



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 2023

SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

5:46 P.M.

CHAIR
Lisa Lachance

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Subcommittee on Supply will come to order. It is now 5:46 p.m. The Subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates of the Department of Agriculture, as outlined in Resolution E2.

Resolution E2 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$45,350,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Agriculture, pursuant to the Estimate.

I will now invite the Minister of Agriculture to make opening comments for up to one hour, and if they wish, introduce their staff to the committee.

The honourable Minister of Agriculture.

HON. GREG MORROW: Thank you, Mx. Chair. I'll introduce my staff joining me at the table here: Deputy Minister Loretta Robichaud and Mike O'Brien from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. We're joined, as you mentioned, by a number of staff as well. Thank you all for coming.

I'm pleased to be here today to talk about the work the Department of Agriculture does and how we work with the agriculture sector. Agriculture is a vital part of life in Nova Scotia. It employs thousands of people across the province, it literally puts food on tables, and it drives our economy, especially in our rural communities. A healthy economy is key to achieving our government's top priority: We are focused on health care, and a strong economy helps us pay for our plan to fix it. Budget 2023 helps move our province forward, investing in health care and in many of the things that are important to Nova Scotians. We will do whatever it takes and invest in whatever it takes to fix health care and deliver the care that Nova Scotia families need and deserve. We've been making progress, but like many important endeavours, it takes time.

Our government's focus on health is broad and recognizes the important role other areas of investment have on our health and well-being. Agriculture is one of those areas. It contributes to a healthy people who in turn fuel a healthy economy and healthy communities. Today I'm pleased to update you on our department's progress and programs designed to support those outcomes.

Let's start simply: What does the Department of Agriculture do? The basic mission statement-type answer is the department helps support and grow agriculture and agri-food throughout the province. How is that done? Through carefully planned programs, services, and policies that we developed to help farming and food processing in rural and urban communities to help them be more competitive, sustainable, profitable, and resilient. By working with farmers, community groups, and partners, we help increase the province's food supply and improve food self-sufficiency.

Our department is also in the promotion business. We use marketing methods to connect Nova Scotians with our farmers and producers, and to promote buying local food and beverages. Then there's the economic growth and sustainability of the agriculture and agri-food sector itself. We support that growth and sustainability through the programs we offer. Our aim is to help food and beverage producers, processors, and commodity associations so they can prosper. On top of all that, we oversee the province's agriculture legislation. That includes supply management as well as providing production, business development and financing, and credit counselling for agriculture.

Let's look at what all this looks like. Last year, Nova Scotia saw a 12 per cent increase in farm cash receipts. That's an impressive \$79 million increase - it brought the total to \$752 million. About half of that is from Nova Scotia's supply-managed industries, including dairy, poultry, and eggs. Other major contributors last year included: cannabis at \$60 million; fresh blueberries at \$51 million; cattle at \$31 million; horticulture and nursery products and sod at \$30 million; fresh field vegetables at \$36 million; fresh apples, \$25 million.

In 2022, 5,050 people earned a living by being directly employed in the primary production of agriculture in Nova Scotia. These are hard-working people - I have met many

of them in the past 18 months on their farms and at their production facilities. Agricultural businesses like Millen Farms, Scotian Gold, Melvin Farms, Maple Mist Farm, Rendell's Farm, Eyking Farms, Eden Valley Poultry, Brook Ridge Farm, Sawler Gardens - countless other farms and businesses who are driving local food production and helping rural communities across the province.

People working long hours all over our province drive the agricultural economy from which we all benefit. Many more Nova Scotians are employed in agriculture-related services in the feed, farm machinery, and food distribution industries, and the jobs in agricultural research and agri-tech are attracting a new generation of young innovators who are passionate about the future of agriculture.

We all want to see growth in the agriculture sector and to see new markets develop. Agri-food products are the fourth largest export category in Nova Scotia. With last year's increase in exports, we're seeing more high-quality Nova Scotia products on tables around the world. These exports totalled \$492 million in 2022, up 23 per cent from 2021. Our major markets are the U.S. at 55 per cent, Germany at 8 per cent, the Netherlands at 6 per cent, and France at 5 per cent. Wild blueberries are the top agricultural exports for Nova Scotia, exceeding \$167 million in sales last year. Sales of unique Nova Scotian balsam fir Christmas trees to the U.S. markets continues to be strong, and with the consumer demand for high-quality products like Honeycrisp apples, Nova Scotia is a small geographic area with tremendous reach. That's what makes us unique in world markets.

In fact, we've made that uniqueness the focus of our new export brand for Nova Scotia. For the first time, producers have a brand that can distinguish Nova Scotian food and beverage products at international forums for agriculture and trade. The brand signals to the world that Nova Scotia is a small place with big taste.

Our farmers and producers need support to find new markets, adapt to climate change, adopt new innovations, and be resilient in the face of challenges. That's why we work with our federal partners through cost-shared agreements to support policy and priorities for the sector. These agreements fund strategic development in business risk management programs. We've had great success with the Canadian Agricultural Partnership. This five-year agreement brought \$37 million to Nova Scotia to strengthen the agriculture, agri-food, and agri-based products sector. It increased the sector's competitiveness, prosperity, and sustainability. It's worked very well, and we're continuing the support through the next iteration of the agreement.

Last July, we reached an agreement in principle for the newly named Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership - it runs for another five years. The new agreement means \$9.25 million annually for Nova Scotia producers. That's a 25 per cent increase from the last agreement, and it boosts our business risk management programs as well.

For Nova Scotia, it means increased investment through provincially delivered programs that focus on building sector capacity, science and innovation, climate change and environmental stewardship, resilience in public trust, and market development. We'll be rolling out programming in early April. The programs will include funding for a new Resilient Agricultural Landscape Program, RALP. This program will support farmers as they build on their commitment to environmental stewardship. They can do this by adopting farm practices that respond to climate change and decrease greenhouse gas emissions.

Few other sectors are as susceptible to the depth and breadth of risks faced by our farmers and producers. That's why we are proud to offer business risk management programs. These are the tools to help producers manage risk. They provide protection against income and production losses, and they help farmers manage risks to remain productive through business ups and downs. These programs are voluntary, and demand driven and are national in scope. They offer support such as insurance, income stability, investment matching, and disaster relief.

Crop insurance has been in place in the province for more than 54 years, and in that time, we have paid out \$1.16 for every \$1 in premiums collected from producers. We've insured more than \$80 million in crops last year, and I am pleased to be expanding our commitment to this program in this budget with an increase of \$433,000. The Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership includes an increase in the AgriStability program. The compensation rate is being raised from 70 per cent to 80 per cent in the 2023 program year. This is great news for producers.

In addition to these business risk management programs, we are ensuring farmers have more funding options in times of very challenging situations such as extreme weather events. Nova Scotia's agriculture sector was hit by two such events in the last six months. In September, Hurricane Fiona did considerable damage to farms, so we arranged \$19 million in provincial funding to support farmers. To make it easier for farmers, our department set up the Fiona Agricultural Disaster Assistance Program. We made this a one-window process with one application to streamline the process for farmers. They asked us to make it simple, and we did. We assigned each farmer a caseworker who worked one-on-one with the farmer to ensure they maximized all the federal and provincial programs for which the farmer qualified.

Five million dollars went toward one-time, \$2,500 emergency grants for roughly 1,200 farms in the impacted zone, plus help with purchasing generators. We made \$3 million available to help rebuild lost greenhouses, another \$3 million served as gap funding to support farmers who did not qualify for the federal Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements programs due to their size or farm structure, and \$8 million helped replace, repair, improve, or remove farm structures impacted by the storm, as well as items to support business continuity. All told, these programs have had nearly 500 applicants, and our one-time grants helped nearly 1,200 producers hit hard by the hurricane.

Then, in February, we had the extreme cold snap known as a polar vortex. I've talked to farmers about the impact it had on their crops, and some are predicting a full loss of their fruit harvest this year. Our department and Perennia's extension staff have been working closely with industry to understand the full impact of this unusual cold weather event. We won't know for sure until Spring, but early assessments suggest there may be very significant loss of grapes, raspberries, peaches, cherries, and plums this year. Again, we're providing funding to help growers recover. Just a few weeks ago, we announced \$15 million to help cover some of the costs farmers and growers are facing over the next few years as the full scope of the damage is determined. We will continue to focus on that work and our connection with growers as they work their way back to recovery.

[6:00 p.m.]

