



House of Assembly  
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MARCH 5, 2024

**SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY**

**3:46 P.M.**

**CHAIR**

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Subcommittee on Supply will come to order. It is now 3:46 p.m. The subcommittee is meeting to consider the estimates for the Department of Agriculture as outlined in Resolution E2.

**Resolution E2 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$46,682,000 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 an hour, if he wishes, and to introduce the staff to the committee.

The honourable Minister of Agriculture.

HON. GREG MORROW: Before I proceed, as you mentioned, I would like to introduce the members of my senior team who are joining me here. Supporting me are Loretta Robichaud, Deputy Minister of the Department of Agriculture, and Jen Thompson with our Crown Lending Agencies Division. We will be joined by Michael O'Brien, who is the executive director at the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, as well. At some point, they'll switch out. I also welcome senior staff here in the room as well.

I am happy to be here to talk about agriculture and the work that the Department of Agriculture does. It's always a good day when I have the opportunity to share the great work farmers are doing in this province and also the great work my team does, showing up in every community from Cape Breton through Nappan and down to the French and South Shores, working closely with our beef producers, dairy and egg farmers, grape growers, beekeepers, fruit and vegetable growers and more, to work with them to keep Nova Scotians fed and the local rural economy supported.

There's no question, agriculture is a vital and historic part of life in Nova Scotia. It's a historic industry that continues to put food on our tables, drive innovation, and support our economies, employing thousands of people across the province, especially in our rural communities. Agriculture is a key part of healthy, resilient communities and economies, which support this government's top priorities. Those priorities are a world-class health care system, building a skilled workforce, more housing, helping families, and growing the economy.

We emerged from the pandemic with a rapidly growing population, stronger economics, and exciting prospects ahead. Our government is focused on helping to move our province forward, investing in health care and housing, helping families, and growing the economy. These investments are all connected. They support growth. We've been making progress and will continue to build on the strong foundation we've laid. Agriculture is key to this work. Farmers produce healthy, quality food that feeds families and creates jobs, and run businesses that fuel a healthy economy in communities. Today I'm pleased to update you on our department's progress, and programs designed to support those outcomes.

What does the Department of Agriculture do? Let's start simply. The department helps support, promote, and grow agriculture throughout the province. How do we do that? In part, we help connect people to the quality food, beverages, and products grown right here at home.

We also deliver programs, services, and policies that support farmers and food processors throughout the province to help them be more innovative, resilient, and sustainable. By working with farmers, community groups, and partners, we help increase the province's food supply and improve food self-sufficiency. This means more local food is grown and eaten here at home.

Our department is also in the business of promoting farmers' quality products. We use marketing to connect and inform Nova Scotians about our producers, to share what is in season and where to get it, 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, both provincially and with our federal partners. Our aim is to help food and beverage

producers and processors so they can prosper. On top of that, we oversee the province's agricultural legislation. We provide production, risk management tools, business development and financing, and credit counselling for agriculture.

These are big bucket labels I'm sharing, but each bucket is filled with actions and outcomes. I'm going to take you through some of those and share a bit about what type of year it's been for the industry and what we've done to try to help.

First, let's talk numbers. Data from the first three quarters of last year is in and so far, Nova Scotia is seeing a 3.5 per cent increase in farm cash receipts. That's an impressive \$26 million increase. It brought the total to \$755.6 million compared to \$729.4 million for the same period in 2022.

A little over half of that is from Nova Scotia supply-managed industries, including dairy, poultry, and eggs. Other major contributors so far include cattle, at more than \$40 million; blueberries, cannabis, floriculture, sod, and fresh field vegetables bringing in more than \$30 million for each category; fresh apples at \$27 million; and Christmas trees at \$25 million.

I've talked about jobs. It's no surprise that people all over our province are working hard to drive this sector that we all benefit from. In 2023, 5,300 people earned a living by being directly employed in the primary production of agriculture in Nova Scotia. That's up from last year - 5,050. We're looking at about 11,000 jobs across primary agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing.

When we talk about jobs, sometimes we can forget to talk about people, but that's not the case in agriculture. People are at the heart of what we do. Often, farmers' businesses are knit together with their homes and their families. I've met with many producers over the past two and a half years. They've been kind enough to invite me to their farms, production facilities, and into their homes. I've met their families and those who work with them. Their businesses are driving local food production and helping rural economies across the province.

Staying on the topic of jobs, jobs in agricultural research and agri-tech are attracting a new generation of young innovators who are passionate about the future of agriculture. This is important. Attracting a new generation is key to the future of agriculture. The average age of a Nova Scotia farmer is 58. That average may very well increase unless we act and work to bring young people into the industry and encourage those who are in it to stay.

That's why, in 2022, we set up the first Minister's Nova Scotia Youth Council for Agriculture. With input from the 10-member council, we developed the Plant Your Roots program. I'm so proud of this program. It's a highly successful program to help support

young people entering agriculture. It helps with the cost of succession for those growing or taking on an existing business.

It offers as much as \$100,000 in interest rebates up to a four-year period. That's a substantial increase from the \$30,000 rebate that was previously offered through a program called FarmNext. We just hosted the Digital Harvest conference for young and innovative farmers throughout the province to learn about marketing and communications from industry giants like Google and Pinterest.

The event was followed by the Youth Council's agri-event reception, where council members announced a new mentorship program that will support young people with aspirations in agriculture to work alongside established producers and agri-business owners.

That's not all we're doing to attract talented young people to agriculture. We also have the Agriculture Skills Student Bursary Program that rewards students who work on farms throughout the Summer. We fund it jointly with our federal partners. These bursaries help address the labour gap for primary agricultural producers in Nova Scotia, and they introduce agriculture as a viable career option for students.

We awarded 51 bursaries in fiscal 2022/23/24. To interest even more of the next generation, 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 very rewarding career choice. We send free learning resources to teachers at more than 300 schools, from pre-Primary to Grade 12. I've been to some of the schools - just this week, in fact - to see the program in action, and it gives me faith that our industry will be in good hands with future generations.

The department is also reaching out and encouraging people to get excited about our sector, especially those in underrepresented groups. There are several initiatives under way to support diversity and inclusion in agriculture. We're seeing good success with these programs, like our Honouring Mi'kmaw Roots, which is an entrance scholarship and student internship for a Mi'kmaw student pursuing a career in agriculture. The first successful recipient began her studies this past September and will join the department for a paid internship this summer. We're happy to have her in the industry and we wish her success.

We also have the Grow Where You're Planted scholarship. This is an entrance scholarship and Summer internship for an African Nova Scotian student pursuing a career in agriculture. The first successful recipient began her studies in September 2022 and joined the department for a paid internship last Summer. The same student will return to the department again this Summer.

Black youth planting their future program: The department expanded the program, which was started by the Department of Public Works, to Bible Hill, and we continue to partner with six other departments to support Black students with Summer employment. One of the goals of this initiative is to expose them to careers in public service and agriculture. The program continues to grow, and I'm proud to share that the department is hiring a returning student as a youth program coordinator for Summer 2024. Again, this is exciting. It's good to see a real impact, and I know these students will do great work.

Working with our federal partners through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership - we call it S-CAP - as well as our partners at the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture, Dalhousie University's Agricultural Campus, and African Nova Scotian Affairs, the department supports Bridge Into Agriculture. This is a 22-week training program for African Nova Scotians to introduce horticulture food production. Work like this helps to get more people into the industry and contributes to our work to get more local food on local plates.

Getting more local food on Nova Scotians' plates doesn't mean we aren't looking for opportunities outside our borders. In fact, we have a number of products that grow really well in Nova Scotia and are in high demand globally. Exports totalled \$495 million in 2023 - nearly half a billion dollars. Major markets are the United States at 64 per cent and the Netherlands, South Korea, Japan, and Germany, all at about 4 to 5 per cent.

One product we see exceptional export of is blueberries. Millions of pounds are exported worldwide each year, totalling more than \$121 million. That's 24 per cent of all agri-food exports. Consumer demand for many of our products is growing - not just blueberries. International buyers are also interested in products like our prepared grains, pastas, live plants and trees, and frozen vegetables. Nova Scotia is a small geographic area with big tastes and tremendous reach. That's what makes us unique in the world market. What this success really represents is a tremendous amount of hard work in an industry that is rarely predictable. In fact, few other sectors are as susceptible to the depth and breadth of risks faced by our producers. That's why we are proud to offer a suite of business risk-management programs. These are the tools to help producers manage risk. They provide protection against income and production losses. These programs are voluntary and demand-driven and are national in scope.

