



STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE

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[The committee met at 16:34.]

The Chair: — Hello everyone, and welcome to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Justice. I'm Mark Docherty. I'm the Chair. Subbing in for Betty Nippi-Albright . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . oh, Erika Ritchie, thank you. In the committee here I've got Gary Grewal, Travis Keisig, Tim McLeod, Lisa Lambert, and Greg Ottenbreit.

**General Revenue Fund
Tourism Saskatchewan
Vote 88**

Subvote (TR01)

The Chair: — Today we'll be considering the estimates for Tourism Saskatchewan. We'll begin our consideration with vote 88, Tourism Saskatchewan, subvote (TR01). Minister Harrison is here with his officials. And as a reminder to officials, please state your name for the record before speaking. And please don't touch the microphones, and the Hansard operator will turn them on for you when you speak. Minister, please introduce your officials and make your opening comments.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Sure. Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. And thank you to members of the committee for being here this evening for estimates of Tourism Saskatchewan. I appreciate this opportunity to talk about the province's tourism sector and some of the work Tourism Saskatchewan will undertake this year.

It's my pleasure to introduce Tourism Saskatchewan's CEO [chief executive officer], Jonathan Potts. And Jonathan is joined by colleagues Amy McInnis, exec director of marketing and communications; Tracy Breher, executive director of destination and workforce development; and Kathy Rintoul, chief financial officer.

Saskatchewan's tourism sector has endured two years of fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. In that time we also saw many operators pivot and employ creative approaches to challenges. Their persistence and determination inspired others to look for ways to adapt and stay open.

It's time now to focus on more than just recouping losses and returning to the status quo. We need to pull out all of the stops to grow the visitor economy, exceed pre-pandemic travel spending, elevate the quality of experiences, and be a competitive, must-visit destination.

Saskatchewan's growth plan sets an ambitious goal of a 50 per cent increase in tourist expenditures by 2030, a jump from \$2.4 billion to \$3.6 billion annually. Tourism Saskatchewan is laser focused on achieving this goal and has solid strategies and bold plans to grow the industry, increase travel spending, and expand job and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, local travel helped compensate for declines in other markets such as international visitors. Tourism Saskatchewan put considerable effort into encouraging Saskatchewan residents to take road trips, try new activities, and make discoveries in different parts of the province. We saw people engaging in outdoor activities and enjoying all four

seasons like never before.

The Conference Board of Canada affirms that "travellers are adjusting both practically and psychologically to taking trips in the era of COVID-19." There are encouraging signs pointing to tourism recovery. According to Destination Canada's *Resident Sentiment* report for April the 5th, over 70 per cent of Saskatchewan residents feel safe travelling within the province.

Saskatchewan's outfitting industry faces a challenging road to recovery. The closure of the Canada-US [United States] border for a year and a half meant that most outfitters lost two full seasons of business. Outfitting is a lucrative industry and traditionally generates \$129 million annually, mostly in export dollars. Its primary market is US anglers and hunters, many of whom have been travelling here year after year for the unparalleled fishing and outdoor adventures. The downturn has had a serious ripple effect, hurting local businesses and suppliers and causing job losses for residents of northern communities.

Throughout the pandemic, Tourism Saskatchewan led marketing initiatives and precisely targeted campaigns to keep Saskatchewan visible and on the radar in key US markets. It was imperative to let consumers know that Saskatchewan hospitality and experiences continue to be as remarkable as ever, and we were eager to welcome back visitors. A concentrated focus on US anglers and hunters is fundamental to reviving travel in northern Saskatchewan and fortifying a struggling outfitting sector.

A partnership between Tourism Saskatchewan and Travel Manitoba will see concentrated focus on activities to appeal to repeat clientele and entice new customers from the United States. This is intended to be a multi-year commitment. The partners are currently working on a plan that will amplify investment and achieve common goals.

The hospitality industry endured serious challenges throughout the pandemic. Tourism Saskatchewan works closely with Hospitality Saskatchewan and participated in summer and winter campaigns that encouraged residents to plan staycations and treat themselves to the comforts of top-notch accommodations without travelling far from home.

In addition to these campaigns, there has been a strong push to urge properties and businesses to create travel offers — packages that provide incentives to visit and make trip planning easy. Reviving a busy calendar of live events, hosting conventions, and helping business travel to rebound is vital to increasing visitor spending. Through Tourism Saskatchewan's marketing and events partnership program, assistance is available to business events, an incentive to travel activities that align with the province's key economic sectors.

2022 will be a big year, signalling the return of many annual festivals and traditions along with some major events happening in Saskatchewan. People are looking forward to opportunities to reconnect with friends, enjoy performances, and cheer on their favourite teams.

There's already great anticipation for the 2022 Grey Cup festival in November. Tourism Saskatchewan's partnership with the

Saskatchewan Roughriders includes a series of 10 videos that will highlight a variety of tourism partners and experiences throughout the province and bring profile to sectors hardest hit by the pandemic. They will be featured during home games on the SaskTel MaxTron and on various Roughrider and Tourism Saskatchewan online platforms. These videos will bring profile to struggling industries and will encourage people to travel the province and enjoy experiences here at home. A summer-long mobile campaign will challenge travellers to check in at Saskatchewan experiences across the province and be eligible for the grand prize, a Grey Cup experience package.

Tourism Saskatchewan continues to work closely with the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada and implement recommendations from the Indigenous tourism strategy that was completed in 2020. An announcement will be made soon about the formation of a new Indigenous tourism association in Saskatchewan.

A close relationship with Indigenous partners and operators is helping the industry navigate the journey to delivering export-ready experiences as well as gain the attention of world media outlets. One example is the role that Tourism Saskatchewan played in getting *Canadian Geographic* and *Smithsonian Magazine* to cover the announcement at Wanuskewin Heritage Park about the discovery of four ancient petroglyphs. Tourism Saskatchewan created a compelling video that was part of the announcement package and worked well in advance with a number of media. The effort helped tell the remarkable story and garner international headlines.

In the 2022-23 budget the Government of Saskatchewan clearly reaffirmed its commitment to tourism. A significant increase in funding to Tourism Saskatchewan will expedite recovery of the visitor economy and build a tourism sector that is stronger and better than before the pandemic and resilient to future threats.

I want to share a few examples of the work Tourism Saskatchewan is undertaking to speed recovery and ensure that Saskatchewan is competitive, can attract its fair share of visitors, and is a place where tourism entrepreneurs and workers are empowered.

Tourism Saskatchewan's restart marketing strategy will continue to guide actions in the months ahead. It's a playbook for navigating these unpredictable times, coming out stronger than ever, and gaining a competitive advantage. Tourism Saskatchewan leads a number of application-based programs that encourage operators to diversify their products, appeal to new markets, promote their attractions and events, and expand into shoulder . . . into winter seasons. Working with industry to increase the number of export-ready operators in the province will have wide-reaching benefits. Developing high-quality niche experiences will lead to more visitors, higher spending and jobs, will enrich communities, create destination clusters, and make Saskatchewan more inviting to travellers from near and far.

A robust, skilled workforce is critical to tourism recovery. Staff reduction and business closures during the pandemic caused many service and hospitality workers to shift careers. More than ever, tools and programs are needed to empower the people who remain working in tourism and help businesses recruit and retain staff.

Tourism Saskatchewan will dedicate resources to broadening awareness about the rewarding careers in tourism and the opportunities for advancement. The work of Tourism Saskatchewan's education division is fundamental to addressing industry-wide shortages. Its acclaimed Ready to Work program has been under way for more than 30 years. Training has been offered in over 50 Saskatchewan communities, ranging from cities to remote northern villages to First Nations. Ready to Work's success is evident in the numbers — more than 5,600 participants, an average completion rate of over 85 per cent, and more than 80 per cent finding employment or returning to school.

I appreciate the time that has been afforded to discussing Tourism Saskatchewan's work. I thank you for your attention, and we look forward to questions.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Ms. Ritchie, the floor is yours.

Ms. Ritchie: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thank you to the minister for his opening remarks. I'm going to be asking some questions here today, I guess, in part just to fill some gaps in my own knowledge since I don't normally cover this file. And I'm looking forward to an engaging conversation and learning more about Tourism Saskatchewan. But I'll maybe start some with some basic questions on vote 88.

[16:45]

I guess, as you noted, there's a substantial effort under way here to recover from two years of the industry being constrained due to the pandemic, and with that we see a \$5 million increase over last year that's fairly substantial. It represents a 34 per cent increase. I wonder if you could provide a bit of a breakdown for me in terms of where those additional monies are going to be directed.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Sure. Appreciate the question. Maybe I'll give the kind of high-level breakdown as to where the \$5 million will be allocated within Tourism and then maybe I'll ask Jonathan if he wants to speak to some of the more granular initiatives that will be the result of this increased funding. But the member is correct in pointing out that there has been a very substantial increase in Tourism Saskatchewan's budget this year. And that's very much a reflection of the understanding the government has that there has been a disproportionate impact in this sector because of COVID-19, and that necessitated and required an additional investment for government to get the sector back on track.