These extreme weather events are only going to increase as the impacts of climate change progress, so it is a top priority of our department to help build resiliency for the challenges ahead. We've worked with the Department of Environment and Climate Change to develop and fund climate change adaptation plans. We are working to protect the agricultural dikeland system, including climate change as a lens for departmental work in supporting industry and adapting to ways that support climate change mitigation.

We're supporting the farmers and producers to become more energy efficient, which saves them money and reduces agriculture's electricity and fossil fuel footprint. We fund an on-site energy manager for agriculture at Efficiency Nova Scotia. This person helps farmers and producers determine which upgrades to make and how to secure funding to help make them. This year, we are also engaging a second energy manager to help with agricultural not-for-profits in a similar way.

Since September 2017, there have been 293 projects completed, more than \$1.7 million in electricity saved per year, and more than \$1.3 million in incentives provided directly to farmers; there was a reduction of more than 6,700 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year.

Another threat we're facing is avian influenza, sometimes referred to as bird flu. It's a contagious virus that can affect several species of birds. As of March 14th, there were 302 sites with cases in Canada: 75 with existing infections, and 227 that are no longer in outbreak status. To the best of our knowledge, more than 7,000,000 birds in Canada have been affected. In the U.S., there are about 800 sites with more than 58,000,000 birds affected. To date, the impacts here in our province have been contained to five small flock outbreaks and one commercial outbreak.

We remain vigilant because an outbreak of avian influenza can be very serious and challenging. That's why we're working with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and producers to contain the spread and help them get through this. That includes strong biosecurity practices to protect their birds and the food products they produce.

Another challenge is rising costs. We're all feeling it in our everyday lives, and the agriculture sector is no exception. Fuel prices have hit historic highs, industry-specific costs for things like fertilizer continue to skyrocket, and this drives up food prices. Through the agreements I mentioned with our federal partners, plus other provincial programs, we are able to offer a lot of help. For example, we offer support programs, deferred loan payments, and reduced insurance costs which help free up cash flow. We also continue to help farmers adopt innovations that reduce labour and farm input costs.

I know the cost of food is on everyone's minds, and too many Nova Scotians are making tough choices as they struggle to pay all the bills and feed their families. The high cost of food is creating barriers to healthy eating, and that's counter to our priority of health care and healthy Nova Scotians. My department is supporting and encouraging local food consumption as a way of giving Nova Scotians more food choices, increasing access to food, and supporting our local farmers.

My mandate is to ensure that by 2030, 20 per cent of the money Nova Scotians spend on food will be spent on locally produced food. The department has run several successful buy local initiatives designed to raise the awareness and sales of our fresh and exceptional quality agri-food, seafood, and beverage products. At festivals and events throughout the past year, our local food products have been profiled and marketed, and we're working on getting more local healthy food into our public institutions, like schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and other facilities. We have a dedicated staff person in the department to lead this work and facilitate relationships between producers and these types of institutions.

We've also launched pilot programs in the institutional sector with nursing homes, schools, and judicial facilities. These pilot programs are showing us that when you collaborate on bringing local food options to the table, you can change buying habits and change the culture within our public institutions. Our initial pilot project was launched this past Fall at Northwood, the continuing care home in Halifax. Purchasing of local food at Northwood increased to 21 per cent. This work is evolving to support the Nova Scotia Loyal initiative.

We're also developing a food and beverage strategy to enhance awareness, improve access, and increase local production. There is a working group of 12 departments on it. The group examined the policies and programs already in place, talked to key partners working on food initiatives, and came up with some proposed initiatives to kick things off. We received plenty of good feedback on those initiatives through a public consultation, and we look forward to sharing a summary soon.

In December, we announced an additional \$9.9 million to help local farmers grow more food and get it into more of the province's largest kitchens - \$900,000 of that is dedicated to new pilot projects for getting local food into institutions like the one just mentioned at Northwood. Five million dollars of that is for the Season Extension

Enhancement Program, a collaboration with Horticulture Nova Scotia. This program will help growers to extend their growing season, adapt to a changing climate, and open new market opportunities. Four million dollars has been dedicated to the Local Food Advancer Program and new programs for emerging food processors. It will help with investments, equipment, and technology to increase production, expand operations, and create new value-added products.

We have lots of products that are loved both domestically and in our export markets; one of them is wine. Both sales and our worldwide recognition are soaring. The numbers speak for themselves. In 2021, there were 25 licensed farm wineries in Nova Scotia: 19 grape wineries and 6 non-grape wineries. Sales of Nova Scotia wine totalled more than \$25 million, supporting more than 600 jobs. Nova Scotia wines have earned numerous local, national, and international awards. There is tremendous potential, so we want to keep that momentum going through strategic investments and export development. The polar vortex threw us a curve, but I'm confident this sector can recover and reach its full potential.

Another Nova Scotia product the people can't get enough of - wild blueberries. I mentioned earlier that it's Nova Scotia's largest export crop, and we love them here at home, too. We're increasing local demand through our buy local efforts, and export demand is growing in export markets in Asia and the European Union as wild blueberries are recognized for their health properties. We need to meet that demand with more supply. The Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board is helping meet that need. The Farm Loan Board helps producers get loans with flexible terms and competitive rates so they can get the equipment and land they need to grow more local food.

I am excited to note that the Farm Loan Board approved its largest loan in its history this past December to bring a \$25 million blueberry processing facility to Great Village. The Millens are second-generation farmers from Nova Scotia, and this investment will help them relocate their processing from out of province, return to their roots right here in Nova Scotia, creating more rural jobs for our province. We're continuing to support the Wild Blueberry Business Enhancement program which was launched last November. It was designed by growers, for growers. It is coordinated and financed by the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board.

We couldn't have berries without bees - we simply couldn't do it. Last year, there were 886 registered beekeepers keeping about 27,000 hives, and almost a third of those hives pollinated wild blueberry fields. The bee industry is responsible for millions in revenue, from hive rentals, honey production, and value-added products, along with the value of the berry and fruit crops they pollinate. That's why we invested an additional \$100,000 in the Blueberry Pollination Expansion Program to support blueberry growers who keep bees to pollinate their crops. Perennia's Atlantic Tech Transfer Team for Apiculture continues to support applied research to find practical solutions for beekeeping in our region. Their research and extension services give the industry the knowledge and

skills to rear queens and expand their operations, and we stand committed to supporting this important program in the future.

Research and innovation are constant in agriculture. They help our industry continuously adapt to the challenges it faces, and we support innovation in so many ways. For example, working in collaboration with Horticulture Nova Scotia and Perennia, we're piloting a Nova Scotia Long Cane Raspberry program. It's helping growers create a more sustainable and profitable way of farming. They can grow more berries with fewer costs, and now they can share that knowledge with others.

Through our work with the Christmas Tree Council of Nova Scotia, we're supporting research into smart trees, the genetically screened and naturally selected seedlings that have superior traits, such as improved needle retention, colour, aroma, and shape. This is a \$25 million sector that's seen outstanding export growth in the United States with exports valued at \$15 million. We're also promoting innovation with maple producers in Nova Scotia. Our Technologies for Value-adding Equipment program has helped commercial maple producers buy state-of-the-art equipment. It allows them to produce more syrup while consuming less industry. Going forward, programs like these will continue to drive our approach to innovation, help producers lower their cost of production, and create more local products for Nova Scotia and for export.

On a variety of initiatives, our department is very fortunate to have an excellent partnership with the industry-led Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. The Federation is a strong voice, and we share in its vision for a prosperous and sustainable future for Nova Scotia farms and farmers. We are grateful to the Federation for all the support they've shown. We've worked together with the Federation on several activities, including promoting environmental farm plans, preparing for climate change, engaging farm safety, and looking after mental health for our farming community.

Public trust has been a key focus for the department and the Federation. We continue to work closely with the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity to promote accurate information on agriculture issues to Nova Scotians.

Ensuring the safety of our local products is paramount to public trust. As of January 1st this year, the responsibility for meat inspection and farm animal welfare has returned to the Department of Agriculture. We're pleased to have these staff members back to continue the important work of making sure meat is safe to eat and farm animals are well cared for. A structure for the programs has been determined, and vacant positions are in the process of being advertised and staffed. As well, there are 20 licensed abattoirs in the province, and we continue to provide support and consultation to these facilities to encourage their capacity and their growth.