They offer support like insurance, income stability, investment matching, and disaster relief. For example, crop insurance has been in place in the province for more than 55 years, and the federal and provincial governments pay approximately 60 per cent of premiums. That means for every dollar that a producer has paid in premiums, approximately \$2.83 has been paid in claims. We've insured more than \$90 million in crops last year, and nearly \$169 million in livestock.

We've also been working with industry and our Atlantic colleagues to understand what a livestock price insurance program similar to what the Western provinces have could

look like for our Atlantic provinces. More good news: The Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership continues to support an increase in the AgriStability program. The compensation rate was raised to 80 per cent from 70 per cent in the 2023 program year. This meant an additional \$72 million throughout Canada to help protect producers against large declines in farming income for reasons such as production loss, increased costs, and market conditions. In addition to these business risk-management programs, we are working to support farmers in times of very challenging situations like extreme weather events.

[4:00 p.m.]

In February 2023, we had the extreme cold snap known as the polar vortex. When it happened, early assessment showed that the majority of grapes, raspberries, peaches, cherries, and plums could be lost. When we heard about the impacts on the sector, we worked with our partners at Horticulture Nova Scotia to quickly launch a program to support these producers. To date, we've assisted 106 producers in maintaining their crops in the wake of the extensive damage caused by this extreme cold, and we're working with industry to design and roll out the next phase of the program this Spring.

Only a few short months ago, after the polar vortex, Nova Scotia set a record that none of us ever hoped we would, with the province's worst wildfires in recent history burning through forests, lands, and homes. On the news and social media, we saw stories of farmers showing up for their communities and organizing emergency evacuation options for horses and herds. People were opening their barns and their homes. We saw the devastation and responded, with staff reaching out to understand how we could help. We quickly provided \$2,500 grants to registered farms in the mandatory evacuation zones. Our support totalled \$40,000 for emergency response for farmers and businesses impacted by wildfires. We also moved to add wildfires to our crop insurance plans, so coverage would be in place if it were ever needed again.

I've listed two major disruptions to our industry in early 2023, but after a dry Spring came flooding, followed by an extended wet period and reoccurring rain. When the floods happened, I attended the town hall meeting organized by the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture and heard the stories of how farmers were affected. Hearing what was needed, we deployed our staff, including our regional ag reps. These ag reps are phenomenal. The boots-on-the-ground work they do to support farmers is not only impressive; it truly makes a difference.

In the case of the flooding this past July, our ag reps and department staff at regional offices throughout the province helped producers navigate through the federal Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements program, or DFAA, administered by the provincial Emergency Management Office. In addition to the floods, it was a wet season from June through to August 2023, and the Kentville weather station measured precipitation on 53 out of 92 days. That is substantial, with five days having more than 25

millimetres of rain. This created significant problems for farmers, including field access, crop quality, crop management, and pest control. Wildfires, floods, and ongoing rain and wet conditions took their toll on agriculture in 2023, leaving thousands of hectares of damage, including extensive crop and yield loss.

As I've said, agriculture is essential to feed our families, support the economy, and maintain a healthy provincial food supply. That's why, to make sure industry was supported, we recently launched the 2023 Season Response Program. This new funding will help fruit, vegetable, berry, and forage farmers as they recover and plan for their upcoming growing season. This program builds on the existing supports to bridge the gap for those still facing challenges or who are not able to access other government support programs.

There's no question this year was difficult. The weather was severe, and it's clear the effects of climate change are being felt by everyone, especially farmers. We know it's time to plan and prepare: to adapt to climate change and adopt new innovative tools and practices. I know you've probably seen the solar panels on barn roofs. Our industry is already at the table finding ways to be more sustainable, and we've been at that table with them. We've worked with the Department of Environment and Climate Change and the talented team at Perennia Food and Agriculture Corporation, our Crown corporation, to develop and fund climate change adaptation plans.

We're also supporting producers to become more energy-efficient, which saves them money and reduces their electricity and fossil fuel footprint. We also fund an on-site energy manager for agriculture at Efficiency Nova Scotia. Kraig Porter helps farmers determine which upgrades to make and how to secure funding to help make them. Since September 2017, through our work with Efficiency Nova Scotia, there have been about 300 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 also a reduction of more than 6,700 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. It's been so successful that this year we engaged a second energy manager to help agricultural not-for-profit organizations in a similar way.

We've also had great success with a variety of programs, including ones that address climate change through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership that I referenced earlier - S-CAP. With a new agreement reached last July, we've secured \$9.25 million annually for Nova Scotia producers. That's a 25 per cent increase from the last agreement. It boosts our business risk-management programs too. 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, business risk management programs, and market development.

This year, through S-CAP, we rolled out a number of programs. One I'd like to focus on is the Resilient Agricultural Landscape Program, shortened to RALP. Forty-four farms have benefited from this program, and we've committed \$793,000. RALP supports farmers as they build on their commitment to environmental stewardship. They can do this by adapting farm practices that respond to climate change and decrease greenhouse gas emissions. Through this program, farmers received funding to purchase no-till equipment and install ponds and pollinator strips. This program was oversubscribed. That means we had more people apply than expected, and that's a good thing. Again, it saves farmers money and supports environmental sustainability.

These types of programs help lower impacts on the environment, but they also help lower the cost of production, and we all know costs have been on the rise. We're feeling it in our everyday lives, and the agricultural sector is no exception. Fuel prices are coming down from historic levels, but they remain high. Industry-specific costs for things like fertilizer continue to climb. Increased costs mean it's more expensive to produce food. Through the agreements I mentioned with our federal partners and through our own provincial programs, we are working to help. For example, we offer support programs as well as flexible loan payments through the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board that help to free up cash flow. We also continue to help farmers adopt innovative tools and practices that reduce labour environment input costs and programs to help with basic costs like the cost of hauling fertilizer and purchasing new equipment.

Part of my department's mandate is to support and encourage local food consumption. That gives Nova Scotians more food choices, increases access to food, and supports our local farmers. In support of local, the department has run several successful buy-local initiatives to raise 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. We've highlighted Nova Scotia beef through social media and television campaigns. We've partnered with major Nova Scotia food events to make sure that local producers are represented.

We've also undertaken numerous projects to get more local, healthy food into our public institutions like schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and other facilities. We have dedicated a staff position and have team members who support them to lead this work and facilitate relationships between producers and these types of institutions.

This past year, we've launched 11 pilot programs at more than 30 facilities to get more local food into 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 program launched this past Fall at Northwood, a continuing care home in Halifax.



Purchasing of local food at Northwood increased to 23.07 per cent. That's nearly a 3.5 per cent increase. During the pilot, Northwood replaced 13 imported products on their resident menu with Nova Scotia products. The pilot started conversations with large third-party food-service distributors on opportunities and the role that they can play in supporting our Nova Scotia producers.

There were new partnerships formed with local vendors that they hadn't used before, and they continue to purchase from these new vendors. This is just one success story. We plan to keep the good work going by rolling out more projects over the coming year.

When it comes to encouraging local, we're taking a multi-layered approach. There are many ways we're working to increase local and strengthen our food systems. One way is by encouraging more local products to come on market by supporting new entrants to agriculture.

This past Spring, we partnered with the Centre for Women in Business at Mount Saint Vincent University to support a new pilot project for women who are new entrants and from underrepresented communities to help them turn their cooking skills into successful local food businesses. Last year, the program had its first cohort of graduates.

The Specialized Program in Cooking Entrepreneurship, SPICE, is an excellent example of the innovation that helps our agriculture and agri-food sector grow and thrive. These new food businesses bring more diversity, create more healthy and local food options, and help create financial stability for women and their families who are doing something they love. We're proud to support this important work.

A mandate commitment for us was to ensure that by 2030, 20 per cent of the money that Nova Scotians spend on food be spent on locally produced products. That 20 per cent number was determined based on the existing data and studies, which didn't quite align with what we wanted to measure.

Over the last two and a half years, while our department continued our work to support local, we also worked to develop a better way to determine the share of total food budgets being spent on local products, to measure progress, and how it changes over time. We worked with leading researchers from the Canadian Agri-Food Foresight Institute to develop a first-of-its-kind survey. This approach has been peer-reviewed and published in an international scientific journal.

