



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Forestry and Parks
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 18, 2025
9 a.m.

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

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Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP), Deputy Chair

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Participants

Ministry of Forestry and Parks

Hon. Todd Loewen, Minister

Dan Lux, Assistant Deputy Minister, Forestry

9 a.m.

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

[Mr. Rowswell in the chair]

**Ministry of Forestry and Parks
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Forestry and Parks for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026. I'd ask we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce your officials who are joining you at the table.

My name is Garth Rowswell, the MLA from Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright. We'll begin to my right.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Morning, everyone. Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Yao: Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Dyck: Nolan Dyck, MLA for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Hunter: Good morning, Mr. Chair. Grant Hunter, MLA, Taber-Warner.

Mr. Loewen: Good morning, everyone. Todd Loewen, MLA, Central Peace-Notley, and Minister of Forestry and Parks. With me on my right I have deputy minister Ronda Goulden. On my left I have senior financial officer and assistant deputy minister Matt Grossman. Further to my left I have assistant deputy minister of forestry Dan Lux, and further to my right I have assistant deputy minister of lands Shane Shreiber, and assistant deputy minister of parks Darren Tansowny is in the back here.

Member Hoyle: Good morning, everyone. I'm Rhiannon Hoyle, MLA for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Dr. Elmeligi: Good morning. Sarah Elmeligi, MLA, Banff-Kananaskis.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: hon. Mr. Schmidt for Ms Al-Guneid.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio and videostream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Forestry and Parks shall be considered for three hours. 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 this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the minister's 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 three hours, the ministry estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should

members have any questions regarding speaking times or rotation, please e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. However, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break?

Ministry officials who are present may, at the discretion of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the front 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 speaking time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run. Any written material 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 questions and answers without interruption during the estimate debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now like to invite the Minister of Forestry and Parks to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I'm pleased to be here to share our ministry's plan to better the lives of both current and future generations of Albertans. I've introduced the ministry representatives at the table, and we also have some ministry members in the gallery behind us. Thank you to the team for being here today.

Budget 2025 allows us to maintain the good work we've been doing in Forestry and Parks. It provides reliable, targeted funding for initiatives that will enhance the health and resilience of our province's forests, provincial parks, and public lands while also ensuring Albertans have abundant and diverse opportunities for camping and outdoor recreation.

If passed, Budget 2025 will provide our ministry with a total operating expense of \$362.3 million, which is an increase of \$11.2 million over last year. This additional investment supports ongoing wildfire mitigation, forest stewardship and trade, Crown land recreation, Crown land enforcement, and shared ministry agreements with Agriculture and Irrigation. Through Budget 2025 my ministry is investing in our incredible outdoor spaces, supporting reliable, good-paying jobs for Albertans, stewarding our wildlife populations, and helping communities stay safe from the impacts of wildfire, all of which make Alberta an incredible place to call home. The year 2024 was full of successes, new opportunities, and unexpected challenges. Budget 2025 allows us to expand on our accomplishments, improve based on lessons learned, and stay the course on many initiatives that make life better for Albertans. This will allow us to create a stronger, more resilient province for generations to come.

Investments from this year's budget reflect the values and priorities of Albertans. We continue to enhance recreation, conservation, and economic outcomes for our province's outdoor spaces by recognizing that forests, parks, and public lands are all linked. Responsible stewardship of our vast landscapes, diverse ecosystems, and incredible wildlife populations will maintain Alberta's reputation as one of the best places to have a family and run a business. Our ministry will continue to engage with

municipalities, Indigenous communities, and other organizations to ensure every corner of our province benefits from the sustainable management of Alberta's outdoor spaces.

Forestry and Parks remains an economic driver for the province. Alberta's forest industry supports over 30,000 direct and indirect jobs in many communities across the province while generating over \$14 billion in economic output. The United States is a key customer for Alberta, representing over 70 per cent of our total forest products exports. In 2024 we sent \$3 billion in forest products south of the border, with one-third of that being softwood lumber. Despite our economic partnership, the recent trade dispute puts the forestry sector at risk. Tariffs are damaging to Americans and Canadians, and that is on top of increasing softwood lumber duties. To maintain stable, good-paying jobs for Albertans in many rural communities, we will continue to vigorously defend our forest products sector through direct advocacy with United States Governors, Members of Congress, and other elected officials.

We are working closely with Alberta's forest industry to understand the impacts of tariff uncertainty. If Budget 2025 is passed, \$2.4 million will go towards softwood lumber litigation, which will support legal action and appeals under the North American free trade agreement, the Canada-United States-Mexico trade agreement, and the World Trade Organization appeal process.

To support continued growth of our province's economy, enhanced recreational opportunities, and the achievement of conservation goals, we must ensure the health, resilience, and longevity of our province's forests. As everyone here knows, recent wildfire seasons in Alberta have had significant impact on our province. That is why we continue to invest in personnel resources and initiatives that improve our wildfire prevention and response effectiveness. If Budget 2025 is passed, the province will invest a new high of \$160 million in base funding for personnel, equipment, training, and contracts for aircraft and additional night vision equipped helicopter and heavy equipment. This investment builds off the over 50 per cent increase to the base funding that was provided in Budget 2024, ensuring Alberta's wildland firefighting teams have the resources, experience, and support they need to not only respond to wildfires throughout the province but also prevent and mitigate the impacts of these catastrophic events in Alberta's communities.

To that end, we have allocated \$900,000 over three years for Alberta's fire weather network, ensuring enhanced fire weather monitoring to support the wildfire response throughout the province. We are also investing \$15 million in the community fireguard program, which has received significant interest throughout the province. This along with \$10.8 million in FireSmart programming supports communities in proactively addressing the risks of wildfires, ensuring we can continue to protect Albertans, our homes, and our communities both now and into the future.

In addition to this funding, my ministry has launched the community hazardous fuel reduction program, which will help us work alongside communities and forest tenure holders to prioritize forest harvest in areas with elevated wildfire risk. Work conducted through this program will reduce the risk of wildfire by removing fuel that could allow a fast-moving wildfire to spread into communities. We are also in the process of developing a comprehensive wildfire mitigation strategy that will guide actions to help homeowners and communities reduce the risk impacts and severity of wildfires in Alberta. Through these various programs and initiatives our ministry is prioritizing long-term health and resilience of our forests while also proactively protecting Albertans and our communities.

In addition to fostering healthy, viable forest conditions and a strong provincial economy, my ministry continues to manage

Alberta's public lands. Our outdoor recreation areas on public lands support millions of visitors each year, providing important contributions to local economies. Albertans spend \$2.3 billion dollars annually on recreation, which is why we are maintaining \$3 million in funding for the Alberta public land trails grant program. Supporting recreation partners in this way leads to enhanced trails and recreation opportunities on public lands throughout the province. My ministry has also invested \$1 million for trail upgrades, operations and maintenance, ensuring our public lands can continue to accommodate increased demand for memorable outdoor experiences.

9:10

Forestry and Parks works hard to provide Albertans access to high-quality, low-cost recreational experiences no matter where they choose to explore. Budget 2025 will allow us to build on our successes throughout Alberta's public lands by investing in infrastructure, working with small businesses, and enhancing accessibility.

Through Budget 2025 we're also investing over \$13 million in the Crown land enforcement branch, including \$900,000 in new funding for enhanced regulatory audits and investigations. This funding will protect our province's incredible landscapes by ensuring recreationists and disposition holders use our public lands safely and responsibly.

Budget 2025 also maintains \$13.4 million in funding for our ministry's hunting and fishing branch, ensuring Albertans will be able to hunt, trap, and fish sustainably on the landscape. This includes our popular recreational fish stocking initiatives, which provide incredible opportunities to harvest fish or simply fish for fun as a family in lakes and rivers across the province.

Albertans and visitors have made it clear they value Alberta's public lands, trails, and outdoor experiences, and Budget 2025 allows us to continue delivering exceptional service throughout the province. These exciting developments on public lands are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to accessible, year-round outdoor recreation opportunities.

If passed, Budget 2025 will invest \$95.3 million in the provincial parks program, maintaining our commitment to provide Albertans diverse recreational experiences and unparalleled access to our province's most treasured landscapes and destinations. Albertans take great pride in our parks system, which supports nearly 9,000 jobs annually. We are excited to build on the success we have witnessed through visitation and satisfaction ratings by expanding opportunities and encouraging more people to experience Alberta's parks.

Funding from Budget 2025 will help us provide safe, enjoyable, and enriching experiences while keeping parks sustainable and accessible. This includes supporting diverse outdoor recreation opportunities, improving infrastructure, and preserving sites for current and future generations of Albertans to enjoy.

We continue to invest in Alberta's parks and public lands infrastructure, including nearly \$224 million over three years to support high-quality, low-cost recreational opportunities for Albertans. This includes funding to expand camping opportunities province-wide and investing in new and improved trails on Crown land with a focus on the eastern slopes and Canmore area. Well-maintained, safe outdoor recreation infrastructure ensures that visitors can explore nature and appreciate Alberta's cultural heritage.

These goals are supported by projects being funded through our capital plan, including the redevelopment of the Carson-Pegasus provincial park seawall, refurbishment of trails and canoe circuit in Lakeland provincial park, improvement of the Mackenzie Creek

trail system in the coal branch public land-use zone, and the completion of additional phases of the rail trail project in David Thompson country.

These are just some of the highlights from our work to continue enhancing recreation areas and opportunities for Albertans. All Albertans, regardless of age, ability or disability, income, or other factors, should be able to enjoy and experience what Alberta's parks have to offer. Whether it is through low-cost camping options, campsites with wheelchair-accessible trails or shower facilities, my ministry strives to ensure that facilities and programs are designed so that Albertans' needs are considered. We recently fulfilled our mandate commitment to make camping more affordable for Alberta seniors by introducing a seniors' camping fee discount starting May 1 at select campgrounds across the province.

Budget 2025 allows us to achieve our ministry business plan of supporting the well-being of Albertans and effectively stewarding our public lands. We are meeting the challenge by investing in wildfire response, public land stewardship, and enhancement to our provincial parks.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Member Boitchenko, can you introduce yourself for the record?

Mr. Boitchenko: Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew Boitchenko, and I'm from the Drayton Valley-Devon constituency, the MLA for the beautiful riding of Drayton Valley-Devon.

The Chair: Member Calahoo Stonehouse, if you could introduce yourself for the record, Member.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Good morning. MLA, Edmonton-Rutherford, Jodi Calahoo Stonehouse.

The Chair: Okay.

We will now begin the question and answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking blocks on both the committee room and Microsoft Teams.

Would you like to share time?

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: I'd like to.

The Chair: Minister, is that okay?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I just want to reserve the right to change each 20-minute block.

The Chair: You can do that.

Mr. Loewen: If you're going first, we'll go back and forth.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Okay. Great. Thank you. [Remarks in Cree]

This morning I want to give thanks for the land and the water. I want to give thanks to all the civil servants for their work in responding to the dangerous wildfires in life-threatening situations. I want to give thanks to the ministry, their staff for preparing this budget for consideration. I want to show my appreciation in general terms to the government of Alberta, who continues to identify the need to put aside money for Albertans when their entire lives burn down, which is especially challenging in Indigenous communities because when we lose a house we can lose an entire piece of cultural history and, at the same time, not just for one family but for many.

Managing the land, the trees, the water and the air is interconnected to Nehiyaw world view. They are our relatives, and

we must treat them as such. To my fellow members here today, I want to thank each of you for bringing your energy, your thoughtful, insightful questions.

I recall two summers ago when I was driving and it was down the Grizzly Trail, and there were dozens and dozens of trucks along the highways – first responders, D8s, Cats, BobCats – all kinds of men and women responding, bushwhackers, while Swan Hills was being completely evacuated. The extraordinary size of the operation was incredible. You know, hundreds and hundreds of personnel were responding, and the smoke-filled sky was terrifying. The animals were running, and in our vehicle we were wearing masks. We may as a society never fail to respond, but we are truly failing to grasp how big this fire weather can get. It is essential that this government invests in fire suppression and land management techniques and that we incorporate Indigenous knowledge to minimize the scale of these fires.

I'll get to suppression and management eventually, but I would like to start my questions with year-over-year budgetary shifts. Through you, Mr. Chair, according to the budget estimates on page 73 of the business plan revenue from fees, premiums, and licences are budgeted for about \$30 million less than forecasted in the fiscal year of '24-25. Through you, Mr. Chair, I ask the minister: why is this number lower when their government has instituted 40 new fees that will certainly increase revenue by some projections of upwards to 30 per cent?

Mr. Loewen: Okay. I think I'll just start, and we'll get into some of the details here in just a minute. A lot of that difference in income is a result of the lower value of wood products. The price that we charge our forestry companies for the use of the land and the use of the timber that they harvest from public land is determined in part because of the value of the lumber that's sold. So that's part of it there. Yeah, a \$39.6 million decrease has been projected in timber royalties based on current market lumber prices. Again, the fees that we charge them, the timber royalties that we charge them are based on current market prices and adjusted accordingly. So as the price drops so does the royalties that they owe the government. If we look back to during COVID times and the price of lumber was high, there was substantially higher timber royalties coming in at that time, and they're coming down from that period of time.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you for that response.

Capital investment for this portfolio is also down. According to the estimate on page 73 capital expenditures will top out at \$106.5 million, which is down \$6 million from last year's forecasted spend. Through you, Mr. Chair, I ask the minister: when will his ministry fulfill the mandate from the Premier and from the public to invest in 900 new, desperately needed campsites to sway those campers who now go to British Columbia or Saskatchewan to camp due to the lack of quality of space?