And with regard to the \$5 million line item itself, the majority, \$2.89 million, will be going to marketing and communications initiatives, and that supports marketing and advertising and event funding. \$1.23 million goes to destination and workforce development, which supports career awareness and industry-development grant programs, and 0.88 million goes to the executive office and corporate services, which primarily supports the organization's digital priorities.

But maybe I'll turn it over to Jonathan to maybe speak in a bit more detail.

Mr. Potts: — Sure. Thank you, Minister, and thank you

everyone for having our team here tonight or this evening. I'd like to apologize, especially to the people on my left who might have looked at my black eye, which I caught a baseball with yesterday. So just wanted to clarify where that came from.

In any event, to your question, we will be putting 2.5 million this year into new market developments. So the minister mentioned our restart marketing strategy. Central to that strategy is our efforts to target new and sometimes existing markets, but to a greater degree than we have in the past, high-yield markets that will come from long-haul Canadian markets, the US, and overseas.

And the minister mentioned in the growth plan that we have an aggressive target, and that's part of where we're going with this increased funding, is to really look at high-yield markets that aren't necessarily great in numbers, in terms of the number of visitors, but are substantial in terms of the amount they spend per person. So we don't want to be a high-volume destination; we want to be a high-yield destination.

On that note, the minister mentioned the hunting and fishing sector and its disproportionate impact that it has taken over the last two years. We're increasing our funding for that area to try and get more US anglers and hunters to come back to Saskatchewan. So you know, there are still some challenges there with the border, and perceptions of the border as well, but you know, we're confident that we'll start to see a good return of American visitors this year.

We're also increasing our co-operative marketing funding. So we do have a substantial co-operative marketing program wherein we allow or we provide adjudicated funding to the industry for things like marketing, obviously, of their experiences; for improvements to their digital marketing techniques, their websites, and so forth; and as well to market research so that they understand their markets better.

We're increasing funding for events, and again the events industry has taken a substantial hit over the last couple of years for obvious reasons. But it is coming back this year, you know, perhaps not in full force, but it is with a lot of gusto if I may say so. So we're seeing most if not all of our major events, you know, trying to get back to where they were pre-pandemic and doing so with enthusiasm. So if you think of things like music festivals, you know, they're really looking to gear up this year.

We're also putting more money into our development programs. So our marketing side of our organization is probably the most obvious and well understood, but our destination and workforce development division is a critical piece of what we do. In order to get where we want to get to in terms of visitor expenditures for the province, we need to also increase the number and quality of experiences in Saskatchewan. So we've introduced a couple of programs over the last couple of years, focused on providing assistance to industry members that want to either develop new markets or new revenue streams and look for ways to attract higher spending markets. So we've seen quite a bit of early success with that program, and you know, we'll continue to do that with some increased funding. Those are a few of the areas certainly that we're focused on, and I guess I'll leave it at that for now.

Ms. Ritchie: — Thank you. That brought up a whole swath of questions and follow-up. I'll try to get through as many as I can here. So maybe you could just start off by elaborating for me a little bit on what you consider as high yield.

Mr. Potts: — Sure, so I'll use outfitting as an example. So the outfitting market for us is our highest yielding market, our highest spending market per person. If you look at the highest end lodges, for example in northern Saskatchewan for fishing, hunting, maybe in different parts of the province, American travellers will spend perhaps upwards or between 5 and \$10,000 American, priced in American dollars, to come for a world-class experience in Saskatchewan. So whether that's big game hunting, whether that's fishing for northern pike, walleye, lake trout, Arctic grayling, etc., it's experiences that compare favourably to any experience they could find anywhere in the world. So when we say high yield, that's what we're talking about.

So when we look at . . . You know, I talked about some other high-yield markets we're interested in. So just as an example, you know, night skies — I can't remember the term we're using now, but astro-tourism it might be; I can't quite recall at the moment — where there are people who will travel for dark skies, for unique experiences that they can receive. And Saskatchewan has two very well-known dark sky preserves in the Southwest with good visitor experiences around them, and we want to encourage more development in the area to help attract and keep those types of visitors to those areas.

Ms. Ritchie: — I think you're referring to Old Man on His Back night preserve. Maybe that's not quite the name either, but I've had the privilege of taking in that particular attraction, if you can call it that. But it's definitely a very beautiful part of the province and certainly a prime destination. Good work being done there by Nature Conservancy Canada.

So this is kind of fun because it overlaps with one of my other critic portfolios. Obviously tourism is based on a lot of people looking to get out in nature, taking in the abundant wildlife and conservation attractions we have across the province. And so I think I'm really going to enjoy this next couple of hours. So in terms of the hunting and angling — and it's sort of, you mentioned, a highest yield market — can you put some numbers around that? Like what's the average amount per person that that brings in?

Mr. Potts: — Okay, thanks. Average amount per person, it might be a challenge to tell you exact numbers. So different lodges obviously price pretty differently. So there's sort of entry level to sort of a mid-range to very high-end experiences.

We don't always get the data on how many people are at each lodge, spending each amount. But I can tell you this, that US angling and hunting licences were approaching 25,000 in 2019. Spending is as high as about 200 million for the sector. So if my math works out, I want to say that's \$8,000 per person, but I might be off on that. So I might have added an extra zero.

More importantly, I guess, is that we offer a range of experiences. What we try to do is if we can hook people — and pardon the pun — but if we can hook people to come for, you know, if it's an entry-level experience, as they sort of progress through their

life cycle and, you know, reach . . . If they come in their 30s, for example, maybe they're in the family stage of their lives. And they eventually hit their 50s and are maybe more financially secure and able to desire a high-end experience. We love to see that progression of people moving through and becoming regular visitors.

So when we talk about high yield, one of the nice things about that market is it's very loyal. So once people have been here, they tend to come back, whether it's every year, every second year, or what have you. But they tend to want to come back. They tend to build relationships with the operators, with the outfitters. And it's a very . . . both a lucrative market but also one that, as the minister touched on, employs a substantial number of people in northern Saskatchewan in particular, which is very important as well.

Ms. Ritchie: — Sure. Yes, of course. But I'm interested to understand how, as a ministry or Crown corp, you are sort of forecasting the revenue for the sector. Like you know, what's the basis of estimates and forecasts and how do you go about doing that?

Mr. Potts: — So you know, we do a substantial amount of market research on our clients coming from the US, again because it is such an important market and for a variety of reasons. Our research agency of record is Environics who, I must say, provide incredible insights into that market, into the motivations and values of that market.

So when we look at, you know, what our investments in that area will do, we focus on consumer marketing, so digital marketing primarily in the US. We do some, a little bit of TV here and there, but we also do a substantial amount with outdoor media, so things like *MidWest Outdoors* — which is a popular hunting and fishing magazine, digital and print, in the US — targets our key market, speaks their language, very trusted source of information. So we'll bring up writers, for example, from those types of publications to, you know, publish stories in those journals about Saskatchewan.

So our investments, you know, we're not always able to do a direct, linear tracking. Sometimes we are if it's focused on a particular lodge. So I can tell you one outfitter a number of years ago, we did have media up there. He told me directly that he had 200 bookings that year as a result of the story that ran on his business.

So those are the types of things that we look for. You know, the experiences are very specific to each lake or each outfitting camp. But if we can build that notion and that brand in the US of Saskatchewan being the best place for freshwater fishing and for big game hunting and bird hunting in North America, we've done our job. We've set the table for the industry to follow up.

Ms. Ritchie: — You mentioned some challenges and specifically some border challenges, I guess, with sort of the reopening. But I'm wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on what other unique challenges are being experienced as part of this reopening.

Mr. Potts: — Sure. So there's a few things obviously as we reopen that are challenging. You know, the loss of air service.

We lost the Minneapolis flight early in the pandemic. That's a key pipeline — I'll just come back to outfitting for the moment — a key pipeline for Americans to come to specifically Saskatchewan as a staging location for their trips further north. So you know, roughly 95 per cent of people that headed to northern Saskatchewan camps prior to the pandemic typically came through Saskatoon first. So obviously the loss of that flight, which like I say, is a pipeline for American visitors, is a challenge.

[17:00]

That's one perception. You know, perception bedevils us in some ways. So as you can appreciate, the American media is not always accurate in its portrayals of, you know, what's happening in Canada, much as media portrayals anywhere could be a little bit skewed. So the perception that Canada is still closed is a challenge. You know, people don't . . . They're not seeing Canadian media all the time. They're seeing an odd story here and there that will shape their perceptions.

