



STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

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Joan Pratchler
Regina Rochdale

[The committee met at 08:31.]

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, folks, we'll convene the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. My name is Trent Wotherspoon. I'm the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for Regina Mount Royal and Chair of the Public Accounts. I'll briefly introduce the members of the committee: Deputy Chair Wilson, MLA Chan, MLA Crassweller, Minister Harrison, MLA Gordon, MLA Pratchler.

I'd like to introduce and welcome as well the leadership of our Provincial Comptroller's office: Provincial Comptroller Chris Bayda and assistant provincial comptroller Jane Borland.

I'd like to welcome and introduce our Provincial Auditor, Tara Clemett, and her team of officials that are here today. She'll be introducing her officials with each of the various chapters that we engage in.

We have the following documents to table: PAC 20-30, Ministry of Government Relations: Responses to questions raised at the January 21, 2025 meeting; PAC 21-30, Western Development Museum: Responses to questions raised at January 21, 2025 meeting.

Environment

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, the first entity we're going to be focused on here today is the Ministry of Environment. I want to thank Deputy Minister France and his leadership, his officials that are with him here today for joining us, and for all those that have been involved in the work that we're going to discuss here today and all those involved in the work that connects with your important ministry.

Deputy Minister France, I'd invite you to briefly introduce the officials that have joined you here today. You can refrain from getting into the comments on the chapters at this point. I'll turn it over to the auditor, and then I'll come back your way for that.

Kevin France: — That's great. Well good morning, everyone. And thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members. Here with me today, Kevin Murphy, assistant deputy minister of the resource management division; Wes Kotyk, assistant deputy minister of the environmental protection division. Behind me to my right is Rebecca Gibbons, assistant deputy minister of the corporate services and policy division; and finally Aaron Wirth, executive director of the climate resilience branch. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Well thank you, and thank you to your team of officials that have joined us here today. I'm going to turn it over now to the Provincial Auditor. She's going to focus on, I believe, chapter 11. And actually most of these chapters we'll be focusing on independently, or all of them independently, and the final chapter we have has some new recommendations in it. But I'll turn it over to the auditor.

Tara Clemett: — So thank you, Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, committee members, and officials. With me today is Mr. Jason Shaw, and he's the deputy provincial auditor that is responsible for the audits of the Ministry of Environment. Behind me, Ms.

Michelle Lindenbach, the liaison with this committee. So I'm sure you've seen her face over the past few days. And then we also have Ms. Nicole Dressler, and she's a principal in our office and would have been involved in some of the audits we're reviewing today.

The first presentation, the order that we have is such that we will look at, there's five separate presentations. The first four are all follow-up audits. So that will provide a progress update basically on the progress the ministry has made with regards to recommendations that this committee has already agreed to and that our office has made.

The last presentation is a new performance audit. And it is around basically the ministry's processes to regulate industrial emitters, and it does contain three new audit recommendations for this committee's consideration.

I do want to thank the deputy minister and his officials for the co-operation that was extended to us during the course of our work. With that, I'll turn it over to Jason.

Jason Shaw: — Thank you. The Ministry of Environment regulates waste management and enforces landfill and transfer station compliance. It regulated about 140 landfills in 2021. Chapter 11 of our 2022 report volume 1, starting on page 155, reports the results of the progress made on the recommendations we initially made in our 2013 audit of the Ministry of Environment's processes to regulate landfills.

We made nine recommendations. This committee agreed with the recommendations in April 2014. By January 2020 the ministry implemented or fully addressed seven recommendations. By December 2021 the ministry implemented the two remaining recommendations.

The ministry developed and updated guidance documents for landfills and transfer stations, as well as drafted codes of practice it expected to include in legislation by December 2021. Having standardized guides encourages operators to build, operate, and close landfills by the same set of standards.

The ministry also completed, at least annually, inspections of landfills it classified as high risk. As of December 31st, 2021 we found ministry staff completed annual inspections for 12 of the 16 high-risk landfills. For the remaining four uninspected high-risk landfills, staff documented rationale for why an annual inspection was not completed. Annual inspections confirm whether landfills operate in compliance with permanent requirements and the law, which enhances environmental and public safety.

This concludes my presentation. Thank you. I will pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay. Thanks so much for the follow-up on this important audit. Of course, I think the original chapter, the original report came out in 2013, and the recommendations were concurred in by this committee in 2014. Thanks as well for some of the actions we've heard and that we'll hear more about that have caused implementation.

I'll kick it over to DM [deputy minister] France for brief remarks, and then we'll open it up for questions.

Kevin France: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And to begin I would like to thank Ms. Clemett for her work and her team's efforts. The Ministry of Environment values the recommendations provided by the Provincial Auditor's office and the vital role in helping the ministry improve our operations. We appreciate your ongoing support and collaboration.

The Provincial Auditor's 2013 report on regulating landfills issued nine recommendations to the ministry. In December of 2021 the ministry implemented the last two remaining recommendations as reported in the 2022 volume 1 of the Provincial Auditor's report. With that, we have fully implemented all the recommendations.

As recommended, the ministry adopted guidance on landfills from the Environmental Code as an operating practice. We developed and published new guidance documents for landfills, including the Saskatchewan solid waste management strategy. We updated our waste disposal grounds guidance documents and developed a new one for composting in June of 2020.

The second recommendation is for the ministry to perform landfill inspections in accordance with its established frequency requirements. Beginning in 2020 the ministry has established its risk-based inspection program and, as discussed, landfills classified as high are inspected annually.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to stop there for any questions from the committee.

Chair Wotherspoon: — All right. Thanks so much, and thanks to all those involved in implementing those recommendations, of course.

I'll open it up now to see if there is questions from committee members. MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — I see that the number of operating landfills has decreased from 500 in 2015 to 139 in 2021. How many are there currently?

Wes Kotyk: — There are currently 111 operating waste management facilities.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. Could one say that Saskatchewan's waste generation is still trending downward?

Wes Kotyk: — Yes, we can say that. The information that we've been collecting shows the trend is going downwards and getting closer to our targets in our solid waste management strategy.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay, thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Could you speak to inspections of the landfills themselves? How many environmental protection officers are there, and how often are they conducting inspections?

Wes Kotyk: — Thank you for that question. We've had a bit of

a change in how we operate that program. We used to have five dedicated EPOs [environmental protection officer] that that was their sole purpose, was to regulate and inspect landfills. We have now redesigned the branch so that we have 23 EPOs who have a shared portfolio of landfills plus mining and industrial facilities. So they have a shared responsibility. So all 23 EPOs will have some landfills in their portfolio to inspect, and they'll also have some mining and industrial facilities.

Hugh Gordon: — Can you just speak to the types of infractions that are found and what enforcement measures the ministry has taken or typically taken?

Wes Kotyk: — Typical infractions that we encounter are things like inadequate cover on the waste, windblown litter and debris, maybe the gate's not locked, and security and things like that. So those are typical infractions. And what we find is when those are identified at an inspection, we give them opportunity to address it. And then we'll follow up to ensure that they have done that within a reasonable time frame.

Hugh Gordon: — How has your experience been with that? Has that been sufficient?

Wes Kotyk: — Yes. For most landfills, it has been. Some sometimes take a little bit more encouragement, but you know, typically they are complying in a good time frame for us.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you. That's all my questions.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you. Any other questions on this chapter? Not seeing any, I'd welcome a motion at this time to conclude consideration of chapter 11. Moved by Minister Harrison. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, that's carried. I'll turn it back over to the Provincial Auditor to focus in on a chapter focused on something very important in this province: our wonderful fisheries and lakes and rivers and fish stocks. So I'll kick it over to the Provincial Auditor.

Jason Shaw: — Thank you. The Ministry of the Environment is responsible for managing freshwater fish populations in a sustainable manner. It monitors fish populations to detect the changes resulting from harvest, environmental conditions, and stocking. In Saskatchewan an estimated 50,000 waterbodies contain fish, with the majority in the northern half of the province.

Chapter 16 of our 2022 report volume 2, starting on page 183, reports the results of the progress made on the recommendations we initially made in 2019 of the Ministry of the Environment's processes to manage fish populations in a sustainable manner. We made nine recommendations. By July 2022 the ministry implemented seven recommendations, and we determined one recommendation was no longer relevant. Therefore, at July 2022, one recommendation remained outstanding three years after our original audit.

As outlined in section 3.1 of the chapter, the ministry prepared a procedures manual for staff to provide guidance on standardized,

science-based field data collection and reporting on fish populations and their health. We reviewed the draft procedures manual and found it contained reasonable guidance for all significant processes. Using consistent, appropriate approaches to sample fish from one waterbody to the next and to analyze results helps ensure comparability of results and consistent analysis.

The ministry also developed a new ranking system to rank waterbodies and set how frequently it would assess waterbodies, based on ranking as summarized in section 3.2. The ministry's new ranking system prioritizes lakes based on the type of fish in the lake; the usage of the lake, such as if the lake is used for commercial fishing; and environmental factors. The ranking determines how frequently the ministry assesses the health of the fish population in the waterbody.

This risk-based approach to prioritizing waterbodies aligns with good practice. The ministry overall assessed the highest priority waterbodies consistent with set intervals. For example, we found the ministry assessed eight of the nine highest priority waterbodies consistent with its expected frequency. One was delayed due to the COVID pandemic.

[08:45]

Indicated in section 3.3 of the chapter, the ministry improved its waterbody assessment reporting. We assessed five waterbody assessment reports from 2020 and 2021 and found each report contained sufficient detail and followed the ministry's new reporting expectations, such as sampling decisions used. Completing waterbody assessments consistent with risk-based frequencies helps ensure the ministry collects sufficient information to detect changes in fish populations or fish health within a waterbody, which enables it to take timely action to avoid potentially irreversible declines in overall fish population and health of key fish species.

The recommendation to create specific management plans for key high-risk fish species and/or high-risk waterbodies remains outstanding, as noted in section 3.4 on page 188. While the ministry created fish management plans for three of the nine high-usage waterbodies as part of its waterbody assessment process, we found these plans did not set population sustainability targets.

We expected the fish management plans to compare fish population data to set sustainability targets, and where necessary would plan specific actions to manage fish populations. For example if the ministry identified a concern, it may intervene by restricting the size of fish caught that can be kept. Not having clear fish population sustainability targets increases the risk that the ministry does not take appropriate action to maintain the fish populations in high-usage waterbodies.

As outlined in section 3.5, the ministry improved timeliness of completing waterbody assessment reports by setting targets such as drafting reports by the end of the fiscal year the assessment occurred. We reviewed five waterbody assessment reports from 2020 and 2021 and found the ministry prepared four of five reports within targeted timelines. The fifth report tested was still in draft seven months after the targeted completion date. Completing timely waterbody assessments enables the ministry

to appropriately respond to significant changes in the health of fish populations.

We found the ministry considered receiving additional information from commercial fishers, but determined the additional information would be burdensome on commercial fishers and not practical. We also found other jurisdictions were not using this practice either, and therefore we considered this recommendation implemented.

Finally section 3.7 notes the ministry reviewed its 2010 fisheries management plan in 2022 and determined it completed all action items. For four of the items completed since our original audit, we found the ministry had sufficient evidence to support its completion status. Thus we considered the ministry had implemented our recommendation about determining resources necessary to complete its 2010 plan. Also as the 2010 plan actions were complete, the ministry no longer needed to develop a strategy to assess effectiveness of the 2010 plan, so we considered this recommendation no longer relevant.

Thank you and that concludes my presentation.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks again for the presentation and the focus of the chapter. I'm going to turn it over to Deputy Minister France for brief remarks. Of course this has been considered before us as a committee before. We've concurred in these recommendations. So a bit of a brief update, and then we'll open it up for questions.

Kevin France: — Thanks again, Mr. Chair. The Provincial Auditor's 2019 report on sustainable fish population management identified nine recommendations. By July of 2022 the ministry has fully implemented seven of the recommendations and one that is no longer relevant based on the Provincial Auditor's assessment.

The final remaining recommendation — to create specific management plans for key high-risk fish species in high-usage waterbodies — was identified as partially implemented in the Provincial Auditor's 2022 volume 2 report. Since then the ministry considers this last recommendation fully implemented.

This past year the ministry created lake-specific management plan templates. The templates incorporate sustainable targets identified in the management plans. Through conversations with the auditor's office, they've indicated that these templates satisfy the intent of their recommendation.

And as such I'll stop there for any questions, Mr. Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thanks so much. And I should have maybe done it a little while ago, but I'll table PAC 22-30, the Ministry of Environment: Status update, dated January 23rd, 2025. And that relates to each of these chapters. Thanks to all those that were involved in that work.

I'll open it up now to committee members for questions. MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Just one quick question on that last one. That took awhile to implement. What were some of the challenges in getting that moving forward to finally implement?

Kevin Murphy: — Hello. Kevin Murphy, assistant deputy minister for resource management with Environment. One of the things that challenges us in terms of setting targets for our fish species is of course that they are in individual lakes. And none of our lakes are exactly the same as our other lakes. So if you think about even the circumstance with Lake Diefenbaker versus Last Mountain Lake. Last Mountain Lake is a relatively natural lake with just a control structure on it; Diefenbaker is a dammed reservoir and behaves very differently in terms of its capacity to create productivity for fish species.

So we had been using a system of managing by species in zones — relatively, sort of the angling zones of the province, three zones — and found that that was inadequate in terms of being able to actually set some of those targets. We're now looking, because we're focused mainly on the recreational fishery with our regulatory structure, we're now looking at these lake-specific templates. And the time to develop those, look at targeting work with other jurisdictions both in United States and Canada to look at things that were mentioned by the auditor like slot limits which give you a sense of how to manage the breeding population effectively of those fisheries.

