



STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 12 — April 14, 2026

**Published under the
authority of
The Hon. Todd Goudy
Speaker**



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Thirtieth Legislature

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY

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Kevin Kasun
Prince Albert Carlton

Kevin Weedmark
Moosomin-Montmartre

[The committee met at 15:46.]

Chair D. Harrison: — Welcome, everyone. Standing Committee on the Economy. I'm your Chair, Daryl Harrison. With us today we have Racquel Hilbert, Kevin Kasun, Kevin Weedmark, and we have Trent Wotherspoon chitting in for Sally Housser and Brent Blakley chitting in for Meara Conway. Any further substitutions? None.

**General Revenue Fund
Agriculture
Vote 1**

Subvote (AG01)

Chair D. Harrison: — Consideration of estimates. Our first item of business today will be the consideration of the 2026-2027 estimates and the 2025-2026 supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Agriculture. We will begin with consideration of vote 1, Agriculture, central management and services, subvote (AG01).

Minister Marit is here with his officials. I would ask that officials state their names before speaking, and please don't touch the microphones. The *Hansard* operator will turn your microphone on when you are speaking to the committee. Minister, please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. David Marit: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Pleased to be here today to discuss the Ministry of Agriculture estimates. The officials joining me here today include Jean-Michel Ferre, my chief of staff. Bill Greuel, to my right, is deputy minister, and his team is: Amy Standish, assistant deputy minister of policy; Penny McCall is assistant deputy minister of sector growth; Brady Pollock is assistant deputy minister of regulatory; Rob Pentland is executive director of corporate services; and Kim McLean is the manager of Farm Land Security Board.

Jeff Morrow, president and CEO [chief executive officer] of Saskatchewan Crop Insurance Corporation, is on my left. And his team is: Lorelei Hulston is the vice-president of operations, Waren Ames is the executive director of AgStability, and Christine Virostek is vice-president of finance and accounting. I appreciate this opportunity to talk about what is ahead for the year and hear your questions as well, talk about the highlights from last year.

As you know, the agriculture industry is foundational to Saskatchewan's Growth Plan, with several 2030 targets centred on agriculture. One of those targets is increasing value-added agriculture revenue to \$10 billion by 2030, and we are on track to get there. Since 2022 we've seen more than \$3 billion in private investment in value-added agriculture. Our sector is now one of the fastest growing in Canada, with annual revenue rising from \$3.5 billion in 2012 to an estimated \$8.4 billion in 2024-2025. That is a \$384 million increase from '23-24.

We are also on track to meet our 45 million metric tons crop production target. Despite dry conditions in several regions, particularly in the Southwest and south central, Saskatchewan farmers still produced a record crop of 41.9 million metric tons. That's up 13.7 per cent over 2024 and 24.1 per cent above the

five-year average. The growth plan target of expanding irrigation to 85,000 acres has been achieved with over 27,000 acres of irrigation developed in 2025.

On the livestock side, our goal of livestock cash receipts reaching \$3 billion was surpassed ahead of schedule. In 2024 Saskatchewan reached \$3.9 billion in livestock cash receipts, and this number grew to \$5 billion in 2025. We also saw strong agri-food export numbers reaching \$18 billion in 2025 in the face of tariffs and market access challenges. These results show the strong position we're operating from even as we face challenges.

One challenge has been controlling Richardson's ground squirrel populations to limit their extensive damage to crop and pasture lands. We were recently successful in working with Alberta and the federal government on a revised emergency-use registration for strychnine to control populations for the 2026-2027 season. While this will be an important management tool in eligible regions, the province will continue to support Richardson's ground squirrel management through extensive efforts, the gopher control program to offset the costs of registered strychnine alternatives, and Saskatchewan Crop Insurance Corporation programs.

Global trade volatility and the impact on our economy have been top of mind over the past year. The Government of Saskatchewan has been collaborating with our federal counterparts in Ottawa to resolve these issues as quickly as possible. In January our Premier travelled to China with the Prime Minister, where they reached a preliminary agreement in principle to significantly reduce tariffs on Canadian canola and other agriculture products. As of March 1st, China has lowered tariffs on canola seed to 14.9 per cent.

In early March, the Premier again travelled with the Prime Minister to India to address trade barriers on pulse imports into that country. These are important steps on the way to rebuilding our trade relations with China and India, two key export markets.

With this year's budget, we look to protect Saskatchewan's agriculture sector in the year ahead. The 2026-2027 budget includes a strong commitment to agriculture with the \$662.7 million investment to support the industry. This year we received an increase in funding of \$37.4 million, which clearly demonstrates the province's support of farmers, ranchers, and the agribusiness, and understanding of how critical agriculture is to the provincial economy.

A \$524.3 million investment — an increase of 8.4 per cent over '25-26 — builds sector resilience through a strong suite of fully funded business risk management programs, including Saskatchewan crop insurance and AgStability. This increased funding ensures Saskatchewan producers can access reliable coverage and responsive service delivery that meets the needs of their operations.

We know our suite of programs supports producers. It has paid out over \$8.1 billion from 2021 to 2025. In 2025, over 85 per cent of the seeded acres were insured through the crop insurance program. Despite variable growing conditions across the province, many producers experienced improved production compared to recent years, supported by strong on-farm

management decisions. These results have helped renew strength in the crop insurance program, ensuring it remains reliable in supporting farmers and ranchers year after year.

Additionally in 2025, responding to ongoing international trade concerns, changes to the 2025 AgStability program year strengthened its support for Saskatchewan producers. Further changes starting in the 2026 program year, responding to industry feedback, include enhancements to better recognize feed costs and pasture use. This will help AgStability provide more meaningful and responsive support for the livestock sector.

SCIC [Saskatchewan Crop Insurance Corporation] continues to innovate the design and delivery of their programs. Leveraging technologies allows SCIC to enhance program accuracy and responsiveness for Saskatchewan producers. This includes the introduction of satellite forage insurance as a localized, responsive, and accurate approach to managing forage risk. SCIC works closely with producers and industry to ensure programs remain relevant and responsive.

Through ongoing collaboration, SCIC remains committed to developing programs to meet the evolving needs of Saskatchewan agriculture while advancing customer service provided to producers. SCIC's programs and services are built to support producers in managing risk and making confident, forward-looking decisions. Reliable programs not only strengthen individual operations but also contribute to the long-term economic growth of Saskatchewan's agriculture sector.

We're headed into our fourth year of the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership. This is a five-year, \$3.5 billion investment by federal and provincial governments and strategic initiatives for Saskatchewan agriculture. This year we are again committing \$89.4 million towards these programs. Through this suite of programs we continue to deliver on our investment in priority areas to help ensure producers remain competitive and profitable.

Popular programs for producers include the farm and ranch water infrastructure program to develop sustainable water resources, the resilient agricultural landscapes program to increase resiliency of agriculture land, and the animal health and biosecurity program. We continue to see a strong program uptake from the producers.

This program funding also invests in programs that support agribusinesses and industry organizations. This includes programs like the Saskatchewan lean improvements in manufacturing program, or SLIM as we call it, for infrastructure projects that improve productivity and efficiency, and market development grant funding for industry associations to increase domestic and international trade capacity and grow demand for Saskatchewan agriculture products through support for in-market development, incoming missions, and trade advocacy.

The budget fully funds animal welfare enforcement in the province for livestock and companion animals. We know proper animal care is a high priority for Saskatchewan producers and the public. The ministry introduced amendments to *The Animal Protection Act* in 2018 following a comprehensive review of the gaps and impacts of animal welfare enforcement under the current legislation.

The amended legislation establishes a clear framework for animal protection agency accountability, fiscal responsibility, and transparency while streamlining the process for addressing animals in distress. The Saskatchewan Animal Enforcement Agency took over enforcement of the Act as of April 1st, 2026. They will provide animal enforcement services for Saskatchewan, excluding the city of Regina where the Regina Humane Society provides that service.

Agriculture research remains a top priority in Saskatchewan, and this budget invests \$37 million in research. The funding will support our research partners and the world-class research they undertake. It helps our agriculture sector stay competitive and able to respond to future challenges and opportunities, and it ensures producers stay competitive and profitable in the international markets.

Our investment includes funding for the Agriculture Development Fund and the strategic research initiative. It also includes core funding for Saskatchewan's world-class research institutions and research and demonstration farms. This includes key personnel at our crop and livestock research facilities; research chairs to advance strategic priorities and to train the next generation of producers, agronomists, and scientists; and research projects that demonstrate innovative technologies to producers and agronomists at the local level.

The Ministry of Agriculture's core operating budget for 2026-2027 remains largely unchanged at \$46.9 million. These dollars support the staff that supports and advocates for the sector and delivers the programs, service, and advice our agriculture industry relies on. This includes funding for 10 regional extension offices that work directly with producers and the Agriculture Knowledge Centre phone line.

[16:00]

As part of the budget, we're increasing our investment in producer mental health supports to \$200,000. One of the best ways to protect the agriculture industry is by supporting those who work in it. In partnership with a new organization, SaskAgMatters, we will expand mental health services to Saskatchewan agriculture workers and their families. SaskAgMatters is a Saskatchewan-based organization led by farmers and agriculture community members.

Beginning April 1st, 2026, the Farm Stress Line will connect with the Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing's Farmer Crisis Line. This will provide free, confidential mental health support along with access to follow-up counselling from Saskatchewan-based registered mental health clinicians with agriculture backgrounds. We've heard how important it is for those answering those calls to understand the unique challenges of working in agriculture, and this change addresses all of that.

In closing, it is my privilege to introduce this agriculture budget that will continue to protect the Saskatchewan agriculture sector so it remains a key economic sector in this province. Thank you for your time today, and I look forward to the questions.

Chair D. Harrison: — Thank you, Minister. I will now open the floor to questions.

Oh, my apologies. We have one more substitution. Jared Clarke is sitting in for Tajinder Grewal. Welcome, Jared.

Questions. I recognize Trent Wotherspoon.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thanks, Mr. Minister, for your remarks. Thanks to your team, all your officials that are here today and those that are involved in the work here today as well. I think we have an incredible team there in the Ministry of Agriculture that, you know, is just like our producers, is the best within this country.

Thanks to them, this is a really proud and dynamic industry, world-leading. From our primary producers through to research and innovation, agribusiness through to commercialization, and that whole ecosystem. It's an honour to address it and advocate for it here tonight.

I guess maybe right off the top, of course, we're facing a fair amount of uncertainty and some cuts from the federal government around ag research in this province. We know how valuable ag research is. I think Sask Wheat identifies ag research with a return of 35 to 1. And those cuts, you know, are really a step in the wrong direction. And I'd like to focus maybe very specifically on where the federal government is at.

Now I know the moment this was announced, we met with industry and with local leaders and with Indian Head and the research folks and the seed growers, and advocated directly with the minister and the Prime Minister, calling on them to stand down these cuts.

I'd like to hear what the latest update is. I hear that there's a bit of a reprieve for things like the planting out at Indian Head. But you know, that leaves too much uncertainty with respect to this invaluable research. So I'd like to hear what your advocacy has been and what the latest is from the feds on this.

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah, thanks for that question and good question, Trent. We've obviously been very engaged in this since we heard of the notification of it as well. I've had a few calls with the federal minister and text messages as well from him in regards to this, both these facilities at Indian Head and at Scott.

We, as I said, we have had discussions with the industry stakeholders here as well. This isn't going to happen overnight. My understanding from the federal minister, it's probably going to take two years. The process is quite lengthy. Obviously it goes through all the other federal ministries before there's any transition.

After that is — and no, there's no interest — then the provincial government has the first opportunity. We're seriously having some discussions with our industry stakeholders on that. Just in my meeting last week with Kody Blois, who's the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, we had a good discussion about these and how it might work out.

Obviously there's an asset there, and so there will be some discussions on how we go through that. I know, Bill, you might want to comment on some of the discussions we're having with officials on that and how it's working with the other research as well.

Bill Greuel: — Yeah, thanks, Minister. My name is Bill Greuel, deputy minister of Agriculture. I think one of the things I would add, Minister, is we've had a lot of good conversations with my federal deputy counterpart really trying to understand the timelines. And the federal government has committed, to date, to put seed in the ground at the Seed Increase Unit at Indian Head, which is positive.

I think what we're looking at is what is kind of the short-term solution for '26 and '27, and then working on a longer term solution that might be a sustainable plan, especially for the Seed Increase Unit at Indian Head. And so we've had a number of good conversations, as the minister has stated, with Sask Wheat, SaskOilseeds, Western Grains Research Foundation, and the Saskatchewan Seed Growers' Association about what a plan looks like for the long term. And in addition, we've had some good conversations with the Crop Development Centre at the University of Saskatchewan, who certainly has a stake in the Seed Increase Unit at Indian Head.

So you know, moving target, lots of things to decide, but certainly a groundswell of support for a made-in-Saskatchewan solution for the long term.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Yeah, it's such a critical site, isn't it? And you know, the replication unit, you've got a real valuable asset. You've got continuous research that has provided incredible innovations and gains for this province and for producers.

Is there a possibility that the feds will step away from the commitment to close Indian Head, as we've called on them to do? Or is it clear now from the minister that the planning has to get to what sort of proposals, what sort of structure would be in place, and what role would the province play along with, you know, whether it's the Western Grains Research Foundation or the Canadian Seed Growers' and IHARF [Indian Head Agricultural Research Foundation] and the other leaders to ensure this site continues and this research continues in a sustainable way?

Hon. David Marit: — Thanks for the question. Yeah, and my discussions with the federal minister obviously have been around a lot of this, and Bill commented about his discussions with the deputy minister as well. And so those discussions are going on.

One of the things I did hear from both the federal minister and from the parliamentary secretary, Kody Blois, last week was the challenge they're having with a lot of these facilities is maintenance and upkeep. And their costs around that is what they're challenged with.

I was happy to see that the crop was going in. That was one thing we had asked for, and I was very, very glad to see when the federal minister actually texted me and said, no worries, the crop is going in. Because that was a big concern for me as a farmer, just because that's where all the certified foundation seed is grown, right. And obviously it goes out to the seed growers and then it becomes certified and down the line. So that was important for us.

The other part that's concerning for us as well, especially with the Indian Head facility, is the forage side. That's obviously

really going to be important and challenging on how we move that through too. There's a lot of balls in the air on this one right now just because of the asset. There's land involved as everybody knows too as well.

There's also partnerships that they have with our folks in the Ministry of Ag. And so there's partnerships and how we work relationships that way too. I'm confident we're going to land in a good place here at some point. It's just right now, the process that we're going through is going to take, as the federal minister . . . probably two years, he told me.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Can you commit to the industry that the province is really going to play a lead role to make sure that in the end, that Indian Head, that this operation is going to continue and sustain well into the future? It may look like, you know, may be operated by a different entity. Maybe the province plays a lead role or some of these other entities that we've identified that are putting forward proposals and looking to partner. But can you commit as minister that the province is prepared to do all they need to do to be a partner with industry to keep this site continuing to operate and bring the gains forward that producers deserve?

Hon. David Marit: — As I said to the industry when we made this call, I said the Ministry of Agriculture and the province of Saskatchewan will lead this. And then we will engage with the industry stakeholders once we know, you know, what the asset is. Is there value, and some of the concerns and challenges around that. But I've made that very clear to the industry on that our ministry will lead the discussions with the federal minister.

