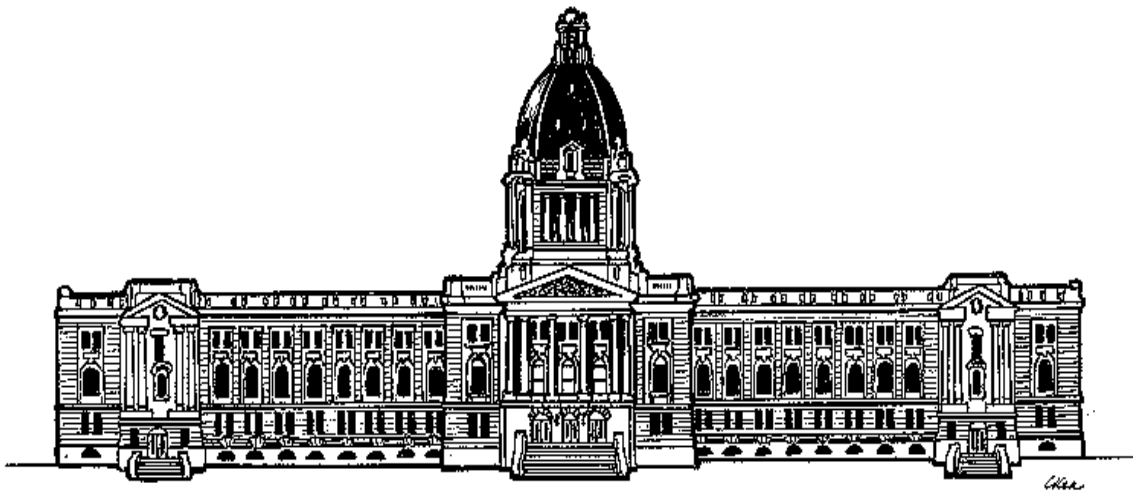




# **STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY**

**Hansard Verbatim Report**

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**Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan**

**Twenty-fifth Legislature**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY  
2006**

Mr. Kevin Yates, Chair  
Regina Dewdney

Mr. Randy Weekes, Deputy Chair  
Biggar

Ms. Doreen Hamilton  
Regina Wascana Plains

Hon. Deb Higgins  
Moose Jaw Wakamow

Mr. Delbert Kirsch  
Batoche

Hon. Eldon Lautermilch  
Prince Albert Northcote

Mr. Lyle Stewart  
Thunder Creek

[The committee met at 19:00.]

**Ms. Woods:** — I'd like to call the meeting to order. Last October we received notice that the Chair of the committee, Mr. McCall had submitted his resignation upon his entry into cabinet. As a result, the first item that has to be done this evening is the election of a new Chair. So I will open the floor for any nominations. Ms. Hamilton.

**Ms. Hamilton:** — I would nominate Kevin Yates for the position of Chair.

**Ms. Woods:** — Are there any other nominations? All right I'll invite Ms. Hamilton to move the motion then. I think you've got it there.

**Ms. Hamilton:** — I would move:

That Kevin Yates be elected to preside as Chair of the Standing Committee on the Economy.

**Ms. Woods:** — The motion therefore before the committee is:

That Kevin Yates be elected to preside as Chair of the Standing Committee on the Economy.

All those in favour? All those opposed? That motion is carried, and I'll invite Mr. Yates to take the Chair.

**General Revenue Fund  
Supplementary Estimates — November  
Agriculture and Food  
Vote 1**

**Subvotes (AG08), (AG03), and (AG09)**

**The Chair:** — Thank you very much, everyone, for your confidence in electing me as Chair. The first item of business before us tonight is consideration of the supplementary estimates for the Department of Agriculture and Food. Mr. Minister, would you please introduce yourself and your guests to the committee.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I would like to introduce my deputy minister, who is immediately to my right, Harvey Brooks; to my left, associate deputy minister, Hal Cushon; behind me, Jacquie Gibney who is assistant deputy minister; Karen Aulie who is director of corporate services branch; David Boehm, director of policy branch; and Tom Schwartz who is branch manager for financial programs branch.

**The Chair:** — Thank you very much. I'll now open the floor . . . Do you have any opening statements, Mr. Minister?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — No, I don't.

**The Chair:** — Okay. I'll open the floor for questions. Thank you. I recognize the member from Melville-Saltcoats.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome, Mr. Minister. And I want to just welcome all your officials here

tonight and thank them for giving up their evening and coming and answering questions that we will have. I have a number of questions later on, but I'll turn it over our member for Arm River to ask some questions to start off tonight.

**Mr. Brkich:** — Thank you very much. Welcome today. I have one case here. I won't mention the individual's name because I won't ask you to — I know you can't — give out the information on a particular individual, but I will lay out what I got from him. And then I will ask how the program fits into it and maybe some more information.

The program is on the unseeded acre program for the \$10. So that the call — and I've got this from my CA [constituency assistant] and I haven't talked to him personally yet — but it just came in and given me a scenario here. Now he's on, so far, in the crop insurance program for this year, and I don't think he was for the last couple of years, I understand. But he did apply for the unseeded acre program for that \$10 payment.

He applied for 60 acres but only got paid for 39 acres. They categorized the remaining as summerfallow. Now he states that that's not accurate. He says the acres were drowned out in 2005 as well as 2006. And it says, and most likely be drowned out again in 2007. And I can attest to that. This is from the Wynyard area, and I've been up there for the last few years. And they've had an inordinate amount of rain for the last three years and runoff there. It's been . . . They've had three wet consecutive years.

Now he also says his son has applied for the program for 50 acres and got zero paid back in the same situation. They classified these acres as summerfallow. Now I haven't . . . We had put a call into the department, and they still haven't gotten back yet why they classified them as summerfallow. I'm not sure of the reason. And I'm hoping later on I'll deal with your department on this individual case.

But I will ask you, I guess, for some information just on the program itself and how you would classify somebody as summerfallow acres when he, let's say, this case he put in for 60. Do you send out an agent, or do you go back over past crop insurance? I'm not sure if this particular gentleman was in crop insurance maybe 5, 6, 7, 8 years ago or four years ago, and you're using them records to check on for information at that end of it.

So I think that's my question. I'll let you maybe address some of it, and then I may ask some follow-up questions.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Basically if the person was not in crop insurance or the father and son, neither were in crop insurance, they would, by filling out the forms, indicate what their history had been in terms of seeding in the area. Clearly we have to deal with the specifics, but according to officials it's not likely that it would have been deemed anything summerfallow. The person's history would be indicative of what might have been done with certain portions of their land. As it is, the same process that would be used if you had crop insurance would be the process that was used to determine how much of the claimed area would qualify for coverage under the unseeded acreage payment.

**Mr. Brkich:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'm a little unfamiliar with the program, so I may ask some basic questions on it because we were lucky in our area. We weren't not really drowned out; we were in the spring. When a person . . . let's say he applied — and I'll just keep using his scenario — he applied for 60 acres. Would he . . . let's say he was accepted for full 60. Is there a percentage that he is paid for of that, or would he just . . . Let's say he just put in . . . I lost 60 acres this year, and this is my history. Normally I do seed that 60 acres. Would he get paid for the full 60 acres, or is there only a percentage of that that you get paid for?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — It basically uses the same formula as under crop insurance. We'd look at 100 per cent of the seeding intensity. It's minus 5 per cent, and so they would get 95 per cent of what their historical seeding intensity would be.

**Mr. Brkich:** — Okay. I guess with this case then I'll probably pursue it further individually, but there'll be one more question I'll ask you. Is there an appeal process, because he'd asked me that too. At that end of it, if somebody feels that they . . . in his instance where he thought he should get paid for the full amount.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — If the issue is around the number of acres, then it would be, the process basically would just be to write a letter into the department saying, you know, we're concerned that it wasn't done the way that we thought. This would be the acreage that we think would be right. And then the department would review that.

And one other thing too, just to note that in determining seeding intensity, the applicant would fill out all the forms with their own personal information and supportive data. If we have supportive crop insurance data or whatever, would be used as well to gain a full understanding of what seeding intensity might be and it might . . . I think we do some regional look at what the picture is too, do we not?

**Mr. Schwartz:** — We do some comparisons just for verification purposes. But there are situations where the producer simply has no documentation that he can provide to support his application. Usually it's a case of a livestock producer who seeds his land for green feed and isn't . . . you know, he doesn't have permit books. He doesn't buy hail insurance, so there's nothing. So in those cases the regulations allow us to simply use the area average to determine his seeding intensity if they can't provide any supporting documentation.

**Mr. Brkich:** — So let's say he wasn't in crop insurance. Was there a good chance that maybe you had used it then without their knowledge, and that's why he was cut out?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Let me just see if I can clarify. In terms of the question, you're saying if he did not have any supportive data, he'd just written in and said, look, I lost 60 acres without supporting data. Yes, I think we'd have to look at the specific case really just to be able to comment further on it.

**Mr. Brkich:** — Well I thank you for your answers. I'll pass it on to him, and then my office and myself will work with your office on an individual cases later on with this case. Thank you. I'll turn it back over to the critic for the area, Bob Bjerneud.

**The Chair:** — Thank you. I recognize Mr. Bjerneud.

**Mr. Bjerneud:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, and I believe you've had meetings with the stock growers and all those groups, and they have a number of questions. In fact I believe these questions had maybe gone to you, and I don't know if you've had time to see them yet, but actually some very good questions here to start off with.

The first ones are about the CAIS [Canadian agricultural income stabilization] program. And I'll maybe give you a little history of what he's talking about here. He's got down as the issue is that federal Agriculture minister, Chuck Strahl, announced \$900 million for a new federally funded program known as the CAIS inventory transition initiative, CITI. In May 2006 the \$900 million announced by Mr. Strahl only covers 50 per cent of the benefits that accrue to producers as a result of the P1-P2 inventory valuation for 2003, 2004, and 2005 CAIS program years. And he goes on with some explanatory notes if you have them.

His first question is, is the Government of Saskatchewan considering topping up the 50 per cent outstanding benefits pertaining to the CITI [CAIS inventory transition initiative] program not yet compensated for by the federal government? If not, why not?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — I think to . . . And I did talk to some of the stock growers about this as well. Very important to note that when the federal government was speaking to the provincial governments about the CITI program, they talked very clearly about how they would commit to funding the past changes of inventory valuation. And partway into it they started to see the numbers and said that the 900 million that they had designated wouldn't cover the costs fully and that they would have to pro-rate.

But never at any point was there any expectation or discussion with the provinces about carrying a portion of the adjustment for the past years. That was a federal commitment that they would open that program up and fund it. On the go-forward years, we would have to make commitment as provinces, though.

**Mr. Bjerneud:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. It's my understanding though that . . . And I know that that wasn't an obligation of the federal government to the province to match this at the point that they announced this. But is it right that in Alberta and Ontario are topping it up to that level, that they had cost shared that program the same?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — As far as Ontario is concerned, Ontario has had for a number of years a market revenue program. And they have applied their market revenue program to the CITI adjustment. But with Alberta, at this point we don't have any confirmation that they have applied funding to the inventory valuation adjustment. They have certainly put more funding into the CAIS program, but by what vehicle, we're not clear.

**Mr. Bjerneud:** — Well to my understanding, you know, they put more money than actually would even be considered their share, if we were topping it up as such.

The other question here that he has, what does the province estimate it would cost to do this retroactive, 50 per cent, CITI top-up for 2003, 2004, and 2005 CAIS program years? Do we have any numbers that would maybe show us what that will cost?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — If we were to match, it would be about \$235 million.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — That's the provincial share that it would take to match up to that?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — No. The federal payment is \$235 million, and if we were to match it, it would be another \$235 million.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — Okay thank you.

The next questions that he goes on to ask here are to do with the livestock horticultural facilities incentive rebate program, LHFIRP. And the issue he's talking about here is PST paid on building materials used in the construction of livestock and horticultural facilities. And the program ended December 31, 2003.

The program was known as livestock and horticultural facilities incentive program and was in place from 1997 to 2003. Exemption provided to all commodities totalled about \$10 million during the program's existence.

And his question is, does the Government of Saskatchewan intend ever on reinstating that program? And if so, what does it estimate the annual cost of the program to be?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Historically the amount that would have gone out would have been somewhere around \$2 million a year on the program. But I think it's important to note the things that we have done and we are also considering today. Since that time, since the withdrawal of the program after December '03, we have now as of this year reduced the PST by 2 per cent which will of course will apply to feedlot and horticultural developments as well.

We have the Vicq commission's recommendations, which recommend against using targeted tax support in that way. And we have under way currently a review of our meat strategy which I think is . . . we want to make sure that with the resources that are available we are applying that in ways that will best enable the industry to grow. So we'll be looking at whether we're doing applications in the livestock development area of feedlots or other aspects of livestock development.

But at this point I think we will probably follow the kind of advice that we got from Vicq. We did reduce the capital tax as well which was I think very important, but clearly the advice of our Finance department would be to not use that kind of a vehicle as we move forward.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — And I'm sure the minister has heard this example that they're using here, and when we met with them it was the same thing too. But Borderline Feeders, they had planned to build a 10,000-head facility, but naturally due to short of capital money, cut it down to a 7,000-head facility. And

I guess what they're saying, had the PST [provincial sales tax] on construction costs been rebated, the feedlot would have actually built a much larger feedlot than they had, because they'd have had that much more dollars to spend.

And I believe they figured out on that amount of money they were talking was around \$140,000 in the first year, you know, during construction, and in the first year of operation spent over 7,000 on PST for operating costs. So it certainly does add up, and it would be one way of assisting these business people — and that's exactly what they are — in helping to grow the province.