So we know that reality and perception is not the same in terms of our American market coming across the border. We know that they think . . . Many people in our hunting and fishing circles believe that the border is still closed or that they'll have some of the same challenges they would have had a year or two ago when they crossed the border. Certainly there are real challenges that still exist. It's not as open as, you know, it has been in the past, and that is a challenge for some people that want to cross, right? So you know, there's no getting around that.

So you know, hopefully as we move forward, we'll see the border continue to open up and we'll be able to get that message across. But that's a problem not just for Saskatchewan. That's a problem for all of Canada and I need to stress that.

Ms. Ritchie: — Of course. So you mentioned, you know, a lot of advertising in various outlets across the US. Is that part of the messaging, just to sort of educate and inform?

Mr. Potts: — It is. You know, we need to focus on our key messages which, you know, again are the best place for freshwater fishing and for hunting and so forth. That is certainly part of a supporting message, but it's not the front-and-centre message because we need to sell people to come here in the first place. That's the critical role that we play.

With that said, of course, anything we can do to help change those perceptions . . . We send people to shows in the US to places like Dallas, Vegas, you know, at times Michigan and elsewhere. That's certainly part of the one-on-one conversations that we have as well as that we are open for business.

Ms. Ritchie: — Now you mentioned that there was an airline that ended up having to discontinue their flights into Saskatoon. I recall a number of years ago we used to have a flight . . . You know, United was flying straight into Saskatoon. They no longer do that. Are there any efforts being focused on improving that pipeline? Or what is currently . . . If those are no longer available, how are tourists from the US making their way to Saskatchewan right now?

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Sure, maybe I'll provide a bit of a

response and then Jonathan can correct me afterwards. But you know, we have been working with our airport authorities who really are the point of contact in attracting and working with airlines to provide air access to markets in the United States. And I would say, and I think that the airport authorities would say as well, that it really is a very high priority for them, and on the part of government working with the airport authorities, for them to be successful in attracting destination . . . or carriers that will go to particularly US hub cities. That is just vitally important for our outfitting sector, but I think in a more broad context, it's very, very important for the province.

So we have been working with our airport authorities on that. The airport authorities, I think have been, it's fair to say, have been working very, very diligently on this. And I think it's also fair to say have made some very significant progress. And we'll likely have some more to say about that in the probably close future on some of those matters, so I'm not going to pre-empt that.

But that all being said, it has been a challenge given the policy direction that the federal government has provided in this space which has really disallowed and put our airports behind the eight ball as compared to other comparable airports in other provinces. And I would say that . . . I would characterize it as being incredibly unfair and entirely arbitrary in that the federal government have mandated that Saskatchewan airports were not open to international arrivals far beyond the point at which they needed to be even in a charitable interpretation of circumstances close to international arrivals, especially when that is lined up with other airports and comparable markets that had been open for months prior to our airports being given authority by the Trudeau government to reopen internationally.

So you know, we have engaged on this at the highest political level. And frankly I find it being . . . I find it hard to find any credible explanation other than petty partisan politics on the part of the national government for keeping our airports closed. And I think others would share that. I'm not going to ascribe those views to all, but I think that that would be the view of a lot of folks who know more about the industry than I do, that it was entirely arbitrary and politically motivated. So that was very, very problematic.

In addition to that, you know, we've just had some other obstacles in that space that have been put forward by the Government of Canada. The main one though just has been the closure of those airports, the international arrivals. But I really do want to give a lot of credit to our airport authorities who, despite all of those obstacles thrown in front of them, just kept working away at it and making the case and making the case and making the case based on data and based on good sense and based on facts as to why there was no reason for the airports to continue to be closed by the Government of Canada, ultimately successful in making that case. But Jonathan, I'm not sure if you want to add anything additionally, feel free.

Mr. Potts: — Yeah. No, I think, Minister, you've covered that off quite well. So I'll let that stand. Thank you.

Ms. Ritchie: — And so are there currently any federal transportation barriers limiting travel for tourism into Saskatchewan presently or have those all been removed?

Mr. Potts: — So federal, I mean any federal barriers obviously are to coming into Canada as a whole, right? So yeah, obviously there are still some testing requirements and so forth for international travellers, especially if you're unvaccinated, you know. And when I speak to an American market, obviously vaccination rates are lower so that can create more of a problem, especially when people travel in groups.

So with our American market obviously they're up, many times they come up in groups of, you know, six to eight or so on. So the odds are somebody in that group is going to be unvaccinated. So it can be a challenge, again going back to my comments about perception, you know, and perceived fairness amongst the group or within the group that they should all be treated the same.

So you know, without delving into the politics of it, I think it's just those kinds of challenges that we face from a marketing perspective.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Yeah, and I would just add to that as well and echo the vaccination requirement which we believe needs to be removed. But you know, just again kind of going back to that arbitrary extension of the inability of our international airports, including losing the designation of being an international airport and the damage that that has done as far as reputation and otherwise, to partners we had worked with or those who had travelled here before, has been significant. And the lag between our airports being allowed to accept international visitors compared to other visitors means that we were further behind even in working with carriers who would be interested otherwise or maybe had before, had service into this market.

So I mean you just see it reflected in the passenger totals, right? I mean Saskatoon Airport Authority as an example, down, you know, 70 per cent of pre-pandemic travel. That's, you know, explainable to a degree but, you know, it didn't have to be that high. And it's a result of policy choices that were made by the Government of Canada.

So you know, I think we've probably canvassed this in detail at this point, but it's a frustration for me and it's a frustration, I think, for a lot of folks who are in this space that have done really good work in moving the ball down the field here but, you know, it's hard when you're up against, you know, up against what we were up against.

Ms. Ritchie: — And not to belabour this for too much longer, but I just had one quick follow-up question. It's my understanding that the international airport status has been reinstated now, but you've still got this extra challenge of carriers flying direct to Saskatoon. So in the absence of that, how are tourists able to reach these destinations from the United States?

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — I mean they have to go through another city primarily. I mean that's the reason. So you add in, you know, additional legs on flights which might take, you know, potential clients if you're an outfitting business, you know, hundreds of kilometres out of the way in order to get to a place where they had previously been able to get to directly. And that just really, you know, operates as a incentive to either reallocate those resources or go somewhere else. And that really has been problematic.

And you know, we didn't actually have our international flights resumed until like December I think or very end of November of 2021. So they have not even had the capacity to re-enter the Canadian market in the way, you know, the way that airlines are, you know, putting in place new routes and making these decisions. It's highly competitive. Even within capital resource, plane allocations within airlines themselves is highly competitive. And you know, the fact we were behind where other jurisdictions already were as far as uncertainty as to what the future was going to look like has just really made it very, very challenging.

So like I said, we are working as government very closely with our airport authorities, but they really are the front line of working with carriers and attracting new routes into the communities which they are responsible for. So we are there, very much supportive and working with them, and I want to say, though, they have been very, very diligent in working in this direction, but really have had hands tied behind their back for much of the past year and a half, two years.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay. Well let's move on then. Next you talked about co-operative marketing funding and adjudicated funding. I wonder if you could expand on that for me please, just to understand that adjudication process. And you know, are these non-repayable loans, or how does that funding mechanism work?

Mr. Potts: — Our marketing and event partnership program, as an example, you know, we've had a program like that for longer than I've been at Tourism Saskatchewan, which is approaching 16 years. I actually used to, when I was in the industry, sit on the committee that adjudicated back in the day. So it's a long-standing program. It's understood that, you know, 95 per cent of tourism businesses in the province are small and medium enterprises, medium-sized enterprises. They typically don't have the dollars necessary to do the types of marketing that they need to do, especially if they want to reach new markets or expand who's coming and so forth. So you know, a program like that has existed in one form or another for quite some time now to help the industry, you know, like I say, just reach its clientele and potential clientele.

The program itself this past year, we, I think, hit 980,000 in funding. The industry needs to put up at a minimum 50 per cent of the dollars for their investment, for their marketing investment. There are several requirements in their applications that they need to meet, obviously a bit of a marketing plan, you know, identifying where and how they're going to spend the money, and giving us some assurance that it's clearly going to be spent properly. We have an internal committee that adjudicates, looks at the different aspects of their plan, and makes recommendations on a scale for each operator as to what funding they should receive.

[17:15]

So yeah, it's been again a very successful program. I can tell you again because I've been in the industry for a long time. Speaking to an operator a couple of months ago, you know, was very, very appreciative of receiving funding this past fiscal year because it allowed them to promote their marina into new markets, and they were able to expand their business and actually have one of the best years they'd ever had because people were looking for

outdoor experiences during the pandemic. So it's been a very successful program for us.

Ms. Ritchie: — Do you report out publicly how much businesses receive?

Mr. Potts: — Do we report individual businesses or do you mean aggregate?

Ms. Ritchie: — Well I'm asking like is there an annual report where you list sort of all the recipients.