Many farm animals need pastures. The Department of Agriculture owns eight community pastures through the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board. We're proud to have this

land available for farmers, and to keep large pieces of land in our province for agricultural use. The Farm Loan Board purchased three new pieces of agricultural land this past year, adding to the Community Pasture Program for the first time in decades. The largest piece - 125 hectares located in Cape John, Pictou County - will be large enough to allow new entrants into the pasture, as well as welcome new members from their waiting list. I was honoured to visit the pasture this year and dedicate their barn to long-time volunteer, the late Tony Corsten.

Over the past year, our staff has worked with the seven active community pasture boards in Nova Scotia, and awarded a request for proposals to revitalize the eighth pasture which has been inactive since the 1990s. This pasture was in Guysborough County; we'll have beef for the upcoming season. Our goal is to keep pastures sustainable and accessible for agriculture use and as a resource for growing the rural economy now and for future generations. It is an important support for agriculture to which we are committed. With this in mind, we have invested \$385,000 to create the Community Pastures support program, aimed at helping pasture organizations with their infrastructure and soil fertility needs.

I noted at the beginning of my remarks that agriculture employs thousands of Nova Scotians, and we always need new recruits. So, we have the Agriculture On-Farm Student Bursary program to reward students who work on farms throughout the Summer. We've funded jointly with our federal partners. These \$500 or \$1,000 bursaries help address the labour gap for primary agriculture producers in Nova Scotia, and they introduce agriculture as a viable career option for students. Dozens of Grade 12 and post-secondary students have been awarded the bursary since the program started in 2019 with 180 farms participating.

To interest students even younger, our Agriculture in the Classroom - Nova Scotia program teaches public school students where their food comes from. It also shows them the importance of agriculture to our province, and that it's a rewarding career choice. We send free learning resources to teachers across the province, from pre-Primary to Grade 12. I've been out to schools to see the program in action, and it gives me faith that our agriculture industry will be in good hands in future generations - plus it's a lot of fun.

At last year's Nova Scotia Minister's Conference for Agriculture back in November, we formally introduced the Nova Scotia Youth Council for Agriculture to more than 500 conference participants. This 14-member council has engaged with the department throughout the year to promote the importance of new mentorship programs for youth, and programs that will support new entrants to the sector. Their insights are starting to inform our provincial and federal programs and the ways we provide support to young farmers.

The department is also reaching out to young people by undertaking several initiatives to support diversity and inclusion in the agriculture sector. Activities include scholarships and Summer internships for African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq students, a

training program for African Nova Scotians to introduce horticulture food production, and specialized lending programs for underrepresented populations. Here are just a few details on some of these key programs.

[6:15 p.m.]

Honouring Mi'kmaw Roots and Grow Where You're Planted are entrance scholarships and Summer intern placements to promote agricultural careers. They are awarded to a Mi'kmaw student and an African Nova Scotian student, respectively, who are enrolled in an agriculture degree program at a Canadian university.

Bridge into Agriculture: A Program for African Nova Scotians is a partnership between the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture, Dalhousie University Agricultural Campus, African Nova Scotian Affairs, and our department. It offers a training program for African Nova Scotians to introduce them to horticulture food production.

The Black youth plant your roots program provides Black youth in Nova Scotia with an opportunity to work in the public service. The Department of Public Works was the basis for the program, and our Department of Agriculture adapted it to fit in a rural community. We work directly with the local high school, community leaders, and our sister departments in the Truro area, and we are pleased to have 15 participants. Our department had four positions in our Truro offices in 2022 and other government departments also welcomed three of these young workers. I'm very pleased to say that we have 13 positions confirmed for the coming Summer.

I feel I've only touched the tip of the iceberg of all that we're doing in the department and the agriculture industry - I could talk all day and not cover everything. I'll end by simply saying there are plenty of great things happening to support our farmers, to drive our economy, and to keep Nova Scotians healthy.

With that, I welcome questions from members.

THE CHAIR: We will now turn to questions. As is our practice, each caucus has an hour to begin. We'll plan to stay here for four hours. If the Independent member wishes to, then the two caucuses will share time with her.

I also wanted to remind the minister that only two staff are allowed to provide direct consultation on any questions, and only the minister may answer questions. I think that's it.

The honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: First of all, I'd like to thank everyone for their work, all 185 staff at the department. I know that there are many hardworking civil servants working on behalf of Nova Scotians and working hard, so I do want to recognize that.

I'd like to begin with just a couple quickies with respect to accountability. Does the department rigorously follow the public sector accounting standards?

GREG MORROW: Yes, we follow all those accounting standards.

KEITH IRVING: Great, thank you. Do the minister and his staff discuss any questions they might have in complying with the public sector accounting standards with the Auditor General?

GREG MORROW: Yes, we discuss with government accounting and, if needed, the Office of the Auditor General.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, those are my easy ones. I'd like to move on now to some of the critical issues that I'm hearing about, and I'd like to begin first with bees. There's a movement in Canada, particularly by the western provinces, to open up our borders to the U.S., and there are concerns here in Nova Scotia with respect to our border. We have, to my understanding, some of the healthiest bee populations in the country, and I'm wondering if the minister will commit to keeping our border closed to the import of bees.

GREG MORROW: That's a concern I also hear from beekeepers I speak to. Yes, the protocol on imports is in place, and when it comes to international import, that will be through the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, also for inspection. We have one of the strictest bee protocols in place: 100 per cent inspection of imported bees and equipment.

KEITH IRVING: Just to be crystal clear here - you will continue to keep the border closed?

GREG MORROW: To be crystal clear, yes.

KEITH IRVING: I'd like to move onto local food. It's a critical element in your mandate letter. In fact, these were questions I had a year ago, but I unfortunately came down with COVID-19 and had to ask a colleague to fill in. The question still remains a year later, and that question is: How are we measuring local food?

My understanding is this is a particular challenge that has evaded us in government for quite some time. With a target to increase local food to a specific number, how are we going to measure local food?

I notice in your *Business Plan* that you are still looking for a method to measure Nova Scotia local food, so I'm wondering if you can give us some insight into whether you have cracked that difficult problem with respect to how we are going to measure and account for local food?

GREG MORROW: The Canadian Agri-Food Foresight Institute was hired in September to implement an economic data analysis project and create a modeling tool surrounding local food purchases. The project has included a scan of all existing data on local food consumption, and a survey of Nova Scotia producers, retail outlets, and more than 500 Nova Scotia consumers. The Canadian Agri-Food Foresight Institute's preliminary findings are now being prepared in a draft report that will highlight the baseline local spend on local agriculture, seafood, and beverage products. Project activities will continue throughout 2023 to test that baseline model that has been created and to continue measuring the level of local food consumption.

KEITH IRVING: With respect to measuring local food, I understand one of the challenges is that the large retailers are not interested in contributing to sharing their data. If the two major grocery store retailers are not interested in sharing data, how confident are you that we can actually measure the amount of local food consumption?

GREG MORROW: A science-based, peer-reviewed method - the first of its kind - has been developed, and I would say in meeting with our major retailers, that we have a willing partner on a number of initiatives in a number of areas. So yes, I am confident that we will be able to determine that.

KEITH IRVING: We don't know quite yet how we're measuring this. If we don't know how we're measuring this, we don't know presently how much local food is consumed. We don't know at this point whether you're trying to move the needle from 19 per cent to 20 per cent, or from 4 per cent to 20 per cent. Do you have any indication of the challenge that we have before us to reach your mandated target?

GREG MORROW: I would say that we know exactly how we're measuring the consultant-developed method, and we will be able to use it year after year. In terms of the lift, or where we need to be - 20 per cent by 2030 - I view that as a floor rather than a ceiling. If it is 17 per cent or 18 per cent and we get to 22 per cent in 2025, then let's keep going higher.

KEITH IRVING: I agree with the minister. If we can go higher from a number that has been put out there in your mandate letter, but I'm a little confused with your comment. You say that we know exactly where we are with local food consumption. Can you share that number with us?

GREG MORROW: To clarify, I believe I said we know exactly how we're measuring. Like, we know the model. (Interruption) As soon as we have that number, we'll be sharing it.

KEITH IRVING: Perfect, Minister, thank you. Then you'll know the challenge you've got before you.

Regarding the issue of measuring local consumption, I'm wondering, with respect to our food and beverage industry, in terms of input costs, how you actually define local. We know that in Nova Scotia our wine industry has certain standards that are very clear and through our pricing system, regulate 85 per cent Nova Scotia grapes in our wines. Can the minister explain how we are going to evaluate all the different products that will have different inputs from different parts of Canada?

[6:30 p.m.]

GREG MORROW: If I could just clarify, is the member referring specifically to wine?