So it took our fishery team some time to change that management regime and structure. A lot of the previous targets for overall population productivity had been based on the commercial fishery, and it's not particularly valid in terms of managing the recreational fishery.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Can you just tell the committee a little bit about how you've modernized your management reports? What was added to better clarify sustainable targets and fisheries' management objectives?

Kevin Murphy: — Thanks for the question. We have made changes in our lake management templates to specify the exact type of index netting that we're expecting the staff to do, the kind of data that they need to collect on a regular basis from each of those lakes to correspond to information that we're also able to collect from the recreational fishery, and in part from the commercial fishery, to look at things like age structures, year class, general health and condition of the population, some parameters that previously we weren't necessarily recording each time.

Our index netting system was based on using gillnets that are effectively a broader span of sizes than are used in the commercial fishery in the past. And we would record numbers of animals, lengths, weights, etc., that were hitting those. Things like health condition, whether they're spawning, disease presence, those weren't necessarily being recorded every time. And some of the overall, sort of, span of lengths of the animals that include forage base, things like that, also weren't being recorded.

Now it's a more comprehensive data template that allows us to build a better picture of what's happening in the lake and provide that guidance to our team, and do so with, sort of, set gear types that aren't different from region to region or biologist to

biologist.

Hugh Gordon: — Okay, that's all for my questions. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions?

Could you give us just a little bit of a glimpse into what one of these assessments would look like on one of these priority lakes. You have the nine different waterbodies that are priority level 1 lakes, and it identifies that Last Mountain Lake was a lake that's recently been assessed, I believe. Could you just provide to us the information you're able to at a bit of a high level, what's being measured and what the state of the lake is with respect to Last Mountain.

Kevin Murphy: — Thanks. The team will first gather information that we have both historically about the waterbody, comprehensive information about water quality and sort of overall regime management for that waterbody from our colleagues in Water Security as they're responsible for a lot of that material.

Any of the previous indices or stock assessment reports, the methodologies we'd used there to prepare them to be able to know whether or not they've got comparable data sets or they have to do some work to be able to build that with all of the activities that I mentioned in my previous response.

So they will, you know, typically we've got a team, comprises biologists, technicians, usually some summer students that accompany us out onto the waterbody. They will be doing things like setting the index nets. So on a daily basis go out, set those nets. There's a prescribed period that they have to be in the waterbody catching. Usually that's, you know, several hours. Then they go out, pull the net again, process the fish. They're taking rough measurements for, say, total length of the animal, weights, things like that as they're processing that catch.

If there is anything else that they're doing in terms of additional work for the forage base, they usually go and do that kind of fishing later using things like seine nets onshore, etc. And that, you know, usually it's a period of two to three weeks that they're actually working on the waterbody. Also weather dependent obviously. Last Mountain not particularly conducive to work when it's windy. So you know, we consider the safety of our teams as they're going out.

And each waterbody they'll have to stage whether they've got appropriate boat launches, how much gas, all of that kind of stuff that they have to do. That information is then taken back and included with any information that we have from doing things like what we call creel census. So if there's been a survey of catch rates, overall success by anglers in the area, we typically try and conduct something like that.

There's some roadside inspection work that we'll do in conjunction with compliance and field services staff, which basically interviews individual anglers coming and going from an area. And on occasion we'll send out mail-in surveys, things like that as well to get a sense of that relative sort of catch rate and which species are being focused and concentrated on.

We focus putting the nets in places where the species of interest.

So Last Mountain obviously something like a walleye would be a targeted fish species for us to work on. If it were Lac la Ronge for instance, we're looking at the lake trout there. So the net sets have to be . . . The biologists have to determine what depth, what locations, things like that for the lakes as well. All of that information then gets collected, processed, and compared to either previous information for that particular waterbody or comparable waterbodies from a sort of Canadian perspective.

Unfortunately I have not seen the final report for Last Mountain Lake yet so I can't state what the status of the lake is currently. I know that it's been relatively stable in terms of its fishery for the last number of years, but we'll have to wait for the final reports to be brought forward.

Chair Wotherspoon: — No, thanks so much. I appreciate all of that. And I was looking as well for a bit of some of the general trends or the current state of that waterbody. These reports, these assessments, these aren't made public or they are made public?

Kevin Murphy: — They will be made public, absolutely. Yes.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Wonderful. Like the management of these fisheries . . . You know, this is a wonderful asset, natural asset, we have in this province, right? And it's incredibly important to many traditional users, many for sustenance but many, many sport fishers and for tourism. And you know, I think we have unsurpassed fishing assets across this province.

And I'm an avid fisher myself; I know Last Mountain real well. So I wasn't just looking for advice on where to go on Saturday to sit on a pail, but I will be out there this weekend as will many other people as well on lakes across this province. And you know, I want to commend you all for the work you're doing to manage the health of these very important fisheries. So thank you for that.

I don't have any further questions myself at this point. I know the previous provincial comptroller, you know, he was a big fisher too, Terry Paton. Good comptroller and awesome fisher and hunter as well, so he'd care about this as well.

Any other questions from committee members at this point? Not seeing any, I'd welcome a motion to conclude consideration of chapter 16. Moved by MLA Crassweller. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay. That's carried.

Moving right along, we'll shift our attention to chapter 11.

Jason Shaw: — Thank you. The Ministry of Environment is responsible for preventing the introduction or spread of aquatic invasive species in Saskatchewan. Aquatic invasive species are non-native animals such as zebra or quagga mussels or plants that usually spread through the water and from one waterbody to another by attaching to watercrafts, trailers, and related aquatic equipment. They pose a serious threat to lakes and waterways in Canada and can cause serious damage.

[09:00]

Chapter 11 of our 2023 report volume 1, starting on page 145, reports results on the progress made on the recommendations we initially made in our 2016 audit about the Ministry of Environment's processes to prevent the entry and spread of aquatic invasive species other than aquatic invasive plants in Saskatchewan.

We made five recommendations. By August 2020 the ministry implemented three recommendations. We are pleased to find by March 2023 the ministry implemented the remaining two recommendations. The ministry established adequate measures to evaluate the effectiveness of its aquatic invasive species public education and awareness activities.

The ministry's measures to evaluate the success of its education and awareness activities included assessing non-compliance rates, social media metrics, and data collected from its watercraft inspection surveys. For example we found watercraft owners' awareness of aquatic invasive species increased from 93 per cent in 2020 to 96 per cent in 2022. Having adequate processes for measuring results helps the ministry evaluate the effectiveness of its education and awareness efforts related to aquatic invasive species.

Also the ministry approved and tested a rapid response plan to mitigate the spread of aquatic invasive species in the province by March 2023. The plan includes reporting, response roles and responsibilities, and processes for activating the response management plan. We found the ministry's plan was appropriately designed to mitigate the spread of aquatic invasive species.

The ministry appropriately used the plan and incident command system to assist in responding to an incident in 2021 where moss ball products sold in Saskatchewan contained zebra mussels. An approved and tested rapid response plan aids in responding to the detection of aquatic invasive species in a formal and timely manner.

This concludes my presentation. Thank you. And I'll pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you, thank you very much. I'm going to turn it over to Deputy Minister France for brief remarks, then we'll go from there.

Kevin France: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Provincial Auditor's 2016 report on preventing the entry and spread of aquatic invasive species in Saskatchewan identified five recommendations.

On the recommendation to measure the effectiveness of public education and awareness campaigns, the ministry conducted a provincial survey and we are using the results to guide future education and awareness initiatives.

On the recommendation to complete and test a formal rapid response plan to mitigate the spread of aquatic invasive species, the ministry formally tested its approved rapid response plan in January 2021 and documented its effectiveness. In January of 2024 we conducted a tabletop exercise to further test and refine the province's response plan. We will continue to test and update the plan annually.

By March of 2023 the ministry implemented the last two remaining recommendations as reported in the 2023 volume 1 follow-up report. And with that, the ministry has fully implemented all the recommendations on aquatic invasive species prevention.

I'll pause again for any questions.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thanks so much. I'm going to open it up to the committee for questions. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Can you tell the committee a little bit about the types of aquatic invasive species? I guess the extent, the number of them, and how they pose a serious threat to lakes and waterways.

Kevin Murphy: — Thanks for that question. I actually don't know a strict number of aquatic invasive species to provide to you because the number grows. The channels of entry are typically, you know, transportation systems, recreational systems. There is sort of a myriad of ways that aquatic invasive species could enter the province.

Some of the main types of aquatic invasive species include things like the mussels that the auditor's report referenced. We have things like various kinds of small fish species — tubenose goby in the Great Lakes system — animals, you know, like that. Things like spiny waterflea, which is a kind of a crustacean, a very small almost shrimp-like organism that can come in in the same livewells and things like that as the zebra mussels can. And then ranging to, you know, various kinds of viri or small, you know, pathogens that can come in on even anglers' boots. The felt pad on the bottom of a flyfisher's boots can contain whirling disease, as an example.

So the points of entry can be border crossings, airports, and any of our roadways. The real challenge for us is to figure out what kinds of basic vectors there are and what sort of the life histories of these aquatic invasive species are, and then go by likelihood to pose risk. So our inspection right now is mainly focused on the sort of external or livewell-carried types of organisms and doing an inspection there.

The other thing that we look at is what typically kinds of activities can be taken or undertaken to ensure that we've either killed or prevented the pathogen from entering. This is why the concentration on things like the clean, drain, dry program. If you have had a watercraft or a container that has been kept clean, drained, dried, it typically will kill virtually any of the kinds of organisms that pose a threat and a risk.

The threat and the risk ecologically, typically either supplantation of our native species. They're taking over spawning grounds, they're predators, or they're outgrowing and outcompeting for food base.

For things like the mussels, there's also an extreme risk to our industry and overall sort of recreational quality of waters. The animals infest almost any surface. They cause beaches to be very difficult for people to even walk into. They clog water intake, so everything from your municipal water supplies through to intakes for power generation facilities. In Ontario, they're finding they have to send commercial divers down to clean out

the pipes on a fairly regular basis. It can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars for a facility like that to maintain their water intake.

So there's a broad span of impacts that these kinds of organisms can have. And damage just to the fishery by outcompeting some of our native fishes. You can see things like carp in a number of our waterbodies. They're actually an invasive; they've been here since the 1950s. They've eventually, you know, essentially established, but they do outcompete some of our native species like the bigmouth buffalo for forage and for spawning ground. So there's a wide variety of impacts. But again, focusing on some of those pathways and some of the easy things that people can do to effectively prevent the spread of the animals.

Hugh Gordon: — Just out of curiosity on that, can you tell us if goldfish are becoming an issue in the province as an invasive species, as it is I think becoming a problem in places like British Columbia and perhaps elsewhere?

Kevin Murphy: — There's a number of carp species, which goldfish are one of them, that are listed in our Act as potential. We have detected, I think there was one in a stormwater detention facility found in the province, maybe two instances of that. It's typically the aquarium trade and then people releasing them.

We don't think that goldfish in particular are a particular risk to our fisheries or our major waterbodies, but certainly in small contained systems like a stormwater detention facility or someone's trout pond they could be problematic. And they are listed, and we do undertake inspection and work for that — education and awareness about not releasing your pets into the wild. Absolutely. Yeah, that's part of our campaign.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — The cost is quite significant, I see here in Alberta's numbers and Ontario's numbers and by some of the things you've just mentioned. Do we have ballpark on the economic impact to the commercial fishing, and how much does it cost to manage, and make sure that these things are done well?

Kevin Murphy: — So I'm happy to report that at present we remain free of these aquatic invasive species. As an example, for the mussels species we have had no confirmed reports of the animals actually entering our waters. And we do actually undertake testing both with physical sampling — have they established — and with genetic markers throughout over 20 of our key waterbodies in the province every year. So far, no establishment of these organisms.

Just for our direct aquatic invasive species program, right now we're at \$2.991 million being spent overall. That's staff, equipment like the decontamination trailers, and all of the work that's done around education and awareness just for that program.

I'm also happy to say that in terms of the potential impact on our commercial fishery, that we don't think is a major risk for us at present, particularly for these. Most of our commercial fishery is in our northern cold waters, and they're not particularly suitable

as homes for these kinds of mussels, the most likely ones that are the current major risk for the province. Mostly it's a concern with our recreational fishery and with things like our infrastructure, the water intakes, all of those things which are mostly in the south of the province. And that's why we're spending these dollars to prevent that incursion, and have been successful to date.

Joan Pratchler: — Prevention matters?

Kevin Murphy: — Yes, and that's why we focus on that. Absolutely. Far better to prevent than to be undertaking some of the work to try and poison the animals and remove them from a waterbody, and may not even be successful based on the type of waterbody and size, etc. So prevention is key. Absolutely. Countries like New Zealand have also confirmed that.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Kevin Murphy: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — I wonder if you could speak to the ministry's rapid response plan as well, briefly.

Kevin Murphy: — The rapid response plan was developed in partnership with federal officials, with officials from rural municipalities and resort villages. And when we undertake the tabletop exercises we engage all of those stakeholder groups. There's a national meeting going to be occurring within the next couple of months where we will run another tabletop exercise with our partners.

The rapid response plan consists of ensuring that we have appropriate identification, and then bringing in the groups that are needed for whatever waterbody. That may be local authorities from resort villages, things like that, to look at closing down boat launches, undertaking inspections, then determining the spread of the risk, whether or not it's through the entire waterbody or localized to a particular marina or boat launch.

And then based on that understanding, looking at our response plan dynamics. Does it involve simply cleaning and removing equipment that's contaminated in one specific area? Or does it involve some level of control using things like a phosphorus Lake Winnipeg was looking at for their waterbody? To begin looking at a bay or is it an entire lake. If it's a small enough lake, that's applicable. If it's not then it's quarantine and containment and not allowing further movement out of that waterbody, and continuing to basically hold that waterbody in quarantine if it's not possible to actually remove the animals from that area.

