



# **STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY**

## **Hansard Verbatim Report**

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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY  
2008**

Mr. D.F. (Yogi) Huyghebaert, Chair  
Wood River

Mr. Ron Harper, Deputy Chair  
Regina Northeast

Mr. Darcy Furber  
Prince Albert Northcote

Mr. Jeremy Harrison  
Meadow Lake

Mr. Warren Michelson  
Moose Jaw North

Ms. Laura Ross  
Regina Qu'Appelle Valley

Ms. Nadine Wilson  
Saskatchewan Rivers

[The committee met at 15:02.]

**The Chair:** — It now being 3 o'clock, can we get started, please.

I'd like to call the committee to order, and I'd like to welcome everyone here to the committee. Today we'll be discussing estimates, and pursuant to rule 146(1), the supplementary estimates for the following ministries were deemed referred to the committee yesterday, March 10, 2008: votes 1 and 146, Agriculture; vote 26, Environment; vote 16, Highways and Infrastructure; vote 17, Highways and Infrastructure capital.

**General Revenue Fund  
Supplementary Estimates — March  
Environment  
Vote 26**

**Subvote (EN11)**

**The Chair:** — First on the agenda, we'll call vote 26, the Environment. And I'd ask the minister to please introduce her officials.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. With me is Alan Parkinson, president of the Watershed Authority, and Wayne Dybvig and Bob Carles.

**The Chair:** — Thank you. And are there any questions?

**Mr. Harper:** — Yes, Mr. Chair. First of all, Mr. Chair, I'd like to welcome the minister and her officials to the committee here. I think my colleagues here have some questions. We have brought along some additional support from our caucus here today. We have our resident expert on the environment, so I would just turn it over to Ms. Morin for her questions.

**The Chair:** — Ms. Morin.

**Ms. Morin:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon everyone, and thank you for appearing before the committee today. The first question I have is: has the minister visited Fishing Lake? Have you been to the location yet?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — No, I haven't had the opportunity to go yet, but the Minister for First Nations and northern relations has been there, as well as the Minister for Public Safety.

**Ms. Morin:** — And has there been an environmental impact study done on the long-term usage of the berms that are currently in place in this location?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — No, there had not been an environmental assessment done. The status of the berms right now is they are still considered emergency berms and in place on a temporary basis. The permit that we have from Fisheries and Oceans Canada says that the berms must be removed by October 2009, and the DFO [Department of Fisheries and Oceans] has provided an assessment of the impact of the berm, provided the berm met with conditions that were followed in the development of the berm.

**Ms. Morin:** — But it's my understanding that there may be a potential for the berms being used on a long-term basis. Is that correct, or is that part of the decision-making process that's currently going on, or . . .

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — We are currently in discussions with Public Safety and in discussions with the community, but as we said, the determination on whether or not the berms are allowed to remain long term is up to Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

**Ms. Morin:** — So in the event that Fisheries and Oceans decides that this is an acceptable situation going forward, I'm assuming at that point we would be doing an environmental impact study. Is that the case, or can you tell us whether that would be something that you'd be proceeding with?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — Our discussions with Fisheries and Oceans is such that if . . . They are currently evaluating the existing berms as to what impact they have on fish habitat, and they will make an assessment as to whether they think some of the berms could be considered to remain long term. And in making that assessment, what they would do is issue an amendment to our existing permit. So most of the environmental issues, they have not indicated to what extent further environmental assessment would be required, but whatever conditions they might request of us for further assessment, we would undertake that.

**Ms. Morin:** — Okay. So Fisheries and Oceans, though, would be more concerned with the habitat of the species living in the water and such. What about the other habitat that would be affected by the potential long-term usage of the berms or the berms being in place as long as they have been already? Is there any impact, any studies done on those types of initiatives?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — There has not been any specific studies on that. Under the Canadian environmental assessment requirements, there may be a need for further assessment. DFO will have to make that determination. So they will assess the impacts that the berms could have on fish habitat, and then they will make recommendations to Canada, and Canada will then assess whether further environmental assessment work would be required.

**Ms. Morin:** — So what other options are being currently considered if the berms are not to be a long-term solution, or what other options are currently being looked at? And what studies are being done with respect to those options?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — The determination as to alternate plans is my understanding is under the purview of the Ministry of Public Safety.

**Ms. Morin:** — So is Environment not involved with that at all? Because, I mean, obviously there are some environmental implications that can come with any of the other options that might be considered. So are there no consultations undergone with Environment right now or is that something that's foreseen for the future?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — We're presently in the process of discussing Fishing Lake with the Department of Corrections, Public Safety

and Policing. The long-term flood protection planning is being led by the department of . . . Or I'll abbreviate: by Public Safety.

Where the Watershed Authority comes into play is that we are in consultation with Public Safety and as well as communities and First Nations around Fishing Lake. How the long-term flood protection starts to play out and what options there are, are relative to the berms, will be a product of what that planning process ultimately yields.

**Ms. Morin:** — So besides the Department of Fisheries and Oceans are there any other consultations taking place with respect to the potential options that are going to be looked at for the long-term situation in Fishing Lake and Waldsea as well?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — Yes, through that Public Safety process.