KEITH IRVING: I'm using wine as an example of something where we do have the methodology, the regulations, the working with a small industry. If I were wanting to start a business up and sell Nova Scotian beer but I bring the beer in from Ontario and I brand it as Nova Scotian - I could do that with potatoes. I can bag them and say, packed in Nova Scotia. Where are the accountability and the necessary tools to ensure transparency with respect to the inputs to a Nova Scotia beverage or product?

GREG MORROW: We have developed the definition of local. The member referenced wine as an example - that would be tested at ALAB at Acadia University, for example. I just had a tour there recently. There are between 1,200 and 1,500 different products that are defined.

KEITH IRVING: So we have the definitions of 1,200 or 1,500 products, and the rules and regulations around them to ensure that they are local products. Are you saying that you now have the tools to regulate those products with respect to its local content?

GREG MORROW: Yes, we have the definition, but we haven't moved to regulations on all of them at this point.

KEITH IRVING: When you move to regulation - presumably at this point - there is no accountability or tools that government can use if someone is misrepresenting their local content. Currently it is not regulated, but are your intentions to have the enforcement ability on 1,200-1,500 products to monitor and enforce the local content?

GREG MORROW: Of those 1,500, definitions will be narrowed down into 15 broad categories, and once Nova Scotia Loyal is implemented, that's how we'll police or enforce.

KEITH IRVING: Do you have any sense of the FTEs and the manpower that will be required to enforce 1,500 local product SKUs that are constantly rotating on shelves? Do you have any sense of what it will take to enforce regulations that you intend to bring in?

GREG MORROW: We have not identified all of our strategic partners yet, but many are collaborating with us now who helped in the development of the definitions.

[6:45 p.m.]

KEITH IRVING: When do you expect to have regulations created that would regulate local in the province of Nova Scotia?

GREG MORROW: We are working with the Department of Economic Development in partnership with Nova Scotia Loyal and they are the lead, so I would leave it to them to comment on the timing of the program. We are using Nova Scotia Loyal as a marketing tool, not as a regulatory tool, I would say.

KEITH IRVING: We will leave that for the other minister responsible for Nova Scotia Loyal. Please clarify for me with respect to Nova Scotia Loyal, what is the role of the Department of Agriculture? We are creating Nova Scotia Loyal as a marketing tool, but we are not going to hold people accountable who say that they are producing a Nova Scotia product when they aren't using Nova Scotia products in their product on the shelf - their inputs?

GREG MORROW: To the question of the Department of Agriculture's role with Nova Scotia Loyal, we will support the Department of Economic Development on Nova Scotia Loyal. We'll use it extensively in our marketing initiatives. The standards that we're talking about will be set for Nova Scotia Loyal usage by the Department of Economic Development, and that will determine the program rollout.

KEITH IRVING: I do think it is important that we find ways to define local. I appreciate where the government's trying to go on this. I'm having quite a bit of difficulty figuring out how this is going to be measured, enforced, become real numbers. When we have businesspeople investing millions of dollars to create Nova Scotian products, am I correct that right now it's a bit of the Wild West? In my example, if I opened up a Nova Scotia beer company and brought in the beer from Ontario and put a schooner on it, am I correct that there is nothing government can do in terms of the accountability and the protection to the public of thinking that they are buying my Nova Scotia beer?

GREG MORROW: There is now a lot of self-policing for content - associations and some suppliers have managed to do their own monitoring. I guess I would use as an example a farmers' market. There would be a lot of self-policing in a situation like that. Again, I would come back to the fact that Nova Scotia Loyal is intended to be used as a marketing tool. When it comes to questions about how regulations are developed or how that's monitored, I would again defer to the Department of Economic Development as they're the lead for Nova Scotia Loyal.

One other thing I would say is that in our federal-provincial programs, we do have some that require proof of local content for eligibility.

KEITH IRVING: If the honourable member from Halifax Chebucto was concerned about my bluenose beer because he has his own brewery . . . (interruption).

KEITH IRVING: Doesn't mean you can't sell it (Laughter). He's concerned his investment is being competed against by my bluenose beer that I got from Quebec. Is there anything that my honourable member from Halifax Chebucto can do and say to government to have me relabel my product?

GREG MORROW: For that example for the member from Halifax Chebucto, I would defer him to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board because he's responsible for the Liquor Control Act.

KEITH IRVING: Can you share with us how much money the Department of Agriculture has spent in this past year on this issue of defining local, and how much is in the budget for next year that you'll be spending on these activities?

GREG MORROW: The definitions were completed in partnership with the Department of Economic Development. They have a staff person hired for Nova Scotia Loyal, so I would defer that question, again, to the Department of Economic Development, but there is a joint working committee represented by both departments.

KEITH IRVING: You mention that there was a contract with an outside consultant, and in your answer, you're basically saying that there is no staff time, external consultants, money being used by your department for Nova Scotia Loyal?

GREG MORROW: The definitions were designed in house. The baseline data was contracted out. It was a \$90,000 contract, and the company will repeat the study. We do have them on retainer, so they'll repeat the study and then turn it over to staff to monitor going forward. That's the Canadian Agri-Food Foresight Institute. We also have \$450,000 with Perennia to help develop buy local initiatives, and \$125,000 invested in institutional procurement pilots that includes one full-time FTE.

KEITH IRVING: I could try to figure out last year versus this year, but, anyway, that gives us a sense of what is being spent.

[7:00 p.m.]

I'd like to move on to the polar vortex support. Clearly, thank you to you and your staff for stepping up to support our fruit growers and grape growers. How was the \$15 million arrived at?

GREG MORROW: Just to talk about that event a little bit and the impacts that the member referenced - just devastating, for sure. It means that some farmers will likely lose their entire fruit harvest this year; minus 25 degrees in the morning on February 4th, with even colder windchills. Some assessments are indicating severe impacts of up to 100 per cent loss for the 2023 crop season, as I mentioned in my opening remarks - grapes, raspberries, peaches, and plums. Yes, we did come to the table with \$15 million to help cover some of the costs that they could be facing over the next few years. It's not just this year that they'll be impacted.

They also have access to several federal-provincial programs, including AgriStability and AgriInsurance. The AgriRecovery Framework, as well, might also be an option once we understand the full impacts of the event, but that might be some time this Summer at the earliest.

Directly to the question of how that \$15 million was arrived at, there was a lot of work with different partners - the Grape Growers Association of Nova Scotia, our federal partners with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in Kentville, the Kentville Research and Development Centre. Perennia experts were involved - viticulturalists with Perennia. We also looked at all farms in the entire impacted zone, not just grapes. It was also calculated based on farm production and cross referenced with our business risk management data.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Kings South, with a reminder that the time is up at 7:17, so you have a little over ten minutes.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, Chair. I'm just trying to clarify this. You've indicated that crop insurance, AgriRecovery will dovetail with this program, but we don't know how much. You've also indicated, and I've heard this from producers, that we don't know the full extent of the damage until the buds come out. We're talking about June or July before we know the extent of the damage and where taxpayers' money will be needed to support the affected farms. So my question remains: How did \$15 million get determined with so many unknowns?

GREG MORROW: I would narrow it down to three main components. We layered on what we knew was already coming from business risk management programs. We also knew our insurance values and our AgriStability enrolments. We were aware of those

numbers. We also knew what AgriRecovery coverage following Hurricane Fiona would be eligible.

It is an estimate but it's the best one that we came up with based on the data sets that we have. We acted quickly to support our growers.

KEITH IRVING: I appreciate that you acted quickly to make an announcement to put at ease many of the farmers who are affected. There remains a very clear unknown and that is the extent of the damage. How do you explain whether the number should have been 12 or 20?

GREG MORROW: Again, with the three main aspects that I just laid out we are very confident that \$15 million dollars will address any of those gaps that remain after those three factors.

[7:15 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Kings South with 1 minute and 45 seconds left.

KEITH IRVING: The Emerging Wine Regions Policy ends soon. Where in this budget can I find the value of a replacement program?

THE CHAIR: Just to restate, I asked the Clerk, and staff members are allowed to switch out. You're just only allowed to have information from two at a time and have two beside you at all times.

Order. I note that the time remaining for the Liberal caucus is has elapsed. It is now time for the NDP.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I have a clarification. I'm not sure if the intent is to have two primary staff and other people moving back from the table providing advice. I'm not really sure the intent of that is you can keep switching back and forth.

I'd be happy to let the Assistant Clerk check on the specifics of that, but I think that defeats the purpose if you can jump back and forth in chairs. It was the pulling up of chairs that was the issue in the other circumstance.

