. In fact, many governments and agencies in competing jurisdictions have investment attraction supports in place. Through the investment and growth fund we are making sure Alberta continues to compete for these investments.

The IGF targets new investments and expansion projects, and it's designed to recognize the significant economic impact that rural and at times smaller investment projects bring to our province. We

work closely with government partners like Agriculture and Irrigation as well as the organizations that help attract investment, like Edmonton Global, Calgary Economic Development, Travel Alberta, and the Invest Alberta Corporation. Together we identify and screen potential applicants and invite them to apply.

It's open to businesses across a range of industries, helping us to grow and diversify Alberta's economy. To qualify, companies must create new good-paying, permanent full-time jobs and commit to capital investment. We are focused on attracting companies that are well established, financially sound, and ready to make final investment decisions, ensuring that taxpayer dollars are leveraged and invested responsibly. To protect that investment, the IGF includes strong safeguards that allow the government to withdraw funding if project commitments are not met. These protections reinforce our commitment to delivering real, measurable results for Albertans. Importantly, the IGF is designed to complement, not duplicate, other programs across the province, working as part of a larger strategy to strengthen our economy.

Since the fall of 2021 we've announced 12 grants that will support approximately 1,200 full-time jobs and 1,000 temporary jobs with total capital investment of more than \$770 million. To date the investment and growth fund has leveraged nearly \$29 in private investment for every \$1 in public funding. This is a remarkable return on investment that demonstrates the strength of our economy and confidence that investors place in Alberta.

These projects are also making a real difference in communities across the province, including in the ridings of some people here today. From Wheatland county to Medicine Hat to Stony Plain, we're bringing new opportunities and jobs and growth. In rural Alberta alone the investment and growth fund will bring over half a billion dollars in capital investment, supporting nearly 600 permanent jobs and 691 temporary construction jobs.

In 2021 the investment and growth fund also helped close the deal with Nova Scotia based Goodleaf Farms to build an indoor vertical farm in Calgary, resulting in 92 permanent jobs, 50 temporary jobs, and additional food security for Calgarians.

In 2022 we kept that momentum going with a \$3.74 million grant to attract CGC, which attracted a \$200 million wallboard manufacturing plant in Wheatland county. This was 180 jobs and 250 temporary jobs and a capital investment 54 times larger than the grant. The same year we also announced the first project under the investment and growth's rural stream. Southland Trailers' new trailer manufacturing facility in Lethbridge county, a nearly \$15 million investment, created about 250 permanent jobs.

In Edmonton the IGF helped secure Siwin Foods' new food production facility, keeping them here in Alberta over other North American competing locations. The project brought 50 permanent jobs, 50 temporary jobs, and nearly \$54 million in capital investment to our province.

In 2023 we celebrated several announcements which I referenced in my opening remarks, so I won't touch on those again.

Now I'll turn my attention to the northern region economic development program. This is a program that provides grants to communities, Indigenous organizations, economic development groups, and regional economic development associations to support economic growth and capacity building. We recently changed the program parameters to enable more people to apply. In other words, we reduced the minimum grant size from \$20,000 to \$10,000, we increased the maximum grant size from \$200,000 to \$300,000, we also removed some arbitrary streams in the program to make it more accessible, and we increased the time that these projects could take to a maximum of three years, again to make the program more accessible to regions or communities or organizations of various

sizes so that they could compete in the economy of today and also collaborate as regions.

Another program that we're using to attract investment and support our economy is the film and television tax credit, which I mentioned. What I'd like to highlight there is that we recently made changes to incentivize filming outside of the major urban areas like Calgary and Edmonton. As you know, there are two different refundable tax credits, 22 per cent and 30 per cent. We've opened up an additional way to access the higher 30 per cent credit, and that's by filming 75 per cent or more of your production in rural or remote Alberta. We had noticed that the majority of filming activity was occurring in the Calgary region, and we had requests from rural Alberta to see more of that, so we wanted . . . [Mr. Jones' speaking time expired]

I'll get to the other programs in my subsequent answers.

The Chair: All really good stuff. We have six hours, so I'm sure we can get through most of it.

I'm not sure if it was MLA Batten or Hoyle who was next. Batten? You're up.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. Good morning, everyone, and thank you for taking time out of your day to come and discuss budget estimates with us.

I would like to start with the federal government collaboration for child care. To the minister, through the chair: the federal government signed eight new child care agreements just this last week. From what I understand and from what the minister has shared this morning, Alberta did not sign on to the new agreement, and the reasoning offered was too little money and too short of a deadline. Mr. Chair, this is highly concerning. It creates a lot of uncertainty for everyone, for parents, for the educators themselves, for workplaces who employ workers who have children in child care, right? It is huge. So I'm hoping the minister might be able to provide Albertans some confidence that Alberta will continue to invest, ideally a lot more, in child care and that having an accessible, affordable, high-quality, inclusive child care system here in Alberta is still a priority for this government.

I want to start by exploring this idea of too little money. Page 152 of government estimates 2025-26: I draw your attention to the revenue section there, early learning child care agreements. It indicates that the province, of course, has accepted funds from the federal government, and I've gone ahead and pulled numbers from the previous years, from the government estimates, just to provide a context for the span of the agreement. Of course, each of the following can be found in the government estimates for that specified year. From 2022 to 2023 the federal government invested \$734 million; '23 to '24, \$937 million; '24 to '25, \$1.25 billion; and '25 to '26, \$1.15 billion, for a total over \$1.8 billion, which, of course, was negotiated back in 2021 by the UCP government.

Again, the funds were to be used to create a system that would be supportive to Albertan children, their families, and, of course, the Albertan economy in general. The idea of the agreement was that the federal government would invest in child care knowing its importance to our economy and that the provinces would use the allocated federal funds in addition to provincial funds to develop a province-specific child care system.

I stress, Mr. Chair, that this agreement was a collaboration between the levels of government. It was under the UCP government that the 2021 to 2026 agreements were negotiated and signed. I want to remind everyone that, again, that totalled over \$3.8 billion already invested inside child care by the end of 2026 from the federal government.

The next question, of course, is: what has the province contributed as part of this collaboration? Again pulling from government estimates for the specified years: for 2022-2023, \$336 million; '23 to '24, \$332 million; 2024 to 2025, \$331 million. Now, of note, in 2019 Alberta invested over \$400 million in child care. With the exception of this coming year, which I will discuss in a minute, the provincial investment has fallen year after year.

Like I said, I will have questions about: there is an increase in this budget, for '25 to '26, of an investment of \$819 million, which is about a \$500 million increase than we've seen in previous years. So I do have questions about that in a bit.

Through the chair, the minister was recently quoted sharing that, and I quote: for example, the federal offer to Alberta, which was \$6 billion over five years, will require Alberta to put an additional \$5 billion over the next five years, which you can appreciate is a substantial amount of taxpayer money at a time when we're facing significant pressures in health care, education, and, frankly, a trade war. End quote. Bluntly, Mr. Chair, Albertans are perfectly aware of the global situation in which we find ourselves. Further, \$5 billion invested in Alberta's child care system certainly would benefit far more Albertans than the \$70 million wasted on Turkish Tylenol, but maybe the government has slightly different priorities.

10:00

The Chair: Member, just keep it within context. I've given tons of latitude for you going outside of the calendar years to prove a point on a trend line. Other comments that are not within this ministry are not helpful to the conversation. It may add colour to it, but it's not helpful. I would ask the member, please, for decorum. Just try to keep it to the matter and the ministry at hand if you could. The speculation is very difficult for that minister to answer. It's a different ministry entirely.

Member Batten: I appreciate that, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Member Batten: Okay. Through the chair, can the minister explain what alternative funding ideas they have on deck given that we've all been aware that this agreement was going to end in 2026? Again, Mr. Chair, Albertans are looking for confidence and stability in the child care system because it enables thousands of Albertans to contribute to our workforce. I'm hoping that the minister can provide some specifics around his plans for child care ongoing with or without the federal investment.

In the same media correspondence the minister has shared that the federal government has historically, and I quote, put in the lion's share of the funding, which I think we can all clearly understand as we've just reviewed those numbers. Mr. Chair, the minister went on to share that this was, and I quote, appropriate as child care agreement is a, quote, national program. My question to the minister, through the chair, is that, arguably, all programs using federal money could be considered a national program. Just like education or health care, child care is provincially delivered. It is part of a national program, but it is absolutely Alberta's responsibility. Will the minister acknowledge the province's responsibility in delivering accessible, affordable, high-quality, inclusive child care? Can the minister, through the chair, provide specific measures the minister is taking in terms of contingency plans given the instability rising from the activity, you know, south of the border but also the increasing cost of living while wages do not follow?

Mr. Chair, I would like now to kind of move on to the too-short-of-a-deadline reasoning provided by the ministry in regard to why

the new agreement has not been signed with the federal government. Now, the initial agreement was signed in 2021 with specified milestones. The desired outcomes were clear: develop, grow, and maintain a healthy child care system. Last year in estimates I asked the minister through the chair what the plan was for 2026, when this agreement was set to expire, and I had urged the minister to consider whether Alberta would be willing and able to continue growing the system even without federal involvement. To the minister through the chair: the answer provided in the 2024 Jobs, Economy and Trade estimates was that the government would spend the allocated \$1.2 billion noted.

This goes to I am hopeful the minister will provide specific actions that the ministry is taking to work through his disagreement with the federal government. Albertans are relying heavily on child care as a growing province, and I know that many of us are asking for confidence that the current \$15 a day child care will continue regardless of the contribution from the federal government.

All right. Mr. Chair, we need to acknowledge the elephant in the room. The UCP government allegedly has misappropriated funds from health care. This is, of course, an ongoing matter with several investigations.

The Chair: I'm trying to give some latitude here. This is, again, not health care. I'm not sure where you're going with this, but I would just caution you to bring it back into this area, regardless of elephants, hippopotamuses, or any other animals for reference. Again, for that, just try to bring it back in. I'll see where you're going with this, but . . .

Member Batten: Appreciate it.

The Chair: Okay.

Member Batten: What I actually wanted to do is provide the opportunity to the ministry. Again, we're providing that confidence to Albertans – right? – that our child care system is going to be invested in, that we know where these dollars are going. I want to give the opportunity to the ministry, basically, to explain that they were not involved and they will never be involved in misappropriation of these funds.

Mr. Wright: Point of order, Mr. Chair. We're talking about the estimates right now for . . .

The Chair: Just wait.

A point of order has been called.

Mr. Wright: Sorry.

The Chair: We just have to pause. Please proceed.

Mr. Wright: We're talking about the estimates for Jobs, Economy and Trade, and, well, it seems there's some muddying of the waters. I believe that this is a point of order on 23(b), speaking to matters other than the question in discussion, continuing to muddy the waters between a Health concern or a Jobs, Economy and Trade concern. I think that we're getting past the point of the guidance and leeway that the chair has given, and I believe that we're in a different realm of questioning entirely that is not pertinent to the budget estimates of Jobs, Economy and Trade; 23(h), (i), and (j) – sorry – as well.