**Ms. Morin:** — So that would be something that you have knowledge of, as to who would be part of those consultations. Is that what you're saying?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — When it comes time to make a decision about the longevity of the berms, whether they're part of the permanent solution, either some of them or all of them, then the Watershed Authority will be part of that.

We will undertake in our own right, that being the Watershed Authority, consultation with communities and consultation with First Nations. And as Wayne has said, right now the way the permits with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans sit is that the berms are expected to come out by October 2009. And so we'll be discussing with them whatever potential options there may be or whatever mitigation requirements they would have.

**Ms. Morin:** — So with respect to these consultations that might be taking place once some of those things have been looked at in conjunction with CPS [Corrections and Public Safety], would any of those reports be made public? Or can we look forward to that? Or how is this going to be publicly reported, shall we say?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — Yes. Any product of the work that we do would be available for public review.

**Ms. Morin:** — The money that's being allocated through the supplementary estimates, how is it being distributed between Waldsea and Fishing Lake?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — I guess in terms of the costs of construction, the total estimated cost, probably less than 10 per cent of the cost would go to Waldsea Lake compared to Fishing Lake.

**Ms. Morin:** — And who is responsible for the distribution of these monies that are going to be allocated to Waldsea and Fishing Lake?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — That funding is coming to the Watershed Authority, so it's primarily to be allocated to the need to possibly remove the berms in addition to doing some of the mitigation work that would be required if the berms remain in place. There's a few things that need to be finished up with the project yet, and these would be work that the Watershed Authority would be overseeing and carrying out.

**Ms. Morin:** — So is there any money distributed to the municipalities for them to be allocating themselves, or is it simply the money is going to Watershed Authority to be distributed through there?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — These funds would be allocated to the Watershed Authority to deal with the berm issue. Any funds that may find their way to communities would be through Public Safety. So whether or not they're actually doing that, you would have to ask them, but that would be the only avenue.

**Ms. Morin:** — My colleague, John, would like to ask a few questions now.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Nilson.

**Mr. Nilson:** — Thank you very much. The money that you receive now is on top of how much money that's already been in the budget for this year as it relates to Waldsea and Fishing Lake?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — The 7.2 is on top of an additional 16.1 million that was in the '07-08 budget.

**Mr. Nilson:** — So that the total amount is about 24 million approximately?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Yes.

**Mr. Nilson:** — And if I understood the answer to a previous answer to my colleague, this money is to go to the Watershed Authority to provide a fund to fund the mitigation over the next couple of years. Would that be an accurate way to describe it?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — Yes. It's for removal of the berms. All the berms are in now for the communities that want to be protected by berms. So this funding would be what would be required to sort of deal with them under the auspices of our DFO fisheries permit. So it's for the removal of the berms over the course of the next, you know, 14 months till like October — well, wrong number — but October 2009.

**Mr. Nilson:** — So that right now it's not anticipated any further funds would be needed to deal with the mitigation issue as it relates to the Watershed Authority. There may be funds that are allocated to the other department as it relates to the overall project, but this in many ways covers all the costs that the Watershed Authority anticipates.

**Mr. Parkinson:** — The only other cost item that just occurred to me is there was a drainage study that was initiated last year by the authority. And that will be covered off by the 7.1 as well. It's about 400,000, plus or minus.

**Mr. Nilson:** — And the cost for the Waldsea berm is about 10 per cent of the total 24 million. So would that be accurate?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — That's the estimate we have right now, yes.

**Mr. Nilson:** — And the Waldsea berm has the same conditions on it as the one at Fishing Lake, that it has to be removed by October 2009?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — No, actually the Waldsea berm has been established as not in fish habitat, so it does not have to be removed. So the money that was identified for removal of the berms only related to the berms at Fishing Lake.

**Mr. Nilson:** — I have no further questions, Mr. Chair, but I think my colleague has another one.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Wotherspoon. No?

**Ms. Morin:** — I have some questions.

**The Chair:** — Ms. Morin.

**Ms. Morin:** — Thank you. Coming out of that question, so I guess I misunderstood something. Ten per cent of this allocation of money was for Waldsea Lake, and this money is simply allocated for the removal of berms. But now we've heard that Waldsea Lake has permanent berms that won't be removed because they're not affecting fish habitat. So what is the 10 per cent allocation for Waldsea Lake for then if it's not for the removal of the berm?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — I misled on that answer. I'm sorry. I was trying to think of the distribution of the costs of construction and relating it that way, but most of . . . There will be some further environmental mitigation work at Waldsea and there'll be work around the drainage study that will be done as was indicated. But there'll be no . . . there should be no funding required for removal of the berms.

Now that's the requirement of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. It is still contingent upon whether or not the plans that Corrections, Public Safety and Policing work out with the local community, whether in fact they want to have berms as the long-term solution. If in fact they didn't want the berms, then they may have to be removed.

**Ms. Morin:** — So we know that the cost for the drainage study at Fishing Lake is approximately 400,000. Do we have a cost attached to the drainage study that was performed at Waldsea Lake as well? . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . So it's 400,000 for the study. That included both areas?

**A Member:** — Yes.

**Ms. Morin:** — So it's 400,000 total cost. Do we have a breakdown at all or is it just simply a total cost for both studies?