So the tabletop exercise posits what . . . You know, is it one boat or is it things like the moss balls coming in? Is it a number of different locations? How do we conduct the response? And there's a series of procedures that have been established, like I say, both from a national and provincial perspective that allow us to walk through that.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks again for all the work on this front. We've discussed it in the past. I mean it's a remarkable

thing when you think about all the waterbodies in our neighbouring provinces or jurisdictions, I think, all have presence of quagga or zebra mussels within them — I believe Manitoba; south of the border, North Dakota, I believe Montana; and then into Alberta.

So it's a remarkable thing that we've been able to maintain our waterbodies free, to the extent that we know, of these invasive species. And it's really disturbing when you talk about some of the impacts, right, if all of a sudden you have some of these waterbodies or watersheds contaminated. So we really commend you and challenge you to continue to take this work on in a serious way because certainly, as you say, the prevention is critical because some of the responses afterwards are rather catastrophic for some of the fisheries.

[09:15]

Could you speak just at a high level, or in a specific way, about what the biggest risks are right now to our watershed, as far as the invasive species entering into our . . . You've talked about release of things, like pets, that shouldn't be happening we know very well. You have a good campaign that I think you need to keep going with to let people know that if you're on Facebook Marketplace or anywhere else, and you haul a boat over the border from the south of us or next door in Manitoba, that there's a fairly straightforward and simple process but one that's invaluable to make sure that you're protecting the watershed.

What other measures or what other factors are a risk for these watersheds?

Kevin France: — Maybe I'll start at a higher level, Mr. Chair, and I'll turn it back to Kevin. You know, I think . . . And we've touched on the importance of prevention and awareness, and you know, I think to everyone's point, we want to make sure we don't end up in a situation like Ontario or some of our neighbours. Just to clarify actually, Alberta right now is zebra mussel-free, but they're prioritizing this work because they obviously see the threat.

At a high level, you know, we're focused on . . . We have awareness around 23 specific aquatic invasive species publicly available on our website, just to educate, you know, the population. Whether it's fishing, recreational, or otherwise, you know, we're really focused on . . . We understand the importance but we're also focused on the economic impact. And so there's a recreational perspective. There's a commercial fishery.

Knowing and understanding other jurisdictions, and as Kevin's pointed out, whether it's Ontario and power generation, once you have it, especially with mussels or quagga, it's almost impossible to eradicate, and therefore you're managing. And the costs of that become, you know, extreme.

And so you think about the focus and the expansion of irrigation in this province. If we have the introduction of a zebra mussel that starts to impact the intakes, that impedes the ability to actually utilize that water to increase our production. And so you know, the numbers are extreme in terms of the millions of dollars that would be impacted, and that's why we place such a prioritization on prevention and monitoring, as well as awareness. Anything else you want to add?

Kevin Murphy: — Certainly. Yeah, and apologize if I gave the impression that Alberta had the zebra or quagga mussel. They're mainly looking at things like whirling disease right now in their salmonid populations.

In terms of the risk, I just wanted to add what the deputy minister spoke to. There are two areas that we're sort of focusing on right now. First of all, we realize with vessel traffic that a lot of recreational users, not anglers but folks who are using things like Jet Skis, wakeboards, even kayakers in one circumstance earlier this year . . . So growing that awareness campaign to the broad boating, and sort of, watercraft or even just water toy-using groups to make them aware that they're also possibly a vector.

And also working with the federal government with the airports. We have a really good connection to border services on our American border; they are outstanding in collaborative work with us. But bringing in the traffic that's coming from overseas through the airports. The referenced previous moss ball circumstance was coming from Europe and was through the airports. So growing that awareness around that route of ingress for us.

Those are the two that we're focused on right now that are sort of being considered to be outstanding risk areas.

Chair Wotherspoon: — No, I appreciate that as well, as well as sort of the broader perspective of watercraft. So you've got a group that goes out to Manitoba to paddle, takes their canoes, comes back to Saskatchewan the next weekend. What should they be doing with their watercrafts, with their canoes?

Kevin Murphy: — So that one is very much follow that "clean, drain, dry." Quite frankly the kayaker had clearly left their boat in the water for a period of time because there were actually adults on the hull, which confuses me as to how you could do that. But basically if you remove the watercraft, drain it and let it dry. So for a canoeist, putting it on the roof of your vehicle and transporting it back over that several hours and then leaving it for the next day before putting it in another waterbody will have satisfied the conditions and the expectations.

Chair Wotherspoon: — No, thanks again. Thanks for the very important work on this front. I hope we continue to talk about prevention for many, many, many years and not about, you know, the responses to invasive species within our own waterbodies. You mentioned the carp. So we have some carp that are native to Saskatchewan, is that right? Like the . . . No. So you talked about the bighorn buffalo. That's not a carp then?

Kevin Murphy: — It's a kind of sucker, sort of, actually.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Sucker, right.

Kevin Murphy: — Yeah. It's part of the sucker family. There are no native carp species. They are all Eurasian. So the one common carp that we do have actually came up through the United States. It was introduced, I believe, in the 1950s from Europe as sort of a food fish in the Louisiana area and areas like that. But we have no native carp species. They're all actually sucker species. They look very similar.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay. No, thanks for that. Now that

we've got you here . . . I promise to stop here soon. So then the common carp. A few years back we had a really hot, dry summer. I don't know if that was a factor, but we ended up having large numbers of common carp which were dying and floating on, say, Last Mountain as an example, but throughout the Wascana watershed as well, down Wascana Creek. There were a few different reports and articles that focused on them.

Can you provide us what the Ministry of Environment's take on that situation was?

Kevin Murphy: — Typically when we see loss of fish in the summertime, it is usually low-oxygen condition. And one of the ways that we confirm that is, is it skewed towards larger bodied fish? A larger animal needs more oxygen and has less capacity to draw that oxygen. And even a carp that can mouth-breathe some air into its swim bladder and use that for oxygen, the larger they are, the more difficult that is in warm water conditions.

There can also be occasionally some algal blooms that put toxicity in the water. They're typically associated with that heat. And then curiously, sometimes, it's a thunderstorm and a lightning strike that's killed the animals, and we look for broken backs in those circumstances.

That particular one, the prevalence of it, the heat conditions, it was low-oxygen conditions in the waterbodies. And they're a shallow-water species, so they suffer very quickly from low oxygen in waterbodies.

Chair Wotherspoon: — And then from a perspective of the fishery, they're an invasive species then? They're not native to the fishery? It was predominantly common carp that died that summer, right? And they were large fish, as you've said, and you've identified why that would be the case. And I guess that's your large breeding stock as well. So from the ministry's perspective, I mean, other than it was unpleasant — the odour and large rotting fish — did that cull a little bit of the population of the common carp then and some of the breeding stock?

Kevin Murphy: — Yes, absolutely. And as you say, other than for the unpleasantness and, you know, potential for localized disease spread, not problematic from a population perspective. If anything, beneficial for our other fish species.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks for that information. Any other questions on this chapter? Not seeing any. I'd welcome a motion to conclude chapter 11. Moved by MLA Chan. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's great. Okay. I'll pass it back to the Provincial Auditor to focus on chapter 19.

Jason Shaw: — Thank you. Saskatchewan produced the third-highest waste per capita in Canada in 2020. Recycling helps repurpose materials that would otherwise end up in landfills. Waste not diverted from a landfill potentially leads to greater risk of water pollution, soil contamination, greenhouse gas emissions, and negative human health impacts. The Ministry of Environment regulates eight waste diversion recycling programs designed to divert various types of solid waste from landfills.

Chapter 19 of our 2023 report volume 2, starting on page 173, reports the results of the progress of implementing the recommendations we initially made in our 2020 audit about the Ministry of Environment's processes to regulate waste diversion through recycling. We made five recommendations. By August 2023 the ministry started implementing the five recommendations, but further work was needed.

The ministry partially implemented the two recommendations on page 175. The first, where we recommended the ministry set written standard definitions for key information it requires operators for waste diversion programs to report, and secondly for the ministry to require the use of material-specific targets to assist in determining whether waste diversion programs contribute to the achievement of the provincial waste reduction goal.

The ministry defined the key terms and calculations for waste collection, waste diversion, and waste recycling for one of its eight recycling programs, the household packaging and paper program. The ministry also revised and included these updated definitions in its regulations for household packaging. We found the new rate definitions and calculations documented in these regulations aligned with good practice. Defining these terms and ensuring all waste program operators use them consistently is important to ensure the ministry receives accurate and sufficient information from program operators to make decisions.

The new household packaging and paper regulations include improved reporting requirements requiring program operators to set and report annually on both aggregate and material-specific targets. However at August 2023, regulated recycling programs, including household packaging and paper, had not set material-specific targets. The ministry expects to receive the first reporting from packaging and paper program using the new targets, definitions, and calculations in June 2025.

The ministry had a schedule for reviewing and updating all eight recycling programs with the latest review occurring in about 2026. Given the long planned time frame to review all program operators, we encouraged the ministry to leverage policy or other methods to expedite these changes. This improved reporting would better allow the ministry to monitor progress and adjust strategies sooner, if necessary, to ensure it achieves its 2030 target to reduce waste generated per person by 30 per cent from 2014.

The ministry partially implemented the first recommendation on page 178 where we recommended the ministry obtain a more robust understanding of the composition of waste entering Saskatchewan landfills. By 2023 the ministry started to identify actions needed to further develop understanding of waste composition. For example, in 2021 the ministry started sending questionnaires to the municipalities operating landfills. This, along with municipal composition studies, provides additional information about waste composition.

In May 2023 the ministry sent surveys to municipalities asking for more robust information. Municipalities were to report this information by January 2024. Obtaining this information will allow the ministry to determine whether it requires additional recycling programs or needs to make revisions to existing programs.

The ministry partially implemented the second recommendation on page 178 where we recommended the ministry analyze the reasonability of program information reported by regulated waste diversion recycling programs. The ministry had not yet assessed the reasonability of information reported by its waste diversion recycling programs, as it had not started collecting information based on revised definitions and material-specific targets.

In 2022 the ministry began compiling data from program operators and reports from the last five years to obtain a better understanding of the trends within individual recycling programs. The ministry was still assessing how it may cost-effectively verify waste-related information provided by recycling program operators. Self-reported information from recycling program operators may not always be reliable and accurate. Independent verification of information provides the ministry with assurance about the reliability of information it uses to monitor the programs.

The ministry partially implemented the recommendation on page 179 where we recommended the ministry periodically report to senior management on the rate of waste diversion through regulated recycling programs. The ministry began in 2022 reporting quarterly to senior management about its progress toward its solid waste management strategy.

However until it begins collecting improved information, previously discussed, it is unable to report on waste diversion rates through recycling programs. Without regular reporting of waste diversion through recycling programs, such as using consistent definitions and material-specific targets, senior management may not have adequate information to assess the effectiveness of regulated recycling programs consistently.

Thank you, and this concludes my presentation.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you very much for the follow-up and the work on this front. I'll turn it over to DM France for brief remarks. Then we'll open it up for questions.

Kevin France: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Provincial Auditor's 2020 report on regulating waste diversion through recycling identified five recommendations. In the follow-up report in 2023 the auditor considers all five recommendations at least partially implemented. The ministry agrees with the findings of the auditor's report, and we are working towards full implementation of all the recommendations.

In the 2023 follow-up audit, the fifth recommendation was for the ministry to periodically report to senior management on their rate of waste diversion through regulated recycling programs. In response the ministry has provided annual reporting to senior management on the performance of recycling programs in the province.

With the remainder of the recommendations we will continue to prioritize this work over this fiscal to work towards full implementation.

I will pause there for any questions.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thanks so much. I'll open it up to members for questions. MLA Pratchler.

[09:30]

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. According to the status update the ministry is using information collected through the program to identify new opportunities to improve waste diversion and enhance current programs and initiatives. Can you speak to any of the data that has already been collected so far and what opportunities have been identified to improve waste diversion.

Wes Kotyk: — All right. Thank you for that question. One of the things that we do is we do an . . . We have a solid waste management strategy and we do annual updates on that. And in the latest update it shows, based on the information that we've collected from the various mechanisms through reporting, through working with our regulated programs we identify what the trends are on the waste diversion, where some of the initiatives are that we're undertaking, things like developing co-chapters for things like transfer stations, and one under development for composting.

So I think, you know, we look at where can we get, you know, the biggest bang for our buck. And I think things like the composting co-chapter, I think what we'll see is once that's further implemented and adopted by municipalities, I think that we will see a significant reduction in waste going to landfills, because currently that's one of the biggest waste items that are going there.

And some of the larger centres, Regina and Saskatoon, already have established programs — the green bin program with that material — and it's easy to calculate and get those reports on what those diversion rates are for those. You know, I think what we need to see is once we have it more widespread throughout the province, we'll see better uptake for that as well.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — I've seen the auditor's report that the environmental assessment and stewardship branch employs 16 staff and noted that at the time of the report there were four vacancies. Can you provide an update on the staffing of those positions and whether they've been filled?

Wes Kotyk: — Yes. So the environmental assessment and stewardship branch basically has two program responsibilities. One is on the waste stewardship side that manages and oversees all of the recycling programs and initiatives that we have. The other side is managing our environmental assessment review process for large developments that come into the province. We still have two vacancies within the branch. One is on the waste stewardship side and one is on the environmental assessment side.

Joan Pratchler: — What's the ministry's relationship with municipalities? I see that in the update the ministry started sending, you know, questionnaires out to the municipalities in 2021 and 2023. What has the response been so far, and are municipalities responding to these surveys? How's the engagement going there?