The survey showed that Nova Scotians are using about a third of their food budget on locally grown or produced food and products. It's good to see that support for our local farmers and growers. Over the coming years, we'll continue to survey Nova Scotians about their buying habits to ensure that our efforts to promote buying locally continue to have a positive impact.

[4:15 p.m.]

Research and innovation are constant in agriculture. Brilliant people are driving our industry forward, adapting to change and challenges. That may sound like an exaggeration, but it's not. For example, for our work with Perennia and their support of the Christmas Tree Council of Nova Scotia, we are supporting valuable research in the many aspects of Christmas tree production, like genetic screening and naturally selected seedlings that have superior traits, such as improved needle retention, colour, aroma, and shape. This is great news, as Nova Scotia's Christmas trees are sought-after. Every year, more than 400,000 Christmas trees are exported to places like the United States, Panama, and the Caribbean.

Another example of innovation is our work with our partners at Horticulture Nova Scotia to launch a \$5 million Season Extension Enhancement Program. It is helping farms innovate by funding greenhouses, irrigation, and enhanced cold storage to extend growing seasons and increase revenue. This also means more local products available longer.

We are also promoting innovation with the Maple Producers Association of Nova Scotia. Our 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 energy. Maple was one of many agriculture industries that was hit hard by Hurricane Fiona in September 2022. It takes about 40 years for a maple tree to grow big enough to tap. Fiona thinned or flattened trees that had been standing for decades or, in some cases, centuries.

Regrowing lost stock could take years. That's why this year we worked with our federal partners to establish a new AgriRecovery program that will support maple syrup producers, who continue to be challenged by extraordinary costs associated with accessing existing but underdeveloped maple forests, to return to pre-Fiona production levels. The recovery program will help strengthen and support the sector by providing funding to reduce the burden on maple producers who have undeveloped production areas.

Moving from maple to wine: Nova Scotia wine is well-loved. Currently there are 33 licensed farm wineries in Nova Scotia: 24 grape wineries and 9 non-grape wineries. Sales of Nova Scotia wine at the NSLC in 2022-2023 totalled more than \$27 million. That's a \$2 million increase from last year. There's tremendous potential, so we want to keep that momentum going through strategic initiatives, program investment, and export development.

Last February the polar vortex threw us a curve, but the industry, Horticulture Nova Scotia, and Perennia have been working with us to deliver multi-year programs that will help wine and fruit growers who are impacted. Early this year, we rolled out the first year of an annual Wine and Grape Industry Development Program that will support the sustainability of the Nova Scotia wine industry. This year the focus is on providing grape growers and wineries support to prepare for climate change and reduce production costs.

This coming Spring, we will be consulting on the establishment of the Nova Scotia wine authority and the implementation of quality standards.

On a variety of initiatives, our department is 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 them on several key initiatives, including promoting environmental farm plans, preparing for climate change, encouraging farm safety, and looking after mental health in our farming community.

I am going to pause on farm safety. Nothing can be more important than making sure our hard-working people come home to their families. I am proud of the work done to make sure that happens. In fact, the week of March 10<sup>th</sup> kicks off Canadian Agricultural Safety Week. I hope everyone takes the time to learn more about how important good safety practices are in agriculture. I am also especially pleased about the work the Federation is doing to support the mental health of our farmers and their families in the partnerships we are forming in workforce development. All told, our commitment to support Federation programs will reach more than \$800,000.

Nova Scotia is in a great position to be competitive in the beef market. Consumers want high-quality local products, and our producers are working to meet that need. There are 380 licensed beef producers in Nova Scotia. As of September 2023, they generated income of \$42 million, and with prices for beef remaining strong, it's a good time to be giving special attention to this sector. That's why we're investing in new programs and projects to help beef farmers. We're working with them to increase production here at home, and to help the industry stay competitive, connected, and consumer-focused.

Less than a year ago, we brought together a steering committee to inform what we're calling the Nova Scotia Beef Initiative. That committee has industry and producer expertise from the Nova Scotia Cattle Producers association, the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board, and Perennia, along with a dedicated team from the department. We used the recommendations generated from a two-day beef forum to create a division and a set of initiatives to grow the Nova Scotia beef industry. Through the Beef Initiative Steering Committee, we're developing new programs, services, and training opportunities that will strengthen and sustain the beef sector in our province.

I'm going to share a few details on those programs. First, I've heard from many cattle farmers about the importance of a good bull. We've increased investment in the Nova Scotia Cattle Producers' Elite Sire Program, often known as the bull bonus. We're working with our partners at Perennia on an updated forage guide to give beef producers access to information about optimal diet and cost of production. That's to raise more cattle locally. We're assessing training needs for Nova Scotia meat processors.

We also want people to know what they're missing if they're not eating Nova Scotia beef. We'll be doing provincial marketing that will show people the tremendous value of eating locally produced beef. Finally, a new feedlot pilot program will help producers grow their cattle here instead of shipping out of province.

To support all the projects I've mentioned, we're investing more than \$950,000 through two years. This funding complements other work the department does. In fact, we can't make any real progress on the beef sector or any meat production without ensuring the health and safety of our animals, and that the local products that are produced at our meat-processing facilities are safe.

As of January 1, 2023, responsibility for meat inspection and farm animal welfare returned to the Department of Agriculture. We're pleased to have this back to continue the important work of making sure that meat is safe to eat and farm animals are well cared for. Farmers care about their animals and take steps to ensure their safety and their health. The Province's Meat Inspection Program makes sure that meat processed here in Nova Scotia comes from healthy animals, is slaughtered humanely, and is safe. This is vital because it ensures confidence in the food we eat. There are 20 abattoirs and 26 meat processors licensed under the Nova Scotia Meat Inspection Act.

Another program supporting the beef initiative is Community 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. There are many hectares of land dedicated to these pastures. The largest pasture is more than 3,000 hectares in Minudie, Cumberland County. This pasture is strategically located near our new regional office in Nappan - the Nappan Experimental Farm and the Maritime Beef Testing Society. Our goal is to keep pastures sustainable and accessible for agricultural use and as a resource for growing the rural economy now and for future generations. With this in mind, we continue to invest in the Community Pastures program, aimed at helping pasture organizations with their infrastructure and soil fertility needs.

Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars was made available this year to pasture co-operatives, and I'm proud to say that an additional \$250,000 is planned for 2024-25. Programs like these are the types of things that have big impacts. Creating shared spaces for farmers' herds is a smart, sustainable way to grow beef, feed sheep, and use our agricultural land in a way that benefits a community of farmers.

We're coming to the end of my remarks, and I feel like we've barely gotten off the blocks. There's so much more that we're doing in the department and across the agriculture industry as a whole, and we're not doing this work alone.

There are a number of partners in addition to the department team who are in Nova Scotia producers' corner. You've heard me mention Perennia. They recently became a

Crown corporation and we're so happy to have them as part of the team. They provide important services for the agriculture, seafood, and food and beverage sectors in our province. Perennia's specialists are key to providing support to the sector. They are experts on everything from apiculture to dairy and all that's in between. They know how to respond to the industry's needs. More than that, they know how to help industry respond to the demands of the future.

We also have the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board. They support the development of sustainable agriculture and agri-rural businesses through responsible lending. This is a team of professionals that understands agriculture and agricultural businesses. Whether it's flexible payment options for farmers just starting out, smaller loans for smaller projects, providing financing for new innovative ideas, or locking in rates long-term to give producers more stability, the Loan Board is a unique resource to our farmers, helping them grow, improve, and innovate. The Loan Board has been there backing farmers for more than a century. Agriculture financing is all they do, and that single focus gives them an exceptionally deep understanding of our producers' realities.

In this most recent fiscal year, ending March 2023, there were record advances for the Loan Board totalling more than \$58.8 million. That's more than 12 per cent above the previous year. There were also record approvals for the Board totalling more than \$87.3 million, more than 52 per cent of the previous year. When a business works with the Farm Loan Board, their loan repayments go right back into financing other producers within the province's agriculture industry.

At the end of the day, farming is a diverse and ever-changing industry driven by hard-working people. Farming is ingrained in generations of knowledge and decades of opportunities and challenges. It's also adjusting and growing with new ideas and new young people coming on board. I could talk well into tomorrow and there'd still be more to share, but I'll end by simply saying that there are plenty of great things happening to support our farmers and youth entering the sector, with endless career choices to drive our economy and to keep Nova Scotians and Nova Scotia's economy strong and healthy. With that, I welcome questions from members.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, for those remarks. According to a practice that has developed in this Legislature, the Opposition caucuses take turns asking questions for approximately an hour each. During each caucus's turn, the members may, within their caucus, take turns examining the minister on the Estimates resolution. Only the minister, as we know, may answer the questions, and caucuses are also expected to share time fairly with the Independent member.