**Mr. Parkinson:** — We haven't broken it down to that level yet.

**Ms. Morin:** — Okay.

**Mr. Parkinson:** — The study is still ongoing.

**Ms. Morin:** — Okay. I believe one of my colleagues, Mr. Taylor, has questions.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Taylor.

**Mr. Taylor:** — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Getting to this point has required some consultations with other levels of government, other jurisdictions — Fisheries and Oceans, First

Nations governments — and within Saskatchewan, the Watershed Authority, Department of the Environment, and Department of, ministries now, of Corrections and Public Safety have all been involved.

Can you give me an overview of the challenges posed by consultations with other jurisdictions? What has had to take place with Fisheries and Oceans for example, with First Nations, and with even municipal level of government, to get us to the point where we're at today?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — Okay. Well there was certainly a lot of challenges faced with implementing an emergency project, having to try and bring a project into place in a short period of time, before freeze-up and to prevent further damages.

So a lot of the work had to proceed kind of in parallel with a lot of the consultations that took place. There was a local group established out there of representatives from the two main . . . at Fishing Lake, the four levels of government out there, two resort villages and two RMs [rural municipality].

Initially there were meetings between the representatives from government and this group on a weekly basis, starting in early May. And certainly there were a lot of challenges faced with what kind of project could be used to meet the needs of the local communities, and a lot of the communities were not necessarily in agreement as to what approach should be used. So certainly, challenges in that.

There were discussions with the First Nation, first of all in the development of a ditch project and then in the development of the berms. And the First Nation certainly had their own concerns and issues with the project as it developed and challenges in trying to meet their expectations for what should happen to the lake as opposed to what some of the public wanted out there.

So I think the main challenges really relate around, revolve around trying to implement a project in a very short period of time and trying to deal with the situation at Fishing Lake, over 400 cottages that had flood damages over probably almost a dozen different communities. Just the logistics of trying to involve people and consult with them presented very significant challenges.

**Mr. Taylor:** — Are there any formal agreements currently in place between the Watershed Authority or the department . . . or Ministry of the Environment and any of these other levels of government — First Nations, Fisheries and Oceans, municipal governments? Are there any formal agreements in place?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — We have two agreements with the local RMs basically following up on their resolutions to have the berms constructed, basically authorizing the Watershed Authority as their agent to construct the berms on their land. So those are the only two agreements that we have that I am aware of.

**Mr. Taylor:** — And as we look ahead, as we take a look at the ultimate removal of some of the berms and assessment of the circumstances we're in, are you currently in discussions or negotiations with any of these other jurisdictions — First Nations, Fisheries and Oceans, or municipalities — that could

lead to future agreements that may be needed to move forward on any future project?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — There's various discussions. Corrections and Public Safety have discussions going with the First Nation, and we don't anticipate necessarily any agreements there with the First Nation. Ultimately it'll be our intention to have the berms transferred to the ownership and control of local government, so that may ultimately end up in an agreement arrangement there.

**Mr. Taylor:** — And lastly then as far as trying to take a look far into the future and some of the discussions that have taken place with regards to permanent drainage of the lakes, are there any discussions particularly with First Nations and Fisheries and Oceans with regards to a more permanent solution, particularly to Fishing Lake?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — Are you suggesting a ditch to drain Fishing Lake? Is that what you . . .

**Mr. Taylor:** — That would be one of the thoughts that might be under discussion. I'm asking you if there's any discussions currently under way or necessary with regards to following this current problem into the future.

**Mr. Parkinson:** — Yes. I think in large part the, I guess, long-term or permanent solution for Fishing Lake will be the accumulation of all of the community plans that are being led by Corrections, Public Safety and Policing. Should those plans yield something that's an alternative to either leaving the berms remain in place or removing the berms and letting the lake fluctuate within its kind of natural levels will be something that we'll be looking at down the road once we see what those plans are actually directing and what the accumulation of them is, or the cumulative effect, rather, of what those various plans are. So at this time we haven't really identified any other solutions that we're actively working on apart from whether or not the berms will play a role in the various community flood protection plans.

**Mr. Taylor:** — Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Nilson.

**Mr. Nilson:** — I just have one more question. As we look to the future this spring and next spring, are the plans still to observe strict enforcement of the drainage rules in the drainage area around Fishing Lake? And maybe you can give us some of the information around the studies that were done last year as it relates to some of the drainage problems.

**Mr. Parkinson:** — I'll have Wayne talk about the studies last year, but it's our intent that the current drainage moratorium that is in place will continue until the drainage study is complete and we've had a chance to assess its relative effect on the flood situation. So in terms of any results of last year . . . I'm assuming the question you're asking relates to reconnaissance and enforcement actions related to any drainage which occurred during the moratorium period.

**Mr. Dybvig:** — There were at least . . . Two different flights were done, both over Fishing Lake and over the entire Lake Lenore-Waldsea Lake watershed, and staff identified potential

works that might have been in violation of the moratorium. There were probably about 30 such works that were possible violations. These were all followed up and investigated, and 11 of them cases, they were ordered to be closed. And basically every one . . . Landowners had generally a high level of co-operation in undertaking those closures.