As I've said, we know what's happening this year. We still have to worry about the harvest of that crop as well, so we're going to have to see how that all plays out, but we're going to ensure that the discussion is going to take place with all our stakeholders on the go-forward on both these facilities.

Trent Wotherspoon: — It's certainly important that the province leads that discussion along with industry, but we also, you know . . . The province is going to have to be ready and willing to act to potentially be a partner or to take on, you know, some active role within this project. So we'll continue to follow up and track it.

Do want to give just recognition obviously, as you're sort of identifying as well, just all the industry partners and all the producers and all the seed growers and all the research community and all those folks, you know, across the research community and certainly at Scott but at Indian Head and the foundation and the farm there. They're just awesome. All the seed growers, just awesome proponents to work with who are all working in the best interests of producers in our province and our country. Also a big thanks to the leadership at the municipality there, the town of Indian Head as well. It's a very important operation.

And I think that maybe what gets lost sometimes down in Ottawa at some bureaucratic level is just a lack of understanding of how important this site is and the continuous research, and the fact that much of it just isn't portable to another site. The geographic location itself and the soil and the weather is unique and presents significant value to producers. So we'll continue to push and

advocate. And wherever possible, Minister, we're happy to have a very strong, united voice, you know, from this Assembly to the federal government and to work with industry on this project.

Maybe shifting gears just a little bit to another concern with the actions of the federal government — and they've stepped back as we've both made calls on this front — and that's around the traceability program that emerged in the early part of 2025 here. And as soon as this emerged, it was really clear at the primary producer level with livestock producers that what was being conceived just wasn't practical at all, wasn't advancing, you know, a greater means and that really came at the cost of producers as well.

So I know we immediately worked with livestock producers and their organizations across this province and advocated with the Prime Minister, and I know you did as well. Another situation where we're able to be united as a province on this front. And thankfully we've seen the feds halt that program, which was the call. But I guess could you give us an update as to where that's all at and what the go-forward looks like?

[16:15]

Hon. David Marit: — Thank you. Obviously this was a big issue when it first came out. When the new regulations were presented, we were one of the first provinces, along with Alberta, to make the call. And really this is a real credit to the federal Ag minister, Minister MacDonald, for walking across the floor to the Minister of Health and saying, this has to be paused. So we're obviously very happy to get that.

Obviously I think we're all in the same position. The one thing we want to make sure is this does not come as a significant cost to the producers in this province and some of the challenges around that. I know Bill has had some discussions at a federal level, and I'll have him comment on those discussions that he's had with CFIA [Canadian Food Inspection Agency].

Bill Greuel: — Yes. Thanks, Minister. I would just add that late last week I had a conversation with Dr. Harpreet Kochhar, who is the new president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. And we talked at length about the issues and challenges that these traceability regulations cause for producers and some of the practical challenges that they will have implementing them.

Dr. Kochhar is of course very well versed in the file. He's the former chief veterinary officer for the country and understands very well the traceability and some of the issues and challenges and the reasons why we need some form of it, but also understands the issues and challenges with the regulations as prescribed.

I will say that, for the first time in a long time, I heard the president of the CFIA talk about really having to know and understand the issues and challenges that producers are facing. And he did offer to come to Saskatchewan at any time and meet with producers and hear first-hand the issues and challenges that they're facing.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Yeah, thanks for the update. It's a very important file. And I think being proactive on this is going to be important because we saw, you know, that entry that really was

a big concern for our livestock sector.

And again just a big shout-out to, you know, the Sask Cattle Association, to the stock growers, to the livestock sector in this province for being so effective in making their case as to why this really missed the mark and why it wasn't in the interest of producers or the sector.

Shifting gears a bit to some of the business risk management programs and some of the . . . a few questions there. I guess around AgriStability, is Saskatchewan actively advocating with FPT [federal-provincial-territorial] partners to make the temporary changes of 2025 to AgriStability permanent, specifically the 90 per cent compensation rate and the 6 million payment limit increase? I think that in light of the current trade and tariff challenges that producers face and the uncertainty on this front, coupled with the rising input costs that producers are facing, there's a real strong argument to make these changes permanent.

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah, I was just getting clarification from the team. First and foremost, Canada has to agree to it first before anybody can say anything. I know in my discussions with the federal minister, this will be on the agenda at the FPT meeting in July. So that's where the discussion will be. Obviously there is parameters around any increase for things like that. They have to have so much support around the table, otherwise it doesn't go through.

But first and foremost, the federal government has to agree to it. It wouldn't matter if the province did; if the federal said no then it wouldn't be happening. So the discussion has to take place with the federal government at the FPT table at some time. And then we'll have that decision to make then on whether we're going to be in or not once we hear who else is in and who is not.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Are you advocating? Is Saskatchewan advocating? We're in a good position to lead of course on these fronts. Are you advocating for those changes to be made permanent, just based on the challenges and the circumstances producers face here right now?

Hon. David Marit: — Well obviously there's lots of challenges in that sector right now. And to advocate for changes and continued changes, that also comes at a cost. And so the big discussion will be, you know, first and foremost, does the federal government agree to it. I would probably hardly say there wouldn't be too many that wouldn't be onside with it, but there'd be first and foremost the feds have to agree to it. So it's really not whether a province advocates for it or not. It's really whether the federal government says they're in or not.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Yeah. No, fair enough, Minister. But at the end, if you decide it's in the interests of your producers, we should make the case, right. And you make that case in an effective way with your relationship with the feds, and a constructive way and with the other provinces.

And so that's sort of my question to you of whether . . . What I'm hearing is that you're not advocating to make that program permanent at this point. It's a bit of a wait and see on your end?

Hon. David Marit: — No, you're not hearing that at all. I'm

saying that we have to wait and see what the federal government does before then we make our decision.

Trent Wotherspoon: — You can always use your voice with the federal government and be clear about some of the priorities that we'd like to see advanced around. That's kind of how the partnership works.

With respect to the livestock sector, for many years I've come to this committee and to you previously as minister and ministers previous, pushing for a livestock price insurance to have both contributions from the provincial and federal government — in essence to be made a national program. Originally there was a fair amount of reluctance out of your government a number of years back. Then there was recognition that this should in fact be a national program, and that there should be federal and provincial contributions.

I just wanted to follow up as to where your advocacy's been at on that front, where your position is. And certainly this is something important to the livestock sector. So seeing where you're at going into some of the processes ahead of us to make livestock price insurance a national program with both federal and provincial contributions.

Hon. David Marit: — Well I want to clear the record up that we were the first province to go online to make the livestock price insurance a national program. We were the very first province to take that to the federal table.

We now have everybody but Ontario and Quebec. And we can't . . . Unfortunately this is a program that's not a 7 out of 10. This is, you've got to have everybody. Ontario right now is saying no to the program because they have their own program and they have administration issues there. And I think if the federal government addressed that, they would probably be in line. Quebec has not agreed to it either at this time, so it's unfortunate.

We advocated really hard with our Maritime folks and we got the Maritime folks onside with it, which really wasn't an issue for them in the first place. But I was very happy when I was in that role to get all the Maritimes to come onside with it. It's a challenge right now for Ontario and Quebec. We always have that discussion with our counterparts in those provinces as to where they're at with it, and we continue to have it. And I think it's a negotiation unfortunately between the federal government and those provinces to decide whether they're going to compensate Ontario on the one side. And I don't know what the challenges are with Quebec. I honestly don't.

Trent Wotherspoon: — No, thanks for the update. Certainly important to the livestock sector. I guess on that front, can you speak to any other changes or changes that you're advocating for to ensure an improved backstop for the livestock sector?

Hon. David Marit: — This is a good one, Trent. And you know, I'm glad you asked it, because I think it's a program that I am very proud that this government has made some significant changes that obviously come with dollars attached to them. They do. And I know I'm going to ask Jeff to ask just what the dollar amount that we paid out on some of this over the last few years. And I know he'll have it there somewhere or one of the staff will, but I think it's important for it to be on public record on what that

has been.

You know, I'll just talk about one of the programs that we implemented a few years ago that is really being utilized, is the fencing costs around feed stacks for the wildlife, for that side of it. And I know I was talking to a rancher in my area — he's a fair-sized rancher — where he has utilized that program four times because he doesn't want to keep all his feed in one yard, right. So he moves it. I just talked to him here a couple weeks ago at a meeting in Rockglen and he said that that program has really saved his feed and his feed costs.

But I'll let Jeff get into exactly all the other things on the satellite and everything like that.

Jeff Morrow: — Thanks, Minister. Jeff Morrow, CEO for SCIC. So one of the things the minister referenced was the satellite forage insurance program. So we worked for a couple of years with industry on that and then did a pilot with about 50 producers across the province in 2025. And really just wanted to make sure we understood from our producers' perspective, our stakeholders' perspective how this satellite program could work for their operations. And they gave us advice and feedback on program design ideas.

What we were able to do was give those 50 producers access to 20 years of data, looking at satellite for their township so they could, you know, recollect back to when they had feed shortages and how the satellite would've reacted compared to our existing program.

And I'd say the feedback that we got from that focus group and from working with industry over two years really led us to the path that the satellite forage insurance was a better program than our forage rainfall. Because one of the common concerns we heard about our forage rainfall was it was based on weather stations, and sometimes weather stations were just too far away from where the producer was actually grazing their livestock and it didn't always represent what happened. So it rains at the weather station, doesn't rain where I'm grazing my livestock. The program has a gap there.

And with what we are able to do with satellite forage insurance is bring that down to the township level. So we go from 224 weather stations that producers could pick from to now it's going to be 3,700 townships. And we know where the producer's land is so he doesn't have to pick a weather station like he did before. Now it's going to be based on where you're actually grazing your livestock, so the producer just has to pick kind of the coverage options that they want, the species that they want to cover.

[16:30]

And the way the satellite forage works is it covers basically a lack of precipitation. So with satellite we're able to measure the soil moisture, and so if soil moisture is below historic normals, that's when the program would pay.

So this is the first year of launch. I'd say through the sale season . . . I'd say good feedback from producers and industry about how the program could work. And we did see an increase over what we had insured last year of about 400,000 acres more insured using satellite forage than forage rainfall. Forage rainfall

has been discontinued and satellite forage replaces it.

On the stacked forage that the minister referenced, that's a prevention program that we have in place for producers to protect their stacked hay from . . . mainly it's elk and deer. And the way that program works is if a producer is incurring losses — because we do cover stacked forage — if they're incurring losses, we'll work with that producer to see if it makes sense based on the losses they're incurring. And the wildlife pressure that's coming to those yards, that we'll provide the cost for the material and 25 per cent above that too if they have to clear a fenceline or hire somebody to help build it.

So that program has been, I'd say, more popular in the last few years due to the pressure. And I think to see that it actually can save the feed yard which . . . It's not fun to have to try and find hay in the middle of winter. So stacked forage prevention has been positive.

The other piece that we've done based on the conditions to help with livestock feed is double low-yield appraisal. And the way that works is if there are areas in the province that are experiencing dry conditions and the crop is deteriorating to a point where we are pretty sure it's going to get to zero, we made some changes to allow those acres to be diverted to livestock feed.

So we've done that three times in the past five years because of the conditions. We've been able to divert 730,000 acres that would have essentially gone to zero. Those acres were diverted to livestock feed to help support the livestock producers in those years.

And then in the minister's opening remarks he mentioned AgriStability changes. So two changes that we worked with industry closely on have been gaps or things that didn't make the program as relevant as it could be. And it was the way that we value feed in the AgriStability program.

So the change now is . . . Or the way it used to work is that if your producer were short of hay . . . Hay is a local market. The price of hay goes up. So at the beginning your inventory price is \$100 a tonne. The end of year might be \$200 a tonne because there's shortage of hay and the producer's inventory is likely going down.

So we were taking producers or moving producers further away from a benefit the way we were doing that inventory valuation. The way we do it now is we're going to use that end-of-year price for both. So if the producer's short of hay, we're going to move him closer to an AgriStability benefit than further away.

And the other feed expense piece is acknowledging and allowing the feed cost associated with pasture rent to be an allowable expense for AgriStability.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Thanks for the update there. You know, we've gone through and advocated on these fronts over the years. Thanks for the update on some of these programs.

I guess I'd look to the minister here. You know, we've spoken in the past with respect to the protracted drought that some have faced in the Southwest as an example, in around the RM [rural

municipality] of Big Stick and Fox Valley and Enterprise and Waverley. And there's other areas as well that are isolated but that have just been through this protracted drought that, you know, now nine years on. And you know, I hope we face a whole bunch of rainfall in the next little bit as we head into this growing season. That being said, they're in a really precarious situation — many would say at a real tipping point — producers in through that area.

And the business risk management programs of course just aren't built for protracted drought like that, right. So they're not effective in mitigating the real devastation that they're facing. They've been desperately calling for some additional measures and actions.

So has SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities], of course, directly with the minister, calling for actions on this front including some sort of additional policy package for those in a protracted drought area. Other things like having that double low-yield program apply as well if a combine is used, so that that seed can be captured and utilized in the following year. SARM's laid out some other calls as well.

But these folks are headed into another growing season right now, and right now there hasn't been any new initiatives taken on. And I was there at SARM with you, Mr. Minister, when you were taking questions from these local leaders from these RMs, and you talked about potential actions that might be taken some time down the road.

I think it leaves producers really uncertain and really stressed when they need a little bit more predictability and to know what sort of other measures may be there to have their backs. Will there be any other actions or programs taken to support these producers in these drought-devastated areas that have faced this protracted drought for many years?

Hon. David Marit: — Thanks for the question, and a good one. Obviously you know, we've had that discussion. I personally had that discussion with one of the RMs as well around some of the challenges around that and the crop insurance coverage. And Jeff will get into the details on that.

Obviously we are, you know, we're looking at some other things, but there's obviously challenges when you do that. Is it actuarial sound? And if we do any changes to the crop insurance program, we got to have federal approval. And there's things like that. Or do we do a stand-alone program, you know, where the producer pays. But then if there's a payout, you know, how is it paid and things like that.

So there's some challenges around that that we are looking at. I can say that we are looking at some options on just if we can do these things. But as I've said in the first part, we'll have to have federal approval. And so obviously we're working on some things, just have to see whether we can bring them forward or not.

But I'll have Jeff talk on just how the crop insurance program has really worked for those municipalities that have had severe droughts, and I know a lot of my areas had it as well.

Jeff Morrow: — Thanks, Minister. Maybe just overall I'll talk

about kind of the support over the last five years. So when we look at the last five years for SCIC, it's \$8.1 billion in payments provincially. When we look at the areas that declared a disaster in 2025 — and majority of those RMs are in the Southwest — 1.8 billion of that 8.1 has gone to those RMs. So you know, about 9 per cent of the RMs getting about 20 per cent of the compensation.

So I mean it is targeted to the areas that are having the most significant challenges at a high level.

And I think one of the other . . . There's two pieces that we do to support coverage. One is yield cushioning, and it's directly to help with situations where there are consecutive years of challenging conditions and low yields. And the way yield cushioning works is that we cushion yields at 70 per cent of whatever we offered you the year before when you have consecutive challenges.