Mr. Potts: — The only thing you would see I believe is anything over \$50,000, which is not typical for that program. Actually it doesn't happen in that program. Our max is 15,000 right now. So typically we don't report on all the businesses that receive funding.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay, yeah. And further to that, how many businesses received funding out of that 980,000 that you mentioned? And is there a limit on sort of year over year? Like, how many times can a business apply?

Mr. Potts: — So to your first question, 123 businesses received funding. No, there is no limit. We used to have some limits just so that we're not viewed as a bank that the industry just relies on to do the same thing, year in, year out. We try to assist the industry to innovate on a yearly basis in terms of its marketing approach. You know, clearly if you look around the room, we're all attached to our digital devices nowadays and that's where a lot of the best marketing occurs. And you know, Tourism Saskatchewan does this. Destination-marketing organizations around the world are working with their industries to try to modernize their marketing techniques.

So we try to in our adjudication favour those that are, you know, moving forward, advancing, and so forth. So it doesn't become a reliable source of funding I guess to do the same thing year over year. We look for innovation. We look for new markets. We look for things of that nature.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay. You talked about supporting events as well. That was sort of the third item you mentioned. Have those events been identified? What's the plan there?

Mr. Potts: — So we have an event strategy that's been in place since, I want to say 2013. I believe that's the right year. So our marketing event partnership program works with the smaller events, so some of that 980,000 is speaking to smaller events in the province.

When we bring in larger events — so you think of major national, international curling events and so forth — those are typically beyond the scope of that program. So it's often, you know, it's a request to the government for additional funding for those types of events to bring, because they do bring increased profile to Saskatchewan, returns on investment that we couldn't achieve with our program, and so forth. So there's sort of two scales to what we do with events.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay. I'm really curious about the workforce development component you referred to. Can you tell me what that looks like?

Mr. Potts: — Sure. So on the workforce side, and I might ask Tracy to come up here in a moment, but the workforce development side we . . . When Tourism Saskatchewan was formed, I believe in 1995 legally and then effectively came together in 1996, one of the partner organizations that came together was part of the provincial government. It was the tourism association for the province, and it was something called STEC, or the Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council. We kept that brand. We have kept that brand for a long time since. So it provides training and education to the industry.

You know, some of the programs that we offer . . . I think of our Ready to Work program. It is a program that is largely federally funded, so we have to periodically apply for funding for that program. It typically trains people who might have had challenges getting into the workforce for a variety of reasons — so they might live in northern Saskatchewan, they might be new Canadians, and so forth — and provides them an opportunity to sort of do a bit of wraparound training to get into the industry, so things like, you know, being a server, working in a kitchen, and so forth. That's been tremendously successful.

And you know, our measurement of success, and I'll maybe let Tracy again speak to that in a moment but our measure of success for that is typically the number of people employed after six months, after they complete the program. So it's been very, very effective for a number of years.

We also have programs like Serve It Right, where over 40,000 people in Saskatchewan have been trained over the years. That's on the responsible service of alcohol delivery. Obviously a very critical piece, when you look at the hospitality industry, to make sure that people are not being over-served that are . . . you know, the establishments are controlling what happens in the sale of alcohol to their patrons.

So if I can go . . . Tracy, do you want to speak any more to that?

Ms. Breher: — You did pretty well.

Mr. Potts: — Okay.

Ms. Ritchie: — So maybe you could also tell me then, how much is apportioned to the Ready to Work program this year.

Mr. Potts: — I might need a moment, if you don't mind. So sorry for the delay, but I just wanted to make sure I had my facts straight. So typically our contribution is primarily in kind, if you will. It's our staff that provides the training, so it really doesn't affect our budget significantly. But as mentioned, and this is where I wanted to get the names right, our funding comes from Northern Career Quest, the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training provincially, and Service Canada, so two federal bodies and one provincial.

And it ranges from year to year. So we can, you know . . . I think we've got 13 projects, if I'm not mistaken, lined up for the current fiscal year. But you know, in the last couple years it's been a little less and some years it's more.

Ms. Ritchie: — So then of that, you know, of the budget or the estimates for the current year, does that include federal transfer dollars for that kind of programming?

Mr. Potts: — Again sorry for the delay. Just want to make sure I've got my facts straight. So with the federal funding, often it's in a form of a three-year agreement. So it's apportioned over each of the fiscal years of the agreement. The one that we are in currently, we received 600,000 last year from Service Canada. Northern Career Quest was close to 125,000, just to give you a sense of the revenue that we would anticipate. We don't have the number you requested today, so just assume it's in that range. But that's roughly how it works.

Ms. Ritchie: — And I'm curious to know the outcomes and results you've been achieving through some of that program work. So you mentioned you had a metric of employees, or you know, people employed six months post-program. So that sounds like something you track consistently. Can you tell me, over the last few years, what those kinds of numbers . . . well I mean obviously it's been a weird time period, but what those numbers have looked like?

Mr. Potts: — Yeah, so not taking into account perhaps the last year, but typically we'd look for a success rate in the range of about 85 per cent, so people that have completed the training would be, you know, employed six months later in the industry. Eighty-five per cent success rate, so obviously that's pretty good. And often when you're talking about people that weren't previously employed, you know, that's a substantial gain I think for not just our industry but for the province.

Ms. Ritchie: — I don't suppose you're able to sort of track them long term in terms of retention. Do you have any insights on that?

Mr. Potts: — I think my answer would be more anecdotal, but the relationship that has developed between our training and education team and the participants in the program typically does become long term or often becomes long term. So people will come back to our staff if they want to . . . If they've had their first position, they see a new and better position somewhere else, they'll come back to us for a reference often for many years at a time.

They'll also come back to us for certification and training in other areas through our other development programs, workforce development programs. So you know, I don't think I'd be able to say, you know, 75 per cent are employed two years down the road, but I would be able to tell you that the nature of the program is such that it develops long-term relationships with the participants. And we see, you know, we've seen a lot of success stories long term from it.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay, I've got two questions in follow-up to that. So you have this . . . You used an example of this Ready to Work program, but now you mention that there's other programs. Maybe you could give me a little bit of a rundown on the range of programming.

Mr. Potts: — Sure, and I hope I do it justice, you know. But there are a number of certification programs offered in the tourism industry within Canada. So we work . . . Sometimes we develop those programs. Sometimes they're developed by sister agencies in other provinces. Sometimes they're developed by the . . . it's not called the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council anymore. I think it's just the tourism human resource council. But each of those organizations shares, you know, a lot of the

programs that they've developed with each other or sell them to each other.

[17:30]

So it could be anything from, you know, a guide, an outdoor experience guide to a room attendant at a hotel to front desk clerk at a hotel, like I said servers, cooking. There are a variety of courses, roughly 20 courses I believe right now, that are available to be offered to the industry if people want to train up.

Ms. Ritchie: — And so your role as an agency in the delivery of those programs is . . . What is the extent of it? Is it kind of case specific? Or like I'm still a little bit fuzzy on, you know, are you the delivery agent? Are you a funding partner? What exactly?

Mr. Potts: — We're primarily the delivery agents. I see Tracy has joined me. So this is really her wheelhouse so I'll let her loose on this one.

Ms. Breher: — Tracy Breher. I'm the executive director of destination and workforce development. So our workforce development team does a number of initiatives in the Ready to Work program, like Jonathan has talked about.

We also do career awareness training, and we work with a number of schools around tourism curriculum and then we offer training. And we offer a big range of training programs, so everything from things like entry-level customer service training. And that's programming that we deliver either online or in person. And then we do, as Jonathan again mentioned, things like the mandated Serve It Right program, which is required if you are working and serving alcohol.

And then we deliver, in partnership with Tourism Human Resources Canada, a training series called *emerit*. And those are national standards and certifications in 35 tourism occupations. And that's everything from housekeeping room attendant and front desk agent training to things like managerial skills. And those programs are unique in that they are developed by industry. The standards are set by industry, validated across Canada, delivered in all the provinces across the country, which means the certifications are transferable.

So anyone who gets recognition and accredited in one of those occupations has a certificate that can be recognized across provinces and certainly across employers, which is starting to build competencies and basic skills in occupations that are transferable then, which is really important within our sector because we know that people don't always stay in the same position. They move around.

And then in addition to those we also offer customized training for employers. We will take components of multiple programs and build something customized to help employers, you know, deal with specific HR [human resources] challenges or problems and really tailor something to them depending on what they're trying to do.

We're doing a lot of work also right now in response to the labour shortage and helping employers think about HR practices a little bit differently, which is training but a different kind of training, I guess.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay. Now I was aware or vaguely aware at some point that Sask Poly offered training programs for the hospitality industry. So how do those things fit together in terms of what they're offering versus what Tourism Sask is providing?