Mr. Loewen: Just to be clear, we are committed to creating those 900 new campsites. The Premier's ask on that was to do that within 10 years. It looks like we'll be able to do that in less time than that. We're hoping to be able to do that in seven years. The expenditures on that will ramp up slowly because they need to be planned, and organizing the plan and actually executing the plan takes a little time. So initially the expenditures will be lower, then it'll ramp up as the plans are made and go on.

For '25-26 we have \$2 million allocated, for '26-27 we have \$12 million allocated, and then '27-28 we've got \$15 million allocated, so a three-year total of \$29 million. Again, now we're in the planning stage of that campsite expansion, and that will increase as we actually start doing the work and producing those campsites.

9:20

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you. Mr. Chair, just to further follow up with that, with the 900 allocated, how many will be co-created or co-designed with Indigenous communities?

Mr. Loewen: I don't have a number specifically for that, but what we do want to do is make sure that we don't focus all the campsites in one area. We want to make sure that they're spread across the province so that people can enjoy camping in areas other than, you know, the traditional core areas of recreation nearer to the population centres. I would expect that some of them will be within or near communities where there are Indigenous people because as we get further away from the core centres, we get into more areas where the Indigenous communities are. I look forward to that and having that opportunity to build those campsites and encourage recreation and tourism in those areas too.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you for responding, Minister. Further to that, I'm curious: will the minister be willing to open up park space for Indigenous folks to be able to do their traditional camps?

Mr. Loewen: I believe that in our public parks we always consider in our plans the Indigenous activities on those landscapes. There's nothing in our plans that would limit that or try to inhibit that. There's no problem there. Again, when you look at all of the plan for parks that we're working on right now and all the other plans with parks and our protected areas, we always consider Indigenous rights and Indigenous activities on those landscapes.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Minister.

Last year, according to the business plan on page 73, wildfire response forced this government to spend over \$700 million more than budgeted. This year fire mitigation spending has been set at \$30.75 million according to the initiatives supporting key objectives line on page 72 of the business plan. Given that the federal Liberal government committed \$800 million over the last 10 years to fire mitigation and protection, my question through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister is: can he explain why he's electing to spend less than half of what the Canadian government is spending on fire mitigation annually when there's such an obvious need for this government to protect Alberta-based communities from escalating forest fires? Through you, Mr. Chair, does the minister agree that the federal government cares more about protecting Alberta from forest fires than he does?

Mr. Loewen: Well, I definitely disagree with the last one. I don't think anybody can be more concerned about wildfire than the province of Alberta and how it affects Albertans. When you talk about the \$700 million, that's the contingency spend. I shouldn't say the contingency spend but the spend on actually battling wildfire last year. When we talk about mitigation, the \$30.75 million in mitigation, that's different than the \$700 million. That's money spent for community fireguards, for FireSmart and things like that, things that work along the lines of mitigation on wildfire.

The \$800 million from the feds, I believe, is spread across Canada, so it's not just Alberta's money there. The \$800 million is spread across Canada, and when it comes to our share of that, about \$28.8 million of federal funding for NRCan's fighting and managing wildfires in a changing climate. That's a 50-50 matching commitment from the province, so for every dollar the feds give us we have to put in a dollar also. Also, the wildfire resilient futures initiative: \$17.9 million of federal funding but again, 50-50 match.

So I think clearly we care every bit as much or more than the feds when it comes to wildfire.

I appreciate the question.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that.

According to performance metric 4(a) on page 72 of the business plan, the ministry fell short of the 95 per cent benchmark for fire containment last year. My question, through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister is: what evidence is he using to justify that \$30.7 million in wildfire mitigation? Is it enough to close the 10 per cent gap? And what assurances can this government give Albertans in fire-prone areas that fireguards are being built currently in Treaty 8 that will be effective?

Mr. Loewen: When it comes to the 95 per cent containment goal, last year, just like the previous year, there were situations that were unusual, I would say. When we look at some of the days, I think there were days when we had as many as 40 wildfires start from lightning in one day. Also, the number of fires was up from the previous year. The previous year was a record number of area burned, but we actually had more wildfires in the 2024 season. Just in July alone we had 497 wildfire starts, which is an 81 and a half per cent increase from the five-year average. So when we look at stats like that, that's why we weren't able to keep up with the 95 per cent goal as far as fire containment within 24 hours.

Again, when it comes to the wildfire mitigation money as opposed to the reaction to fires, the reaction to fires usually comes from contingency in the fire season, and the mitigation funds are funds that are planned for projects like the community fireguard program and FireSmart, things like that.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

Key objective 4.1 on page 72 calls for innovation for promoting healthy and resilient forests. However, there is no explicit allocation for innovation or for the incorporation of Indigenous fire mitigation techniques or Indigenous land management strategies. My question, through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister is: how much of the \$30.7 million allocation on mitigation will be used in paying traditional knowledge keepers to nurture healthy forest ecosystems in a holistic Indigenous way?

Mr. Loewen: When it comes to Indigenous involvement in wildfire fighting in the province of Alberta, we do have our firetack crews, which are almost solely contracted through Indigenous bands across the province. All of our mitigation strategies are developed including Indigenous engagement, and every spring we do hazard reduction burns near Indigenous communities using local crews from the community. We've been building out prescribed burns in Indigenous communities, and also a lot of our mitigation activities, including FireSmart and the community fireguard program: we've been considering the Indigenous communities in them, too.

We want to make sure that we protect our Indigenous communities. When we look right close to my home – in fact, right at my home – the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation in 2023 suffered a lot of losses in their community of homes. Again, that's literally right across the road from where I live. I remember in 2019, I believe, Paddle Prairie Métis settlement lost a lot of homes, too. East Prairie lost homes in 2023 also. Tallcree had a lot of losses, too, in the past couple of years and some evacuations there. So we definitely want to consider our Indigenous communities. They tend to be more remote and more susceptible to wildfire dangers, so they are definitely top of mind when we're making our plans.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you. As a young girl we did prescribed burns with my grandfather, my great-grandfather and my great-uncles. That's a deep-rooted tradition in the prevention of protecting the homestead.

Mr. Chair, through you I would just ask the minister if he could speak to why there was no explicit allocation to innovation as well.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. I think we do have some. Yes. In the budget we have about \$1.1 million. Yeah. Here are some examples. Satellite technology, using the satellite imagery to create maps of how the forest is drying and things like that. Advances in fire behaviour intelligence, high-volume water delivery systems. We see a lot of companies and organizations coming and telling us about their different options that they have for high-volume water and sprinkler systems, huge sprinkler systems, things like that. We've increased our enhanced night-vision operations with helicopters, night-vision helicopters. We are adding one more this year than we had last year. I think we have the largest fleet in Canada when it comes to night vision; in fact, maybe three or four times the next area.

9:30

Continuing smoke-detection technology evaluation: that's a project that began in fall of 2024 and continues into 2025. That's using evaluation of combined camera and gas sensor technology.

Then advanced forest genomics and integrative resource database and management systems, so that's collaborating with forest industry and the University of Alberta in developing advanced forest genomics and integrative resource database and management systems.

So a lot of different things when it comes to technology and innovation, and we're always looking at the latest, greatest, and newest things that are out there. Again, as I said before, we do regularly have people coming to meet with us and meet with the department with new ideas and different systems that can help protect communities and help stop wildfire.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you for that, through you, Mr. Chair.

Further into the innovation piece, when I was up there two summers ago, the fires had broke out before the bomber planes were able to dip into the lakes because the lakes were still frozen. I'm curious if any of the innovation that you're investing in is connected to water allocation.

Mr. Loewen: What we've done with that – and you're exactly right. Especially in 2023 the fire started so early in the season that there was ice on the lakes, making it hard to skim the water. What we do in a situation like that is that we have water trucks contracted to bring water to where the airplanes land so that we can fill them from the water trucks to make sure that we can get the water there and make sure that's available.

You brought a great point up, because that was one of the issues that we had in 2023, that we didn't have that water readily available because the ice was on the lakes. The fires started in central Alberta before the ice was off and early in the season, and as the fire started in the far north, the ice wasn't off there either. Like I say, bringing water trucks in to be able to fill those water tankers was how we'll solve that issue.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

Key objective 4.4 on page 72 of the business plan calls for the development of a provincial wildfire mitigation strategy, with the allocation of \$30.7 million. However, on the wildfire preparedness

page translated resources do not include Indigenous languages like Nehiyawewin, Michif, Stoney, or any dialects of Dene or Blackfoot. My question through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister is: what proportion of this allocation is dedicated for Indigenous language speakers to develop materials that could save Indigenous lives and homes in a forest fire crisis?

Mr. Loewen: When it comes to Indigenous communities as far as, you know, fire mitigation, they can apply and do apply for FireSmart programs. I was looking at some of the grants just this morning. I'm not sure exactly where they are now, but we have a lot of grants going to Indigenous communities on both the fireguard program and the FireSmart program.

Here's a list of Indigenous reserves that completed FireSmart projects in '23-24 to the tune of about \$1.4 million: Smith's Landing First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, Woodland Cree First Nation, Stoney Nakoda, Sunchild First Nation, O'Chiese First Nation, Swan River First Nation, Sawridge First Nation, Kapawe'no First Nation, Sucker Creek First Nation, and Bigstone Cree. We do have a lot of the communities that do take advantage of those programs. As I mentioned before and as you know, these communities are often remote, and it is very important that we have that available to them and then make sure that they – and, again, they're always willing partners and want to do the best for their communities, too.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you for responding to that, through you, Mr. Chair.

Further to that, we can agree that the FireSmart program is very important. As I understand it, the full-time equivalent personnel has left that position, and I'm curious. Has it been refilled?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I guess that has been done. That's through FRIAA. Yeah.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Okay. Excellent. Thank you.

Modernizing wildfire detection and information systems is crucial in our fire-prone times. Key objective 4.3 on page 72 of the business plan calls to replace current systems with a \$2.1 million allocation. My question, through the chair for the minister, is: given this government's reputation in procurement and overspending and misallocating taxpayers' money, could the minister outline where in the RFP process the ministry is at for a new wildfire dashboard?

Mr. Loewen: The dashboard isn't changing, but when it comes to the wildfire modernization technology transformation program, that's an initiative that this department has. It was launched in 2021. The wildfire management technology transformation program includes four product teams, a data team, a third-party vendor, and current products encompass aircraft flight reports, contracts and invoicing, warehouse management, data analytics, municipal incident reporting, and dispatch lite. Those are some of the additional operational innovation projects that we're investing about \$2.1 million in in the '25-26 budget.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you. I am inquiring about the RFP process for these. Sorry; through the chair.

Mr. Loewen: Those are all run through Tech and Innovation, that RFP process, because they're the ones that are working with any of the new innovations and things like that. That's done through Tech and Innovation.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Excellent. Thank you for that.

On page 12 of the strategic plan there is \$160 million allocated for wildfire response capabilities that will primarily be spent on equipment. While safe equipment is a priority, some union leaders are concerned that not enough is being spent on recruitment and deployment. Given that this government needs to compete for firefighters with other jurisdictions, my question through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister: how much should the ministry commit from the \$160 million to improve precancer coverage and strengthen benefits packages for our firefighters?

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Out of the \$160 million, \$71 million of that is salaries and wages – that's for our wildland firefighters – \$70.6 million is for supplies and services, and \$13.1 million is operating grants. The total FTEs that's included in that is 812. So that \$160 million, a good portion of that is already for personnel and for wildland firefighters.

When it comes to recruitment and retention, you know, we do have a full slate of firefighters for this season that have been selected already. They're going through the training process as they finish their schooling year, and they'll be ready to go when needed. Again, as far as recruitment and retention we've been doing very well, and we will have the firefighters we need for this season.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you for that.

Through you, Mr. Chair, of the \$71 million salary wages, how many are FTE and PTE, of the firefighters?

Mr. Loewen: Full-time versus part-time?

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Yes.

Mr. Loewen: They're all based on a full-time equivalent, is the base number that we use, and depending on the percentage of time that's allocated to an FTE. About 450 are full-time.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

Last year Alberta lost over 700,000 hectares to wildfire, yet performance measure 1(a) on page 70 of the business plan shows that the ministry has not reported reforestation regeneration standards since 2022-23. My question, through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister is: without reliable data on reforestation and knowing the staggering loss of forested area last year alone, how much of the \$50 million land management budget will go to recuperating our forests?

9:40

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. In 2024 a grant of \$85 million was provided to FRIAA for reforestation due to the significant number of hectares burned in the 2023 and the 2024 season. The future funding, of course, will be dependent on the number of hectares burned in 2025. The wildfire reclamation program is eligible for matching the 2 billion trees program of federal funds. The grant on our end was \$85 million. The reforestation will go ahead. If the forestry companies do harvest the burned forest, then they're responsible for that reforestation. For the areas that aren't, then they aren't responsible for that. Again, \$85 million in 2024 for reforestation.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

In 2023 wildfires in Canada accounted for about 640 million metric tonnes of carbon emissions while last year's global wildfires resulted in a record leap in CO₂ emissions. The inability of this government to suppress and de-escalate major fire events is a global problem. My question, through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister is whether the \$160 million allocated for mitigation from page 12 of the strategic plan takes into consideration off-setting the carbon debt of mass fire events in this province.

Mr. Loewen: Well, our focus is to make sure that we reduce the amount of forest burned by wildfire. That is the goal. That's why the goal is to have 95 per cent of the fires out before the next day. We also want to make sure that we protect our communities. Our focus in Alberta Wildfire is to reduce those losses and reduce those forests from burning. That's why we're so focused on not only putting out fires that start but also making sure that when they do start, we have mitigation strategies to help protect communities but also to make sure that we identify fires as soon as possible to make sure that we can reduce that opportunity to have those huge burns.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

Further to that, Mr. Chair, we know that moss is one of the greatest carbon capture species we have. Are you investing in moss growth?