So in the first year of a poor yield, even if it's zero we pay the claim out at 100 per cent. Zero gets used to update your future coverage. But in the second year if you have zero yield again, we pay the full crop insurance claim, but to update your future coverage we use 70 per cent of whatever we offered you the year before.

And so if there are producers that have had nine years in a row of really challenging yields that fall below that 70 per cent trigger each year consecutively, each year we would prop that coverage up to 70 per cent. That has helped to stabilize coverage and that's what that yield cushioning was intended for. And we've had that as a feature of the program since 2009, I believe.

The other piece is yield trending and that's for crops where . . . Because we built our yield coverage to be stable by design because we know we have cycles in this province where we're going to see some challenging yields, so it's stable by design. But that means our yield methodology doesn't always capture the great improvements that have been made through research and farming practices, so it's lagging sometimes. Yield trending applies to crops like canola, wheat, and durum, and yield trending also supports that coverage that is available to producers wherever they are in the province.

And I think, you know, some examples of looking at those risk zones in the Southwest, how yield cushioning and trending combined have helped even with challenging years. Since 2016 long-term average yields for durum, for example, have actually increased by 4 per cent; for hard red have increased 6 per cent; red lentils have declined by 11. I think it just helps to demonstrate that some of the pieces that we have in place to stabilize that coverage for producers is helping, is responding, and hopefully helping those producers out.

The other piece, maybe just back to the satellite forage insurance, you know, most acres in our forage insurance programs are in the Southwest, and so we're hopeful with the improvements to satellite forage that makes that coverage more relevant and responsive and accurate.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Okay, well I would just identify . . . I appreciate the responses and those that work on the matter in crop insurance. But there's a real disconnect, I think, with just where

producers on the ground are with the pressures they're facing and, you know, their plea to work with the ministry, as they are heading into this growing season, to see some additional measures. That would be a bit of a backstop at what seems to be an incredibly precarious situation that they face.

And you know, I would continue to press the minister. I think that from what I hear from these producers in these rather isolated areas — we're not talking huge, huge areas, but rather isolated areas — is that it really could be a tipping point as far as their operations and ownership of multi-generational farms. And I think it's incumbent of the province and the minister to work with these producers that are in an isolated area to make sure there's some programs built up to ensure they have some backstop through this very challenging period. We'll continue to push and advocate on that front on their behalf.

I think to even illustrate that, you know, it's like the . . . Of course we're all supportive of the utilization of strychnine for control of gophers and the devastation they can cause, the emergency utilization or the limited utilization that's been extended. But as that map got brought forward — and it was positive news that there was going to be some utilization — but the map didn't even include some of these drought-devastated areas. And in essence that was because they hadn't filed crop insurance.

I wrote you as the minister on this right away advocating for the extension of that map. But basically producers in those regions hadn't made claims of course for gopher devastation because their crops themselves were devastated. So that illustrates I think just how stark things are in some of those areas. Now we're pleased to see the broadening of that map.

Maybe just on the point of strychnine, I'm really hearing concerns of course on supply and timelines. It needs to be used very early here to be effective. So I just want to hear what actions the ministry's taken to address and make sure that supply is in place when it's needed.

[16:45]

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah. Yeah, I mean obviously we were challenged with all of this. We'd been asking for it for a long time. And we knew that the other products were not working, and that was the challenge we had. And that's why we have the outbreak we have in most of the South and Southwest.

And in fact now it's even going farther up, even up into Lloydminster now. And I can tell you, I never thought I would see it on the east side of the province either, and it's bad there too as well. I've seen quarter sections of canola actually destroyed within a matter of a week because of gophers and the challenge we have around that.

The challenge we had with this, quite frankly, was PMRA [Pest Management Regulatory Agency] and not giving us the approval. The product can only be sourced from one country, as you know, and there's no way they're making it until they know there's an entrant level that they're going to get. And so it's our understanding we're probably going to get so many bottles this year between Alberta and Saskatchewan to utilize. We haven't got final verification on what that is. They've given us kind of an idea of what it might be, but we're probably not going to see it

till June or July because it's . . . as you know, to get it into the product and then to get the product processed here.

Obviously I'm very concerned about it. In my part of the area it's way too late. I was just touring the constituency last weekend, and I mean they're rampant to the point where they are destroying pastures now. And it's very concerning for us on that side of it. But I can say I'm very thankful that we got the 18 months out of it so that we can show PMRA and the federal government the utilization of this product is something that we have to have in permanency.

And obviously the rules around the usage are very restrictive, and that's fine. The farmers and ranchers that I've talked to — when we had it a few years ago it was the same rules — and they're all prepared to live by those rules and use the product in the best means it has to be. But this is obviously a very serious problem in many parts of the province now and it's not getting any better. Thanks.

Trent Witherspoon: — Yeah, thanks for speaking to it. The timeliness of the supply is a real challenge. In the meantime my son will continue to do his part with his twenty-two, but that doesn't go the distance, right?

Hon. David Marit: — I'll give him some names.

Trent Witherspoon: — Yeah, so an important file. Shifting gears just a bit. Looking at RALP [resilient agricultural landscapes program], looking to see if there's any changes or any reductions on that front provincially.

And then maybe to give you two questions at once — and I've identified this in the past — I know there's been a real reluctance by the province to stack some of the programs that exist on this front. But I continue to hear from the stock grower community and the livestock community that it's really important that these programs be allowed to be stacked in an accountable and transparent way to be able to respond to just the cost pressures that producers are facing and to be as effective as they can be.

Hon. David Marit: — I'm going to have Amy come up and explain the issue and the challenge that you raised, and it is the stacking side of it.

But on the RALP program, there's no reductions. It's a program. I know some ranchers in my constituency. A good friend of mine was very happy about it where he took some marginal farm land and seeded it back into forage and increased his cattle herd. So no, we've been obligated or we've been committed to that funding and we have signed onto the agreement.

But Amy's going to talk to the other part, to the question you had about the stacking side and the program itself. Go ahead, Amy.

Amy Standish: — Amy Standish, assistant deputy minister at the Ministry of Agriculture. And so this would be a bit of a twofold response. And so when we look at RALP and the agreement that we have with the federal government, there is principles written in there already that there is no stacking allowed with certain other programs. So I will use the On-Farm Climate Action Fund, which also provides beneficial management practices. And so that principle is in the agreement.

So we cannot stack between those two programs.

The other piece that you mentioned, I think gets into some of the other programming that's offered through some of the NGOs [non-governmental organization] and other organizations. And so the decision was made to then extend that principle through to other programming that's available with the idea that we don't want to duplicate or overlap those dollars on the same activity given kind of the finite resources of the program. Wanting to make sure that we're maximizing the positive impact out there with producers and extending those dollars as far as possible.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Thanks for that. So then to be clear, there's no reductions planned on the forage on the seeding of perennial grass? Okay.

And with respect to . . . I understand the agreement that may be in place with the feds, but the decision the province made as it relates to some of the other organizations — let's use Ducks as an example — there's no reconsideration on your end? I continue to hear from the livestock community that really, and faced with some of the cost pressures that folks are facing, that the stacking of some of these in a transparent and accountable and honest way is, you know, really important from their perspective. There's no consideration to change that?

Hon. David Marit: — I think Amy hit it really good in her reply saying that we want to make sure the dollars are utilized in the right way. So if I'm a farmer and I apply for the funding under RALP and they agree to it, and then Ducks Unlimited comes along and they say, yeah, okay we'll give you some money too, then to me, I'm getting a benefit as a farmer. I agree with what you're saying. But on the same token I'm not utilizing the dollars in the best interest.

If you're getting \$10 or \$20 an acre from the program and somebody else offers you another 20, well then as a producer I should only really get \$20 an acre. I should either get from one program or another.

That's my thoughts on that. I think Amy hit it right on the head. We want to make sure that the dollars and the producers can be utilized to the greatest degree we can. Otherwise if you did the stacking and allowed it to some degree, you would see obviously not as many acres being utilized through the program through another means, that's all.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Is there full uptake in the provincial program?

Amy Standish: — Yes.

Trent Wotherspoon: — And do you happen to know at all, like some of these other NGOs, like Ducks or something, is there full utilization of their program in the province?

Hon. David Marit: — I wouldn't know that. You'd have to ask them directly.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Okay, shifting gears just a little bit with respect to export sales reporting. I know particularly APAS [Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan] has done some good work along with some of the producer partners. Their

research has shown that export sales reporting could boost farming, improve market decisions, support risk management, and identify logistics bottlenecks. I guess my question is, how is your government acting on this evidence to inform its position?

Hon. David Marit: — This is quite an easy answer because it wasn't done by me, it was done by the former minister, who is the Chair — yeah, a good guy — who wrote a letter to his federal counterpart expressing support for the concept of a federal export sales reporting program highlighting potential advantages for producer decision making, market transparency, and sector competitive. So it's a federal issue, but I guess we're on record as the letter is there.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Thanks. You know, that's good. That former minister, good guy, good Chair, good minister, good letter there obviously. I think it's an area that we continue to advocate, right? Because ideally it becomes a national program that that sales data is reported out. And the province could play a lead role in bringing this through to fruition by bringing on board other provinces to understand what this means for producers.

I guess, would you speak to what you'd see as Saskatchewan's role on this going forward and maybe identify any key barriers to implementation?

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah. You know, in just talking to the team here, there's obviously challenges. It all falls under federal jurisdiction and changes in legislation. I think they'd have to find . . . There's obviously going to be some commercial sensitivities around this from industry as well. So there's going to have to be full consultation in how it proceeds, but hopefully they can find a balance in this.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Have you taken a look to see . . . So it's agreed we need to get to national export sales data. Have you looked to see if there's any short-term measures that the province could take itself that would improve market transparency and data access for producers?

[17:00]

Hon. David Marit: — I'm going to have Amy come and just comment on how there's some . . .

Trent Wotherspoon: — Sure.

Hon. David Marit: — Yes. If there's more technical stuff in this one, then I want to . . . Yeah.

Amy Standish: — So to get at the question here, I would say provincially we don't have a database or tool that is public facing that would assist in this area. But there is a number of public data sets or systems that are out there that even we as a ministry use that we would suggest to any producers or industry groups to look at.

And so the first one being the Canada grain commission. They publish a number of data that people can look at. There is sometimes a lag in that data, but ultimately you can look at volume and throughput, producer deliveries by commodity and province, the stocks and inventory, and different pieces there.

There is also the Ag Transport Coalition, and so they do some surveying across the West, Western provinces. And they are going to look at kind of the health of the system and how well things are moving as well.

And the last one that I'll mention is the Grain Monitor. And so this is a program that the federal government funds, and they are also looking at kind of the health of the system. And they publish data regularly so that producers or industry groups can look there for some of that market transparency.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Okay, thank you. With respect to movement of grain and transport, certainly this is an incredible cost that producers face and also, you know, very often they're faced with lack of performance of that system. That's why it's critically important, of course, that we get the big things done as far as to make that system perform — pipeline infrastructure, ports, addressing rail bottlenecks.

But if you look at what producers are up against, you know, we really pay the lion's share of the cost on the rail side, Saskatchewan producers. In fact combining production and distance to port results in Saskatchewan farmers paying 65 per cent of total rail cost for moving grain. And you know, I think that constitutes 35 per cent of total farm costs according to the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. So a really major cost for producers, very little transparency, and very little competitive forces or reforms to be on the interests of ensuring value and fairness for producers in this system.

Now I know the CTA [*Canada Transportation Act*] is overdue for review. This is timely. It's always very important that Saskatchewan play a lead role in a review like that. And an important part of this as well is a costing review on the transport side. I've spoken to this in the legislature. I met with producers about the importance of a costing review by the federal government, by the CTA [Canadian Transportation Agency].

What's your government's position? And have you advocated on this front? And if not, is it a file that you're interested in making a priority?

Hon. David Marit: — Well this is going to take the rest of the night just because, Trent, you hit it right on the head. I mean, farmers pay the freight bill, and I'd been paying it for 50 years. And it comes off every check, every rain check that we get. And we have no recourse for it because we're a landlocked province and we're living within a duopoly of two railways.

The challenge we have with it obviously when you talk about the freight rate . . . And I mean, there is the revenue cap within the CTA agreement and that's obviously concerning. Is this something that I'm going to advocate for? I always have been, probably in all my career in municipal politics. And I've said it publicly: there's two railways that don't like me. And they don't and I really don't care.

One thing this province did that I was very pleased with was, back in 2017 when I was Highways minister, we lobbied hard for the Port of Vancouver to get in the neighbourhood of \$500 million to streamline the tunnel to get more trains through. And now they have installed jet engines within the tunnel so they can get more trains through. This was a real debacle and a

bottleneck and some of the challenges we have around the Port of Vancouver.

I think we're obviously . . . We have signed an MOU [memorandum of understanding] with Alberta and Manitoba and us at looking at the Port of Churchill and some opportunities around expanding our trade corridors that way. I can assure you — and I'll assure anybody listening — that this will be a strong issue for this government and will be a strong issue for this minister and I'm sure the Minister of Highways as well.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Thanks for the response. And yeah, it's super important to producers. They don't have transparency, and often they don't have performance and they don't have a competitive market on this front. And clearly there needs to be some reforms to ensure performance and value and fairness for producers. An important step of that is a full costing review. And just to be clear, have you advocated recently with the federal government for a costing review?

Hon. David Marit: — That's probably a question better given to the Highways minister at this time. I'm sure they have. If they haven't, I'm sure they will be. So at the time . . .

Trent Wotherspoon: — Okay. Well this can be one again if we can all stand united out of this Assembly. I offered up to the minister here, you know, we've been real clear publicly on the importance of this matter and would be ready to stand together in any way that may be helpful to advocate with the feds, and to make the position that producers deserve a costing review. And then I think from that, there's going to be some important actions and measures to ensure fairness and value for producers. So thanks for the response on this file. We can follow back up on the file.

Hon. David Marit: — You know, and I will comment too — and I have been told this even by producer groups to some point and even by other entities et al. — if there's a costing review, we'd better be careful too. It could go the other way, so we'd better be very careful on it. I think though that it has to be done. I think there has been one done. But it could come with a challenge too.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Well I think that's why it's important Saskatchewan plays a lead role on it, right?

Hon. David Marit: — Yes, I agree.

Trent Wotherspoon: — And you know, this province, this ministry, and certainly producers in this province bear the costs of an inefficient, unfair transport system. And I know we would stand united and fight and have the backs of producers to ensure fairness for them and to make sure a costing review properly captured the burden that producers face.

Moving on a little bit, I'd be interested to see what you're up to and what you're looking at or taking on with respect to some improvements around grain contracts and addressing some of the ongoing concerns that grain contracts can be unbalanced and leave producers with limited protection. And looking to see what role your government may be playing to better protect producers and improve fairness in contract terms.

Hon. David Marit: — I've just talked to the team, and I guess it's apparent on our website that we have put out there some best practices when you're looking for contracts or looking at contracts, and things you should be looking for. I can't see where this government is ever going to get in the way of a commercial deal between a farmer and an entity that they choose to do business with. And I guess that's as far as I'll go. That'll be our position. We won't get in the way or intervene on a commercial deal between a producer and a company.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Do you review sort of this environment and see if there is any improvements that you might act on, on this front, to address some of the concerns that exist around like delivery windows or penalties or contract flexibility?