He goes on to ask the question here, Mr. Minister, and I heard your answer, but you can care to answer this or not. If the LHFIRP is reimplemented — and that's what he was asking — would the program be retroactive to 2004, 2005, and 2006, and if not, why not? And I guess with your answer I guess what you're saying you're not probably going to go there, but should you go there, I guess he's asking the question, would it be retroactive?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — I think it important to note certainly we have been involved, supportive of the feedlot development and are committed to helping to build that part of the industry. We provide a number of services — training for feedlot operations and expertise in engineering and just . . . there are a number of services that are provided through the department.

I think the changes that we're making in terms, in taxation whether it's the reduction in capital tax, whether it's the PST today, they'll have ongoing positive influences. In terms of, I think, it's . . . just in terms of your question about whether we'd do something if we reinstated it, I think the reality is that there is not an opportunity given the recommendations, given the direction that we've chosen to move in, to reinstate.

So on a go-forward basis, we want to see how we can provide the most support to Borderline and to others. And clearly recognition . . . when we look back at the program as it operated before, it did provide support and help to those who were building when the program was in place. No denial of that at all. But as we go forward, we're going to see if we can make sure that we're providing good support to enable that side of our livestock industry to keep developing.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — Thank you. Going on here, I know I've had this concern brought to me by a number of other farmers and large cattle producers out there. And it's to do with dyed diesel and farm plates usage by custom ag contractors. And I'm sure the minister's heard this one but, you know, the problem I guess out there is that Alberta contractors are allowed to use farm licences on and use dyed diesel on their highway vehicles when performing custom services such as corral cleaning, silaging, and things like that but solely for the purpose of agriculture producers.

And I guess the question is, is the government pushing Finance and SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] to allow custom ag producers, ag contractors performing services solely for agricultural producers to use dyed diesel in and farm plates on their highway vehicles? And I guess his question goes on to say, and if not, why not? So . . .

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Well first of all, just note that there is only one province that does allow marked diesel fuel to be used in commercially licensed vehicles and that is Alberta where marked diesel fuel can be used in licensed manure spreaders.

Secondly, just an acknowledgement the way the programs operate and the parameters of each department that this is an issue that you might want to pursue with Finance when you have Finance in estimates. Certainly again we have dealt with many inquires about this and we do refer them to Finance and do note what the implications are when we refer them.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. And that we will follow up with Finance when the estimates come up there. And I guess what he's also talking about is that we have the ability now to get permits, you know, on a day basis but I guess what they're saying is number one, the permit, I believe, is about \$35 per truck per day and if you get six trucks in and do all this, the farmer is picking up all these tabs. If it happens to rain and you have permits, you just got to go back and get more permits. So it can be very costly and this money all comes back to the farmer when the bill is made out because he's the guy that's naturally picking up the tab for this.

His last question on this subject is, what does the province estimate this exemption would — the benefit — actually would cost us if we did have an exemption for something like that? Is there any way of telling what that might cost the provincial coffers?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — I think again the member would be directed towards Finance to get that data.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — Okay. Thank you, Mr. Minister. I would hope though that you would give this some consideration because I know it's an issue not just brought by the stock growers or the cattlemen, but actually individuals out there that are also caught in that same scenario when they bring contractors in and it's an added cost that they feel that they would certainly benefit if it was, an exemption was put in there.

He goes on to ask questions here about — and we've talked about this before — about the drought assistance for southwest Saskatchewan farmers and ranchers. And the issue he's talking about here is south and southwest portions of Saskatchewan have been significantly dry during both 2005, 2006 resulting in reduced forage and crop production in the areas.

What amount and type of assistance does the Government of Saskatchewan plan to offer to farmers and ranchers of the Southwest that have experienced severe drought during 2005 and 2006?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Sorry. It's taking a bit of time just to gather together the number of things we did. We were, through our officials, aware of . . . and also some early letters, aware that the Southwest was, particularly in pockets, was dealing with some quite severe drought and also some other implications of damage in the area.

We met with a delegation from the Southwest and talked to them about what was currently available and what might be available. We talked to them about how the CAIS program,

how the crop insurance programs do apply to those areas. We were clearly getting a message from the federal government that ad hoc programs are not on, that they really wanted to see the end of any further ad hoc programs. And so we started to ask about, well will this disaster program come on stream quickly enough? Is it going to be able to apply? And we were told that we would see it in the fall.

We did get a picture of the disaster program. Basically a framework was outlined — what would be in, what would be out — at the federal-provincial-territorial meeting on the 13th, 14th. And really there's limited areas that it would apply.

In the meantime we have also written to the federal government on a number of fronts. One to see if they could, through PFRA [Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration], could have some of the water programs apply today rather than, you know, waiting until a new year to begin to activate those.

We also have written and asked for the drought-induced income tax deferral for cattle dispersals to be applicable, and they have agreed that that will be applicable.

Outside of that, really there is no consideration by the federal government or our provincial government to do any further ad hoc payments. We're clearly looking at trying to work through the programs, develop a program that will work. I'm not, I'll have to say, not completely pleased with the disaster program as it's been outlined. It would be effective for disease. It might have some effect for some losses.

The other loss in that area of drought which is quite significant, and it's not just loss but also damage, has been from gophers. And so we're looking there at readjusting crop insurance to be able to make sure that it applies to those situations. I also asked the federal minister if he would consider doing a ministerial exemption for the appropriate poisons that would enable them to deal with the gopher problem. And he assured me that they would look at that.

And I know there have been other folks who have pressed him to try and make sure that that will happen as well because I know farmers down in that area have done everything they can with the tools they have to try and reduce the gopher numbers. But it's an infestation that's causing significant damage. The disaster program would apply there, we assume. And we also asked him if we could do an overlay kind of a test pilot program with it. But we assume that that would help with reclamation of land that's been damaged because of the gophers.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. You might find this kind of interesting. Mr. Minister, I was at a trade show on the weekend. There was an older gentleman there that had farmed all his life and we got talking about problems in the province and agriculture in general. And he has a quick cure for gophers — I'd never heard this one before — that if you feed them Juicy Fruit gum, the problem goes away very fast. We don't want to get into how it goes away real fast but the gophers don't show up next spring. So it might be something we can pass on to the farmers in the Southwest to help work with their problem. We won't advertise that very loud, probably, although Juicy Fruit might like it.

Mr. Minister, just some of the other points that he makes here, and you may be full aware of this, but I thought I would get them on the record because, I mean this is very important to the guys in the Southwest — the ranchers and the cattlemen, and the cattlemen and the guys that have crops seeded down there. But some of the other points that he makes here is spring flooding in 2006 resulted in a large number of acres in northeastern portion of Saskatchewan not being seeded. And we both toured the area and saw how bad it was up there.

But he goes on to say flooding assistance offered by the federal and provincial governments to producers in these areas included ad hoc \$15 per acre payment for unseeded acres — that was the federal government — ad hoc \$10 per acre payment for unseeded acres, provincial government; and then as we know, the \$50 an acre unseedable acreage payment for those enrolled in crop insurance.

Many hayfields in southwest Saskatchewan were not harvested or hayed or grazed in 2006 because there was nothing there. Moisture conditions in this part of the province were also very dry in 2005, so they're going to their second year, a number of those ranchers out in that area. A large number of cattle will have to leave the area of the province in 2006 and 2007 if conditions do not improve. And I guess he's talking probably about rain and then now snowfall in the winter and runoff.

Drought assistance was provided to producers in the north central and northwest portion of Saskatchewan during the drought of 2002. So I guess, you know, he's trying to get the point across that they feel that they're in the same predicament that, you know, Carrot River and Porcupine area and those farmers were up there that needed help. And I know they certainly needed the help when it was given up there and it certainly didn't solve all the problems but it certainly assisted the situation they were in. And I guess what this producer and these guys are saying out there is what they'd like to do is be treated equal and they feel they're in somewhat of the same position.

So would the minister care to comment on that?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Thank you. Yes. I think one of the problems with ad hoc programs is that people would always impute and say well, you know, our situation is very similar and it's a precedent. And I believe that that is one of the reasons why the federal government and ourselves would be moving away from ad hoc programs and trying to make programs that people can count on. They know they're there. They're reliable. It's not a matter of twisting arms. It's a matter of having good, solid programs that people can count on.

I think in the . . . You know, when we look at the history there, and people know that the water programs are annual, that you have to get your applications in, there is a responsibility on the producers — you know, just looking at their recent history — to get applications in, recognizing that a drought could go on for several years. So hopefully they will take advantage of those programs that are in place and not wait until things get to an extreme where it's very difficult for them to then follow up or you're late into a year, as with this year, and it's too late for applications. So I'm hoping that they'll pick up on that.

The other reference that Mr. Bjornerud was making is to the program that was the drought program for producers in the Northwest, and certainly we're reviewing that and seeing whether that would apply and could be applied in this case.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — Did I understand you, Mr. Minister, before — and I missed the comment about the tax ramifications — should you have to downsize your herd because of the drought is there something in place for that?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — There is. We had applied to the federal government to make sure that that would be in place — if people need to do some herd dispersal that they won't be dinged by income tax in doing that.

**Mr. Bjornerud:** — Good. Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Chair, just for a few minutes I'd like to give the floor to my colleague from Spiritwood.

**The Chair:** — Thank you very much. I would recognize Mr. Allchurch.

**Mr. Allchurch:** — Thank you. Welcome, Mr. Minister, and welcome to your officials here tonight. My line of questioning is to do with crop insurance and wildlife damage. And as you know, Mr. Minister, I've brought this to the attention of the government I believe for the last, you know, five or six years. The problem has not gotten better. The problem has gotten worse.

And one of the problems that happened this year is we had a fair amount of rain in the springtime. The crops were seeded somewhat later this spring, which then puts the harvesting later in the fall time. As you're also aware, we had a significant snowstorm on September 19 where areas around Spiritwood got in the neighbourhood of anywhere from 4 to 6 inches of snow.

The farmers in the area have done what they could to resolve this problem. A lot of them have seeded alfalfa acres now and not crop but that's also to do with the pricing of crop. They've also gone to straight cut headers so they'd leave the grain standing. And the reason for this is in that area there is an over and abundant of wildlife. And I see your deputy minister shaking hands, and he knows well as sure of the problem I'm talking about because he just came from there hunting. And I hope he had good luck.

The farmers in that area say when they allow you to shoot, they don't want you to shoot one. It's a penalty if you shoot one. If you shoot 10, well they'll let you on their land and hunt. That's the seriousness of the problem with the wildlife damage.

Some of my questions should be restated through the Environment, but because wildlife damage is covered under crop insurance then that allows me to ask questions here tonight. The deadline for wildlife damage claims was, I believe, November 15. At that time many farmers that did have crop out . . . and there's not a lot but there are some and they vary in acres anywhere from 10 or 15 acres to possibly 200 acres. Some of the remarks coming back from crop insurance adjustors in regarding that is the fact that they feel that there was enough time or sufficient time for the farmers to get their crop off, therefore the chance of wildlife damage coverage is slim to nil

and probably not any. To the farmers in that area, that's kind of a kick in the face.

So I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, has there been changes to crop insurance to deal with wildlife damage? And is crop insurance covering wildlife damage this year or not?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — There is no change in the crop insurance program around this issue. But I think a correction that is important to note that the November, the November 15 deadline is reporting whether or not crop can be taken off. If you can't take your crop off, you need to report to crop insurance that you're unable to get it off. But if you are still under crop insurance — you've made your report; you can't get it off — then your claims are still eligible if there's wildlife damage.

And finally on the other point you made, I just want to commend my deputy on his hands-on way of trying to implement policy and solve problems for people who are in difficulty.

**Mr. Allchurch:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Well as you know with the deputy minister coming up there, I've talked to him a couple of times on this issue with the amount of wildlife in that area. And it's unbelievable. It's not just deer. It's elk alone. Not only do they do damage to fences wherever, but the crop damage is unbelievable, which leads me into my next question regarding crop that was harvested. And some of this crop has deer manure in it.

Has policy changed within crop insurance to help the farmers in that regards? Because, you know, grain that has material in it is not subject to saleable grain. I know crop insurance will cover the coverage of cleaning the grain, but still the grain is not saleable. Has any changes been made to that policy to address the problem of farmers with wildlife damage, and how do they market a grain that's not marketable?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Again the policy has not changed with regard to cleaning excreta from the crop, and the department really does try to help people who are facing that problem to market their grain. First it's cleaned, and then the department tries to help them find market for it. And if in the end they are unable to market the grain, it is destroyed, and it is covered through crop insurance.

**Mr. Allchurch:** — Well thank you, Mr. Minister. I wasn't aware that if grain is unsaleable that it can be destroyed, and they can collect through crop insurance. I was not aware of that, and I know that farmers are not aware of that. If this is in the policy, I'm wondering why crop insurance adjusters or whoever don't let the farmers know that this policy's in place because many, many farmers that I've had phone calls — and I'm not talking just around the Spiritwood area; I'm talking the broad range of the forest fringe area — have this problem and they are left with the grain in their granaries and they can't do anything with it. If you take that grain and gradually blend it off with some good grain, you can sometimes get rid of it, but it takes years to do that and farmers are not in a position to keep grain for years and years because it brings up their inventory.

So if there is this in place, I'm wondering why the officials

don't tell the farmers when they phone in regards to this.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — The associate deputy has assured me that there hasn't been, again, there hasn't been a change in the policy but that we will look at what is there in the written portion of the policy just to make sure that people do understand. He has also noted that sometimes it could be a year or more of trying to find an appropriate market for the grain before it would be eligible to be written off. I think if it was damaged, uncleanable — which can be acknowledged at times — then it would be covered as well.

**Mr. Allchurch:** — Well thank you, Mr. Minister. I know for a fact that there are many farmers in my immediate area that have granaries full of grain that is contaminated grain. And as I said before, the only way they're finding a way to get rid of that grain is through the feedlots, and that is by blending it on a very, very small portion to get rid of it.