Mr. Loewen: I don't know if we have anything specific for moss growth. No. We don't have anything with that.

When it comes to wildfire, of course, a lot of our fires go into the peat moss, and they're very hard to extinguish then. When we look at the fires that are holdover fires from last year, there were six as of January 1 that were holdovers from the previous years, and most of those are in the peat and the peat moss. I know we're actually fighting some of those fires right now. Even though there's snow on the ground and you wouldn't think it would be the time to be fighting wildfire, we are fighting those fires right now. I talked to some of the people on the ground just yesterday. We are working on those to make sure that we – for a couple of reasons, to make sure they don't continue to smoulder but also so they don't flare up in the spring once the snow is gone.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you for that.

Through you, Mr. Chair, how many forest fires or moss fires are burning currently in Alberta?

Mr. Loewen: I don't know if we have them identified as moss fires or anything like that, but we do have – again, like I said, on January 1 we had six holdover fires. Of those six holdover fires from January 1, I think we have four left. That's available on our Wildfire app. Currently we have seven active wildfires, but I'm not quite sure – I might be able to find it here shortly – when they're from. I see three from – sorry. It looks like three, maybe four from 2024.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

Given that caribou require 65 per cent of their forest habitation to be protected to facilitate healthy and functioning herds, my question through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister is how the \$8.3 million allocated for meeting objective 1.2 on page 70 of the business plan ensures healthy forests for a variety of land uses when forests for caribou preservation are so precious.

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Caribou are definitely a concern of this government, both in my department and especially Environment and Protected Areas. One thing we've realized is that, you know, caribou do prefer to have older forests, but we also realize that older forests are highly volatile for wildfire. We have concerns of caribou ranges actually having a wildfire come through and burn them up, so we want to make sure that we're working with the forestry companies to ensure that we have an opportunity to protect those ranges from wildfire just coming through and burning them all off.

We had a fire south of Grande Prairie a few years back that burned a huge amount of caribou habitat. It was because there was no break in that forest to allow any kind of opportunity to fight that fire and stop it. That is definitely something that's considered and that we talk quite a bit about, protecting our forests for caribou.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you. Through you, Mr. Chair: are there any caribou preservation comanagement agreements with Indigenous communities?

Mr. Loewen: That would be done through EPA, and I understand they are working with some First Nations groups on that. But that would be a question for EPA.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: According to the strategy plan this ministry will allocate \$280 million across the next three years to expand irrigation capacity to enhance productivity and improve crop yields while the Oldman reservoir continues to remain at or below historical levels. My question through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister is: given how reckless it is to increase production in water-scarce times, how much of the \$90 million per year investment in irrigation will go to efficiency and prevention of leakage/water loss in the system to ensure Albertans can access the water when they need it?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I believe all that project and that spending would be all in Ag and Irrigation and not in this department. I think that would be a better question for the Ag and Irrigation minister.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you. In outcome 3, key objective 3.1 on page 71 of the business plan it states, “Develop a Crown land recreation and conservation strategy to expand public access while protecting natural spaces, including a new Plan for Parks.” My question through you, Mr. Chair: where is the minister at with Crown land recreation strategy, the conservation strategy? What experts are consulted to guide this work, particularly in the protection of Indigenous and inherent treaty rights?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. The Crown land recreation and conservation strategy will expand recreational opportunities on Crown lands while still meeting conservation goals and considering the needs of communities and job creators. Ultimately, an investment in recreation is an investment in conservation. The two are very much connected, which is why our provincial park system is able to successfully deliver on a dual mandate of recreation and conservation. It also increases access to Crown lands while ensuring their future sustainability, and that is a priority for our government.

We’ve completed target engagement with over 32 organizations representing the recreation, conservation, hunting and fishing, municipal, and tourism sectors. Further engagement is planned and the strategy expected to be released sometime – upcoming in maybe 2025. All developments on public lands are already subject to strict environmental and cultural reviews.

That just gives a bit of a background on the Crown land conservation strategy.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you. What exactly is the plan for parks? Can Albertans assume that the ’24-25 underspend on parks in the statement of operations on page 104 of the government estimates is now part of this new plan? How about the \$10.6 million cut for the ’25-26? Through you, Mr. Chair: is the minister’s plan to slowly defund our beautiful province park system, which supports local economies and attracts tourists from around the world?

9:50

Mr. Loewen: No. There’s no plan on that, but we do have a plan for parks that’s being worked on right now. We’ve had the first round of consultation and input from the public on that, so we’ll continue engaging Albertans on that plan for parks. It was part of

the mandate letter from 2023. It’s to bring stakeholders together to develop a Crown lands recreation and conservation strategy to expand public access while protecting natural spaces, and the plan for parks is part of that engagement process. Once we have a draft, that’ll be shared with Albertans, Indigenous groups, and various organizations for review and feedback.

Yeah. The 2025 budget for parks is \$95.3 million, which is a \$3.7 million increase to parks spending. Maybe what you’re viewing as a cut is actually how we look at amortization in the budgets and how the Finance ministry looks at amortization, which is a \$12 million reduction in the amortization. But, of course, the actual on it is the \$3.7 million increase to the parks operating budget.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

Further on that, Mr. Chair, I would like to know when the date will be for review and feedback. When do you intend on having this released?

Mr. Loewen: It’ll be in 2025 is my understanding. I don’t have a specific date.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

My next question, through you, Mr. Chair: why is the government cutting back on capital grants for inspection and enforcement in our parks?

Mr. Loewen: You’re talking about parks or lands?

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Capital grants for enforcement of our parks. Page 28 of the strategic plan: \$220 million over three years for campsites, trail upgrades, and enhanced outdoor recreational opportunities, features, and buildings on Crown land; ’25 to ’26 will have \$29 million for new campgrounds, \$5 million over three years for Kananaskis, \$5 million for three years over Big Island provincial park; \$24 million over the next three years for Crown land, page 111 of the fiscal plan. Underspent on last year’s capital budget of parks of \$96.7 million by 23 per cent, page 73 of the business plan. Capital investment in parks planning and business supports was underspent by over \$22 million in ’24-25 and is getting cut even further for ’25-26, page 99, line 3.2 of your estimates.

Mr. Loewen: The original funding is still in place, but some of those funds have been reprofiled into future years, when the planning can be done and the work can actually be done. Again, it’s reprofiling, not actually a cut. The expenditures are just being moved into future years.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you for the clarification.

At this time, Mr. Chair, I would like to cede my time.

The Chair: Are you still okay with sharing time?

Mr. Loewen: Who’s next?

Dr. Elmeligi: I’m taking over.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. We’ll go block time.

The Chair: Block time? Okay.

You’ve got 10 minutes to ask your questions.

Dr. Elmeligi: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I’d like to shift the conversation to talking about hunting and licensing management. Key objective 3.4 on page 71 of the business plan is to enhance angling and hunting opportunities through policy, program, and consultation to benefit the public and First Nations and Métis

people of Alberta. We've got \$13.4 million allocated to support sustainable hunting and fishing programs in Alberta this year. I'd like to start by addressing the premier and minister's special licences.

According to travel and expense disclosures the minister and his chief of staff spent just over \$10,000 on several international trips promoting hunting opportunities and auctioning premier special licences. These trips included trips to Nashville for the Safari Club International convention; Salt Lake City for the western hunting expo; and Reno, Nevada, for Alberta's special license auction. The Alberta special licence auction in Utah generated \$356,000 for seven licences, an eighth special licence for a bighorn sheep sold at \$400,000 at a different auction, and overall the 2025 special licenses raised \$923,000. I'd like to know where this money goes. If the money goes towards conservation, as the minister has said in media, what kinds of conservation projects, and which species are benefiting from these conservation projects?

These special licences exempt hunters from the same rules that Albertans have to follow. These hunts can occur year-round in most parts of the province as long as hunting for that animal is already permitted in the area; 2024 special licences included cougar and white-tailed deer, which was new. This suggests that the minister is expanding the special licences program. Why are the winners at these auctions not subject to the same rules as Albertans? Why are we selling our wildlife to the highest bidder and then exempting them from the existing regulations that Albertans have to follow?

Media has reported that the funds go to the Alberta Professional Outfitters Society. APOS doles out the money for conservation projects. According to the APOS website this can include habitat enhancement, disease management in wild sheep, and wildlife movement ecology, et cetera. To be clear, the Alberta Professional Outfitters Society represents 500 professional outfitters and nearly 1,600 hunting guides. They are a delegated administrative organization of the government of Alberta. They manage big game allocations, licensing outfitters, among other services. I can appreciate the need to have APOS as an administrative organization for the GOA. They do fill an important role, and I have nothing against the Alberta Professional Outfitters Society.

I will say, however: is APOS the best organization to dole out conservation funds when their bias is clearly to develop habitat for animals to be hunted at a later date? Is the minister concerned about this bias at all? If we are literally selling Alberta's wildlife to the highest bidder, shouldn't we also ensure that the funds raised are truly going towards conservation and not just growing populations for future hunting opportunities? This is particularly problematic when we consider species at risk or other species that are not hunted but still require conservation efforts and projects like habitat enhancement.

I also have a series of questions about the hunting quotas and limits and recent changes in the past few years. Part of the description of supply vote program includes, 5, provides hunting and angling opportunities through effective fish and wildlife management. That's on page 98 of estimates. It seems like this section particularly has been a big focus for the minister in the last year. In the last year the minister has increased licences for hunting female cougars during the winter. The quota in 2022-23 was 106 and was increased to 124 in December 2024 due solely to increasing the licenses for female cougars. The minister has also made decisions allowing a cougar hunt in Cypress Hills interprovincial park.

The minister has removed trapping limits on fur-bearers including wolverines, fisher, Canada lynx, and river otters. Of particular concern are wolverines, where recent data really is suggesting that wolverines should be listed as a species at risk or

listed as threatened, and river otters which were once nearly extirpated due to trapping efforts and have finally rebounded, and now we've lifted trapping limits.

The minister has also opened up mountain goat hunting as a minister's special licence. Hunting quotas in wildlife management are usually based on population data, density, immigration and emigration, reproductive rate and success, and different species dynamics. However, these decisions listed above are not based on any of these data, and in my review of the science there are no wildlife science data or population estimates to support these changes in hunting quotas and limits. What were these quota increases based on, and what is the objective of increasing these quotas? Can the minister provide the communications between himself and his fish and wildlife staff who set the hunting quotas and conduct these complex equations so that Albertans can understand how these decisions were made? How are these increases sustainable or an example of effective wildlife management?

10:00

Hunting access to Crown lands is a recurring request and challenge for First Nations. If the minister was looking to increase hunting opportunities, did he consult with any First Nations or Métis communities to see how their needs could be met first? I will say that every time I have met with Indigenous groups over the past few years, the first thing that comes up when we start talking about land management is access for hunting and traditional land uses. With these changes to hunting quotas and limits, I'm particularly interested how Indigenous communities were engaged or involved.

The minister has said that a lot of these changes to hunting quotas are to manage human-wildlife conflict. I find this particularly problematic, especially with the minister's new grizzly bear management authorizations that were put in place apparently to reduce human-wildlife conflict. For the record, there is no evidence that trophy hunting cougars or hunting female cougars reduces human-cougar conflict risk. In fact, trophy hunting has been found to increase conflict. Research shows that hunting bears also does not reduce human-wildlife conflict or human-bear conflict risk.

Hunting large carnivores does not reduce conflict, but it does throw species' social dynamics out of balance, which can lead to an increase in human-wildlife conflict. How many cougar conflict incidents were reported in 2024 that warranted the increase in winter hunting? How many grizzly bear management authorizations were issued in 2024? How much did the grizzly bear management program cost Albertans to administer? Basically, I'd like to know how many people ended up out on the landscape hunting a conflict grizzly bear, how many grizzly bears were killed as a result of this program, and how much did it cost to administer this program?

Research shows time and again that the best way to reduce human-wildlife conflict is to work with people to reduce attractants. This can be accomplished through programs that work with landowners to reduce hiding places for cats like blocking off their decks or wildlife-proofing their garages so that cougars and coyotes can't get in and hide in those places. We want to get rid of hiding and denning habitats on properties, but we also need to work with landowners to reduce food attractants, both natural and anthropogenic. It is these efforts that reduce human-wildlife conflict. Working with people is the foundation of effectively reducing human-wildlife conflict.

The grizzly bear recovery plan recommends a human-bear conflict specialist for each management unit to do this work, yet there are no full-time, permanent human-bear conflict specialists working in Alberta at the time. Was this considered before opening

up these special authorizations? My question, through you, Mr. Chair, to the minister is: have we exhausted all other options to address conflict before we started allowing the public to have a licence to hunt a conflict bear? I am very concerned about this new program, not only for the risk that it poses to grizzly bears but also the risk it poses to people. I do not think a member from the public should be set loose on private land to hunt a conflict grizzly bear. That scenario, as a bear biologist, makes me very nervous, and I'm very concerned about what it can mean for public safety.

I think it's almost 10 minutes, so I'll just give the rest of the block to the minister to answer those questions.

The Chair: All right.

Minister.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate the questions. You started on the special licence, the minister's special licence program. Just to give a bit of background on that, I believe it started in 1995, so it's been going for about 20 years. It went through the time period when the NDP were in government, so obviously they were selling minister's special licences at that same time.

Where does the money go? Again, I believe you're correct in the figure that it's about \$651,000 U.S. that was brought in by the minister's special licences, and I think it's about \$931,000 Canadian for those special licences. So where does the money go?