Wes Kotyk: — Generally we have a good relationship with

municipalities. We also, you know, engage regularly with SUMA [Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association] and SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities], the associations that represent the municipalities, and they will partner with us on a lot of these initiatives to help encourage communities to participate in these surveys and in their responses.

I apologize I don't have an actual number of what the return rates are on some of those surveys. I think we likely report on that in the annual update report, but I just don't have those numbers at my fingertips right now. But generally the uptake is good and sometimes we'll send reminders and look at different ways to get that information. We can always get some of that information as well from our regulated municipalities, the ones that still have operating landfills. That number is, because of the number of landfills is drastically reduced, it is a bit more manageable and a compact number of facilities that we need to engage with for that information.

Joan Pratchler: — But generally overall would you . . . You know, as I go around the province and see communities, there are some that are just gung-ho about recycling. That's been established now in the general psyche of the province that recycling is where we're going in reducing waste. Would you be able to comment on that?

Wes Kotyk: — Yeah, that's a great observation, and yes, municipalities quite often are ahead of the province on taking initiative on their own. They see first-hand what they can do and what the implications are, and quite often what drives their programs is they see, you know, they want to extend the life of their existing landfill and their facilities so they're quite keen on wanting to remove waste from their landfills. And yeah, there are a number of municipalities throughout the province that you see are out front of all the others and are actually driving some of these initiatives.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions, committee members? Okay, not seeing any, I'd welcome a motion that we conclude consideration of chapter 19 at this point. MLA Chan. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. We'll move along now to the last chapter actually for the Ministry of Environment here this morning on our agenda, chapter 3. There's some new recommendations in this one here, so I'll turn it over to the Provincial Auditor.

Jason Shaw: — Thank you. The Ministry of Environment is responsible for managing and protecting Saskatchewan's environment for the well-being of the province and its people. One of the initiatives the ministry manages is an output-based performance standards program that began in 2019 to regulate industrial emitters to reduce greenhouse gas emissions intensity. Emitters who join the program are exempt from the federal carbon pricing system.

The program regulated 154 industrial emitters in 2023. Industrial

emitters regulated by this program, such as from the oil and gas or potash or steel industries, accounted for about 16 per cent of Saskatchewan's total greenhouse gas emissions in 2021. Emissions intensity means the emissions per unit of production. Nearly half of regulated emitters exceeded their permitted emissions intensity limit for 2019 and 2020.

Under the program, industrial emitters exceeding annual facility-specific emissions intensity limits must pay a levy to the ministry intended to fund technologies to reduce emissions intensities. Levies from industry are accounted for in the Saskatchewan Technology Fund. Emitters that reduce emissions intensity below limits earn credits that can be sold or saved for future use.

Chapter 3 of our 2024 report volume 1 starting on page 45 reports the result of our audit of whether the Ministry of Environment had effective processes for the period ended December 31st, 2023 to regulate industrial emitters to reduce greenhouse gas emissions intensity. The audit did not examine the ministry's processes to fund technologies that mitigate, sequester, or capture greenhouse gas emissions at industrial facilities as the ministry did not approve any funding applications by December 31st, 2023.

We concluded the ministry has effective processes except in the areas of our recommendations to regulate industrial emitters to reduce greenhouse gas emissions intensity.

We made three new recommendations for the committee's consideration. On page 52 we recommended the Ministry of Environment use sufficient measures to publicly report on the effectiveness of its output-based performance standards program. The ministry had two measures specific to the OBPS [output-based performance standards] program at December 2023. These were to increase the number of facilities registered in the OBPS program and to increase the amount of emissions covered under the OBPS program. Both measures focus on program participation as reflected by the quantity and the size of industrial emitter facilities registered in the program. These measures are output based rather than achievement oriented, such as reducing emissions intensity, and do not support an effective assessment of the program. In addition these measures lacked adequate targets.

Without sufficient measures the ministry cannot effectively assess and publicly report on the performance of its OBPS program toward economic and environmental goals of the government and report on what is important to the public.

On page 53 we recommend the Ministry of Environment implement a robust data management system to efficiently obtain, track, and analyze sufficient greenhouse gas emissions data reported by industrial emitters.

We found the ministry manually input limited data in a spreadsheet, such as the total emissions of emitters registered in the OBPS program. For example, it did not track emissions and units produced by product type. This process did not efficiently support detailed trend analysis, and increased the risk of manual input errors or unauthorized changes to data. While we did not identify any input errors or concerns during our testing, using a more sophisticated data management system can help the ministry identify data inaccuracies and improve analysis to

identify potential issues.

In addition, we found the ministry combined actual and baseline data in its spreadsheet used to track actual emissions for the year. The ministry used baseline data as a proxy where actual results were not yet available. Such estimation methods do not provide accurate provincial emissions data for emitters. Clear explanations would be needed to provide for these data inconsistencies to support effective decision making.

At December 2023, the ministry was developing an IT [information technology] system to allow efficient tracking of all information collected from emitters, which will support more robust analysis and reporting. Without an adequate data management system, the ministry cannot efficiently obtain, track, and analyze greenhouse gas emissions data reported by industrial emitters to determine whether the OBPS program is achieving the desired results.

On page 60 we recommended the Ministry of Environment document staff guidance for evaluating concerns identified in third-party verifier reports about industrial emitter returns. As part of its review of emissions returns, ministry staff confirmed that emitters use appropriate accredited companies called third-party verifiers to verify and issue an opinion on the accuracy of emissions returns. This is important as emissions returns are complex and may require various methods to quantify and estimate emissions.

Qualified opinions means the verifier found some issues but overall did not find any significant errors in the emissions data, whereas an adverse opinion means the verifier found significant errors in the emissions data or the data was not in compliance with standards.

Of the 480 verification opinions on emitter returns up to December 31st, 2023, 56 were qualified and four were adverse. The ministry followed up to confirm. The concerns reported did not result in a significant deficiency that would impact levies due or performance credits earned or required revised returns with reissued positive opinions for all adverse opinions. Of the 16 facilities we tested, eight had qualified opinions. The ministry appropriately followed up with these facilities to obtain further details and assess the significance of reported concerns.

We found the ministry did not have documented processes that outlined the steps staff would take when third-party verifiers report concerns. While ministry staff addressed the concerns reported to December 31st, 2023, more complex concerns may arise in future years where staff may need further guidance. For example, staff may need further guidance on questions to ask emitters for common types of concerns, when to escalate a concern to the supervisor, or methods to resolve disagreements.

Not having written guidance for staff to follow when third-party verifiers report concerns with information submitted by emitters may lead to inappropriate or inconsistent follow-up or compliance action for emitter returns, increasing the risk the ministry may not collect all levies owed or treat all emitters fairly.

Thank you, and this concludes my presentation.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thank you. Thanks very much for that presentation. For the thousands of folks that are watching at home and committee members, just a reminder, this is a new report from the 2024 report. So this isn't a follow-up report like the others that we have. So we have new recommendations as well.

I'll kick it over to the deputy minister for remarks, and then we'll open it up for questions.

Kevin France: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. The ministry recently received the Provincial Auditor's 2024 report on regulating industrial emitters. The audit report found that the ministry has effective processes and procedures. This includes setting appropriate requirements for regulated emitters, monitoring their compliance, and reporting emissions and testing results under the output-based performance standards program, known as the OBPS program. These recommendations are new; however I'm pleased to report that we've made meaningful progress on all three identified in the auditor's report.

The first recommendation is for the ministry to use sufficient measures to publicly report on the effectiveness of the province's OBPS program. On that point, the ministry updated the OBPS performance measures now that we have sufficient program data for a trend analysis. We will continue to identify new performance metrics as the OBPS program matures and additional data becomes available. We consider this recommendation fully implemented.

The second recommendation is to implement a robust data management system. The ministry has been developing and refining an OBPS database since 2019. The OBPS data management system is already partially operational and the ministry expects it to be fully operational by the end of this fiscal year, with all data uploaded to the system by the end of this month.

[9:45]

The third recommendation is to enhance staff guidance for industrial emitter returns. The ministry has added a check box to its existing comprehensive OBPS review checklist to confirm that reviewers should follow up on concerns identified by third-party verifiers. We consider this last recommendation fully implemented.

With that I'll pause now for any questions from the committee. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thanks so much for some of the actions on this front and the report. I'll open it up to committee members. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — The auditor notes in her report that nearly half of the regulated emitters exceeded their permitted limit for 2019 and 2020. Can you provide the committee with an update? Are half the emitters still exceeding that permitted limit? And if you could provide specifics for '21, '22, '23, or '24 that would be great.

Aaron Wirth: — Hi, it's Aaron Wirth, the executive director of the climate resilience branch in the Saskatchewan Ministry of

Environment. Thanks for the question. So it's remained about the same, around 50 per cent. And that's really just indicative of the various compliance options we have in the OBPS program.

So really there's three. It's a flexible program and we're sort of agnostic on which options regulated emitters use to fulfill their compliance obligations. So they can either generate and retire a performance credit, carbon credit; they can buy or retire one; they can pay into the Saskatchewan Technology Fund to fulfill their compliance at the rate for that year, the carbon tax rate for that year; or they can reduce some of their emissions intensity; or they can do a combination of those three things and reduce their emissions intensity, buy and use some performance credits, and/or pay into the tech fund.

So that number isn't really indicative of anything other than to say that there's, I'd say, balance in the program in terms of the supply and demand of . . . likely the supply and demand of credits.

It suggests to me that, you know, some regulated emitters are choosing to reduce their emissions intensity and likely earning credits as a result of it, and others are choosing other compliance options and then are therefore buying credits from those that are reducing their emissions intensity, incentivizing more people to reduce their emissions to earn credits. So I suggest that anything, you know, as long as it's not sort of a 90/10 split, probably within the range of 50/50 or anything that isn't 90/10 is probably pretty appropriate.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Can you tell the committee a bit more about the OBPS data management system, the IT system in particular? In the development, was it in-house development or was it outsourced? How did that come to be?

Aaron Wirth: — Yeah, thanks for the question. So it's something that's been in development since 2019 and we've been continuing to kind of build on it. And that's been the result of changes to the provincial program, changes to the federal carbon pricing benchmark, and expansion of the program, things of that nature. So we're continuing to sort of build on it and, you know, now we're able to sort of operationalize it. It is something that we partnered with ISM on, but we used mostly in-house emissions engineers and coders to work with us and ISM to do that. So it's been very successful.

As was mentioned, we're looking forward to uploading all the data. I think there's 23 million data points. And so that's going to help us with some of the trend analysis the auditor had identified, so we're really excited about that. So that will go live and be fully operational by the end of the fiscal year and provide some really significant opportunities in terms of trend analysis and informing policy.

Joan Pratchler: — What type of data will this management system collect? And do you have a sense already of some of the trends that the ministry will be able to analyze through that system?

Aaron Wirth: — Yeah, so the main data is really emissions data from the various regulated facilities and their production data.

And that's how we calculate their emissions intensity, which is their emissions per unit of product. So that's the main stuff, and it's broken down into a number of different categories.

But really that's going to allow us to also serialize carbon credits as well, for those that are earning carbon credits within our program, and make sure that the database is housing those serialized credits and then retiring them as appropriate. It's going to allow us to do trend analysis and be able to report on regulated emissions, compliance owed, credits awarded, compliance broken out by fulfillment method, so use of credits as I mentioned, credit status. It's going to allow us to better, and through the use of a dashboard that we're building, to talk about emissions intensity of the program, which is a very positive story.

You mentioned where some of the trends we're seeing, we're seeing a pretty significant emissions intensity reduction. We've achieved a 3.5 per cent emissions intensity reduction. The federal benchmark has only required us to achieve a 2.33 per cent reduction. So we're 3.5. We've been required to reduce by 2.33, so we're overachieving, which I think is really positive. And we are seeing . . . It's going to allow us to better calculate the carbon tax savings to industry.

Really the OBPS program, it's really designed as a tax-sheltering program for emissions-intensive and trade-exposed sectors in Saskatchewan. That's how the federal government has set it up and how their program operates. It's how every other program operates. And so we're able to pull numbers like the most recent one suggesting that we saved industry \$1.7 billion from 2019 to 2022, which again is the purpose of the program, to allow those industries who are trade exposed to reduce their emissions and not be fully exposed by the federal carbon tax. So those are some of the things that we're going to be able to pull out of it.

Joan Pratchler: — And so when we talk about emissions, were we talking about air pollution, other hard emissions? What kinds of . . .

Aaron Wirth: — So our program deals specifically with atmospheric emissions, yeah, greenhouse gas emissions, whereas other colleagues would be dealing with air emissions.

Joan Pratchler: — Is the OBPS reducing emissions intensity?

Aaron Wirth: — Yes, by 3.5 per cent. Above the 2.33 per cent we're required to.

Joan Pratchler: — And you said it was saving industrial emitters money, 1.7 billion? Did I write that down correctly?

Aaron Wirth: — It's 1.7 billion between 2019 to 2022. We're forecasting . . . Based on reductions of between 1 and 3 per cent per year of emissions intensity, we're predicting if the program continues to exist and the federal benchmark continues to exist, a \$14 billion savings to industry.

Joan Pratchler: — And over what period of time? Sorry, I missed that.

Aaron Wirth: — Yeah, good question. 14 billion cumulative to 2030.

Joan Pratchler: — From 2019?

Aaron Wirth: — From 2019, correct. Yes.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — The auditor recommended that this information be publicly reported on. So will all this data that you were just referring to, will that be available in the annual report?