The Chair: The member is calling (h), (i), and (j)?

Mr. Wright: Standing Order 23(b), (h), (i), and (j). Yeah.

The Chair: Okay, so speaking to matters other than under discussion, (h) makes allegations against another member, (i) imputes false or unavowed motives to another member, and (j) is the one you're pointing, uses . . .

Mr. Wright: Sorry. Not (j). I'll withdraw (j). I apologize.

The Chair: Okay.

. . . language likely to cause disorder. That's correct?

Mr. Wright: Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. Who wants to counter on your side? Please go ahead.

Mr. Ellingson: Yeah, Mr. Chair. I'm confident this is not a point of order. This is, in fact, a matter of debate, one that – I mean, we're covering a lot of ground there under (b), (h), and (i). I'll cover (h) and (i). In no way did the member make any allegations against another member. As is, you know, commonly known in the House, when a member refers to the government, that 23(h) is not applying. She's not referencing a specific member or making accusations against a specific member.

With respect to the matter at hand I'm confident that the member is coming back to a reference in the estimates. I think we need to understand that Albertans, in fact, do have their confidence in the general accountability of the budget more broadly – it is being called into question by the public, and I think it is acceptable that each minister should be able to speak to their responsibility and accountability for their part of the budget. I think that's where the member was going, and I'm confident that the member will pull it back into the estimates for this ministry.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this point I'm not going to call a point of order, but obviously the language or the way you're setting it up, Member – and I've cautioned you – is going those ways. If your concern is on procurement, if it's on those type of items, that would probably be better if you got to your question on how the procurement works within JET or if there's anything else along those lines. Referring to other matters that are either under review in the House, RCMP investigations, third-party investigations: like, we can litigate that all we want in the House. Here I'm hoping that it is more businesslike – let's put it that way – with the language. Just try to make sure that if you're asking questions about procurement, please bring it back into that, or we can have everybody going back and forth with points of order, which, obviously, I don't think is the best use of time for anyone here.

With that, please proceed.

Member Batten: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Page 152 of the government estimates 2025 to 2026, to the minister through the chair. Child care can be a lucrative endeavour, especially in times of instability, which seems to be kind of the world's new normal, unfortunately. Of course, I've already shared that the child care agreement will bring by the end of 2026 more than \$3.8 billion into the province for child care, and the minister has communicated that an additional \$6 billion was on the table from the federal government. So, Mr. Chair, we're talking about a lot of taxpayer dollars here, right?

In addition, there have been capital investments in child care, and in fact, Mr. Chair, the budget for this actually seems to have exceeded what was budgeted. On page 152, change in capital assets, child care, you can see that the budget amount there for 2024 to 2025 was \$10 million. However, it's forecasted to be over \$18

million. To the minister through the chair: some insight would be great into this overspending. How were these dollars allocated? Where, what, when will Albertans see fruits from this investment? You know, was there any sole-source contracting used in here? How competitive was the funding?

Mr. Chair, just making the assumption – and I will clarify that – that the space creation grants and the building blocks capital grant programs both fall into this budget line, when then we're seeing a huge drop from \$18 million to the budgeted \$5 million in this upcoming year, I guess the question to the minister quickly is: does the ministry believe that Albertans' need for child care space is going to decrease as our population continues to climb, and should Albertans be concerned that this step is the opposite of investing in child care and should be budgeting for the loss of their current \$15-a-day child care?

10:10

The Chair: And back to the minister.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the member for again very thoughtful, reasonable questions. The federal government: I'll start by saying that I reached out to the federal government in December so that my department could engage with theirs on the negotiations of the next term of the agreement. The federal government refused to meet. On February 6 they sent a rushed and politically motivated extension offer with two weeks to sign. We have a multibillion-dollar agreement with significant implementation challenges not just in Alberta but across the country, and the federal government said: you have two weeks to sign this.

I reached out to my federal minister partner, Minister Sudds, to discuss the offer to see if there was any flexibility in the terms. I indicated that I wanted to discuss the flexibility of the operations of the agreement, not an implementation. The subject of the call was not actually on the amount of money, although that is a significant concern. The minister indicated the offer was the only offer on the table, and they were not willing to explore any changes to the agreement whatsoever, not one change. I said: "Well, shouldn't we take the learnings, the experience of the three years of implementation of this agreement? Shouldn't we take the feedback of parents and providers and the provinces and territories, including Alberta, and work that into a more sustainable child care agreement?" The answer was no, which surprised me.

While the federal government has put in the lion's share of investment to date, that will not be the case in the coming term or two of the agreements. Many provinces and territories are approaching a 50 per cent contribution in what is a nationally driven program. If Alberta were to re-sign under the currently proposed extension, we would be putting in \$1.2 billion in the fifth year of that agreement. The federal government would be putting in \$1.28 billion.

I'll ask just a question to the members around this table: does that sound like a partnership to you, where the province which is responsible for the jurisdiction of child care – the implementation, the provision, the operation of the system – will be putting in about half of the money and will have no say on how the agreement works? That doesn't sound like a partnership to me. It doesn't sound like something that Albertans would be advocating that I sign. I think they'd be saying: if we're going to put in \$5 billion dollars, we better make sure that it works, that it's sustainable long term.

And the Alberta government is not the only government saying that the agreement is unsustainable. I think all the provinces and territories have indicated that the funding is insufficient for the aspirations and goals of the agreement. I think that child care

providers across the country – we've even seen child care providers exit the agreement in other provinces – have raised sustainability concerns. So that's a little background on that.

Alberta's primary reasons for declining the extension at this time were, first, the \$5 billion funding gap; second, the agreement would continue to discriminate against the vast majority of providers in our province. As the member knows, the majority of providers and spaces in this province continue to be private and family day home, so this agreement would continue to discriminate against the majority of child care providers in the province. That's not something that Alberta is okay with.

The agreement would also prevent Alberta from fully income testing the system. In other words, we believe that with finite federal and provincial resources we must ensure that heavily subsidized child care is accessible to low-income households. Right now that's currently not the case. The requirement in these agreements to reach an average of \$15 a day today and \$10 a day in 2026 severely limits the province's ability to target child care subsidies to those that need it most.

And these are massive subsidies. For example, an infant receiving care in a major urban centre in Alberta can cost the government up to \$21,000 per year in tax-free subsidy, \$21,000. That is twice what it costs health care on a per capita basis. That is almost twice what it costs to provide K to 12 education. This is a very expensive program. Again, let's go back to... [Mr. Jones' speaking time expired] There's no way that was 10 minutes. Was it?

The Chair: It was just the end of the block. We have six hours, Minister, so we have ample time here. We don't have to squeeze it all in at once.

With that, we're over to the other block, I believe, at this point, are we not? Government caucus block. MLA Cyr, the chair recognizes you. You're up.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Minister. Is back and forth fine, Minister?

Mr. Jones: Back and forth is great.

Mr. Cyr: All right. Did you want to finish your thoughts, sir, before I go into it? Mine is actually related to child care as well.

Mr. Jones: Yeah. I'm sure we'll get to the context there.

What I would just like to add on is that Alberta has engaged with the federal government in good faith. We have made, you know, I would say, top progress in the country on the expansion of child care. We've added 35 per cent, 35,000, spaces. We have 50 per cent, 60,000, more kids accessing the system. We are achieving \$15 flat child care province-wide as of April 1. By all accounts Alberta has done the job. So my message to the federal minister was: if we were negotiating an agreement today, shouldn't we factor that in? I can understand guardrails and all these arbitrary requirements when the federal government is the majority funder and the work has not yet been done, but if you were evaluating what Alberta has done over the last three years – again, top marks in Canada – why don't we use those learnings? Why don't we learn from the implementation of three years? Why don't we learn from providers, the feedback from parents, from my team, which has been implementing this agreement, and make the next agreement truly sustainable?

That's where I wanted to go. I've got another hour that I could rant on this, but let's get to your questions, Member Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: My questions are actually more focused on the program itself. I would like to touch on my first term, from 2015 to 2019. During that time we did have the NDP really bring in the \$25-a-day

daycare system. It was the early learning child care. I think I'm the only UCP MLA here that was serving in opposition back then. They piloted this program in my constituency in Cold Lake, and what happened was that I had all of my parents from the entire region pretty much pile in wanting to get into that one centre. They implemented a lottery system on who would get it. We had families that were making \$300,000 or \$400,000 and other families that were making \$20,000 accessible to that lottery system. I will tell you that it brought division and chaos to my constituency. We had providers that were told that they were overcharging because of this one program going in. I'll tell you that if you're looking at a debacle, if you will, the NDP poorly managed this in my time. So I do recognize this is a hard program that you're trying to get in. I believe that you've been working hard to make it fair across the spectrum. I would sure hope that the NDP don't get another crack at this.

Getting into this, line 5.1, page 148 in the government estimates, identifies a \$467 million increase in Alberta's budget to support child care affordability and access, which provides subsidies to low-income families, support for children with unique needs, and oversight to the program licensing, inspection, and staff certification. It's important to understand how these funds are used to support families to strengthen child care in Alberta. I'd also like to highlight that this doesn't come without its own economic benefit as an investment in child care is an investment in the future. This is a very large budget item, sir. Can the minister please elaborate on the intentions behind this increase?

Mr. Jones: Yeah. Thank you for the question. Just briefly on the previous attempt at affordable child care, the \$25-a-day program under the NDP government, it had many of the same challenging aspects that the federal agreement has. It was prejudicial or discriminated against private providers, and it was not income tested. I think we have to be realistic with finite government resources, federal and provincial, which means that we can't have millionaires accessing the same level of subsidy as single mothers, in my opinion. It is actually strange to me that the federal government, who income tests their own programming, like the dental benefit, for example, refuses to consider income testing for what is a much larger subsidy program. Again, lots of issues there.

10:20

We're committed to safe, high-quality, accessible, and affordable child care that meets the diverse needs of Alberta families. Families across Alberta rely on many different forms of child care, whether it's daycare, preschool, or a family day home. As Alberta's population grows and child care becomes more affordable, the demand for high-quality, affordable, and accessible child care is increasing, to the member's point. We are improving the way licensed child care is funded to provide a more consistent experience for parents and transparent and flexible reimbursement for quality child care delivery.

In '25-26 Alberta's government is allocating approximately \$2 billion to meet commitments under the federal early learning and child care agreements, which includes the implementation of a new system-wide funding formula. There are actually a few funding formulas. With the new funding approaches child care will be more affordable and accessible no matter where Albertans live or which provider they choose.