What happened before I was the minister in charge of this program: the APOS was chosen to be the ones to market those tags at those auctions because they would know best where to market them, which hunting shows to have those auctions happen at. They were chosen, again by a previous minister, to market those tags, those licences, and that money goes to a special fund. A committee has been set up that involves many different organizations from across the province to determine – and what happens is that different organizations, including universities and things like that, in Alberta make applications to that committee to determine how that money will be spent. That committee makes that decision. So it isn't APOS making the decision; it's a committee set up by APOS that involves many different organizations and educational institutions to determine how that money is spent, and that money is spent based on the criteria that's been determined for things like habitat enhancement, wildlife studies, and things like that.

Now, there was a suggestion that there are different rules for these minister's special licences than for Albertans. But for every minister's special licence that's sold at an auction to anybody from around the world, there's a minister's special licence that's raffled within Alberta, and the exact same rules that apply to the ones sold at auction are the exact same rules that apply to the ones that Albertans can win in a lottery system. There's no difference in how people are treated there.

As far as expanding species, when it started in 1995, it was started with bighorn sheep, and before I became the minister, it expanded to I think four or five other species, and now we've expanded it to a couple more species. So that expansion has been happening over the past. It isn't something that I just myself came up with.

When it comes to cougar management, you brought up some comments on the female cougar quota increase. Just so you know, when we make decisions on these quotas, we use the cougar management plan, and that plan is focused on maintaining a healthy cougar population. Cougar quotas are regularly adjusted in line with that management plan. Of course, the plan aims to reduce human-wildlife contact, protect species at risk like caribou, manage predation on susceptible species like bighorn sheep and mule deer, and ensure the long-term health and sustainability of cougar

populations. In the last year or so the area that we hunt cougars has expanded, based on the population of cougars expanding across the province also.

You mentioned about Cypress Hills. There's been hunting going on in Cypress Hills, I believe, since I want to say maybe in the '80s, so it isn't new to have hunting happen in Cypress Hills provincial park. In fact, about 85 per cent of our areas managed by Alberta Parks has hunting taking place on it. We have hunting, I believe, in four provincial parks – Cypress Hills, Castle provincial park, Kleskun Hills provincial park, and Winagami Lake provincial park – and also in 10 different provincial recreation areas. And that is along with the areas – anyways, I'll just go back to say that hunting takes place on about 85 per cent of the areas managed by Alberta Parks. So, again, there's nothing new there. That's something that's been going on for quite a while.

There was a comment about the mountain goat minister's special licence. This year was the first year for that, and that was resident only. There wasn't one sold in the U.S.

10:10

There were comments on, I think, the quotas on wolverines and other animals with the trapper's quotas. We went through this before. We can go through it again. The quotas that were in place were defensible. Basically, somebody had decided that we would have a quota of one wolverine for every registered trapline in Alberta. Of course, we have some areas where there are no wolverines, where they would have a quota, and we'd have other areas where there were a lot of wolverines, with a low quota. Just another thing to keep in mind there is that not only were the quotas one per trapline, but it was basically a one-plus-one situation, where if a trapper incidentally caught a second wolverine, they were allowed to keep that, too.

There are no quotas on wolverines in the Northwest Territories, immediately to our north. There's no quota on wolverines in Saskatchewan, immediately to our east. No quota on wolverines in the Yukon, to our northwest, and that conservative bastion called British Columbia, to our west, also has no quotas on wolverines. Again, I believe that if I had brought forward that out of the blue, that we were going to have a quota of one wolverine per trapline, I would expect that the members opposite probably would have lit their hair on fire and said that there was no science involved and it was crazy. You know what? They'd be right because that would be crazy to have a quota of one wolverine where there are no wolverines. Those quotas were arbitrary, and we can bring quotas back in if need be, where it's needed, but we'll use science to do that and not ideology. I'm not sure if there's anything else to cover on that.

As far as dedicated human-wildlife coexistence, we have six FTEs, we have one provincial wildlife conflict specialist in lands operations. We have one human-wildlife coexistence team lead in Parks. We have one human-wildlife conflict co-ordinator in conservation officer service and lands operations. We have three FTEs to support the Kananaskis bear response program in Parks. Additionally, conservation officers routinely respond to human-wildlife conflict situations in addition to their more than 200 counterparts in the fish and wildlife enforcement branch in Public Safety and Emergency Services.

In '23-24 there were 1,007 reported incidences of human-wildlife conflict, 850 of which were bear related. When we look at the situation with bears in the province of Alberta, last year I believe we had two people mauled in Alberta, and in the last few years I think we've had four people killed by grizzly bears in the province of Alberta. The fact is that the grizzly that mauled somebody last

fall was actually the same grizzly that killed somebody previously, a couple of years before that. So we do have situations here where grizzlies are causing issues and actually hurting and killing people in the province of Alberta.

By having the responder program – yeah. There was a question of how many times it was used. I believe it was used only once, and there was no bear killed with that program. I think that what that does prove is that the members opposite have done a lot of fearmongering. That there would all of a sudden be just an enormous amount of bears being killed is not correct.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

You have about 40 seconds to make things set up for next block, or you can do what you want there.

Dr. Elmeligi: We can?

The Chair: Well, you got about 35 seconds if you want to say something. If not, we can just move on.

Mr. Loewen: I can finish up.

The Chair: Well, you only have 10 minutes to speak.

Dr. Elmeligi: I think we can just move to the next block. We can't do anything in 20 seconds.

The Chair: That's fair enough. All right. Thought I'd give you the chance. That's all. Thank you.

That includes the portion for questions from the Official Opposition. Just before we move on, I'll get Member Sweet to introduce herself for the record.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair. MLA Heather Sweet, Edmonton-Manning.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

And to let everyone know, we'll take our five-minute break after the 20 minutes.

Okay. Who is speaking? Member Boitchenko, go ahead. Did you want to share time?

Mr. Boitchenko: Yeah. We go back and forth.

The Chair: Okay. You have 20 minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Boitchenko: All right. Well, the minister did a great job giving us a lot of information, details. You know, some we knew, and some – actually, I was quite impressed with the amount of work that's been done in protecting our province from the wildfires and getting fireguards and FireSmart programs in place where we can somewhat get ready for the disasters as coming in.

I would like to actually say that I think you have the most unpredictable portfolio that anybody can have in the government. We can never predict fires, we can never predict floods and the severity of it. So I think you're doing an amazing job, and I think we can attribute a lot of it to your personality, you know, to have such calm and composure that you have. I experienced it personally when we went through the wildfires in Drayton Valley. I remember previous MLA Mark Smith and I: we woke you up in the middle of the night and just asked you to come help us out, and we were surprised that three hours later of driving in the middle of the night, you came. When you walked in the room, everything kind of settled down because you have that composure with you. So we appreciate; I don't think we can ask for a better minister for this portfolio. Yeah. So thank you. Thank you very much for what you do and the great

work you do both in preservation and getting us ready for the wildfires and floods.

Another thing before I ask you questions: I want to actually highlight that I've been travelling around the province last summer visiting First Nations and Métis settlements. They had expressed a tremendous gratefulness, and they were thankful for the idea you had with the fireguards and FireSmart where we created, around settlements and First Nations, zones where – you know, take down trees and creating, actually, grazing land. They could use the funds to actually spend money on fencing it and have cattle there, and that would prevent and stop the fires in case of emergency coming into the reservation. They were very thankful and super excited about that program. Most of them applied for it. It was a very innovative way to address the prevention of the fires. So thank you for that, and thank you on behalf of First Nations as parliamentary secretary for Indigenous Relations. They were quite happy with that.

I want to start my question with a little bit broader overlook and then maybe zone in a little bit to more detailed aspects of particular questions that I have. I'm going to start off by looking at the big picture first and some topics, issues. Specifically, on page 97 of the fiscal plan under the expense line, I see that the total expense for ministry has declined from the forecast despite increasing funding for the key priorities. To the minister, through the chair, of course: to start us off, could you speak broadly to priorities that will receive increased funding under this fiscal plan?

A second question would be, to the minister through the chair, wildlife – maybe we'll start with the wildfires first. Wildfire-related costs vary significantly from season to season and can be hard to predict because of the unknown factor of the, you know, severity of fires or floods, but they play a major role in this ministry's budget. The question would be: what projections did you use for three-year wildfire-related expenses, and how accurate can we expect these projections to be? So what do you use for projecting it and how accurately we're expecting to come to it?

10:20

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Yeah. Thank you very much for that. I appreciate your comments. I'll start with the first question there. Budget 2025 will enhance wildfire mitigation efforts, expand opportunities for outdoor recreation, stay the course on initiatives that enhance facilities and accessibility on public land, and make additional improvements to visitor experience. That's kind of going into the parks part of it, too.

The priorities that received increased operating funding in Budget 2025 will be the \$5 million increase in funding for the community fireguard program in '25-26, which means it's a \$15 million increase over three years. The program allows Albertans and their communities to take an active role in wildfire prevention and mitigation, strengthening our province's resilience to wildfire.

We'll have an increase in the parks programming, too, about \$3.7 million.

You know, another increase. You talked about the Métis settlements and the First Nations. We have a \$4.9 million increase for Métis settlements and FireSmart funding from the government of Canada. That's something that we're working on together with the federal government.

When it comes to '25-26, we'll invest \$160 million in base funding for personnel, equipment, training, and contracts for aircraft, an additional night vision equipped helicopter, and then equipment also, and all of those improve our wildfire prevention and response effectiveness. Having those personnel hired and ready to go, having that equipment and those contracts ready to go helps us, you know, be prepared for the fire season coming up. That's why we have that \$160 million in base funding, and then it

increased by 50 per cent last year. Now it's gone up \$5 million again, to bring it to \$160 million, and that's to make sure that we have our base personnel and our base equipment and contracts set for the season.

Then as we get into the actual firefighting season, that's when we draw from our contingency fund. We don't really have a three-year projection for wildfire presuppression and response. We assess the financial impact as the fire season progresses, and the funding required is provided through a combination of the contingency fund and the supplementary estimates. Again, that contingency fund comes into play once we start battling the fires in fire season and then basically using those contracted individuals, the contracted helicopters, the contracted heavy equipment, and then our firetack crews, which are contract also.

You were exactly right. The wildfire-related costs are variable, so we rely on historical data, risk modelling, and climate trends to inform our three-year projections. We can't fully predict, you know, how severe any season will be, but we have to be flexible in our budgeting approach, and we've got to make sure that we have those base necessities as far as resources to respond effectively. We have to make sure that we're managing costs prudently, too.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you. I don't think it's very predictable. I mean, only towards the end of the winter and the beginning of spring can we start maybe reading the weather and the conditions out there before you can truly understand how the season would be and maybe start preparing for the season.

On my next set of questions here I would like to touch a little bit more, because I know you're heavily investing – and we all understand that our firefighting aircraft play a huge role in suppression and also firefighting. My next few questions would be on our readiness, preparedness, and your overall plan for the future specifically related to firefighter aircraft. On page 72 of the ministry business plan under key objective 4.1, I can see the ministry exploring and adopting innovative wildfire management technologies to promote the health and resilience of the Alberta forest resources. I also know that the ministry has expanded its operating capacity for the firefighting aircraft here in Alberta to combat the threat of the wildfires.

So two questions on that. How does our fleet compare to the rest of Canada and maybe other provinces? What is your future forecast on maybe expanding the fleet? Also, to the minister again through the chair, how are we leveraging our firefighting aircraft capacity to allow for quicker, more efficient wildfire response times? God forbid, we're facing another wildfire season coming up. Basically, I would say: overall, a vision of expanding firefighting aircraft – and I'll talk to both helicopters, aircraft, water bombers – and generally the fleet and how it compares to the rest of Canada and what makes us so unique and maybe, you know, have that further-looking vision to prevent the fires and fight them.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Yes. Thanks for that. In your opening comments there you talked about the weather conditions being unpredictable. One thing I have to say for this year is that we definitely have more snow in a lot more parts of Alberta than we've had the last couple of years. Of course, that'll melt, and by May we could be in a serious situation just the same if we don't have some timely rains at that time. You know, we're hoping for the best, but we have to prepare for the worst when it comes to wildfire.

As far as the aircraft, you know, we do have our fleet of our own personal aircraft. We have four of our own water bombers, and we do contract a number of other water bombers to add to our fleet, so we do have those contracts done. I'll try to find out the exact numbers, but we're probably in the neighbourhood of 15 extra

contracted aircraft when it comes to fighting fire. As far as the idea of expanding in the future, we're definitely looking at that, too. We are hoping that we can expand our own government-owned fleet, but like I say, in the meantime we make sure that we have the contracts for these other aircraft to make sure that we're ready for season when it comes about.

As far as other opportunities as far as air opportunities for fighting wildfire, one of the things that we have done kind of over and above what other jurisdictions in Canada and possibly even North America: the night vision helicopters. What the night vision helicopters have allowed us to do is to fight those fires at night when the fires are subdued because of the temperature and the humidity. It's been incredibly helpful, having those night vision helicopters. I was talking to some of the wildland firefighters on the ground this past summer, and they described an incident where a fire had started and they got called to go into that fire. They went in the night vision helicopter. Normally they would have had time to get there, look at the fire, and then they would have had to fly back because they would have had to have been back before dark, but because they had a night vision helicopter, they were able to land nearby. They were able to contain the fire, do a rough containment, and then get back in a helicopter and fly back at night, which they wouldn't have had the opportunity before, and that allowed them to roughly contain that fire so in the morning, when ground crews could get in, they were able to put that fire out and keep it from spreading.

Going back to the tanker fleet, again, we have our four government-owned tankers, and then we have 14 on contract right now. This year we'll have the four night vision helicopters; last year we had three.

With the air tankers comes the bird-dog aircraft. We have nine of them. Basically the bird-dog aircraft flies ahead of the air tankers and scouts out the fire, decides where the air tankers should drop, and they circle around and watch what happens so that they know as the next round where the water bombers are supposed to drop the next one.