To begin our examination, I'll now recognize the Official Opposition, the Liberal Party. The honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: Welcome, Minister. Thank you for joining us today to answer a few questions. Thank you to your staff and all the work that they do on behalf of Nova Scotians in this most important sector.

I'd like to begin, if I could, by getting in your own words, Minister, how you feel the industry views the state of the agriculture sector.

GREG MORROW: Sorry, could the member just repeat the question?

[4:30 p.m.]

KEITH IRVING: I'd like to hear, in your words, how you feel the industry views the state of the agriculture sector.

GREG MORROW: It is certainly a sector that's not without its challenges. We had a challenging 16 months. We had a historic hurricane, a once-in-a-century hurricane. We had the polar vortex, which I referenced. We had wildfires, we had floods, we had an incredibly rainy season overall. I spoke to one farmer who has been farming his whole life, more than 50 years, and I said, What was this season like? He said it was the worst one we've had.

There are challenges, even before we talk about climate change and weather challenges. We went through COVID-19; we went through the pandemic. We're talking about labour challenges. There are rising costs to production. There are always issues with red tape at various levels of government. There are challenges, without question.

When I talk to the sector, particularly with young people, they see hope. They're doing this not just because they've necessarily always done it or because it's just another job; they do it because they love it. They do it because they're proud of what they do and what they provide to the province. With challenges, there's hope. I talk about increases in farm cash receipts. We're always looking for ways to support industry. I hear that. I feel that they receive very well the work that we're doing in the department to support them. I believe that with the challenges I mentioned there is hope for this sector and they continue to drive forward.

KEITH IRVING: I do believe in my conversations with industry that it goes far beyond the recent events, which you've alluded to, that have caused additional stress. From the farmers that I'm talking to in industry, we really have a crisis in profitability, and if they're not profitable, then a succession plan will fail because who's going to take over a farm that's losing money?

In fact, the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture talked about the opportunities that you suggested, but, and I'll quote, "it has been grappling with substantial obstacles for the past few decades. These challenges have not only affected the sector's economic

stability but have also taken a toll on farmers' mental health, with declining farm profits and increasing barriers, regulatory demands, and roadblocks." You've alluded to some of those, but I want to make it clear that the industry needs additional supports.

My question for the minister is: With the government receiving 39 per cent more revenues over the last four years - \$4.1 billion more per year than four years ago, \$4.1 billion - are you concerned that the budget for the Department of Agriculture has remained more or less static? Have you gone to the table looking for additional funds for agriculture with a sector that is in a crisis of profitability?

GREG MORROW: Yes, we've worked with agriculture. The Department of Agriculture has worked with industry to help them recover from ongoing challenges that they've mentioned of climate change over the last couple of years. We talk about dedicated support programs where I have gone to the table: \$19 million for the Fiona Agricultural Disaster Assistance Program; the Post-Fiona Maple Recovery Program for \$2.1 million; the Polar Vortex Industry Recovery program at Horticulture Nova Scotia for \$15 million; and the 2023 Season Response Program at \$9.2 million.

The last couple of years have been incredibly challenging for farmers, from Fiona, the most agriculturally devastating hurricane in Nova Scotia's history, to the extreme cold of the polar vortex, and then the drought, wildfires, and tremendous wet conditions of the 2023 growing season that I mentioned. I mentioned labour shortages and increasing costs of production. I've heard of the devastating impacts on the agriculture industry from department staff, individual farmers, the Federation of Agriculture, fellow MLAs, and I've seen it personally on my farm visits.

In terms of sustainability, I talked about increased support through the Plant Your Roots program to help make succession affordable. There are a number of programs in our Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership to reduce cost of production.

Agriculture had an additional \$40 million last year, and an additional \$12 million in this year's budget to respond to these challenges. I'll point out that last year's budget included a 12 per cent increase in the Department of Agriculture, after years of decline. That was among the highest of any department, that 12 per cent, so I'm proud of that. We have increases again this year, and yes, I'll always go to the table to support this industry in any way that I can.

KEITH IRVING: Maybe I'll move along to - you indicated that 106 applications have been approved under the Polar Vortex Industry Recovery program. How much money has been expended of the \$15 million?

GREG MORROW: As the member noted, unique events impacted our grape and wine sectors in the past couple of years, most notably, as we've mentioned a number of times, an extreme cold event in February of 2023 that caused production loss. Our

department's main focus has been on supporting the industry's recovery, including that \$15 million program with Horticulture Nova Scotia. Phase 1 of that funding, \$3.2 million, has been expended, sent out the door. The remainder, Phase 2, will be distributed this spring. Again, these are programs that were developed in consultation with industry.

KEITH IRVING: What will Phase 2 entail?

GREG MORROW: Phase 2 funding will be launching in the Spring, as I mentioned, and it will include a replant program for various perennial crops, including grapes, and include plant removal, trellis replacement, and continued maintenance costs for grapes and potentially stone fruit until they reach pre-polar vortex cropping potential. It is anticipated that most of the replant funding will go toward grape producers, as this is where the majority of losses were incurred, and that approximately \$6 million in funding will be expended in Phase 2. The remaining funding of approximately \$5 million will be dedicated, in consultation with industry, towards sustaining climate-resilient practices as replant activities continue.

KEITH IRVING: We clearly have spending from last fiscal year being spent this - then the following, then the following. I'd like to touch on the Auditor General's report on this issue. If you remember, a year ago I asked the minister whether you followed good accounting practices and whether you consulted with the Auditor General with respect to that, if needed.

I'll quote from our conversation a year ago at this table: "Do the minister and his staff discuss any questions they might have in complying with the public sector accounting standards with the Auditor General?" Your response was, "Yes, we discuss with government accounting and, if needed, the Office of the Auditor General."

You went on to say, with some confidence, that you were confident that the \$15 million would address any gaps, as well. I'm just quoting from you. As I indicated, it seemed we didn't have enough information at that time, so my question to you was: Why not 12? Why not 20?

Given the Auditor General's report, in which you and your department have been cited for not doing the basics of good financial planning - this program was cited at \$15 million for horticulture. I do remember, in August of last year, your own department's newsletter indicating you needed data to develop the program, which clearly indicated to me that you didn't have the data to come up with the number of \$15 million. Now, in what is really a scathing report by the Auditor General, she said, "We determined there were not sufficient details to support the cost for the proposal which is intended to support grape and other fruit growers whose crops were affected by the polar vortex in February 2023. We note the grant was requested and provided to Horticulture Nova Scotia before the full impacts of the damage were known."



The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board has said he does not agree with the Auditor General's review of this over-budget spending. I thought I'd give you the opportunity at this table, given your commitments a year ago to us, to respond about how you feel the Auditor General has interpreted the actions of your department with respect to this \$15 million expenditure of taxpayers' money.

[4:45 p.m.]

GREG MORROW: The department was successful in obtaining this funding to support the agriculture industry almost immediately after the polar vortex occurred. Crops such as grapes, raspberries, peaches, cherries, and plums were impacted. We partnered with Horticulture Nova Scotia to design and deliver the needed support to farmers. This was a multi-year arrangement, because the total impact to these crops could not be determined until the buds in the Spring and even into future seasons.

The Auditor General evaluated this grant to Horticulture Nova Scotia, along with 10 others across government. There were concerns raised about the timing of the funding and program design. We said right up front that we were going to consult industry to help design the programs they needed. We also needed to make sure we didn't overlap with any federal funding. There were also concerns about a lack of performance measures and potential conflicts of interest. Those were covered by the management group established for this program, with members from Perennia, the Federation of Agriculture, and the department to provide oversight on the funding.

It was also determined that the department had a clear purpose for these funds, and that the agreement we put in place with Horticulture Nova Scotia held key comments to protect public dollars. I do understand that the Auditor General had some questions about the financial and auditing process. I was pleased to be able to get this much-needed money to industry, and I am confident my team worked with the Department of Finance and Treasury Board and the Department of Justice to safeguard the money.