**Mr. Nilson:** — Thank you.

**The Chair:** — Ms. Morin.

**Ms. Morin:** — One more question as well. So do we anticipate any problems this year with respect to the current solutions that we have in place for the, you know, the spring thaw and such? Are we looking at anticipating any of those problems, or do we think that we have a solution worked out for the spring? Or can you look in your crystal ball and give me that answer?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — The forecast we have for the Fishing Lake area is quite a normal runoff, maybe slightly in the high end of the normal. And we think Fishing Lake should rise about one foot, and that will still be probably a foot and a half below the top of the berms that have been constructed. So most of the communities, with the exception of the Chorney Beach community, are protected by dikes. They are in discussions with Corrections and Public Safety to implement some emergency measures to deal with their particular situation this year.

**Ms. Morin:** — And have we already seen any negative effects from any of the flooding that's taken place on the natural habitat in the areas that are affected? I mean, I'm assuming there's been some studies done around that as well. So have we seen any negative effects on the natural habitat yet, or do we know that?

**Mr. Dybvig:** — We're not aware of any negative impacts. In general I think the flooding around the lake and in some of the neighbouring lakes has been considered a positive thing from a Fisheries standpoint. And DFO, certainly they point to these extreme years as being very good and productive spawning years, so there's been some benefits in that regard. Some of the negative areas . . . I guess there's some areas farther downstream that have endured sustained flooding of pasture land and some of that pasture land might become rendered less productive as a result of that.

**Ms. Morin:** — Well thank you very much for your answers today. I very much appreciate answering all the questions of the committee here, and thank you for appearing before the committee.

**The Chair:** — No more questions? Vote 26, Environment, environmental protection and water management, subvote (EN11) in the amount of \$7,231,000, is that agreed?

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

**The Chair:** — Carried. I'll now ask a member to move the following motion:

That it be resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31, 2008 the following sum, \$7,231,000.

**Mr. Harrison:** — I so move.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Harrison. Is that agreed?

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

**The Chair:** — Carried.

[Vote 26 agreed to.]

**The Chair:** — I'd like to thank the minister and officials for being here and answering questions. Our next item on the agenda is Highways, and I believe that the minister is in another committee until 4 o'clock, so I would call a recess until 16:00 air force time.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

**General Revenue Fund  
Supplementary Estimates — March  
Highways and Infrastructure  
Vote 16**

**Subvote (HI10)**

**The Chair:** — I'd like to call the committee back into session. And our second item on the agenda for this afternoon is vote 16, Highways and Infrastructure, and vote 17, Highways and Infrastructure capital.

And I would now invite the minister to introduce his officials.

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to be here. I want to introduce Mr. John Law to my right; he's the deputy minister of the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure. To my immediate left is Terry Schmidt, the assistant deputy minister, operations. And Ted Stobbs is behind us at the secondary table here. He's the assistant deputy minister, corporate services.

And those are the brain trust of the ministry.

**The Chair:** — And does the minister have any opening remarks he would like to make?

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — Yes, Mr. Chairman, I do, and thank you for the opportunity. I'd like to say to the committee members, this is the first opportunity I think I've actually had to meet with you, if I recall. But so much has happened in the last few months, I may be mistaken. Nevertheless, I think this particular responsibility is a pleasure for me to hold, and I really appreciate the opportunity to take some time with you this afternoon to respond to your questions on these supplementary estimates.

The transportation system has always been critical to Saskatchewan's economic prosperity. Our export-based economy is growing, with exports generating about 70 per cent of the provincial GDP [gross domestic product]. Transportation is also critical to the social prosperity of this province. People rely on our roads and highways to access vital services like health care and education. And because of the importance of the transportation system to the economic and social prosperity of

the province, it is critical that the system operate safely and efficiently.

The supplementary estimates the committee is considering today are reflective of that imperative. At fiscal mid-year, an additional \$23.1 million was allocated to the ministry for emergency road repairs related to widespread flooding this past spring and for other special projects. Today this committee is being asked to consider further supplementary estimates in the amount of \$10 million. As at mid-year, this funding is directly related to government's obligation to ensure the transportation system operates safely and efficiently.

Ensuring safe travel on provincial highways in the winter is obviously a priority for this government. Budgeting for winter snow and ice control is, however, difficult for a number of reasons. There can be a high degree of variability in the number of snow and ice events from year to year. The severity of snow and ice events affects the costs. Weather systems that impact large areas of the province cost more than local events, and the ratio of snow to ice events has an impact, ice events being two to three times more expensive to treat.

To deal with this variability and to ensure the ministry has the resources it needs to provide winter maintenance, our government's policy is to provide a base level of funding that is established on historical costs. Expenses over and above this base level of funding are dealt with through special warrants. Of the \$10 million today, 1 million is allocated to expenses in the winter maintenance program over and above the base funding level.

Another challenge that the ministry faced was the geotechnical failure on Highway 16 — the Yellowhead highway — Canada's second trans-Canada highway near Langham. The complete failure of the westbound lanes of Highway 16 was caused by record rainfalls in August that washed out infrastructure in the Langham area. Again the ministry's first priority is public safety, so the repair of this catastrophic highway failure required an immediate response. Highway 16 is of critical importance to the province. As a strategic component of the national highway system, it is important to the Western Canadian region and the country as a whole.