Another thing we're doing this year that's new is we're going to be testing the hoist system. The hoist system will allow helicopters to pick up wildland firefighters, move them to another location, and set them down. It's something that's been used in other jurisdictions, but we're piloting it here. We may have one, maybe two helicopters that will be able to do that for moving crews. Again, talking to some of the ground crews that have used that same system elsewhere, they found it incredibly advantageous to be able to cover a lot more ground and create landing pads for the helicopters. If they could be hoisted in, they can cut a landing pad, and then the helicopter can actually land and bring in more crews.

So that's something that we'll be using this year that I think will be incredibly helpful. And, again, it not only can drop off wildland firefighters, but it can also pick them up – the rappel program only allowed the wildland firefighters to be dropped off, not picked up – so they can be used for pulling them out of dangerous situations, too.

10:30

Another thing that was kind of interesting is that we have the Q400 aircraft. When I was in Slave Lake last summer, I was talking to the folks there, and when those aircraft are positioned in Slave Lake, they can be to any part of the province in an hour. They're loaded and ready to go, so they can be dumping retardant within an hour virtually anywhere in the province. I think there was one part of the province that was just a couple of minutes more than an hour to get to, but other than that, they could do that. I believe British Columbia even used them last year because they could get to British Columbia before the British Columbia planes could get to their own

fires. So there's some great technology there when it comes to our aircraft. Again, we have a good fleet, and we want to expand that as we can.

Mr. Boitchenko: Wow. It's impressive, the timelines where we can actually get them out there. Great job on that quick response.

Before I ask my next question here, can you shine a little bit more light on the night-vision helicopters? I think it's one of the best technologies that we have today to prevent the fires, especially at night, when they're more suppressed. Do we know comparisons, like the stats, how many we have versus the rest of Canada? Is it something that's unique for Alberta, or is it something that every province has? What are we to expect on the expansion of this program? And then I'll have another question pretty quick for you.

Mr. Loewen: That's good. Yeah. We'll have four. We had three last year. We're going to four this year for the night-vision helicopters. The other provinces are just kind of starting on this. I thought maybe B.C. might have had one last year, but I'm not . . .

Mr. Lux: They use ours.

Mr. Loewen: Oh, okay.

They use ours, I guess. I was going to say that we're kind of ahead of the game on that, but actually we're way ahead of the game on that. Again, just because of the nature of wildfire, as the temperatures drop at night and the humidity rises, the fires are substantially smaller. You could have a fire that would have, you know, 100-foot-plus flames at 10 o'clock at night, and by 3 o'clock in the morning that same fire could be three feet high, metre-high flames. Obviously, dumping water on a smaller fire like that is far more effective than dumping it on a large fire.

I remember the Fort Mac fire from 2024 here that was approaching Fort Mac. I believe the night-vision water bombers dropped 100 loads of water during that one night when it was really critical, and that was 100 loads of water that wouldn't have got dropped otherwise. There was no other way to get that to happen other than with night-vision helicopters. So, again, it is a game changer for us, and I think we're on the right track as far as having those available and making sure that we use them in our wildfire fighting.

Mr. Boitchenko: Okay. Well, thank you very much. Very comforting to see you actually looking forward and that you have a general plan for us in case of the next emergency coming up, especially with arranging, organizing helicopters and airplanes. It's very comforting. You know, kind of feel a lot safer knowing that we are ready and have this technology in Alberta here.

I have only one quick minute there. I'll try to squeeze another quick question here. We know that the 2024 wildfire season was particularly challenging, with above average fire activity. On page 73 of the business plan because of the high funding for wildfires measures we do see an increase in the ministry's net operating budget for '25-26. However, the business plan notes that this expense is partially off-set by reduction in other areas. Again through the chair to the minister, if we can maybe quickly touch on the areas where you have identified inefficiencies and made reductions. As well, through the chair to the minister again, the business plan notes that the money saved from these reductions has been redirected to higher priority areas. Is this reallocation . . .

The Chair: Might have to save that for the next block.

That concludes the government members' first block. This is where we'll take our break. We've got a five-minute break. Come back at 10:40.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 10:35 a.m. to 10:40 a.m.]

The Chair: Okay. Everyone grab their seats, and we'll get started.

Okay. We now move to the second round of questions and responses. The speaking rotation going forward will be the same as the first round, starting with the Official Opposition, followed by members of the government caucus; however, speaking times are now reduced to five minutes for the duration of the meeting. We will begin the rotation with the members of the Official Opposition, who'll have up to five minutes for questions and comments, followed by a response from the minister, who may speak up to five minutes. After both individuals have had an opportunity to speak once, we will then move to the next caucus rotation. If the member and the minister agree to share time, we will proceed with 10-minute segments during which neither the member nor the minister may speak for more than five minutes at a time. Members are reminded that they may not cede any portion of their time, of the five minutes, to another member.

We go to the Official Opposition. Who's going this time? Member Calahoo Stonehouse?

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Yes.

The Chair: Would you like to share time?

Mr. Loewen: Back and forth.

The Chair: Okay. Back and forth.

Go ahead.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Great. Thank you. Artificial intelligence, the realm of drone applications in forestry, has revolutionized forest operations and their role in mapping, monitoring, and leveraging advanced imaging technologies. On data processing techniques drones enable real-time tracking of changes in forested landscapes, facilitating effective monitoring of threats such as fire outbreaks and pest infestations. They expedite forest inventory by swiftly surveying large areas, providing precise data on tree species identification, size estimation, health of assessment, and inform decision-making on sustainable forest management. Drones also can contribute to tree planting, pruning, harvesting while monitoring reforestation efforts in real time. They are an alternative.

Drones are now equipped with thermal cameras that can enable early detection of wildfires, enabling timely responses, mitigation, and preservation efforts. The integration of AI and drones is now moving forward around the world. Through you, Mr. Chair, you mentioned earlier, Minister, being ahead of the game with night-vision helicopters. I might add that helicopters are the highest emission producing vehicle. I ask through you, Mr. Chair: what are your intentions of moving towards AI technologies to use in our mitigation, in our prediction, and in our management of wildfires, forestry, and the health of a forest through pest infestation?

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Yes. Thank you very much for that question. When it comes to the drone technology, you're exactly right. It's been incredibly helpful for us for battling wildfire. Being able to send a drone up at night, when we have limited ability to get up with other forms of aircraft, to be able to do that thermal imaging on fires has been a huge help. I've been in some of the fire camps where at the first meeting of the morning what's laid out on the table is the thermal imaging map from just a few hours before in the dark, so when the crews are headed out, they know exactly where the hot spots are and where to focus their energy. So that's been incredibly helpful.

As far as opportunity to do more, there's definitely an interest in doing more of that because it has been incredibly helpful. Even the satellite imagery helping us identify hazardous fuel on the landscape and things like that has been very helpful, too. It also helps with investigations as far as determining where fires and how fires have started. You know, it'd be nice to have more companies to have a better line of sight to be able to use them safely. When it comes to the use of drones, we want to make sure that they don't interfere with our regular aircraft. We've seen in California what happened with a plane battling the California wildfire that collided with a drone. So we want to make sure we're working on that, too.

We're using AI to help predict where fires will occur and assist in our presuppression decisions. If we identify a part of the province that's particularly dry, has a particular fuel load that we think might be a concern, then we can start moving our equipment to where it would most likely be needed so that we can be ahead of the game if a fire does start. Again, this AI and drones and that kind of technology has been incredibly helpful for us.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

The last few fire seasons were tough. This is no secret. This is something the government has been incredibly vocal about. The minister's own ministry says that, quote: Alberta has faced unprecedented wildfire challenges over the last two years. End quote. It was reported by the CBC less than two weeks ago that experts are warning of a lower snowpack than last year in parts of Alberta. Tricia Stadnyk, Canada research chair in hydraulic modelling, a professor at the University of Calgary, says, quote: people last year at this time were very concerned about drought; we were going into unprecedented negotiations around water; we were at stage 4 drought scenario with the province, and this year last we're not, but we're actually lower in snowpack in certain regions than we were at this time last year. End quote. John Pomeroy, the Canadian research chair in water resource and climate change, the University of Saskatchewan: the mountain snowpack is short hundreds of millimetres of water from where it's expected to be at this time of year. Quote: it's not impossible that we're headed into some of the worst mountain droughts of this century. End quote.

The southwest part of the province along the Rockies most likely will be affected by drought conditions. In February the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas said that snow accumulation in the Oldman, Bow, Athabasca, and North Saskatchewan rivers was much below average. All of this to say that we are on the side of quite concerned, and we could be in for yet another difficult wildfire season, where we aren't confident that this ministry is fully prepared to deal with. Through you, Mr. Chair: is the minister concerned about the current snowpack, and has he factored in these conditions into the 2025-26 budget?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Definitely, we are always concerned. We're always watching the weather. Daily I get a map of the snow and ice load across the province and how it's changing. That kind of monitoring is being done regularly. We are concerned when we see lower than average snowpack in certain areas, and definitely the eastern slopes has been one of those areas. Overall, across the province we're probably average because there are parts of the province that have had, you know, average or maybe even slightly higher than average snowpack. I know that in my area where I live, we've had a plenty of snow, and probably for one of the first times in a few years I actually heard a farmer complaining about too much moisture and that they didn't need any more. That doesn't happen very often, but I did hear that the other day at one of the ag shows. Yeah. Again, we monitor the snowpack, and we'll be ready when the snow melts.

We'll continue to invest in wildfire mitigation. Some of you might be aware of the wildfire mitigation project we have going on just outside of Canmore. We're removing some of the trees nearer to the community to make sure that if wildfire does start, you know, if it comes in from that direction, anyways, there's less chance it'll affect the community.

We've got our crews, tankers, heavy equipment, helicopters. They'll be ready to go. Again, when it comes to this kind of monitoring, we want to make sure that we put our resources as close as possible to where we believe they'll be needed. We do make sure we have crews and equipment staged across the province, but when it comes to focusing attention, we want to focus it in the areas that we feel may be most likely to need it. Again, we have crews and equipment ready now, and we have crews and equipment working now on wildfire, and that will continue.

10:50

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'm curious: are we, as in the government, investing in AI technology insofar as the innovation line? Are we using water monitoring to measure snowpack?

Mr. Loewen: Yes to both. We are using the AI technology now, and it helps us predict where fires could occur. They also assist, again, in our presuppression decisions. It isn't like we solely rely on AI, but AI is one of the tools that we use to try to predict where wildfires may start.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you. Based on using the tools and the AI technologies along with the current snowpack and the current conditions, through the chair, what is the plan to address what could be a very challenging wildfire season?

Mr. Loewen: Again, we are constantly evaluating the situation on the ground, as far as, as you mentioned, the snow load, the moisture that's on the ground. We do have maps that are developed during fire season regularly or daily that give us an idea of the conditions and the weather forecast in those areas so that we have an idea of what kind of fuel load and how dry the fuel is on the ground. We also have an idea what the forecast is for weather.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We will now move to the government side. Member Dyck is up. Minister, would you like to go back and forth or block?

Mr. Dyck: Are you willing to do back and forth with me, Minister?

Mr. Loewen: Okay.

Mr. Dyck: Excellent.

Well, thank you, Minister. I appreciate it. I appreciate you and your staff being here. It's good to talk a little bit about wildfires and forests and parks and all these things. Also, thank you to the staff for being here today as well in their roles.

First question is on forests on page 72 of the business plan, supporting key objectives: in this upcoming budget \$30.7 million will be allocated to support wildfire mitigation initiatives. This is very important. Preventing wildfires before they start is what we need to continue to do, I believe.

One way to prevent forest fires is to remove old-growth forests before they have a chance to dry out and become a large risk. As forests dry, they become more – younger forests, from my understanding, are a little bit more fire retardant. As forests grow to be that 120- to 150-year-old forest, which is geriatric, and they potentially start dying off, do we have a system? Is there any system

in place going into 2025-26 where these forests can be harvested by our industries before they become a problem?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. A great question on that. When it comes to the harvest of our forests, our forest companies that have FMAs, forest management areas, develop plans based on the age of the forest and in the areas that they're harvesting, and they take into account, you know, public input for starters, First Nations input. They also take into consideration the age of the forest.

When it comes to, like, wildfire mitigation and protecting from wildfire, one of the things that we do focus on is public education to make sure that those fires don't start to begin with. We've had good results in the last couple of years in reducing the number of human-caused wildfires.

You did mention the old-growth forest. Of course, there is value to having old-growth forest on the landscape. That is incredibly valuable, too. But what's important as far as reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire coming along and completely wiping out a huge stand of old-growth forest is having a mosaic of ages of trees on the landscape so that when the fire comes through, there is an opportunity to slow it down depending on what kind of forest it hits.

We do have the community hazardous fuel reduction program, and we're working to help develop this program, which focuses on removing hazardous fuels within five kilometres of community boundaries. So we're really focused on making sure that these fires are slowed down before they hit communities. We're working with our forestry companies to harvest some of those trees. We've gone across the province and identified communities that we feel could be at a higher risk based on the age and the type of forest that is closest to their homes and to that particular community. That's where we've been focusing our energies through this latter part of winter and into spring, to make sure that we are doing whatever we can to protect those communities.

I'll mention again the project going on in Canmore, but we also have projects going on in Whitecourt and Hinton and a couple of other communities, too, right now. And, again, those are to reduce that fuel load and that type of forest that's most likely to start fire.

We know that we are still going to have wildfire. We will; that's a given. We are going to have wildfire on the landscape, and we still could have communities threatened, but we're doing everything we can to try to reduce that opportunity for having communities evacuated or having, you know, homes burned and things like that. That has been our focus through this past winter, since the wildfire season ended, to really focus on that community protection and that wildfire mitigation.