But a lot of this grain that was condemned grain should have been just destroyed and paid out through crop insurance. But I know the farmers are not been available to have that option put forward to them.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — We will make the terms and conditions available to the member as well and review to see whether or not it's available in the public documents. And if it's not, we'll make sure that that's dealt with.

**Mr. Allchurch:** — Okay. Thank you, Mr. Minister. I have no further questions.

**The Chair:** — Thank you very much. I'll recognize the member from . . . or pardon me, Mr. Hermanson. Sorry, Elwin.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good evening, Minister. Last night I was in a meeting in Outlook and I was asked a question that I couldn't answer, and perhaps, because irrigation falls under the Department of Agriculture, you can help me in this regard. It's also an environmental and food safety issue.

I was asked by a vegetable producer that draws water through the South Saskatchewan River Irrigation District infrastructure about liability given, you know, recent news stories about E. coli contaminated vegetables. He just simply didn't know who was liable and who was responsible should he have vegetables that had E. coli through contaminated water through the irrigation system. He wasn't sure whether it was a provincial matter or a federal matter or his responsibility.

I know that irrigation is a provincial concern and also though that water quality is a provincial environmental concern. But I know that food safety is a federal responsibility through the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. So could you outline for me, and for my constituents, what responsibilities are placed on their shoulders as far as food safety is concerned. What responsibility does Sask Ag and Food carry with regards to water quality?

His concern was that the irrigation ditches that were used were also obviously exposed to wildlife and livestock and he had no control over any contaminants that might be placed in the water



from these sources.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — If the producer is producing vegetables that will be used fresh, I think really what we'd have to say is we need to talk with the person, look at what the situation is that they're working in. If they're vegetables for further processing, then it would be the processor that would really be accountable for the food safety at that point. And so it's an area — and again you'll recognize that irrigation is a fairly new part of the portfolio — but I think that as we look at the further development of the industry, we're going to want to make sure that we've had good full discussions around food safety with our producers.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Can you tell me, is your department involved at all in water quality testing when it comes to irrigation, particularly for any diseases like E. coli?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — We're unsure as to whether or not SaskWater is doing water quality testing. At this point we're not. The other thing that I think it's... We want to also take some time and talk with other jurisdictions that are doing irrigation — Alberta, California, and others — and see what's applicable there. Because at this point it hasn't been an issue and... But I appreciate the raising of issue and it's something that we will follow up on.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Thank you. And I just want to clarify one other point as a result of the comments you made. I don't know what this producer does with his product, whether he sends it to the distributor or whether he, you know, some of it might end up in a market garden, I don't know, a farmers' market. But if it ended up in a farmers' market and the waters used to irrigate the crop were contaminated coming through provincial infrastructure, would he be the sole... would he bear sole responsibility for the quality of that food? Is there any liability that would be incurred by the province? Does he have to provide some due diligence that his food is safe for human consumption? He wasn't clear and I couldn't tell him.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — I think there are a number of factors, and again it's going to depend on the type of operation. It's going to depend... I mean a producer has a variety of different markets that they can work through. And if they were going through a retail chain, the retailer on the end of it is responsible for food safety.

I would not attempt to go through and try and say who would be accountable at each level. I mean that, you know, there's so many factors. What kind of nutrient is the person using? We've got irrigators who are using effluent, and they have to go through a significant process to, in order, if they're going to use effluent for their crops, to make sure that it's safe.

And I think for, you know, wildlife is going to be a factor in some cases as well. So I just simply... it would be inappropriate for me to try and say today in general who might be accountable because of the variety of factors that there are.

I think overall we'd look at the use of manure as nutrient, and we can say that we do have... It is managed and monitored, and at this point we try and make sure that its use on any of our crops is safe. And I think as we move forward with greater and

greater irrigation, we're going to be looking at what examples there are and try and make sure that whatever production that is here is safe.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Thank you, Minister. Just a closing comment. I think with the greater public awareness of this problem because of recent cases, we can expect more scrutiny and probably more concern by producers which I think is a good thing. And so I would just encourage you and your department to communicate as much information to the producers and be prepared to communicate to the public if they ask so that, you know, both our producers and consumers are assured that the food quality remains of utmost concern and they can have no concern whatsoever that their food may not be safe. So thank you for that... for your attention to this matter. Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** — Thank you. Mr. Elhard.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I want to take the next few minutes to return to the topic of drought in southwest Saskatchewan.

I think the case was made by one of my colleagues earlier that this is as much a disaster for producers in the Southwest as drought has been in the past and as has flooding been to other producers in other parts of the province over the last number of years. And disaster is disaster. It doesn't seem to matter how it arrives; it has the same kinds of consequences for producers.

I want to reference in particular though, the forage insurance program that is operated through crop insurance. I have with me a printout of the rainfall that was recorded at the Willow Creek monitoring station this past summer. And as you are no doubt aware, this was probably the worst year for drought since the dirty thirties. And I think anecdotally we've had evidence that producers down there have been feeding cattle since as early as the first week or two of July, which would indicate there is virtually no growth in their pastures whatsoever. And according to the printout I've got here, in the entire period from April 1, 2006 to July 31, the monitoring station recorded 137.2 millimetres of moisture. That's 13.72 centimetres which would be approximately 5 inches of moisture through that entire important part of the growing season.

But what's really interesting, Mr. Minister, is that in the recording of the moisture, the daily amounts are registered in one-tenth of a millimetre. And if you add up one-tenth of a millimetre over that entire period of time you're not going to have much rain but even if you had much moisture of any sort, it would be unusable by the crop, by the forage crops and by the grass.

And I'm wondering if the minister can tell us if this is an appropriate way to measure rainfall. Because as I look at this, this really doesn't record rainfall at all. It's barely recording a dew. But if you take point six of a millimetre and point two of a millimetre and point one of a millimetre and add them all up over several months, you might have what looks to be like a suitable amount of moisture to grow a forage crop, but in fact it produced nothing. And as I understand it, forage insurance is not going to pay any claims — at least the gentleman that has brought this to my attention — when in fact this was the driest

year in recorded history, probably. So if it's not going to pay a claim this year, when will it pay a claim?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Currently, as the member notes, we are using what I would say is a relatively blunt instrument to try and provide a form of crop insurance, of forage insurance, that is difficult to measure, difficult to really get a sense of what is produced or not taking a crop off. And so the rainfall measurement, using the best meteorological tools that we have available, was the instrument that was available for us to use to try and deal with some of the issues around the desire for an affordable forage insurance for ranchers and farmers.

There is work going on to try and perfect other technologies, satellite technologies, to be able to get a better measure. There are all kinds of issues with current technologies in terms of placement of stations, etc., that are unsatisfactory. But to date it is the only technological tool that is available that enables us to provide a measurement by which we can then provide some forage insurance. Is it what we desire? Is it as effective as what we would like to see? No, but it's the only tool that we have available today.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Well, Mr. Minister, I don't think anybody would argue with the accuracy of the measurement. I think the argument would be based on the inappropriateness of the application of that measurement. The case has been made already tonight that the Southwest has experienced a serious drought in most locations this past growing season. It was coming off a fairly dry year the year before. And if I understand soil science and crop science just in a rudimentary way, if you have eight or ten inches of very dry soil and a little bit of a cover crop trying to struggle for survival at the top of that, it takes at least three- or four-tenths of an inch of moisture to have any beneficial impact on the forage, not three or four millimetres.

And what we're doing here is measuring decimal points of millimetres, you know, an amount so small that you can't mark it with your finger. And when you measure those minute amounts of moisture . . . which don't amount to rainfall, they are just probably no more than dew. There's only three occasions in the entire months from the first of April to the end of July where you had measurable moisture of any kind, and that wasn't enough to make grass grow.

So I guess the question isn't whether or not the measuring and accuracy of the measurements is in dispute. It's the appropriateness of using that limited amount of moisture as an indication as to the ability to pay out on a crop insurance or a forage insurance claim. And I guess the question still remains, Mr. Minister, if in the driest year in recorded history in the Southwest, the extreme southwest part of the province, forage insurance is not going to pay out, when will it? And why should producers have any confidence in this forage program? Why should they become involved with it, if it will not pay out under these circumstances?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — What we know is that it was, first of all, not heavily subscribed. Secondly, it does pay out, has paid out in some circumstances over the years. Again I will take you back to the point that we do not have an adequate yield measurement. And in a . . . I mean, given a variety of

circumstances like misty rain can provide some benefit, but if everything is dried out, it probably isn't going to have any kind of significant benefit.

The cost of trying to monitor every area is prohibitive, would not make for a program that would work either. And so as I indicated earlier, if we can get some kind of an instrument that will be able to give us a yield measurement, we will be much more successful in terms of providing forage coverage.

For those years of extreme where you've got noticeable, clearly noticeable losses, I expect that's where it's paid out. Why in this situation — and we don't have the specifics here — I can only say is that we can't measure the yield losses, and we can only look at the accumulation of moisture. That's the way the program is set up. And if we can get an adequate satellite measurement of yield and be able to determine yield loss, I think we will have a much better, much more fully subscribed program, a program that will provide significant benefit.

But we have to be able to measure. We can't just suppose and try and come to some guess at what we should pay to whom.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Mr. Minister, I would venture that if you presented this moisture accumulation report to a soil scientist or a rangeland specialist at any of our post-secondary institutions, they could tell you just by looking at this that this wouldn't produce grass. I mean this is not rocket science. This is pretty straightforward. You don't grow grass on point two of a millimetre of rainfall.

And if we need a mechanism to measure the production of forage, I thought that was pretty well established when the program was developed. That's why we had cages, and that's why we did clippings of production. That's why we sent inspectors out to the field: to see what kind of yield was identified within a protected area.

And producers have to have some confidence that a program is going to be worth subscribing to if you're going to kind of build the confidence you're talking about. If you don't have the techniques in place to make appropriate measurements now and you need more people to subscribe, how are you going to accomplish that if we can't provide some certainty that the program will pay when in fact it is probably the worst drought conditions that a producer will ever experience down there?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Well again there are a couple of programs. There is the rainfall program, where people are essentially betting on rainfall or not. And it's based on the measurement of the rainfall. And there are yield loss programs. There is a yield loss program available for forage but nobody buys it.

And can we improve our programs? We seek all the time through the mechanisms that we have — the farm support review committee, through input from producers — to try and make sure that we have effective programs. At this point we're dealing with a rainfall program where people are basically and essentially betting that there is going to be rainfall or not and that it will be measurable. And this is not a combination rainfall, yield loss program. There are two separate programs. And if they don't subscribe to the yield loss, then there's no

measurement happening.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Well, Mr. Minister, I've been around a farm just long enough to know that . . . You know, a drop here and a drop there might represent a 40 per cent chance of rain, but it doesn't produce a crop. It doesn't even produce measurable rainfall.

And I think it's just simply inappropriate to say that when you've had a bit of dew measured in the minimal amounts that are indicated in this report, that when you add them all up it produces adequate rainfall — it doesn't. And you know, it might from a perspective of a bean-counter, but it doesn't from a perspective of somebody who's depending on rainfall to grow a crop.

And you might call it basically a bet on whether it's going to rain or not. But in the instance of this producer, that's all he had available to him. And it probably met his affordability requirements better than anything else. And it should have, it should have produced some kind of a benefit to him, given the fact that it's pretty dry out there.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — I can acknowledge that this instrument doesn't give you the be- all and the end-all — no question about that. What it does is it measures the rain distribution by monthly period. But people going into the program know that. They subscribe based on what the conditions are in the spring. Is it a wet spring? Is it a dry spring? It's going to impact what they go into.

Really all I can say to you is this is the program that's available today, and people subscribe knowing what that program is. But it's not going to guarantee a crop, and it's not going to guarantee a payment. And so there are situations where the program doesn't apply and doesn't work. That's a fact. I agree with you.

Is it a fully adequate program? No. It's got some inadequacies. We know that, but we don't have a perfect program to apply at this point.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Mr. Minister, can you tell me how little moisture had to been recorded at Willow Creek in order for this contract to have been any benefit to the producer?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — We can get back to you on that.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Okay. Can the minister indicate to us tonight how many producers would have taken this option? And I'm not thinking about province wide. If you can break it down into the southwest corner, can you give us any indication of how many producers would have bought insurance under this option and insurance under the forage production option that you mentioned earlier?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Did you ask specifically for southwest?

**Mr. Elhard:** — Primarily southwest, that's what I'm most interested in.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Because my numbers are for overall,

for the province.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Okay.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — We'd have to try and get a further breakdown for you. I only have provincial numbers.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister, I'll wait for that information as you can provide it. I would appreciate it.

Mr. Minister, I understand that the issue of drought was discussed earlier. I didn't get in on the entire discussion, but I also want to refer to crop insurance and the way it can or may not provide adequate support for farmers who experience drought.

I have a constituent who has farmed probably 25 years or so. He's a very good and diligent farmer, but given the financial implications of purchasing crop insurance and knowing that he probably could not afford the 80 per cent coverage, he opted to buy the 70 per cent coverage. The 70 per cent coverage in his particular situation guaranteed roughly 21 bushels per acre. And while he just was right at that amount . . . He was just barely in a claim position; that wasn't the problem. It wasn't the guarantee that was the issue. It was the value per bushel that was assigned to the contract earlier this spring.

And, Mr. Minister, at two dollars and fifty or sixty cents a bushel — I don't remember the exact value — that was attributed to it earlier this year, at 21 bushels per acre you're not looking at much more than about \$50 an acre. And in today's farming reality, \$50 an acre won't come anywhere close to covering your fixed costs let alone your variable costs and certainly won't provide a living for the family on the farm.