THE CHAIR: I will take that under advisement. We will confirm the rule for you.

LISA LACHANCE: Maybe what I'll do is continue on from my colleague's questioning around emergency response. I've heard really positive things in terms of the

rapid and respectful response to Hurricane Fiona. I know folks were relieved to hear about funding around the effects of the extreme weather in February. We're in a changing climate. We're being affected by climate change. We can see the effects of this.

One of the things that I've heard a lot from stakeholders is concern that the emergency management office that used to be part of the Department of Agriculture no longer exists. They feel that there isn't a home for emergency response within the department. I'm just wondering if there's been any reconsideration of that given what we saw in the last couple of years and what we can expect to come in the future.

THE CHAIR: While they're working on the question, I can confirm that the information I gave you was correct.

Support staff of Minister, 62FB: "A Minister appearing before the Committee of the Whole on Supply or the Subcommittee on Supply during the consideration by the Committee or Subcommittee, as the case may be, of the Minister's Estimates may have one or two support staff seated with the Minister but all questions shall be directed to and answered by the Minister."

It says nothing in here about switching out staff, only that he's allowed to have two at one time.

LISA LACHANCE: I think that it doesn't match with what was brought up by the Clerk previously in the meetings of the subcommittee this year, that that sort of moving back and forth wasn't allowed. I understand that the Rules don't speak to it, but I think overall there should be a clarification.

THE CHAIR: It was confirmed by both Clerks. What's not allowed is for a minister's staff to turn around and speak to any of the staff behind them. They are allowed to switch out, but the minister is allowed to have one or two staff members beside him at all times. For clarification, he needs to answer the questions.

GREG MORROW: To our knowledge, this has never sat with the Department of Agriculture. We do certainly have an agency representative who is directly connected to the Emergency Management Office. They link with industry to get live situational data to EMO staff.

LISA LACHANCE: The funding for Hurricane Fiona and for this initial response to the extreme cold event came as additional appropriations - they form part of the \$1.6 billion in additional appropriations from this fiscal year that's just drawing to a close.

Did the department receive any other funding and additional appropriations? Looking forward, in the coming year, is there money earmarked for further investment in

the extreme cold event? Is there any reserve earmarked for any potential emergency response to avian flu?

GREG MORROW: Yes, we were able to invest extra money this year to help farmers recover from extreme weather events and pursue our goals for local food. We provided \$34 million to help the sector recover from Hurricane Fiona in September and the polar vortex in February. We also invested \$9.9 million in programming to help increase local food production and purchases at schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, and post-secondary institutions.

With respect to Hurricane Fiona specifically, the department was allocated \$19 million - \$5 million for a one-time emergency grant of \$2,500 for approximately 1,200 farms in the impacted zone plus assistance for impacted farms to purchase generators. There was also \$3 million to assist the industry in rebuilding lost greenhouses.

There was \$3 million in gap funding to support farmers who did not qualify for the federal Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements program - DFAA - due to their size or farm structure. There was also \$8 million to assist producers replace, repair, improve, or move farm structures impacted by Hurricane Fiona as well as items to support business continuity.

With respect to the polar vortex, when those extreme low temperatures hit on February 4th throughout the province, affecting the horticulture fruit crop including Nova Scotia's grape-producing regions, to assist grape and soft fruit growers, the department was allocated \$15 million to address business continuity, replanting, and climate change mitigation needs.

The department was also allocated \$9.9 million to assist with increasing local food production. As I referenced earlier, \$5 million to address season extension and climate change, \$4 million for advancement of value-added food processing including \$2 million for a large-scale Local Food Advancer Program and Abattoir Enrichment and Efficiency program, \$2 million to assist smaller scale emerging producers, and \$900,000 to increase local food in our institutions in the province.

I'll just add that AgriInnovate would be covered through a federal program and they would compensate us for that.

LISA LACHANCE: You had walked through the \$9.9 million previously. In fact, it was something that I wanted to ask about both in terms of the local food question and also institutional procurement.

I wanted to ask: Where are we with the 20 percent by 2030 local food goal? What's our ramp-up plan? Just to confirm, we don't know what our baseline is, we don't know what the consumption is. I know you said that you'd announce it soon. When do we actually

think we'll have a baseline number - it isn't really a baseline number because your commitment was in 2021. When will we get that number?

[7:30 p.m.]

GREG MORROW: The peer review for that report is just wrapping up. The baseline will be released in the coming weeks.

LISA LACHANCE: Is there an intent to map out a goal line with interim goals to the 20 per cent by 2030?

GREG MORROW: Once we have the baseline data, we will evaluate the goal going forward to 2030.

LISA LACHANCE: The program with Northwood has been held up as an example of institutional procurement of local foods. How much was allocated last year for that program and how much is allocated in the coming year? It was a pilot, so how was it evaluated?

GREG MORROW: We talk about the 20 per cent goal of all money spent on food in this province being from local food by 2030. One of the key ways is institutional procurement. That's one of the important ways that we can help reach that goal of getting healthy local food into our institutions.

We're working with all of government on that, whether it's the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, the Department of Advanced Education, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development - all of those. Getting more local food into these types of institutions is good for our farmers, healthy for people, and better for our environment.

The Northwood pilot that was launched in December was the first pilot that was initiated, Northwood being the largest long-term care home in Atlantic Canada. It resulted in Northwood producing more than 21 per cent of their food from local sources. That contract with Northwood was for \$25,000. We are evaluating via reports.

The measurement framework is in the agreement. The objectives of the project are to measure and determine the baseline for food purchases from all sources and identify a percentage of current Nova Scotia local spend; identify a basket of goods within Northwood's Halifax campus, menu, and purchasing that are not currently Nova Scotia products; and displace imported items with local Nova Scotia products available to Northwood. The province will assist in financial offset of purchasing these items and the administrative costs associated with participating in the program.

This measurement framework in the agreement is typical for all of our institutional procurement agreement pilots. The reporting and tracking come from our procurement manager in the department.

The other thing about the pilots is that they help us identify any barriers that we have getting local food in and will help resolve it.

LISA LACHANCE: From that \$9.9 million, you talked about there being \$900,000 available for pilots in institutions. How many pilots exist right now and how many total are planned for the 2023-2024 fiscal year?

GREG MORROW: There are nine pilots under way right now. Two in correctional institutions, five in schools, one in the long-term care facility that we mentioned, and one food hub. For 2023-24, we have two more for food hubs and two for school zones - so, regional centres for education - that would encompass a lot of schools.

LISA LACHANCE: The \$900,000 allocated would be divided among the nine current projects, the two food hubs, and the RCEs or are the other pilots wrapped up?

GREG MORROW: The money for these pilots wouldn't necessarily be divided evenly. It would be divided by the institution type and their identified need. As of now, we don't have any wrapped up at this point, but Northwood will be the first.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm wondering if you can tell me about the pilots in schools. You have five in schools and you're changing the approach this coming year for the two regional centres for education. Can you tell me a bit about what the school pilots were, why the change in approach, and how the first five projects were evaluated?

GREG MORROW: Two things that we're doing are salad bars and fresh fruit baskets. None has been evaluated yet. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is measuring the usage and orders. The three goals here would be awareness, new Nova Scotian products for students to try that they may not have tried before, and nourishment.

LISA LACHANCE: How much of the \$900,000 will be spent on the food programs and food pilots in the schools?

GREG MORROW: These are for student lunches. One of the barriers is the actual infrastructure for the salad bars. There is \$300,000 to go toward that and \$100,000 for fresh fruit. If the member would like a more detailed breakdown, we can get that for sure.

LISA LACHANCE: Yes, I think that would be great to have that tabled. I'll ask a follow-up question and continue on.

[7:45 p.m.]

I want to ask about the school lunch program and what the Department of Agriculture's involvement has been in discussions around the school lunch program. I'm curious about this. The pilots aren't done yet, but there seems to be a commitment to this idea of salad bars.

I'm wondering: How and why did we get to salad bars as the pilots? Is that the contribution the Department of Agriculture will make as part of the school food program? Why have we locked into salad bars as opposed to providing different types of infrastructure?

GREG MORROW: I would defer questions on the school food program to my colleague, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

If I could speak to the salad bars specifically, that was the department working on an initiative with schools on institutional procurements to increase healthy local food. Salad bars are one way to do that. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development just partnered with us to deliver that. Their contribution was \$100,000.

LISA LACHANCE: Has the Department of Agriculture been involved in any discussions about a school food program? I understand that the lead is the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, but how is the department involved?