Ms. Breher: — Sask Polytech's program is a two-year diploma in hospitality and . . . The name of it has recently changed, and I will get it wrong so I won't do that. But certainly I think a little more advanced training in terms of what we're doing and a broader range of training covered. I sit on the advisory committee for the program at Sask Polytech. We work collaboratively. They do some of our training programs in their classroom as part of their delivery as well.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay. And just a question again about the funding model for these programs. Is there funding to participants to participate in these programs, or is it just simply covering instructor and facility costs? I'd like to understand how that works.

Ms. Breher: — We shoot to cover our costs. But we also are really driven, I think, with a passion about the value and importance of this training and the difference that it can make. So we offer a bursary program that's open right now. So if there are people who have challenges in terms of the financial cost to participate in a certification program, they can apply for the entire cost to be covered. And then there are, you know . . . Service Best online, I think, is maybe \$25 a person. So we're doing our very best to keep the costs down to make them as manageable as possible.

Ms. Ritchie: — Is there a link with like employment services Canada or for people who are underemployed? Is there a connection there? And what is that?

Ms. Breher: — The Ready to Work program absolutely is working closely with partners as we are recruiting participants especially. And otherwise, you know, the training subsidy that's currently offered by the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training is also applicable towards our training. So we've bundled things up so that it will work within that program. Generally we will find a way. If there is an interest, we will find a way to make sure that the training will happen.

Ms. Ritchie: — You mentioned certifications that is offered through some of this programming. Does that have any ties to trade agreements or . . . I'm just thinking about the bill that's before the legislature right now that's overseeing, you know, professional bodies. Does this apply to those in the travel sector?

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Sorry. I just want to clarify. So does Bill 81 apply to the travel sector? It would depend on whether, what regulated . . . It applies to regulated occupations, so I'm not sure that it would. That's a question I would have put to committee on Bill 81.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay. Yeah, no. I was just curious. I don't know the answer to it, but just the thought occurred to me. And then lastly, you mentioned something about labour shortages. Could you elaborate on that for me please?

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Yeah. Maybe I'll speak to kind of the macro on that and then some of the blanks can maybe be added

in. So I mean, there has been a challenge. Even before COVID we had a challenge in a lot of areas of the hospitality sector in securing employees. And we have been working closely for many years with the hospitality sector on different initiatives that would fill some of the gaps that have been identified through associations and individual businesses with regard to shortages of labour in those particular areas.

So that has become more acute, I think it's fair to say, particularly as we have, you know, and are coming through COVID-19 and seeing a lot more activity in the hospitality sector. We continue to have very real challenges, labour market challenges, in the sector.

So you know, we've responded in a variety of ways directly partnering with Hospitality Saskatchewan and on some labour market initiatives for example. But also in making what is a, you know, fairly substantive and significant change to our provincial nominee program that created a sub-stream called the hard-to-fill skills program. And that really was targeted at filling labour market gaps that exist in the hospitality sector. And we really work closely with the sector in designing the SINP, Saskatchewan immigrant nominee program sub-stream as we had worked with the tech sector for example who were facing similar challenges. So I mean, that's not to ... There are challenges there.

But I would just kind of put that in a broader context by saying these are challenges associated with growth and renewal. And those are good challenges to have as opposed to having more folks wanting to work than jobs available. So you know, we're going to continue to work though with the industry and going to continue to try and find innovative ways that we can either partner or government can initiate different mechanisms like through SINP that will provide opportunity for those labour market gaps to be filled, whether that be through international immigration, whether that be through relocation within Canada, folks who are looking for opportunity, or whether that means training people here in this province to take advantage of the opportunities in that particular sector.

So we really take an all-of-the-above approach on this. And that's why we are, you know, moving in the direction that we are with regard to the challenge of labour market shortage in the hospitality sector.

Ms. Ritchie: — I'm curious to know if the industry relies on temporary foreign workers at all?

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Jonathan can maybe speak to this. I would say that there is very, very little uptake on the TFW [temporary foreign worker] program. I'll maybe talk a little bit about some of the background in this space. You know, I know a bit about this from having been the labour market minister for quite a long time. There's been a long progression of the TFW program in the province, in the country, because it's a federal program. It's not a provincial one.

So changes were made ... Maybe I'll just pick up the backstory as to where changes were made, which was in 2014, I think. Significant changes were made to the TFW program that instituted a number of different mechanisms, including the necessity to secure a labour market impact assessment in order

for employers to access temporary foreign workers to work in their particular business.

What that did, given the substantial resources and costs associated with securing an LMIA, labour market impact assessment, is really put the program out of reach for a lot of employers in the hospitality sector outside of maybe some very large ones. But the economics just really, really did not work. So you ended up then in circumstances where you had enduring labour market shortages in particular areas, which is really why we've been working with employers in this space for a long period of time, not the sole reason but at least a part of the reason why we have been.

So what you have found though, through the development of that program — and you know, obviously exacerbated during COVID when there was virtually no international migration, whether it be through temporary foreign workers or through provincial nominee programs, simply owing to the fact that international travel was next to impossible — there really is no reliance on the TFW program in the hospitality sector as it stands right now, or very limited.

I'm not aware of any, but I don't want to say that definitively because there might be some employers that accessed the program. I don't know of any though. So you know, kind of a long answer to the short question. That is that there really is very little reliance if any.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay. Thank you for that. How many FTEs [full-time equivalent] are employed by Sask Tourism?

Mr. Potts: — Currently there are 68 FTEs employed at Tourism Saskatchewan.

Ms. Ritchie: — And you said currently, and so how has that changed from previous years?

[17:45]

Mr. Potts: — We've slowly gone downwards over the last few years. I think about four years ago, we had about 72. So you know, maybe attrition of about one per year to the current number.

Ms. Ritchie: — Someone mentioned to me recently that the Saskatchewaner position had changed from ... I don't know if it was contract. How has that status changed?

Mr. Potts: — Sure, I'd be happy to talk to that. So for a number of years it's been a one-year contract. So every year we would take applications. We would look at them. There'd be a committee of the various partners within government. So at times we were up to four partners. The two core ones have been Tourism Saskatchewan and the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport.

So every year, you know, we run a competition; we gear up; we get a new person and get them up and running over the span of a month or two. They go out and typically do a great job, and then we start winding down the program and trying to hire again.

So over the past year or so, we've have a number of discussions

and talked about ways that we might want to change the program because it's been running on that model for a while. You know, one of the advantages of making it a permanent position, which is to your point exactly what we have done, is the fact that we can have one person consistently. We don't have those downtimes twice a year, where now we can keep the content flowing, if you will, on a yearly basis. You know, it smooths out some of the edges as those people are learning the job. Some people are more adept when they start the position than others.

And you know, in terms of things like strategic alignment, it's a little easier to direct an employee, you know, to reach some of those outcomes that we talked about at the outset, than it is a contracted person in that position.

So there's a number of advantages. You know, we were able to hire one of our former Saskatchewanerers who does a fantastic job and is, you know, widely recognized across the province for his role as an influencer and as a trusted source of tourism information. So you know, I think we've made a good choice and we're pretty excited about the future with that.

Ms. Ritchie: — I mean, I've watched with a lot of fascination the Instagram account and so on of that role, and yeah, I think they serve as a great ambassador. But I did also kind of wonder about sort of the occupational safety aspect of one individual touring around. I'm just curious to know, is there like a support team? Does that person travel alone? How do you ensure the safety of that one individual in that sporty, little SUV [sport-utility vehicle]?

Mr. Potts: — Sure. It depends on the activities that they're doing. So sometimes there are people travelling with them, sometimes there are not. There is a support team. There's not always a support team travelling with them. There is a support team that helps, you know, with the administration of the program, and you know, that type of thing. So back at our office and at Parks, Culture and Sport, there are people who have part of their jobs dedicated to supporting that position.

In terms of the travel itself, and I don't know the example, you know, you're mentioning, but we do pre-approve the types of activities that they do, especially if they're going to be dangerous. I don't think they're too often dangerous. It kind of depends on your threshold of danger sometimes. You know, people go up in gliders or go, you know, jump out of a plane in a parachute. And that's far beyond my threshold, but for the Saskatchewaner often it isn't.

So you know, it depends on the situation, I guess, but often if there's something that is more involved that requires . . . You know, we don't want to put them at risk. We want them to be able to promote an experience that's available to the public. So typically it's not something that goes beyond the bounds of adventure for perhaps the most adventurous in the province.

Ms. Ritchie: — Yeah. Well certainly they end up in fairly remote locations at times and things like that. So it was just, yeah, kind of an idle curiosity on my part to know that, you know, the background, behind-the-curtain coordination is occurring for that individual to keep them safe. That's great.

So I also wanted to ask about, you mentioned we've got these 68

FTEs. You mentioned the Saskatchewaner being a partnership with Parks, Culture and Sport. So can you tell me what other additional resources Tourism is capturing, maybe from coordinating with other ministries?