It was urgent for the ministry to restore four-lane service on the failed section as expeditiously as possible. Originally it was thought that this would not happen until this upcoming construction season. However with good weather and the dedicated efforts of ministry staff, contractors, and consulting engineers, four-lane service was restored fully on November 21. This achievement resulted in some \$11 million of unforeseen expenses for our ministry. Obviously it would be difficult for us to absorb this expense without impacting planned maintenance and construction. With \$9 million in these supplementary estimates combined with mid-year supplementary estimates, this shortfall has been restored to the ministry.

Our government was elected in part on our substantial commitment to transportation investment. Our commitment clearly shows that this government is focused on creating the conditions that foster economic growth today and in the future, ensuring the safety and security of Saskatchewan families, and keeping our word. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chair:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Are there any questions?

**Mr. Harper:** — Yes, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Harper.

**Mr. Harper:** — Mr. Minister, I would like to welcome you here before the committee, along with your officials. This is the first opportunity we've had to have this visit, and I'm sure we'll have this opportunity many times into the future.

In regards to the special warrant for the extra funds for winter maintenance, what caused the need for the extra funds?

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — I think the most specific answer is a general answer, and that is the complete unexpected variability of the weather this year. The winter costs associated with clearing, ice and snow removal, is established on a base level of funding that is considered over a longer period of time. We have a pretty good idea as a ministry what the averages might be, but when you have the unexpected storms that sort of took their toll on some of Saskatchewan's roads this winter, it creates considerable pressure on our financial and human resource reserves. And as a consequence, we ran short of funding.

**Mr. Harper:** — Were there any particular highways in Saskatchewan or any particular areas of the province that were affected more so than others or more dramatically than past years?

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — I'm going to ask Terry Schmidt to answer to the specifics.

**Mr. Schmidt:** — Yes, that's a very good question. What we do is when we set the budget, as the minister said, we look at the typical average cost provincial-wide. And what we've seen this year is the North has experienced more snowfall than would be an average year. And so there's been more pressures on the northern areas and the northern highways for some of the snow clearing.

We've seen about near normal or close to normal in the central areas and a little bit below normal, especially in the southwest corner, below normal snowfalls. But even some of the savings that have been realized, they were not enough to offset the incremental costs for above average snowfalls in the North.

**Mr. Harper:** — So when you're looking at your budget and going through your budgetary process, is that how you have the province divided into three areas — the North, central, and south? And would you look at historical costs and that would then play the part in your formulation of your budget?

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — The ministry is divided into the three regions of the province, and we are basing our estimates on the experience, the best experiences, of those various regions.

You know the South, as was indicated, has had very, very little snow-related episodes, especially in the southwestern quarter of the province. Southeastern to a little greater extent, but maybe not to the extent that they've experienced as a whole in years recent past. I think we can all remember times when the

Southeast was dumped on really badly, and that wasn't quite the case this year.

If we look at snowfall maps for the entire province — we've just been given one from Saskatchewan Watershed Authority — we are significantly below average in the southern part of the province. We are about average in the middle part of the province, and we're significantly above average in the upper, I would say, about 40 to 50 per cent of the province. The North takes in a vast territory, but nevertheless snowfall is significantly higher there, which has not only presented its challenges for winter maintenance but it's likely to present some real challenges come this spring when spring thaw begins.

**Mr. Harper:** — So when we say the southern part of the province versus the central part of the province, what is the dividing line?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — Well we would use approximately for the dividing line would be the South Saskatchewan River on the west side up to probably across to Davidson and Lake Diefenbaker area and Highway 1 east of Regina. We would consider that, for the most part, generally the southern part.

The central part then would be from there north, pretty much following then the grain belt area. So north of Lloydminster and the Onion Lake area, when you start hitting more of the bush country, and then kind of across through the provincial forest north of Duck Lake and then across to Hudson Bay. That's roughly the dividing area that we would divide the province up into the different climate areas and the different weather zones. And that's reflected a lot in the way we've regionally divided up the province too, for delivery in winter snow and ice services throughout the province.

**Mr. Harper:** — So the very far northern part of the province, I believe there's a highway running up to Key Lake. Would your department be responsible for the snow and ice removal on that particular highway?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — Yes, we are responsible for delivering the services for winter snow and ice maintenance on that highway up to Key Lake. However I believe there is an arrangement that dates back historically with the mine up there that there is some cost-sharing arrangements for some of the maintenance services. I don't know what those are offhand but there is a cost-sharing arrangement with the uranium mine.

**Mr. Harper:** — Okay, very good. I understand your department has also entered into agreements with RMs as far as road maintenance is concerned. I think it's something to do with the heavy-haul roads and so on and so forth. What arrangements would you have with an RM that you have turned the responsibility of maintenance of a road, a former highway, over to the RM? What responsibility do you have to ensure that they are meeting the safety standards, I guess you would say, for snow removal and ice removal?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — We do have several different arrangements for providing services. We have some arrangements with rural municipalities, and it's typically on some of our lower-volume highways whereby we enter into a contractual arrangement with them to provide summer maintenance on some roads, and in



some cases that extends to winter as well. And that is done in such a way to look at what's the most efficient way to deliver the services by pooling some of the available resources.

So by contract the RMs are held to the same standards as we would be for providing levels of service for winter maintenance on those, for how many hours they have to respond after a storm event to clear the road. In most cases these are gravel, so salt treatment and ice treatment is not part of the process. It's done through sanding and blading. And so they're under the same contractual arrangements for occupational health and safety requirements and for public safety requirements.