GREG MORROW: Again, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is the lead on this. We work with many departments across government to increase local food consumption, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development being one. I mentioned some earlier. The Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care, the Department of Justice, the Department of Advanced Education.

In terms of this, we have a cross-departmental team. They met on school food yesterday. Again, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is the lead there. I did write my federal counterpart, Minister Bibeau with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, to support educational pilots for Nova Scotia and to coordinate all food-related initiatives across the province.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm hoping to ask some questions that would go a bit faster. Do you support extending MSI coverage to temporary foreign workers in either of the agricultural streams? That's a yes or no question.

GREG MORROW: That question would be for the Department of Health and Wellness.

LISA LACHANCE: I would invite the minister to share any thoughts that he has about the program and what he's heard in the sector. Is it a priority for producers, for instance, to have MSI coverage for their temporary foreign workers?

[8:00 p.m.]

GREG MORROW: The Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture is a lobby group that's working with the federal government and the Department of Health and Wellness. I certainly recognize the importance of temporary foreign workers. It's something I hear all the time. We have passed on that NSFA request to the Department of Health and Wellness.

LISA LACHANCE: Thinking about consultation with other government departments in collaboration, does the department have discussions with the Office of Addictions and Mental Health around growing industries and producers in terms of cannabis and wine, for example? Are there any implications for addictions and mental health in the province?

The question, just to clarify, is: Are there discussions between the two departments?

GREG MORROW: I just recently facilitated a meeting between my department and the minister responsible for the Office of Addictions and Mental Health in the last few weeks and the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture.

We covered many subjects during this meeting - mental health, farm safety, and potential future pilots and initiatives. As a result of that meeting, staff are working on a potential initiative. As well, we take mental health and agriculture very seriously, so there's a support line in the Department of Agriculture and we have extension workers who are trained in mental health.

LISA LACHANCE: One of the things that I've heard - I'm sure you have heard too - from industry groups and producers is concern about access to veterinary services in Nova Scotia. I'm wondering if the department is working on that. Is there a budgetary allocation to that work on enhancing veterinary services in Nova Scotia?

THE CHAIR: There are approximately nine minutes remaining for the NDP.

GREG MORROW: Yes, this is an issue that I hear a lot about from farmers. It's very top of mind for me and my Atlantic colleagues. We just talked about mental health; that's a big one when we meet and so is this one. We recognize that it is an issue facing industry. Everyone needs doctors but all the provinces need veterinarians, as well.

Recognizing this need, we are running a student program valued at \$60,000. ABC also has student initiatives and strategies in place. At the Atlantic Ministers' meeting, we

did meet at ABC with them in September. As a result of that, we delegated our deputies to form a working group and continue to look at this issue.

The Herd Health Plan has a million-dollar program as well to get veterinarians to farms. The department is also part of an industry-led working group on this important issue.

LISA LACHANCE: Another issue that was a resolution from this year at the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture general meeting was around access to EI for farmers. Recognizing that that's a federal issue, does the department support the expansion of EI for farmers?

GREG MORROW: The Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture is raising this at the federal level. Yes, we recognize the importance of this issue.

LISA LACHANCE: You talked about investments in support for bee farmers. You mentioned a \$100,000 investment. Is that ongoing? Also, are there any increases in this coming year?

GREG MORROW: Yes, that funding is ongoing. There will be new programming under SCAP that the bee producers would be able to apply for. Recognizing the importance of this, the department has a bee specialist. As well, the Atlantic Tech Transfer Team for Apiculture and their continued work is very valuable.

LISA LACHANCE: You talked about investments through the Community Pasture Program. I'm wondering what other work the department is doing in terms of preservation of agricultural land. What other levers do you see as possibilities to be used? I'm wondering about the use of land trusts. Is that another lever that you're looking at in the department?

GREG MORROW: Community pastures play a critical role in the development and growth of our beef sector. The Community Pasture Action Committee . . . (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes time for the NDP.

The honourable member for Kings South.

KEITH IRVING: In Round No. 2, maybe we'll pick up where we left off. I was asking with the ending of the Emerging Wine Regions Policy where I could find in the budget money set aside for a replacement program.

GREG MORROW: This is obviously a very complex file when you're dealing with the World Trade Organization. We are working with our colleagues in the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs and the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. We've conducted extensive industry engagement. We do expect to have a program soon, but the funding for this is not in the budget as of yet.

[8:15 p.m.]

KEITH IRVING: No money's in the budget. Have you consulted with industry on this replacement program? How many meetings have you personally had with the industry to work through this issue?

GREG MORROW: Yes, we have done two extensive rounds of consultation plus the deputy ministers of the three departments that I mentioned earlier: the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs, the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, and the Department of Agriculture, met with producers in Wolfville on this subject.

All of the information from those meetings and consultation sessions will help shape replacement programs going forward. I know that personally it's obviously top of mind for producers. It's something that I hear when I go visit wineries or fields. As recently as our announcement on the funding for the polar vortex just last month, it came up there so it's obviously very top of mind. We're always listening.

KEITH IRVING: You met personally on what date with the industry?

GREG MORROW: The deputy minister's meeting was in the Summer. I spoke to producers during the polar vortex announcement on March 9th. In terms of other discussions, as I mentioned, they would have happened while I was doing farm tours. I don't have all of those dates readily available.

KEITH IRVING: I want to now move to your 2022-2023 *Business Plan*. You've highlighted a few of the areas that you have made progress on. I just have some inquiries about a few elements here.

Last year, your department was to implement a Nova Scotia wine strategy. I'm assuming that's the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy that's referred to this year again. Am I to understand that very little progress, if any, on that file occurred during 2022-2023?

GREG MORROW: Industry has actually asked us to wait on the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy and to put our full attention on the replacement for the Emerging Wine Regions Policy and polar vortex. At their request, those two items have been our focus.

KEITH IRVING: When did they make that request?

GREG MORROW: Those requests would have been made over several months. Multiple letters came in to me and to the department. There would have been multiple times in the Fall and again as recently as the polar vortex announcement last month.

KEITH IRVING: With respect to the mandated actions of 2022-2023, it appears to be a commitment to develop a food and beverage strategy. I see that that was to be developed last year and your *Business Plan* indicates that it is being implemented this year. When will this strategy be released? I'm not sure that I've seen it.

GREG MORROW: In February of last year, the Department of Agriculture established an interdepartmental working group to develop a provincial food and beverage strategy.

I keep referencing all the different departments that we're working with on a number of items, but with the food and beverage strategy specifically, we're involved with the Department of Advanced Education, the Department of Community Services, the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, the Department of Economic Development, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Executive Council Office, the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs, the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care.

Some of the objectives of the strategy are facilitating healthy food choices for all Nova Scotians, promoting the production and usage of Nova Scotian food and beverages, supporting economic growth in our rural communities, and providing new inclusive opportunities and key linkages for success.

The strategy will promote enhanced awareness, increase primary production and processing capacity, and improve access to support food security in the province. There were jurisdictional reviews to understand what's being done in other provinces like New Brunswick, Ontario, and B.C. The team identified and reviewed the existing food-related initiatives in government, more than 90 in all. They spoke to key partners to understand what was working well and what was missing.

From this, they developed seven possible focus areas for public consultation. The seven were food access infrastructure, food security initiatives, collaborative food networks, capacity building for underrepresented groups, marketing of local products, targeted production support, and food processing expansion.

Public consultation for this had an amazing response. More than 1,900 people provided feedback. Roughly 85 per cent of those were individuals, not companies or not-for-profit agencies. These were individuals interested in telling us their thoughts.

The response also closely matched the population of Nova Scotia with identified responses from rural communities, Indigenous persons, people with disabilities, African Nova Scotians, seniors, and recent newcomers. A What We Heard Report has been put

together. We are just getting it translated and will be releasing it publicly, hopefully next week.

[8:30 p.m.]

KEITH IRVING: Terrific. Thank you very much. Just moving to the dikes. It's a bit unclear. Last year's *Business Plan* said that you would be doing the third year of a nine-year project. This year's *Business Plan* says the fifth year. It's likely a bit of a typo, but anyway.

I'm just wondering what was completed. The intent last year was the design of ten sites and construction on four. Was that work completed?

GREG MORROW: The member mentioned four projects. The project will address vulnerabilities in four regions along the Bay of Fundy. For the Annapolis River, dikes in this region protect significant historical marshes linking back to the first settlement of Nova Scotia. In the Southern Bight, the dikes in this region protect more than 6,000 acres of Annapolis Valley agricultural land. Dikes in Cobequid Bay protect some of the richest farmland along the Shubenacadie River and the shores of Cobequid Bay. Cumberland Basin includes isolated marshes along the basin and the New Brunswick border. Work in this area is separate from the Chignecto Isthmus.