Aaron Wirth: — It will all be made public starting this year, in actually just a few weeks. I don't think we've decided exactly how we're going to do that. We'll be reporting it to the federal government. They are likely to make it public. We'll likely probably put it on our website. It's been a pretty good repository for the public to access and regulated emitters to access. So yes, it will all be made public.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Can you update the committee on the number of industrial emitters currently? I noted that it grew from 80 in 2019 to 154 in 2023, and over the last year. What would you say the number is totally?

Aaron Wirth: — I don't have the exact number in front of me, but it is starting to plateau. It's probably another dozen I would say. And that's because, you know, the big increases were in the formative years of the program as we were sort of educating and raising awareness about the eligibility for emissions-intensive and trade-exposed companies. And since we've added 17 new electricity facilities, largely from SaskPower, we've seen a substantial increase that way.

So we're probably in the kind of 170 to kind of 180 range, and probably that will taper off a little bit. But you know, as new companies enter the province or maybe companies that we haven't really been introduced to learn about the program, we could see a few more. But we've probably hit the main cohort of large, regulated emitters.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. Could you tell us how many projects have been funded through the technology fund to date? And could you table a full list of those projects and how much each project received to date?

Aaron Wirth: — So 13 projects were funded for the first-ever intake. That was last year, and that was \$25 million. Actually the projects are available on the news release as a background attachment, and it details the exact amounts to the companies and the nature of those projects.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions, committee members? So we've got implementation on two of the recommendations here already, right. And then the other one, you've laid out some of the actions that you're taking. And in fact implementation on that one you're expecting by April 2025. So thanks for sharing all of that.

Any further questions with respect to this new chapter and new recommendations? Not seeing any, I would welcome a motion . . . I believe it's recommendations 1 and 3 that implementation has occurred, so I'd welcome a motion that we concur and note compliance with recommendations 1 and 3. Do we have a mover? Moved by Minister Harrison. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. And with respect to recommendation 2, I'd welcome a motion that we concur and note progress. MLA Crassweller moves. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — All right. That's agreed. Okay. Well that gets us to the end of our morning with the Ministry of Environment. I want to thank DM France and all the leadership, all the officials that are here today. I want to thank as well all those that are working through the ministry and that are connected to the work here today as well. So thanks for your time. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Yeah. I'd also like to note the hard work you guys apparently have been putting in. The level of professionalism you've displayed here today is quite noteworthy. I want to thank you for being so well prepared in answering our questions and for being so knowledgeable. This is an important area of our economy as well as our environment, and the two go together. And hopefully your progress in these areas will continue to provide a positive pathway for the province. Thank you very much.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Hey, good words there, MLA Gordon. I know we'd all support those words, so thank you very much. Yeah, I would offer you a chance for a final remark if you have one, DM France.

And you know, if you have some advice out of the extensive knowledge you have on the fishery about where I should locate on Last Mountain Lake on Saturday afternoon and, kind of, how deep and what lures you'd suggest, do that privately because I don't want anyone else to know.

Kevin France: — Probably don't want those on the record.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's right, yeah.

Kevin France: — No, thank you. And thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the committee. Appreciate the comments. You know, I truly am honoured and blessed to have a team with me, to your point, very knowledgeable and dedicated to this file and the importance that the Ministry of Environment plays both for our economy as well as our well-being in this province.

So again, thank you to the committee for your time today and allowing for us to provide you with an update on the ministry's progress on the auditor and recommendations. And again I extend my appreciation to the auditor's office as well. We are truly proud of the progress we've made to date and commit to addressing each of the remaining recommendations. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thank you very much. We will

have a very brief recess, maybe just a few minutes, and we'll get the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency in here probably a little bit earlier than planned. So thank you once again. Brief recess here as a committee.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

Saskatchewan Cancer Agency

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, we will reconvene our meeting here this morning, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. We're going to turn our attention to the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. I want to welcome once again here today Deputy Minister Smith, the DM of Health, along with all of the officials that have joined us here today and all the leadership from the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency.

I'll ask DM Smith to briefly introduce all the officials that have joined us here today. And then I'll turn it over to the auditor to put some focus onto the chapters, and then come back to the DM and officials for some remarks. So go ahead, DM Smith.

Tracey Smith: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's good to be back today. And good morning to the entire committee. First I'll just start again by extending a thank you to the Provincial Auditor, Tara, and her team for the audits that we're about to discuss throughout the course of this morning.

So maybe I'll just turn and go right into introductions. We're joined today by staff from the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency to address any follow-up questions related to the reports that we're about to discuss. From the ministry today I've got Norman O'Neill, assistant deputy minister; Ingrid Kirby, assistant deputy minister; and Ryan Dobson, our director of operations and internal audit.

And with us today as well are: from the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency we've got Deb Bulych, who is the president and CEO [chief executive officer]; Braden Giblett, the chief financial officer; Ron Dufresne, the vice-president of corporate services; Karen Efthimiou, vice-president — apologies, Karen, if I messed that up — Darryl Boehm, the director of oncology pharmacy services and care services; Jillian Fensom, provincial manager of drug strategy and value in care services; and David Tran, the director of population health.

The Ministry of Health, along with our health system partners, have made significant progress on the recommendations from the Provincial Auditor. Work is ongoing to fully implement any remaining recommendations from previous reports. We recognize that there is still work to be done, and we are committed to continuing this progress. The ongoing efforts will build on today's review and discussion.

Our ministry and health partners share the same objective as the Provincial Auditor and her team: to improve health care services for all Saskatchewan residents. The health care system remains fully committed to strengthening services and implementing the efficiencies identified by the Provincial Auditor and her team. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Well thank you very much, DM Smith, and thanks again to all the leadership with the Sask Cancer

Agency and the Ministry of Health that have joined us here today, and to all those others that have been involved in the work we're going to be discussing here today.

Just a reminder to officials, if you're not seated at the front table with the DM and you're coming up to speak, just introduce yourself. Just provide your name before you speak so we can have it properly recorded in *Hansard*.

And at this time I'd table PAC 23-30, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency: Status update, dated January 23rd, 2025. I'd like to thank all those that have been involved in the work that's reflected in that document as well. At this point I'll turn it over to the Provincial Auditor. I think they're going to focus on the first two chapters that are on the agenda there together and the new recommendations that come from them, recommendations 10 and 25.

Tara Clemett: — So thank you, Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, committee members, and officials. With me today to the left is Mr. Jason Wandy, and he's the deputy provincial auditor that is responsible for the audits at the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. Just behind us is Ms. Michelle Lindenbach, and she's the liaison with this committee as well.

Jason's going to present the chapters for the committee in the order that they do appear on the agenda. It will result in three presentations. He will pause after each presentation for the committee's discussion and consideration. The first presentation is about managing the supply of cancer drugs, and it does include five new audit recommendations for this committee's consideration. The last two presentations are follow-up audits that include the status update on outstanding recommendations that we made and this committee has agreed to.

[10:15]

I do want to thank the CEO and her staff at the Cancer Agency for the co-operation that was extended to us during the course of our work. With that I'll turn it over to Jason.

Jason Wandy: — Thank you, Tara. Chapter 10 of our 2022 report volume 2 reports the results of our audit of the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency's processes for the 12-month period ended June 30th, 2022 to manage its supply of cancer drugs. We concluded the agency had effective processes, other than the areas reflected in the five new recommendations for the committee's consideration.

Chapter 25 of our 2024 report volume 2 reports the results of our first follow-up on this audit, where we found the agency implemented all five recommendations two years after the original audit.

Cancer is the leading cause of death in Canada and poses an enormous burden on both the health of Canadians and on the Canadian health care system. The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency is responsible for delivering effective and sustainable research, education, prevention, early detection, treatment, and supportive care programs for the control of cancer in Saskatchewan. It provides cancer drug treatments to more than 10,000 patients each year.

The agency maintains a list of approved cancer drugs for cancer patients in Saskatchewan through its drug formulary and administers most cancer treatments at its two main centres, the Allan Blair Cancer Centre in Regina and the Saskatoon Cancer Centre. At September 2024 the agency had over 200 approved cancer drugs on its list.

The agency uses three main methods for acquiring its cancer drugs. It primarily purchases drugs through contracts negotiated by the pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance, or the PCPA, along with purchasing drugs through contracts directly negotiated by the agency itself and through contracts established by Health Shared Services Saskatchewan's involvement with a national group-purchasing organization. In 2023-24 the agency purchased over \$175 million of cancer drugs.

The agency implemented our first recommendation on pages 105 and 239 of our 2022 and 2024 reports volume 2 respectively. We recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency formally document its processes for updating the approved list of cancer drugs that is its formulary available to treat cancer patients. Our initial audit found the agency regularly reviewed and updated its cancer drug formulary, but the process to do so was not formally documented.

The agency makes its drugs and therapeutics committee responsible for the oversight and management of the cancer drug formulary. Each month the committee reviews new drug recommendations from the PCPA. Once a PCPA letter of intent for a new cancer drug is in place, the agency submits a request for approval of the drug in its quarterly drug-funding submission to the Ministry of Health. Upon receiving ministry approval, the agency adds the new cancer drug or indication to its approved drug formulary.

The committee also reviews and approves requests from physicians for changes to drug eligibility requirements set out in the drug formulary. In addition, if the agency continues to see multiple requests for a particular exception, the committee also considers adding those particular exceptions to the formulary.

While we found the agency's processes to modify its cancer drug formulary aligned with good practice, it had not formally documented its processes. Our 2024 follow-up audit found the agency implemented this recommendation by documenting its process for updating the cancer drug formulary within the terms of reference for its drugs and therapeutics committee.

We tested a sample of three drug formulary changes and found the agency met the documentation and approval requirements outlined in the terms of reference. A documented process for updating its cancer drug formulary helps those involved in the process be aware of and fully understand the process and desired results. This may also reduce the risk of delays in cancer drug availability for treating patients.

The agency implemented our second recommendation on pages 106 and 240 of our 2022 and 2024 reports volume 2 respectively. We recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency establish a time frame for making decisions on physician requests for exception cancer drugs.

Our initial audit found the agency had a formalized process to

approve exception drug requests but did not have an established time frame for deciding on requests. The agency maintains a case-by-case review program for exception drug requests on an individual patient basis. The program is intended for a small group of patients with rare types of cancer. The program requires physicians to apply for an exception drug by completing an electronic form that includes information and evidence to support the request. The agency evaluates all applications to either approve or deny the requests.

We found the agency had not established a time frame, such as within one week, for making decisions on physician requests. Our testing of exception drug requests found two cases where the agency's decision was not timely. It took 9 and 64 days, respectively, for the agency to decide to deny the requests.

Our 2024 follow-up audit found the agency implemented this recommendation by updating its case-by-case review program policy to include a target to approve or deny exception drug requests within five business days. Our testing of 13 exception drug requests found the agency made its decision on these requests within the established time frame. Timely decisions on exception drug requests help facilitate patients having access to the cancer drugs needed to support their treatment.

Pages 108 and 109 of our 2022 report and 2024 report volume 2 include our third and fourth recommendations. We recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency set out in writing relevant factors it expects staff to consider when deciding to purchase cancer drugs directly rather than using group-purchasing methods. Additionally, we recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency document its rationale and seek approval when purchasing cancer drugs using the single- or sole-source purchasing methods. The agency purchases the majority of its cancer drugs using group-purchasing methods, though it directly purchased over \$15 million of cancer drugs in 2023-24 using tenders or single- or sole-sourcing methods.

Our initial audit found the agency's contract management policy did not consider certain factors, such as pricing or clinical reasons that staff should consider when deciding to purchase cancer drugs directly and not use group purchasing. The decision to negotiate contracts directly rather than participate in group purchasing is an important purchasing decision, as group purchasing enables the agency to realize benefits of nationally negotiated prices for cancer drugs.

Additionally, we found the agency's contract management policy did not set requirements on what staff must consider and document when using the single- or sole-source purchasing methods. We tested 17 such purchases. While management was able to provide reasonable verbal rationale for each purchase, we found the agency did not document its rationale or seek approval from management independent from oncology pharmacy services for using these purchasing methods. Our 2024 follow-up audit found the agency implemented both of these recommendations.

Tara Clemett: — We found the agency approved a document in January 2024 outlining each drug acquisition pathway, including factors for staff to consider when purchasing cancer drugs directly. Examples of factors included the clinical needs of the specific patient population, availability of generic drugs, supply

interruptions, and the quantity of cancer drugs needed. We tested one tender and one sole-source cancer drug purchase and found staff appropriately documented the factors supporting the decisions to purchase directly, and senior management approved those decisions. Maintaining documented rationale and approval for cancer drug purchases helps the agency facilitate a fair and equitable procurement process and obtain best value when making purchasing decisions.

The agency implemented our fifth and final recommendation on pages 110 and 241 of our 2022 report and 2024 reports volume 2 respectively. We recommend the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency formally document when and who completed potential supplier evaluations when tendering for cancer drug purchases.

Our initial audit found the agency used an evaluation matrix to score each bid received on a tender with members of the agency's pharmacy team completing the evaluations and providing an overall score for each proposal. However testing found the agency didn't record who was involved in the evaluation process and have them sign off on the completed evaluation.

Our 2024 audit follow-up found the agency implemented this recommendation by preparing a work standard for evaluating and awarding tenders to potential suppliers, including requirements for all evaluation committee members to declare their independence. Additionally the agency now requires all members to sign an award submission form documenting the evaluation committee's final award decision.

We tested one tender for cancer drugs and found the agency formally documented when and who completed evaluations of the potential suppliers, including having all the evaluation committee members declare their independence. Maintaining adequate evidence to support an independent supplier evaluation and award decision prepares the agency to defend against potential conflict-of-interest allegations and challenges to the tendering process and the award decision.