So what is the intention of your ministry to make crop insurance a more realistic program, something that farmers can count on; that they know will meet their minimal insurance requirements; that they will be able to take to the bank and say, I have got this level of protection; and that will allow them to rest somewhat comfortably when they go to bed at night, knowing that their entire farming future isn't at risk every evening?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Well I think to start with, there's a recognition that prices are too low. Anywhere we go, that's the reality that people are facing. The prices for our grains are too low.

That said, when we're looking at the design of a program, it has to be something which is affordable, and there are certain tests that it has to meet, and the federal government has certain requirements on it as well. It's a yield loss protection. It's not a cost-of-production protection, and it can only pay out at market price, and that price is set in January with a view to how things will unfold through the year, an estimate. And very often the . . . Today particularly, where prices are trending up, that price looks particularly low. But as I think the member knows, this program has to be actuarially sound over 15 years and so when we're designing the program, we have to keep all of those factors in mind.

The other reality is that it is not the only business risk management tool that is available for farmers. CAIS is also

available. It helps if there is margin drop, helps to provide some coverage for business risk as well.

The other factor which we have pressed time and again, and have no response on is the issue of significant trade injury. And there is just clear refusal of the federal government to deal with that issue at all, whether it's because of a rising dollar, whether it's because of subsidies, focus subsidies in our main competitors markets. Trade injury is a factor that our farmers are dealing with in terms of competitiveness and certainly does affect price.

So we're looking at a situation. We want to provide coverage for yield loss. It has to be manageable financially for the farmers, or they won't buy it as you indicate in your question. Your constituent had to determine whether they would get 80 per cent or 70 per cent and because of costs went to 70 per cent fully realizing that it would not give the kind of payout that an 80 per cent might, but factoring in what their costs would be.

So clearly given the parameters that we have to deal with in designing crop insurance for yield loss protection, we're basically subject to the issue of prices as well.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Mr. Minister, this really becomes a downward spiral. You're telling me . . . And I accept the fact that you want this program to be actuarially sound. In order to accomplish that, premiums have to go up, but coverage also goes down. That's been the reality over the last seven years I've been in this House pretty much. Every year we've seen the premiums go up and/or the coverage go down, and that's done to try and keep the program actuarially sound over the 15-year cycle that you're talking about.

But you know, in order to accomplish that, it becomes more and more difficult to keep subscribers in the program. They look at it and they say, what's the point? What's the point of laying out this big premium for crop insurance coverage that isn't going to meet my needs if I have a claim? So you find your circumstance getting worse and worse each year, not better and better.

And it becomes particularly problematic, Mr. Minister, if, as I understand, you commented earlier that your government is not real keen on ad hoc programs. So I guess the answer becomes, if the government is not going to step in to fill the gap when there are urgent situations developing in the farming sector, if ad hoc programs are not on the agenda any longer, then it's incumbent on your government . . . and whether you can involve the federal government or not, I guess it is up to you to decide or to achieve. But that's why a reliable and very specific crop insurance program is all the more necessary for our producers.

In fact if I hear you right, basically you're saying, well we can't do anything about the price of grain, and we're not going to do anything about ad hoc programs, and we're sorry about crop insurance. But the actuarial realities are forcing these limitations on us. So that means a no win situation for producers at any point.

And I guess I'm asking you as minister representing your government, is this government going to come to grips with that reality? Or are we just going to stand by and watch 5,000

farmers a year leave the land?

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — So what does come to grips with that reality mean? Does it mean huge subsidies to farmers, to these private businesses? Does it mean taxpayer funding to enable farming to continue?

I can look at the programs that we have been designing, and I can really dispose of some of the assumptions that you have posited and point to the facts of how much commitment the people of Saskatchewan and this government has made to support agriculture.

And when we talk about a program that is actuarially and needs to be actuarially sound, it's not about my desire or my government's desire for the program to be actuarially sound. It is a fact that if you want to have crop insurance, it has to be actuarially sound. If it isn't, you don't get crop insurance of any kind.

And therefore when we have had a number of good years, when the amounts, the massive amounts that crop insurance has paid out in past years are paid down, then the reverse happens. You can increase coverage. You can reduce prices. But that's the reality of an actuarially sound program. If the demand is always payout, you are not going to get a shift in what's happening there.

But let me point to, I mean, just some of the assumptions in terms of whether this government has and will come to grips with the reality. I have, in the House, named a number of times the amount that the people of this province are putting into agriculture and have made clear where part of the problem lies is in a federal government that has no will — no will — despite the fact that we have put forward programs that would be much more balanced across the nation to try and provide some balance for the province of Saskatchewan.

We are and — if you just pull Alberta out of the picture — we are on a per capita base paying three times the provincial per capita average, four times the federal per capita average to try and sustain this agriculture industry which is such a huge part of this province's life, culture, and economy. And when I, even when we look at Alberta, we're almost two times per capita what Alberta is putting in despite all their wealth.

So there is no question of this government's or the people of Saskatchewan's commitment to agriculture. It's what can be afforded and within those parameters of what can be afforded . . . and I mean given the fact that you've got a virtual abandonment of fairness by the federal government. And you can come to their defence if you choose to. But I wouldn't want to be in the position of trying to defend their actions and their insistence on a patently unfair 60/40 split in the programs. And all I can tell you very clearly is within the parameters that we have, we have come far further than any other province in providing support for our primary producers.

And in terms of our support programs, whether it's crop insurance or CAIS, we are putting in to the full extent and we have — note this — we have from the beginning. Even though it's been difficult to get there, every year we have come into the full extent to provide the support that we can for the farmers of

this province. And anything, anything that would say that the people of this province or this government in its decisions have not been providing support or that we haven't come to grips with the reality or that we don't have a sense of how important this is to the individual farmers or to the agriculture sector of our economy — it's just erroneous. It's wrong. It's simply not facing reality.

**Mr. Elhard:** — Well, Mr. Minister, there is another reality, and that is that unless some of these issues are addressed . . . And I didn't allow the federal government off the hook. I said that's up to you and the federal government to coordinate between you. But if they're not addressed, then I think we can face the reality that we're going to have literally thousands of farmers leaving the land every year.

I mean I can tell you that in some of the small communities around the constituency that I represent, I've seen half a dozen farmers pack up and leave the farm this year in community after community. And if you replicate that or extrapolate that all around the province, we're looking at thousands of farmers over the next year or two — not dozens, not hundreds — thousands.

And I guess you cite the figure that, you know, that your government is supporting agriculture to a tune of three times of what other jurisdictions are doing. The reality is that we have 45 to 50 per cent of the arable land in the country. I think that's an asset, and it should be considered an asset, not a liability, as you seem to be suggesting in your comments.

And, Mr. Minister, at some point or other, whether you agree with it or not and whether it's politically desirable to do so, at some point your government has to say agriculture is so important to the future of our province that we are prepared to do what is necessary in terms of crop insurance.

I haven't asked for a big cash subsidy, but I'm sure that at some point or other somebody can design a crop insurance program that is actuarially sound and can meet the needs of our producers today. And I don't think that's asking too much on behalf of the producers in the province. And I think that they would hope that that is accomplishable without getting into the partisan politics that I think is about to rise to the surface.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — Well the member suggested that we should come to grips. Let me say it's vitally important that the people of this province — and that includes the members who are sitting around this table — come to grips with reality.

And I would have to say again, when as I asked in the House for . . . And partisan or non-partisan, if your policy is you don't put funding into private business, it's a little awkward then to come and push somebody else to put funding into private business, whether it's farming or any other business.

We have provided, and we will continue to provide significant support for this sector of our economy. And I mean when I look at the proportion that we are putting in, my question is, if we are abandoned by a federal government that does have the resources and the ability to provide balance, do you think. . . is there any measure that would tell you that a provincial government should put together programs that are non-affordable, not actuarially sound, and just take the risk of

maybe increasing the debt by — well let's pick a figure from the '80s — \$13 billion?

I mean talking about coming to grips with reality means we have to come to grips with the full fiscal picture of the province. And we have to come to grips with the full picture of the demands of the province which includes, as the member is ready to raise in the House any day, highways — costly, hugely costly to build; vitally important to the agriculture industry.

So when you're pressing for a particular piece, it's easy to say, but let's be clear. If we're coming to grips with reality, let's look at the whole reality, and let's look at what is needed to help sustain this sector which includes transportation, which includes the infrastructure in those communities that is so vital to keeping the communities there, all of which the member will raise in the House.

And so if we're going to deal with a particular aspect here, please, I ask you, try and keep in mind the whole context with which we're dealing and the demands and the level of those demands. If you don't do that, you're not coming to grips with reality. You're taking the easy route and just picking every piece that you can, and saying throw more money at it. And that won't work.

**The Chair:** — Thank you very much, members of the committee. We have now reached the time at which we will have to move on to the next set of estimates. I'd like to thank the minister and his officials for attending this evening, and thank you for your attendance. Mr. Weekes.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Mr. Chair, as Deputy Chair I'd like to thank the minister and the officials for a very interesting question-and-answer period.

**The Chair:** — With that, we'll take a five minute . . . Oh, pardon me. Mr. Minister.

**Hon. Mr. Wartman:** — I would like to thank the committee. These are challenging issues, and I know that members around the table, including myself, are passionate about the issues and wanting this sector to prosper. I don't doubt that for a minute. I think it is important to point out the challenges.

And I want to thank my officials who I think worked very hard to try and build program and to try and make sure that that program is effective for the farmers of this province. And I want to thank them for being here tonight and providing support, answers, and for their on-going work. Thank you.

**The Chair:** — Thank you very much. At this time we'll take a five-minute recess and give the chance for officials to change prior to reconvening the meeting.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

**Subvotes (ER10) and (ER14)**

**The Chair:** — The next item before the committee is the supplementary estimates for the Department of the Environment. I would like to welcome the Minister for the Environment, Mr. Nilson, and his officials to the meeting. If you could introduce your officials, Mr. Minister.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Okay, I'll try. I think I can name everybody. The formal list that helps me. Good evening, everyone. Happy to be here. I have Alan Parkinson, the deputy minister, with me; Daryl Jessop, with the forestry area; and behind me I have Donna Johnson who's in the finance area; and Lin Gallagher on the other side working on all of the environmental issues; and directly behind me is Sam Ferris, Sam Ferris, who works in the environmental protection area; and Everett Dorma, who is executive assistant to the deputy minister. So I think I passed the test pretty close. Sorry about that, Sam.

**The Chair:** — Thanks, Mr. Minister. I'll refer over to Mr. Weekes this time.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Welcome, Mr. Minister, and to your officials. We certainly look forward to a fruitful evening of debate and questions and answers. And I'd like to turn it over to my colleague, the Environment critic from the Saskatchewan Party, Glen Hart.

**The Chair:** — Thank you. Mr. Hart.

**Mr. Hart:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And, Minister, welcome to you and your officials at this late hour of the evening. We have a number of important issues to discuss tonight, so I think we will dispense with the rhetoric and get on with the questions and answers.

Minister, in the supplementary estimates, Environment, vote 26, there is an additional \$12.9 million being allocated to your department; 900,000 of recoverable fire suppression operations. Just very briefly, what is that about, that extra \$900,000?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Basically it's just expenses that took place this year, and we're paying them, related to the summer. And so it would be expenses that weren't in the initial budget in the year. As you'll know, in the forest fighting area we try to get the best estimate we can of what the expenses will be for the year. And in this particular year that . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — Minister, there's a footnote under vote 26 which talks about, it says, "Additional . . . [funds] required to provide for recoverable out-of-province fire suppression activities . . ." I wonder if you or your officials could expand on that.

**Mr. Parkinson:** — Yes, that would be recoverables that we got for sending planes and personnel to other jurisdictions in Canada — Ontario, Alberta, BC [British Columbia], etc.

**Mr. Hart:** — I know there was a lot of activity in that area, forest fires this year in our province. Did we send resources outside this province? Or what time of the year did we send resources outside this province, I guess is a better way of phrasing the question.

**Mr. Parkinson:** — We send them out throughout the fire season pending demand from other jurisdictions through the Canada interagency fire centre. So we would have sent them — off the top of my head I probably can't recall the specific weeks that we sent them, but it would have been through the course of the summer — April through August. We also import resources throughout the same period of time.

**Mr. Hart:** — Just for clarification though, I can recall that at the height of the forest fire season here in the northern part of our province, the minister saying that he wished he had more resources. I'm presuming that we didn't have resources. We wouldn't have had resources outside of our province at the height of the fire season, or did we?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — I think you're referring to the time in late June, early July, and during that period of time we did not have any resources exported. I believe that throughout that period of time, we did import resources from various jurisdictions. Ontario does stick out in my mind, and it was during that time that heavy demands were being placed on the Canadian interagency fire centre for resource sharing across the country.

And I think what the minister was referring to was that as we put requests into that interagency fire centre for additional resources to come to Saskatchewan, there was also high fire threat in British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba, and there weren't additional resources to be distributed.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Just to add to this, is that this is one of the reasons that this issue was top of the mind in the discussion with the forestry industries of forestry . . . of forest ministers of Canada in Yellowknife this fall. Last year there was an agreement that was signed around a Canadian wildfire strategy, and there was strong desire, but also I think a sense, that the federal government was going to come in and help and fund this sharing of resources across the country. And at the meeting we . . . this year we haven't gotten that kind of support like we thought that we would, and so we're still in a position now waiting for the federal government to come in and share with all of the provinces and territories of Canada in this national sharing of equipment. It's a frustration.

I know that on behalf of the forest ministers, the forest minister from BC wrote a fairly strong letter to the federal minister saying, look, you know, you're from British Columbia, and you've seen what's happened in BC this summer. You know, we need some resources here.

So we're happy to be sharing with other jurisdictions and working with them. This summer we got some help, but we also in times when we didn't need all our staff, we gave help to other places.