KEITH IRVING: As I stated last year, I'm sure it was helpful to know the government would be there for them, but that I do believe - and the Auditor General has been very clear on this - that you should be following basic good financial management of taxpayers' dollars. It is clear here that at the tail end of the subsequent fiscal year in which you allocated these funds, you've only spent \$3.2 million of \$15 million. I appreciate the prepared response, but I certainly hope that you will become an advocate in your government for stronger financial management.

I'd like to move on now to the bottling program for Nova Scotia wine industries. It's a little less heated in here than it is in the Chamber. Perhaps, Minister, you could tell us what your role in the development of the commercial wine bottling support was. Where did you actually interject your role as the Minister of Agriculture in the development of this program?

GREG MORROW: The commercial wine policy of the NSLC was highlighted in the trade challenge by Australia. This program is through the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, and we are continuing to work with the department and the Finance and Treasury Board on wine policy-related matters, but this is a program that falls under the purview of the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

KEITH IRVING: So what I'm hearing there, Minister, is you had no involvement in the development of this program?

GREG MORROW: My mandate is to support programs that support the farm wineries. Some of those we've touched on already: the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy at \$5.45 million, committed from 2021 to 2026; the Wine and Grape Industry Development Program, \$700,000 annually, starting in 2023; and the extension support at Perennia for the wine industry, \$540,000 from 2023 to 2025. Again, I would refer any questions about the commercial wine policy to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

KEITH IRVING: What I'm hearing there is that you were not at the table in developing this wine industry. Clearly, as the Minister of Agriculture and your relationship with the wine industry, you would be the Cabinet minister who knows and understands the wine industry best. Do you just want to clarify that you were not involved in the development of this program?

GREG MORROW: My involvement would be working through the Emerging Wine Regions Policy, EWRP, replacement (inaudible) provided a preferential markup to wines from emerging regions instead of the 140 per cent markup used on imported wines.

In 2020, the federal government reached a settlement with Australia following their challenge of wine practices through the World Trade Organization. Under this settlement agreement, Nova Scotia was required to begin to phase out the Emerging Wine Regions Policy by 2024. In July of 2023, EWRP changed from a 43 per cent markup to 60 per cent. It will increase to 140 per cent by July.

Senior officials from the Departments of Agriculture, Finance and Treasury Board, and Intergovernmental Affairs held many consultations with the industry related to alternative supports for the local wine industry on a go-forward basis. In response to these consultations, government has developed a direct payment program called the farm wine support program to assist Nova Scotia farm wineries.

KEITH IRVING: Actually, there's an issue that has not been discussed. When we were having conversations about the urgency of replacing the Emerging Wine Regions Policy, there was a deadline of June 30, 2023, in which the wineries were informed that the solution had been found to support them in the loss of the emerging wine market with a subsidy program.

That was the time in which the industry understood how they would be made whole under this trade challenge. It was through a subsidy through the Department of Agriculture. In June of 2023, did we not have a solution that met the trade challenge that had nothing to do with this commercial wine bottling policy?

GREG MORROW: In June 2023, there was the start of the phasing out of EWRP. The subsidy was moved to the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. Commercial was raised in trade challenges as well. Looking at it in phases, EWRP was first and then commercial.

In terms of agricultural subsidies, we were successful in obtaining \$700,000 to implement an annual Wine and Grape Industry Development Program. After consultation with industry, the program is focused this year on helping grape growers and farm wineries purchase more efficient equipment and prepare for climate change. This program has the flexibility to respond to the industry needs each year.

KEITH IRVING: When that was announced a month ago, I called the wine industry and they said: Oh, what's that? I believe that was told to us last May: \$700,000 across some 80 wineries and wine growers is a drop in the bucket compared to the decisions by this government to support in the millions of dollars - \$6 million to \$12 million - bottling operations. I just cannot fathom, Minister, how you were not at the table fighting for this industry.

I'm going to move now to the letter from the wine industry of January 12, 2024, addressed to you, Minister, and the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. A couple of statements I'd like you to respond to, because I believe you have not responded to their letter: "The urgency of this matter cannot be overstated. We collectively implore you to take immediate action by suspending new licences for commercial entities and halting the commercial wine program."

Minister, what is your response to that plea from the wine growers?

GREG MORROW: Yes, after we received the first letter, we did meet with the wine growers and grape growers to talk about their concerns - the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board and I, along with our staff in our respective departments. I feel like an in-person or face-to-face meeting would be better than a letter. Since then, we've continued to work closely with Finance and Treasury Board on this file. I keep an open line of communication with the chair of the wine growers' and the chair of the grape growers' boards.

KEITH IRVING: In my discussions with the wine industry, they have a completely different perspective on your view of the communication with you and the industry, so I would recommend that you sit down very soon with them again.

Why is the government deviating from a long-standing policy of promoting Nova Scotia growth for wine? Perhaps I'll add a question: Does the minister understand why the industry is saying that this bottling program will be catastrophic? Does the minister understand why the industry feels that way?

[5:00 p.m.]

GREG MORROW: We continue to promote the farm winery industry with the replacement of EWRP and the additional \$700,000, as I mentioned, in development funding every year. Just this past month, we supported several wineries in having a showcase in Europe and Asia.

In terms of the concerns, we're listening. We've listened - the minister and I, our staff members - and we'll continue to work with the industry. In terms of the commercial program, that would fall under the purview of the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

KEITH IRVING: Do you know of any other jurisdiction in the world that subsidizes bottling products from abroad?

GREG MORROW: I can't speak to what all other jurisdictions do. I'd just point out again that the commercial wine policy is not under my mandate.

KEITH IRVING: In your knowledge in agriculture - when you sit down with ministers of agriculture in other provinces, clearly you must know that they have all found a way to be trade-compliant by using agricultural subsidies from the Department of Agriculture. This is happening throughout the world in the wine industry.

Why will Nova Scotia not do what everyone else in the world is doing, which is using their Department of Agriculture to support their wine industry? We have turned our back on our wine industry to attract bottling companies to buy juice for a dollar per bottle from Chile, bottle it near the airport, and give them \$5.15 of Nova Scotia taxpayers' dollars. Is this right?

GREG MORROW: We do provide agriculture support through our programming in the department. We talked about the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy - nearly \$5.5 million from 2021 to 2026; the Wine and Grape Industry Development Program, \$700,000 annually, starting in 2023; and extensions for (inaudible) wine industry, \$540,000 from 2023 to 2025. That's in addition to our regular agricultural program that would be available through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

We do have that new programming in place to replace the trade challenge to EWRP. I mentioned \$700,000 for development of industry and the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy. We want a wine authority and quality standards to promote the excellent

wine that's made here. We're working with industry on that, and we'll continue to work with them.

KEITH IRVING: Let's talk about this issue with respect to buying local. This government has made a commitment, which you were working on, on buying local, and in Estimates a year ago you informed us that you were defining what buying local was . . . (interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order. I'll just remind the member that you're speaking through the Chair.

The honourable member for Kings South.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, Chair. The minister informed us a year ago that they had spent \$90,000 and counting on defining what "local" meant with respect to food and beverage products. What does "local," in that definition that we paid for, what does "local" wine products - how do you define that? How does the minister define that?

GREG MORROW: Wine would be considered outside the scope of our baseline metrics, but local is considered 85 per cent content under our regulations.

I could speak a little bit more about that methodology. In September of 2022, the department hired the Canadian Agri-Food Foresight Institute, or CAFI for short, to create a methodology and conduct an analysis for measuring the baseline consumer spend in Nova Scotia toward local food. In January of 2023, CAFI ran a preliminary test of this new local food measurement model by conducting a survey of 500 Nova Scotians through the polling firm Angus Reid Institute. The preliminary findings estimated that on average, just over 27 per cent of participants' food spend - not including restaurants or takeout meals - were spent on local food products over the last 12 months. This survey also confirmed that this methodology would be easy to replicate going forward.

To gain confidence in the model, a second test was completed in April 2023 involving 511 Nova Scotians. It found a higher average of just over 34 per cent for local food products.

A third test of the model was completed in October 2023, involving 500 Nova Scotians. The results then were an average of almost 33 per cent. These results are consistent with the two previous tests, providing an overall range of 27 per cent to 34 per cent of participants' food expenses being spent on local products in the last 12 months. All three surveys drew upon the local food definitions that were developed by the Department of Agriculture and Perennia in collaboration with industry.

KEITH IRVING: Minister, you have a mandate to buy local, to support local. Our regulations are that Nova Scotia wine has to be 85 per cent Nova Scotia-grown grapes.