I think that probably covers your question there. Thanks.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Minister. I really appreciate that answer.

I just want to ask about parks for a few minutes, too. Alberta is such an amazing place to live. We have a vast landscape. We have very vast public lands, and it's our responsibility, or your responsibility, to govern that and manage these lands.

Just looking at recreation, and even just for context, south of Grande Prairie, we have significant recreational land. I see a lot of value in that for recreation. I see a lot of it also is working, as I just asked about forestry. On page 72 of the business plan, this budget includes \$83.5 million for Crown land recreation and maintenance. Can you expand on that, how these funds are actually going to be used?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. When it comes to our recreational facilities, of course as they were constructed, then they immediately start needing a certain amount of maintenance, so we want to make sure

that that maintenance continues. When it comes to the \$83.5 million for Crown land recreation and maintenance, it includes \$78 million for Crown land capital investment, \$1 million for supplies and services for trail management, \$3 million for grants for public land, trail and recreation management, and 1 and a half million dollars for a public land camping pass that is reinvested in recreation management, including trail development, maintenance, and signage.

That money is all being invested back into our communities to make sure that we can, you know, upgrade campgrounds. What we've noticed, of course, is the campgrounds that were built 40 years ago don't really fit well with our modern camping equipment. So there always has to be some upgrading there to make sure that we have access for all sizes of RVs and things like that in our campsites.

When we look at the trails and things like that, people want to use trails, and we want them to use trails, too, because that focuses the disturbance on the landscape in certain areas where it can be managed, so that is a part of that.

We're looking at water and waste-water upgrades and then, of course, developing new campgrounds and things like that. Again, we want to make sure that when people visit our public lands, visit our parks, they enjoy their experience and tell others.

Mr. Dyck: I appreciate that. I appreciate that answer.

Also looking at page 72, I understand the government is committing more than \$95 million to Alberta Parks operations in 2025-2026. Could you provide some more detail on what this funding will support in Alberta Parks? I mean, we have some of the best parks in the world. This funding is important. I just would like a little bit more colour around what that money is going towards in our Alberta Parks operations.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. That's a good question.

Yeah, \$95.3 million in Budget 2025: that maintains our commitment to Alberta provincial parks system and sustainable outdoor recreation. This includes \$86 million for parks delivery, which is an increase of \$3.7 million from '24-25. It also includes \$9.3 million for planning and business supports, which consists of the Crown land recreation capital program as well as business services such as revenue contract management.

11:00

We're fortunate to have more than 300 provincial parks located throughout the province, and that offers nature-based outdoor recreation opportunities for Albertans and visitors to enjoy. This includes 250 campgrounds, with approximately 14,000 campsites. Just as a matter of interest, over the last five years the number of nights visitors spent camping has increased by 17 per cent, so there's definitely an interest for Albertans and visitors to Alberta to enjoy our outdoor areas. Again, we want to make sure that we have a place for them to enjoy and also so that they can return and tell others.

Mr. Dyck: Excellent. I appreciate that.

Just going back to the recreation conservation strategy, key objective 3.1, can you just expand a little bit more upon this? It's a pretty important objective. I think that this can have some significant impact. Can you just speak more to the status and intent of this strategy?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. We want to bring stakeholders together to develop, you know, a Crown lands recreation conservation strategy that is meant to expand public access but still protecting these natural spaces. The strategy will explore how to expand recreational

opportunities on Crown lands while still meeting conservation goals and considering the needs of communities and job creators. Recreation, just so we're clear, refers to both nonmotorized and motorized land-based recreational activities, so things like hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, off-highway vehicle use, snowmobiling, hunting, snowshoeing, all those different activities that happen on the ground but also the ones that happen on the water like canoeing, rafting, kayaking, paddleboarding, fishing, et cetera. We want to make sure that we have that access to Crown land.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll now go over the Official Opposition side. Who's next? Member Sweet. Okay. Back and forth or block time?

Mr. Loewen: Block time.

The Chair: Block time. Okay.

Ms Sweet: Aw, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well, that's too bad. Usually we used to go back and forth all the time.

Mr. Loewen: We can go back and forth. Sorry.

The Chair: You have 10 minutes.

Ms Sweet: I just had to whine a little bit. All right. Thank you, Minister.

Through the chair, Mr. Chair, I will be focusing on 2.1, wildfire management. Primarily, if we can, Minister, I would just like to focus on people and on our staff. As you know, it's always been an important issue for me to make sure that our front-line staff are trained appropriately, protected, and receive supports as they need. In your first comments earlier today you had mentioned that there are about 812 positions that you anticipate to hire for this season. Is that correct?

Mr. Loewen: I'm not sure of the exact number there, but yeah.

Ms Sweet: I'm curious. I think at one point there were 522 that were considered full-time FTEs, which is the number that was provided earlier today. I'm just wondering how many of those are – out of the 800 that was initially provided, there were 522-ish that were said to be full-time FTEs. How many then would that mean are contracted staff? Do we know?

Mr. Loewen: Okay. As far as contracted, we do have our 320 firetack crews, which are mostly contracted through Indigenous reserves and settlements.

Ms Sweet: And then what about our procurement practices for helicopter, air, our pilots? Like, those are all contracted out?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. The government doesn't own any helicopters, so all of our helicopters are contracted. When it comes to the aircraft, we have our four air tankers of our own, CL-215s, and then we have contracted 14 additional aircraft along with the nine bird dogs.

Ms Sweet: Do they have to apply every year under an RFP for contract?

Mr. Loewen: Multiyear contracts.

Ms Sweet: They are multiyear. Okay.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah.

Ms Sweet: Thank you.

I'm wondering, Minister, and I'm not sure if you can tell me this or not, so I appreciate that you may not be able to. Out of last year's returning FTEs, do we know how many have more than two years of experience?

Mr. Loewen: I'm not sure if we would have that specific number. When it comes to our wildland firefighters, as I'm sure you know, many of them are students. What we find is that college students that are doing a two-year program: we sometimes get one or two seasons out of them before they're trained and ready to go on to their regular careers. When it comes to university students, we sometimes get three or four years from those students, so a lot of that depends on their ability to, you know, work around their schooling and then when they get into their careers.

From last year it shows we have 563 individuals that applied to return in 2025.

Ms Sweet: That's higher retention than last year. Is that not correct?

Mr. Loewen: It's kind of comparable. When I looked at numbers in the past five years, there were some years where there were dramatic differences. Not really sure why, but the last couple of years we've been pretty consistent.

Ms Sweet: Can we talk about training, then? If we have individuals that are returning, what is the training? Like, do they redo their training every year, or is there an adjustment that's made based on experience?

Mr. Loewen: They'll go through that base training every year.

Ms Sweet: Need to go through it. Okay.

Mr. Loewen: Along with the fitness test every year, too.

Ms Sweet: Right. I would hope so.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah.

Ms Sweet: I'm wondering, Minister: throughout this season I've had quite a few wildland firefighters reach out to my office looking for WCB support, whether it be with PTSD – there was lots of trauma, I think, last year based on the experience that happened. I'm just wondering if you know how many of our full-time year-round wildland firefighters or support are currently off on an LTDI or something kind of related to WCB.

Mr. Loewen: Not offhand, anyways. We could try to figure that out, but we don't have that information available right now.

Ms Sweet: Yeah. I mean, to be fair, Minister, it's honestly just about: is there learning from it? Are there opportunities to support front-line staff? Again, as you know, I've asked this question a few times, making sure that our front-line wildland firefighters have the same benefit support as our municipal firefighters do, whether that's presumptive coverage or any type of psychological supports. I mean, I couldn't imagine running into a forest fire, to be honest. Like, there's got to be some impact, I would think. From a benefits perspective, I'm just curious.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Definitely there's some bolstering going on in the department right now for mental health in particular. That is actively happening. You are correct. You know, there's definitely an opportunity to have mental health issues with the type of job this is and some of the things that happened on the landscape and some

of the things that happened last year. So there is a bolstering going on in that and trying to see if we can improve existing programs and maybe start new programs, too, as necessary.

Ms Sweet: Yeah.

I think maybe then we can pivot to something that I think is really positive that I've heard. The Minister of Municipal Affairs and I were chatting a little bit about this in the last estimates. It sounds like there's a liaison advisory committee being developed to support the work of wildland firefighters and municipal firefighters. I'm just wondering if the ministry can give us some insight as to what that's going to look like or if there are meetings. I recognize RMA has also provided some recommendations now out of their working group specifically to address what happened in Parkland county and some of those other regions.

Mr. Loewen: We're definitely increasing our wildland-urban interface groups. That working group report provided 31 recommendations to the government of Alberta. That's actually not just to the government of Alberta, but the government of Canada, too, municipalities and other agencies and organizations. Most of the recommendations fall into three categories: preparedness, response, and recovery. Some of the key recommendations are enhanced training, co-operation, information-sharing, which we are doing.

I want to say – I know we're over 1,000 as far as training our municipal firefighters in our facility in Hinton for wildfire. All of our training manuals and things like that are available for municipalities to use to train their firefighters also. Again, we've definitely increased that working relationship when it comes to that sort of training. Again, our wildland-urban interface groups have increased.

11:10

Ms Sweet: Minister, is there a cost associated for municipalities to access Hinton? Like, if they want to send their municipal firefighters, do they have to pay a fee?

Mr. Loewen: No. It's all provided.

Ms Sweet: That's good.

Then, I guess, based on those recommendations, one of the questions that my colleague had chatted a little bit about: the Indigenous communities and the fact that we've seen an increase in wildfire around those communities specifically. With those recommendations now and specifically to the federal government, is there a partnership that's going to start being created about – I don't want to see another Parks Canada debate around an Indigenous community in the north or wherever. What does that look like for how we're supporting community on-reserve to address wildland firefighting? Is it a federal responsibility, or does the province take lead? I guess that's my question.

Mr. Loewen: It still is a federal responsibility, but we have agreements with the First Nations to be able to fight fire on the reserves and protect those communities, too. Yeah.

I just wanted to go back, if you didn't mind. There are about 11,000 structural firefighters in Alberta, and about 2,200 of them have registered to take some of these courses that are available on wildland firefighting. There are six modules, including fire behaviour, methods of attack, water delivery, and advanced fire line safety training. At this time 49 per cent have completed the courses that they've enrolled in. So, you know, there's a good relationship going on between municipal firefighting and wildland firefighting.

Ms Sweet: Yeah. I appreciate that, Minister. I recognize that the people conversation is just as important to you as it is to me, and I want to acknowledge that and your ministry as well.

In my last 25 seconds I'm just wondering if you can provide me with the procurement list of all of the RFPs that have gone out in the last two years.

Mr. Loewen: It should be public anyways. It should be available, I believe, online. I think we have to produce the reports quarterly on those.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Our next question person on the government side is Member Yao. Would it be okay to go back and forth?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much, Chair. Minister Loewen, I just want to give you and your team a big shout-out. It's incredible work that you guys have been doing. It's a difficult balance you do, and I think it's underrated as to the work that you guys do, especially with the state of our forest and the positioning of so many of our communities, especially in the northern forest, where, you know, we're not surrounded by a lot of agriculture, farmlands and stuff; we're right next to the bush. I also want to give the member across the way a shout-out for actually being interested in firefighter safety. That's fantastic. As well, the component on cross-training: I was one of those cross-trainers. I went to Hinton, took all the forestry courses, and then my job was to teach our firefighters in Fort McMurray about forestry stuff. So fantastic work. Keep up that great work. It's just phenomenal.

With that said, I'll just drift to my first question here. Obviously, our forests play a huge role in supporting both the environment and the economy, timber production to recreational activities and wildlife habitats. There's a balance between responsible forest management and long-term sustainability of our forests. In performance measure 1(a) on page 70 of the ministry's business plan you list a target threshold of 97 per cent for forest health in terms of natural variability within a region, landscape, or due to climatic conditions. I'm wondering if can share an overview of our current forest management strategy. How does your ministry ensure that forest practices remain sustainable while still meeting the needs of industry and responsible management practices?

If I can expand on that, I know one of the discussions that we always had at the fire hall was the let-it-burn policy. We recognize that there's a lot of industry in these areas. There are a lot of cabins and habitations. Then we look at a place like Australia, where they actually will allow an individual – if his place is in the bush, if he can demonstrate that his property is firesmarted and he has a good water source, they'll even give him equipment, like firefighting equipment, to protect himself from the heat. You know, I'm intrigued by these methodologies like this in other nations. By allowing that, they do enable that concept of letting their forest burn. Mind you, they have more grassland-type fires than the big, heavy forests that we do. I'm wondering if you can expand on that concept.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. That's good. Kind of going back to the original question, Alberta's forest management systems are among the foremost in the world. Alberta follows the sustainable forest

management framework that demands forestry activities support the continued flow of forest goods, like timber, but also services, things like clean water. Forest harvesting is guided by forest management plans approved by my ministry, that over a 200-year planning horizon assess how the forest will be maintained. These plans are updated every 10 years to ensure activities and projected future uses use the most accurate data. Forest management plans are informed by local and regional needs such as caribou conservation and address Indigenous treaty rights. Reforestation of harvested areas is the law. We actively monitor forestry practices to ensure they meet requirements to sustain ecological and social values that forests provide.

When it comes to, like, a let-it-burn policy, quite often, like you mentioned, there could be cabins, there could be energy infrastructure, things like that, and that timber supply is a little bit too valuable to just let it burn. As far as a let-it-burn policy what I would say is that, you know, we do have plans for prescribed burns. In areas where the forests are old and have encroached on areas where they wouldn't have traditionally been, that wouldn't have traditionally had forest, then we do try to have prescribed burns, and if we can't do the prescribed burns, then we use mechanical clearing to open up some of those areas. If we look at our landscape and how it's changed over the last 80 years of wildfire fighting, we've created an older forest. We've had forest encroachment in areas where it hasn't traditionally been, so we want to make sure that we manage our forests in a more natural way.