**Mr. Hart:** — Okay thank you, Minister. The next line item is \$7 million for forest fire capital projects. And again the note says, for the replacement of provincial fire suppression aircraft. I note in a news item that the replacement of the lost air tanker is estimated at \$13 million. So the 7 million, is that a down payment on the new aircraft?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — That's exactly what it is. We're putting in 7 million this year and then 6 million next year. And they're

working to get the airframe and develop it, and we'll hope to have delivery early in 2008, so for the 2008 fire season. So what we're doing is basically spreading the cost of it over two years.

**Mr. Hart:** — So that means we will be short one of these large air tankers for the 2007 fire season then.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well we will except that we were going to be decommissioning some of the airplanes last year, and we kept the ones that we were replacing in service. And I think that what this will do is we'll have one more this year in service for next year and then the two the following year. And I think we're getting delivery of a couple of the other ones next spring. So by next spring I think we'll . . . Will we have three? I'll bid out and maybe turn it over to Daryl. . . or Alan.

**Mr. Parkinson:** — The delivery contract we have is . . . Conair delivered two CV 580 aircraft in March of this year. One of them was the plane that had the unfortunate accident, and in the production queue we had two more aircraft that are scheduled for delivery in March 2007.

This particular replacement aircraft, we had a clause in our agreement with Conair that if we were able to exercise it by a certain date, they would go out and search for and purchase airframes — CV 580 airframes — upon which they would then commence to manufacture a fourth aircraft for us for delivery in March 2008. And the reason why it's two years out is basically due to the capacity of the manufacturing plant in Kelowna.

**Mr. Hart:** — Just a few questions about the 580. Where are the 580s based? Where's their home base?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — They're in La Ronge.

**Mr. Hart:** — In La Ronge. And they use . . . I guess I should ask the question. Do they use fire-retardant chemicals, or do they use water or can they use both?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — They use fire-retardant chemicals.

**Mr. Hart:** — And do they need to come back to La Ronge to be reloaded after they've dumped a load of fire retardant on a fire?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — That's their main base, but the fire-retardant chemicals can be loaded on at other bases in the North. So they can go over on the west side or on the east side or come down to PA and be loaded up as well.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well during the last . . . I presume that we just had the one plane, the one 580 that was operational this past season. Is that correct?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — That's correct.

**Mr. Hart:** — Did you have stockpiles of retardant at various locations throughout the North for this particular plane this season, or did it always come back to La Ronge to be reloaded?

**Mr. Jessop:** — No, we have retardant bases that the Trackers operate out of in La Ronge, Prince Albert, Hudson Bay,

Meadow Lake, and Buffalo Narrows. So the 580 can actually reload out of those bases. So it depends on where the fires are where the closest base is to load with respect to closest to the fire, that kind of thing. So we spread out where they can work.

**Mr. Hart:** — So this season the 580 was actually was reloaded at a number of different locations across the North?

**Mr. Jessop:** — It was reloaded out of La Ronge and Prince Albert. There was some apron issues. They had to do some repair work at Meadow Lake, so we couldn't load the large aircraft out of Meadow Lake. But we were loading this year out of La Ronge and Prince Albert.

**Mr. Hart:** — So then in fact this year the large aircraft was never reloaded in the Far North. Of the number of locations you listed, Stony Rapids wasn't one of them, was it?

**Mr. Jessop:** — Stony Rapids doesn't have a facility for reloading.

**Mr. Hart:** — So what do you need as far as a facility to reload?

**Mr. Jessop:** — Facilities of reloading, we have large tanks that store the retardant, and there are pumps to pump the retardant onto the aircraft when they're reloading. So those . . . And we have to have the proper fuelling; we have to have an airstrip that's going to be able carry the weight of those aircraft because these aircraft carry around 800 gallons versus around 650 to 700 gallons in the Tracker aircraft. So we have to have specific loading bases that has all of this equipment.

Further to that, the retardant is hauled by semi-trailer, so we have to have them in locations where they can be serviced by semi-trailer to haul the retardant there as well.

**Mr. Hart:** — Again just for . . . so I get a better understanding of what will happen in this upcoming fire season, which areas will you be fully operational and be able to load the 580s out of? You mentioned that this past season you only loaded them out of La Ronge and Prince Albert. Will these other communities that you mentioned, will they be ready, will they be able to load the 580s in 2007?

**Mr. Jessop:** — Well those two locations are . . . I believe we will have Meadow Lake operational with the . . . because they've been able to put the work into the tarmac there and into the apron that leads off the tarmac to the actual loading area. The six Tracker aircraft that we run in groups of three are still going to be operational all this coming summer. That can load from all of those bases.

The 580s can only load from the bases where we have the new tanks set up and the new fuelling and that kind of thing, so we'll have Meadow Lake, La Ronge, and Prince Albert. They're a faster flying airplane than the Trackers are as well. So strategically, although they can only load in those areas, they can travel huge distances in a short period of time.

**Mr. Hart:** — So am I correct in understanding then that the only locations that these 580s will be loaded out of is La Ronge, Prince Albert, and Meadow Lake?

Those are those the only three locations that you're planning to load those aircraft out of?

**Mr. Jessop:** — I believe so for this year, and then we will have Hudson Bay coming on stream as well. And we will, in the future, likely have Buffalo Narrows because we're loading the Trackers out of those locations now, and we're operating out of those locations with the Trackers.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Just for example, we'll have the full complement of planes that we had two years ago, the Trackers. This last summer we had the extra 580. Next summer we'll have three 580s on top of the six Trackers.

Last summer when the fire was there at Stony Rapids, one of the key extra tools that we had to deal with that fire was the fact that the 580 could fly from La Ronge right up to that fire and deliver the chemicals in a way that the Trackers, you know, just don't have that capability. So this was something that was of assistance in this last summer.

Normally we just use the water bombers in the Far North because of the difficulty of getting the retardant up north. I assume when we have that road finished up there, well then it'll be much easier to have the retardant at even a further north point. But La Ronge is able to cover a broad spot across the North because of the capability of the plane.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well that's true, Minister, except that I know from personal experience it takes a fair bit of time to fly from La Ronge to Stony Rapids. In times when forest fires are threatening communities, it would seem to me that we need to develop some ability to react more quickly if we're investing, you know, significant dollars into, you know, four large aircraft.

I know you mentioned the difficulty of hauling the retardant up to, say, Stony Rapids which has a good airstrip that . . . I'm not an aviation expert by any means, but I'm guessing that the airstrip itself could handle the tankers. And the community brings in the majority of the supplies over that seasonal road including aviation fuel, car fuel, and groceries, and that sort of thing. I mean, it would just seem to me that we might want to be looking at developing some ability to reload those aircraft in that part of the province just so they'll be much more effective in fighting some of these forest fires.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Yes. Well I think . . . I mean I'm not an expert on runways either, but I know that that Stony Rapids runway is good for what it's used for now. But I think to have the heavy loads that you'd have with these planes, the runway probably wouldn't last that long. It's like driving some of the big trucks on our, you know, rural highways that aren't designed for the big, heavy loads

And so I think that that's one of the reasons that we've put extra money into Meadow Lake. And that's a very good airport. I always thought it was a very good airport. But the actual weights of these new planes were such that we couldn't use them there until we fixed that. So I think I mean clearly the Tracker planes do a good job, the ones that are water bombers. And those are the ones that we have servicing the northern communities that are farther away. But we also now have this capability of some new planes, and we'll continue to deploy

them in the best way possible.

**Mr. Hart:** — There is an additional \$5 million for green initiatives. I wonder, Minister, if you could just briefly explain what the funding is required for and explain the green initiatives and the \$5 million that's being requested.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — The green initiatives funding, this is money that we will be spending obviously before March 31, and it will deal with a number of requests that we're getting. We're still in the process of sorting them out around how we can make changes that respond in a whole broad area, you know, from, I mean, energy conservation issues, water issues, air quality issues, right across the board. And you will, I guess, just have to stay tuned, and we'll explain how we are going to be expending this money.

**Mr. Hart:** — Minister, it seems to me the process in this building works somewhat on the presumption that you have some definite plans for the additional funding. And you know when they ask to explain what the taxpayers' dollars are going to be used for, I don't think the taxpayers would really like the answer stay tuned and we'll let you know, sort of thing.

I mean there is a request here for an additional \$5 million for your department, and I would hope that we have a somewhat more refined program rather than stay tuned. I was wondering if you could perhaps just elaborate a bit more.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well what we're working on is a number of areas where we will be using these funds around certain kinds of green initiatives. We have people that have been approaching us for funding for different things. We were looking at some of those kinds of aspects. We haven't had specific money to deal with some of these responses. And so we'll be working on that. We'll be basically looking through the various proposals that do relate to the green strategy discussions that we've had over the last year. And I think you've been part of a lot of those discussions where ideas come forward. And so we'll be announcing more about this very soon.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well, Minister, if you could provide the committee with even one or two examples . . . You'd mentioned that people have been requesting funding for some green, you know, for some green-initiative-type projects. And I wonder if you could at least give us one or two examples. You know, we're going to be asked to vote on allocating more dollars to your department. And, you know, it would certainly give at least my colleagues and myself a bit more comfort in allocating this additional funds to your department if we had a little bit better idea of what the funds are being requested for.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Okay. Well these are . . . I'll give you a whole array of different kinds of ones, and they're ones that we're evaluating and looking at. The city of Yorkton is very interested in water issues because of the pressures on their water system. And so there's a possibility of trying to do something with low-flow showers, low-flow toilets, which actually would reduce the amount of water they need in that community.

There's a few different places that have asked for funding to help them build green roofs, which I don't know if you know



what . . . greenroofs.com, I'd recommend people go and look at that if you want to see some very interesting things. But effectively what it is, is having vegetation on the roof, and it stores water. There's a lot of very positive things. It's also an insulator.

We have requests from various museums and places to do interpretation things around green areas. So there are some of the things like that.

All of the watershed reports that have come out have had requests for various projects within watershed areas. We'll be looking at some of those.

There is . . . Through the various, you know, NGOs [non-governmental organization] involved in the environment areas, there are different kinds of proposals that come there. Obviously there's technology companies, whether it's water or some of the biogas and all these other ones, waste water treatment. So there's a whole, whole array of different things like that. And so we end up with . . . Also in homes dealing with some of the generation issues, you know, electrical generator, wind power things, quite a number of different things.

And so what we're trying to do is to figure out how to respond to a number of these requests in light of an overall strategy.

**Mr. Hart:** — So, Minister, would it be fair to say that a good part of this funding will be used for a number of pilot projects in various areas of energy conservation and those sorts of things?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Some of that would be, yes. And we also then have all of the recycling requests and issues that are coming through some of the municipal organizations across the province. So some of those we'll be looking at, trying to address some of those issues as well.

**Mr. Hart:** — The recycling area, I know from previous discussions with the regional waste management authority people that they are having some financial difficulties due to a number of things, including the fluctuating prices for recyclable materials. So is part of this \$5 million, is some of that earmarked for these regional waste management authorities?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — That's a possibility as well. And basically the requests that are coming are so much greater than the resources, so that's one of the reasons that we wanted to try to get some money in this year because we have ways we think that can be very positive for the environment, and the money will be able to be used in the next three or four months.

**Mr. Hart:** — Okay, good. Minister, I'm sure you'd be disappointed tonight if we didn't raise the whole area of the forest fire protection policy and the so-called let-it-burn policy. This area has caused, I believe, a great deal of concern for a number of our communities in the North, and not only for residents of those communities but residents of southern Saskatchewan who own properties in the North. I have been contacted by quite a number of citizens who are very concerned about the let-it-burn strategy that's been implemented. I believe we're into our second year of . . . that area of the province . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Can I just correct you? Okay. You use those words. I don't use those words. Anybody who's involved in this whole process do not use the words that you have just used to describe this policy. And it's, frankly, offensive. So why don't you use the words that we use, which is wildfire strategy, to deal with those things which are important to Saskatchewan residents — people, homes, communities, businesses, and setting priorities around using our resources to make sure those things are protected? And that's what our wildfire strategy is all about.

What we also recognize is the science. The professional foresters and the biologists and everyone else know and tell us that the whole boreal forest — starting all the way up in Alaska, going right across to Labrador — the natural way of regeneration of the forest is fire.

And if you don't understand that in asking the questions, then you don't end up with the right kinds of answers. But it's very offensive to me and to many others for the kind of terms that you use to describe this because it's not in our vocabulary at all.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well, Minister, I certainly do understand the role that fire has to play in nature with . . . not only plays a role in the forest, it also plays a role in the southern part of the province.

And as someone who has been involved in agriculture for many years, we do use fire to renew certain areas of our properties and that sort of thing, and we know how fire can be very unpredictable. And we've seen that and very many of us have experienced that firsthand.

Certainly part of your wildfire management strategies is to let forest fires burn in areas of the province, and I don't think we can dispute that. Certainly as you've mentioned, I recognize that there is a strategy that's in place to deal with fires when they threaten human life, communities, and commercial installations. I have all your documents; I see your map and that sort of thing.

But nonetheless, this change in policy from where, three years ago, forest fires were attacked at the time that they were first spotted by and large to now letting fires burn if they aren't close to communities has caused some problems for a number of people. And not only northern residents, but also residents in southern Saskatchewan who happen to own properties in those areas that are being affected by this new policy.

So if you're offended by the term — let it burn — it is part of the overall management strategy as I understand it. And I don't know if you can . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well I mean, I think that what you have to recognize is that in Saskatchewan, in Canada, the forest fire fighting policies have been around protection of people, communities, businesses, and also commercial forests. And so that that kind of a forest fire strategy, for example, was very strongly used in BC. Now what we found out in BC is that the trees all grew 60 years more and became prime targets for the mountain pine beetle, and now they've lost the whole forest. I mean I was talking to a fellow yesterday from Quesnel. He said 95 per cent of the trees were killed last year, and now they got

the last 5 per cent because they haven't had the rejuvenation of the forest through fire.