Mr. Potts: — I don't think . . . So there are no other positions that would compare to the Saskatchewaner. That position, just to be clear, is a position within Tourism Saskatchewan. So in terms of how the program operates, that's where the partnership occurs, but the position itself is considered an FTE within Tourism Saskatchewan. We don't have a similar type of arrangement anywhere else within provincial government for sure.

Ms. Ritchie: — Yeah. And I mean obviously there's lots of touch points. You know, we talked about the labour and the training aspect and that. So I mean, does Trade and Export Development sort of cost-share on any initiatives? Is there shared funding arrangements there?

Mr. Potts: — No, typically not. Over the years there might be a one-off here or there, but typically not. You know, we certainly work closely with a number of ministries on different initiatives, but typically we're not cost-sharing with any other ministries.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Yeah. Maybe I can add a bit to that one too. I mean, look, there's close coordination between the economic ministries, you know, whether that be Tourism Saskatchewan, Trade and Export Development, ICT [Immigration and Career Training]. The minister talks to each other on occasion and comes to different coordinating functions and conclusions. So anyway, I'm being flippant. But you know, obviously there is a coordinating function played by my office, being minister responsible for a number of the organizations and that, you know, making sure that we're all on the same page and moving in the same direction, in addition to a very close working relationship at the senior officials' level between the ministries as well.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay, thanks. I think in your opening remarks, you mentioned an industry that generates 2.4 billion. And I didn't quite catch the point in time that that's referring to versus the growth target up to 3.6 billion. So just a clarification there, please.

Mr. Potts: — Sure. So the 2.4 billion is pre-pandemic, like 2019. 3.6 we're targeting for 2030. And obviously the last two years we've gone backwards a little bit, but we've seen growth in 2021 compared to 2020.

Ms. Ritchie: — So based on my math, that's like a 50 per cent increase that you're targeting over the next seven years, seven, eight years.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Yeah, and if I could just add to that as far as the growth plan target, it is by 50 per cent. That's exactly what the target is for increase . . . You know, we've got the question — I'm not sure if the member is going there — but whether we're going to be revising any of the growth plan targets, and the answer is no. We're going to continue to strive for the growth plan targets that were laid out in the plan when we introduced it, with the intention of getting there. You know, we might not get to every single one, but we're sure as heck going

to be working towards it.

Ms. Ritchie: — Thank you for that, Minister. Certainly we've already canvassed a couple of the challenges in reaching that, you know, through labour shortages and airline challenges as well. And then of course you throw in a pandemic, so those are a lot of challenges.

Where would you say you are right now? Is this a target that's, I mean, excuse the reference, but would you say it's on track? Or like where are we at? Is this a stretch target? How do you sort of assess the ability . . . I mean obviously you took 5 million and added that to the budget to work aggressively towards it. But maybe you could comment on that.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Yeah, and maybe we'll speak to that. I mean our absolute intention is to get to the target. And you know, one of the real advantages in having a broad, comprehensive economic growth plan is that it provides the planning tool by which governments, ministries, agencies, Crowns can structure what their operations are going to look like and work towards with full knowledge as to what that growth target is. And that very much is what informs our planning and Jonathan, I think, has spoke to that already.

With regard to what our objective is at Tourism Saskatchewan, which is to meet our growth plan goal, that's how we've structured the organization and that's how we make decisions. And that's how we collaborate across government, is to make sure that we're all going to be reaching our growth plan goals. And I think it's a great management tool as far as structuring government, you know, right across the entire organization. But it really does provide a degree of certainty and direction for ministries, agencies, Crowns in order to make their detailed decisions, operational decisions that are, you know, much more at the operational and management level even.

So you know, we're going to continue moving forward with our growth plan, and we are planning on meeting that target.

Ms. Ritchie: — Does the tourism ministry have . . . Sorry, I'm not sure whether to call it a ministry or an agency.

Mr. Potts: — Treasury board Crown.

Ms. Ritchie: — Treasury board Crown. Okay, thank you. I'd like to understand the risk model that your ministry uses to guard against either unforeseen or potential challenges or impacts affecting your ability to reach your goals.

Mr. Potts: — Sure. So we have a pretty comprehensive process that we go through on a yearly basis to evaluate our risks to the organization, to the industry, and so forth. You know, we work with our management team to identify those risks, to go into considerable depth on what the implications would be, again both for the organization and for the industry.

We then work with our board — as a treasury board Crown, then obviously we have a board — so we work with our board to go through . . . We prepare that initial document, work with our board to evaluate that piece. And we've just gone through that process recently, and we're approving that, I believe, at our next board meeting in a few weeks. So you know, it's a multi-month

process where it's very comprehensive, it's very detailed.

And you know, we don't anticipate everything. We had, I'll say, a few years back when we looked at, sort of, plague and pestilence. We didn't anticipate COVID. We had other things we thought might come to the forefront sooner. But certainly we anticipate things like pandemics in our planning.

Ms. Ritchie: — What is the Crowns' top three risks?

Mr. Potts: — Good question because we're just moving them through . . . I mean obviously things like our industry's ability, and I talked to it before, technological advancement with small business is a real challenge.

So our industry's ability to meet changing consumer expectations, to meet . . . You know, for us to be able to sell the industry, especially on an international basis, there's expectations that international travel trade will have of the industry they're working with, you know, in that jurisdiction. So making sure that a, you know, substantial number of our industry members are meeting that level is a critical risk for us to help achieve our goals.

You know, there's always a technology risk or, you know, a risk identified with computer hacking, that type of thing. But we've taken steps this year and are certainly working with others in government to ensure that we mitigate those risks as well.

[18:00]

The third one I'm going to struggle honestly to come up with off the top of my head. I don't think I have that with me today, but . . . Top of my head, I don't want to answer incorrectly, but those are the types of risks that we're looking at to be sure. And certainly this year, I guess, the third one this year is obvious in that, you know, the pandemic has caused considerable harm to the industry, set it back, set those businesses back and put them in a more precarious position. Sorry, that was obviously should have been number one on my list, but that's the critical piece right now.

Ms. Ritchie: — And so can you tell me where climate impacts would fit within that risk registry?

Mr. Potts: — Yeah, it's one that we certainly evaluate. You know, we don't pretend to have all the answers there but, you know, we do look at things like forest fires, you know, the potential impacts there and what they might mean, and drought — different types of things, our unpredictable climate. Those are all considerations we take. I think that right now is probably sitting in the middle of our risk factors, but it's not, at the moment, just because of some of the other things that are happening in the world, you know, it's not near the top at this stage.

Ms. Ritchie: — You know, I think in recent memory we can recall years when we've had major forest fires here in Saskatchewan. And I can only just imagine how that would have affected the tourism sector, you know, with anglers being prevented from coming to, you know, fish in northern Saskatchewan, what have you, you know, coming up for duck season, you know, when there is maybe other environmental-like

drought conditions, that kind of thing.

So what has been the engagement . . . has there been engagement with the Ministry of Environment to quantify those risks and have mitigation strategies or contingencies?

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Well maybe I'll make a couple of comments here. You know, we work across government on identifying what risks are, and you know, do our best analysis. You know, I think it would be fair to say private businesses do the same thing. I mean having forest fires in northern Saskatchewan isn't a new occurrence. You know, these have been occurring since the beginning of time.

So you know, businesses that have been operating in this space for lengthy periods of time undertake risk mitigation and, you know, manage their business in such a way. And that might include the, you know, installation of sprinkler systems and, you know, different mitigation measures that they have. I mean as a provincial government, we work to mitigate risk by, you know, upgrading our CL-215 fleet, for example, with the ability to directly engage forest fires.

You know, what we've seen though in the last two years is a risk that, you know, I don't think anybody saw coming, which was a global pandemic which shuts down international travel. So you know, there are going to be, you know, hopefully less of those going forward. But you know, we have a war in Europe for the first time in 80 years on a very, very large scale under way right now which, you know, has all kinds of potentially unpredictable consequences for the sector as well. And let's hope that there aren't any of those impacts but, you know, to have government somehow be able to mitigate those, I'm not really sure what, as a subnational government, we would do in that circumstance.

So you know, what we are seeking to do is working with industry and our partners on the things that we have in front of us that we can manage and that we can control as a subnational government, and engaging with the federal government on things that maybe, like border closures for example, that are within their ability to address that they've chosen not to, in the case of airport reopenings, or at least at a more timely fashion.

You know, we are cognizant of challenges that are out there, but we have some real world challenges right now that we're working through with our partners and we're going to work with ministries across government, whether that be Environment, whether that be Trade and Export, whether that be ICT, whether that be Agriculture in, you know, how we best, where challenges exist, can mitigate or prepare for in instances where that's a possibility.

I'm not sure, Jonathan, if you want to answer or add anything.