Hon. David Marit: — No, not since we had that issue a few years ago with the drought with some contracts that couldn't be fulfilled. And I think the industry has learned from that. Both sides of the industry have learned from that. The producers have learned, and I'm sure the industry has also learned from that.

I know some contracts now do have an act-of-God clause in them. Obviously it's at a reduced price. I've signed act-of-God contracts myself. You take a reduced price. That's totally a business decision between a farmer and a commercial entity, and no way is this government going to get involved in that at all. We're not.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Would the province work at all, or do you work at all, with the federal government and the Canadian Grain Commission to strengthen contract transparency at a base or some of the dispute resolution mechanisms?

Hon. David Marit: — No, we don't.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Okay. Moving on a little bit to matters of trade, maybe focus a little bit first on some of the interprovincial focus. And I'd be interested in if you're working on anything like with respect to interprovincial trade for meat direct to consumer.

For example, if you've got a producer down . . . You know, maybe they're in the Southwest and they're having their meat processed out at Ranchhouse in Shaunavon and got a customer just over the border in Alberta. Or maybe over on the east side of the province you've got a producer that has a customer directly over the border in Manitoba, and processing in at that great operation down at Wawota, for example. It seems that we don't have common-sense measures for producers to have some improved markets and direct sale to some consumers.

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah, thanks for the question. Obviously I'm pretty proud of the project we did get. That was obviously a collaboration between Alberta and Saskatchewan to get the Lloydminster pilot project on the interprovincial issue, which really seemed kind of hilarious in a way — that if you made a sandwich on the one side, on the Alberta side of Lloydminster, you couldn't take it over to the Saskatchewan side and sell it. So you know, I mean that finally got some . . . And obviously the CFIA has regulations on interprovincial trade and things like that, and Bill will get into some of that side of it. But obviously it'll be a discussion at FPT as well, but Bill will get into some . . .

Bill Greuel: — Yes. Thanks, Minister. To your specific question about working at the FPT table on this, we've had a number of discussions both at the policy, regulatory, and at the DMs' [deputy minister] table looking at a couple of things. So the CFIA is looking at two regulatory amendments — they haven't been published in a *Gazette* yet — but looking forward, looking at exactly what you were driving at, which is serving underserved slaughter capacity.

So working on some regulatory amendments but also being cognizant of the risk we have about what that might do to our free trade agreements, and being cognizant of the risks associated with importation of meat and the interprovincial movement of meat. And so trying to balance all of that is part of the work of the CFIA.

[17:15]

The second thing that they're doing is really helping companies who have slaughter capacity or food processing capacity bring themselves up — if they're at provincial level — bring themselves up to be in line with the *Safe Food for Canadians Regulations* and providing a concierge service to those companies. So any company in Saskatchewan that wants to bring themselves up to the federal standard can get preferential treatment from the CFIA to implement the processes, procedures, and bring themselves up to that level of regulation.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Okay, thanks for the updates. I think there's some important improvements that could be brought on this front that would present value for the livestock sector, for producers, even improve sort of food security, if you will, and certainly boost our local economy as well.

And it kind of goes hand in hand with this push I continue to bring forward which is the importance of building up our meat processing industry in this province. I mean we have the second-largest beef herd in Canada and we process, I believe, 1 per cent of that meat here in this province. And we're really beholden to these foreign, out-of-province, anti-competitive meat packers who don't present value for producers or for the food supply chain or consumers in the end. And so it's really good to see some growth in that sector.

New project that's popped up, of course, in around Perdue that I know you've toured as well. And a multi-species facility, other operations as well. But I think this is, you know, an area that we really should lean into to make sure that there's value and fairness for producers, fair price. And you know, then importantly addressing those anti-competitive behaviours of the packer industry.

So I'd like to hear about some of the actions you're taking as minister on this front. And then I guess as well some of the advocacy with the federal government to crack down on those foreign, out-of-province, anti-competitive meat packers.

Hon. David Marit: — It's a difficult question. It is for a number of reasons. Obviously the business case has to be made and that side of it.

But I do want to touch on just what we have done as a provincial government to really improve the value-added processing here in

the province of Saskatchewan, and that's through our SLIM program. Since 2023 over \$6.2 million . . .

And I just want to list some of the projects because some of these are actually interprovincial already. Drake Meats Processors, both their facilities in Drake and Saskatoon, we have helped those out; Prairie Meats with two facilities in Saskatoon; Southeast Butcher Block in Alameda, we've helped them; Horizon Meats in Maryfield; Harvest Meats in Yorkton, who is obviously a national; Boryski's Butcher Block in Saskatoon; SJ Fine Foods in Saskatoon; Larson's Abattoir in Leross; Hub Meat Market in Moose Jaw; Maple Leaf Foods in Regina; Valley Meat Processors in Gruenthal; and Bison Ridge Farms in Prince Albert. Just a few, and I think there's just about another half a dozen that have applied for funding and doing it.

And also even talk about the pork processing plant in Moose Jaw with Donald's Fine Foods where they, you know, have opened another facility and obviously came to us for some assistance on part of the processing plant that in the event there was ever a disease outbreak that there would have to be a massive cull in the province of Saskatchewan and how would we do that. And it was working with Donald's Fine Foods that we helped them and assisted them in building that line so that we could do a cull. So that's the program we have that really does assist that side of it.

The other side that you're asking for, obviously the business case has to be made. I'm in agreement with you. The challenge we have with the slaughter facilities, the two big ones in Alberta, obviously are concerning for us there. I mean that's where it is, and I would have thought and hoped that at some point the business model would work for a company to come to this province and say, yes, this makes sense.

Trent Wotherspoon: — But the file we'll continue to work with across the livestock sector and across the province . . .

Hon. David Marit: — If I could add to it, and I do want to add to it, and just for public record. We have had some discussions, but I just can't talk about it here. Sorry.

Trent Wotherspoon: — When do you think you can talk about it?

Hon. David Marit: — I'll talk about it if there's a sod turning.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Yeah, that's good. I think something important as well, obviously we want to have those programs in place, those incentives in place and the regulatory environment here in this province to make sure we can build up meat processing. But then importantly we really have to make sure that we have actions against the anti-competitive meat packers if they're going to use their clout and their control against the economic interests of an enterprise here in the province.

So I just, kind of the second part of my question . . . Of course we want to build that industry up here. It needed to have that strong foundation. But we really need to I think work and push with the federal government to make sure that they're ready to act and crack down on anti-competitive behaviours of that packer industry as we . . . I think that builds some certainty for capital in this province as well and for projects. And certainly it's rather critical if we want to build up the processing sector in this

province which is certainly for the benefit of producers, certainly for the benefit of our economy and rural communities, and certainly for the benefit of consumers as well.

So just on the, you know, working with the feds to make sure that . . . and Saskatchewan is well positioned to be a leader on this front. Have you undertaken actions with the federal government on this front, or do you anticipate doing so?

Hon. David Marit: — No, we haven't yet at this time. And I think, you know, your question probably falls into probably a lot of different departments that would have to be consulted or have to be dealing with the same issue as that way. I think we try and do as a government the best we can to create the value-added processing. And you've seen it explode here in this province over the last 10 years probably because of the policies we've put in place on the tax incentive side for the capital investment side.

So we'll continue, you know, doing that and promoting that. And we're obviously seeing some great value-added as we're just seeing in Regina that will probably open either later this month or next month with that canola crush facility and other opportunities around that as well.

Trent Wotherspoon: — And just on the meat processing side though, I think there's some really good initiatives, some great operations across the province doing awesome things. I love to support them. They're really doing a good job. It's hard work as well.

But this is a sector that we really should focus on growing, and I think that we're going to need to make sure that they're protected against anti-competitive behaviours of that packer industry. And we're well positioned as a province to really lead this because of our livestock sector and the importance of it and what this means for producers, as well what it means for our province economically and certainly for consumers as well.

Shifting gears a bit, you know, we've had the discussion around the serious concerns producers have around farm landownership and illegal foreign farm landownership and the Act itself and the Farm Land Security Board over the years, not having the resources and teeth that it needs to make sure that our law can be enforced on this front. You've had a bit of a preliminary committee reported out here today, and you're going to be going into another project on this front.

Certainly I'd want to thank all those producer groups and organizations and people that have committed to being a part of that project. I think this is really important to rural communities and to agriculture in our province that we're able to enforce the laws that we have and that our laws are up to the test of making sure they're in the interests of agriculture in Saskatchewan and our producers.

I think there's some frustration that, well to say it lightly, over the years that this issue's been dismissed for a long, long time. But I'm not going to dwell on that too far here. We have exchanges back and forth across the public domain and in the legislature on this front.

So just looking at the project you're leaning into right now, I guess, can you speak to some of the timelines? I know there's

been suggestion as well that there might be some legislative changes. Can you speak about anything that you have a sense already that you'd like to see changed or brought about to bring improvements around enforcement or to address some of the concerns that producers have on this front?

Hon. David Marit: — You know, I'll talk about the timeline, and then I would like Dr. Kim McLean to come up and maybe give some comments on some of, you know, what the committee heard and presented to the board.

You know, the timeline . . . I think it's the right time. That's why we introduced it now. Obviously we're getting into the spring season. You know, everybody's going to be busy from now till whenever, and that's why we made sure the timeline was going to work for everybody. My goal is that the consultation will take from now right through the fall and we will introduce any changes that are . . . And there probably will be some. There's going to be some wording changes for sure in some of the Act. And there'll probably be some other changes, you know, around whether it's penalties increased and things like that. So we'll definitely have a serious look at that in the consultation process.

I really want to commend the committee for the work that they did. It was phenomenal in who they reached out to and it was a great committee of three to do a lot of work. And that's why we're going to do this further consultation. Because there was things, you know, that were discussed at the committee level that haven't been discussed in a public format world or in a room in the public format. So my goal is, any changes that we will be making will be made in the spring of 2027.

Kim McLean: — Hi, everyone. Kim McLean, general manager of the Farm Land Security Board. I did assist the committee throughout their consultations, and so they did do quite a lengthy conversation with most of the groups independently and heard them. Some of the biggest ones . . . There's no surprise that the verification before land transfer definitely came up, but there's also some concerns that they don't want to see that slow down transactions. They want to keep the speed of business flowing, and so there's a lot of things that have to come together to make that happen.

Oversight for permanent residents to make sure that everybody is meeting the requirements to be a permanent resident. And so that's a federal program, and so there's a little bit of concerns there. And so perhaps adding to the Act that they must report back to the board is one way to address that.

And again of course the increase in penalties. Penalties are pretty standard across government. And so to come in and say that a board should be allowed to levy a million-dollar penalty might be a hard piece to deal with, with Justice. But that's certainly something that was heard, that it better match the crime. And so those are all things that I don't think were a surprise.

There was some conversations about how can we help young producers or producers trying to expand have access to capital, and certainly making sure that that lines up with where people can be in control of the land still and that it's owned by Canadians or permanent residents.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Thank you very much for the update

here and the work on this front. The role of the Farm Land Security Board is essential. And yeah, I actually want to thank you for your leadership, your current board, previous boards. You know, an exceptional organization.

[17:30]

You don't need to respond to this. It's my view — and I think many — that you haven't had the resources or the teeth and the tools that you need and deserve as an organization for a long period of time to enforce the law.

With respect to . . . Going back, there's very serious concerns around landownership. It requires an audit and deeper review of some of the land holdings and financial structures, some legal structures of those entities, of those operations. Minister, are you committed at this point to having an audit of past transactions that are of concern part of this review here?

Or would you see that . . . Do you want to get the . . . Obviously we need to have the penalties beefed up. We need to have the enforcement structures in place to deal with it. In our view, we have legislation before us, you know, that to force the forfeiture of any profit, no one that's broken the law should be allowed to make bank on it or to make money on it, and that we need to have improvements there.

So I guess my question is, you know, we think there are some serious improvements that are long overdue on these fronts, and then there needs to be the enforcement side and there needs to be an audit of previous land transactions. Is that part of this current review? Or are you looking to get those other pieces dealt with around enforcement and penalties and those legal matters before you would go in and do a proper review and audit of farm landownership in the province?

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah, I don't think it's the intent. I'm going to have Kim comment on it. I think in 2016, under former minister Lyle Stewart, gave the Farm Land Security Board a lot of teeth. And Kim can probably comment on that as well, just on the transactions and being able to follow the money if that's . . . the case may be. But you did ask earlier about the number of cases and things like that. But I'm going to have Kim comment just on, you know, how far back and how resourceful they have been on doing the checklist on some of these cases.

Kim McLean: — So certainly this is the board's responsibility. This is not the minister, and it's up to the purview of the board. And the board certainly wants to make sure that there's no foreign owners, and that's why they implemented the change back on September 15th. They are now requesting that everybody that's had a transaction complete a new stat dec [statutory declaration].

And so there's certainly a lot of concerns from individuals that have been owning land for 60 years or 80 years, and it's one of the ways that the board is auditing currently. Certainly the board would like to do for their audits, and they have items planned. Once we get through this new process and get the letters flowing to all of the individuals right now, they do have a plan that they will be implementing for regular audits. If there's ever a complaint, they will do a thorough review of that. But they are auditing as they see fit.

Trent Wotherspoon: — We'll continue to press, I think. Anyways I commend the board, and you know, I am thankful for all the folks that are going to be involved in this work ahead of us here. But there needs to definitely be a beefing up of penalties and measures that match the crime and that, you know, act as a deterrent. And then there needs to be a will and resources to support a proper audit of farm land in the province. We'll continue to push on these fronts and work with the review and work with, you know, producers and rural leaders on this front.

With respect to . . . Can you clarify for me? It's my understanding that investment funds aren't allowed to own farm land in Saskatchewan.

Kim McLean: — In order to own land in Saskatchewan, you must be 100 per cent Canadian owned. All funds need to come from Canadians. And so there is some investment funds that are currently owning land. They are on title. They are only using funds from Canadians or permanent residents. They have not opened it up outside of that. There's no trusts involved with that. Those are all individual investors that have provided funds there. We do monitor them very closely.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Because there had been actions years ago — it was my understanding — and I thought some regulations to address investment funds from holding farm land. Certainly we saw it with the CPP [Canada Pension Plan]. We had legislation that was passed. And there was regulations that were brought forward more recently, if I understand, to crack down further on this front around investment funds. Could you speak to what those changes were?

Kim McLean: — So the changes were to eliminate the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board from being able to own. But the trusts were changed in 2016 and 2017 to limit only family-owned trusts to be able to own land. And so there is one large investment firm that had an exemption for a trust. That trust is expiring, and so there will be no investment trusts that are owning land in the province. Only family, and it's specified whether it is dad, sister, nieces, etc. And they can only have up to 10 individuals in that trust.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Can you speak to what trust that is?

Kim McLean: — Avenue Living has an exemption for a trust.

Trent Wotherspoon: — So they have an exemption. But you know, that's where I'm getting to here is they've got over . . . They're touting over 100,000 acres of land they've acquired. They lay out their prospectus with the return on it here. They're headquartered in Calgary. So why are they compliant? Why are they able to hold land as an investment fund, but others aren't?

I'm not suggesting we go this way. I think my question is, I hope this is an outlier and I'm wondering then what's the minister doing, I guess. Is it your view that Avenue Living, headquartered in Calgary as an investment fund, should be able to continue to own land in Saskatchewan and position itself as an investment for Canadians?