So we know that some of the older ways of dealing with rejuvenation of the forest have caused some major, major problems. Now what we did in Saskatchewan and what we've done in Saskatchewan over a number of years is continually re-examine how we fight forest fires. And we've done it in conjunction with our colleagues across the countries.

Now I . . . Daryl, I don't know if I've put you on the spot here, but if you want to explain where and how we've gotten to where we are now. But I guess I want to assure you and assure the public that the wildfire fighting strategy that we have is specifically meant to protect people, communities, commercial operations, those little isolated cabins. We've got them all mapped. We know where they are. We know how to get people in there to try to do protection.

The other side, there's a huge responsibility that we're slowly working through to get all the communities ready because quite a number of the communities haven't had fire plans around how they can protect their communities with fireguards and things like that. But Daryl . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — Well, Minister, if I could interject, our time is fairly short here. I'm certainly not in disagreement with the statement that fire has a role to play in our forests. You know, I certainly agree with that. I think where we disagree is in the implementation of that policy and perhaps some of the rigid adherence to the guidelines of the current policy, at least . . . Well you don't believe me, but I believe that was the case in the Stony Rapids fire where we just about lost a community. But we'll get to that.

And like, as I said, our time is short here. I would like to discuss this issue in a bit more detail with more specifics, you know, and that sort of thing. But as I said, I certainly understand that fire has a role to play. However as I said earlier, fire can be very . . . it changes as the wind blows, as conditions change.

And I think we've seen that, and particularly, I think, we saw that this summer in the Stony Rapids area. The people up there are very concerned about the policy and the way it was implemented this summer. They felt that there wasn't enough flexibility in the implementation of the policy, and as a result we had a near catastrophe. But as you know my colleague and myself — Mr. Allchurch and myself — we, at the request of the people of that area, not only of Stony Rapids but of some of the other communities, we went up, and we saw for ourselves the area that was burnt. We talked to the people up there. We have, I think, a pretty good understanding from their vantage point as to actually what happened.

What I would like to do, and in the interests of time, we only have three-quarters of an hour to cover a number of issues, what I would like, Minister, from you and your officials, basically a brief outline of the series of events that started with the first notification that we had of fire between Stony Rapids and Fond-du-Lac, and take us to the point in time where the people came back to the community of Stony Rapids and Black Lake. But as I said just very briefly, just so that we can get a sense of the series of events as you and your department officials dealt

with this in late June.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Sure. I will do an overview, and I'll get help if there is some places where I'm . . . but I think practically our understanding is this. This is the Noel fire, I think is the name for it. And it started on June 3 within fire response observation zone at a distance of about 32 kilometres from the village of Stony Rapids. And this fire start location was approximately 12 kilometres outside the full response zone, so it was the observation zone.

This fire was monitored daily by air, and the burning conditions fluctuated between moderate to high between June 3 and June 22. The fire had reached a size of about 860 hectares by June 10 and remained relatively inactive after that date until June 22.

On June 22, an additional six firefighters were sent to Stony Rapids to augment the existing fire crew of 12. So that meant there were 18 fire personnel on . . . That was on June 22. So there were 18 fire personnel on the 22nd. On the 23rd, June 23, the burning conditions became extreme, and these Environment personnel began to assemble more firefighting resources.

On the 24th, a Sask Environment firefighter went out and installed what is called values protection system on an exploration camp. Effectively, go out and put up sprinklers and, you know, cover it that way. And at that time the fire was about 20 kilometres from the community. So that's on the 24th.

On June 25, extreme burning conditions caused the fire to travel approximately 20 kilometres in a direction towards Stony Rapids. And by late afternoon the fire had reached the north side of the Fond du Lac River, with spot fires occurring within and around the village — so in other words, coming across the river. So on that day, June 25, the Sask Environment personnel and resources were actively engaged in firefighting south of the Fond du Lac River in the immediate area to protect the structures and the inhabitants.

So the value protection units — that's basically where water cannons, sprinkler systems — they were set up around the Stony Rapids hospital, the fuel storage tanks, and vulnerable community structures. There were also mobilized fire suppression staff. Helicopters and heavy equipment were used to extinguish spot fires as they occurred in and around the community. So they were working there.

**Mr. Hart:** — What date did the helicopters extinguish the fires?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well I think that was . . . that's on the 25th when the whole thing blew, you know, came across. And the Sask Environment staff were directly working on a fire of about 800 hectares just west of the community and one running in a westerly direction approximately 7 kilometres along the shoreline.

The airport was closed by the Sask Highways and Transportation because of smoke. And so . . . except for emergency traffic. So there weren't suppression aircraft sent to Stony Rapids on the 25th, concerned because of the smoke around the airport.

On June 26, 39 staff including a Sask Environment incident management team, support staff, more sprinkler systems, pieces of heavy equipment, and six aircraft were on site at Stony Rapids to coordinate the fire suppression and the community protection. And the provincial Emergency Measures Organization dispatched evacuation coordination and information to Stony Rapids to coordinate the evacuation of the high-risk, health-impacted community residents of Stony Rapids, Fond-du-Lac, and Black Lake. In other words, there was lots of smoke around up there, and a lot of people were having a hard time breathing.

By June 27, Sask Environment had 60 firefighters involved, and they were providing the fire bombing aircraft to support the back burning operations to contain the spot fire located on the south side of the Fond du Lac River. So it had come across the river, and this was about 7 kilometres west.

On the 28th there were 55 firefighters working, and the fire was contained south of the Fond du Lac River. On June 29 and 30 there were 52 firefighters fighting the fire and which was still active north of the Fond du Lac River. And then on June 1 and 2 there were 51 firefighters, and then it started to rain and on July 3 more rain came and as that happened more of the firefighters were taken to other spots where there was lots of pressure.

So I think finally by July 14 there was a major rainfall, and that brought the fire status from out of control to just being observed, which it had been back in June. So it was not . . . after July 3, 4 was when people were allowed to come back by commercial airline.

So that's kind of a rundown of what happened. And I think the key factor here is that you had a fire that for three weeks had gone maybe 10 or 11 kilometres, 12 kilometres, and then in one day it went 20 kilometres. And then the response of the firefighting people who were watching the whole situation out of the command centre in Prince Albert sent extra people in there to do the work.

So that's how it's described, and that's how the firefighting system is supposed to work. As you know, and I haven't laid out all of the other pressures in all the other places; all of our staff, our airplanes, everything were all extremely busy. We brought in the Ontario crews because they'd had rain down there. We had crews from other places to help out. Some of the Manitoba people were covering on the, I think, on the east side, and some of the Alberta people were helping us, although Alberta was under a huge attack, and also BC. There were lots of fires.

So this is a situation where the best position you can be in is to have everybody aware and getting the best information possible. But you put your staff to the places where the most need is, and that's what happened here.

**Mr. Hart:** — Thank you, Minister, for that outline. The department has an office in Stony Rapids, and it's my understanding that there's a conservation officer stationed there, and there was a forest protection officer stationed in that office in Stony Rapids. Now did your forest protection officer, did he request that the fire be attacked before it reached the

20-kilometre response zone, prior to June 22?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well the information that I have is that it was being monitored by air. I mean people go out and look at it. Also . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — Okay. Who would be doing that monitoring?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — Well we have under contract . . . We contract annually to have aerial reconnaissance fly across the northern part of the province. And what they do is they do a bit of smoke spotting, as well as they will monitor fires as they go out and they do that reconnaissance work. And they report back to the fire centre.

**Mr. Hart:** — Now which fire centre, and to who specifically would they report to?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — That would be the Prince Albert fire centre, Daryl?

**Mr. Jessop:** — Yes. And if I could just add to that. We do have some contract aircraft that will fly flight patrols for us for spotting fires. They would be reporting any fires that they do spot directly back to that office. And the local forest protection officer there reports to La Ronge. La Ronge is the regional headquarters, and then we have Prince Albert as a provincial headquarters. We have Buffalo Narrows as another regional headquarters, and we have Prince Albert as another.

**Mr. Hart:** — I have your org chart here so . . .

**Mr. Jessop:** — Okay. So that's the way it would be happening. And the local forest protection officer that you mentioned would also be doing some patrolling himself as well. There was a helicopter that was available, that was hired. That helicopter was there. It was hired at the time as well, when there was difficulty with the fire. So he would be doing some patrolling himself, and his staff, with a contracted fixed-wing aircraft that was at Stony Rapids.

**Mr. Hart:** — So if the person on the ground in Stony Rapids . . . You just said he would also be out flying the area and observing the fire. And if he had a major concern that this fire was going to get out of hand, even though it wasn't within the 20-kilometre response zone as your policy dictates, it's my understanding that there was a request made before the fire reached the 20-kilometre zone from the Stony Rapids area to attack this fire because the residents and your people up there felt that we were sitting on a ticking time bomb.

Now I was told that that happened. My question is, who would . . . your local person in Stony Rapids, who would he make that request to? Would he be requesting to La Ronge, to Prince Albert? And who makes the decision to deploy resources or to not deploy resources?

**Mr. Jessop:** — He would make . . . The person in that position would be making a request through to — and it would be through a fire report and through a wildfire situation analysis report — would be making recommendations or suggestions to the area base in La Ronge. And La Ronge would be forwarding . . . would be reviewing that and forwarding information to

Prince Albert, to the provincial headquarters there. And it would be reviewed by our operational folks, operations director in Prince Albert.

**Mr. Hart:** — So my question to you is, did your person, your forest protection officer, request that this fire be responded to before it got to the 20-kilometre zone?

**Mr. Jessop:** — I don't have the information with me. I'm not aware that there was a request to take action. If there was it would have gone through to La Ronge for review and they would have reviewed it. And they would have reviewed what is happening in situation with all of the fires in their region and also through the province. They also would have reviewed weather forecasts. We have a weather office of our own, a fire weather office. And they would have reviewed potential weather and potential fire behaviour and all of those kinds of things would have been . . . would go into a review before a decision was made as to whether or not we send additional resources to any fire anywhere.

**Mr. Hart:** — Okay. So what we have in here is a situation where we have a fire burning between two communities — Fond-du-Lac and Stony Rapids — started approximately halfway between the two communities in the driest area of the province where the forest fire reading was the highest.

We've got residents of a community . . . And from what I've been told by the residents also, your own people on the ground up there were saying, look we've got to get at this fire before it gets out of hand. Residents of the community said that that request went in on June 19. So what you're telling me then is that this request goes first of all to La Ronge, and then it goes on to Prince Albert. And eventually a decision is made in Prince Albert as to whether additional resources should be deployed. Is that the way the system works?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — I think that's the procedure. But if you have seen or talked to these people and understand how they work, those kinds of requests are going very quickly. I mean, it's not as if it's sort of going from desk to desk to desk. These are phone calls. These are emails and things like that. But the way you describe it is like there's a whole bunch of delay. Well there's not delay, but I think what you also have to recognize is during that time period there were many, many fires burning close to communities.

**Mr. Hart:** — I don't think so. I think if you review the data, the only community that was in danger at that particular time frame, that was endangered by forest fire was the community of Stony Rapids. Shortly after that there was quite a number of communities that were endangered. I think if you go back and check your data, there was other fires burning, but they were burning in areas where there was no danger at that particular time to other communities.

I know you and other members of your government have used that as an excuse. But, Minister, I don't think that the people. . . You go to Stony Rapids and tell the people that. We were there. I don't know if anybody from your department in a senior capacity has been there to meet with those people.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — I think the answer to that is yes. And

you've asked about the policy. The policy includes a review, and this is an ongoing thing. I think that there was a full-response fire by Buffalo Narrows that was taking place at this. . . But also as I pointed out in the timeline, until June 22 this fire was 20 kilometres away. It moved 20 kilometres in one day. And that's the factor in this particular situation that is, you know, causes, you know, everybody to sort of take a look at what happened in this particular area.

But I think we also have to remember — for the people who have just joined us — that no lives were lost, no structures were lost, and that people were able to get in and respond in a way that made sure that the values that we were protecting were protected. But I think that there were a lot of people that were concerned. Some people were evacuated. Unfortunately this summer we had people evacuated in quite a number of communities.

**Mr. Hart:** — One further comment, Minister, before I turn questions over to my colleague. First of all, the point that I was trying to make, it wasn't as far as the command structure and the decision-making structure. I don't think time was a factor here in making the decision. But what I think was a factor is that the decision was made in Prince Albert, a half a province away from where the fire was taking place. And that the input of your own people on the ground and the residents of that area who have had a lot of experience with fires in that part of the province, I don't think that their opinions entered into the decision at all. That's what it appears to me, Minister.

**Mr. Jessop:** — Just on our policies and strategies and actually fire operations, if I can just offer something here on that. And we've heard tonight there is fire on the landscape. There's been fire on the landscape for thousands of years up there across the boreal forest. The area burns about every 60 to 70 years so there has been fire there. Irrespective of what kind of response, operational strategies we've had any time in the history of this province, there has always been large fires.

Our response has always been to protect people — the safety of firefighters has also been part of that — communities, structures, industrial structures, that kind of thing. And the types of things that we look at when we make those decisions is, what are fires doing? Is it a threat? Is there potential threat? So we have to do that analysis on every fire that's out there including this fire.

And even in past policies, the policy has been if a fire was beyond initial attack and couldn't be put out small, which means you need to get to a fire within . . . The statistics and the science is that you need to get to a fire within 15 minutes or you have potential of not being able to contain it. So even under past policies where we've had initial attack, many of the fires, a lot of the fires in that area, because it's such a huge expanse of an area, were actually beyond initial attack.