**Mr. Harper:** — There was an article in the paper I remember reading here a while back about a program that your department has instituted to ensure that the highways in Saskatchewan are in the best possible conditions during and perhaps after a storm by having a patrolling system. Could you elaborate on that?

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — I think you're referring to the night rider program that was implemented I think maybe two years ago already, but it didn't come into prominence until this past year. It's a program that the ministry established, operating out of three centres, Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert. Each centre has its own equipment and its own designated personnel for this specific job. They take to the roads late at night. They patrol anywhere from, I think 5 to 700 kilometres of highways in the regions around those three main centres. And as they pass the evening away, they look for specific tough travelling conditions.

If they can manage it on their own, they'll put the blade down and do the snow removal. If it looks like it's a situation that's going to be more than they individually can handle, they will also take that opportunity to contact the toll-free number, the highway hotline, with updated information, so that will provide the most current information to the travelling public as they use the hotline.

And as the evening progresses, they will file reports with their dispatcher in the centre from which they originated. That really gives the ministry personnel in those areas a heads-up, and maybe a head start in knowing where the road conditions are the most problematic and where they need to take their attention first.

And you know, it's really interesting to hear comments of the travelling public as a result of this program. You wouldn't think that you could get that much positive public response from that little investment, but it's really proved to be a very successful program. And yes, I think we would want to look at replicating that type of endeavour in other areas as finances allow.

**Mr. Harper:** — How did you come up with that name, if you don't mind me asking?

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — Night riders?

**Mr. Harper:** — Yes.

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — It's quite unique, isn't it?

**Mr. Harper:** — Well it has some history to it, yes.

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — It has some history to it but it also speaks very specifically to the what and the when is happening with the ministry personnel and their equipment.

You know, these people work all night and it's not a short night shift; it's a fairly lengthy night shift and they're out there pretty much on their own. The only thing between them and a problem is a radio.

And I'm not talking about an AM-FM radio, although they may have that too, but you know, communications with their base. And they're out there on kind of a lonely job, making sure that the information they feed back to the dispatch area is accurate and complete and is giving the ministry crews a heads-up as to where the most problem exists. And we get a head start on it.

I know people personally who drive between Moose Jaw and Regina somewhere between 5 and 7 a.m. on a regular basis and they've been pleasantly surprised to see Highways crews out working already. And they've been given a heads-up because of the night rider program.

**Mr. Harper:** — Yes. Well I think it's a good program. Don't get me wrong. I just found it interesting name because if you look back at the history, particularly in the southern US [United States], is quite a bit of history goes with that same type of name. I'll turn it over to my colleague, Cam, then.

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — We're actually putting a good spin on the night rider name.

**Mr. Harper:** — I believe you are.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Broten.

**Mr. Broten:** — Thank you, Mr. Chairperson. Thank you to the minister for answering some questions today, and thank you to the officials for coming along as well and helping out. As the minister alluded to, often the information, the details are often found in your background knowledge and your knowledge of the files, so.

I have a couple questions around the repair work done on Highway 16 with the slide there, with the slide that occurred . . . Weather does happen and we don't always, we can't always predict that; we can't always be prepared for that.

I know in my home constituency the heavy amount of rainfall we had in a very short period of time caused some enormous problems for the municipal infrastructure with the sewer. So often government just has to react and deal with what it has or been given to them through acts of God, acts of nature.

With the type of repair that is going on on Highway 16, is it simply repair that is taking it back to the current type of construction that occurred, the current formation of the land in that area? Or are there attempts being made to somehow set up the environment in that small area there that if there were heavy amounts of rainfall in the future . . . because some could argue that with climate change we might be seeing rain in higher amounts more often, and possibly droughts as well.

I know in speaking to the rain problems we had in our area, in

my constituency, I saw a graph of the rain over the last 50 years and really the heavy amounts of rain that . . . they really were outliers to what had been the trend over a good number of years. So I'm wondering if you could speak to that, what the approach is to the repair in that area.

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — I won't take the time to give you the technical information. Somebody else can do that much better than I can. But I think you're right about one thing. We have seen rather abnormal rainfalls in various parts of the province over the last couple of years, and it seems to be those episodes are more frequent than they once were.

I recall the last huge rain . . . Or maybe the first big rain that I really recall is the one that the chairman will recall in the Vanguard area where, you know, feet of rain actually fell in a short period of time and washed out railroad tracks — made pretzels out of steel, and did a lot of damage. I think the situation in Langham was maybe not as huge in terms of the downpour, but it was certainly a significant rain — highly unlikely occurrence for that area — too much rain all of a sudden that the infrastructure hadn't anticipated.

We ordinarily would build roads in a situation like that to accommodate about a 25-year rain level. We'd operate or build to that level. And I think the event there was probably significantly greater than that. It might have been a 1 in 50 year event. So the infrastructure wouldn't anticipate that kind of a situation.

Having said that, you know, it was only one failure, not many failures along the road. And thank you to the very quick response of ministry personnel, there was no loss of life, and as far as I know, no loss or damage to equipment. But we had a massive sinkhole appear in the roadbed and the side of the road washed away. And it could have been a very significant event in terms of damage or loss of life even, if we hadn't had people there to respond to the emergency in as timely a manner as was accomplished.