Kim McLean: — So Avenue Living was an early adopter of investing in farm land. And so that was before the amendments were made in 2016 and 2017. And so they knew they needed an

exemption at that time, and that's why they applied to the board and the board reviewed it at the time. They have since . . . You have to be a Canadian to be a beneficiary of that trust, and so that is specified on that.

They did apply for an exemption in . . . I think it was last year. That was denied. And so they are currently owning land under a limited partnership where it is only Canadians that are allowed to invest in that fund.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Okay, so they were denied? I think that's the right decision. I don't think Saskatchewan producers should be up against, you know, an investment fund from across Canada. That's not in the interest of rural communities or ag.

My question is this. So they still are advertising that investment and the growth that they see. I think they touted that there's real opportunity in Saskatchewan in driving up the price by consolidating landownership. That's sort of their prospectus, if you will. That's their pitch to investors. If the exemption has been denied, why are they able to continue to advertise that investment and continue to hold land in the province?

Kim McLean: — So they are currently owning that as a limited partnership with only Canadians as investors, and that is not something that has been removed from their ability to do that in the Act. So that's certainly something that might come up in a review. It's certainly something that the board is concerned about. They want to make sure that it is Canadian farmers that own the lot.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Okay. Yeah, no, it stands out like a sore thumb, hey, when you look at this, when you look at the pressures that producers are facing. There's serious concerns around, you know, breaches to the spirit and intent of the Act around foreign capital and ownership and then, you know, other big interests like this investment fund.

Are there other investment funds? If this is legal and it's — which I don't think it should be — if this is legal right now, are there other investment funds that are accumulating land right now with investors from across Canada?

Kim McLean: — There is some and the board is watching them. They are sent a stat dec on a regular basis to ensure that they still meet the requirements of the Act.

Trent Wotherspoon: — And so the requirements are basically that it's Canadian investment then, that it's a Canadian permanent resident or a Canadian citizen.

Kim McLean: — No pension plans or trusts.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Yeah, but wide open on the investment fund side as it stands right now.

Kim McLean: — I think mutual funds, that is not specified in the Act. But no trust, and that's typically how people like to operate out of a fund.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Yeah. But it's giving, you know, I think it's a minimum \$25,000 investment for example into Avenue. And so it's giving wealthier Canadians or permanent residents in

other parts of Canada the opportunity to, as it states, to profit off the consolidation of farm land in Saskatchewan. I mean it just seems . . . Do we have to wait on this front? Or is this not something that if we feel this is wrong . . . As the minister, do you feel this is wrong, Minister?

Hon. David Marit: — Well I mean the Act acts on its own, according and within the Act. I think that's why we're doing this process now. We'll do the process and go through it, and if it comes through as a legislative change, then we'll make those changes in March of '27 or in . . .

Trent Wotherspoon: — You've changed regs in the past so . . .

Hon. David Marit: — This wouldn't be a reg, though. This would probably be a legislative change, so we'd have to go through the process, and that's why the consultation.

Trent Wotherspoon: — How many . . .

Hon. David Marit: — And you've always said to us that we don't do a fair consultation. This is going to be a fair consultation that's going to take some time to process. We know right now between now and August, it isn't going to be a very good time for farmers and ranchers to do a lot of consulting. We announced that we're going to start that process. It'll be a very good process. You'll be able to make your recommendations as well, which you will, I'm sure. And then we'll go through that process, and then in the spring we'll introduce legislative changes if those changes come forward.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Yeah. No, to be fair though, Minister, we've been identifying these concerns with your government for almost 18 years going on, including statutory declarations at this committee, you know, almost till we're blue in the face over the years. Glad to see they're being implemented at this point in time, but you know, there needs to be sometimes a bit of a hurry-up offence if you're going to act in the interests of producers and rural communities here. And I wouldn't disguise consultation as a reason to punt or slow walk some of the changes . . .

Chair D. Harrison: — Excuse me here, if I could ask the member here to please get to a question.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Right. So we've established that right now Avenue Living is then allowed to continue to grow its holdings and to have this investment fund in place. I guess my question is, how many other funds? Can you list the funds that are currently holding land as well? And how many acres of Saskatchewan farm land are held by investment funds like Avenue? I think Avenue . . . I don't know what their exact number is, but I think it's identified that it's over 100,000 acres anyways.

[17:45]

Kim McLean: — Just in the interests of business and protecting people's privacy, we will not disclose their names. Certainly the board has reviewed stat decs on all of the funds that they are aware of. Anybody that is currently holding land meets the requirements of the Act. And so if you would like to go find more, you can go to *The Land Titles Act* or the Saskatchewan land registry as a way to find those.

We certainly don't have the number of acres. With the amount of acres that ebb and flow for some of these companies, we don't keep track of them; we look to make sure that they are allowed to own land. And as long as they're allowed to own land, they can have 100,000 or they could have 10 acres. We make sure that the people are allowed to own the land. Certainly if you've heard names, we've reviewed them.

Trent Wotherspoon: — I think the understanding for many is that investment funds weren't allowed to hold Saskatchewan farm land. I think it's going to be a surprise to many in the province. And I think it's an expectation as well for transparency from the minister back to the producers of the province to be able to identify some facts around this. Can you speak to the number of investment firms, funds that own land in Saskatchewan?

And I find it surprising, Mr. Minister, that you wouldn't be tracking the number of acres. I don't know why it would've been legislated that the CPP, the Canada Pension Plan, couldn't hold those funds. I agree they shouldn't. But that somehow it was acceptable for other investment funds across this country to buy up and consolidate farm land in the province, competing against Saskatchewan producers.

Kim McLean: — So I'll say that every fund and every landowner has a very different business structure. The board has denied I believe it's two different companies that have applied for exemptions as well that would like to operate as an investment — come in and assist a farmer, whether they take on the infrastructure payments, etc. — and then they partner with the farmer. The board has denied those as they're concerned about that. There's just some very unique arrangements, and everyone's structured differently. These ones currently meet their criteria.

Trent Wotherspoon: — Well I think this is a point of some pretty significant concern, and it's going to need to be some actions taken in the interest of producers, including basic transparency. You know, I would push the minister for action on that front in the days ahead here.

I would like to shift, just cognizant of the time here . . .

Chair Harrison: — Excuse me. Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of these estimates, we will adjourn consideration of the 2026-2027 estimates and the 2025-2026 supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Agriculture. Minister Marit, do you have any closing comments?

Hon. David Marit: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thank you, Trent, for the questions and the committee as well. I just want to thank the entire team within the Ministry of Agriculture and the work that they do. Make it pretty easy for me to be the spokesperson for it. And I'll leave it at that, because that's probably about my biggest role. It's a great team, both at Crop Insurance and at the Ministry of Ag and also at the Farm Land Security Board, and the work that Kim and her team are doing as well.

No, I just want to thank everybody for this evening, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chair D. Harrison: — Thank you, Minister. MLA [Member of

the Legislative Assembly] Wotherspoon, do you have any closing comments?

Trent Wotherspoon: — Yeah, no, you bet. Thanks, Mr. Chair. Thanks, committee members. Importantly, thanks to the minister for the time, all the officials for your work and your time here tonight as well. Definitely as a team of officials, you're exceptional. So I appreciate that.

We'll continue to press on some of these important issues, and I had other . . . We ran out of time there. I wanted to get through disease management and some of these other key areas, but we'll look to continue to advocate on these fronts. And I'm thankful for some of the undertakings that have been committed to here tonight. And then there's clearly a few files that are going to require some action here. Thank you very much.

Chair D. Harrison: — Thank you. This committee will now recess until 6:30 p.m.

[The committee recessed from 17:49 until 18:30.]

**General Revenue Fund
Water Security Agency
Vote 87**

Subvote (WS01)

Chair D. Harrison: — Welcome back, committee members. The committee now will be considering the 2026-2027 estimates for Water Security Agency. We will begin with consideration of vote 87, Water Security Agency, subvote (WS01).

Minister Marit is here with his officials. And I would ask that the officials state their names before speaking, and please don't touch the microphones. The *Hansard* operator will turn your microphones on when you are speaking to the committee.

Minister, please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. David Marit: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the 2026-2027 budget and the important work carried out by the Water Security Agency.

I'm joined today by senior officials from the Water Security Agency, who will assist in answering your questions following my remarks, including members of the executive leadership and senior management team. I have with me the executive team: Shawn Jaques, president and CEO; John Fahlman is vice-president of infrastructure; Thon Phommavong, vice-president of science and licensing. Oh, Terri's not here, okay. Jordan Huber, vice-president of finance is here; and Ali'i Lafontaine is here, the general counsel. Also joining us is Krystal Tandler, executive director of agricultural water management, and Leah Clark, executive director for irrigation and economic development.

Water has always been foundational to Saskatchewan, not just as a resource but as a responsibility. It shapes our landscape, sustains our communities, and powers the industries that keep this province moving forward. From agriculture and energy to communities large and small, our shared prosperity depends on

how well we manage and protect this vital resource. As the world changes around us, one truth remains constant: a strong, resilient Saskatchewan depends on secure, sustainable water. That is why planning for the future means investing wisely today, ensuring our water systems are protected and reliable, our stewardship is sound, and our province remains competitive and secure for generations to come.

That clear commitment is reflected throughout this year's budget. For 2026-27 the Water Security Agency has an overall budget of \$130 million. This investment focuses on protecting Saskatchewan's water resources through three core priorities: rehabilitating and maintaining critical infrastructure; supporting economic growth while protecting aquatic habitat; and ensuring Saskatchewan people continue to have access to clean, safe, and reliable water.

At a time when jurisdictions across North America are facing increasing pressures from more extreme weather conditions to aging infrastructure, our government is taking a proactive approach by supporting economic growth, strengthening rural growth, and enhancing quality of life in communities across Saskatchewan. We are investing now to protect what matters most.

A key part of this proactive approach is fixing and maintaining what we already have. This year Water Security Agency will invest \$38 million in capital funding for water management infrastructure. Reliable infrastructure is the backbone of effective water management. Without it we cannot effectively manage the more than 70 dams and control structures or the hundreds of kilometres of conveyance channels that support our communities, producers, industry, and aquatic ecosystems.

Capital investment this year is focused on maintaining and upgrading existing infrastructure, expanding irrigation capacity, and ensuring the long-term integrity of dams, canals, and control structures across the province. Key projects include replacement of the Cowan Lake dam structure, improvements to the Lafleche dam spillway, and continued refurbishment of the East Side pump station. These are targeted investments designed to ensure the infrastructure Saskatchewan relies on continues to meet the needs of a growing province and remains adaptable in a changing and dynamic future.

To put this in perspective, in 2006, roughly 20 years ago, WSA's [Water Security Agency] predecessor organization invested just \$2.8 million annually in capital projects. This year WSA will invest \$38 million. That represents an increase of more than 1,200 per cent. Since 2010 our government has invested over \$360 million in water management infrastructure across Saskatchewan. We are protecting our water infrastructure more than ever before, and it's this infrastructure that supports many different parts of our lives.

In rural areas it supports irrigation. Expanding irrigation across Saskatchewan remains a key priority under the province's growth plan. Increasing irrigation capacity delivers real and lasting benefits, supporting producers, strengthening food security, and driving economic growth across rural and urban communities. As part of the Saskatchewan growth plan, the province set an ambitious goal of 85,000 acres new irrigated across by 2030. I am proud to tell this committee that

Saskatchewan has already surpassed that target with roughly 108,000 new irrigated acres added to date, and we are just getting started.

This year's capital plan includes \$19 million dedicated to irrigation development and expansion, including \$1 million for the Luck Lake irrigation project and \$3 million for irrigation development initiatives across the province. Also a major focus within this plan is the Westside irrigation rehab project. In 2026-27 WSA will invest \$15.5 million to further advance this important initiative.

In December 2025 WSA released the final economic analysis for the Westside irrigation rehab project, which demonstrated the scale of its potential impact. An estimated \$12.9 billion contribution to the GDP [gross domestic product] and the creation of approximately 80,000 jobs over the life of the project. This analysis, completed by KPMG, identified significant benefits across the crops, livestock, land, and food manufacturing sectors.

Prairie Engineering Partners, a joint venture between Stantec and MPE engineering, continues to advance design and engineering work, allowing for more detailed cost estimates and enabling the project to expand from 90,000 to 100,000 acres of potential irrigated land. These investments recognize water as a strategic asset, one that strengthens Saskatchewan's economy and ensures the benefits of growth are shared by people across the province.

It is important to note that the progress we've made in irrigation expansion and the confidence we have looking forward rest squarely on the leadership of Saskatchewan's producers. Government cannot do this work alone. Producers are on the ground managing water responsibly, investing in their operations, and helping turn opportunity into results.

Their partnership is not just valuable; it is essential. The economic analysis done by KPMG shows that every dollar of public investment will result in \$11 of private investment. Since 2020 it is estimated that Saskatchewan producers have invested over \$430 million in irrigation expansion projects.

Turning to operations: WSA will invest nearly 72 million this year to deliver the programs and services Saskatchewan people rely on every day. I will highlight a few of these areas for the committee.

The science and licensing division is at the core of informed and responsible water management decisions. Their work ensures water resources are allocated based on sound science, balancing user needs while protecting long-term sustainability.

Key priorities include strengthening scientific capacity and continuing support for the outcome-based compliance framework. Investments include \$100,00 in one-time funding for hydrology service needs assessment to identify current and future demands; 125,000 to fully fund a hydrologist position, adding specialized expertise to support core services and economic development; and funding for species assessments including lake sturgeon, bigmouth buffalo, and other species at risk.

Funding under the flood hazard identification and mapping program will total \$2.4 million, advancing flood science and

flood hazard mapping across the province. This work supports public safety, protects infrastructure, and reduces economic disruption from flood events. In fact the Water Security Agency found that every dollar invested in flood mitigation activities prevent \$20 to \$30 in damages to both public and private assets. Flood mapping is the most cost-efficient way of planning effective flood mitigation activities, and we are investing in it.

WSA will also continue its \$1.55 million investment in key grant programs including the Agricultural Water Management Fund, the flood damage reduction program, and channel-clearing initiatives. In addition, the budget maintains support for the Agricultural Water Stewardship policy announced in January 2025. Since its launch, 17 projects have been approved under new wetland retention requirements and \$1 million has been committed to ongoing stewardship research and monitoring.

Infrastructure operations remain central to ensuring water is available when and where it is needed. The infrastructure division manages the planning, operation, maintenance, assessment, and the rehabilitation of dams, conveyance systems, and pump stations across the province. Their work directly supports Saskatchewan's Growth Plan. This year, infrastructure has an operating budget of \$14.8 million supporting day-to-day asset management, enhanced governance processes, improvements to early warning systems, increased condition assessments, and support for the province's anticipated dam infrastructure audit.

In closing, this budget reflects a clear and deliberate commitment to protecting Saskatchewan's water resources, not only for today but for the generations to come. It speaks of our responsibility to plan ahead, to invest wisely, and to ensure that the choices we make now continue to serve our province well into the future. It demonstrates how we're making responsible, forward-looking investments that strengthen Saskatchewan in a meaningful and lasting way by aligning infrastructure, economic growth, and stewardship into a single long-term vision.