Starting April 1, parents with children up to kindergarten age attending full-time licensed daycare or family day home programs across the province will be eligible for a flat parent fee of \$326.25 per month, or roughly \$15 per day. Parents requiring part-time care will pay \$230 per month. These additional investments will further

reduce out-of-pocket child care fees for families, support child care providers to ensure the stability of the system, and help expand capacity to accommodate growing demand.

The only comment I'd add to that is that the funding changes will really remove some of the inequities that existed between parents accessing the system and providers serving the system. In other words, we had parents in the same region with the same age child getting care to Alberta standard paying radically different amounts. That didn't make sense to parents. And we had providers coming into the system sometimes at fees three times higher than an existing entrant. Again, that doesn't seem to make sense with government now reimbursing 80 per cent of the providers' costs of delivery. So I'm pleased to roll out a system that's more fair and transparent.

Mr. Cyr: One of the things that I think you've touched on already but I'd like a little bit more clarity on is: how many families and operators will these increased funds impact?

Mr. Jones: The funding will support our roughly 2,600 providers across the province. Again, those are a mix of daycares and family day homes and preschools and family day home agencies. We also have, outside of the federal agreement, out-of-school care and our ECS program, which is found in education. The agreement is going to continue to support about 2,600 providers, and then we have about 150,000 users across all forms of child care in the province.

Mr. Cyr: Well, that's quite remarkable.

How is it that this \$15 a day daycare fee will be beneficial to families? I think you've touched on this as well, capping what families are paying out of pocket, if you will.

Mr. Jones: Well, I think the member is well aware of the cost-of-living challenges that are being faced across Canada but also in Alberta. We've experienced record inflation. We experienced interest rate increases, which have put pressures on the family unit, and of course savings on child care off-set those pressures.

They also enable parents to work or pursue a further education or pursue other priorities. I think those are the benefits, and we've certainly seen that in our data, and we do expect that child care will continue to facilitate greater participation of women in our workforce in particular. This is, of course, a key priority for us as we're seeing shortages in fields like construction and skilled trades. We'd like to see if we can utilize accessible and affordable child care to help alleviate those pressures in particular and other industries that are currently more male dominated, where we'd like to see increased participation of women.

So everything you would think of, saving families money and increasing access to child care so that they can do the things that they need to do.

Mr. Cyr: Well, I know that my constituency is appreciative of that, sir, especially with these difficult times with the inflationary pressures we've had on us.

With the additional funds, will this make the child care system in Alberta more sustainable in the long term? We've heard sustainability concerns by the opposition.

Mr. Jones: Yeah. The additional funding will sustain the system. It's really that the province is backfilling the gaps in the federal agreement funding. We made it very clear that due to the rapid population growth and the inflationary pressures on all businesses but also child care businesses that more money would be required to sustain the system, so Alberta is stepping up to provide that right now. We'll obviously be looking forward to negotiating with the

next federal government on an agreement that really reflects the future and unknown inflationary pressures.

I'll say one thing. I was pleased to say that the federal government did include an inflationary mechanism, a 3 per cent increase starting in years 2 through 5 of the next term of the agreement, but frankly sometimes inflationary pressures are higher than 3 per cent. We also have the question of the parent portion. If the parent portion is frozen, it would fall on the federal and provincial governments to account for the inflationary increase of their fees.

This funding will make the system more sustainable, but ultimately we require a sustainable federal agreement for the system to be sustainable long term. I look at this as a bridge or an interim measure to getting to a future agreement that will sustain the system.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you for that foresight.

Will this funding equally support both private and public operators? If not, why not?

Mr. Jones: In Alberta we do not differentiate between private and not-for-profit providers except where we are compelled to by the federal government's terms. The funding framework that is being rolled out on April 1 applies to both not-for-profit and private providers. In other words, we determine by region, by child age what the parent fees can be. We determine what the parent fee is; that's that \$326.25 a month for full-time care and \$230 for part-time care. We determine all aspects of their revenue. We also determine the standards under which they operate.

For Alberta there is no distinction between a private or a not-for-profit provider. I would note that they hire the same staff, they care for the same children, they follow the same rules, and there is – the federal government's preliminary concern at the beginning was outsized profits. Well, I've communicated numerous times to the federal government that there is no longer an opportunity for outsized profits because all aspects of revenue in the system are now managed, determined, fixed by the provincial government, and these are robust funding frameworks. We engaged in extensive consultation with the system to inform these ranges, and I'm pleased to report that 85 per cent of providers will be seeing a funding increase with the implementation of the new framework, and the lowest 25 per cent, roughly, of providers in each region – in other words, the ones with the lowest fees, that have been frozen with some increases over the last three years – will see a more substantial increase, again, to support the viability of the overall system.

In everything Alberta does, we treat the private and not-for-profit providers equally. Unfortunately, even in recent capital infrastructure support programs that the federal government has rolled out, they have made it only accessible to not-for-profit and public spaces, and I think this is really unfortunate. You know, I've met many entrepreneurs who are running private daycares, and I can tell you they're not making outsized profits. I can tell you they're not even in the business to make substantial profits. They just want to care for kids. That's what they've chosen to do as an entrepreneur, and I think it's, unfortunately, them who miss out on potential space creation grants, like our building blocks program, because the federal government ideologically is opposed to private businesses and entrepreneurs.

I also feel for family day home providers. This is very bizarre to me. There are caps in the agreement on the number of family day homes that we can create, that can be funded under the agreement. For some reason, the federal government is opposed to primarily

women caring for children in their homes. I can't figure it out. I don't understand it.

These are the reasons that we have not signed the extension offer with the federal government. We would like to get past arbitrary barriers to the success of this agreement. We would like to move past ideology to supporting all. We need it all. You know, there are areas of the province where nonprofit facility-based care is not going to happen or not going to happen quickly. So why don't we leverage the private sector? Why don't we leverage family day homes to quickly put up accessible and affordable and inclusive child care? That makes sense to me, so we're working on it.

10:30

Mr. Cyr: Thank you for that. This will be my final question, and then I'll cede the rest of my time, which probably is not going to be much here, to member de Jonge. Can the minister please speak to the local and regional economic impacts of space creation efforts of both families and child care providers, and can the minister speak to the impacts of rural, remote, and northern communities? This is especially important for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, sir.

Mr. Jones: Yes. In July of 2022 Alberta launched the space creation grant for new or existing nonprofit groups interested in creating facility-based child care spaces or expanding existing spaces from zero to kindergarten age. It expanded to family day home agencies interested in creating spaces in areas of high need or high demand, and then in late 2023, the space creation grant expanded to include for-profit providers, who play a critical role, as I mentioned, in delivering high-quality child care for families.

The interest was so significant that the intake was closed on November 12, 2024, and as of December 2024, Alberta had supported the creation of more than 35,000 affordable child care spaces for a total of over 138,000 child care spaces for children up to kindergarten age requiring care during school hours. The child care space creation grant has supported the creation of more than 15,000 of these spaces.

Through the building blocks program, we are helping nonprofit child care providers grow their programs and provide the quality care families deserve. Building blocks applicants must prioritize the areas you're referencing, including one of the following: high-need areas, rural and remote regions, low-income and high-cost urban communities or communities with other barriers to access, and underserved communities. We continue to look for opportunities going forward to ensure spaces are targeted to areas where families need them the most, so we are specifically targeting space creation in the areas that the member referenced, and we will continue to do so.

I should mention that this is funded through an additional \$53 million from the federal early learning child care infrastructure fund, and, again, it's only applicable to not-for-profit and public or municipal spaces, which I think is unfortunate. We've broken it into a major capital grant stream, which is for projects with capital costs of at least \$500,000 with a maximum grant of \$30,000, then we have minor capital stream, which would be eligible for up to a \$10,000 grant. This is when you're not altering the structure or building a new structure, so a less significant construction project. They'd be eligible for up to \$10,000 a space, where a new building, major add-on, that would be eligible for up to \$30,000, and, again, targeting it based on need.

Mr. Cyr: I cede my time to member de Jonge. I'm sorry, Member.

The Chair: MLA de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Chair. I will continue on with the back and forth, I believe, in this block. We don't have much time.

Minister, thank you for being here today. I'll continue on with child care. I have a number of high-quality child care providers in my riding, and we've been in active discussions on child care for the past – well, since I've been elected. Page 148, line 5.2 of the government estimates identifies a \$19.3 million increase to Alberta's budget for child care quality and worker supports since the 2024-25 budget and the '24-25 forecast.

You know, child care workers play such a vital role in shaping a child's development, and investing in quality worker supports is so critical to attracting and retaining skilled educators and ensuring that children receive the best care possible. My question is – and maybe you can sort of preface your answer with speaking a bit to the importance of ECEs and their role in the Alberta child care system, but, Minister, can you please elaborate on this funding? How is this going to help early childhood educators in Alberta? What will these funds accomplish?

Secondly, can you provide some details on how the funding will be beneficial to child care providers and Alberta kids within our child care system? Finally, can you speak to: what can the average provider expect from those wage increases in 40 seconds?

Mr. Jones: Forty seconds. Well, you can't provide high-quality child care without high-quality educators. As I referenced earlier, Alberta – well, every province and territory could use more ECEs. Alberta has done very well. We've created or added 11,600 ECEs since the signing of the agreement in November of 2021. Again, I'll point out that they choose to work in not-for-profit and private child care facilities. Another reason the federal government should remove these ideological barriers to ECE's success. They choose to work in private centres. Why discriminate against them? An early childhood educator is an educator certified to work with children in their early years. They plan, organize, and initiate activities to help children. [A timer sounded] We'll get to it.

The Chair: Yeah. That's the best way of putting it.

We're moving on to the lightning round, as we like to look at it. We're moving into 10-minute blocks. This can be up to five minutes or combined. I'm just going to read the rules on this one so that everybody understands how this one works. No one may speak longer than five minutes at a time. Time cannot be ceded to other caucus members. If time is not combined, then the member or minister may only speak once.

And who's up? MLA Batten, the floor is yours.

Member Batten: Thank you so much. Thank you so much to the minister and the ministry for all the answers thus far. I would like to talk to the . . .

The Chair: You didn't ask if you're combined or if it's blocked.

Member Batten: I'm sorry.

The Chair: No worries. Just so we know on the front end.

Member Batten: Yes. Through the chair, Mr. Jones, would you like to do shared time?

Mr. Jones: Let's do blocked time.

Member Batten: Thank you. All right. Again, we've been talking about child care, and I would like to continue discussing that. On page 106 of the business plan 2025-2026 the second paragraph reads that "Jobs, Economy and Trade supports parents and caregivers to participate in training, education, or work knowing

they can afford high-quality child care.” To the minister, through the chair: what specific steps is the ministry taking to ensure that child care in Alberta does not become an orphan between different governments? Studies show that with every dollar invested in early childhood education, the broader economy receives between one and a half dollars to \$2.80 in return, so it’s really important for the future of Alberta and the future of our children.