The project is well under way with additional construction on Round Marsh, Allain River Marsh, and East Tidnish aboiteau scheduled for this year, 2023. All work is anticipated to be completed by the end of fiscal 2028-2029.

KEITH IRVING: Last year the department also committed to finalize business plans for the Community Pastures co-operatives. Is this completed?

GREG MORROW: Yes, and seven of the pastures have plants.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you and thank your staff for getting that complete. One that stands out in the work plan that I don't see continued in this year, and I don't think it was completed based on what happened, was to support the livestock industry to develop an emergency and business interruption response plan.

That clearly would have, I presume, been something that would have been helpful with Hurricane Fiona. Was that something that we just weren't able to complete before that storm? Given our experience with Hurricane Fiona, I'm just wondering if it still a priority as we don't see it in the upcoming *Business Plan*.

GREG MORROW: Could I ask for clarification since that's not in our current *Business Plan*?

KEITH IRVING: I'm quoting from the Department of Agriculture *Business Plan 2022-23* under Business Continuity and Emergency Preparedness as an area of focus for last year. The bullet says, "Support the livestock industry to develop emergency and business interruption response plans that ensure the ability to respond to an emergency event, including business continuity in a market interruption event."

GREG MORROW: There is funding available through our new 5-year agreement with the federal government with the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership for emergency planning. Industry will lead the development of these plans and we'll provide the funding through that.

We're also working with the feds on a number of issues including African swine fever and completing joint plans for industry. We did a national table top exercise, as well.

KEITH IRVING: I'll just reiterate that I think Hurricane Fiona has taught us the importance of us getting these plans in place. The effects on livestock, dairy, feed for chickens, et cetera, is a major concern. I think, in the same way that we need to act quickly on the reinforcement of our dike system, Hurricane Fiona has taught us the need for emergency preparedness. Industry will take the lead. I hope that the minister will do everything in his power to make sure that moves along for everyone.

My next question: Do you have any interest in creating a lab here in Nova Scotia to deal with testing for avian flu?

GREG MORROW: An outbreak of avian influenza can be very serious and challenging. That's why we work with the CFIA - the Canadian Food Inspection Agency - and producers to contain the spread and help them get through this. This includes strong biosecurity practices to protect the birds and the food products that we produce.

The important thing here is that it's up to CFIA and the federal government to identify where these labs can be. We are supportive of available services to industry. The New Brunswick Provincial Veterinary Laboratory has a testing facility that allows them to perform preliminary testing on avian influenza-suspected specimens. Confirmatory testing is performed at the National Centre for Foreign Animal Disease Winnipeg.

This is another area where Atlantic cooperation comes into play. We're very supportive. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia work very closely together. Again, I would say that at the end of the day, it comes down to CFIA to direct where specimens may be submitted for testing. They would determine testing priorities, as well.

KEITH IRVING: I'm puzzled by that response, but I'll move along.

You're taking over meat inspections. Is the minister aware of the challenges that abattoirs are having with respect to those meat inspections and meat inspectors who do not

want to work on the weekend or do not want to drive in a little bit of weather causing significant disruption to producers? Can the minister comment on whether he feels, having this lodged with the Department of Agriculture, that he can make any improvement on these complaints from industry?

[8:45 p.m.]

GREG MORROW: The responsibility for meat inspection and farm animal welfare is a natural fit with our department. It's something I've heard plenty about - that this is where they should be before they moved back on January 1st. We're pleased to have these staff back in our department to continue the important work of making sure that meat is safe to eat and farm animals are well cared for.

We've been working very effectively with abattoir owners and the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. As I mentioned, this is something that industry has asked for. All progress and everything to date has been very positive. All client feedback has been positive. I'm sure there are going to be issues. We're a few months into it and we'll work to address them. We will continue this important work.

KEITH IRVING: I know that it's new in the department, but I just wanted to ensure that you knew that this has been an issue that I've heard about. Now that it is in your house, I want to make sure that you know about it and can take action if problems continue, or take the credit when things improve.

Just sticking with abattoirs, I hear a lot about access to abattoirs - that we don't have enough to meet the needs of our producers. I believe you brought in a program in an attempt to expand capacity. Was it a \$2 million program? I'm not certain - I'm just going on memory here.

Can you tell me, first of all, if I'm correct about there being a program? Secondly, what the response was and whether we have been able to utilize funds from the government to expand access to abattoirs?

GREG MORROW: Madam Chair, would it be appropriate to take a 2-minute break?

THE CHAIR: Yes. I now call a 2-minute recess.

[8:50 p.m. The Subcommittee recessed.]

[8:54 p.m. The Subcommittee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order.

The honourable Minister of Agriculture.

GREG MORROW: We did have a \$500,000 program that received 30 applications. The Atlantic deputy ministers are also leading a self-sufficiency working group and evaluating processing capacity.

KEITH IRVING: Of the \$500,000, how much money went out? Can you clarify how much expansion has taken place?

GREG MORROW: Of that \$500,000, \$300,000 has already gone out and more is expected. Expansion will be varied by the project initiative.

KEITH IRVING: You're carrying forward with the program into the new fiscal year. Are you topping up that program to a half-million dollars for this new fiscal year?

GREG MORROW: We will have all projects approved this fiscal year. We are still working through six applications. There are no current plans for the next fiscal, but there are options through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

KEITH IRVING: Staff are busy over the next couple of days to get six more contribution agreements out.

Let's go to SCAP. How much money - and does it appear in this budget - is going into the SCAP funds for this upcoming fiscal year? How much of that money is federal and how much of that is provincial?

GREG MORROW: I referenced this before, but in July we reached an agreement in principle with our federal, provincial, and territorial counterparts for the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership. This means \$9.25 million in funding for Nova Scotia producers. That's a 25 per cent increase from the last agreement. There are increases within our business risk management programs as well.

The breakdown through the five-year agreement is a total of \$46,250,000 with the federal government providing almost \$28 million and for the province, \$18.5 million through the five years. Annually, as I mentioned, that works out to \$9.25 million. Of that annual contribution, the federal government covers roughly \$5.5 million and we are \$3.7 million.

I guess what you would see in the budget itself is a total of \$8.5 million. The feds would contribute \$4.8 million, and we would be \$3.7 million of that. The federally attributed funds are \$721,000 to spend on Nova Scotia.

[9:00 p.m.]

KEITH IRVING: The increase this year over last year from the federal government - you said that they are now putting in \$4.8 million. What would they have put in under the old cap in the last fiscal year?

GREG MORROW: When you take away that 25 per cent increase, it's \$7.4 million and the federal contribution would be \$4.4 million.

KEITH IRVING: Those numbers appear in this budget. Let's just review your budget increase this year from \$40 million to \$45 million, an increase of \$4.8 million. If we back out the \$2 million for the transfer from the Department of Environment and Climate Change, the budget increase is 6.9 per cent or \$2.7 million. Am I correct that of that \$2.7 million increase to the budget, that only \$400,000 is coming from the federal government, or are there other federal contributions to this budget increase?

GREG MORROW: There were no other federal increases.

KEITH IRVING: It's part of the budget that I don't generally get into, but maybe you could educate me here. The General Revenue Fund - the Ordinary Revenues summary is showing \$5.36 million for agriculture and the Ordinary Recoveries are \$6.45 million. Could you just provide a bit of information on those two numbers and what that is actually saying in your budget documents?

GREG MORROW: That \$5.6 million is a combination of federal recovery, which would be the vast majority of that. There's also some third party, as well.

KEITH IRVING: The \$5.36 million - is that what you're talking about in the general revenue fund, ordinary revenue? You said \$5.6 million. One number was \$6.4 million and the other was \$5.36 million.

GREG MORROW: Just for clarification, is the member asking on revenue or ordinary recovery?

KEITH IRVING: I was asking on both in terms of understanding how one has gone up \$300,000 and the other one has gone up \$800,000. I'm just trying to get a sense of where those increases are coming from.

GREG MORROW: Dikes are capital revenue and they are \$8 million. The difference in the \$300,000 and the \$800,000 is the difference between forecast and estimate in recovery. There's a \$300,000 increase in dike TCA revenue and the increase in recovery is related to SCAP. If you want a breakdown, we'll get it for you.