For the specifics as to the repair, we accomplished as a ministry quite a bit more in a short period of time than even the ministry expected, and that really brought together the goodwill of a number of parties. Everything worked. Everybody kind of jumped to the assistance of the ministry as was required to allow them to do something that they might not have achieved under ordinary circumstances. But Mr. Schmidt, I think, could fill you in on the details.

**Mr. Schmidt:** — Thank you, Minister. You're correct in that, in meetings with my colleagues across Canada and internationally and through communications and different literature, climate change is one of the top of mind issues now and the impacts that has on how we design transportation infrastructure, how we maintain and how we operate infrastructure, because it is changing. So those are top of mind issues that are being taken into effect.

And what we did in this instance, as the minister mentioned, we typically design our smaller drainage structures for a 1 in 25 year flood event. This section of Highway 16 was built in the '60s, so it had operated quite well for 40 or 50 years. And what we did when we built the second set of lanes, the westbound

lanes in the '90s, is it came to light that the old lanes had been built on an active landslide, right near the North Saskatchewan River. And so we took that opportunity to do the geotechnical due diligence, and the westbound lanes were constructed about 200 metres further south to ensure they were off of the active landslide area. And then the decision was made that we would continue to operate those lanes in the existing location until such time as it became an issue and we needed to relocate them after we did our economic analysis and risk management strategies.

This flood event, what happened was there's a large catchment area that flows into a gully, a rather deep gully that the highway crossed at this location. And with that amount of rainfall, what happened with that aging culvert is it failed the culvert, and it just started washing out around the culvert. And very quickly, with 40 feet of head and water, it just started taking the dirt and the soil and everything out. And we were fortunate enough to be able to, as the minister mentioned, identify that and close the highway down before there was any loss of life or damage.

And at that point in time we then engaged our own in-house experts and some experts from the private consulting industry in geotechnical work. And we relocated the highway further south again so that it is off of the active landslide area. And we've taken some measures too to ensure that the drainage is more positive now with the new culverts and things like that. We also undertook some work, some restoration work to remove parts of the old highway to ensure that the mitigation there is in place to mitigate the risk to the railway line that's still on the active landslide area as well.

So those were all incorporated as part of the design. The highway is now located off of the active landslide area. And we've taken mitigation risks to reduce the active slide area as well.

**Mr. Broten:** — Thank you for that information. In your responses you talked about, when doing planning, when doing repairs, construction, you plan for the rainfall that happens once every 25 years. If, with this repair and other repairs, if in the coming years we see an increased amount of high level rainfalls, would you consider using a different benchmark in terms of establishing what the requirements are for construction?

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — I think the engineering fraternity are starting to evaluate the necessity to do that kind of thing, you know, as these incidents — which once were isolated and now are seeming much more commonplace — start to add up.

And there's good reason to believe that, if we're going to continue to see this kind of thing, what was the normal standard will be insufficient. We may have to build to a higher standard. I don't know that those engineering standards have been achieved yet. I don't know if they've been decided on as part of design criteria.

But I think the fraternity, the engineering fraternity and other science practitioners are very keenly aware of the impact that these climate change events are going to have in the future. And so, you know, if prudence is the best policy, we will start designing infrastructure to address that. Maybe Mr. Schmidt

knows more specifically about that, but anything I have read would suggest that the engineering fraternity is very aware of this and are starting to consider the implications for their designs.

As an off the top example I'd like to throw out, I understand that it's recently been decided that there is an earthquake potential on the Prairies. Now we never think of earthquake as being something that we have to attend to or concern ourselves with, but for engineers a very real issue now is, do they build buildings to withstand earthquake shock? Do they build those design capabilities into the project? And now that this seems to be an accepted fact, that there is earthquake potential here, any engineer that doesn't do that might be considered remiss in his responsibilities.

**Mr. Schmidt:** — I can expand on that a little bit, and as I mentioned this is top of mind things, and we've been working as a national association through the Transportation Association of Canada, which Saskatchewan is a member of, and it's taken on an importance level such that we've established for example, subcommittees to look at permafrost. And just that climate change is having its impacts on permafrost on some of the northern roads that we build, and the impacts that's having. These areas are no longer frozen for 12 months of the year any more, so the permafrost underneath starts melting and that impacts.

Along coastal regions where we're seeing more and more storms, where some of the highways are now starting to actually fall into the ocean. And we're even having discussions about . . . Typically we use historical rain events for determining 1 in 25 year flood. Is that still the right thing to do, to use historical numbers or should we be starting to forecast that now 1 in 25 year flood is different than the historical trends?

So these things are all being taken into consideration at not only the provincial level, but we're involved nationally and internationally on some of these projects as well.

**Mr. Broten:** — Thank you. For the vote 17 there's a reference to addressing public safety concerns. In your answers to my questions about the Highway 16 landslide, you mentioned a gully. So obviously you knew the lifespan of this piece of road. You knew that there was a gully here and if in a heavy rain, this might be an area that could go through the sinkhole or some other way.

Out of the additional funding that has been requested here, is there a portion of that or what portion of that is going to areas where you might be aware of a similar situation on another highway? Because perhaps it could be argued that it's easier to put some money in before the incident occurs because then there's not . . . the extent of the damage might not be as great. And also you don't lose the economic activity while a road is down, and there's not the safety concerns to the same level. So are there places where this funding is going to address concerns such as those?