With that I will now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Witherspoon: — Okay, thanks again for the focus of these chapters and the presentations. Thanks for the actions that have been detailed here to implement these recommendations.

This committee has left the deputy provincial auditor speechless once again here today. We wish him well.

We'll turn it over to Deputy Minister Smith to make a brief remark and then we'll open it up for questions.

Tracey Smith: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. And I will remark on all of the recommendations that were touched on.

The recommendation regarding Saskatchewan Cancer Agency formally document its processes for updating the approved list of cancer drugs available to treat cancer patients is considered as fully implemented as noted. The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency documented its process for updating the cancer drug formulary within the terms of reference for its drugs and therapeutics committee in August of 2024. The terms of reference clearly establishes the frequency for updating the formulary at least annually or when it adds new cancer drugs to the list.

The terms of reference also includes documentation and approval requirements for various types of formulary changes, including recommendations for new drugs from a national drug expert review committee requiring provincial consideration of drug funding and implementation, requests for new treatments not reviewed by a national drug expert review committee, adding a historical standard of care to the drug formulary, updated clinical criteria and/or treatments reflecting current clinical practice, and removal of existing treatments from the drug formulary that no longer reflect clinical practice.

The recommendation regarding the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency establishing a time frame for making decisions on physician requests for exception cancer drugs is considered as fully implemented. The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency maintains a case-by-case review program for exception drug requests. This program is intended for a small group of patients with rare types of cancer. The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency's case-by-case review program policy outlines a standardized and transparent process for agency staff to follow when physicians request the use of cancer medications outside of the agency's approved formulary. In March of 2023 the agency updated its policy to include a target to approve or deny exception drug requests within five business days.

The recommendation regarding the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency setting out relevant factors when deciding to purchase cancer drugs directly, rather than using group-purchasing methods and document its rationale and seek approval when purchasing cancer drugs using the single or sole-source purchasing methods, are considered as fully implemented. The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency documented and considered relevant factors before approving the purchase of cancer drugs directly through tendering or single sole-sourcing rather than using group-purchasing methods.

The agency documents the rationale when choosing a particular drug acquisition pathway, including factors for staff to consider when purchasing cancer drugs directly. Factors include clinical needs of the specific patient population, for example, patient intolerance to a certain drug; availability of marketed generic drugs; supply interruptions; financial considerations, including impact on associated costs of cancer drugs based on existing utilization patterns; quantity of cancer drugs needed; and manufacturer declines to participate in group purchasing.

The recommendation regarding the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency formally documenting when and who completed potential supplier evaluations when tendering for cancer drug purchases is considered as fully implemented.

[10:30]

The agency maintains documentation of when and who completed potential supplier evaluations when tendering for cancer drug purchases. The agency uses an evaluation matrix to score each bid received for a tender. Members of the agency's pharmacy team complete the evaluations and provide an overall score for each proposal.

In May of 2023 the agency prepared a work standard for evaluating and awarding tenders to potential suppliers, including requirements for all evaluation committee members to declare

they are independent. Additionally, the agency requires all members to sign an award submission form documenting the evaluation committee's final award decision.

That concludes my comments.

Chair Witherspoon: — Thanks very much for the presentation and the work on this front. I'll open it up now to committee members. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — You touch on some of the relevant factors that have to be considered before approving purchases of cancer drugs directly or through tendering or single sole-sourcing, as mentioned I believe on page 241 of the 2024 report. I was just wondering though if you could tell us what type of staff are involved in that process.

Darryl Boehm: — Hi, I'm Darryl Boehm. I'm the director of pharmacy for the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. So I think the question was how many, or what type of staff are involved in making the decisions for purchasing directly. It's primarily the senior management of the pharmacy department — so the director of pharmacy, our provincial manager of drug strategy and value, and we have a provincial manager of oncology drug programs. We do have purchasers that would weigh in on the decision, but the final decision would be made by our senior management team. And then as noted in the auditor report, we do seek management approval independent of pharmacy, so our executive leadership team.

Hugh Gordon: — And I was also wondering if you could provide the committee with an update on the full-time employees of the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. Are there any positions vacant? And if you could tell us which ones.

Darryl Boehm: — Just to clarify, do you mean across the entire agency or within the pharmacy department specifically?

Hugh Gordon: — Well I guess, to the deputy minister, if you could just discuss it for the agency.

Tracey Smith: — For the agency?

Hugh Gordon: — Yeah.

Tracey Smith: — Okay, just give us one moment. Thank you.

Deb Bulych: — Good morning. Deb Bulych, president and CEO of the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. As of December 31st, we have 918 FTEs [full-time equivalent] and our currency vacancy rate for the Cancer Agency is 5.67 per cent.

Hugh Gordon: — Are you able to identify which of those positions that are vacant . . . What are those positions?

Deb Bulych: — I think we can give you some idea. I'll just confer.

Hugh Gordon: — Fair enough.

Deb Bulych: — Give me just one minute.

Ron Dufresne: — Good morning. My name is Ron Dufresne,

vice-president, corporate services at Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. To your specific question about number of vacancies, we have a number of vacancies, or number of classifications rather, in the organization.

The top, what we consider the strategic or the priority positions right now would be nurse practitioner, registered nurse, and radiation therapy. And currently we have seven nurse practitioner positions available, 34 registered nurse positions, and 13 radiation therapy positions. Currently in pharmacy we're in really good shape specific to this chapter, and we only have three vacancies in pharmacy.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — In terms of physician requests, can you explain to the committee how a physician makes a request for exception cancer drugs and the process that that request takes before it's approved or denied?

Darryl Boehm: — Yeah, Darryl Boehm again. Thank you for the question. Physicians make requests. We have an electronic form. It's received by our pharmacy department who gathers background information. It summarizes the request, which would include evidence, the specifics of the particular patient, if there's individual circumstances that a patient needs an alternate therapy. It's then considered by the Chair of the disease site group — so that's a physician that specializes in particular cancers, so like breast cancer, lung cancer — and myself as the director of pharmacy.

So together we evaluate that and make a joint decision. And that decision is then documented in the patient's electronic health record, and the physician requesting the alternate treatment is notified.

Joan Pratchler: — How often would you say those medications would be denied or requests denied?

Darryl Boehm: — I'm just going to . . . I have the exact number in my binder; I didn't bring it up. From April 1st of 2024 to January 15th of this year 83 per cent of the requests were approved.

Joan Pratchler: — And what would be some reasons that they may be denied?

Darryl Boehm: — Particular reasons they may be denied may be a lack of evidence. It may be a request that would be for a particular medication that's already being considered through a national process, which we follow, and wait for that process to play out. So those could be two particular examples of why they may not be approved.

Joan Pratchler: — And would any of those denials cause patient outcomes less desirable?

Darryl Boehm: — Well it's hard to say. It would depend on the individual circumstances of the case. Sometimes there's alternate treatments available. So it would really have to be, you know, on a case-by-case basis. It would be very difficult to say, you know.

That's the best I think I can answer on that one.

Joan Pratchler: — So bureaucracy could hinder therapy?

Darryl Boehm: — I suppose it's a possibility. Again it depends what alternative treatments would be available. It depends on the specific nature of the case, the type of the cancer, the stage of the cancer. Without any sort of details it's difficult to answer that.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — No further questions on your end? Any further questions on these chapters? Okay, thanks very much. Not seeing any further questions, we have the five recommendations, right, and we have implementation on all of them that's been noted. So I'd welcome a motion that with respect to chapter 10 that we concur and note compliance with respect to recommendations 1 through 5. Do we have a mover? Moved by Minister Harrison. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, that's carried. We will turn our attention to chapter 17, and I'll turn it back over to the Provincial Auditor's office.

Jason Wandy: — The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency is responsible for providing services with respect to prevention and screening of individuals for cancers, including breast cancer. One in eight women in Saskatchewan will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. Through the screening program for breast cancer the agency informs women when they are due for their next mammogram and suggests women over 50 years of age have a mammogram every two years. Starting January 1st of 2025 breast screening eligibility ages will be lowered as part of a phased approach over the following 18 months to include women over 40 years of age.

Chapter 17 of our 2023 report volume 1 reports the results of our fourth follow-up audit of management's actions on the last remaining recommendation. We first reported in our 2016 audit about the agency's processes to deliver its systematic population-based screening program for breast cancer. By November 2022 we found the agency implemented the last remaining recommendation. We found it periodically reports key performance information on the screening program for breast cancer, including the interval cancer rate, to senior management and the board timely. The interval cancer rate is the number of invasive breast cancers found after a normal or benign mammography screening episode within one and two years of the screen date.

The agency also continued to provide other key performance information such as the participation rate and retention rate. The participation rate is the percentage of women who have a screening mammogram within a 30-month period as a proportion of the target population. The retention rate is the estimated percentage of women aged 50 to 69 years who returned for a screening within 30 months of their initial screen. Timely reporting of all key quality indicators provides relevant information for decision making by the agency.

I'll now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thank you. Thank you very much for the important follow-up on this front. I'll turn it over to Deputy Minister Smith, and then we'll go from there.

Tracey Smith: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency has established cascading metrics for the breast screening program which are updated quarterly and readily accessible to management and executive leadership. These metrics include participation, retention, and interval cancer rates, providing critical insights into the program's performance.

By streamlining reporting processes, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency ensures timely availability of key information, supporting evidence-based decision making and enabling leadership to monitor trends and address program areas requiring attention.

That concludes my comments.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, I'll open it up now to committee members. And for anyone that's observing the proceedings, of course, we've considered this report and this recommendation in the past. We've concurred in it and we have implementation now noted by the ministry. Opening it up for questions. MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Just an overall general question. What happened in the last few years that necessitated longer wait times for just regular mammograms and that people had to go out of province? What would be the factors that were involved in that?

[10:45]

Tracey Smith: — Thank you for the question. So before I turn it over to Deb, just to you know, again just to acknowledge your question just around some of the wait times and what's happened over the course of the last number of years. And I know Deb, you know, Deb will touch on some of the impacts of the pandemic obviously.

But just a general comment I would say is that, you know, in the time that I've been in this role in working with Deb and the team, the Cancer Agency has made really significant progress across a lot of areas. I know we're really focused on screening right now in terms of the audit, but Deb's going to touch on a little bit more in terms of their approach to health human resources during this time and just some of the changes that they've made at the Cancer Agency to be able to speed up processes, reduce wait times, and ensure that patients are getting timely care. So I'm going to turn it to Deb to fill in some of that.

Deb Bulych: — Thank you, Deputy Minister Smith. As Tracey was saying, certainly the pandemic had the greatest impact on screening for breast cancer. During the pandemic we had stopped screening for a period of time. And then certainly restart-up proves challenging with some HR [human resources] shortages of MRTs [medical radiation technologist], mammo techs. That proved very challenging. However I am proud to say that, working collaboratively with our SHA [Saskatchewan Health Authority] partners and ministry, we've increased training seats for MRTs with the hope that that will help greatly.

There's always internal things that we can look at as well, and

we shortened a mammography appointment time from 15 minutes down to 10 minutes to better utilize our MRTs that we have, and that has proved to be greatly beneficial. Evening clinics as well proving beneficial in many areas for clients as well as staff, and certainly the second mammography bus that will help as well in terms of this.

I want to clarify though that we haven't sent anyone out of province for mammography. Those are people who needed biopsy. So just to be clear on that.

Another really good news story is that we're caught up in most of our breast screening sites. Our longest wait right now is currently in Regina, and we're booking into November '25. So it's down to a few months, thank goodness. So a lot of great work between our team and our SHA colleagues as well as the ministry.

And just also to let you know some other good news in terms of reducing the age, we'd heard a lot about how this could potentially impact our system. The ministry had provided extra staff for us to manage this workload. And as I said in terms of the wait-list and the workload that's happening out in those sites, it's being managed very well so far.

Joan Pratchler: — What are some of the trends that you're currently seeing with the interval cancer rate?

Deb Bulych: — Sorry, say that again.

Joan Pratchler: — What are some of the trends that you are seeing with the interval cancer rate?

Deb Bulych: — Okay. All right. Sorry, took a minute. So we follow the national process with CPAC [Canadian Partnership Against Cancer] for reporting interval rates. What was holding me up a little bit is the latest we have are our 2022, and I was questioning that. However it makes complete sense. It's a two-year cycle, so we would have had them the end of '24.

And David is just pulling them up, so if you could just bear with me. What we do know is that we're hitting the targets. He is just looking for some exact data. Or if you would like, we could just get that to you.

Joan Pratchler: — I think that would be fine too. Could you do that in a month? That's what our last . . . Yesterday was a month. We agreed to that.

Deb Bulych: — Well the good news is we know we're hitting the targets.

Joan Pratchler: — Yeah, thank you.

Deb Bulych: — But because of the two-year cycle I was questioning them a little bit, but it makes sense. It is a two-year reporting cycle.

Joan Pratchler: — Perfect, thank you. So we're lowering the screening age, right? So that's going to put a little bit more, you know, pressure on the ability to, you know, make plans to deliver that in a timely way. What's the process for contacting all those new people that may not be on a regular, you know, basis waiting

for that letter in the mail?

Karen Efthimiou: — Hi. I'm Karen Efthimiou. I'm the VP [vice-president] of population health, quality and research.

So with lowering the age, that age is actually self-referral. So women assess their risk, and they can have those conversations with their physician. If they feel that screening is right for them, they call the program and then we can book them in. We have had extra staff which has managed our call volume. So January 1st was when we first decreased the age to 47 to 50. We have experienced high call volumes, but we've been able to manage it within the program because of the extra staffing. That might be all that I can add for you right now. If you have another question . . .

Joan Pratchler: — So if it's self-referral, many people don't have access to a physician. Is there going to be general communications or some kind of, you know, marketing campaign to raise awareness for those that may not access a physician?