This fire was beyond initial attack for the period that we're actually speaking about here, and the policies have always been protect the values, protect the community, protect the people, protect the structures, and that kind of thing. And that's what we were doing under current strategies as well. And we did that in the end. When the fire did roll down to Stony Rapids, it did not actually jump the river.

We've done assessments on over 100 communities in the North and we've determined and we've identified where the real high-risk fuel areas are around communities.

The river was a fireguard; we knew it was a fireguard. The fire didn't actually jump the river, as some people have said. There was spotting across the river. I've been evacuated from communities, and I've had to fight fire at night and back burn from communities and have firebrands falling around me and that kind of thing. So I have experienced it. Spots were thrown across the river, firebrands in the wind, so firefighters put those out in the community.

The fire we talk about west of the community was a spot fire. It was a spot that went across. We took action on that. The department and the staff there and the community people that were hired to work on the fire as well took action on that spot fire and . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — I've got to interject here. The fire jumped the river west of the community. And it wasn't your staff that put that fire out and defended the community. It was the residents of that community. Your staff assisted. And, Minister, there wasn't 18 staff members in the community on June 25. I don't know who give you those figures. There were five people in that community. We talked to your officials . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — But just understand how the fire system works.

**Mr. Hart:** — We understand how the fire system works. We . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well we've had some . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — We make the point . . . Just a minute. I'm going to have . . .

**The Chair:** — All right. Could we please have order. Let's ask the question and allow the minister to respond and not argue back and forth, please.

**Mr. Hart:** — So who has the floor again? Thank you, Mr. Chair. You and your officials made the statement that there was no buildings lost, no loss of life and that sort of thing. You're right this time, and only by the grace of God and the extraordinary efforts of the people of that community that we didn't lose that entire community and perhaps loss of life.

I suggest you and your officials travel up, go to Stony Rapids, sit down and meet with those people. Minister, the community of Stony . . . the mayor of Stony Rapids wrote you a two- or three-page letter on August 24 where he asked a number of questions. Did you respond to his letter? Have you responded to his letter?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — I'm not sure what letter you're referring to, but . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — It's dated August 21, 2006.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — I don't have it with me here, but . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — No, no. Just a minute.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — You asked me a question. You let me answer.

**The Chair:** — Let him respond to the question.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — What we know on that particular fire is that there were local people hired, which is the normal course, and then they become Sask Environment personnel that deal with these particular fires. And so, sure it's local people that are involved there. And I think you understand how that policy works. But I think also what you end up with in this particular situation is that the community has asked for a chance to review what's happened in this particular fire. That's being done, as you understood here where there's some of the initial review of all of the information. That will continue with consultation with local communities and working with the local communities.

I think also it's very clear that one of the things that happens in the off-season or when there's a rainy part of the summer is that the forest fire fighting professionals go into communities and help them do local planning to be ready for incidents that may arise or may not arise in the coming years. And that's an important part of the wildfire strategy as well.

All of these things have to be done and we have to make sure that we protect the local communities. And so we'll continue to work with the local people. We'll continue to work and coordinate this on a province-wide basis. We'll work in the regions and I think that's the appropriate way to do it.

**Mr. Hart:** — Minister, the letter I'm referring to is dated August 24 of this year. It's from the hamlet of Stony Rapids. It's addressed to you. It's a three-page letter. Copies were sent to myself and my colleague, also the chief of the Black Lake First Nation and the outfitters and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

And you said . . . in your statement you said that the fire travelled 20 kilometres in one day. The people that were there said, in your letter they said, and I'm quoting now. There's a series of at least seven questions that they ask. We checked with the village of Stony Rapids, with their administrator. To date they haven't received a response to this letter. I guess that's a whole other area. Are you ever going to respond to them?

But getting back to how quickly the fire travelled, they said, and I'm quoting now from the letter.

Remember this fire did not sneak up on anyone; it took three days to go 20 kilometres. Where . . . [was] our Fire Suppression Personnel?

They have an entirely different version. These people were there, Minister. I think we . . . You talk about a review. We'll talk a little bit later in a few minutes about this review. But I think your version of the facts and, Minister, I know you're going on what you've been provided, but it seems if you look . . . I'm sure you must have that letter. If not we'd be more than happy to give you a copy. The version of the facts as outlined by the mayor of Stony Rapids and the people that we talked to, there's quite a difference between your version of the facts and

their version of the facts. And frankly, Minister, I tend to believe the people that were there and went through this fire.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — All I'll say is that that's exactly why one would review what's gone on, to get the perspectives from different areas. But what I know is that we have professional firefighters working at a whole number of different levels — local level, district level, and at the fire centre — and their job is to provide broad-based perspective on dealing with this and then dealing within specific communities.

Part of this overall wildfire fighting strategy that we have includes a review, in the time when the fires aren't being fought, as to what happened the previous year. That's exactly what I said in the summer, in the fall, now, is going to happen. And if there are things that we can learn, obviously we'll end up changing some of the policies. That's just how this has developed over many, many years.

And so we'll continue with that kind of work, and we'll listen carefully to what the local people have to say as well. But I think it's important that we get all of the factors into the picture before we make any judgments.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Allchurch, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Allchurch:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, welcome to your officials. I just wish there was more time than just a little over an hour to discuss this issue. This issue is very dear to my colleague and my heart because we took the time to go there. We were asked to go there and we went there.

In regard to some of the answers, Mr. Minister, that you gave in events that led up to the fire, on August 19 when we were up there we were told by the CO [conservation officer] from that area and the person representing fire control in that area that on August 19 there was a phone call that went out asking for help, that the fire was within 20 kilometres at that time and needed attention.

Now whether it took five minutes to get an answer back or 25 minutes or 25 hours, whether it came from La Ronge or P.A. [Prince Albert] is here nor there. The matter of the fact is they were denied. When you get the local CO and the local fire person from there asking for a request, the least that could have happened is the department send some help. And that's what the people were asking for. It was denied.

Now the people in that area know better what was going on, and surely to God the CO and the fire protection person knew what was going on. And yet it was denied. Why is that?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Are you saying August 19? Or like I mean your questions . . . doesn't sound like you . . .

**Mr. Allchurch:** — Sorry. It was June 19, not July — pardon me.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Okay so June 19, well I mean there's the process as Mr. Jessop has explained of where those requests go, and I think that that was the appropriate procedure. But this is once again, is exactly the kinds of issues that are being carefully reviewed as it relates to this particular fire, to see what the local

perspective is from the community, from the staff that were on the ground, and then district and the region. And that's the kind of thing we do during the winter.

**Mr. Allchurch:** — In regards to the time frame, it took from June 19 to 25 when the fire took place. There was ample time to send personnel up there to put the fire out. And had we been under the old system of three years ago there would have been a helicopter moved out there, and the fire would've been out in 15, 20 minutes. And this did not come from us. It came from the CO and the firefighting person from Stony Rapids.

The point I'm trying to get at, Mr. Minister, is if the fire would have been addressed in a timely fashion which the people from Stony Rapids are asking for, that fire would have been a cost of maybe \$5,000 total to the taxpayers of the province of Saskatchewan. Now we have a figure that came in that has cost well over \$700,000 to put out that fire. What do we say to the taxpayers of Saskatchewan?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well you know your question, I'm having a hard time following it because you said that if somebody had gone out on June 19 that they could have stopped it in 15 minutes. Well at that point it had been observed since June 3, which is almost three weeks, and it had burned from 32 kilometres out to 20 kilometres or maybe 22 kilometres, whatever it was. And then it wasn't until a couple of days later that it burned that whole last distance. So your question is not understandable. It doesn't make sense because the fire was burning and being observed daily by air or . . . and that had started on June 3. So I don't understand your question at all.

**Mr. Allchurch:** — Mr. Minister, I did say I believe it was August. Before June 19, if the fire would have been dealt with before June 19.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well the explanation that I gave you is that the fire started on June 3. Okay. We know that from observation. And so from June 3 to June 19, well June 22 when it . . . [inaudible] . . . 20 kilometre area. It was being observed daily. Daily reports were being filed. It came down through the structure, so as far as how this thing was being monitored. So that was a three-week period. So I just don't understand your question or your comment about June 19 at all.

**The Chair:** — Go ahead, pardon me, Mr. Hart.

**Mr. Hart:** — I think what my colleague was attempting to point out is under the old policy, when the fire was first spotted, it was a small fire; it was between water bodies. It only actually had one way to go initially, and it could have been very easily extinguished. And it was our understanding, under the old policy, that it would have been extinguished. But now under the new policy, it is allowed to burn. You're shaking your head but . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Just let me answer.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well no. Let me finish because I will make a few more comments, and we're running out of time here. We were told that by your old staff, staff who now I see are no longer stationed in Stony Rapids but have been reassigned as a training officer. And that is a whole series of questions whether this was

a voluntary transfer or not. And we'll be watching very closely as to what happens to some of these staff members as a result of the questions and that sort of thing, Minister, just for the record.

And so that was the understanding that your own staff had as far as the difference between the old policy and the new policy.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Okay. The line of questioning that you've just entered into is, frankly, insulting to the civil service, but we'll leave that aside.

What happens under the old policy is similar to what happens under the new policy . . . is that you monitor where the fires are in relationship to communities and you make sure that you use your resources appropriately. That's what would have happened five years or ten years ago. That's what would happen now.

The intent of the question that your colleague was asking seemed to be, well if you knew the fire started and you could get there in 15 minutes, sure we could put it out. But this is 32 kilometres west of Stony Rapids on the north side of the Fond du Lac River, and it's not a place where you would very easily get a crew in to do anything. And so it just seems very strange, the whole line of questioning here.

But I especially do not accept your comment about these staff and what happened, so that's just entirely inappropriate.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well, Minister, I'd like to respond to that comment. This weekend your NDP [New Democratic Party] convention was picketed, had an information picket line by SGEU [Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union]. And one of the vice-presidents of that organization made the statement, and it's in the press, that there are managers within the civil servant that need to be dealt with.

I believe I am paraphrasing, but I believe that was the gist of it, his comments. And comments were in that line that we feel very strongly because that if a member of the civil servants provides some public information to members other than the government's side, that we certainly do feel that these people should not be disciplined in any way, and that's where those comments were coming from. And we are watching carefully in that area, Minister . . . . The member from Moose Jaw laughs. So why did you, did you, did you . . . did that member talk to I believe it's Mr . . . .

**A Member:** — Did you?

**Mr. Hart:** — He was in the media, and that's what he said. But that's another issue, Minister.

**The Chair:** — Could we have some order please, and simply ask the questions. And, Mr. Minister, would you respond to the question please?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Yes, I'd like to respond. I think that whole line of questioning reflects complete ignorance of how the civil service works. Now earlier in this time period, the member raised the question of the letter from the mayor of Stony Rapids, and it arrived in my office on September 13. It was dated on August 24. I sent a response back to him on October 16. And I'm not certain because I don't have a copy of his

letter, but I think that we responded to all his questions and explained what was going to happen. And this is a response to that letter. So that deals with an earlier issue where you were raising some questions.

But I think that what we need to recognize is that we have highly skilled people who are managing our forest fire fighting system in this province. We need to thank them for the good work that they have done. Stony Rapids is fortunately a situation where no lives were lost, values were protected, and that a lot of good work was done with the local community and with other places in this area. I think that rather than cast aspersions on the people that are trying to do this good job . . . It's not the kind of thing that should be done by members of this Assembly.

**Mr. Hart:** — Mr. Chair, we'll leave the Stony Rapids issue, Minister, for now. There were other issues that arose during the forest fire season in northern Saskatchewan. I've been in conversation with a gentleman who owned property at MacKay Lake, and his cabin was lost. The water bombers were on the lake when the fire started. They left. We don't know why. Perhaps there are legitimate reasons.

But in the whole system of notifying people about the status of their property and those sorts of things, it took this gentleman a long time to get word from your department as to whether his property was saved or whether it was burned. It took over a week before he could get any kind of information. He contacted your officials numerous times to get some confirmation as to . . . You can well imagine him and his family were very anxious about the status of their cabin up at MacKay Lake. As I said it took well over a week for that individual to get any kind of indication from your officials as to what happened.

When he contacted you, your office, about things like lease fees because the cabin did burn down, he was told that he would get some responses from your office. To date, it's over a month since he's contacted your office, Minister. It just seems to me — and I'm just summarizing very quickly because we are short of time — it just seems to me that there are other aspects to the whole way the forest fire issue has been handled in this province the last two years that really need to be reviewed, Minister.

And what I would suggest, Minister, is that, again speaking about the review . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Can I respond to that question first?

**Mr. Hart:** — I'm going to . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Because you raised an issue and . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — Well I'll sum up, and then you can respond, Minister, okay?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — Because I'm going into the review part. In questions yesterday, you said that the review of the firefighting policy and the way the fires were handled is taking place currently. Yet, Minister, in a response from the former Chair of

this committee when my colleague and myself wrote to the Chair to ask this committee to review the whole forest fire issue, that letter received from that Chair was I believe in early September or mid-September. The former Chair of this committee had indicated that a review was taking place.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Can I respond or . . . [inaudible] . . . Like, let me respond here, okay, because you're just rattling off . . . because you obviously, you obviously have a lot of notes.

**The Chair:** — Can we have some order, please.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Yes, but basically you raised the issue of MacKay Lake, and that particular cabin is on MacKay Lake. The fire . . . and it's part of the fire that came . . . it was a huge, long fire that was coming right across through that area. I was actually up in that area that day and saw the smoke and saw the fire at MacKay Lake, so I know what you're talking about. One of the really interesting challenges is that the whole fire service in the North is designed to try to protect as much property as possible. But it's not possible to protect every individual cottage in the situation, so they work very hard to respond to that.