I know one of the members in the opposition here mentioned today about the Indigenous practices of burning and prescribed burns and things like that. I think that's something that's missing on our landscape. When Canmore announced the forest harvest around their community to help protect from wildfire, they put out a photograph from, I believe, the late 1800s of that valley and compared it to a picture of today. Such a dramatic difference between the two pictures. In the late 1800s it was a nice open, grassy valley, perfect for wildlife and things like that, and now it was heavily forested. Not only did the forest take away the habitat from wildlife, but it also increased the fire risk to the community and to that area. Prescribed burns: I think there are areas, probably in parks, where there might be a policy to let it burn because there's not going to be any forest harvest there, and we do need something to change that habitat to a little more natural habitat because we would have traditionally had either wildfire or prescribed burn by our First Nations in the past.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much for that, Minister.

I'd like to just change gears a little bit and piggyback on some questions my friends from across the way were talking about, and that's the management of some of our parkland. I'm a fiscal conservative. I just strongly believe in balanced budgets. I'm really disappointed that we have a \$5 billion deficit, but sometimes that is just the way it is. It's on the forecast. It's not necessarily what we're going to get, and we obviously have issues like the Americans with their tariffs.

One of the things that came from your ministry was allowing local groups to manage some of our provincial parks. I'm a strong believer in that. I think local groups can do a better job, quite honestly, and do it for a more responsible dollar amount. You know, we talk about reconciliation. Some of the First Nations in my region have actually asked for that opportunity to manage some of the provincial parks and other lands in the Wood Buffalo area. I'm just wondering if you can give us an account of some of the parks that have gone to local groups. Have they demonstrated that they can save money, like that they can do it for a cheaper dollar value as well as doing an effective job at managing those? If that's the case,

I would certainly be trying to promote this more and more, that the province relinquishes control of these provincial parks to our municipal and other partners who might have a better grasp of it at the local level.

11:20

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. Great question, and great comments, too. More than 50 per cent of our campgrounds are operated from some form of third-party partnership. There are over 184 parks with partnerships in place throughout the province, including private businesses that operate through recreation leases, contracted service providers, nonprofit organizations, and municipal organizations like the Special Areas Board, which operates Gooseberry Lake and Little Fish Lake provincial parks. We have nonprofit groups, including organizations like the Friends of the Eastern Slopes, a nonprofit group that encourages sustainable recreation of Alberta's eastern slopes. We've got 10 remote provincial recreation areas, not-for-profit education-oriented groups such as the Friends of Fish Creek Provincial Park Society – that's Fish Creek Provincial Parks in the city of Calgary – to provide high-quality visitor services and educational programs, and Indigenous communities, like you mentioned, including Kehewin Cree Nation, which operates the Kehewin provincial recreation area.

We do have other partnerships across the province, and we really value them. They are great partnerships to have. Like you mentioned, these are people that not only have an interest to do it, but they've got an interest because it's part of their community and part of, you know, being good community members. We look forward to having more of them, actually. Eager to have more.

Mr. Yao: Are there demonstrated cost savings to that?

Mr. Loewen: I believe so because a lot of them take the funds from the camping and things like that, and that's how they fund themselves. It reduces the need for us to have parks personnel, for instance, travelling across the province to different areas to service some of these smaller campgrounds. So there are definitely some efficiencies found there.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Minister. Great work.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Who's next?

Minister, our next member is Member Elmeligi. Would you like to block or ...

Mr. Loewen: We'll go block.

The Chair: We'll go block. Okay.

Go ahead. Five minutes. Yeah.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to shift to land management a little bit here, and I'm going to start with rangeland management. One of the principles of the Forestry and Parks ministry is to manage Alberta's forests and Crown land sustainably. This includes land management, access compliance, and enforcement. That is page 69 of the business plan. Key objective 1.2 is to sustainably manage Alberta's forests and rangelands to ensure healthy ecosystems and support a variety of land uses. My first question, through you, Mr. Chair, to the minister, is really an overarching one about how our priority is decided when there is a conflict between land uses; for example, forestry and recreation or grazing and recreation. Eight point three million is allocated to grazing and range management to facilitate ecosystem health. This is on page 70 of the business plan. I find that a very interesting choice of words because grazing and range management don't

facilitate ecosystem health. Ecosystems are healthy without grazing and range management, but those things can definitely be managed for ecosystem health.

Recently a decision was made to cull the wild horses along the eastern slopes. I get dozens of e-mails about this every single day. I recognize that the wild horse management on the east slopes is quite difficult and controversial. It all stems from: are wild horses native to the province, or are they invasive? We have classified wild horses as invasive and saying they're not endemic to Alberta, meaning that they need to be managed; however, they have been occupying these habitats for several hundred years. As a biologist I guess I struggle with: when does an introduced species actually become a native species? I had a very interesting conversation with an Indigenous elder about this, and he said to me: but if they've been here for 400 years, surely they're part of the landscape by now. Why is the decision being made to cull the herd through sterilization of mares and adoption of stallions?

Really, what I'm trying to get at is: if we're taking an ecosystem-based approach to managing rangelands and grazing lands, is this decision really stemming from the idea that wild horses are competing with cows on grazing leases for grazing lands? If that is the case, I think we just need to be a little more honest about that. I also think that then we would need to have data to support that wild horses are truly in competition with grazing cattle, and I haven't necessarily seen that. I do think that there is enough habitat for wild horses and cows on the eastern slopes. I'm not seeing this crazy abundance of wild horses negatively impacting grazing habitat on the eastern slopes.

When I meet with grazing lease holders, conversely, most of the concerns that they share with me are about unenforced recreational activity on Crown lands, so recreationists cutting fences, motorized recreationists displacing cows from primary grazing habitats. I'm wondering how much money we spend on culling wild horses, and what would it look like if we allocated that investment towards more effective management of recreation on public Crown lands and making sure that cows that are out on the eastern slopes on grazing leases are not disturbed and are not bothered by recreationists?

How is the ministry working with grazing lease holders to ensure that grazing lease holders are compliant and managing their leases with the health of the landscape as a priority? What efforts are being taken to keep cows out of sensitive alpine habitats or away from sensitive riparian areas, and what efforts are being taken to enforce recreational regulations on grazing leases?

Indigenous knowledge has substantial wisdom to contribute regarding rangeland management, particularly in association with grazing management and particularly not in the north of the province; I'm talking about the eastern slopes from Grande Cache down to Waterton. We spent a lot of time discussing the north, which I appreciate, but how is Indigenous knowledge woven with western science to accomplish holistic Crown land management?

And then: what are we doing about the linear disturbance on the eastern slopes? It is above density for trout and grizzly bears. I really want somebody to tell me how linear disturbance is being reclaimed on the eastern slopes to protect our headwaters.

The Chair: Okay. Minister, you have five minutes to respond.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much. It started off with land management, rangeland management, sustainability, and having healthy ecosystems. In much of the province where we have grazing leases and we have cattle grazing is land that previously held bison several hundred years ago. There is a balance that can be had by

having cattle grazing in the landscape and having a healthy ecosystem, like we had in the past hundreds of years, by having cattle replace bison on the landscape and having that grazing.

Grazing also does keep the grass down a bit so that it helps with wildfire prevention and wildfire spread. There are definitely benefits, and I believe that we can have both on the landscape. We can have our cattle grazing on the landscape, and we can have healthy ecosystems.

It was interesting to hear your comments on feral horses. I'm gathering from that there's a change in stance as far as the NDP is concerned, because the NDP in the past was never supportive of feral horses on the landscape. So I'm guessing – this is an interesting change to hear that there's actually support for having feral horses on the landscape and, obviously, unmitigated feral horses, because I hear that you don't like the idea of adoption or sterilization. Now, you used the word "cull," and I think that's the wrong word to use. Cull indicates that there's a lack of respect or that animals will be killed, and that's not the case. There's also bringing up the idea of the competition for grazing cattle.

What was decided, and long before I was a minister, is that there was a Feral Horse Advisory Committee set up with members of the public from both feral horse advocacy organizations and also others. Just to give you an idea of who's all on that committee: Alberta Wildlife Federation; Alberta Professional Outfitters; Alberta Wilderness Association; Horse Welfare Alliance of Canada; Helmer Creek Ranch; Help Alberta Wildies, HAWS; Livestock Identification Services; Royal Canadian Mounted Police; Rocky Mountain forest association; Stoney Nakoda First Nation; Trout Unlimited; University of Alberta; University of Saskatchewan; West Fraser; and Wild Horses of Alberta Society. So a lot of organizations supportive of feral horses there. They came up with the feral horse management framework, which, of course, was done before I became minister, too. That is what the government is using to manage feral horses on the landscape.

11:30

I think we can all agree that feral horses feed differently than cattle or bison. They have both top and bottom incisors, which cattle and bison don't have, so there's a difference in how they feed on the landscape. As our plant species have developed in Alberta over the years, I don't know that the plant species have developed in line with the grazing that a feral horse does on a landscape. You and the feral horse advocacy groups will be happy to hear that the feral horse management framework allows for horses to be on the landscape. I would presume that you and them would be supportive of the management framework because it does clearly state that there's a willingness to make sure that feral horses remain on the landscape. Again, the feral horse management framework was developed with a lot of different science on feral horses and with scientists on the committee, too.

Again, I'm a little confused over the NDP's last stance on feral horses versus now, but I guess that's for you guys to decide.

As far as grazing lease compliance, we do have agrologists that watch the grazing leases to make sure that the grazing leases are in compliance. Grazing lease holders develop plans to decide how recreation activity happens on their grazing leases that they operate on. We do have a recreational access regulation that helps decide how that is managed so that there's an opportunity for recreational activity but also protection for the grazing lease holder and the protection for that land. I'm not sure if we covered anything else in there.

Linear disturbance on eastern slopes. When it comes to that . . .

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Our next questioner from the government side is Member Armstrong-Homeniuk. Would you like to go block or back and forth, Minister?

Mr. Loewen: Oh, sorry. Who are we going to? Oh, yeah. We'll go back and forth. Sorry.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.
Go ahead.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Chair, through you to the minister, first of all, I want to thank you for all the hard work you do. I know how dedicated you are to your ministry, and your staff are amazing. We're very, very lucky to have you as the minister. So thank you again.

Chair, again through you to the minister, the impact of catastrophic wildfires is felt not just under forests and landscapes but in the very communities that surround our forests. Preventing wildfires before they start is essential, especially at high-risk areas where the potential for disaster is greatest. On page 72 of the ministry's business plan \$30.7 million is listed as being allocated to support wildfire mitigation initiatives in 2025-2026. Minister, how does your ministry prioritize wildfire mitigation, particularly in the most vulnerable regions, and what steps are being taken to actively reduce fire hazards and protect communities, wildlife, and critical infrastructure from the threat of wildfires?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. When it comes to wildfire prevention, it's a shared responsibility for all of us. It ranges from individuals to community to industry and all orders of government. The best way to mitigate wildfires is to prevent them from starting in the first place. Every Albertan has a role to play in wildfire prevention.

When it comes to wildfire mitigation in particular, we'll be bringing forward \$30.7 million worth of investment: \$15 million of that is for the community fireguard program, \$10.8 million for the FireSmart program, and \$4.9 million through a federal government agreement to support FireSmart for Métis settlements. Again, it's kind of a multifaceted thing that we have to do when it comes to prevention, mitigation, and battling wildfire.

Again, I appreciate the question.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, through you to you again, Minister, given the vast remote areas of Alberta's forested landscapes detecting wildfires as early as possible is crucial. Catching a fire in its early stages can mean the difference between a manageable situation and a full-scale disaster. On page 99 of the government estimates, line item 2.1, the operating expense for wildfire management is listed as increasing from the 2024-2025 budget. Minister, obviously through the chair to you, how is this increase helping the ministry ensure it has the technology and systems in place to detect wildfires early, especially in remote or hard-to-reach areas? Also, what technologies or innovations are being explored to improve wildfire detection, and how are they being integrated into the province's wildfire response going forward?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. The increase in wildfire management operating expense represents additional funding for the community fireguard program. This program will help minimize the risk of full-scale disasters by wildfire.

With respect to detecting wildfires as early as possible, continued investments in both operating and capital are being made in expanding aerial surveillance, upgrading fire lookout infrastructure, and enhancing satellite and remote sensing capabilities. These efforts ensure that fires are identified quickly, allowing for a faster

and more effective response. Again, when it comes to wildfire, time is definitely a critical aspect, so you want to be able to detect as fast as possible. A lot of times that's private individuals that notice wildfire and call it in. That's incredibly important, as we want to identify those fires as soon as possible to make sure that we can get our crews on them as fast as possible.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, through you to the minister, reducing fuel loads, whether through controlled burns or forest thinning, is one of the most effective ways to mitigate the risk of wildfires. However, these practices require careful planning and balance as they can have long-term effects on the health of the forest ecosystem. Page 72 of the ministry's business plan explains that management of wildfire threats through prevention, preparation, response, and recovery reduces risk to human life, communities, and critical infrastructure as well as preserves natural ecosystems. Minister, can you elaborate on how the Ministry of Forestry and Parks approaches fuel load management in fire-prone areas?

Mr. Loewen: When it comes to enhancing wildfire resistance, we want to make communities more resilient to wildfire, and that's a priority for our government. That was a lot of our focus this past winter. We want to make sure we have FireSmart communities and prevention programs like that to help reduce the risk of wildfire loss and damage. We want to increase public and firefighter safety and enhance wildfire suppression capability. Vegetation management is a core activity that's funded through the FireSmart program.