That made sense. That was how we built the industry, because we were able to build quality with our terroir by ensuring that the bottles that appeared in the Nova Scotia liquor stores were Nova Scotian and had quality.

The wine industry spends \$5 a bottle raising grapes, investing millions of dollars, and now a complete market disruption to fill up our shelves up with \$1 juice from Ontario or Chile or wherever.

Minister, in your mandate to Buy Local NS, to support our local businesses, to help grow our local economy, to create 1,100 jobs in the wine industry, please square this for Nova Scotians on why this government is intent on supporting vineyards from the other side of the world with our dollars? I can't understand what this government is doing to send our taxpayer dollars to Chile to hurt our businesses here. Does this government - is it committed to Buy Local? Is the minister committed to Buy Local, and using the responsibility, the power that you have as a minister of the Crown, to fulfill your duty to Nova Scotians when this government says that they are 100 per cent behind Buy Local? What I'm hearing here from the minister . . . (interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order. I know it's not intentional, I get that, but there were about four or five times, and we can all get caught up in it and I get that, too, but I just remind the member that you're speaking through the Chair. Thank you.

The honourable member for Kings South.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you very much, Chair. You're doing a good job. I'd like the minister to reconcile for Nova Scotians this government and the minister's commitment to Buy Local and this commercial wine-bottling program.

GREG MORROW: Again, questions about the commercial wine program should be directed to the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, but I can talk about the commitment that we've made to the farm winery sector in Nova Scotia. I've already spoken to the support programs we have put in place through the Department of Agriculture. We also do extensions, especially through Perennia, to support wineries and grape growers; we do marketing and export navigators to support wineries; we have loans to wineries from the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board. We support our local wineries, and we will continue to do so.

In terms of supporting buying local, there are a number of programs that we've launched to increase local food consumption and support our local industries. I mentioned Plant Your Roots, an interest rebate program; the Agricultural Clean Technology Program; Limestone Trucking Assistance Program; the Organic Certification Rebate Program; exhibition grants; the Wine and Grape Industry Development Program that I mentioned; the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy. We've done plenty of work in season-extension funding with Horticulture Nova Scotia - \$5 million in funding there.

[5:15 p.m.]

In support of my mandate to increase the production and use of local products, the department collaborated with Horticulture Nova Scotia to launch a \$5 million Season Extension Enhancement Program. The objective was to increase our local food, self-sufficiency, and displace imports by creating year-round food production. The program provided as much as 60 per cent of project costs for on-farm infrastructure. I can talk about value-added equipment that we supported in the 2023-24 budget through S-CAP, \$800,000; Taste of Nova Scotia Emerging Food Processors Program, \$1 million in provincial funding; a number of institutional pilot projects. I mentioned at the beginning about Northwood, the largest long-term care facility in the Atlantic region; the IWK Health Centre, the largest children's hospital in the Atlantic region; our schools; our hospitals. These pilots support our goal to increase local food consumption. It's good for economies, it's good for communities.

The pilot projects also - I've talked about ways they break down barriers, and they make it easier to put more local food in our institutions. That goes hand in hand with the recently announced school lunch program. Not only are we putting healthy food in schools for Nova Scotia children, we now have broken down barriers to get more local food, make that healthy food local, and put it in our institutions.

KEITH IRVING: You referenced the wine quality standards you brought in. The minister brought in personally the Nova Scotia Wine Authority Act two years ago, work the industry had done with the previous minister. You committed in those presentations to carry on that work. Now, I do understand that given the trade challenge, industry asked you to step back from that, and their understanding was that the trade challenge and the replacement program were resolved last June. We're now seven months later. I note that the legislation has not been proclaimed. I would like to ask the minister if he is still committed to that program, and when he will proclaim that piece of legislation that is now two years old.

GREG MORROW: That was one of my first actions as minister, to establish the legislation that would enable a wine authority, to establish, administer, and enforce a quality standards program for Nova Scotia wine. I would love to get this going; however, with the challenges of the last couple of years that we've talked about, industry has asked us to pause, so we did. We have heard recently from industry that this is important to get going, so we'll be looking to launch consultations this Spring and get the authority in place so that we can proclaim legislation.

KEITH IRVING: With respect to tying together this recent direction that the government has taken with respect to attracting bottling companies to Nova Scotia, how does that fit with the food and beverage strategy that the minister is responsible for?

GREG MORROW: Yes, there has been a lot of work done on the development of a potential food and beverage strategy for Nova Scotia. A really cross-government approach: 12 to 14 departments involved at various stages, and others were consulted. A working group did a review of existing food-related initiatives in government, with more than 90 identified.

They talked to key partners about what should be included and then did public consultation on potential focus areas. The Department of Agriculture worked through the amazing number of public responses - more than 1,900. We're so thankful to Nova Scotians for their input. Then they put together a "What We Heard" report that was released publicly this year. We're reviewing all the work to see how it aligns with existing priorities and initiatives.

In the meantime, we are working on projects to enhance awareness, increase production, and improve access to healthy, local food. For example, in our department we're promoting local foods here and abroad, promoting agriculture awareness through Agriculture in the Classroom - Nova Scotia, encouraging technology and varieties to help extend growing seasons - I mentioned that earlier - supporting value-added products in both large- and small-scale processing, and implementing pilots in a variety of public institutions to encourage use of food products grown here in Nova Scotia.

The food and beverage strategy is intended to promote and increase local food consumption. Alcohol was not part of that approach, given the focus on healthy local food. We promote local wine in several other ways. I've mentioned a few areas. Again, questions about the commercial wine policy could be directed to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

KEITH IRVING: The What We Heard report came out in May, some eight or nine months ago, I guess it is now. I notice in your business plan there's no mention of completing - as I believe it did last year - the Food and Beverage Strategy. Perhaps the minister could confirm that the department continues to plan to release the Food and Beverage Strategy. Will it be this year that it is released?

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes the time allocated for the Liberal Party. We'll move on to the next round with the NDP.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I don't want to let your discussion at the head table go to waste, so I'll just ask it in a very simple way: Will this government release the Food and Beverage Strategy this year? Yes or no.

GREG MORROW: We are continuing to work on the Food and Beverage Strategy. As I mentioned, we received a phenomenal number of responses. The department



continues to work on that Food and Beverage Strategy, but it is a complex strategy involving, as I mentioned, 12 to 14 various government departments and an all-government approach. We are working on it. We're going to take the time to get it right.

[5:30 p.m.]

In the meantime, we're not waiting for a strategy to act. I mentioned the school lunch program that was just announced in our budget. That would encompass parts of what we heard in our responses. Improved institutional procurement and building awareness around local food - that's all the work we're doing in the department right now. We are continuing to work on the food and beverage strategy, but that's not slowing down the work we're doing on the ideas contained in the responses we received.

LISA LACHANCE: I think I've heard, though, that various industry partners have talked about how things are on hold, or expectations for the sector are really quite contingent on the release of the strategy. I guess I would say that, of course, you have done things over the past three years - it would be terrible if you hadn't - but the strategy is still sitting out there. Has it been slowed down because of the slowed-downness of Nova Scotia Loyal? Are those two processes mired together somewhere?

GREG MORROW: As I mentioned, we are advancing priorities across various departments in government, a list of them. That work continues, but I would simply say that no, we're not being slowed down by Nova Scotia Loyal. These are two different programs.

LISA LACHANCE: What is your department's role in the development of Nova Scotia Loyal? How many FTs? Are there any allocations in your budget to support that work?

GREG MORROW: Of course, Nova Scotia Loyal is led by my colleague, the Minister of Economic Development, but we work closely with their department. We provide support by staff members who work with the steering committee. We do have one Buy Local development officer through Perennia. We do have our own Buy Local marketing team, and as I mentioned, we work closely with the Department of Economic Development as the program is being developed. There is an advisory group that's been established that we participate in, and as I mentioned, we also work with Perennia and other industry partners on Buy Local initiatives, and that's where our Buy Local development officer resides.

LISA LACHANCE: The research project with the Canadian Agri-Food Foresight Institute: Can you tell me how much that project costs and whether there was an RFP issued or whether it was a sole-source contract?

GREG MORROW: The budget for the project was \$80,000, and an RFP was issued. As I mentioned earlier, it was awarded to the Canadian Agri-Food Foresight Institute, or CAFI, at Dalhousie University's Agri-Food Analytics Lab.

LISA LACHANCE: I also want to talk about the commercial wine policy. You've stated that it's under the mandate of the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. Have you asked for this project to be part of your mandate? Do you not think it would fit better within your department?