First it renews and safeguards critical water infrastructure, ensuring that communities, producers, and industry can rely on it with confidence and certainty. These investments recognize that dependable infrastructure is the foundation of public safety, economic stability, and community well-being.

Second, it expands economic opportunity by recognizing water for what it truly is — a strategic asset. By supporting irrigation expansion and long-term water security, this budget helps unlock growth, increase productivity, and enhances Saskatchewan's competitiveness.

And third, it strengthens our approach to stewardship, ensuring Saskatchewan's water resources are managed sustainably and responsibly. That means decisions grounded in sound science and guided by a deep respect for our environment.

Taken together these investments position Saskatchewan to remain resilient in the face of aging infrastructure, extreme weather conditions, and growing demand. They enable us to manage water responsibly while supporting economic growth, protecting public safety, and preserving the environment we all depend on. This is a budget that reflects confidence in Saskatchewan's future and a commitment to building it carefully,

collaboratively, and with purpose.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. And I will now look forward to the questions.

Chair D. Harrison: — Thank you, Minister. I will now open the floor for questions. I recognize MLA Clarke.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Looking at page 126 in the Estimates booklet, I see a reduction from 99.407 million in the 2025-26 budget reduced to 85.778 million. Wondering if you can speak to that reduction.

[18:45]

Hon. David Marit: — I'll turn it to officials.

Shawn Jaques: — Yeah, good evening. Shawn Jaques, president and CEO of Water Security Agency. I'll take a first crack at it and then I'll have my VP [vice-president] of finance jump in.

So where the difference comes in is you'll see on the line item there the 70 million for '25-26 and the 58 million for capital. For this year we're not expecting as many capital projects to move ahead, so we didn't need as much capital for this coming year. So that's where the reduction . . . As well as the number above is the transfer from the GRF [General Revenue Fund]. We're expecting an increase in power revenue, our power generation revenue and water that is used by the hydro dams in the province. So then our appropriation is a little bit less from the GRF. So that's the reason for the change.

Jared Clarke: — Okay, thank you. I'm wondering how many in-scope and out-of-scope staff do you currently have in the Water Security Agency? And how does this compare to last year as well as five years ago?

Hon. David Marit: — I'm just going to make one brief comment, then I'll turn it over to Shawn or on some of the others too. You asked for the last five years.

Jared Clarke: — Just comparing the last year and five years ago, not necessarily all five years.

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah, we've gone up every year. It's gone up every year from '25-26. We went up another full employee from '25-26 to '26-27 and up significantly from '20-21 to '26-27.

Jared Clarke: — You going to give those numbers?

Shawn Jaques: — Yeah, so as the minister indicated, we have 325 FTEs [full-time equivalent] for '26-27, 324 for '25-26, the same number for '24-25, 320 for '23-24, 297 for '22-23, and 296 for '21-22.

Jared Clarke: — And how does that break down in terms of in-scope and out-of-scope staff?

Shawn Jaques: — I don't have that number here right now. We'll look for it. One thing with Water Security Agency, we employ a lot of engineers, and the engineering profession is out-of-scope, so our out-of-scope numbers are probably higher. But I don't have the breakdown right now.

Jared Clarke: — Okay, yeah.

Shawn Jaques: — We'll try to get it before the end of the evening.

Jared Clarke: — Okay, sounds great. Thank you. How many staff were terminated in the last fiscal year?

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah, just two.

Jared Clarke: — And what was the total severance cost for the last fiscal year?

Shawn Jaques: — So for the '25-26 fiscal year the severance was 115,338.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. In the past, Water Security Agency has relied on complaints to look at illegal drainage, and farmers wanting to register a complaint have to pay \$1,000 for that fee. I'm wondering, have you included that revenue and monitoring and inspection into this budget? And what kind of dollar value of revenue do you expect from that \$1,000 fee over this fiscal year?

Hon. David Marit: — Since the \$1,000 fee has been introduced, we don't keep any of that. If the complaint is legitimate, is a complaint that is understood or real or whatever, the money's returned to the complainant. Since 2024 since we implemented it, there's been 27 complaints and 23 have been paid back and four are pending and probably will get back as well.

Jared Clarke: — So the program is working.

Hon. David Marit: — The program is working the way it is intended to do.

Jared Clarke: — How does that compare? So 27 complaints, I believe you said, since 2024 since you initiated. How many complaints did you have, say, in 2022-2023?

Shawn Jaques: — So in the '23-24 year we had 26 complaints or RFAs [request for assistance] registered. And in '22-23 we had 16.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. How does Water Security Agency define a nuisance complaint, so one that wouldn't be paid out?

Krystal Tendler: — Hi. Krystal Tendler, executive director of agricultural water management. And so to file an RFA, the first thing is you have to be a registered landowner. You have to have your name on title to be able to file it. And then you have to be hydrologically connected to where the drainage works exist.

And so if you're, you know, driving down the highway and see something, you couldn't file it. You'd have to be the landowner. You would have to have your land be connected to the drainage works. And there has to be actual drainage works in question. And so it can't be a natural weather event or something like that. There has to be drainage works constructed on the landscape.

Jared Clarke: — When did those criteria come into force?

Krystal Tendler: — So once we get an inquiry about someone being impacted by drainage, the first thing that we do . . . We

have a team of compliance specialists who would first work with the client to help screen the inquiry, to ask them those general questions to get a sense of what's going on before an RFA is filed. So ideally we're trying to find the right pathway, the right mechanism for them to find resolution for their issue.

If they chose to continue with the process and file their RFA, that would then trigger us to do an investigation. That's where we're looking at those questions that I mentioned about hydrologically connected, who's the registered landowner, are there drainage works. And through that investigation we're able to make a recommendation on how the issue be resolved. One mechanism to get into compliance is an approval, or recommending closure of works are the choices typically.

The intent behind this again is to ensure that the concerns that are coming in are coming into the right mechanism to solve them. And so we were previously getting a number of complaints that were coming in that were about something completely other than drainage. And in fact we saw that number up to about 30 per cent of the complaints coming in weren't actually about drainage. So we weren't able to help solve their problem, which is frustrating for the client and also is a big use of resources for us.

And so what we were able to do by implementing this fee is ensure those compliance resources are being used to solve real drainage problems. And although it's only been implemented for two years, we have actually seen our number of RFAs in our system — so the backlog of RFAs — nearly cut in half. We're at a 46 per cent reduction of the backlog. And that in turn allows us to provide better service to the clients who are coming in the door now.

So our goal is to be as responsive as we can when we have new clients coming in the door who are being impacted by drainage. We want to be able to get out there and help them solve those problems right away. Part of that is ensuring that we can clear that backlog up and free up the capacity to focus on the real stuff that we're experiencing right now.

Jared Clarke: — I guess my question is kind of to get an idea of the number of complaints that have been coming in. And so I am curious as to like the timeline of when the decision was to make, you know, being the local landowner that's impacted, a requirement of whether you can lodge a complaint or not. That's kind of my question. When did that policy change occur? Just to get an understanding of how the number of complaints have changed over time.

[19:00]

If you had to be a landowner, you had to be connected to the watershed or the water system. Was that a rule that was implemented or a policy that was implemented prior to 2023-24 where you only had like 16, 26 complaints? I'm just trying to get an idea as to when that change occurred.

Krystal Tendler: — So the requirement having to be a landowner impacted by drainage in order to file a complaint about drainage has been in place since, we think, the beginning of the drainage regulations, so about 1982. That's always been how this program's operated, how the request for assistance mechanism was framed.

The language talked about, you know, being impacted by drainage in order to file that complaint, and so again the criteria of being hydrologically connected. You have to be a landowner, but you also have to be upstream of the point of adequate outlet. So it means you can't be on the other side of the lake where the drainage works exist. You know, you have to be between the drainage works and the outlet in order to submit the complaint. So that was a criteria as well.

And so this isn't a new criteria. It's not something that changed over the last number of years. It's something that's always been in place.

The problem was there was no deterrent that would stop somebody from filing it. You could quickly throw in a complaint in a number of minutes that came to us. We would investigate it, look at all those considerations. But it might not be for a number of years before we would have determined, oh, this isn't actually the right mechanism to solve that issue. And so for the client who thought they were, you know, on a pathway to resolution and then figure out a couple years down the road this wasn't even the right mechanism for them to find a solution, it would be really frustrating.

So what that RFA fee has done is allowed for that screening up front, cause clients to pause, make sure that they're pursuing the right pathway to resolution, ensure they're serious about the pathway. And then they're able to work with us and again provide more timely service.

And so I did just want to note the numbers that I provided for 2023 was accurate that we . . . Or the 2023 number, that we received 56 in that year, was correct. But it was 2022 we actually received 54. So I just wanted to correct that.

But it obviously fluctuates over time, and a lot of that is dependent on weather, the number of RFAs we receive in a year. In wetter years we receive more. We can see that history over the last number of decades. But that rule about needing to be impacted by drainage in order to file a complaint, that hasn't changed.

Jared Clarke: — So I'll just look for clarity then, just so I understand correctly. 2024, since implementing the \$1,000 fee, there has been 27 complaints; 23 of those have been paid back, four are pending. In the 2023-24 there were 56 complaints? In 2022-23 there were 54 complaints? I'm just not clear on those numbers.

Krystal Tendler: — So you're finding an interesting little nuanced piece here, is that the RFAs fees we receive doesn't exactly equate to how we count RFAs, because you can file one fee, so pay a \$1,000 fee, against a number of different quarter sections. So you might pay one fee and that counts for three RFAs. And so that might be why you're saying, why do these numbers kind of sound funny.

So if I take you back through the total RFAs received in the fiscal year, in 2025 the number is 22; in 2024 the numbers received is 14; in 2023 the numbers received is 52; and in 2022 the number received is 70. And so that doesn't exactly equate to how many fees we might have received if we were charging those previous years and what we receive now. But that's the number of RFAs

that we got physically in our hands.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you for that. How many RFAs are still . . . You spoke about a backlog. How many RFAs are still in that backlog and being investigated?

Krystal Tendler: — So currently the number of active RFAs, so RFAs that are still in our queue is 178. Of note again, that's a 46 per cent reduction since this fee was implemented in January of 2024. Also of note, during this last fiscal year, we were able to resolve 85 RFAs in the one year. And so the majority of those are through getting the works into a state of approval. There's some voluntary closures, some dismissed, and some withdrawn. But we're able to, as we talked about, able to be more responsive to those concerns coming in and provide more timely service because we're getting the right issues into this stream now.

Another thing I want to note about the 178 active RFAs, a number of those are quite old. So they would have come in to WSA's system before the RFA fee came into place. Along with the RFA fee came also a prescribed timelines resolution. So now when we get a concern coming in the door, we put a clock on it and say that within a certain amount of days, certain things need to happen. And so that goes from how many days until we can acknowledge the receipt, until we investigate the receipt, until we issue recommendations, until they have to come into compliance.

And we have timelines on every step of that process now. That wasn't in place previously, and so that's why we saw some of these drag out. So again with the addition of the fee, we're able to put higher quality service standards in place as well, and clients know what to expect once they come in the door.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. Of the 85 RFAs that were resolved in the last fiscal year, how many of those would have not had the \$1,000 fee repaid?

Krystal Tendler: — So as of right now, we haven't kept any fees. So we've returned every fee that we've received. And so of the 27 that we've received, 23 have been returned; 4 are still pending investigation. And so when we look at the 85 that were resolved last year, if they would have paid a fee, if they came in since January 2024, it would have been returned to them. If they came in before that timeline, they wouldn't have paid a fee. That was a new instrument.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. Yeah, I'm just trying to get a feel for or an understanding for how many RFAs you're dealing with that are not appropriate. And so the minister kind of spoke to the fact that, you know, the \$1,000 fee is working; it's doing what it's supposed to do. But I'm not really seeing in the data necessarily that you're receiving a lot of unnecessary complaints or unfounded complaints given how many are receiving back their money or are being resolved.

Krystal Tendler: — Yeah, so previously to 2024 when we implemented the fee, we were finding 30 per cent of RFAs that were coming in the door were not about drainage. They were about other issues. They might have been water related, they might have not been water related. But this wasn't the right mechanism to solve them.

Since January 2024 when we put the fee in place, it was intended

to ensure that we're getting only those drainage-related concerns coming in. And it's doing exactly what it's intended there, that we aren't getting those issues that maybe are about something else coming in this way. They're finding the appropriate pathway to resolve their concerns.

And so our goal was never to generate revenue from this. It was to ensure that we can get clients in the right pathway to find resolution and ensure our resources are being reused for the appropriate thing.

Jared Clarke: — Were you pre-screening the applications prior to the \$1,000 fee in terms of just, like, doing that pre-evaluation?

Krystal Tendler: — It would have been case by case and depending on how the client reached out to us. If they called us, talked through their concerns, there would be some amount of pre-screening that would be involved. But there was also a mechanism where they could get a copy of the form and send it in without ever talking to anyone, in which case we didn't have the opportunity to do any pre-screening or discussion on it.

[19:15]

And the only way that we're able to really dig into whether it was a drainage issue or not is to begin the investigation, and so begin spending resources on that. And that, depending on what our queue was at that time — what the backlog was — it might have taken us a while to get to that file. And again that impacts our ability to be responsive to those clients.

Jared Clarke: — So it would be fair to say that it's possibly the pre-screening that's happening now that is having a large impact on whether these are nuisance complaints or not?

Krystal Tendler: — We don't have any way to really determine what is preventing the RFA or is redirecting some RFAs. Whether it's the pre-screening process, whether it's the fee, we aren't able to determine that. But when we initiated the fee it was always about a full package. It was never just a stand-alone fee. There was always a set of new procedures, new timelines, new service standards that went along with that. And so it's the combination of that change that we made that we're seeing the impact from. I don't know that we can piece that apart.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. How many compliance managers and compliance officers does Water Security Agency currently have?

Krystal Tendler: — So within the agriculture water management branch we have 29 staff who are working towards compliance. So compliance with the legislation would involve either getting and issuing drainage approvals or pursuing some sort of enforcement or closure.

Also within that team are folks focused on education, and so encouraging adoption, compliance with the regulations as they're in place. That's a part of our approach to compliance as well. So within that full team we have 29 employees.

Jared Clarke: — How many specifically compliance officers do you have?

Krystal Tendler: — So we don't technically have anybody with the job title "compliance officer," but I'm going to kind of again talk about the people working in the area, working on RFAs and related work.

So we have a compliance unit that has six people in it. They would be the ones who would be receiving RFAs, who would be screening them, who would be investigating them, and would issue recommendations and work through the compliance process on that side. But we have 20 who work on the approvals side. So if an RFA came in the door and we need to get the works into compliance, issuing a drainage approval would be a pathway to do that. So that team of 20 approvals staff would be issuing drainage approvals for varying term lengths, doing the work to assess risk, and ensuring the right mitigation conditions are in place.

So although we don't have the compliance officers, I think that's probably more of what you're intending is how many people are actually doing this work. And we have, between the two teams, 26.

Jared Clarke: — And how many . . . I guess two questions. One, it was my understanding that there were possibly three compliance officers, so I'm curious as to when you went to zero. But also is any of those six individuals in that compliance section actually out on the land when there isn't a complaint but just checking on drainage projects or doing any fieldwork that isn't related to a specific RFA?