Karen Efthimiou: — I have to check. I'll be right back.

[11:00]

Okay, with self-referral, patients do not need a physician to self-refer. They can call our clinic and then we'll book them. We'll send them the results. If there is an abnormal result, we have a nurse navigator that will work with them to try and get them a physician or a nurse practitioner to help navigate them through the system.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay, and so how will the general public know that they can self-refer?

Karen Efthimiou: — It's in our marketing campaign that we provide. So we do provide instructions; it's on our website as well. Again when we lower the age from, I think it's 44 to 47, we'll be doing the same thing. We'll be creating that media awareness, promotional campaigns to let people know that as well.

Joan Pratchler: — Perfect. So when we decrease the age we're going to be increasing demand. So I'm wondering, you know, there's the rural, the two mobile units, or that's what I understand. How else will rural be able to access? Will that be enough support to run that? And secondly, what about in the North? How will we meet that demand in the North?

Deb Bulych: — Hi. So I think it's important to note that because we're a provincial cancer agency we really do have a provincial focus. So in terms of breast screening overall and prevention, we have a fairly robust prevention program that we utilize alongside of our screening programs. They're now an amalgamated department within the division, which is very helpful to us. We have great partnerships with the communities that we will be going to. We have 42 remote sites that the mammo-bus will be going to. The most northern is La Loche.

So while we're doing the work of the mammography screening, there's also a lot of prevention work that's happening as well in partnership with these communities to understand their needs. So

with the lowering of the screening age there's also a lot of education, but participation from the communities in terms of what their needs are. We listen to that and we do implement in our programs and services. So that's why there's 42 remote sites now being attended by the mammography bus.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay, thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — The announced breast health centre in Regina, I was wondering if you could provide an update of the progress of the health centre. Have staff been hired? And what diagnostic equipment has been purchased to date?

Tracey Smith: — Thank you for the question. So just to provide a brief update, construction of the breast health centre in Regina is currently under way, and we are on track to be in a position to open within the next few months, in the coming months. In terms of staff, two nurse practitioner, nurse navigator positions have been hired. I don't have an update on the rest of the complement of staff, but I can say that the Saskatchewan Health Authority is in the process of hiring for the remainder of those positions. And that's well under way, but I don't have sort of the specific grid of the positions with us here today.

And equipment, similar. I don't have the itemized list of equipment that is going to be going into the new facility, but I can confirm that all of the equipment has been ordered. And again it's all sort of working towards being on track to open within the next few months.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you for that.

Joan Pratchler: — Would you be able to provide us with how many people are currently on the wait-list for mammograms and biopsies? And is that different between Saskatoon and Regina, or is it just a provincial number? I'm not sure.

[11:15]

Tracey Smith: — Thanks for the question. Deb is going to provide a little bit more information around the mammographies. We're looking up just more generally on biopsies to see if we can get a little bit more information. But in the meantime, I'll turn to Deb.

Deb Bulych: — Okay, so we have eight mammography sites plus mobile. And at this moment, I can say that for six of the actual sites we do not have anyone without an appointment, so there aren't people on the wait-list waiting. However for two of the sites, due to the way that they schedule the mammographies — they do it in terms of weeks not months — and so there are people waiting. However I don't have the most up-to-date numbers. But I can say that six of the eight stationary sites do not currently have a wait-list.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Do you have the numbers, even if you don't have the most up to date, that could be provided? What numbers do you have?

Deb Bulych: — The numbers that we have are just their overall wait-lists, but they include things like other diagnostic imaging

and whatnot. I think it would be a bit too muddled for me to give full numbers because we're not sure specifically which are mammographies versus other tests, if that makes sense. It's the way that they do their scheduling for that service.

Tracey Smith: — I'll just say, just because I don't think the agency has sort of the numbers that you're looking for today, we can take that back and see what we have in terms of more updates and be able to provide that through to the committee, if that works for everyone?

Chair Wotherspoon: — Sounds good. And just looking, does that satisfy the member in getting that information supplied back to the committee?

Joan Pratchler: — I think so, yeah.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay.

Joan Pratchler: — Because there's a delay sometimes, and is that a wait-list or is it just it takes that long to get through those appointments? Is an appointment equal to a delay or a wait-list? Yeah, I think we just need to parse that out to make sure that we're answering those questions.

Tracey Smith: — And that's what the team was talking about is just, you know, understanding the different points in time. Because I think that's important to the overall picture when we're providing the information back, just making sure we understand, that everybody's talking about the same points in time.

Joan Pratchler: — Sure. And you could include that with the trunk of things that are coming back. Great.

Chair Wotherspoon: — And maybe just, as Chair, thanks so much for committing to get that information back to the committee. Sort of 30 days, one month, is that reasonable? Yeah. And then that gets supplied through the committee Clerk, and then it's available to all of us as members. Thank you very much.

Joan Pratchler: — So just to make sure I asked it properly, wait-list for mammograms, wait-list for biopsies. Does that make sense?

Deb Bulych: — Right, and I spoke to just mammograms.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay, yeah. Thank you. Are women in Saskatchewan still travelling outside of the province for any breast health diagnostics?

Tracey Smith: — Thanks for the question. Ingrid's going to come up and provide some information.

Ingrid Kirby: — Good morning. Ingrid Kirby, assistant deputy minister. So yes, we are continuing to send patients to Calgary for breast biopsies. We continue to work with the Health Authority to try to minimize the number of patients who have to travel out of province. They've made great strides in redirecting patients. Most of the challenges have been in Regina. So patients from Regina have also been travelling to Saskatoon and Moose Jaw, which are a little bit closer than Calgary, for those biopsies.

Joan Pratchler: — And could you give a number?

Ingrid Kirby: — For in-province redirections or for out-of-province?

Joan Pratchler: — How many go out of the province for any kind of diagnostics?

Ingrid Kirby: — Thank you. So far to date 457 women have received a biopsy in Calgary.

Joan Pratchler: — And that date range was back as far as?

Ingrid Kirby: — I'd have to check, sorry.

Tracey Smith: — Mr. Chair, just while Ingrid is just getting confirmation just of the dates, I guess, that you're looking back to. But I thought just in terms of just, you know, more broadly to your question around this program in particular, just really want to reinforce that — as we've heard this morning even just with the start of the first questions — in terms of cancer care, cancer waits, you know, between the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency, the Health Authority, Ministry of Health, obviously this has been a high priority for government as a whole.

All of the agencies have been working together to either, you know, shorten wait times, make things more accessible for patients, quicker, when they need the care that they need to get.

I would stress with this one as well, again, I know in a lot of my conversations with other jurisdictions, you know, access to cancer care, timelines, it's an issue that we're all facing and all really needing to really work together and think really hard about what are different options, possibilities to be able to improve access to cancer care services.

You know, while Ingrid's getting I think the date around, you know, the number of patients that have been sent out of province in the time frame, again just to reinforce that that's really intended to be a short-term scenario while we continue to make improvements in Saskatchewan and really ensure that we've got the resources here. But in the interim, you know, we need to look at other options to ensure that women have access to the care that they need when they need it.

So with that, I'm just going to turn to Ingrid to see if she has the dates that we can confirm for you and if there's anything else, Ingrid, that you want to, any other context that would be helpful for the committee. Thank you.

Ingrid Kirby: — For sure. So we started that initiative in December of 2023, so it's just been just over a year. And as Tracey noted, there's been a lot of progress done in the province to try to stabilize and ensure that patients are getting care as close to home as they can.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. That's all I have.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions over here? MLAs, any other questions at this point? Not seeing any I'd welcome a motion to conclude consideration of chapter 17. Moved by MLA Crassweller. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. And now we'll turn our attention to the last chapter with the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency on our agenda here today, and I'll turn it back to the auditor.

Tara Clemett: — The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency is responsible for providing services with respect to prevention and screening of individuals for cancers, including colorectal cancer. In collaboration with the Saskatchewan Health Authority, the agency delivers a population-based screening program for colorectal cancer.

Through the screening program the agency provides at-home fecal immunochemical test kits, also referred to as FIT kits, to participants who are between the ages of 50 and 74 with a valid Saskatchewan health services card and do not already have a colorectal cancer diagnosis. It asks participants to return completed tests via mail or a drop-in location where kits are then sent to the Saskatchewan Health Authority for processing at the Roy Romanow Provincial Laboratory.

Chapter 23 of our 2023 report volume 2 reports the results of our first follow-up of management's actions on the six recommendations we made in 2020 about the agency's processes to deliver its population-based screening program for colorectal cancer. By March 2023 we found the agency made some progress towards implementing our recommendation but further work was needed.

[11:30]

The agency didn't implement the recommendation on page 207 where we recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency analyze if its promotion strategies help increase participation in its screening program for colorectal cancer.

The Canadian Partnership Against Cancer notes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis; those living in rural and remote communities; and those living in northern regions of provinces are among the people at a higher rate and risk of developing cancer, including colorectal cancer, as they are generally underserved in health care.

From November 2021 to March 2023 the agency held 16 events to promote colorectal cancer screening, including five events targeted at Indigenous and immigrant populations, who are generally under-screened populations in Saskatchewan. However we found the agency did not conduct an analysis to determine whether these events raised awareness or increased participation in the screening program.

We found the participation rate of individuals over 50 years of age in the agency's colorectal screening program continued to decrease over the past five years to about 41 per cent, which is below Canada's national benchmark of 60 per cent. We also found the participation rates in northern Saskatchewan and those residents in the colorectal screening program remain the lowest and continue to decrease.

Focusing promotional strategies on under-screened areas to raise awareness and educate eligible target groups should lead to increased program participation rates. Analysis of the promotional events will help to determine whether these events

achieve the desired outcomes.

The agency partially implemented the recommendation on page 208 where we recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency work with the Saskatchewan Health Authority to reduce the time patients wait for colonoscopies, with the aim to provide these services within the nationally accepted benchmark for colorectal screening programs.

The Canadian Partnership Against Cancer has a benchmark of booking 90 per cent of follow-up colonoscopies within 60 days of a patient's receipt of an abnormal screening result from a FIT kit. From screening program invitations sent from January to October 2022, we found almost 2,400 patients had an abnormal result from a completed FIT kit, with 559 of those patients having a follow-up colonoscopy by December 31st, 2022.

On an overall basis, 66 per cent had a follow-up colonoscopy completed within 60 days of the abnormal FIT result, falling short of the target of 90 per cent. Additionally, we continued to find the average wait time for an abnormal result to a colonoscopy continued to be over 60 days for patients in regions of the province where non-navigated booking process existed. Under this type of booking process, the responsibility for referring patients for a colonoscopy relies solely with the patient's primary care provider.

We found that the agency began working with the Saskatchewan Health Authority to reduce patients' wait times for colonoscopies by proposing plans to have the agency book colonoscopies for all patients with abnormal screening results. Without a consistent approach for booking colonoscopies, patients who are non-navigated through the agency's screening program often were waiting longer for colonoscopies. Delays in receiving colonoscopies could result in delays in colorectal cancer diagnosis and required treatment.

The agency partially implemented the recommendation on page 210 where we recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency work with the Saskatchewan Health Authority to determine a time frame or a benchmark for providing patients and health care providers with pathology results related to the screening for colorectal cancer.

In January 2023 the agency and the Authority met to determine an appropriate turnaround target time frame for pathology results. Both agreed to a target of 95 per cent within 14 days for all locations. At May 2023 the target was under review by the Authority's lab medicine and atomic pathology provincial discipline committee, so it had yet to be finalized.

From January to October 2022, our analysis found 559 patients with colorectal screening program had colonoscopies, with 433 of these patients having biopsies taken. We found the average pathology wait time, so the receipt of the biopsy results, was 16.4 days, with the longest time frame though being 37 days.

Having benchmarks for expected time frames to give pathology results from colonoscopies to patients and primary care service providers would help the agency and the Authority assess wait times. Timely receipt of pathology results assists in determining and providing appropriate and prompt treatment and reduces the risk of the cancer growing or spreading.

The agency partially implemented the three recommendations on page 211. We recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency align its quality indicators it regularly uses on the screening program for colorectal cancer with nationally accepted indicators.

We also recommended the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency report on the results of key quality indicators for its screening program for colorectal cancer and the agency periodically include analysis of the key quality indicators for its screening program for colorectal cancer in its report to senior management and the board.

The Canadian Partnership Against Cancer has set 10 national quality indicators for colorectal cancer screening programs. The agency developed the indicators or reasonable proxy to monitor 7 of the 10 national quality indicators and plan to develop indicators for another two.

At the time of our follow-up audit the agency only reported the screening program participation rates to senior management and the board twice a year. Management indicated the agency was determining what other indicators to report to senior management and the board and how often. Expected to do so by December 2023.

Our review of participation rates for November 2022 and February 2023 found that, while the reports included timely information, the reports didn't include trend analysis or reasons why the program did not achieve the national participation rate benchmark of 60 per cent along with management's actions or the plans to improve participation rates.

Reporting on key performance indicators for colorectal screening that are consistent with good practice can provide senior management and the board with pertinent information for decision making. Written, detailed analysis would help the agency understand its progress and identify opportunities for improvement.

With that I will now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you. Thanks very much for the focus of this chapter and the follow-up here. All these recommendations of course have come to this table. They're part of the 2020 report. And thanks as well to the ministry and the Sask Cancer Agency for the actions that have been taken on this front. I'll kick it over to Deputy Minister Smith for remarks and we'll go from there.

Tracey Smith: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. To enhance participation in the screening program for colorectal cancer, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency undertook a series of strategic initiatives.