On page 105 in the business plan 2025-2026 the first sentence ends with “by creating the conditions to help more Albertans prosper.” To the minister, through the chair: speaking maybe from the perspective of a parent making minimum wage – which, Mr. Chair, I’ll remind everyone the minimum wage has not moved since 2018 and is now tied, I believe, for the lowest minimum wage in the country, so we have some work to do there. To the minister, through the chair: how can a parent making minimum wage possibly afford to send their child or children to child care so that they can continue to contribute to the economy?

Mr. Chair, the minister had previously mentioned and understood that minimum wage workers predominantly are teenagers or those with their first jobs, and this certainly is not the case. Many Albertans work for minimum wage, from cashiers to servers to retail workers, and for many Albertans without a subsidy they cannot afford child care. To the minister, through the chair: what concrete steps is the ministry taking to create conditions to help early childhood educators? And as we’ve discussed, the quality of early childhood educators dictates the quality of the care provided to these children, so if the minister intends to create conditions to help, further investment in the workforce is necessary. Of any initiatives that are going forward, how does this differ from years prior, and where in the budget are those costs captured?

The minister has been reported sharing that he felt that Albertans could not appreciate child care unless they paid for it. Mr. Chair, I’ve heard this from so many different stakeholders, and it is upsetting: accessibility should be for all Albertans, not just the ones who can afford it. Again, the purpose of the provincial or the federal-provincial agreement was to create a healthy child care system for all Albertans who need child care. Recent changes to legislation across different ministries are negatively impacting Albertans’ ability to afford child care. To the minister, through the chair: for families who now find themselves blocked from accessing affordable child care, what’s the plan?

Mr. Chair, plainly, to benefit Alberta’s economy, working parents of children in child care must earn more from their employment than they are spending on child care. A flat rate of more than \$300 a month for full-time, where every Albertan pays the same amount regardless of where they live, is an interesting approach. We know that the cost of living and the associated wages and specifically the cost of services vary across the province. For example, a loaf of bread in Edmonton might be \$3 whereas that same bread sold in Fort Murray might be up to \$5. What child care needs is equitable costs, not equal.

And I just want to correct what we heard a few minutes ago describing what equity versus equality is because this is really important. The difference, of course, Mr. Chair, is that equality is providing the exact same thing to everyone, regardless of need whereas equity is where everyone is supplied with what they need. This is truly about meeting Albertans where they’re at and not where we think they should be.

10:40

And just in response to comments made earlier about how excited the parents are about this new flat fee, that is not what I’m hearing from my stakeholders. In fact, the only one parent who reached out and said, “I’m really excited about this” was really upset that it

means that their neighbour no longer can afford child care. They do not want a two-tiered child care system, Mr. Chair.

Up until recently Alberta provided subsidies to households earning less than \$180,000 a year to help with that equity piece. To the minister through the chair: what data was used to make the decision to eliminate the subsidy to Albertans? Where in the budget can I see these funds absorbed?

The Chair: It goes fast.

Back to you, Minister.

Mr. Jones: Thank you for the questions. Just touching on minimum wage, 57 per cent of minimum wage earners in Alberta are youth. They are between 15 and 24 years of age. As the member knows, we are facing a youth unemployment crisis in our country with unemployment rates for youth roughly double the general unemployment rate. We have looked extensively at the minimum wage, and we’ve determined that the majority of minimum wage earners are, again, youth; 61 per cent work part-time. Only about 5 per cent work part-time because they could not find full-time employment. Only 5 per cent. The reality is that the majority of part-time earners work part-time for a reason; 35 per cent of them are pursuing higher education, and for many, they are pursuing other – again, they’re 15 to 24. They’re engaged in sports or other things, and they’re looking for the flexibility that part-time work provides. To the other, the assertion that people are working multiple jobs to make ends meet, 93 per cent of minimum wage earners work one job.

Again, I understand the concern of the member, but when reviewing the data, it’s clear that the minimum wage really is a new entrant. Gain some experience, gain some education so you can move up in earning capability in experience and education and really take advantage of the many job opportunities, the highest wages, and lowest taxes in Alberta.

We don’t want to see what the NDP, frankly, saw when they ratcheted up the minimum wage very quickly. They saw fewer jobs for minimum wage earners. They saw automation replace minimum wage work. They saw less opportunity for minimum wage earners.

I’m also expecting more jobs to open up for Alberta’s youth with the recent changes to immigration at the federal level. They’ve made several changes to reduce broad immigration but also to reduce international students and temporary foreign workers. It is certainly my hope that we will see greater attachment of youth to Alberta’s workforce. That’s another factor that we’re monitoring right now.

In terms of the concern over minimum wage earners, you know, providing for children on minimum wage, that represents roughly 1.7 per cent of minimum wage earners. It is, of course, something that we’re mindful of. We want to make sure that Albertans of all earnings are able to provide for their circumstance, but we cannot calibrate a program without looking at who’s on it. Again, the vast majority of users of the minimum wage are part-time workers who work one job and who have worked at that job for less than two years, which shows – and the reason for that is because after engaging in entry-level work, they gain experience, they complete their education, and they start earning higher and higher wages and fully participating in Alberta’s diverse economy.

Now on to child care. With the move to a flat \$15 per day, or \$326.25 per month, on April 1, the average Alberta family will be saving \$900 per month. That’s \$11,000 tax-free on average per year. Again, it can be as high as \$21,000 per year.

The former subsidy, which is now being rolled into sustaining ECEs and the provision of the flat \$15 per day, was reducing child care fees for some parents, not all, by between \$106 and \$266 a

month. So we've moved from a smaller subsidy for some Albertans to a massive subsidy for all Albertans. I would think that this would be in line with the NDP's perspective on child care. I could be wrong. Very pleased to move to that flat fee.

Another thing that we're correcting with the flat fee is those inequities that I described where parents in the same region with the same aged child were paying radically different amounts for child care to the government's standards. I can't explain that when the government is paying for 80 per cent of the service. I can't have providers coming into the system with radically different fees, again, both paid for 80 per cent by taxpayers through the government.

That's what we're addressing. We've made it more transparent and equitable and predictable for parents and providers.

The Chair: I appreciate that, Minister.

With the indulgence of the committee, would this be an opportune moment to have a five-minute pause, if everyone is in agreement with that? Don't be late. Five minutes goes really fast. We'll reconvene in five.

[The committee adjourned from 10:46 a.m. to 10:51 a.m.]

The Chair: I'd like to welcome everybody back to the committee.

MLA de Jonge, I believe you have the floor.

Ms de Jonge: I do.

Minister, would you like block time or to go back and forth?

Mr. Jones: Back and forth.

If I could, you had asked a question, a few questions that I can now answer, if you'd like.

Ms de Jonge: Yeah. I would love to hear your answers on that. That was page 148, line 5.2 that I was inquiring about.

Mr. Jones: Thank you. An early child educator, as I mentioned, is an educator certified to work with children in their early years. They plan, organize, and initiate activities to help children develop and learn intellectually, physically, and emotionally.

In Alberta the Early Learning and Child Care Act and early learning and child care regulation requires people who work in our licensed child care programs to have provincial certification. This applies to both facility-based programs – for example, daycares and out-of-school care and preschool – and home-based programs, family day homes, operating under a licensed agency. There are three levels of certification in Alberta: level 1, which requires a minimum of one postsecondary three-credit course in early learning and care or equivalent; level 2, which requires a minimum of a one-year ELCC certificate or equivalent; and level 3, which requires a minimum of a two-year ELCC diploma or equivalent. The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade provides certification assessments for this regulated profession and also responds to any conduct complaints.

ECEs play a crucial role in delivering high-quality and safe early learning and child care programming and are instrumental in our licensed child care system. We know recruitment and retention of qualified ECEs remains a challenge across the country to meet the needs of newly created affordable child care spaces, which is why Alberta's government is making investments to support and strengthen the early childhood educator workforce.

Alberta's budget for child care quality and worker supports includes investments in our long-standing wage top-up program, that provides all front-line certified early childhood educators working with children in a licensed child care program with a wage

enhancement. The ministry provides wage top-ups that vary by certification level. For example, \$2.64 per hour for level 1, \$5.05 per hour for level 2, and \$8.62 per hour for level 3. Wage top-ups are paid for direct hours working with children as well as indirect hours such as time spent planning educational activity and organizing resources. In addition, wage top-ups are paid for vacation time for educators who receive their regular wage while away from work on vacation, up to a maximum of 120 hours, or three weeks, per calendar year. By offering targeted wage enhancements based on certification levels, the wage top-up program ensures that highly trained professionals are compensated in a way that reflects their expertise and responsibilities.

Alberta's government also invests in extensive professional development to help early childhood educators increase certification and advance their skills and competencies. Alberta provides up to \$4,300 for professional development and release time funding per educator per year. This funding assists eligible ECEs with the costs of approved postsecondary tuition, textbooks, and other approved training. It also includes release time funding to pay certified ECEs while they receive education and training. Professional development funding includes more access for level 3 ECEs for building opportunities that assist them to advance their careers and leadership, to build their capacity in managing and sustaining child care operations, and to support the retention of the experienced ECEs in the sector.

Beyond training, Alberta's government supports initiatives like the business supports program and the pedagogical partner supports, which help early childhood educators improve child care operations and receive mentoring related to curriculum implementation. In 2024 I was pleased to reinstate the minister's awards of excellence in child development to recognize the important work of certified early childhood educators, programs, and teams working licensed child care. These awards recognize the dedication and valuable contribution of ECE professionals who demonstrate excellence in their field and embody the characteristics of quality childhood development.

Combined, these investments in child care worker supports will continue to strengthen Alberta's recruitment and retention of qualified ECEs as more child care spaces open up across the province and as the early childhood educator workforce continues to grow.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Minister.

Were you able to touch on what the average providers can expect to see from the wage increases?

Mr. Jones: Yeah. Alberta's government will continue to support licensed child care programs as they look to recruit and retain qualified staff. The wage top-up amounts vary by certification, which I mentioned earlier, ranging from \$2.64 per hour for level 1s to \$8.62 per hour for level 3s, and they're provided for up to 181 hours per early childhood educator per month. We last increased wage top-ups in January of 2023.

Child care programs that receive wage top-ups are also eligible to receive mandatory employer contribution funding to assist the program with making required payroll expenditures associated with the wage top-up amounts. The mandatory employer contribution helps cover costs like the Canada pension plan contributions, employment insurance, Workers' Compensation Board premiums and are calculated and paid at a rate of 9.51 per cent each month of the total wage top-up amount. So in addition to the wage top-up we also cover the employer-side contributions of the wage top-up. The additional employer contributions help alleviate the burden of mandatory payroll costs for child care providers, which can

improve operational sustainability of the child care system. These investments help to stabilize the workforce and contribute to higher retention rates and greater job satisfaction among ECEs, which is essential for maintaining child care quality.

Thank you.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Minister.