Fireguards are an important tactic used in wildfire suppression, too. They are designed to increase the likelihood of containing a wildfire, reducing losses and improving the safety of firefighters. The ministry is working with the forest sector to focus harvesting of hazardous tree stands around vulnerable communities. The community hazardous fuels reduction program Alberta is protecting communities against the effects of wildfire and is another tool for increasing proactive vegetation management activities in the forest protection area through that program. It aims at leveraging the forest industry's expertise to remove merchantable hazardous fuels within five kilometres of at-risk communities in Alberta. Normally the forest companies plan to harvest hazardous stands near communities, but this initiative will accelerate that planning as we want to make sure that we protect those communities as soon as possible.

We also have the controlled hazard burns that are also an important part of wildfire prevention. We see them happening around communities, burning up dead grass and things that, if it's burned in a controlled manner, could help prevent a wildfire from getting out of control.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, through you to the minister again, wildfires don't respect boundaries – we've seen that – so ensuring effective responses requires seamless collaboration between provincial, federal, and municipal governments as well as Indigenous communities. A co-ordinated approach ensures that resources are used efficiently and that wildfire response is timely and effective. On page 72 of the ministry's business plan key objective 4.2 covers adapting wildfire management capacity through effective resource allocation and collaborative partnerships. Minister, can you explain: how does the Minister of Forestry and Parks work with federal, municipal, and Indigenous partners to co-ordinate wildfire response efforts? Can we expect this co-ordination to continue in 2025 and 2026? Also, can you explain the communication and decision-making processes

in place to make sure that these efforts are well co-ordinated even in the face of multiple fires across several different jurisdictions?

11:40

Mr. Loewen: Yes. We have various agreements and plans of partnerships with international, federal, interprovincial, provincial, municipal, and Indigenous partners. An Indigenous Services Canada agreement allows us to provide wildfire suppression and prevention and mitigation services to First Nations communities within the forest protection area.

We have mutual aid wildfire control plans and agreements with over 100 municipalities both inside and outside the forest protection area – these plans detail co-ordinated response plans for municipal fire departments and Forestry and Parks – and Department of National Defence and Parks Canada agreements for wildfire response on designated federal lands. In addition, Forestry and Parks works closely with the Alberta Emergency Management Agency to co-ordinate wildfire response and emergency management between other provincial departments and municipalities. We also have mutual aid resource-sharing agreements with other provinces and internationally, mostly co-ordinated through the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, or what we call CIFFC, and these agreements allow for more timely access to additional highly trained firefighters in times of need.

We've seen just recently other municipalities in North America needing help, and we were happy to provide firefighters to California in their recent fires. We've also seen in the past two years us bringing in firefighters from around the world to help us fight wildfire in our province. That's because no jurisdiction has the firefighting capacity to fight fire in the worst case scenario. We rely on each other to get us through those toughest years and those toughest times of the year.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

With 27 seconds, 26 now, left I just want to say again: thank you for the amazing job that you do. I do feel very protected having you as the minister, and all the good work that you do is very much noted and appreciated.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Member Ganley, if you could introduce yourself for the record.

Ms Ganley: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Kathleen Ganley, Calgary-Mountain View.

The Chair: Okay. Who is our next speaker on the opposition side? Member Calahoo Stonehouse, would you like to go block time or back and forth?

Mr. Loewen: We can go back and forth.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Great. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: The forestry and lumber sector remains a significant contributor to Alberta's economy. It supports more than 30,000 jobs, generates over \$14 billion in economic activity, including \$2.8 billion annually in labour income. The U.S. currently meets only about 70 per cent of its homebuilding lumber needs domestically and uses Canadian lumber to fill the gap. The U.S. is the destination for half of Canada's lumber, pulp, and wood panels.

President Trump has specifically called out Canada's forestry industry, claiming that the United States has its own forests and can produce its own wood and lumber products. The U.S. raised duties on softwood lumber from Canada in August 2024 from 8 per cent to 14 per cent under Biden. The U.S. Commerce department recently revealed another increase in duties on lumber from 14 per cent to nearly 30 per cent. Combined with the incoming 25 per cent tariff, Alberta's forest products will face a staggering 55 per cent tax when being exported to the U.S. My question, through the chair, is: what specifically is the minister doing to protect our forestry sector from the threat of tariffs?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. Thanks for the question. It's definitely a concern of ours. As mentioned, the duties had been rising already, and they were already causing serious concern in the industry and in government, too. The addition of tariffs only makes a tough situation worse.

As far as what we're doing, we're working with the federal government on trade advocacy. You can see in the budget that we allocated money to be working on, to battle some of these duties and tariffs in the U.S. I think it was about \$2.4 million. We have business and market development initiatives. I and some of the department and many of the forest industry companies travelled to Japan last fall to try to increase our trade with Japan. We want to make sure that we expand markets wherever we can to make sure we get our product sold but also at good prices.

Providing access to low-interest loans. I know the federal government has some programs, and we want to encourage the federal government to be working on some of these programs to help the industry through these tough times. We've been coming up with ideas of things that we may do to help alleviate some of these concerns in the meantime when it comes to making sure that we have our businesses remain in business.

We have a business-friendly environment for our forestry companies in Alberta. We've seen mills closing down in B.C., a substantial number of them, and our mills are still going really good right now, but that doesn't negate the concern of these tariffs and duties moving forward. The U.S. is a large customer for our forest products, and we would hope that would continue, but we'd also hope that we can have a fair trading platform as far as duties and tariffs.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you for that.

Further to that, through the chair, in key objective 2.3 it suggests the minister is advocating for fair and open access to markets for the forestry sector. My question through the chair is: does the minister consider his advocacy work on this a success so far? Is he concerned about the tax exports, that they might go even higher than the 55 per cent?

Mr. Loewen: Well, this work is ongoing, when it comes to dealing with the U.S. trade situation. I think we've seen a lot of back and forth, a lot of up and down in those discussions. That work will continue, and we want to make sure that we do our best for our forest industry and the families and communities that depend on the forest industry. We have a lot of our rural Alberta communities that are highly dependent on jobs and that economic benefit of having that forest activity happen on the landscape.

We also know that there's a value to the work that the forestry companies have on the landscape as far as creating that mosaic of forestry to somewhat represent wildfire that used to happen on the landscape. We're definitely still concerned and continue to be concerned, and we'll be working on this. Hopefully, again, we can

get things to a situation where our companies and our forestry industry will have some certainty and some confidence in things going forward.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: According to page 31 of the fiscal plan, in the economic outlook, the forestry manufacturing industry is highly exposed to the proposed U.S. tariffs. Chart 10 lists Alberta's top 10 manufacturing exports by product in 2024. This list includes veneer, plywood, and engineered wood; sawmills and wood preservation; pulp. The vast majority of exports from those first two categories go to the U.S.A. Exports for pulp are more diversified; a significant portion goes to the U.S. This is a massive multibillion-dollar industry. My question, through the chair: is the minister considering any major regulation or policy changing to support the forest industry?

Mr. Loewen: I think the short answer is yes, we're considering all. We have all things on the table as far as how we might react to the situation that's unfolding. Again, it's kind of hard to predict where it's headed because it seems to be changing fairly regularly, but we have to prepare for the worst case scenario. So we're looking forward to working with our forest industry and those companies. Again, we presently have a very competitive industry here in the province, and that's based on how we've dealt with our forestry companies and how we appreciate the work that they do in our communities, but we also want to make sure that that continues and make sure that they continue to be competitive.

11:50

We also work with Jobs, Economy and Trade to assess that competitiveness of the Alberta forestry sector. It's important that Alberta's forestry business environment meets or exceeds that provided by other North American jurisdictions to ensure forest-sector investment is maintained or expanded in the province. We have seen recent investments in the province when it comes to our forestry industry, and we would hope that that would continue.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Through the chair, is the minister planning to implement a forest manufacturing tax credit, and if so, when?

Mr. Loewen: Again, we're considering all options, and we'll respond accordingly to what we have to as we see how this unfolds. We are looking at everything as far as how we can make sure that our forest industry companies remain competitive and remain the good employers that they are and the good community members that they are in rural Alberta.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you.

I just would like to quickly return to key objective 4.4 on page 72, where the business plan calls for the development of a provincial wildfire mitigation strategy, with the allocation of \$30.7 million on wildfire preparedness. In my question I'd asked, through the chair, the minister what portion was dedicated to Indigenous language speakers.

I just wanted to provide a little context of why this is so important. The United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples has declared this the year of preservation of Indigenous languages. I want to remind this government that they are a signatory to the United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples as well as upholding the 94 calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I fear that this question was not a stupid one but one that upholds both the United Nations declaration and the truth and reconciliation calls to action along with the relationship of reconciliation. So that is why I brought

forward this question, just for clarification and context and why I believe bringing forward Indigenous languages on this budget line could be effective in saving Indigenous lives and Indigenous homes during a crisis. I just wanted to make that clarification.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you. One thing we are considering doing: for some of our firefighters, the training programs happen within the community. I'm not sure if we've started that yet or not. Yeah. We'll be training our type 1 firefighters right in Indigenous communities. I think that's a real step forward as far as bringing those opportunities right to the community rather than them having to travel to get that education.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: I think that's really important insofar as reconciliation and economic reconciliation. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: That's it for me today. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our next presenter is Member Hunter. Would you like to go back and forth or block?

Mr. Loewen: Back and forth is good.

The Chair: Okay. You have six minutes and 40 seconds.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Appreciate what I've heard today. It sounds like you have a good understanding about how to make sure we protect our forests and our parks. I can tell you, Minister, that growing up, being out in our parks and in our wilderness and in the mountains was the thing that kept me sane. Probably lots of people I've talked to before are the same way. I thank you for the work that you're doing in protecting our parks. They are something that we want our children and grandchildren to have.

The work that you're doing with wildfire: my first questions will be on that. I thank you for the innovation that I've seen in the work that you've done in that space. You know, I was on Treasury Board when we saw the big fire, and that is not just a cost to Alberta taxpayers but a cost to the industry and to Alberta. So thank you very much for being innovative in that space. Now, I see on page 72 \$2.1 million to modernize wildfire applications. Minister, through the chair, could you speak to what this investment entails? And second, through the chair to the minister, how will this funding help improve wildfire responses and reporting?

Mr. Loewen: Yes. I appreciate your comments off the start about being in the outdoors keeping you sane and the importance of our mental health when it comes to spending time in the outdoors. For me, I feel a great relief when I get outside the walls of buildings and get out in the outdoors. That's something I enjoy, too.

Going on to your question, the \$2.1 million investment is focused on upgrading and integrating our wildfire management information management and technology applications. This includes enhancing data analytics, real-time tracking, and predictive modelling capabilities to improve both real-time decision-making and planning. Additionally, we are modernizing our reporting systems to streamline communication and co-ordination among response teams. Through this investment the province will benefit from streamlined warehouse management, improved data analytics and reporting, and enhanced dispatch tools. Obviously, I'd like to thank

the Ministry of Technology and Innovation for their support in developing this new technology alongside our dedicated wildfire team.

I'll leave it at that, then.

Mr. Hunter: Thanks, Minister.

Wildfire is, of course, a threat to our forestry sector, but unfortunately, it isn't the only one. The softwood lumber dispute endures and continues to affect forestry and forestry-related jobs in Alberta. This budget includes \$2.4 million for softwood lumber litigation and negotiations, based on page 71 of the business plan. Minister, through the chair to you, do you have some information on how the softwood lumber dispute continues to affect our provincial forestry sector?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. When we look at what's happening with our trading partner in the U.S., obviously a lot of our forestry products are sold into the U.S., and we have both the issue of duties and tariffs, so two different things. The tariffs have been increasing over the last couple of years from 8 to 14 per cent now to about 30 per cent. If the tariffs are added on there, adding another 25 per cent definitely puts our businesses in a tougher situation. We want to make sure that our businesses remain competitive and able to withstand this trade war that's going on right now.

When it comes to the duties, some of our companies pay more than other companies. The 30 per cent is kind of an average, where some of them are paying substantially more. Some of them with the tariffs could be paying as much as 70 per cent of their costs in tariffs and duties in combination. It definitely causes us concerns and it's obviously a concern of our industry.

We have a competitive situation here in Alberta for our forestry companies. They're able to invest more and more into our province. We've seen recent large investments in our province from our forestry companies, and we want that to continue. We want to make sure that we keep that market share and keep these companies going. Again, they provide not only an economic benefit to Alberta

and to Albertans but on the landscape the work that they do is beneficial to us, too.

As we move forward and deal with the U.S. government, again, we've allocated the \$2.4 million to help in this battle. We're doing all we can as far as travelling to different places to make sure that we can market our products in a way that hopefully we can keep these companies going, too.

Just a minute left, I see. If I can, I just want to take a moment to say thanks to my team here, the good people in Forestry and Parks and the work that they do and how much I appreciate them and everything they do. We have people that are working in offices in Edmonton here that are doing good work, we have people on the landscape doing exceptional work, too, and we have our wildland firefighters that are working to protect our communities. Incredibly important work. The work that's done in parks is incredibly important because we want to have that opportunity to be able to recreate and have that time for that mental break, to be able to get away from things and enjoy the beautiful landscape we have. We have our people in our lands department, in the hunting and fishing branch that are concerned about the environment that we live in and want to make sure that it's sustainable into the future, to make sure future generations can enjoy the same things that we enjoy on the landscape.

Sorry for taking a shameless opportunity to make a plug here, but I appreciate them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of ministry estimates has concluded.

I would like to remind the committee that we're scheduled to meet this evening at 7 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