The review that I talked about is the fact that this policy has built right into it an annual review, and that will continue. It will happen every year. And that's what's going on right now.

**Mr. Hart:** — Mr. Chair, I understand we will have a bit more time.

**The Chair:** — Yes, we had allotted one and a half hours for this period of time. We were about 15 minutes late, so we will continue on to allow for the full hour and a half.

**Mr. Hart:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Now that we have a bit more time, I will try and deal with some of these issues in more detail.

The particular incident that I'm referring to, Minister, this gentleman's cabin was the only one that was lost on MacKay Lake. I believe there's a total of seven cabins on the lake plus two trappers' cabins. The fire crept along the edge of the lake, as I understand it, and ended up just burning this one cabin down. As I'd said earlier, apparently the water bombers were on the lake but left. I guess there was questions. I know that the owner of the cabin would certainly like to know why the water bombers left without attacking the fire first and thereby preventing the loss of his cabin.

But another issue that has caused concern not only to this particular individual but other individuals is the lack of response and the long delay in getting information as to what is happening now. I can understand that at the time there was, in the La Ronge area, there was quite a number of fires and a lot of things were happening. So I guess some delay is certainly to be expected. However, frankly this individual had confirmation from some of his neighbours that his cabin actually was burnt. They were able to tell him well before your officials and your hotline was able to deliver that kind of information. So I mean that's a bit of a concern.

I mean if . . . Well you may shake your head, but I mean the

people were evacuated from the area, so therefore somehow the ordinary citizens were able to find out what actually happened prior to your people being able to tell the owner what happened. But then when the individual asked for some relief from lease fees due to loss of his cabin, he was told no; there'd be no adjustments made. Even though the local municipal authority up there said yes, we can forego this year's taxes because of your loss, your department said no. I wonder if you could explain that.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well I'm at a little bit of a loss to understand what you're talking about because on that kind of a place, if it's a lease, there would be a lease fee that would go to the lands department that covers these properties up north. I don't think there would be any local fees, but I'm not totally certain so we can check that.

But practically the situation in those kinds of places will be reviewed and looked at. I know we're trying to get more information about that particular situation, and I am aware of it myself because I actually was up in that area when this fire was happening. But the fire was, I think, a 30-kilometre front, and they were fighting it all along the 30 kilometres with the water bombers. And they put out over 200 sprinklers at 200 different sites to protect the places that they did, but unfortunately this place was caught in an area where it burned.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well, Minister, I think the owner of the cabin would certainly appreciate an explanation as to what decisions were made around the MacKay Lake fire, and I could provide you with the individual's name after we're done here this evening and . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — We have that information. Just for example, on that day that was also the day that Stanley Mission was cut off by a fire and the whole community was isolated because the fire came right across their only road in. The fire was moving very quickly across that whole area, and people were fighting it, like I say, on a 30-kilometre front. People were working very hard trying to protect as much as possible.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well if I recall correctly from my conversations with the individual, I believe the people there, that were there before they evacuated that area, said that the fire moved quite slowly along the lake and that they felt that there was enough time to actually . . . Probably with one or two loads from the water bombers they could have extinguished the fire.

But I mean these are facts that need to be discovered and reviewed through an in-depth review. The other issues . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Okay. I think you asked me questions so I'll try to respond here. That is one that we're looking at because it is a situation where something that we valued — somebody's cabin — was destroyed. And so it is one that we're looking at. And in a situation like that you have to look at all the things that were happening around there. There are people that direct where the water bombers go and how they make their choices and so we can get some sense of that. And we have his name already, so we will get information to him.

**Mr. Hart:** — You say you are reviewing that particular incident, that loss at MacKay Lake.



**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Yes.

**Mr. Hart:** — Who's involved in the review, Minister, of this particular incident?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — This is also being reviewed in the firefighting program by the senior people, the policy people, and they go and they look at all the information. Because as you've clearly indicated through the questions tonight, there are people operating on many different levels to respond to fires. And so they gather that information together and see what the whole picture is. And that's what they will do here.

**Mr. Hart:** — Are any members of the general public, and particularly members of the public who reside in that general area or own property in that area, are they being involved in the review? Do they have any input into the review?

**Mr. Jessop:** — We don't have a committee as such. It's an internal department review. The reviews we are doing is with the public, with the leaders of the North. There was a meeting in August where there was leaders from the west side. There was some of the east side communities. We held another meeting in October where all of the northern communities and the northern First Nations leaders were invited. We're having another review meeting tomorrow with the Athabasca chiefs and the Athabasca land use planning committee. We also have a meeting with the Saskatchewan outfitters at their association meeting in December, December 13 or 14. So, and we've . . . you know, that information has been put out in the news media that we will take information from anyone, from the public and from community leaders and industry and so on.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — . . . and clearly the letters that people have sent and questions that come in that . . . Because that identifies areas of concern and that's what the whole purpose of the review is.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well are you also . . . Is part of your review, are you reviewing — and this may not be your department's responsibility, I'm not sure as far as areas of jurisdiction and responsibility between yourself and the Minister of Corrections and Public Safety — but when evacuations take place and whether it be by air or by ground, does the Minister of Corrections and Public Safety, do they have a responsibility and are they involved or is it solely your responsibilities as minister?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well let me try to explain a little bit what happens. Basically it's Corrections and Public Safety. If it's a forest fire then clearly Department of Environment officials are involved, Health officials are involved both on a provincial basis and on a local regional health authority basis. There also quite a number of people that come from Community Resources because they have a task of finding accommodation, food, child care, all those things that relate to what's happened. If it's a longer evacuation that's involved, well then we get the Department of Learning involved because there may be school issues that need to take place if it happens during a school year. I think some of the fires were just at the end so that wasn't as big an issue this year. But it's a multi-faceted review.

I know I had the opportunity to be in Prince Albert at the

command central when these things were happening, and we saw incredible focus on making sure they could respond to the needs in different communities. In that meeting they had many people come in on a telephone conference call and I think these were held every day at 10 o'clock in the morning, and it included the chiefs from the various communities that were affected. And I think the, one of the . . . it always had the meteorologist, the weather guy, explaining what the 24-hour weather picture was so that every . . . And the whole purpose was so that everybody involved could have the same information and understand what things were being done. And on that basis I think we've got some very good work being done in the province to respond when there are emergencies.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well, Minister, the reason why I asked you to explain the areas of responsibility, because I was in conversation with a number of people who were in the La Ronge area at the time of the evacuations and their impression — at least the people that I spoke to — was that there was a fair bit of disorganization, that it was unorganized in some aspects. There was traffic being allowed to go in one direction and not the other. And there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason. It seemed to me. . . and these people were certainly asking that they have a forum whereby they could register their concerns about the way that whole evacuation process was handled in the La Ronge area.

We're short of time and I'm not going to go into great detail other than to say that there was some . . .

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Are you talking about evacuation from Stony Rapids?

**Mr. Hart:** — No, no. I'm talking about the La Ronge area.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — From Stanley Mission . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — Yes, yes, that area. But getting back to this individual who lost their cabin at MacKay Lake, they did, as I said, did ask for relief from paying this year's lease fees. They were told no.

You know, they have some major concerns. The individual, the cabin owner, did eventually contact your office, and they relayed all the information to one of your assistants, Minister. And that was on October 12, and this individual was assured that he would be getting a response from your office. To date he hasn't had a call or anything with regards to his issues. And I was wondering if over a month, I'm sure you and your people would have some time to at least respond to this individual's concerns. And I ask that you would do that, Minister.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well I'm not certain of the timelines involved. And I know the previous timelines you used, related to the mayor up North, were out by about a month. So I will take that under advisement. But what I would say is that these specific requests will be looked at and dealt with appropriately.

I mean obviously we were very concerned when somebody lost their cabin. And I know this was quite a nice place that had many memories attached to it. And that's always a very difficult thing.

And I know. I've been on MacKay Lake a few times myself. It's a beautiful area. And I, frankly, was almost crying seeing what kind of damage was done to that whole area around the Churchill with the fire. But I always have to remind myself that that is part of what happens and makes for a renewed and better forest in that area. And our goal here as a firefighting service for forest fires in the North is to protect values and that's one where the activities didn't do that. So we will look into it.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well, Minister, I guess we could probably discuss this whole, these issues for another hour and a half. However I think what is abundantly clear, at least to myself and my colleagues, is that there seems, particularly if we look at the Stony Rapids fire, the . . . [inaudible] . . . fire and that's the area that we're most familiar with, and it seems that there seems to be different versions to the events that happened.

And, Minister, I would suggest to you that, and I certainly don't mean to make any presumptions, but it seems to me that you may not be getting the full picture by only having, by having the review done only by people within your own department. I think you need to involve the communities that were directly affected by the fires and these policies. And, Minister, I think the public would like to be part of that whole review, Minister.

And what I would ask you at this time is if, is that you refer the review of the firefighting practices of this past year to this committee, the Standing Committee on the Economy, so that this committee can conduct a review of what happened during the forest fire season of 2006. Would you do that, Minister?

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — I don't think that would be the appropriate thing to do. I think probably a better thing to do would be for me to invite you to come with me to the forest fire fighting centre in Prince Albert and get a full briefing on how we work and operate in this province. And I think that when you have the full briefing of how this whole system works, that many of the questions that you seem to have tonight would be answered.

I think that this is an area where we need to have the community information. We need to have the information from people who have been affected, but I think it's especially an area where we need the advice of the professionals that are involved in this business. And we are, I think, fortunate in Saskatchewan to have very many capable people who are running our whole system — which is a very complicated one but it's one that's been providing good service for us in this province.

**Mr. Hart:** — Well, Minister, thank you for the invitation, but what I would do is I would invite you to accompany me to Stony Rapids and Black Lake and bring your officials with you. And in fact I think, Minister, it would probably be very helpful and beneficial if this entire committee journey to Prince Albert, meeting with your officials, and then moving on to the North, to Stony Rapids, Black Lake, Fond-du-Lac — all the communities that were evacuated this summer as a result of the forest fires — to hear from the people who were directly affected by the forest fires, to have their input, Minister.

I think it would be a valuable experience, and I would hope that you would have the courage to recommend and refer this to this committee, Minister. This is what these committees have been

set up to do — to work intersessionally, Minister.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — Well I think what I would say is that clearly a number of members, including you, have spent some time up in the North looking at some of their issues. I know that I have spent time up there. The Chair of the committee's been up there a number of times.

And we listen carefully to people in the communities and try to work through how we can deal with this. The system that we have now is there because we've listened to people over many, many decades, and we have allocated large numbers of dollars to make sure that we have even a better system. We want to be part of a national firefighting system.

I think that if we're talking about suggestions for each other, it might be helpful if you could contact some of your colleagues in Ottawa on some of these kinds of issues around firefighting as well because clearly these are issues where we need to share resources across the country. And I think that we will continue to work with local people and communities. We will continue to work with individuals where they've had problems, but we'll also work with the professionals who have ended up spending their whole careers making sure that we can provide the best service possible.

You may want to end on a high note and apologize for some of your previous comments about our civil servants because we don't need that kind of comment here in the legislature when we're dealing with valuable public employees.

**Mr. Hart:** — Minister, I certainly will apologize for some of the comments when one of the vice-presidents, I guess — I'm not sure of the term — of the SGEU apologizes for their statements they made outside your convention, Minister. I'm not sure of the individual's name, but I certainly can get it for you. And he made some very disparaging remarks about some of the managers in the civil service. And I certainly . . . That's not a broad-based comment, Minister, on my part.

All I was trying to say in the comments that I made is that we certainly would hope that because some of your staff in Stony Rapids spoke to myself and my colleague and provided public information, that no actions be taken. And as I was on your website today and I noticed that the one individual is no longer stationed in Stony Rapids but is in another position with your department. Now that might be very legitimate. I hope it is. I have no reason to believe otherwise. But all I would like to say is that we will be observing movements of these individuals and we would hope that they would be treated very fairly. But based on the comments by this individual with SGEU, it does leave the door open for some suspicions. But we certainly are . . . Those suspicions and those comments were made by a senior member of SGEU, not myself, Minister.

**Hon. Mr. Nilson:** — I only raised that point because I see that we are all colleagues in the legislature and there's certain kinds of comments that are beneath being a member of the legislature and I just felt that that was one, and so we'll leave it at that.

Thank you very much for the kinds of questions that you had this evening, and we will continue to work to make sure that we have the best professionals available to protect the people of

Saskatchewan as it relates to fighting forest fires in Saskatchewan.

**The Chair:** — All right. Thank you very much. I'd like to thank on behalf of the committee the minister and his officials for coming tonight. It's been a long evening and we do very much appreciate you coming and appearing before the committee and answering the questions of the committee. Yes, Mr. Lautermilch.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, on behalf of the government I want to thank the officials for their patience, for their tolerance, and for the good work that they do. As a member of the legislature from northern Saskatchewan whose community has been threatened by fire and who has lost a neighbour to a forest fire through an accident just east of Prince Albert, I understand the nature of second-guessing the work that you do, and I understand the criticism that comes from some areas unfairly. I also understand that you have some major challenges when you have huge forest fires. I want to thank you for the work that you do on behalf of the people of Saskatchewan.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Hart, you wanted to . . .

**Mr. Hart:** — Yes, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I also would like to thank the minister and his officials and I certainly hope that the minister's officials here tonight didn't take any of the comments out of context. We also believe that the officials certainly do a great job for this province; however when comments such as were in the media by a member of the SGEU, we certainly have to be cognizant of those type of comments. I know we certainly hope and feel that there's no grounds for those type of comments.

**The Chair:** — I would now entertain a motion to adjourn. Moved by Ms. Higgins. All those in favour.

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

**The Chair:** — This committee now stands adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 22:21.]