Krystal Tendler: — So all of those 29 staff that we have are proactively working with landowners. Whether it be within a network, whether it be a voluntary project coming in the door, they all spend some amount of time in the field working with clients. Some of them are RFA driven, we call it; some of them aren't. And they're all working with farmers proactively.

Education we know is a key component of this, is that we have to help producers understand what responsible drainage looks like and what does compliance with the regulations look like. And so we're committed to doing that client service, that education. And in fact we have a new drainage extension unit and a drainage extension strategy that's just that. It's all focused on educating those clients and helping them to come into compliance with the regulation.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. I mean at the crux of it, I think government has chosen a system where concerns are brought forward around a potential illegal drainage in a complaint system, instead of having staff out looking and looking for compliance and ensuring that, you know, if people are illegally draining water that there's maybe compliance officers out on the landscape just looking around.

So I'm wondering, Minister, can you speak to why you've chosen to go down the path of a system where you're kind of pitting neighbour against neighbour? Like if the requirements are that you have to be connected to the watershed, you have to be a landowner, you're basically got to say, "I'm going to complain about my neighbour," versus, you know, a neutral entity like a compliance officer who could go around and check for illegal drainage without having to pit neighbour against neighbour.

Hon. David Marit: — I think I'll speak on the political side on some of your comments about pitting neighbour against neighbour. I think this process has done the exact opposite. It has actually put neighbours working with neighbours to find solutions on the challenges they're having around water, and we're seeing that through a lot of the process and a lot of the projects. This is really working more in the respect of really neighbours working with each other and not against each other. And so the process seems to be working quite well that way. But I know Shawn's going to add, and then Krystal is going to add as well.

Shawn Jaques: — Yeah, like I think just like the minister said, it really is about what we're seeing is, you know, producers are working with producers when it comes to managing water on the landscape.

You know, the RFA process is risk based. We want to spend our time on the most risky files. And I think, you know, when we're bringing these works into compliance, we are working with producers to, you know, have the least impact, making sure we're not adversely affecting another neighbour or road infrastructure, things like that. And we will focus on the ones, you know, that are causing some issues for people. And I don't know if you have anything else to add, Krystal.

Krystal Tendler: — Yeah. I think the way our system is designed right now is that we want to tell producers how to do the right thing, how to drain responsibly, rather than just hit them if they don't. We don't just need to go out and penalize them when they didn't do it right without trying to help them understand how to do it right.

And so our emphasis and focus on education is designed to do that. Let's help them understand what responsible drainage looks like, support them to comply, and then when there's something not going right, someone's being impacted, then we can use our escalated compliance tools.

But it doesn't mean that we can't look at other things. It means we've prioritized those compliance files where somebody is being impacted today and is willing to stick up their hand and ask for government's help on those. That triggers us to put it at the top of our pile. It doesn't mean we're not looking at anything else, but those are the ones that we're prioritizing through our compliance process.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. I don't think that having compliance officers means that you necessarily have to just go out and find people. You can still do that education piece. But again, we've certainly heard and we've had producers in to the legislature who don't feel like this is a collaborative model, that they are being pitted against their neighbours. And their concerns, I think, are valid. And that group continues to grow in membership. So there's clearly a group of producers in the province who are feeling the negative impacts of drainage and don't feel like their voices are being heard in this conflict.

I'm wondering about the ag drainage, ag water management policy. The ag management policy, drainage policy gave certain metrics that were to be developed. I'm wondering if any of those metrics have been reported on in 2025. Is there an annual report?

Hon. David Marit: — I'll start just for clarification. And a good question. But I think I just want to emphasize here the work that Krystal has done on this through the implementation of this whole process, and the consultation process that we went through on all of this, and the discussions we had with a lot of organizations, municipalities, farmers, individuals as well. But this young lady did a phenomenal amount of work on this one. So, Krys, I'll turn it to you.

[19:30]

Krystal Tendler: — Thank you, Minister. So within the agricultural water management program there's over 20 different policies. Each of those have different measures of success, different indicators we're looking at. But the most public policy that was announced — although not the most recent, the most public — was the agriculture water stewardship policy, and that's the one with a lot of attention around it. And it really set the bar for how much wetland retention we're looking for on the landscape.

That policy was released with an indicator framework that identified 10 different measures we are going to be looking at over time. Eight of those were published initially in January of 2025. Two of them were in development at that time and have been recently finalized, and you'll see an updated indicator framework coming out right away that will have those posted.

The next piece that you'll be seeing is the baseline measures for each of those 10 indicators will be published, and those will tell you where are we at right now, or where were we at upon policy implementation. And that'll provide us the baseline to measure against in the years to come.

Some of the measures that we're looking at are things that we can see change over a year. You know, how many projects adopted the policy? Well we know that right now. In the last year we had 17 projects who adopted the policy and have wetland retention as a part of their project. But there's some of those measures that are going to take a long time to assess change. We might not see any difference in some of the indicators for a number of years, or the data sources take a number of years to be renewed. And so those ones will take longer for us to be able to publish that new data on. And so this isn't a short-term initiative. This is something we're committed to over time.

And that correlates to our commitment to ongoing research and monitoring. So when we announced the policy in January 2025, we also announced a million-dollar commitment to ongoing research and monitoring. And so in our first year of that research commitment we were advancing a number of different projects. I think we have about . . . We have 12 projects on the ground already through that million-dollar commitment.

And an exciting part of that is we've also now seen our investment, our initial million-dollar investment, nearly doubled. We had \$900,000 in additional commitment come through the Agriculture Development Fund and the Western Grains Research Foundation because they're interested in the same questions we are and assessing some of those same indicators over time. And so we're looking forward to see how this research commitment, these new projects, help us understand and assess the policy's effectiveness — not, again, over one year but over the next

10 years — really helping us to understand what's working, where we need to adjust.

The other point of importance for us is assessing how it's working for the clients. How is it working for producers who are adopting that policy on the ground? And so getting ongoing feedback from our stakeholders. Is it practical? That was one thing we knew all along is if the policy wasn't practical, it wasn't going to be effective.

And so we'll continue to solicit that feedback from clients on, how is the policy working for you? Are you able to adopt it? What improvements can we make in terms of the administration of it to make sure that it's going to work for you while also meeting our landscape level outcomes? And we had those six defined outcomes that we set out with and we continue to measure against those.

So long answer to say, lots of measurement going on. The indicator framework is a big piece of that, and we will continue to invest in research to ensure we're having the data to support those metrics.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. So when do you think that those baseline measurements will be published publicly?

Krystal Tendler: — We anticipate the baselines to be published by the end of the year.

Jared Clarke: — And then going forward, how often will they be published?

Krystal Tendler: — So the reporting frequency will depend on the measure. We will have to put out . . . Some of them, as I said, will be annual measures. Some, the data sources won't be available annually; they're longer term, so maybe every three or every five years. And so again, it will be a bit dependent on the indicator, but we will publish those that are available annually. We'll publish them annually and add in those others as they become available.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. What kind of data is going to be collected? So what are you looking at? You talked about 12 different projects. I don't want you to go through all of the 12, but I'm wondering kind of, what kind of data in what locations are you collecting to analyze water quality or those kind of measurements?

Krystal Tendler: — So the indicators themselves are published online in the policy. And so there's the eight there, the two in development. So just examples of some of those things that we're looking at. So total area of wetlands retained through the stewardship policy, so how many acres are actually retained with the condition of approval. So on the land title that it says that that wetland must be retained. So that's a really important measure to see what type of protection is in place for wetlands in Saskatchewan. What we know already is this will be the greatest protection that ever has existed in Saskatchewan for wetlands, and so seeing that number over years will be important.

We also look at things like, in terms of water quality, we'll be looking at a subset of indices that will help us understand where drainage is having an impact on water quality or if it's having an

impact. So there's the indicator but then there's also the research work. And so there's research projects that are going to help us understand kind of the bigger picture around these indicators.

And so I can give you a few examples of some of those research projects you might be interested in. One is the Buffalo Pound water quality research project. That's a really significant investment where we are assessing water quality coming into Buffalo Pound Lake through a number of different tributaries. Some of them are natural tributaries, various different creeks and streams, but one of them is a C & D [conservation and development area authority] project. And so assessing what's the water quality difference that we're seeing and what could we do about that if there is differences. So we are one year into that project. It's a WSA-led project, a significant investment to understand water quality impacts in various different tributaries coming into that lake.

Another example of a research project that's going to help us better understand the effectiveness of our stewardship policy is a project we're doing with Ducks Unlimited where we're developing new methods for mapping wetlands in the province. As we've talked about before, we have completed the most thorough inventory of Saskatchewan wetlands in our history over the last number of years, but that was a really intensive project to develop that inventory. We're now working with Ducks Unlimited to develop new methods for doing that type of inventory work. It will benefit us as well as other stakeholders who are interested in that data. And so those types of investments in long-term data will help inform future policy decisions as well.

Another one that might be of interest would be another water quality project we're doing with Irrigation Saskatchewan that's looking at the water quality implications of tile drainage under pivot irrigation. So irrigation being an incredibly important priority for the Government of Saskatchewan, we need to make sure that the drainage that's associated with those projects is being done well and is positively contributing to soil health, to agricultural productivity, and managing environmental mitigation as well.

And so this project is a proactive one to understand what the implications of tile under pivot could be, what our water quality implications would be, and again, how do you mitigate those if they exist. And so these types of projects will help us understand the full picture around the stewardship policy while we have the 10 indicators that are directly tied to our policy.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. Will the results, the findings from, say, like the Buffalo Pound research project that looks at water samples coming in from the C & Ds as well as the natural tributaries, will that be publicly available?

Krystal Tendler: — Yes, our intention is to publish the results, the reports from the Buffalo Pound study and all the studies that I've described today, just as we have with all of our past research and demonstration projects that we conducted in development of the stewardship policy. So our commitment to transparency was a principle of our policy and we'll continue down that pathway.

Jared Clarke: — You spoke about the mapping, the most extensive mapping of wetlands to date in Saskatchewan. Is that the 86 per cent number?

Krystal Tendler: — The inventorying provides the data source for the 86 per cent undrained statistic.

Jared Clarke: — And so what kind of . . . You kind of spoke about how that was a fairly intensive endeavour. How often will that metric be identified? And I'm thinking about in the water stewardship policy there are, you know, 60 per cent wetland retention goals, 40 per cent water retention goals. How will you know . . . How often are you monitoring that? And how will you know if you're meeting those goals?

Krystal Tendler: — So the determination of whether or not we're hitting those targets — the 40 per cent retention target, the 60 per cent retention target — that's actually right through the drainage approval process. So every drainage approval we issue since January has to have wetland retention as a part of it. It's a condition of approval. And so we won't issue a drainage permit if it doesn't meet that requirement.

And so going forward every project will ensure, if it's within the Buffalo Pound basin, it will have 60 per cent retention on it or it won't be in compliance. We won't issue the approval.

But the question of how often will we update that full wetland inventory of the whole province, we don't know right now. We're working on the development of those new methods. And then once we've moved through that process, we'll have a better sense of what's going to be feasible in terms of updating that inventory data.

Jared Clarke: — Is it true that class 1 and class 2 wetlands would be sufficient to meet, say, the 60 per cent or 40 per cent retention on the landscape?

Krystal Tendler: — So the way the wetland retention policy works is there's two components that go into the total calculation of retained wetlands.

[19:45]

The first is called the floor. So it's the wetlands that are unlikely to be drained that exist on the landscape already. And so those might exist under some sort of protected status. They might be under WHPA [*The Wildlife Habitat Protection Act*] designation. They might be in provincial parks. They might be in land that's just unsuitable to drain, that those wetlands are going to be stayed there forever. And so those are considered floor.

So we take the total retention target. You minus what's going to stay there, and then the remainder is what's the landowner retention target. And so for wetlands that the landowner needs to retain, there's a lot of flexibility given to the producers to work together with their neighbours to find solutions about what's going to make the best sense for their collective project.

And so it might be class 1s. It might be class 4 and 5s. There might be more likelihood a combination of all the various different classes depending on the landscape, depending on the type of operation. We see a lot of projects where you have a variety of different producer types. So you've got livestock operators with grain operators who are working together. Well they have different interests in what type of wetlands they want to see on the landscape, what they need them for.

And so at this point we don't have a sense of what type of wetlands are going to be the ones retained. That's something we're going to continue to look at. But we do allow producers the flexibility to choose which type they want, so whether it's those class 1s or the class 2 through 5s.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. One other question just before I move on to another line of questioning. In terms of the 86 per cent, I heard someone say that that number includes existing lakes and rivers, creeks, as part of the cumulative total of 86 per cent wetlands retained on the landscape. Is that accurate?

Chair D. Harrison: — If I could just interject here. Could I get the question to refer to estimates?

Jared Clarke: — In terms of the work that will continue to be done in the upcoming budget on this indicator, which is clearly outlined in the budget document, does that number include or continue to include lakes and streams and rivers?

Krystal Tendler: — The 86 per cent is 86 per cent undrained of pothole wetlands. So that does not include lakes, creeks, or rivers in Saskatchewan.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. Switching gears, one of the places that I have in both my roles as shadow minister for Environment as well as newly Water Security Agency, that has been a focus of concern is the Cumberland delta. I'm wondering what in this budget . . . Is there anything in this budget or in the work of Water Security Agency in the coming year that will monitor or collect data or do any work in modelling flows of the delta and what can be done to save the delta?

Hon. David Marit: — I'll start. Obviously we just had discussion. There's been a lot of work done and it's a lot of technical things. And Shawn's going to start on what we are doing and what's in this budget. And then Leah is going to get into exactly all the dynamics around what we've done at Cumberland.

Shawn Jaques: — Yeah, thanks, Minister. Yeah, we have done a lot of work with, you know, the northern community, both the village of Cumberland House and the Cumberland House Cree Nation.

You know, in this budget what's included — I don't have it itemized — but we have hydrologists that do work studying the flows on the river that flows through Cumberland House. We have a number of hydrometric stations that are measuring the water. We spent significant dollars here a few years ago flying LiDAR [light detection and ranging] for the whole area, which helps determine, you know, where the water flows, things like that.

As well as we have two committees that we meet regularly with, you know, northern residents. The delta water management committee is one that is chaired by Water Security Agency, and it brings together representatives of, you know, SaskPower, Minister of Environment, WSA. We meet three to four times a year with that group and it also involves people from the community.

I'm going to get Leah to talk about some of the significant

activities that we've done over the last couple years with this group.

Leah Clark: — Leah Clark, executive director of irrigation and economic development. There's a number of things that we're proud of that we've partnered with in the area of Cumberland House. I think first and foremost is the communication streams with those two committees and just building some trusted partnerships with some of the locals there.

But there's a lot of both indirect and direct things that we've done on the ground at Cumberland House to support the delta and the water in that area. The first is we did a big LiDAR capture where we shared that data with that area. We also are just in the process of completing some flood maps, which will be really important. Bathymetric surveys have also been done.

And then just lots of different communication-related things, like high-flow warnings and forecasts that we do on the ground. We've done lots of tours of the delta, bringing lots of different partners from SaskPower, Water Security Agency, Minister of Environment, and actually Ducks Unlimited as well.

Fisheries branch, we have a focus on the delta there. We've done lots of fish tagging, as well as we have a senior biologist assigned to the Cumberland House delta. Initiations of discussions, both in the delta and local lakes — Dumbell Lake area is one of those areas.