GREG MORROW: In the Department of Agriculture, we do not have the authority for commercial wine issues related to the NSLC. Our legislation is related to the production of wine.

LISA LACHANCE: With all due respect, this is about the production of wine. It's still unclear to me why you wouldn't be fighting for this. There's a key stakeholder in this province who is angry and alienated - that's clear from their letters and from what's in the media today - and it's concerning for this industry and for the future of Nova Scotia wines that, as you know, have been revolutionary in this province over the past couple of decades.

It is also concerning as part of a pattern of not really engaging with or listening to key stakeholder groups and then issuing decisions that, at the last minute, they aren't able to connect with you on. I think it's part of a pattern of how this government has been working with stakeholders.

Maybe you will defer this to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, but has any money been spent under the commercial wine policy?

GREG MORROW: I would defer that to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

LISA LACHANCE: We'll make sure to ask the minister but, given what we understand about this program and the investments you've identified - in fact, your department's investments in the wine industry are dwarfed by what is going to be under this policy. That's concerning. I would also think it's important for you, as Minister of Agriculture, to be engaged.

I wanted to turn to the question of business risk management. My colleague from Kings South started off by talking about the crisis of probability that's also affecting things like farm transition. The agriculture sector is an amazing confluence of folks who do business and who do science. The work is part of their family, their home, and their community. You know this. The sector is well-organized, yet this is a sector in crisis on the front lines of rising costs, the housing crisis, the labour crisis, the climate change crisis. All of these things affect the day-to-day of farmers and folks in the agriculture sector. I don't take any pleasure in stating that, despite all that, there is a crisis in the sector.

You've talked about the response to risk and the response to climate catastrophes. I think what's really clear is that the sector repeatedly says that the current approach of the provincial government to supporting farmers in the agriculture sector is not sufficient. They've said this in many different ways. They've said it in many different forms. It's not adequate. It's not enough for their businesses, their farms, to survive. The NSFA has been really consistent, and so have others, about calling on government to actually invest in sustainable, ongoing, predictable, transparent business risk management programs. The NSFA and *Growing Nova Scotia Together* talk about the real need to do a sector-wide consultation and to enhance the business risk programs that are being offered. They need you as their advocate. As you've stated, of course, a lot of the funding . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. I just want to remind the member that you're speaking through the Chair. I know it's easy - we all get caught up in it. I know the honourable member didn't intend it.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: My questions for the minister are: Why hasn't the department listened? Why hasn't this government listened to what has been clearly stated by the sector time and time again about the need for better risk management and that the one-off responses to climate emergencies are not sufficient? What industry has said is that they don't provide any security for going forward to plan on.

The budget impacts are clear in terms of agricultural risk management and lending. The Estimate for last year was \$13 million. Of course, it cost \$25 million for all the responses, but then again, it's just been budgeted for \$14 million again this year. So again, farmers are like, The climate crises are going to come, and maybe or maybe not you're going to respond. They can't take the "maybe" responses into their business planning. They can't take that to the bank, literally. Why is there not a better approach to business risk management in this sector, and why is the minister not fighting for that?

GREG MORROW: I spoke about this in my opening remarks. We all know that our local farmers have faced a number of challenging years, with several weather events that have impacted their operations. A suite of business risk management programs - BRM programs - available through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership are designed to support farmers and manage the financial risk associated with these events.

However, I've heard from farmers that BRM programs are not always sufficient to help them recover from these events. I want to assure you, Chair, that we have been working on this. We need to work within the federal cost-share agreement for these programs. What we can do provincially, we are doing.

Last year, in partnership with our federal colleagues, we piloted having a local staff member here in Nova Scotia who knows our industry and how the programs like

AgriStability and AgriInvest work for our farmers. They answered questions, attended and presented at meetings and events all over the province, and did key research on how these programs are working in Nova Scotia so that we can continue to make them more responsive.

[5:45 p.m.]

The AgriStability adviser and other BRM staff recently held information sessions around the province, from Yarmouth to Mabou, to increase awareness and answer questions. For the 2023 program year, we were also able to allow for late participation in AgriStability so that farmers who are not already in the program can still sign today to participate in the 2023 year.

We also supported an increase to the compensation rate for AgriStability, with increased coverage from 70 per cent to 80 per cent. I was pleased to be able to work with my cabinet colleagues to change regulations on the request of the Nova Scotia Crop and Livestock Insurance Commission. The Commission has been working with industry to make the crop insurance plans work better for them and add more protection for our farmers.

We have added wildfire as an insurable peril on all of the insurance plans and improved wind coverage on new apple varieties that have later harvest dates. We also have made changes to clarify the poultry plant regulations so that industry has peace of mind that they will still have the same level of protection they always have. The Commission is wrapping up a year that saw the largest number of claims in the 55-year history of offering crop insurance. Although we don't want to see farmers have such a loss, we do know that this is working for lots of farmers right now, with more than \$5 million in crop insurance claims paid to date.

That said, we want the Crop and Livestock Insurance program to be as responsive as possible to what industry needs. That's why the Commission has started planning for a program-wide review of its offerings, and they'll be hearing directly from producers and industry associations on what works well, and ideas for plan improvements or changes. I really look forward to hearing what this review brings forward from our farmers.

We know that business risk management tools need to work well for our farmers - to be their first line of defence in helping to manage their financial risk. I am committed to working hard here in Nova Scotia and with our federal partners to make sure the BRM suite supports our agriculture industry. In terms of the vicious cycle, I hear that. I realize that. Our farmers want to get out of that vicious cycle. We've shown that we've been there when they need us following large natural disasters - again, Hurricane Fiona, polar vortex, wildfires, floods, our newly announced 2023 Season Response Program. We've been there when they need us. We've also listened.

We're hearing - I'm hearing - that they want changes to our BRM programs to make them work better for them. We are listening, and we are working. We're working with the Federation of Agriculture. We've had this discussion many times. I see it in letters from industry. They say, We want that peace of mind of better insurance programs. As I mentioned, we are limited in what we can do based on the federal-provincial programs. Provincially, we've made some changes, and I'll continue to work and advocate with my federal colleagues to make these important changes.

THE CHAIR: Just as we are approximately at the two-hour mark and have been sitting here some time, would you entertain a five-minute break? Okay. We'll take a five-minute recess here.

We are now in recess.

[5:47 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[5:54 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. We will return to Estimates for Agriculture. The NDP caucus has 42 minutes remaining in their time. MLA Lachance, I believe you are directing questions.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: We were talking about business risk management. I appreciate that the minister explained that work is under way to develop a reliable, dependable model of business risk management for farmers in the province.

I'm wondering, though: Does the minister consider the allocation for agricultural risk management and lending foreseen for the coming year to be adequate, given what last year looked like? And we know that the effects of climate change are only increasing. Obviously, this government avails itself of extraordinary preparations outside the budget cycle, so perhaps it's not too big a worry. Even in terms of what message it's giving to industry, does the minister think that a drop from \$25 million this past year, which was extraordinary - but I bet you years to come are going to be extraordinary too - to \$14 million is adequate?

GREG MORROW: Yes, we do anticipate that we will have adequate funding in this year's budget for BRM programs. As far as what industry would know, industry would know that we will be there for them. We have been. I have listed the examples after various natural disasters. We've stepped up; we've listened to industry.

One of the things industry told us was, We want to make things simpler; we don't need to jump through hoops. For example, after Hurricane Fiona our staff developed a

one-window application process that was so well-received by industry. And we've moved that forward to our S-CAP programs; we've done it again with our 2023 Season Response Program grants. We've heard that after these events: We don't need to be made to jump through hoops and fill out piles and piles of paperwork. So we've listened; we've done that.

We've responded. We've stepped up when we needed to, and we will continue to do so. We will continue to work with industry on improvements to BRM programs. It's absolutely no good for me, Chair, to tell industry what they need. I will and we will continue to work with industry on changes to these programs that reflect their needs and what they need going forward.

LISA LACHANCE: While I have the Estimates Book open, under departmental expenses there is a drop in the grant contributions line from \$33 million to \$22 million. I'm just wondering if you can tell me why that number has dropped.

GREG MORROW: The difference in the 2023-24 forecast to the 2024-25 estimate would be reflected in the \$9.2 million in disaster relief funding that we announced recently through the 2023 Season Response Program, one-time funding, and also reduction in the Nova Scotia Quality Wine Strategy that was planned.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm going to turn to the question of labour force and workers. How many registered farms in Nova Scotia employed migrant workers during the past year?