Mr. Potts: — Yeah, you know, it is as the minister said, it's difficult for us to . . . You know, when we develop our risk registry, we talk about the things we can mitigate. So part of the challenge with, you know, the challenge of climate change is what can Tourism Saskatchewan as an organization reasonably do or lead the industry in? So you know, we have identified it.

The minister touched on, you know, another risk that's risen up very quickly for us is geopolitical. You know, it's just . . . at the

moment it's not one that we're as focused on as some of the other risks. And we can mitigate . . . to the point the minister made, you know, we work to mitigate some of the risks that come from even geopolitical disasters, if you will, like Ukraine, you know, or the situation in Ukraine.

So you know, when we look at a German market, or a German-speaking market in Europe, which is a key market for us, you know, we can offer things like safety and security and a potential, you know, getting away . . . a destination where they can get away from some of that, some of those issues.

So you know, those are the kind of things that we are able to mitigate as Tourism Saskatchewan. You know, it's not that we are not concerned about climate change. But as the minister said, you know, with forest fires, those challenges have come, they've gone, they've come, they've gone. This year I think the bigger risk is going to be the spring melt in some areas of the North. So it's just, you know, on a yearly basis we're challenged by a variety of environmental issues that may or may not stem from climate change.

Ms. Ritchie: — The minister may recall the forest management Act, or was it . . . I can't remember the exact name of it, but there was a piece of legislation that came in in about 2014 on, you know, protecting values in the forest and ensuring that they had adequate protection measures, you know, in terms of limiting the amount of debris around structures to ensure that they don't burn down.

I mean those are . . . So I guess that was kind of the sort of answer I was maybe expecting to hear in terms of, you know, working with your partners in industry that are, you know, located in areas that have fire risk, wildfire risk, and ensuring that they're adequately protected from those kinds of things. Or you know, just even understanding the impact of a wildfire season that's greater than normal, and how that's going to impact the industry.

Because when I was talking in estimates with the Environment minister and his staff, they indicated to me that they were just embarking on, you know, sort of an all-of-government strategy, which again I found a little bit shocking that it was only just getting under way, because I thought certainly that would be something that would have been well established by now. But you know, that's what I'd heard that this was under way.

So you know, as I talk and ask questions in estimates, I'm just looking for that indication of, you know, how are those conversations progressing. You know, have you been in meetings with, you know, at maybe your DM [deputy minister]-CEO level to, you know, identify those kinds of strategies, ensure that the right mitigations and contingencies are in place.

Because I mean we're not . . . I mean sure, wildfires have been around for a long time, as the minister was saying, but it's about the severity and the frequency. And you know, there's oodles of scientific studies and information and, you know, those forecasts pointing to greater risk, right? It's a moving target. It's not something static that you just look back and say, well, over the last 50 years it's been like this. Going forward we think it's going to be the same. That's not the case here. This is a dynamic situation. It requires government to be monitoring and preparing on all fronts. And so you know, it's a question to every agency

of the Crown in terms of what the mitigation strategy . . . How are they dealing with this risk in a responsible manner with everything that we know? So that's, I guess, the context in which I ask the question.

And not only that, I guess I mean, I've been . . . You know, this has been great. I've been so educated here this evening, learning about the work that Tourism does here in Saskatchewan. It's crucially important clearly, lots of work that's under way. And you know, love to see more being done around, you know, night sky preserves and how that can attract tourism to Saskatchewan.

And you know, also ensuring that, you know, we can present Saskatchewan as having lots of natural areas that . . . Again, that's a big draw. You talk about people coming from Germany, and I mean that's what they're looking for, right, is that pristine, natural environment where they can get out in their RVs [recreational vehicle] and go to the, you know, the outfittings and have a great experience for sure. That's definitely what we want to see.

And you talked about some of these things being sort of high value, and I guess that's partly what, you know, drew my line of questioning in that direction. Because if it's the 8,000, like you were saying earlier, that . . . I mean gosh, if there's any kind of significant wildfire events impacting on outfitters in these locations and preventing their ability to draw in these high-value clients, then that's going to have an impact on the industry.

So you know, I think it's . . . I know it's on your registry. I don't doubt that for a second. It obviously should be there, and that's why I asked the question to sort of see because, you know, it could have a pretty big impact.

But I had some information on, you know, that the NAICS [North American Industry Classification System]-related sectors over the last number of years, you know, from 2017 to 2021 for fishing, hunting, and trapping as one line item; information, culture, and recreation as another; and then finally accommodation and food services. So they're tracking, you know, those tourism-related job sectors and the number of people that are employed.

So in 2019 we had about 71,000, or 12 per cent, of the Saskatchewan workforce represented by these tourism sectors, and according to Destination Canada. I'm wondering if you can provide some figures or projections on the amount of jobs for the past year and then what you're projecting for the current.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Okay. Yeah, maybe I'll take a shot at . . . There's a bit of a long intervention. So I'm going to maybe ask Jonathan after maybe I make a few comments regarding some of the preamble to the specific question, which I know Jonathan will be well prepared to respond to.

But with regard to some of the . . . I'm not sure if they were questions or comments with regard to forest management practices. I would posit that those are best put to the Minister of Environment and senior officials at the Ministry of the Environment, who are responsible in a technical context for both the legislation that had been referenced and also with regard to implementation and policy through staff in that ministry. That's really not in our purview at Tourism Saskatchewan as far as the

enforcement or policy around the forest management Act.

[18:15]

With regard to some of the industries referenced, you know, we have really embarked on a strategy to maximize, you know, a lot of our high-margin, high-revenue sort of tourist opportunities without compromising any other elements of what we do and what we are known for.

But you know, I can tell you as minister, I've given direction over a number of years to our leadership with regard to what is just a world-class hunting and fishing resource here in this province. We have the best big game hunting in the world. We have the best angling in the world, best freshwater angling in the world, and we need to market that. And we need to attract those who are interested in shooting a world-class whitetail buck. They need to come to Saskatchewan. That's what we want. And that's what we are going to, and have had a focus on marketing in the United States, and we're going to continue to do that.

And not everybody is comfortable with that. I think, Mr. Chair, you know that there's some folks who are not too comfortable with guns and hunting and that sort of thing. This is a world-class resource that we are going to continue to market, and I've been criticized by the opposition and others for doing that. I'm prepared to take that criticism.

This is a big industry in my area up in northwest Saskatchewan that has been really a hard-hit industry. And we've really worked hard in working with that industry to make sure that when we get back to the point — and it hopefully will be this season — where we can have a return at least of an element of hunters coming up, whether that be spring bear hunting, whether that be whitetail hunting, whether that be moose hunting, whether that be bird hunting, we want to see that happen, and we're going to continue to see that happen.

Also, I mean, part of what we are really working on this year with the \$5 million additional increase, we want to attract very large events to this province. I want 20,000 people in the SaskTel Centre. I want tens of thousands of people coming to concerts. I want tens of thousands of people coming to events.

And again, that's again something not necessarily that everybody is comfortable with, and we'll be criticized by the opposition for it. I'm comfortable with that though because that's what we need to do. We need to get people back here. And so that's going to be a big focus of our marketing budget, whether that be in other parts of the country, whether that be in the United States, whether that be around the world.

So, Jonathan, on that specific, kind of targeted question, I'll turn it to you.

Mr. Potts: — Sure, and thank you. So you're right. So our pre-pandemic employment level was around 71,000 people. Currently we're down about 20 per cent from that. Our most recent numbers, which I believe are from February, so we're looking at about 57,000 workers in the tourism industry. So during the pandemic it dropped significantly lower than that, so we're on the right trend. You know, the minister has talked to some of the challenges in finding workers and some of the

programs that government has introduced to attract new workers to the province. So you know, in terms of trending where we're going, I don't think we anticipate being back to full employment or back to the numbers we were at. Tracy, I want to say 2023, hopefully to maybe 2025. It could take some time.

So different aspects of the industry such as the accommodations sector are still down significantly. And then again, that's an area where there are programs targeted to try and bring more people in, you know, recreation and entertainment, similar but lesser decline, and so forth. But we are seeing recovery in all areas of employment, which is positive. And you know, we're hopeful that as the tourism sector really starts to recover here this year, and the minister talked to some of the types of activities that we're hoping to see, you know, we'll start to see employment rise even more significantly.

So you know, we're optimistic. We know it's going to take some work. We know it's going to take a lot of partnerships to help achieve our goals in terms of employment, which then supports the revenue growth for the industry. But we feel we're doing the right things to get there.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — And yeah, I just want to . . . very good explanation by Jonathan there as well. But I just want to highlight as well, you know, part of that additional \$5 million in addition to our existing event-hosting budget is going to be directly allocated to working with event-hosting organizations for events to attract more very large-scale events.