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — Mr. Chair, the question is well taken except for a couple of facts that I want to address. First of all, the ministry wasn't aware of the fact that there was a sinkhole there. We had no reason to believe that it was an active

landslide area. It was precipitated by the unusual weather event. And in consequence of that, we now know that there's a problem there, and that's why we relocated that section of road.

The other thing is that going forward I want you to know that in the short time I've been minister here, the one thing that has impressed me the most about this ministry and the leadership of this ministry by the gentlemen with me today is that they always say safety is our first consideration. Cost is important, but safety is always our first consideration. And you know if we ever step back from that mantra we would be, I suppose, legitimately subject to all kinds of legal action. People expect us to take safety seriously. And so that's always going to be built into our projects going forward.

There are some projects that are aging around the province where safety was not as big a concern. We've heard about a few of them, where early projects didn't maybe realize the implications of the speed of modern day traffic or the width of the road. Or the sightlines that were built into a particular piece of road weren't adequate to address today's traffic volumes and conditions. So as we move forward, we are very deliberate. This ministry is very conscientious about designing safety into the project first.

However the money that we're seeking today is not for future projects. It's to compensate for the cost of the project already built. The ministry absorbed all of the cost of that project, virtually, and because the ministry did, it made it tough on them to do other projects that they had scheduled. So we're really just, through this supplementary estimate, recouping money that was rightfully deigned for the ministry.

**Mr. Broten:** — Thank you very much. That's all I have.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Furber.

**Mr. Furber:** — Yes, welcome. We're half an hour in but my first opportunity to chat and welcome to the minister and his officials. I'd like to ask a question in light of safety, being the first consideration, and addressing public safety concerns, being part of vote 17.

There was a situation in my community this week that precipitated having the bridge shut down for a period of time which caused grave concern in terms of safety for the people that live in my community. And I'm wondering if the minister would share his opinion on whether or not he thinks that, in light of that and other concerns, that Prince Albert might be in line to have a second bridge to address the safety concerns.

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — Well the member will appreciate that he's wandered a fair distance off of this particular vote, but I think I'll indulge him and will try and answer the question because, you know, I think the . . . I assume you're talking about the Prince Albert bridge, and I'm not familiar with the fact that . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . pardon me?

**A Member:** — It's the Diefenbaker Bridge.

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — I'm not familiar with the fact that it was closed down this past week or so.

But, you know, we have in this province a \$1 billion deficit in infrastructure. That is an accumulated deficit that is going to be very challenging to compensate or overcome. The municipalities come and talk to us on a regular basis asking us about bridges in their communities. The ministry has compiled a list of all the bridges and culverts and . . . both large and small bridges and culverts in the province and have assessed the need for repair or replacement as urgent. And we need to take that seriously.

Most of our infrastructure of that nature was erected in the 1960s. They are usually built for a 40- to 45- maybe 50-year life span. Well guess what? We're there. And a lot of that infrastructure is absolutely in need of renewal. So without commenting specifically about your bridge and your community's need for a bridge, I can tell you that that is an area of very real concern for me personally and for our ministry.

I have seen pictures of bridges in this province that fail when heavy traffic crossed it. I don't want that to happen under my watch. I don't think our government wants it to happen under our watch. And so I think we're going to be very conscientious about addressing the bridge infrastructure issues in the days and years to come.

**Mr. Furber:** — Thank you.

**Mr. Harper:** — I believe that's all the questions we have right now, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** — Seeing no more questions, vote 16, Highways and Infrastructure, operation of transportation system, subvote (HI10) in the amount of \$1 million, is that agreed?

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

**The Chair:** — I'll now ask a member to move the following motion:

That it be resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31, 2008, the following sum, \$1,000,000.

Can I have a member to move that?

**Mr. Harrison:** — I so move.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Harrison. Is that agreed?

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

**The Chair:** — Carried.

[Vote 16 agreed to.]

**General Revenue Fund  
Supplementary Estimates — March  
Highways and Infrastructure Capital  
Vote 17**

**Subvote (HC02)**

**The Chair:** — Vote 17, Highways and Infrastructure capital,

infrastructure enhancement, subvote (HC02) in the amount of \$9 million, is that agreed?

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

**The Chair:** — I'll now ask someone to move the following motion:

That it be resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31, 2008, the following sum, which to the extent that they remain unexpended for that fiscal year are also granted for the fiscal year ending on March 31, 2009, and the sum is \$9,000,000.

Could I have somebody move that?

**Ms. Wilson:** — I move that.

**The Chair:** — Is that agreed?

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

[Vote 17 agreed to.]

**The Chair:** — That concludes our business for the committee for today. I'd like to thank the minister and officials for being here and answering questions. Mr. Harper.

**Mr. Harper:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I also would like to thank the minister and his officials here for answering our questions, and we're looking forward to our next get-together. Thank you.

**Hon. Mr. Elhard:** — Thank you.

**The Chair:** — Thank you. And I will declare the committee is now adjourned until we sit tomorrow. And advise committee members that tomorrow we're in the Chamber at 3:30 and not down here. So 3:30 in the Chamber tomorrow. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 16:37.]