

EVENING SITTING

PRIVATE MEMBERS' MOTIONS

Motion No. 13 — Containment of Forest Fires

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to get up and talk a little bit more about the amendment brought forth by the member from Shellbrook-Spiritwood:

That this Assembly urge the provincial government to be more forthright in accounting for the necessary costs of fighting forest fires in Saskatchewan.

And I believe that they should. This government, it always says that it wants to be more open and accountable to the people, and I think they should know what it costs to be fighting these fires. We were hearing rumours that it might be up to 17 million so far. I believe that they've only budgeted \$34 million and I think last year they had spent \$39 million, and we've had at least 100 more fires this year I understand than we had last year.

So I mean the cost. And we're only into the middle of June so the cost is going to be more — should be more if you go by the figures — this year than it was last year. So where's the government going to find the money? Is it going to have to borrow the money? Is it going to take it out of somebody else's budget, Mr. Speaker?

But they should be more offright. What's it costing right now? And the communities that have asked for help in firefighting, such as Nipawin. Where's that cost going to come from?

There was a huge fire at the Turtle Lake inferno where 56 homes were burnt and destroyed there, Mr. Speaker. That needed to be a lot of firefighting to be going there, Mr. Speaker. And we need to know the budgeting. How much of the province is going to be helping there?

Another question I have to ask is, I didn't really know till we kind of got into this debate before, Mr. Speaker, was that you can request, if you have fires — a farm fire or a grass fire, RMs (rural municipality) — that you can request water bombers to come out, Mr. Speaker. Who absorbs the cost of that? Do the RMs pay for it?

Let's say if there was a raging forest fire out . . . you take out in our area the last . . . I'd say the last six years maybe . . . no, it'd be in the last 10 years, Ducks Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, Mr. Speaker, has started to buy land starting at Hanley going up towards the Allan Hills there. They have as much as now — there's some private pastures in there — but they have as much as 20 to 25 miles of grass in there. And last year was really dry.

I remember we had a meeting with the RMs and they tried to have a meeting with Ducks Unlimited to have fireguards ploughed every mile, to have grass cut, and Ducks Unlimited at that time had said no. Part of their plan was to have a lot of this land left natural, which was good when it was . . . there was a lot of wet years.

Last year we were in a very dry year, as we are this year. The

farmers wanted to go in and either cut it or turn some cattle in it, but the biggest fear starting . . . Once we got into July, that grass was about a foot to two feet high, dead grass that had been there for two . . . two, three years that accumulated over the dead years, and they were really concerned that a fire would've got going.

Now they would've . . . no way would've been able to put that out, Mr. Speaker, with the equipment they've got. I mean if it raised with some of them winds, it would've just taken off. And there's farmyards and acreages kind of spread out through there, Mr. Speaker, and they were . . . there were a lot of families were very worried about it.

So one . . . you know, one of the things if that fire would've got going, would you have been able to . . . what would've been the routine to call in the fire bombers, the provincial end of it, and who would've absorbed the costs? I remember that was some of the questions that were asked of me and I kind of asking the Assembly now, like would the RM after the fire . . . Because I mean naturally you just put the call out, the fire bombers go. I mean, you know, same thing. I mean there's a fire, you've got to put it out. You worry about the costs after.

But after everything would've happened, if the fire would've been put out, who would've absorbed the costs? Would the RMs had to have bear that cost? Would Ducks Unlimited had to bear that cost? Would the province have eaten it? Or would the RMs have to declare kind of an emergency state funding?

I believe the Premier was up in Nipawin and he had talked about declaring kind of an emergency and possibly giving them some funding and, you know, kind of shrugging his shoulders and saying that there probably would be some help but not laying out nothing — a concrete plan — which this government seems to be kind of famous for, is not kind of laying things out in advance, laying out a plan.

And also at the budgeting end, that's . . . We still don't know, and I believe the member from Carrot River has asked what is the cost right now for firefighting, and he still hasn't gotten a question . . . or an answer of what it's cost right up to this point. So we know in opposition how much money, how much money is already in that that is going to be needed and how much is going to be needed in the future possibly.

And that's as opposition it's . . . And the province needs to know that that's what it costs to fight these fires, instead of at the end of the year all of the sudden just kind of saying, well no, we're not going to even help these communities now, you're on your own. And also all of a sudden we're running a deficit. We're going to pull 10 million out of this budget or we're just going to borrow the money.

I think this government should be more upfront with the costs of what this costs so far, of what the projected costs are of the fires. Of what the Turtle Lake fire has cost. What the Nipawin fire has cost up to date. What the numerous fires have cost in the North so far and even some of the southern fires that have to have been fought.

I know Alberta there, I was reading somewhere, and it wasn't

that long ago, they pretty well had their costs laid out. Basically they were only about two weeks behind the fires, of what it was costing to fight them and how much money was needed and how much of it was already spent and allocated that way, and how much would possibly be needed in the future.

I think we're probably two months behind. I mean we're still working from possibly the spring budget when they had just put in some money in there. Now I understand at one time they had a firefighting contingency fund and it sounded like they've kind of exhausted that last year from the questions if I can remember here in estimates with Environment. And it sounded like this year that they did not budget as much that was spent last year. So I mean they are probably, Mr. Speaker, going to be running into trouble further down the road when it comes to their budget end, which seems to be quite normal for this government.