[9:15 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Kings South with a reminder that his end time is 9:21 p.m. so he has approximately six minutes.

KEITH IRVING: I didn't mean to get too deep into the weeds of the numbers, but you've got crack financial people around you, so we want to make sure that we pay attention to them a bit.

My other question here is with respect to the eight new staff that are funded externally. Could you explain those eight new staff and who's funding them?

GREG MORROW: This is through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership. Under the new policy framework, we cost-share these positions with the federal government. As this is a new policy, these are new positions.

KEITH IRVING: They have doubled how many staff that they are covering. Is that, in essence, the \$400,000 more that they are putting into the department? In other words, it's not additional program money that they have added, but money for staff? (Interruption)

My time is coming to an end here, so perhaps the minister can forward that question at another time. I wanted to thank his staff for his questions.

Because I do not have enough time to dive into capital, I have a few written questions here. I'm wondering if you could look at it. They're fairly straightforward in terms of spending on capital. Perhaps you could have a look at that and get back to me with those answers in the next few days.

GREG MORROW: Yes. As soon as we can. Thank you. I appreciate that.

KEITH IRVING: Again, I want to thank the minister for responding to two hours of questions. I know that it's challenging. I only had to go through Estimates once and you just never know what's coming. I appreciate the work of the minister and all his staff who have supported him through my time here during Estimates.

I'll turn it over to my colleague from the NDP.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm wondering what financial supports are in the 2023-2024 budget for new entrants to farming.

GREG MORROW: There is \$574,000 in a program called FarmNext. There are also various initiatives that we can do through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

I would also take this opportunity to talk about some of our diversity initiatives which bring diversity of new entrants, as well. I touched on some of them during my opening remarks. We have two scholarships and Summer internships, Grow Where You're Planted, Honouring Mi'kmaw Roots, Bridge Into Agriculture, engaging African Nova Scotian youth in agriculture and community food security, Black youth planting their future, 902 Man Up, Resilient Agricultural Landscape Program, and accessibility planning.

LISA LACHANCE: I know that you've shared those programs before. Are those part of the \$574,000 that's budgeted? What other programs are included in that? How much is there from the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership with the federal government?

GREG MORROW: No, this would be additional funding. The new entrants may be eligible for \$125,000 through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

LISA LACHANCE: To clarify, each new entrant may be eligible for up to \$125,000 under the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership? What's the total amount budgeted for new entrants?

GREG MORROW: New entrants can qualify for various programs under SCAP. There are various funding levels. They may qualify for more than one, but the specific \$125,000 was a total for the Get Growing Program. That breaks down to \$10,000 per farm.

LISA LACHANCE: Farms would apply for that \$10,000. What would it be used for typically?

GREG MORROW: It would be for small equipment, infrastructure, and those sorts of things. The program hasn't launched yet, but we'd work with each individual applicant and understand their needs on a case-by-case basis.

LISA LACHANCE: Farmers and producers, like everyone, have been dealing with increasing costs and the cost-of-living crisis, but certainly the inputs into production have increased at various rates in the agricultural sector.

One area where there could be a gesture from government in terms of recognizing the impact on farmers and producers is around farm registration rates. Is the department looking at changing farm registration rates or the scales around farm registration rates?

GREG MORROW: These farm registrations, they're a program through the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. We collect them on their behalf, so they're in regulations.

We'd have to change regulations in order to change them. It supports the operation of NSFA, but we do review it every five years with them. At the end, it goes to the Federation.

[9:30 p.m.]

LISA LACHANCE: In your opening remarks, you talked about the revenue of almost \$500 million in exports in 2022 and noted that that was an increase of 23 per cent over 2021. Has the industry rebounded from pre-pandemic levels? Does that match or exceed 2019, for instance?

GREG MORROW: Just to go back to some of the numbers that I mentioned in my remarks, I mentioned wild blueberries as the top agri-food export at \$167 million. They account for 34 per cent of all agri-food exports in 2022.

Some of our main export destinations were the United States with 55 per cent, Germany at 8 per cent, the Netherlands with 6 per cent, France at 5 per cent, and Japan at 4 per cent. Our exports are up but in terms of specific numbers, we can send that data to the member.

THE CHAIR: A reminder to everyone that we are to stop at 9:50 p.m. If you're looking at that clock, it is a minute off.

LISA LACHANCE: Just to clarify, is that a stop at 9:50 p.m. for the minister to provide closing comments or are we stopping earlier than that?

THE CHAIR: We can stop earlier if you have no questions, but we have to stop at 9:50 p.m. That will be our four hours.

LISA LACHANCE: My plan will be to stop before that so that we can hear closing comments from the minister.

THE CHAIR: All right. Excellent. If we could stop at 9:45 p.m., that would be fantastic.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm wondering if you've seen any crops or any products in decline in terms of either total revenue domestically or export revenue. Are there crops or products that the department is concerned about and working on?

GREG MORROW: If I could just go back to the previous question, staff has found that number. I appreciate that. It was \$367 million in 2019.

To the current question, extension staff in Perennia continuously monitor crops for decline and for disease. More importantly, they're always looking at new opportunities, whether that's new crops or management trials, and always looking at ways to deal with

climate change or season extension. I mentioned in my opening remarks about the Long Cane Raspberry program as one example of that.

LISA LACHANCE: Is the cannabis industry growing in Nova Scotia? I'm also thinking about the craft breweries and wineries, of course. Businesses and farms have been able to create amazing experiences where people can go and see the product being made and do tastings and that sort of thing. They're licensed to sell directly on site. Of course, it's great. It's created a whole wine trail in the Annapolis Valley and that sort of thing.

Is the department in support of considering a similar approach with cannabis growers?

GREG MORROW: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, cannabis came in at \$60 million last year. We are evaluating this sector. It is federally regulated but we would look at other provinces and what they're doing. The Department of Finance and Treasury Board would be involved in any policy decisions when it comes to cannabis.

LISA LACHANCE: Yes, I know that the Department of Finance and Treasury Board would be involved. I'm just wondering if the department was supportive of this idea.

I also wanted to ask about your collaboration with colleagues in other departments around housing issues. As we know, housing is in crisis everywhere. The Annapolis Valley this past summer had lots of folks sleeping in their cars at beaches and down roads and that sort of thing. It affects the labour available for farms and producers but also it affects communities and the entire rural landscape.

I'm wondering what the department and the minister have been doing around housing.

GREG MORROW: Temporary foreign workers would be the department's main link when it comes to housing. The Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board finances housing regularly to help facilitate labour on farms.

THE CHAIR: A reminder to the member of the 9:45 p.m. agreed upon end time.

LISA LACHANCE: I feel like I don't have any simple questions left. In terms of the protection of agricultural land, is it possible to track the percentage of land that has moved officially over from agricultural land to other purposes? Is that something that we track in the province?

THE CHAIR: While they are figuring out the answer, just to confirm that this is your final question. (Interruption) Okay, thank you.

GREG MORROW: The land is tracked at the municipal level. They would be able to provide that data.

[9:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: With that being stated, we now have almost five minutes for closing statements and to go over our work.

GREG MORROW: I guess I would just wrap up by thanking the members for their questions. I say that in general it's been a heck of a year in agriculture. There's been some real challenges.

If you go back to Hurricane Fiona, we talked about the polar vortex, and rising costs. I am always energized by the resiliency of our industry and how they always bounce back and continue to provide such important work to our province and outside our province with export markets and those sorts of things. It just continues to blow me away. No matter what challenges they face, they always rise above it.

When I talk about things that have happened this year, I'm biased, but I really believe that I do have the best staff in government. I know how hard they've been working through SCAP, through Hurricane Fiona, through the polar vortex, the Emerging Wine Regions Policy, the budget process, all of those things. They've been going non-stop right up until this point.

I know that the member for Kings South mentioned earlier about them having three or four days to get six applications in. By golly, they'll do it. They'll be working day and night to get it done before the end of the fiscal year. I can't thank the staff in my department enough for all they do.

THE CHAIR: Shall Resolution E2 stand?

Resolution E2 stands.

I would like to thank everybody for the great questions and also the minister and the minister's staff. I really appreciate your time.

It is now 9:48 p.m. That concludes the subcommittee's consideration of Estimates for today. The subcommittee will resume consideration when the House again resolves into a Committee of the Whole on Supply.

Just a note, they finished over there at 9:43 p.m. and have been waiting for us to finish, so I would suggest going quickly. With that being said, we are adjourned.

[The Subcommittee adjourned at 9:49 p.m.]