Certainly, without high-quality educators and child care providers none of this would work, but there are other factors as well. On page 148 line 5 of government estimates it shows that child care in total is expected to cost over \$1.9 billion this fiscal year. That's a lot of money. That's a lot of public dollars. Exploring the economic impact, the affordability measures, and what I think is so critical, the long-term financial sustainability of the child care system: that's extremely critical. From what I can see, the cost of child care is increasing at a fairly high rate, so it's important to be informed and on top of these issues so we can be better prepared for the future.

We talked earlier in the meeting about the labour market. Minister, can you explain: what are the economic benefits of the overall funding to child care? You know, with that, how is child care projected to affect Alberta's labour market? Who is benefiting from Alberta's investment in child care?

Mr. Jones: Yeah, good questions.

Higher child care availability is driving increased labour force participation in Alberta, particularly among women with young children. Expanding child care access is projected to add between \$1.1 billion and \$5.6 billion to Alberta's economy as more parents, especially women, re-enter the workforce. Investing in child care strengthens Alberta's economy by increasing workforce participation, generating tax revenue, and supporting long-term economic growth. More accessible child care is expected to enable between 6,300 and 34,000 Albertans to work, train, or pursue education, contributing to a more skilled and active workforce.

As of December 2024 licensed daycare enrolment is around 90 per cent and home-based care is around 88 per cent, reflecting strong demand for affordable child care. Long-term investments in early learning and child care lead to lasting economic benefits including increased productivity, higher employment rates, and stronger labour market outcomes.

11:00

Increased access to child care is driving higher labour force participation, as I mentioned. When looking at the labour force participation rates of men and women in Alberta over the last five years, the increase in participation of women with young children was noticeable after Alberta initially lowered parent fees in early 2022. With government investing in child care, it contributes to a stronger workforce by enabling more parents to work, train, or pursue an education. The economic benefits of child care include increased productivity, higher tax revenue, and stronger labour market outcomes.

Parental decision-making for choosing to use licensed child care is complex, as you know, and includes various economic, social, and cultural factors. But, again, they broadly result in increased labour force participation, productivity, and labour market outcomes.

So who's benefiting? It benefits, obviously, parents, it benefits children, and it benefits the child care providers and their staff. It very much has the potential to increase Alberta's economy and productivity while providing meaningful employment opportunities and business opportunities for Albertans and nonprofits. That's why it's critical that we work with the federal

government to put an agreement in place that can continue to backstop the entire system. That agreement must be calibrated to succeed in Alberta, and it must be sufficiently funded to meet the targets within the agreement.

As I mentioned, the recent offer from the federal government, unfortunately, was not calibrated correctly for Alberta, but we do look forward to engaging in good faith with the next federal government, perhaps sooner than you think, at the next term of the agreement. We hope that they will really take the concerns of parents and providers and provinces and territories . . . [Mr. Jones' speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks for that.

We're back to the opposition. I see MLA Batten.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. Again, I appreciate all the answers that we've received, and I appreciate the minimum wage commentary we just had. However . . .

The Chair: Could you just ask that question?

Member Batten: Oh, I'm sorry. Would you like to go shared this time?

Mr. Jones: Let's do block.

Member Batten: Okay. All right.

Yes. I just wanted to comment on a few things that we've heard over the last few minutes. In terms of flexibility inside the child care system this flat rate actually eliminated flexibility for a lot of folks. Part of this is that child care is only now being supported between, you know, like, regular work hours, Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, or whatever those hours are. Evenings, weekends, overnights, so the very flexibility that folks really were asking for – like, we're talking about shift workers. There are so many people who simply do not fall into that bucket, and that flexibility is now gone. They will be charged a lot more to have their child stay there. The other is that, of course, this flexibility: there's no choice now for low-income families, right? They cannot access our child care system under this new plan, full stop.

The Alberta NDP: absolutely, we had a \$25-a-day trial, or pilot, which was part of our ability to cut child poverty in half. So, yes, child care is very important, and I'm hoping that through these discussions we start to see reinvestment for all Albertans. As much as the ministry would like to claim that this change in subsidy isn't harmful or that it's now benefiting more Albertans, the change in this, the subsidy removal, affects over 26,000 families. That is over 70,000 children. These are our incredibly vulnerable families. These are our low-income families. So what we're hearing is not correct, Mr. Chair.

I've heard from many stakeholders that, actually, their wait-lists for child care spaces are emptying now post this announcement because families are not able to afford child care – full stop – even if there was a space for them. So to the minister through the chair: how is the ministry going to support these families that no longer have access? How will the ministry account for this loss of workforce as parents are now forced to stay home with their children?

The deleted subsidy supported thousands of Albertans, as I'd mentioned – right? – and those thousands of Albertans are required for our workforce. To the minister through the chair: how many families is the ministry willing to sideline to provide slightly less expensive child care to households making more than \$180,000 annually?

On page 146 at the bottom 5.1 reads Child Care Affordability and Access, and it goes on to describe that it “provides subsidies to low-income families.” To the minister through the chair: is this a typo? Given the recent deletion in supports for low-income families – or ideally, Mr. Chair, maybe there are new subsidies that are being introduced, maybe part of the 28 per cent increase that we see in the funding on budget line 5.1. If not new subsidies, maybe it’s the no return of the very necessary recently deleted one by this ministry.

In that same section it goes on to say on the budget line, “support for children with unique needs,” which again is interesting as recently there have been major cuts to disability nonprofits who serve some of Alberta’s most vulnerable. For example, Inclusion Alberta, who provide peer support programming for families and children, are seeing a cut of half a million dollars in this budget. This sounds a lot like defunding, Mr. Chair. To the minister through the chair. These cuts to disability supports in other portfolios have massive impacts on the ability of parents to actively participate in our workforce. What specific initiatives is the minister allocating funds to in order to pick up the slack? Does this explain the 28 per cent increase we’re seeing?

Page 146, budget line 5.1, goes on to indicate the funds are then used for “oversight of program licensing, inspection, and staff certification.” Through the chair to the minister: can he provide specific actions the ministry has taken to develop safe, high-quality child care? To address safety, should Albertans expect to see the implementation of the recommendations provided by the tax dollar paid Food Safety and Licensed Facility-based Child Care Review Panel report?

I’m excited to see some investments in staff certification. Through the chair: can the minister provide insight into whether this 28 per cent increase is being used to invest in the workforce? If yes, why is it not budgeted, then, in line 5.2, that indicates “child care quality and worker supports”?

The Chair: Over to the minister.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Chair. First, we have preserved flexibility in our child care system, more so than any other province or territory. The first way we did that was by enabling private providers and family day homes and agencies to continue to participate in the agreement, although not fully participate in the agreement. As I have mentioned earlier, there are capital grants and other caps that are present in the system that are prejudicial to private providers and family day homes.

Optional services are just that; they are optional. We do have many providers providing a variety of services, including hours tailored to the needs of families, with no additional charges. It’s also important to note that no child and by extension no family can be discriminated against in terms of accessing affordable child care based on their decision around optional services. They must remain optional. Parents must opt in. Those additional services must be shared with my department twice a year to ensure that they are compliant. And any provider that goes offside with the optionality of these services or tries to charge for things that are really core child care will risk their licence and will risk funding. We will ensure that parents are protected.

One of the challenges of a universal system is maintaining the ability for the system to be innovative, entrepreneurial, and respond to, really, the demand of parents. My message to the federal government was that I didn’t build the child care system; parent demand built it through our mixed market of providers, so who are we as government to come in and say: child care must be this? At every turn we have tried to preserve the flexibility of our wonderful child care providers, not-for-profit, private family day homes to

provide the care that parents expect. Again, while we successfully negotiated private providers in the agreement and while we successfully implemented or enabled the provision of optional services, you know, this is to do exactly what the member is asking for, which is to maintain high quality and to provide flexibility to parents.

I’ll give you some examples. The system across Canada can’t provide busing to and from every child care centre. There’s not enough money in Canada to do that. But, you know, in some child care centres this is an important service, so that child care provider, because of our negotiated agreement, will have the ability to offer that to parents at an optional charge. There are lots of parents that wouldn’t access it, so it must be optional, right?

There are other things like access to software or live cameras or extensive meal programs that child care providers can offer as an optional service. Again, many providers include these things within the core child care budget. We’ve simply done what the member is advocating for, which is to preserve quality in the system and to preserve flexibility. I think Alberta has done the best in Canada, frankly, at preserving quality and flexibility.

11:10

In terms of the subsidy the move to the flat fee, again, will see the majority of Alberta families actually paying less. As I outlined earlier, the previous subsidy, which ranged from \$106 to \$266 per month, is being replaced by a \$900 average per month subsidy for all families, \$11,000 per year on average and as much as \$21,000, as I have also mentioned previously. The parent copayment was always part of this system. The national program is not \$0 a day. It’s \$10 a day, and I can assure you that the parent copayment is necessary for the sustainability of the system. This isn’t my perspective; this is every province’s and territory’s and the federal government’s.

Frankly, providers will be the first to tell you that there should be some parent copayment because we have 100,000 children on wait-lists in Alberta, so we have to ensure that people accessing heavily subsidized, again, to the tune of twice health care and almost twice education, subsidy amounts – we have to ensure that it is being utilized by people who truly need child care.

Now, again, Alberta would like to fully income test the system to ensure that the lowest income households are able to access the system. In other words, today we have roughly 50 per cent of families accessing incredible subsidies for child care who are earning more than \$180,000 per year while we have lower income single mothers waiting on wait-lists. This is not something that Alberta is comfortable with. It’s not how we would structure a program. We would target need to the lowest income households, so we’ve requested for the ability to fully income test the system, with subsidies for higher incomes declining as income rises. The federal government said no.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

We’re over to the government caucus. Just to make sure that everything is fair, throw me a couple “through the chair”s and, if you can, reference the estimate documents that you’re talking to a little bit quicker on the uptake.

With that, MLA Wright, you caught my attention first.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Chair and through you to the minister. I’ll be referencing page 105 of the business plan.

The Chair: Did you want to share time?

Mr. Wright: Sorry. Can I do shared time?

Mr. Jones: Yes.

Mr. Wright: Perfect. Minister, Alberta's deficit is projected to be \$5.2 billion. With investments in job creation I truly believe that this is the way that we can create new income that will also raise our tax base. We can attract new job creators, increasing that tax base, which would then reduce that deficit. In my riding we've had a number of projects, currently or in the past, that have used the concierge program, and with one job project alone it's bringing 400 full-time jobs to my riding.

Now, I see on page 105 of the business plan that the concierge and pathfinding services help businesses gather the information they require and navigate approvals so they can confidently invest in Alberta. I'm wondering if you could go into some more details for those that aren't familiar with the concierge program and pathfinding services to showcase how this service is actually helping create jobs like the program usage I just mentioned, with those 400 full-time jobs in my riding, and what the associated programs that support these services look like. I think that this is vital to showcasing why I believe Alberta is the best place to raise a family, grow a business, and really present that entrepreneurial spirit that made us as great as what we are.