First, the prevention and screening departments were amalgamated in September of 2021 to integrate screening closing with outreach and health promotion efforts. Recognizing the importance of data in driving decision making and business intelligence, a specialist was hired in July of 2022 to support evaluation and data analysis.

An outreach and engagement framework was developed in September of 2023 incorporating evaluation components to

ensure strategies are effective, such as tracking tools and metrics from events. For instance, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency ran a province-wide colorectal cancer promotional campaign in 2023 aimed at increasing screening participation and awareness. The campaign's effectiveness was evaluated using key metrics including 1.8 million impressions, which surpasses the 1 million goal; 7,100 web page clicks, which exceeded the 4,000 targets; and an 800 per cent increase in audience reached compared to 2020 efforts.

Additional efforts included attending community events to foster relationships and promote screening while leveraging direct communications such as letters from the medical advisor to surgeons and family physicians to encourage participation. Targeted outreach strategies, such as understanding non-participation amongst the 50- to 54-year-old age group and redesigning promotional materials, were also initiated.

The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency has prioritized reducing colonoscopy wait times by establishing a screening program for colorectal cancer quality improvement committee in July of 2022 and participating in the ministry-led provincial endoscopy committee since January of 2022. Through these efforts a comprehensive endoscopy strategy was developed. Reporting tools were introduced in January of 2023 to monitor wait times quarterly, and a provincial navigation framework was created in August of 2023 to guide the expansion of navigation services.

To address resource gaps, the program hired additional nurse navigators and engaged quality improvement consultants to provide dedicated support. Expanding navigation services across the province has become a key priority, focusing on establishing a provincial navigation model and ensure seamless support from a positive fecal immunochemical test result to colonoscopy. And navigated regions securing dedicated spots in endoscopy units for FIT positive patients has contributed to achieving the national benchmark of 60 days from an abnormal result to colonoscopy.

The Saskatchewan Cancer Agency informed the Saskatchewan Health Authority of this audit recommendation back in 2020, and has since taken several steps to establish benchmarks for pathology results. Meetings with lab and pathology representatives began in January of 2023 to explore collaboration opportunities. A reporting tool was developed by the business intelligence specialist to track pathology result timelines with quarterly updates initiated in December of 2023.

The Saskatchewan Health Authority and the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency have agreed on a target benchmark for pathology result wait times, which is 95th percentile of patients, within 14 days. This benchmark has been implemented by the Saskatchewan Health Authority in December of 2024. Reports have been shared with the lab quality improvement committee to identify improvement areas, while ongoing collaboration with Saskatchewan Health Authority aims to establish a high-level plan for operational incorporation guided by equality improvement framework.

To enhance transparency and decision making, the Cancer Agency incorporated trending data into its reports in September of 2022 and integrated historical data in January of 2023. This foundation supported the development of a standardized reporting framework, which was approved by leadership and the

board in late 2023. Collaborative efforts with the epidemiology and performance measurement department led to the inclusion of additional metrics in the reports, ensuring comprehensive information is shared with leadership. Standardized dashboards have been created, providing access to performance indicators for population health managers and leadership.

To improve the timeliness of reporting on key quality indicators, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency completed the backlog of colonoscopy data entry in June of 2023, ensuring accurate and up-to-date records. The agency expanded its analytics capacity by integrating business intelligence across the department and streamlining processes. A standardized reporting framework was developed in fall of 2023, enabling efficient exchange of performance indicators to population health managers and leadership. This framework allows access to data, enhancing decision making and operational efficiency.

And finally, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency assessed national quality indicators for colorectal cancer screening and aligned its reporting with benchmark standards. These indicators have been embedded into internal reporting frameworks, ensuring the informed decision making and strategic planning processes. To enhance reporting capabilities, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency hired a business intelligence specialist, as I've noted earlier, and is using that to inform the dashboards. Again these are the tools that the agency is using to be able to make good decisions, evidence-based decisions, and really have a line of sight into those key metrics.

That concludes my comments. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks for the comments. Thanks for the actions on this front as well to implement these recommendations. Looking to committee members that may have questions. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — I see some of the actions that the agency's taking to increase participation in the screening program, which is alarmingly low. Can you speak to some of these actions in more detail? So for example, what type of outreach and health promotion is the agency doing, and what are some of the challenges in promoting your efforts?

[11:45]

Tracey Smith: — Thanks for the question. Deb is going to come up and answer the questions.

Deb Bulych: — So I think the first thing, I think I just need to provide some reassurance that that 60 per cent national benchmark is a national benchmark that no province is currently meeting. And Saskatchewan, the last data that we had in terms of colorectal participation, we are the highest participation rate in Canada. I'm not saying that that is great because of course we would love . . . we aspire to the 60 per cent. But I thought I would just provide some reassurance that it's not that Saskatchewan is lagging behind Canada. We're actually leading with some of the work that we're doing. But no one in Canada is meeting that benchmark yet unfortunately.

Specific to your question though around outreach, health promotion, and challenges, just to give you some examples,

we've conducted multiple community events where we set up a booth. We get invited to communities. We set up a booth. We provide a lot of education on all of our screening programs and on the cancer agency itself. We track the numbers of participants and questions. We get back to communities with answers. It's really a lot of community collaboration, participation, and engagement to promote the screening programs.

One important thing to highlight is we work very closely with many First Nations and Métis organizations, especially communities. A great example of us taking some feedback in our partnership with them and then changing our services to try and increase collaboration and participation rates, we've recently changed our names from . . . removing the word "cancer" essentially, so breast check program, colon check program.

The reason we did that is we heard from our First Nations and Métis partners that word is just something terrifying. It doesn't exist in their language, and that . . . We took their feedback. We actually changed the names of our program. So that's an example of things that we're doing to try and keep increasing our participation rates through real feedback from our communities. We've also had multiple First Nations and Métis education sessions again out in community about all of our services but really targeting prevention and screening.

One of the challenges — and I know it's really difficult; I struggle with this myself — that number's always going to move very slowly because it is so multi-faceted. But we do believe . . . And we now have data that is stratified where we can target certain areas. And I do believe Deputy Minister Smith mentioned the 50 or 54 area, the age group where we can target some strategies specifically to them through our communications and through our education. So we do have that data now that really stratifies it and allows us to target in that way. So we're doing multiple things, but that challenge is again the rates move slowly and are very multi-faceted.

Hugh Gordon: — Just wondering if you could also discuss, you know, the types of outreach your agency is doing with health care providers.

Deb Bulych: — So thanks for the question. Just want to make sure I don't miss anything. So multiple educational venues for health care providers. Our medical advisor for each of our screening programs provides education at specific conferences for medical professionals. We have educational materials specifically packaged for all of the screening programs that are out to primary care, so in general practitioners' offices, family physician clinics, that type of thing. And we also present to new physicians through the SIPPAs [Saskatchewan international physician practice assessment] program as well.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you for that. I was also wondering, I see you've hired a business intelligence specialist to support evaluation and data analysis. And I just was wondering if since that hiring, if there are any trends that that person's been able to identify for you that are helpful anyways.

Deb Bulych: — Thanks. Thanks again for the question. A few things. I'll just give a few examples of trending that we have seen from the business intelligence specialist. I mentioned the age 50 to 54. It was the business intelligence specialist's analysis that

showed us that was an area we needed to target, so that was one example.

Through his work we're also able to do geographical mapping of participation rates, so potentially targeting separate communities. We're able to provide report cards to the endoscopists throughout the province so that they can compare their average to the provincial average. And he also attends the screening quality improvement committees. So if there are trends identified through his work, they're discussed there in a quality improvement fashion.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you for that.

Joan Pratchler: — I was wondering if you might be able to tell the current wait times for colonoscopies in Saskatchewan, Regina, Saskatoon, rural, and the North.

Deb Bulych: — So are research results okay?

Joan Pratchler: — Sorry, the air's dry in here.

Deb Bulych: — You guys have been talking a lot in here.

Joan Pratchler: — I know. So can you provide, you know, the wait times for colonoscopies for Saskatchewan in general, and then the two large cities, Regina, Saskatoon, rural, and northern?

[12:00]

Tracey Smith: — Thanks for the question. So just to clarify, colonoscopy, endoscopy procedures, those are procedures that are provided through the Saskatchewan Health Authority. And so, Deb's team . . . We don't have that information here with us today, but what I could suggest again is that's something that — similar to the last question — we could commit to bring some of that information back to the committee through that process.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay. And are you thinking within the next month in the package.

Tracey Smith: — It would be in the same, yes. It would be within that package.

Joan Pratchler: — Perfect. Okay. And one other question I have, can you speak to the role of nurse navigators and what they do? And also are those positions still filled? You know, are there vacancies? Do you need more? Just to let me know a little more about that, that would be helpful.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks again for that undertaking to get that information back. And if we could have that supplied within that same time frame, sort of the one month or sooner, through the Clerk.

Deb Bulych: — Thanks again for the question. So we currently have six positions filled. One is a vacancy due to retirement. We've not had any problem filling these positions though, so we don't anticipate that that'll be an issue for us.

So what they do really is when a person has an abnormal FIT, something comes back in the result, they will contact the person, go over the result of the abnormal FIT, explain it to them, and

then help educate them, counsel them, and prepare them for the procedure. And then they will actually book the appointment for them.

Joan Pratchler: — And do they do follow up as well, or does it just kind of end at the procedure there for their services?

Deb Bulych: — It ends at the test. So, yeah.

Joan Pratchler: — That's all the questions that I have.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you. Looking to committee members that may have other questions at this point. Not seeing any at this point.

I guess we don't have new recommendations here. We have the implementation with respect to the recommendations that are before us. So again, just thank you to all those that have made that happen. And I would welcome a motion to conclude consideration of chapter 23. Do I have a mover? Minister Harrison. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. I think we've reached the conclusion of our time, our agenda with the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. I want to thank Deputy Minister Smith and president and CEO Bulych for their time here today, along with all of the officials that have joined us, and all those that have been involved in this very important work, and all those that are working tirelessly within these respective organizations across the province to provide the health care that Saskatchewan people count on. So thank you very much.

Any final words for us, Deputy Minister Smith? We spent a fair amount of time together the last couple days. Thanks for your work on this front.

Tracey Smith: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. And again it has been a good couple of days. I think we've covered a lot of ground. There were a lot of programs and services where there were recommendations.

And I think, when I sort of reflect back on the last couple of days, I know we had the SHA here yesterday, and today we had the Cancer Agency. But I think you would have seen some themes where the need to work collaboratively and that the relationship between the agencies again as a health sector, every single day that is what we are working to do, is to ensure that in all of it that we're focused on the patient and on the citizens that we provide care to. So I really was reflecting on that throughout the course of the last couple of days, absolutely.

I do want to thank again the committee for the questions, and I want to thank Tara and her team again for the audits and the approach to the audits. We really appreciate what you do working with our respective teams pretty much every single day.

And finally to Deb's team, again thanks to Deb for being here today along with the team and answering some questions on some really important topics. And again, thanks to the ministry team for all of the efforts in pulling this all together and getting

us ready to be able to talk about these really, really important items. So just thank you and have a good rest of your deliberations.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you again. Members, I'll just hold you for . . . So thank you very much. And maybe just to the Provincial Auditor at this point, there's been a full few days of meetings. Thanks to you and your entire team for all the work — your resource to this committee, your incredible leadership in ensuring accountability and performance, and the follow-ups that happen on all of the audits as well. So thank you to you as well.

Now just one last item here that we've chatted through here briefly with the Deputy Chair. Just looking to see we've circulated the procedures manual for Public Accounts.

And, Health, you don't need to stick around for this stuff at all, unless maybe we can turn the tables and you can have questions for us. You'd probably love that.

But we've got this procedures manual, and from time to time it gets updated to make some little bits of improvements. But the Clerk has done a bit of a scan on this front and brought forward some minor updates that I can speak to here in a minute. Just looking for the indulgence of the committee; you're good with us taking a look at this?

Hon. Daryl Harrison: — Mr. Chair, could I get the item added to the agenda?

Chair Wotherspoon: — I guess I would . . . Yeah, so I'll do that more formally. We can't add it to the agenda, but we can add it to the agenda in this way. So looking to the committee members to add this consideration to the agenda at this point. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — All right. Good. Pretty straightforward. I think the changes here, majority of changes are minor revisions, updates to branch names, rule numbers in the rules and procedures, committee process changes, and document titles that are referenced in the manual. Each of you have a copy here as well.

The most substantive change is simply to clarify the wording on the status updates we receive and those requirements. Currently the manual states that any recommendations that have already been implemented don't need to be included in the status updates. Sometimes status updates look incomplete because they could be missing these recommendations.

Also I think they then get presented to us in a bit of an inconsistent way. You'll notice the last couple of days most entities provided the implemented recommendations. So it's just sort of having a standard process here around what's expected. Ministry staff often ask for clarification on this section, we understand, through the Clerk's office.

So the recommended changes would remove wording that states implemented recommendations don't need to be included. That way committee members can have a fuller picture of all the outstanding recommendations, especially if an entire chapter only has implemented recommendations. And we're not looking

for a bunch of extra detail here; it's simply the statement that they've implemented that recommendation and it's recorded out.

So I guess at this point, like do committee members have any questions on these revisions? Not seeing any. If members are in agreement with changes, then I'd ask a member to move a motion. Deputy Chair Wilson.

Sean Wilson: — I move the motion:

That the Standing Committee on Public Accounts procedures manual be adopted as revised.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Wilson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, that's carried. Okay, that takes care of business. Thanks to all of you for all your work. These have been some fairly full and long days. Thanks for being engaged in good ways. At this point I'd welcome a motion of adjournment. Moved by MLA Crassweller. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. This committee stands adjourned to the call of the Chair.

[The committee adjourned at 12:11.]