You know, the Grey Cup is a great example of this, right? I mean we're putting significant resources into working with the Saskatchewan Roughriders because we want to have 40,000 people in Mosaic Stadium for Grey Cup. And we want thousands more to participate and come to events that are associated with Grey Cup because this is a huge economic opportunity for the city of Regina. And we've seen it repeatedly when we've had that opportunity to host Grey Cup. So we've been working very, very closely with the Saskatchewan Roughriders on making this the best Grey Cup that we're ever going to see, and until the next time we host it.

So you know, part of those additional resources are going into additional event hosting because there are costs associated with doing these things. And we know that, but we want to be a destination of choice for large events that are looking for a home.

Ms. Ritchie: — I just want to go back and clarify. You know, my line of questioning is focused on how the agency is protecting the industry. It's not, you know, to disparage or anything of the sort. These are just, you know, basic accountability questions around ensuring that we continue to have a viable sector.

But, Minister, you mentioned, and through the Chair, that you're looking forward to, you know, Grey Cup and major events, filling stands, so on and so forth. I'm wondering if you have any comments on what we've heard from leaders regarding the tax, the application of the PST [provincial sales tax] onto events, and some of the concern that's been raised by, you know, the Saskatchewan Roughriders, by TCUP [TCU Place], REAL [Regina Exhibition Association Ltd.] district here in Regina. And I mean, they seem to be concerned that that will put some downward pressure on those events, and just interested to know

what you say in response to those comments.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Sure. Thanks, Mr. Chair. No, I'm happy to respond. And you know, I've been in direct contact with the Roughriders, for example, and with REAL and others, stakeholders in the space. And you know, I've got to be honest. I don't see there being a significant impact because of the change that was made with regard to attendance at large events. I just don't see that being the case. The reality is, I mean, I've talked to a number of people who . . . You know, and I think it's probably a representative view. I think most people had felt or already thought they were paying PST on tickets, for example. I think that's the case.

So you know, we take the concerns very much, and that's why I, you know, have engaged directly with a lot of the stakeholders in the space, and I know officials have as well. You know, the Minister of Finance has spoken to the reasons and rationale, which I'm not going to rehash since that really is a Ministry of Finance question. But you know, we're very hopeful and working with industry in how we can be supportive through Tourism Saskatchewan in making sure that we continue to have very high attendance and successful events.

And I'm very confident that we are going to continue to have very well-attended and very successful events going forward, starting with a great Rider season we're looking forward to, and you know, culminating with Grey Cup in that particular sport, a whole bunch of others including festivals, concerts — all of these events that are able to happen again, and something the government is very happy are able to happen again.

Ms. Ritchie: — Well on the flip side of that, I understand that — and again a lot of this is fairly new to me — but I understand that we are the only province without legislation requiring a hotel levy directed to the province or a local tourism authority. Is the government considering aligning Saskatchewan with other provinces on that?

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — I'll respond to that. We're going to consult for a second here, but I'm certain that there are destination-marketing fees already that are in place. But just a second.

Okay, yeah. We'd feel comfortable in saying that that is wrong, that we do not have a destination-marketing or hotel tax mandated provincially. Other jurisdictions do not either. What some jurisdictions do have at the municipal level are destination-marketing fees. And those are allocated by local tourism associations that are creatures, organizations of the municipal government. So those exist in Saskatchewan.

But I mean if the member, and I think she was basically saying that we should have a provincial tax on hotel stays separate, that's not something that's going to happen.

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay, great. Thanks. And just to clarify the record, I was not suggesting it. I was just simply asking the question.

I know we're getting short on time. If there's time for one more at least, I'll keep going. You mentioned earlier increased investment in digital initiatives and I just would like a little more

detail on what those are.

Mr. Potts: — Sure. So one example: so we're a very data-driven organization and data-driven industry. And again, part of the challenge when I talk about, you know, 95 per cent of the industry being small and medium-sized businesses, they don't have much capacity to do that type of work, right? So we fill that void.

What we are trying to do and we have the ability to do based on our structure and based on the talent that we have in our organization is . . . And I'll maybe backtrack on this a little bit by saying that I used to be a consultant in private industry doing things like market research for the tourism industry. But that was always reactive. It was a survey after the fact to see how a campaign had done. It might be proactive, testing some concepts for a marketing campaign.

And we do some of those things still but with advancements in technology, we're able to take all of our data sources, whether they be federal, whether they be work that we do ourselves, work with Environics, secondary sources, etc. And what we're moving towards is going from that sort of reactive — here's what we did and here's what the outcomes were — to being predictive, trying to say, you know, if we do this, this is what we think will happen, to prescriptive.

And so aligning our technology and working our technologies so that we have . . . And I'm not a techie so I just put that out to you first, but the terminology that gets used often is data lake. So we have a data lake of data that we can, you know, based on any operator's question, if they come to us and say, you know, we're thinking of doing this, we can probably predict outcomes that would happen with a variety of different stimuli and ideally, you know, for ourselves and maybe for the industry, be prescriptive and say, this is the best path forward based on the data. You know, and that's looking at travellers that are coming here, what they're spending, what their interests are, what trends are in the industry, and so on and so forth, right.

So part of our investment on the technological side is to become much more adept at predicting and being prescriptive in our actions going forward, so not relying on past data to try and guess what's going forward but to use all the data we have at our hands to make better decisions.

Ms. Ritchie: — Is that some in-house tools that you're developing to provide that data?

Mr. Potts: — Yeah, a lot of the work is in-house. The data sources themselves, we've invested in more and better data sources over the last number of years. We have good partnerships. You mentioned Destination Canada, our federal partner. So we have good partnerships with them. They have a very strong research team. But there are other sources, you know, in the world and in Canada as well. So you know, the more that — I won't get into multiple regression — but the more data that we can put into the model and, you know, run regression on, then the better again able we are to predict what should happen going forward.

[18:30]

Ms. Ritchie: — Okay. So just to kind of wrap that up a little bit, are you going to . . . you mentioned some in-house. Will you be outsourcing or contracting to develop those tools?

Mr. Potts: — Yeah, to a certain extent, you know, obviously we . . . whether it's a different platform at times, we're always looking for the right technology or technological resources to achieve our goals. So there's not a specific planned source of information or tool that we're planning on using right now, but it's incremental. As we get better at one piece of the puzzle, then we move on to the next.

Ms. Ritchie: — Just for some clarification there. So I believe you had indicated that, you know, part of that \$5 million increment was to support digital initiatives. And so what are the deliverables there? Like, I'm wondering is this like a contract that's going out to develop some kind of . . . or what is it?

Mr. Potts: — Yeah, so you know, I understand your question a little better now. So you know, we haven't, to be clear, we haven't identified specifics. We don't have a RFP [request for proposal] process planned in that regard, but we are looking at, like I say, where we want to get to. And using the data management as an example, you know, as we go forward we've got investments to make internally to have the different data sources talking better to each other so that we can run better models. And a lot of that comes down to just internal capacity. But you know, if there's an investment required in the coming fiscal year on a different platform or tool, that would certainly be part of it.

Ms. Ritchie: — Thank you for that.

The Chair: — Okay. We've got, by our clock we've got 6:34 is our two hours, so where are we at here? — 6:32. If you want to do one very quick one or we can have the minister wrap up.

Ms. Ritchie: — I think you can have the minister wrap up.

The Chair: — All right. Excellent. You have two minutes, Minister. So we've reached the agreed upon time for consideration of these estimates today, and we'll now adjourn consideration of estimates for Tourism Saskatchewan. Minister, final comments from you and your officials, then I'll give the same opportunity for Ms. Ritchie.

Hon. Mr. J. Harrison: — Just want to thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to members of the committee for the time spent here this evening. Thanks to the staff from the Legislative Assembly Service who've been here and provided support through now 70, I guess 69 hours of estimates in total, three hours — no, 72 in total — three more to go tomorrow.

And I want to thank my officials, obviously Jonathan, our CEO, and through Jonathan all of our senior officials and through them their teams that work so hard at Tourism Saskatchewan. And it's really greatly appreciated by the people of the province. So with that, Mr. Chair, I will turn it back to you.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Ms. Ritchie, final comments.

Ms. Ritchie: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank the

minister and his staff and the CEO of Sask Tourism, his 68 FTEs, and all of the hard work that they are doing to promote tourism here in Saskatchewan. I want to thank Legislative Services, Hansard as well, my fellow committee members here for this opportunity this afternoon. And that's all for me.

The Chair: — Excellent. Thank you. I'd also like to thank the minister, the officials, and yourself, and Anne Drake from the Clerk's office for doing an awesome job, and the committee members. Thank you, all. And I believe with that, we're adjourned. Can I have someone . . . Mr. Ottenbreit moves adjournment. Can I have a seconder? Mr. Grewal. All in favour of adjournment?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Agreed. Thank you, all. We're adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 18:35.]