Mr. Jones: Thank you for the question. I'll start, and then I'll probably invite my ADM Liam Stone, who manages the concierge portion of our department, to comment on just how it practically has worked to bring in investments like Dow and Lufthansa Technik.

Jobs, Economy and Trade is taking action to make sure our province continues to attract new investments and create more opportunities for Albertans. Our goals for economic growth include the ease, speed, and clarity of information as well as making the transitions between partners and different levels of government as smooth as possible. Our focus is on refreshing and expanding existing tools and resources that will provide the right path for investors, business owners, and any Albertan looking to invest, grow, or expand a business in the province.

JET provides a range of services, including business and investor supports, regional and workforce connections, and data and analytics. By enhancing our pathfinding services, we are doing more than just pointing people in the right direction. We are also guiding businesses and investors on the shortest route to access economic information, best practices, advisory services, and funding. JET continues to work with a variety of economic organizations, businesses, and investors to provide information that supports their decision-making and, in turn, supports economic growth across the province.

Our concierge service ensures a co-ordinated, focused, and tailored approach to addressing barriers to a positive FID, or final investment decision, for large-scale, transformational investments with complex crossministry needs, significant industry implications, or substantial government program, policy, or intergovernmental implications, as would be seen in the Dow example. JET provides concierge service to a select few large projects, like Dow Canada's Path2Zero project and Lufthansa Technik's recent aircraft maintenance and repair facility investments, and we work in collaboration with IAC, the federal government, and, of course, other agencies. The focus is on barriers or risks to an investment decision that can be uniquely addressed by governments such as through policy or regulatory issues, advocacy to the federal government, or even incentives.

Through the department's investment pathfinding and referral services department staff provide investors and partners in the investment ecosystem with timely information to support the

development of investment value propositions and to contribute to positive investment decisions by investors that may not require the tailored concierge service. This includes sourcing investment-related information, facilitating connections to resources and contacts, helping navigate Alberta's investment attraction ecosystem, and redirecting investment-related inquiries and issues to other government ministries.

That's kind of a high level. But how does it actually work in practice? My ADM Liam Stone can provide just a few examples of recent investments that we've successfully won over U.S. jurisdictions.

The Chair: ADM, just read your name into the record, and you're good to go.

Mr. Stone: Good morning, Chair. Liam Stone. I'm assistant deputy minister for economic strategy and investment at Jobs, Economy and Trade. I'll say in follow-up to the minister's comments that no specific concierge file is like any other one. Basically, what we do is that we'll start working with a team that's identified by the company, and what they're trying to do is meet information needs within their chain of command to make an investment decision. Generally these fall into a number of buckets: regulatory, often workforce questions, and then government supports.

Examples sort of have been wide ranging on files that we've been working on. Often they're looking to understand Alberta's regulatory system but then also potentially understand the federal regulatory system and have us support them as they navigate both, generally trying to take a one-window approach wherever we can so that they can bring together the regulatory agencies in Alberta and sort of work the project through with them. That can range from, you know, moving a very large load down a highway – "What do I need to do? Who do I need to talk to about that?" – through to environmental assessment.

On the workforce side often what they're trying to do is prove that the workforce is going to be available in Alberta. If it's a large-scale project, you know, will we have the skilled trades, will we have the right type of workers that we need to meet what the project needs? We work with our colleagues in labour to give them forecasts of workforce supply and try and make the case for them internally that that workforce is going to be available.

Then on the government supports side of things often for sort of a large-scale investment or an investment that's transformative, it will take federal and provincial collaboration and even municipal collaboration at times. So our team will start with looking at what the competing supports might be in other jurisdictions and then working back from that with the partner agencies across the federal and municipal governments to try and make the best case for Alberta.

Mr. Wright: Thank you for that.

Through the chair to the minister and his team, I appreciate that we brought up skilled trades. That's something pretty near and dear to my heart for my riding. Medicine Hat has seen quite the emergence of a really healthy aerospace, aviation, and defence sector, whether it's from rocket development to drones or antidrone technologies that are going on there. You know, this requires a highly sophisticated workforce, and it's not the only industry within our province that requires a highly skilled workforce.

11:20

You know, on page 86 of the fiscal plan I noticed that there's an increase of \$11 million in funding allocated to the Alberta Is Calling moving bonus. To my understanding this is a one-time refundable tax credit of up to \$5,000 for up to 2,000 individual people who will

provide additional skilled trades for Alberta, working in eligible occupations and meeting the eligible criteria. Now, could the minister please provide some additional insight as to the reason for the increase of the funding in this fiscal year? Is there a selection process for applicants? How is success measured for this program? Will this funding be going forward into the future, or is this a one-time investment? If I could throw on just a last kind of talking point: are we going to see this expanded into perhaps the engineering field or other skilled labour like that?

I'll turn it over to you.

Mr. Jones: I'll be quick with the time remaining. The reason for the allocation of \$11 million is because the earliest that an individual can meet the 12-month residency requirement under the program is May 1, 2025, which means moving bonuses will be awarded to eligible individuals in this year. This is a very specific, targeted initiative to get the skilled trades that we need to build homes, schools, hospitals, and job-creating infrastructure. Of course, if the program proves to be successful, we will consider leveraging it in other areas where we are seeing shortages.

There are a number of requirements. First, an eligible applicant must work in one of the 62 primarily trades- and construction-related eligible occupations, they must be 18 years old or older at the time of application, they must be a Canadian citizen or permanent resident, they must have moved to Alberta between May 1 and December 31 of last year, 2024, and they must be a resident of Alberta for at least 12 consecutive months at the time of application. Very important for program integrity, they must be a tax resident of Alberta on December 31, 2024. The application for the moving bonus will open on May 1, 2025, and the department will award funding on a first-come, first-served basis.

Measures of success for the moving bonus will include the number of people, Albertans, who receive the incentive, their occupation, and employment status. We'll be monitoring the uptake of the program and also whether they remain in Alberta as taxpayers, to determine how successful the program was and . . .

The Chair: Thanks, Minister. I apologize. Your time has come to a close for this segment of this block.

MLA Hoyle, you're up next.

Member Hoyle: Minister, would you like to do block time or shared time?

Mr. Jones: Block time, please.

Member Hoyle: Okay. I'm going to actually continue on a little bit of that question. Perhaps one of the biggest changes our province has seen over the last couple of years relates to the number of people moving to Alberta. This is certainly something that's important as we're dealing with labour shortages in several critical fields.

Page 108 of the ministry business plan '25 to '28 under the initiatives supporting key objectives section, second point, shows that \$10 million is being allocated to the Alberta Is Calling moving bonus to attract skilled workers. You know, relating to this, the minister's mandate further reinforces this initiative on page 108 of the ministry business plan. It states that this is "a one-time 'Alberta Is Calling' attraction bonus of at least \$1,200 for workers in skilled trades and professions where there are labour shortages in Alberta, including health care, child care and trades." Through the chair, can the minister provide specific numbers on how many individuals from skilled trades, health care, and child care made use of this attraction bonus since its implementation?

Growing urban centres like Airdrie are struggling to fund core infrastructure projects. Costs have increased significantly over the

last five years, and the on-and-off tariffs have created high uncertainty, resulting in increased costs for inputs. For Alberta to continue to grow, support for core infrastructure projects is required, and this means getting more skilled trade workers into jobs to work on these projects. Mr. Chair, can the minister share which of the 62 professions and skilled trades that he just mentioned are specifically being focused on with this funding, could he name the top five skilled trades of that 62 list, and can we see where or get a copy of this 62-skilled-trades list, a comprehensive list, please? Can the minister also share specific numbers into how many of these skilled trade workers have been retained in full-time, permanent jobs? What is the minister's plan to support areas like Airdrie with their infrastructure projects and providing skilled trade worker jobs in these areas?

Further, the bonus was later increased to \$5,000 per worker. Can the minister explain how it was determined that this additional increase of \$3,800 was needed? Did this change increase the number of skilled workers coming to Alberta, and if so how much of a percentage difference is it from when it was \$1,200 versus the now \$5,000?

What performance metrics were used to determine whether this program was a success or not? What was the return on investment for the total money spent on this program? According to a BuildForce Canada report Alberta will need 20,000 skilled workers to support \$22 billion worth of resource value-added projects between now and 2030. Page 108 of the '25-28 ministry business plan states that \$70 million will be "allocated to Skills and Training Support to help individuals get back to work and build a skilled workforce." This amounts to a significant cut. Further, in 2024 I introduced Bill 207, the Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship Education (Valuing Skilled Workers) Amendment Act, 2024, aimed at supporting skilled trades in Alberta, which would have been a strategic investment in the future of our workforce and economy. Unfortunately, in this province we continue to see that the skilled trades are at risk under this government because of decreasing apprenticeship enrolment numbers.

Mr. Chair, can the minister clarify how this \$70 million will be allocated? Will it be through apprenticeship training programs, grants, or going directly to businesses? Is this going to institutions for skills training, like union training centres or polytechnics? I think it's important that the industry professionals and stakeholders are collaborating with the ministry, guiding Alberta's skilled trades and ensuring that training aligns with changing needs in this province for our economy and in the long run.

Mr. Chair, can the minister share what industries are being prioritized with this attraction bonus? Which ministries is the minister working most closely with to determine these goals, and how is success being defined and measured?

Mr. Jones: Thank you for the questions. During the election we committed to introducing a one-time Alberta Is Calling attraction bonus of at least – the key word there is "at least" – \$1,200 for workers in skilled trades and professions where there are labour shortages, including child care and health care. I am pleased to have delivered on this mandate item.

Starting May 1, 2025, eligible workers can apply for the Alberta Is Calling moving bonus. The moving bonus provides eligible skilled tradespeople who move to Alberta to work in one of the 62 high-demand eligible occupations with a \$5,000 refundable tax credit. The moving bonus represents just a part of Alberta's overall approach to dealing with shortages in the labour market, which I will expand on later.

The reason I decided to focus the moving bonus on skilled trades is because there is such a need in the construction sector across

Alberta. In 2024 Alberta's average annual unemployment rate stood at 7 per cent, yet the construction and transportation and warehousing sectors still struggled to fill their vacancies. In the third quarter of 2024 there were more than 20,000 job vacancies in the skilled trades, accounting for 28 per cent – 28 per cent, over a quarter – of all vacancies in Alberta. The construction sector relies on skilled trades to build homes, deliver Alberta's next generation of large-scale industrial projects, build schools and hospitals, and drive overall economic growth. The moving bonus was designed to alleviate hiring challenges and labour shortages that industry was experiencing in 2024 in trades, transport, and related occupations.