Another concern is also the costs you know of the volunteers. And in . . . I was going to say, back to the fire there, if it ever would have got out of control in the Allan Hills there, would they have brought in the provincial firefighters plus the water bombers? The RMs, how would they have got to maybe possibly get the army in because when you have to fight a fire you need a plan, you need to set it out so that it can be implemented within hours when you hit an emergency situation?

And if that fire would have ever got rolling in them hills there, you know where it's burning probably you know covering great distances, and you're going to need . . . the RMs are going to have to know who to call and who can be there and who is the authority to say we need these water bombers, and they're going now. Or we need the army in to work ahead of this fire to fight . . . plough guards ahead or fire banks or you know, whatever a lot of the firefighters do to try to — fire breaks — to try and stop the fire from going there . . . from going there further.

But the biggest thing is, Mr. Speaker, is accounting for the costs of it. And this side, when the House is in session — and it's probably going to be here till, I'm guessing, you know sometime later July, whatever, you know how things there go — but with stuff that's in front . . . but it would be nice now if we can have these costs so we can debate them now in the House rather than holding them back over a length of time, bringing them up possibly in the fall when this government doesn't want to have a fall session, which we've always called for.

We've always wanted a fall session and this is another reason why, Mr. Speaker, we probably should have a fall session dealing with this amendment. So there is lots of things that happen in the spring, through the summer, with the budgeting end, that can be discussed and debated in the fall. And I think this motion is a very good argument for that.

One of them is the firefighting end of it, and that's why we support the amendment. And I think the government on the other side, I would hope that they would also support that amendment and . . . because there was a lot of business that is before this House that could be done in the fall, that happens through the summer. And one of them is firefighting costs of the budget and how it's going to affect the upcoming budgets.

Which budget it should come over, which government department? Or is the government going to have to possibly borrow some money or get some money from . . . transfer some money from CIC (Crown Investments Corporation of Saskatchewan)? That should be debated in the . . . that should be debated in the House rather than by an order in council by this government, Mr. Speaker.

And like I say, we've always supported it, and this is a good example of why we need to have some more answers. When you only sit three . . . for three months of the year, and this government, you have to force them to sit them three months of the year. There's a lot of business that could be debated in this House that probably isn't or that it's possibly nine months old, that's already past the budget year. And having a fall session just before the budget is done in January, or getting close to the budget end, would do very good to do some budgeting at that end, Mr. Speaker.

And that's why, Mr. Speaker, I support this amendment.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Lautermilch: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's been an interesting afternoon actually. We've been debating a resolution as it relates to people who work in the forest fires that invariably happen, unfortunately, in this province and others, about the forest fire suppression initiatives and programs that have been developed in this province over a number of years. And I have listened with interest to some of the forest fringe MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly) from Saskatchewan Rivers and from Shellbrook-Spiritwood as they have articulated their concerns about old forest firefighting equipment, old aircraft. Well I hear comments from the other side, and I won't go there, sir.

But I want to say that what I do know is that this province has the most effective forest firefighting and the forest fire suppression system anywhere. And that's beared out by the quickness to which they attack a fire and the size at which the fire is ultimately put out.

So I want to say, Mr. Speaker, I know that all of us that represent the forest fringe are very concerned about the costs with respect to forest fire suppression. I think I can say on behalf of my colleagues that all of us support very much the people who put their lives at risk every day when they move in to the fire. And that is not unique . . .

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Lautermilch: — And I listened very much with interest as this debate on this motion took place, that some of the members opposite were trying to isolate urban from rural, north from south, suggesting that people in southern Saskatchewan who represent this place, this province had less concern for the people who work and less understanding for what happens up there in the forest fringe.

And so I say to members opposite, I think the people of this province clearly understand the importance — the importance of what the people who work in that industry do.

I know people who fly those airplanes, those 30-year-old airplanes, and I know the mechanics, as they do, that work hard to keep those airplanes together. But I tell you what, Mr. Speaker, I know also the people who work in the GIS (geographic information system) system that monitors the fire hits, and the people who understand what it takes to lower the cost of firefighting in this province. And so we all do.

And so let's all support good work that's done up there, sir. And I think we all do.

Is that a priority for us as a province? Yes, it is. Is it a priority for us as people? Yes, it is.

And the members opposite want to debate and I say to them they will have ample opportunity to debate, not only through resolution which we've debated since question period this afternoon but they will have ample opportunity to in depth question the minister responsible for the department that funds our fire suppression initiatives. And I asked earlier today, this government asked you earlier today that we would move to House business so we could do that.

And I think, sir, this debate has been well debated, well debated, and we all support the people who work in the industry, and we all support as well the initiatives and the facilities that we put in place and the funding that we put in place to make this happen as a province, as people of this province. So I think it's been well debated today and we could be well served by adjourning this House tonight.

So I move that we adjourn debate . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . or adjourn this House.

Motion agreed to on division.

The Assembly adjourned at 19:16.