We also purchased some solar water gauges. We have them right now at Niska and Big Eddy. And those are nice because they're locally owned and operated. But we do support with the different numbers that are coming in, and helping with data, reviewing agreements. We've submitted a report to DFO [Department of Fisheries and Oceans] for relicensing.

And then those secondary things that we've done, related initiatives. I mentioned the LiDAR survey, but that's a big one, a big investment for the area. WSA hydrometric works, lots of work with our hydrologists there. Vegetation is an issue with water flows in the area. So we've looked at different ways to control vegetation and get those water flows going.

Birdsong recording project in the area, cultural initiatives, DFO studies, electrofishing, log clearing, sturgeon management program, and different cameras that we have looked at to look at different species in the area. So really proud of the work and the team. It definitely takes a lot of different groups and different organizations working together.

Shawn Jaques: — If I could just add as well some of the most recent work. I was up there in February with my colleague from SaskPower, and we've been working with the First Nation in the northern village on, you know, what other options are available. What could we look at, you know, to help capture water in some of those areas that maybe are drying. Does it mean maybe putting in a dike or a weir? We've been working with Ducks Unlimited on that. They have a number of projects up there.

And you know, in my most recent conversation with both the mayor and the chief because they have a lot of snow out there, they've actually reached out to me and asked about, you know, are we going to see a significant increase in the river? They're

thinking they're going to get a big flush because, you know, there's looking like there's going to be more water this year than there has been for a number of years. So we are doing a lot of work with that community.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. It sounds like there's lots going on in terms of monitoring and especially warning the community if there's flooding and that kind of thing.

I'm looking more for details around mitigation work that can help protect and re-establish the Cumberland delta. Since the E.B. Campbell dam and the Tobin Lake dam was established 50 years ago, we've seen a change in the hydrological system of how the river flows, right. And that has had incredibly detrimental impacts on the delta itself.

This is the largest inland delta in North America, an incredibly important place for birds, for wildlife, for fish, for the community, the First Nation, and surrounding area. It is, by all accounts of locals, dying. The water level is going down. Siltation in the delta is not being replenished. It's settling out in Diefenbaker, in Tobin, in front of E.B. Campbell there.

And so that nutrient load is not being flushed in, and because of the flow — or the increased flow during winter under the ice — the water is carving deeper into the riverbed and creating more of a channel, and less water is actually flowing in. We're also seeing increases in phragmites, an invasive species; all of those pieces.

So I'm wondering, is there any work . . . You spoke a little bit about it in terms of what can be done, because we know the dam is there. The dam is going to be there; it's being refurbished right now for another 50 years. What can be done by Water Security Agency and the Saskatchewan government to actually ensure that this incredibly important ecosystem is not lost? I'll leave it at that.

Shawn Jaques: — Yeah, so thank you for the question. And I mean, that's exactly why we put together that delta water management committee, to work collaboratively with, you know, the community and the First Nation, our partner at SaskPower, to . . . What can we do? What options are available? I spoke a little bit about some of the, you know, initial conversations we've been having about, where can we capture water? How can we hold water in areas, in some of those tributaries that may be a bit drier?

[20:00]

We've been working with the U of S [University of Saskatchewan]. They're doing an extensive study on invasive weeds and grasses. We've been doing some work on that. We've just also started the modelling, the hydrological model that we talk about, to study the water. So I would say it's ongoing and we're going to continue those conversations with the northern community.

Jared Clarke: — I guess my question would be to the minister. In terms of your government, how much of an appetite is there to put money, invest money into protecting the delta and ensuring that it exists? The community is 250 years old this year. Will the delta be there 250 years from now?

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah, I'll start. Obviously the delta is important to us. I have been there. I have been up there I think it's two times for sure, if not . . . two times for sure, and I've actually been out on the delta. I have been along with former ag minister Lyle Stewart. We toured there for an entire day and saw the importance of it. And yeah, it is very important and the community is important to us as well.

And we have done some things to really help it, and I know full well. Shawn had come to me a while ago. The community, we put a million dollars into their water infrastructure to ensure they had good clean water for the community as well. I don't think there's ever been a time we haven't been there for the community that I can remember, that's for sure. And I know Shawn's going to get into some more of the technical things that we have done, and then Leah might add something as well.

Jared Clarke: — I think I'm okay with that answer.

Hon. David Marit: — Okay.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. In terms of the AI [artificial intelligence] data centre that's being suggested to be built just outside of Regina here, what kind of water implications are there?

Hon. David Marit: — It's my understanding that the CEO of Bell, at the press conference, had made comments about the water usage on that site. Right now all we can tell you is there's been no application to Water Security Agency yet, so we can't comment on something we haven't received an application on.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. In terms of water flow coming in on the North and South Saskatchewan River, what kind of modelling does Water Security Agency have in terms of the impacts of climate change? How will the flow rates change say in the next 5, 20, 50 years?

Shawn Jaques: — So at Water Security Agency, we have a large team of scientists. We have hydrologists, hydrogeologists, people that study flows on both rivers. We look at things like, you know, the snow pack in the mountains. We work with academia to understand better what's happening on the water that's coming into our province. We work very closely with our neighbours, both to the west and to the east, to study those flows. And we ensure that we get our share of the water.

I think what's also important, you know, in speaking with Dr. Pomeroy, he's commented a couple times that he thinks Saskatchewan is well suited. We're probably going to see the same amount of water, if not more, at certain times of the year. And so that's why we're very fortunate in our province to have a gem like Lake Diefenbaker that can capture, you know, that excess water as it flows down the South Sask River to use in times when there's less water available.

And if I think of the last, you know, five years, we've been in a significant drought in this province. But because of Lake Diefenbaker, we've been able to mitigate some of the impacts on, you know, on industrial users, on human consumption, recreation, etc. So I think Saskatchewan is well suited to be able to utilize that water as it comes.

John, I don't know if you have any other technical information you want to add.

John Fahlman: — Thanks. John Fahlman, vice-president of infrastructure. I think you've captured it very well, Shawn. I think the key to remember here is that we live in a mid-continental climate that has a lot of variability in water, and the effects of climate change will only increase that variability. When we developed the Lake Diefenbaker operating plan, we also looked at long-term records in Dr. Dave Sauchyn's tree rings to develop long-term estimates of droughts in high-water years to try and look at that too and work that into it.

So I think on the South Sask River specifically, the important thing is that it's going to be different. There's no real consensus on higher or lower as far as volumes go, but because we have that big storage there, it buffers that.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. So it's safe to say, reading between the lines there, that like Water Security Agency isn't doing its own modelling in terms of what are the effects of climate change going to be in 5, 20, 50 years.

Shawn Jaques: — So thank you for the question. WSA, we aren't doing . . . Even though we have a team of scientists and we do all the work on, you know, the flows and the hydrology, all of those pieces, we are not running climate models. That's where we partner, where I've mentioned that we're doing work with academia. They're the ones that are doing some of that work, the work of Dr. Pomeroy.

But what we do is we operate. We manage the water. We manage the reservoirs based on, you know, the real time and the flows that are coming in, what we're being told is expected to come in. And then we change the operating of that structure.

So for example, we're seeing, you know, the snowpack on the eastern slope of the Rockies significant this year, probably higher than we've seen in decades. And so we've changed the operation of the reservoir to make sure we can capture most of that water. We're probably going to have to let some out this spring if that snowpack melts the way we anticipate it does. And so that's how we manage it at WSA. John, I don't know if you have anything else to . . .

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. Yeah, just kind of linking all the things that we've been talking about today in terms of, you know, wetland drainage and seeing more water coming into rivers and lakes, into those systems faster because they're not being retained on the landscape to the Cumberland delta, which is drying up, to climate change, where we know glaciers are melting at an alarming rate, which is providing a significant amount of the water that flows through the South and North Saskatchewan River.

It's kind of concerning I think that Water Security Agency, if we're talking about new irrigation projects or new industry coming online, that we aren't putting forward any kind of thought to how much water is actually going to be flowing through those rivers in the coming decades. I'll just leave it at that I think. Yeah, go ahead, Minister.

Hon. David Marit: — Yeah, if I could, I think there's a stat that

has to be put on the record here too. And it's something that really alarmed me when I first was told it by the Water Security Agency, but just how big that Lake Diefenbaker reservoir is. It's bigger than all the reservoirs in the province of Alberta combined. And 1 metre of water on Diefenbaker will provide enough water for 300,000 people for more than 15 years. So that's how massive that water system is. And it's unfortunate that we're losing more to evaporation than we're ever using on irrigation.

[20:15]

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. And yet the Cumberland delta is going dry. It is.

In the annual report under progress of goal 2 — clean, safe, reliable water supply that is responsive to change — under key actions you talk about WSA signing a memorandum of understanding to advance the Canadian-Saskatchewan flood hazard identification and mapping program. I'm wondering if you can give a status update on that.

Shawn Jaques: — Thank you for the question. So as you said, we have an agreement with Natural Resources Canada, or NRCan, and it's a four-year deal starting back in '24-25. And the total value of that partnership is \$9 million, and it's shared 50/50 between the federal government and the Water Security Agency.

Jared Clarke: — And when will the mapping . . . Well I guess are you using that flood hazard identification and mapping system right now? Is it developed? Is it implemented?

Leah Clark: — Hi. So we are developing flood maps across the province. And what we do is we work collaboratively with communities that request flood maps. We've prioritized the most at-risk communities for flooding, and are working with those communities to create those flood maps.

In addition to that we've used some of that money to collect LiDAR for different areas around the province, what has been really beneficial for a number of different things, both from an environmental habitat standpoint to a development and an economic use standpoint. So it's been a really good investment.

Jared Clarke: — What is the total amount of funding allocated to the conservation and development, or C & Ds, in this budget?

Shawn Jaques: — The Water Security Agency doesn't directly fund C & Ds. But what we do is . . . There is a fund available to C & Ds if they want to do maintenance through our channel-clearing program that is cost-shared 50/50, as well as the Ag Water Management Fund if they have a project that they want to bring into compliance. They can also apply for that. But we don't provide direct funding to C & Ds.

Jared Clarke: — So how much money was given to C & Ds to bring those projects into compliance in 2025? And how many projects would have been completed?

Shawn Jaques: — So under the Ag Water Management Fund, people who's eligible for the funding, it could be individuals, corporations. It could be First Nations, Saskatchewan rural municipalities, C & D authorities, watershed association boards,

or irrigation districts. So in '25-26 under the Ag Water Management Fund, we funded 30 projects for a total of 650,000. I don't have the breakdown of which are C & Ds or not.

The other program that I referenced that C & Ds can access money was the channel-clearing program. And there were 71 projects there for a total of \$700,000. And 90 per cent of those projects were either municipalities and C & Ds. But again I don't have the breakdown of how many were C & Ds. Lots will be municipalities, I'm assuming.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. How much money did Water Security Agency spend in 2025 restoring any drained wetlands?

Shawn Jaques: — So Water Security Agency, we don't spend money on restoring wetlands. There's 86 per cent of the wetlands are retained. We don't need to pay producers to restore them because they're already keeping them. There's consolidation projects around the province, so the corporation isn't paying to restore wetlands.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. Just in the last few minutes we've got here, I'm wondering if you could clarify, when is the data point being used as a baseline for that 86 per cent?

Krystal Tendler: — Hi. Krystal Tendler, agricultural water management. So in developing the wetland inventory, we were looking at what wetlands were historically on the landscape pre-development. And so we're able to look at historical aerial imagery and mapping to look back at what wetlands were once there. So we're not just looking at what's there at any given point in time; we're able to see what might have been drained at any point in time. So we're able to see that historical picture of wetlands.

Jared Clarke: — So the 86 per cent baseline is pre-settlement, is what you're telling me?

Krystal Tendler: — Yes. Because we're mapping drained wetlands, we're able to use that baseline of pre-settlement — pre-settlement of the province.

Jared Clarke: — Thank you. In closing, my last question would be again looking through the annual report, you know, really an emphasis on economic development. I don't see any mention of preserving wetlands or preserving waterbodies for wildlife, for the importance of like the intrinsic value of those ecosystems.

[20:30]

I'm wondering, is there . . . I guess my question would be, why not? Why not have a wetland conservation policy that specifically makes commitments to protecting and conserving those wetlands or the ecosystems that so many Saskatchewan people enjoy through hunting, fishing, recreation, living on a lake, drinking fresh water? Why is that not included in the annual report?

Shawn Jaques: — So while we don't have a budget line item that's specifically for retaining or restoring wetlands, the largest budgeted area of the corporation is our science and licensing division at \$17 million. And that division is dedicated to making sure we have safe drinking water for every community in the

province. We have money that is spent on testing water, water quality. We have money that is spent on measuring the hydrometric program, measuring flows, making sure we have water flowing into the lakes, as you mentioned.

It's also the area that looks after a number of programs such as, you know . . . We have the piping plover program, an endangered species, that we're spending money to make sure operations aren't impacting that. We have the lake sturgeon study. We have the bigmouth buffalo study. We strategically fund the Saskatchewan Association of Watersheds. You know, there's programs that incentivize good practice.

So back to my earlier comment. You know, we're not paying producers to restore wetlands. We think they're doing a good job. They're good stewards. But we are investing a lot of money in the corporation in that science area of protecting our habitat and the environment.

Chair D. Harrison: — From a previous question that MLA Clarke had regarding FTEs, did you find that information?

Shawn Jaques: — Yes, I've got that number, Mr. Chair. So you had asked the question about in-scope and out-of-scope. So I'll give you the five-year breakdown: '21-22 we had 158 in-scope, 148 out-of-scope; '22-23 is 153 in-scope, 145 out-of-scope; '23-24, 164 to 141; '24-25 is 166 to 144; and '25-26 is 166 to 143.

And again I just want to clarify the reason for our high numbers. Our engineering profession are out-of-scope positions, and we have a large contingent of engineers in our corporation.

Chair D. Harrison: — Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of these estimates, we will now adjourn consideration of the 2026-27 estimates for Water Security Agency. Minister Marit, do you have any closing comments?

Hon. David Marit: — Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. And thank you all, committee members, for the questions as well. It was a good discussion.

I really want to thank this team at the Water Security Agency and the work they do. And I think it was really presented well in the answers that were given to the member through this whole discussion on the budget. We have a great team at the Water Security Agency and — I'm surrounded by a wealth of knowledge — and really are very committed to ensuring that the safety of the water that is in the province of Saskatchewan is going to be very well looked after and maintained.

So with that, Mr. Chair, I'll end my comments and thank everybody for their presence and their questions here tonight. Thank you.

Chair D. Harrison: — Thank you, Minister. MLA Clarke, do you have any closing comments?

Jared Clarke: — Sure. Thank you, Minister, for your answers this evening. As well to your team, thanks for taking time out of your evening to be here and answer my questions. Of course always thank you to the Clerks and broadcast and *Hansard* and the folks on the committee opposite and my pals here on this side.

So with that, thank you.

Chair D. Harrison: — I'd also like to thank the minister and his officials in the committee here tonight and *Hansard* and Clerks as well.

This concludes our business for today. I would ask a member to move a motion of adjournment. MLA Kasun has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair D. Harrison: — Carried. This committee stands adjourned until Wednesday, April 15th, 2026 at 3:30 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 20:36.]