Again, to be eligible for the payment, the applicant must be 18 years or older, be a Canadian citizen or permanent resident. They must have moved to Alberta between May 1 and December 31, 2024, and they must be a resident of Alberta for at least 12 consecutive months at the time of application. They must be a tax resident of Alberta on December 31, 2024, and work in an eligible occupation, which are listed on the website. Over 60 professions are eligible, such as aircraft mechanics, carpenters, crane operators, electricians, gas fitters, machinists, plumbers, and welders, to name a few. To answer the member's question, the top five would be construction trades helpers and labourers, heavy-duty equipment mechanics, automotive service technicians, carpenters, and electricians. But we'll take them all.

11:30

Funding will be provided on a first-come, first-served basis. The \$5,000 amount was calibrated to off-set the average or estimated moving costs of a skilled trades worker from our target jurisdictions. Ontario and British Columbia would be the top two there. It was very much: how much would it cost for a skilled trades professional to relocate from another province to come work?

I should also highlight here that we're doing – actually, before I do that, on health care there are a number of recruitment initiatives and incentive programs, which Health is in a better position to speak to. But I will say that the Premier is working alongside her counterparts in every province and territory to collaborate on health care worker shortages. So that is being handled by Health and the Premier and her office. On child care, as I mentioned, we've got programs across the child care system that are creating new ECEs. We've also successfully upgraded many level 1s to level 2 and level 2s to level 3, so we are seeing significant progress in child care. We have other initiatives under way in health care. That's why this program was laser focused on skilled trades.

This is only one initiative that's seeking to close the gap on skilled trades and construction. As you know, we have space creation grants for skilled trades. In Advanced Education they're piloting union direct training. In Jobs, Economy and Trade we're piloting industry direct training, which is open. We just had a recent intake close, but it was open to companies in the skilled trades and construction sectors. This is one tool. We won't know until May 1 and the applications for the grants start coming in who has received it or how many, but we will be collecting that information, of course, to determine whether the program was successful and whether it should be leveraged.

I can't provide those numbers today, but we have put the allocation in the budget to fund up to 2,000 skilled trades professionals to relocate to Alberta. I certainly believe they will or they have because Alberta has the job opportunities. Alberta has the highest wages. We've got tens of billions of dollars just in the petrochemical sector outside of Edmonton to build, and that's in addition to the record school accelerator initiative that we're doing. We've got 90 schools to build, 200,000 student spaces over the next seven years. We have a hospital in Red Deer to build. We have

highways. We have everything. So I do expect uptake, and industry was collaborated with on this program as well.

The Chair: MLA Wiebe, you've caught my attention. You're up next, sir.

Mr. Wiebe: Well, thank you, Chair, and thank you to the minister for being here and answering all these important questions. Minister, I'm going to be on page 107 of the business plan here.

The Chair: Are you looking for back and forth or block time?

Mr. Wiebe: Oh, back and forth, if I can. Sorry.

Mr. Jones: Sure.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you.

You may have touched on some of this already, but I want to go back to Alberta's northern and regional economics, you know, talk about that, how vital they are to the province's overall prosperity and providing key resources in industries and opportunities for economic diversification. Under the initiatives supporting key objectives it identifies the allocation funding of \$3 million, which you talked a little bit about before already, in the economic development, NRED, program. Gaining insight into the scope of this program is essential to maximize its impact. Can you go into some detail about the NRED program and what types of projects it supports and who can apply for this funding?

Mr. Jones: Thank you for the question. Investing in regional economic development is a priority for Alberta's government. Established in 2022, northern and regional economic development, or NRED, is a grant program supporting community-driven projects that promote regional economic development and diversification. The NRED program supports Alberta municipalities, nonprofit organizations with an economic development mandate, which include REDAs, or regional economic development organizations, and many others. It also includes Indigenous communities in establishing projects that help support and retain businesses, increase investment attraction, develop key sectors of the local economy, and build capacity for economic growth. To date the program has supported 144 projects with a total of over \$12 million in funding, supporting things like feasibility studies, planning, economic sustainability strategies, and things to support investment attraction.

Through Budget 2025 Alberta's government will continue to invest \$3 million annually in the NRED program. The NRED recently accepted applications for its third intake from September 16, 2024, to December 6. The 143 eligible applications have been assessed, and I'm excited to announce the successful projects, which will be released in the coming weeks. The NRED program supports Alberta municipalities, nonprofit organizations with an economic development mandate, and Indigenous communities, as I mentioned, so that's who can apply. We're looking for them to establish projects that will help support and retain businesses, increase investment attraction, and develop key sectors of their local economy while building the capacity for economic growth.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you. Also, what direct economic outputs can be correlated with the NRED program, the grant allotment as the number of jobs generated?

Mr. Jones: Yeah. Great question. NRED grants are often the catalyst that leads to further projects and job-creating investments. The grants support community-driven projects that promote regional economic development and diversification, including

projects that help support and retain businesses, increase investment attraction, develop key sectors of the local economy, and build capacity for economic growth. The program provides up to 50 per cent of total eligible project costs. Indigenous applicants can receive up to 75 per cent of total eligible project costs. Many of these projects just simply wouldn't proceed without the support of the province through the NRED program.

The 2023-24 grants provided by the NRED program include support for several impactful projects across Alberta. In northern Alberta the county of Grande Prairie expanded its site selection tool regionally, implemented targeted investment marketing strategies, and hosted site-selector forums, enhancing private investment attraction and regional economic growth.

I should mention that approved applicants are eligible to receive between \$10,000 and \$300,000 per project. That's one of the recent program changes we made, to expand the eligibility to as low as \$10,000 and as high as \$300,000 from the previous \$20,000 to \$200,000 range. Another of the program changes was to allow projects up to three years in duration to apply for funding. We also simplified the application process, removing specific streams and ensuring comparable projects were evaluated in tandem with one another for fairness.

The feedback from our partners was that the application process needed to be simplified, fairer, and more flexible. By allowing longer-term projects to apply and boosting the maximum funding cap, we're giving applicants greater flexibility to work together; in other words, more regions working together on bigger projects. These changes will allow applicants to look at initiatives with larger scale, greater economic impacts or to target programs to meet smaller but valuable community needs on the lower side.

In southern Alberta the Alberta Southwest Regional Alliance facilitated networking and industry collaboration for 177 businesses in the manufacturing, energy, construction, and ag processing sectors, and they strengthened economic ties across the region. They received a \$25,000 grant for that. In central Alberta the city of Spruce Grove conducted a needs assessment with over 40 start-up and early-stage businesses, helping to shape future municipal support programs. They received a little over \$20,000. Among Indigenous communities the Stoney Tribal Administration completed a development study guiding long-term plans for Kananaskis lands, positioning the Stoney Nakoda nations for sustainable economic growth, and they received a grant amount of \$200,000. Again, for the Indigenous projects they're eligible for up to 75 per cent through NRED. The other applicants are eligible for up to 50 per cent, with the province matching their investment.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you.

Through the chair to the minister: I just want to continue a little bit more on the NRED program. On page 105 of the business plan it mentions the Northern Alberta Development Council. How does it provide specific advice to northern Alberta, and can the minister clarify how this council promotes the NRED program?

Mr. Jones: Yeah. Just before I do that, I'll touch on the NRED specifically in the north. We know the north has made significant contributions to the provincial and national economies through the principal industries: oil and gas, forestry, and agriculture. We recognize that northern communities are faced with unique opportunities and challenges, and we are taking action to support their economic growth and prosperity in a number of ways, including through the NRED. NRED-funded projects provide support for needed projects to support and retain businesses, increase investment attraction, develop key sectors of the northern economy, and to build capacity.

11:40

In '22-23 NRED provided 70 grants worth over \$5 million, and 26 of those grants were to the northern or Indigenous community organizations, with a total value of over \$2 million. In '23-24 the overall NRED program provided 74 grants worth \$7.4 million; 28 of those grants were to a northern or Indigenous community organization, with a value of over \$3 million. In '24-25, as previously mentioned, NRED accepted applications for its third intake up to December 6, and we're going to announce those soon. The north will be very much included in what is a good-sized envelope. Let's put it that way.

The mandate of the NADC, or Northern Alberta Development Council, is to investigate, monitor, evaluate, plan, and promote practical measures to foster and advance general development in northern Alberta and to advise our government accordingly. To carry out this mandate, members are responsible for engaging stakeholders, other government entities, and the public in order to gather information and become knowledgeable about different perspectives to ensure informed advice is provided. NADC members meet with northern stakeholders on a regular basis to hear about issues facing the north and share that information with us and also share information about Alberta's programs that support economic development, including the NRED program.

As part of a major round of stakeholder outreach across northern Alberta in 2024 the NADC shared information and sought feedback on the NRED program and other government programs and services from over 170 individuals who attended those outreach sessions.

The NADC works with the government of Alberta staff to respond to inquiries from stakeholders and ensure northern Albertans have the information they need about programs like NRED. I'd just like to highlight that our colleague the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, who is the chair of the NADC, is doing great work. He spent a lot of time consulting.

The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade provides secretariat support to the NADC. This includes providing a modest budget to support member expenses, organizing NADC meetings, and communicating with stakeholders and carrying out research to inform the council's advice. The ministry also helps connect NADC members with information and key contacts within the government of Alberta and our many programs and services.

They've been very active since the new chair I mentioned and council were appointed in early 2024. They conducted outreach sessions in 12 different communities during June and July of last year, with approximately 170 attendees. The sessions focused on the challenges and opportunities of northern economic development. They're in the process of sharing their findings with government. They already shared the outreach with stakeholders in September 2024 through a What We Heard report, and now they're just finalizing their recommendation to government, which I look forward to receiving and working with to address, you know, the challenges and feedback provided.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you.

The Chair: MLA Hoyle.

Member Hoyle: Thank you. On page 9 of the 2025-28 strategic plan objective 2 states that . . .

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt. We need to know . . .

Member Hoyle: Oh, sorry. Yeah. I'm just assuming – I shouldn't assume.

Minister, shared time or block time?

Mr. Jones: Block time would be great.

Member Hoyle: Okay. It's been block the whole time, so I'm assuming it's block time, but thank you. Let's follow process.

On page 9 of the '25-28 strategic plan objective 2 states that "government is addressing current and longer-term labour market challenges by supporting Alberta's workforce through responsive training and employment programming, attracting talent, and creating a labour force to meet the demands of Alberta's growing economy." Yet on page 148 of the '25-26 government estimates the table titled Expense Vote by Program, operating expense line 2.3 shows that the 2024-25 budget for the skills and training support program was \$101,426,000, and there is a \$16.417 million difference between the '24-25 forecast and the \$70 million now being budgeted. To the chair: can the minister begin by explaining why there was such a difference in what was budgeted in 2024-25 and what was actually spent?

Overall there is a \$31.36 million cut between '24-25 and '25-26 to skills and training support, which aims to help individuals get back to work and build a skilled workforce. To the chair: can the minister explain why there was such a large 30 per cent cut in this current budget? What metrics or key performance indicators were used to estimate \$70 million, which is a large cut from last year, especially now that we're hit with U.S. tariffs? Is the minister expecting this severe of job losses to skilled trades? Can the minister share how this plan is addressing current and longer-term labour market challenges by supporting Alberta's workforce, attracting talent, and creating a labour force to meet the demands of Alberta's growing economy.

Many economists and experts say that Alberta does not have a spending problem as much as it has a revenue problem. However, our core social services are facing immense pressure. We have a strong oil and gas industry, and we should be using this as a springboard to expand key emerging industries. Alberta should be looking for opportunities to diversify our economy to not only increase our revenue but create jobs, attract investment, and help with affordability.

Mr. Chair, is the minister working on market expansion to increase Alberta's job opportunities in the energy industry? If so, which ones, and what is the plan? We have watched this government make changes, especially with the renewables sector, and we've had a moratorium in the past couple of years, and there were many job losses there. In fact, it was approximately 24,000 job hours that our province lost, and many of those folks moved to other provinces like B.C., so there will be a challenge in getting those jobs back. I really would love to know how the minister will look at that piece.

My next question, through the chair: can the minister provide insight into other key energy industries that he has identified as potential areas for job growth and, if so, which ones are a priority? Many industry experts and economists are saying that we are seeing a rare opportunity for Alberta to be recruiting and retaining talent from other jurisdictions, especially as the U.S. recently has gutted talent in key industries that would benefit Alberta. So, to the chair: can the minister explain why this budget does not lay out clear incentives and regulations to support small and medium-sized businesses with investment attraction and job growth, specifically as we've got, you know, a gutted industry, to these key areas here in Alberta? Does the minister have plans to utilize this rare opportunity of helping reduce barriers for businesses to recruit these highly skilled and talented workers to this province across various high-need and high-demand sectors and, if so, what's the plan based on this budget?

The Chair: With three seconds, Minister, over to you.

Mr. Jones: Thank you. Again, great questions.

First, I'd just like to highlight that Alberta remains the job-creation centre in Canada. We added about 100,000 jobs over the past year, about 65,000 private-sector jobs representing about 35 per cent of the nation's private-sector job growth. We also have the most productive and youngest and most highly educated workforce in Canada. We're doing great.

We need to continue to continuously improve, especially as it gets more competitive around the globe and in light of tensions with the United States. JET collaborates among partner ministries for investments made under Alberta at work in the labour market transfer agreements, and we work collaboratively to review the priorities across ministries to share best practices, to co-ordinate program, and disseminate labour market information. This helps ensure that Alberta is positioned to meet the current and future workforce needs that are required to support business growth in Alberta's economy. We work closely with Advanced Education; Education; Seniors, Community and Social Services; Indigenous Relations; Transportation and Economic Corridors; Children and Family Services; Health; Agriculture and Irrigation; and Forestry and Parks on labour market priorities for programming. I note that because training is all hands on deck; every ministry and government is engaged in it, pretty much.

We continue to deliver training programs. In '25-26 JET is investing over \$70 million in skills and training support. Again, as I touched on earlier, there was a reduction, a removal of the LMTA top-up, which was unfortunate and at the wrong time, and we joined our provincial and territorial colleagues in protesting that reduction and demanding the reinstatement of it.

11:50

When the U.S. first initiated the recent tariff or trade dispute, that was one of the asks that we had at the Forum of Labour Market Ministers, that we should be doubling down on training; let's get the LMTA funding back and then some.

We have a number of training programs within JET: the Canada-Alberta job grant; training for work, which has transitioned to employment services; workplace training programs; immigrant services; integrated training. We have Indigenous partnership programs. We have labour market partnerships. As you heard, we even work with large industries and businesses on their workforce needs, even with investors on solving their future worker requirements. As you also heard earlier, we are piloting industry and union direct training.

To give you a more in-depth view of JET's training programs and perhaps a couple of recent examples, I'm going to invite my ADM Suzanne Harbottle to give some examples.

Ms Harbottle: Certainly. I can talk about the different areas that we have invested in skills training programs for the upcoming fiscal year, but I'll use some examples from the past year just to give you a sense of what, practically, they are. Of course, we have program categories, but they're not always immediately obvious what we're doing under them or where we're doing them.

As the minister indicated, we have a training for work program. That has a number of different streams under it. That includes transition to employment services, workplace training programs, immigrant services, and integrated training programs. We also do self-employment training programs under that training for work program.

Some examples, just to give you an idea of the type of training that we do in training for work, that were provided in the past year

– and they would be similar programs that we would be taking into the future – are that in 2024-25 there was supply chain training in Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Brooks, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer. We did tech industry training on full-stack developer cybersecurity software systems in both Calgary and Edmonton. We did accounting and finance and customer service training in Lethbridge and Red Deer. We offer these programs in 65 different communities across the province. We did a class 1 truck driving program in Medicine Hat, self-employment training in Red Deer, Camrose, Lloydminster, Edmonton, Calgary, and surrounding areas. This gives you an example of the type of training that we were doing under the training for work banner.

In addition to that, we have workforce partnership program examples. An example I can give you of the type of programs we do was the Jasper business recovery lunch-and-learn series. That project helped Jasper businesses rebuild and adapt after the Jasper 2024 wildfire.

Going quickly, just to give you examples of some of the other programs that we offer, as the minister indicated, we have an Indigenous employment training partnership program. That program is extremely successful, and it partners with Indigenous communities. One example that I can give you of the type of training that occurs under that program is last year Swan River First Nation did an accounting diploma training program, which started in September and provided 10 on- and off-reserve members training in accounting.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

It's back to the government block, and I see MLA Bouchard threw a virtual hand up. Over to you, sir.

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Chair. To the minister: would you prefer shared or block time?

Mr. Jones: Shared time.

Mr. Bouchard: Excellent. Thank you.

Alberta's trade relationships are vital to the province's economic success. On page 148, line 4.3 of the government estimates there's roughly \$12.3 million in funding allocated towards trade. I'd like to go a bit more into detail about this item as it's necessary to understand how this funding supports Albertan companies in the province, the country, and around the world. Could the minister please elaborate on this funding and how it benefits Alberta's businesses?

Mr. Jones: Thank you for the question. The ministry supports conditions where business and trade can thrive, creating jobs and economic opportunity for Albertans. We achieve this by delivering client-centred programming such as the Alberta export expansion program, a program I have previously mentioned. This program promotes Alberta's value proposition and supports economic growth by leading Albertan businesses in international market development admissions, advocating for Alberta's trade interests at home and abroad, and hosting collaborative forums between different levels of government and industry.

One of the interesting things about international trade is that in many areas of the world business and government are more intertwined than they are here in North America and in Alberta. So it very much does help Alberta-based businesses to go alongside the government of Alberta to meet with, for example, state-owned or national oil companies if they're an oilfield services provider or, for example, a company that wants to support the delivery of health care in another jurisdiction. We have trade missions where they get to come alongside us, and we have programs like the Alberta export

expansion program that really off-set the costs of joining us on those missions.

Mr. Bouchard: Excellent. Thank you, Minister. Another question, I guess: how does JET, Jobs, Economy and Trade, identify companies for trade missions? Do we invite them along on the trade missions, or do they self-select?

Mr. Jones: Prior to mission departure JET leverages our CRM database to reach thousands of Alberta export-ready companies to promote missions and seek potential participants. JET staff continue building this database by entering in company information collected at domestic and international economic events. In addition to this, the ministry also publishes and promotes a publicly accessible list of upcoming trade missions, that can be found online. This is done to ensure transparency and that these trade missions remain open to all Alberta export-ready companies.

Interested companies and organizations must complete a standardized mission application to gauge their suitability. Some of the selection criteria include a minimum annual sales requirement of \$50,000, that they must be incorporated legally within Alberta, and they must have a permanent physical presence and at least one employee in the province.

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you. Would you be able to provide a breakdown or a list of outcomes from our international trade missions?

Mr. Jones: Yeah, absolutely. This past year I had the opportunity to lead a ministerial delegation to London, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, and also to participate in a Team Canada trade mission to Indonesia and the Philippines. I'll highlight that I very much view this as going alongside Alberta companies, as I will outline. I represented Alberta at Canada Day London from June 24 to July 1, and during this mission I met with numerous companies and organizations, promoting Alberta as an attractive investment destination and a reliable trading partner to the U.K. These engagements resulted in several follow-up discussions with U.K. stakeholders who were eager to explore opportunities with Alberta-based businesses.

One of the most significant outcomes of the mission was a major funding deal secured by Calgary-based ClearSky Global corp. The company finalized a U.S. \$168 million investment from a private international ESG investment group, with Tailwind Ventures serving as the financial adviser. This financing represents the fifth-largest early-stage venture capital raise in the global clean fuel sector. ClearSky will use this funding to deploy its innovative technology for producing high-quality, low-carbon aviation and transportation fuel, an advancement that aligns with Alberta's commitment to clean energy and economic growth. We're proud to support this innovation, and ClearSky's leadership in clean energy contributes to reducing emissions while driving job creation and economic prosperity in Alberta. This mission demonstrated Alberta's proactive approach to expanding trade, and I look forward to strengthening these partnerships in the years to come.

In the UAE the anchor event was the Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference. While in market my ministerial delegation met with numerous companies and stakeholders from the Middle East to raise Alberta's profile in the region and to discuss trade and investment opportunities. We supported over 70 Alberta companies and organizations that took part in the exhibition, taking targeted business-to-business meetings and attending marketing briefings and networking events. The trade

team from my ministry facilitated 50 business-to-business meetings between Alberta companies and international buyers and coordinated with Global Affairs Canada to dedicate 40 square metres of space at their pavilion to be used as the Alberta booth for our oil and gas technology and services companies.

Additionally, my ministerial delegation met with key government officials and business leaders in Abu Dhabi and Dubai on issues of logistics, venture capital, advanced education, and technology and investment, and we are working with them on a number of large potential deals.

In Argentina I led an Alberta delegation of 20 Alberta companies, comprised of 10 that participated directly in the mission and 10 additional companies that participated independently, to the Argentina Oil and Gas Patagonia Expo 2024 that took place in Neuquén, Argentina with an extension to Buenos Aires. This mission was used to facilitate targeted business-to-business

meetings for Alberta companies . . . [Mr. Jones' speaking time expired] Oh, sorry.

The Chair: No, nothing to be sorry for.

I hesitate to interrupt, but we have reached the end of our three hours for the first block. I could have asked the question if anybody wanted to continue speaking. We could have got out of here earlier, but that's not happening, so there's still lots to cover. I apologize for the interruption. The committee's time allotted for this portion of consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I'd like to remind the committee members that we are scheduled to a meeting this afternoon at 3:30 to continue the consideration of the estimates for Jobs, Economy and Trade.

With that, thank you very much. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