GREG MORROW: We have approximately 1,600 temporary foreign workers a year in Nova Scotia. They apply to the federal government for that program, so we don't directly see information on which farms they may go to.

LISA LACHANCE: To clarify, you are unable to say how many migrant workers work in the agriculture sector as opposed to fisheries, as opposed to aquaculture? You don't know how many work on farms?

GREG MORROW: Yes, I do: 1,600.

LISA LACHANCE: Okay, well that clarification is helpful. So there are 1,600 migrant workers who work on farms in the province. How does the minister work with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration to ensure that working standards and working conditions are correct and maintained?

GREG MORROW: We work closely with Labour, Skills and Immigration. We have a staff member who attends on our behalf on the labour committee. Most of this work is led by industry through the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. They are the labour force sector for agriculture. We support them through funding and, as I mentioned, support staff on the labour committee, but again, this is industry-led.

[6:00 p.m.]

LISA LACHANCE: As we all know, if we have the commitment to local food, we have the commitment to ensuring that migrant workers feel welcomed and feel supported when they're here. Not to date myself, but I can remember some of the earlier days of folks coming to the Annapolis Valley. One of the issues is that they don't qualify for MSI upon arrival, so employers have to opt in. Through their employers, they are provided with some insurance, but it's not adequate.

I know we've talked about this before at this table. I believe the deputy minister at that time or the minister assured us they were working on this issue. Could the minister talk to their efforts to ensure that migrant workers are eligible for MSI from the moment they arrive in Nova Scotia?

GREG MORROW: MSI is, of course, the responsibility of the Minister of Health and Wellness. We do hear this from industry. I've raised it with my colleague and will continue to do so.

To the comment about making sure temporary foreign workers are treated well when they're here, that's certainly been my experience. I know we can hear about bad apples here and there, but I hear lots of stories about temporary foreign workers who return to the same farm year after year because they are treated so well. They're treated like family. The farm owners and their families may drive them into town to get their groceries at the end of the week or do different things with them. They really are welcomed as part of the family. I do believe most of our temporary foreign workers are treated well, and I will continue to advocate on their behalf.

LISA LACHANCE: I couldn't agree with the minister more that, in fact, a lot of folks have been coming back to the same farm and the same community for decades at this point. That's even more of a reason why - because of their length of stay in the province. Not only does it affect their ability to access MSI, but it also affects their ability to apply for permanent residency. Is the minister undertaking lobbying with his federal counterpart to open a permanent residency pathway for temporary foreign workers in the agricultural industry?

GREG MORROW: Labour is a key topic at my FPT tables. It is challenging. We've talked about it a number of times, but there is such a need in agriculture. It often falls to the responsibility of other departments. We try to collaborate on initiatives and priorities. Yes, I always advocate to my federal colleagues on issues important to the industry, this being one of them.

In fact, it just came up recently at a meeting with my Atlantic colleagues, the Atlantic agriculture ministers' meeting in Charlottetown in January. We are trying to see what we can do to work together. We had our colleagues from the Atlantic federations join

us at that meeting and discuss the topic and we talked about several paths forward. So yes, we continue to advocate at the federal level, at the Atlantic level, and the provincial level. Yes, we continue to advocate and will continue to do so going forward.

LISA LACHANCE: Certainly, one of the challenges for communities, but also for the labour force in our rural areas and the agricultural regions, is the lack of housing available for folks. It's hard for people to move into those areas. We're seeing lots of people who have been tenting through this winter in our prime agricultural areas - along the Harvest Moon Trailway, for instance, in the Annapolis Valley. I'm wondering what the minister is doing specifically on housing, and is the minister supportive of waiving the provincial portion of HST applied to the purchase or construction price of bunkhouses as a source of on-farm housing?

GREG MORROW: We'll always look at every way to support industry and see what we can do in, I guess as they say, the art of the possible. We'll do what we can. In terms of our current role, the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board offers temporary foreign worker home financing and has done many loans for this purpose at affordable interest rates. The Board has financed both farm residences as well as on-farm homes.

To the HST portion of the question, that would be through the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. I do appreciate that it's an expense incurred by farmers, but I would defer that question to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

LISA LACHANCE: Is the minister advocating for that as one of the things that the sector is looking for?

GREG MORROW: The sector has not asked me for that. As I mentioned, I'll always advocate on behalf of the sector and work with my colleagues to see what we can do to support the industry, but I've never heard that specific request.

LISA LACHANCE: One thing that the industry has been grappling with, of course, is transition, and ensuring that new farmers are able to enter the industry. The minister spoke earlier about some of the support for new entrants. One of the key recommendations is to establish a provincial land bank program. I don't see that referenced in the business plan, nor does there seem to be funding provided for that. I'm wondering if the minister can provide an update on whether he supports a provincial land bank program and what he's doing to establish one.

GREG MORROW: Yes, support for new farmers is so important. I talked about a few of those ways that we're doing that. I talked about the Plant Your Roots program that's included in this year's budget. That came from a recommendation from the Nova Scotia Youth Council for Agriculture. Again, I was so proud of the work that they've done. We've engaged young people to find out how to get more young people not just into the industry but staying in the industry. That's a program that came from them. The Get Growing



Program is part of our budget. The Apiculture Sustainable Growth and Health Program is another one.

[6:15 p.m.]

Supporting the next generation of farmers is key to ensuring the sustainability of our industry. Plant Your Roots recognizes the challenges new farmers face in securing loans for farm start-ups. It provides eligible applicants with a rebate of up to \$100,000 in interest for the first four years of their loan. The Get Growing Program helps farmers who have at least two years of experience running their farm to expand. Again, I mention not just new farmers, but keeping and retaining farmers who are already there and getting young people and keeping them in the industry.

The Apiculture Sustainable Growth and Health Program helps with expanding pollination, small equipment needs, and hive health. Farmers with under \$30,000 in income can receive up to \$10,000 to purchase up to 10 hives as well as an additional \$2,000 in equipment support at 50 per cent of costs.

In terms of land, I think the community pastures that we have available throughout the province - I listed those, eight of them - it shows a strong investment by government. We're expanding them. We expanded Cape John in recent years. I talked about the largest one in Minudie. We're working with all these groups to help them with funding to not just establish these pastures but expand them, make them better, and make them work better for industry. The Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board can also offer delayed payments on land purchases until the farm gets established and is making revenue. That is often the issue for new farmers coming in, getting started in agriculture: establishing that revenue.

The Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board has specific land purchase programs to help finance land for blueberry producers, orchards and vineyards. So yes, continuing to look at ways to help farmers secure land to establish themselves and their businesses.

LISA LACHANCE: Perhaps I missed it, but could the minister clarify if he is supportive of establishing a provincial land bank and if the minister has been looking at different new policies under agricultural easements to support the farmers and compensate farmers for placing land under agricultural easements? Again, to clarify: Is the minister supportive of provincial land banks? What about agricultural easements support?

GREG MORROW: Land banks are not something that we are looking at at this moment. Our focus really is on investments and programs to help farmers, especially new farmers, to acquire land.

As I mentioned, I would never rule anything out, but it's just not something we are looking at right now. Again, our focus is on investing in programs that help new farmers acquire land.

LISA LACHANCE: At the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture annual general meeting this past November, November 2023, there was a great deal of anger expressed over the Department of Agriculture's handling of the acquisition of farmland near dikes in Hants County. At that time, I understood there was a moratorium on any further purchases of land, that the community was wanting more consultation, and that was promised.

I'm wondering if the minister could walk me through what has happened since that meeting at the end of November with regard to this issue.

GREG MORROW: The Department of Agriculture is one of many partners in this project. It's led by Saint Mary's University and funded in part by the Government of Canada's Aquatic Ecosystems Restoration Fund. We've provided \$150,000 from our department for this. There's \$1.9 million from the Province's Green Fund at the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

This project is intended to help mitigate the risk to agricultural land and vital historic and public infrastructure posed by climate change, improve agricultural drainage, restore salt marsh habitat and improve carbon sequestration potential within the St. Croix River estuary. The project will require land for research purposes, and the Province, through the Department of Public Works, was planning to focus on acquiring land that is of marginal use and not likely to be used in the future for food production.

We have heard concerns from farmers about this project. We committed to halting the purchase of land until the agriculture sector can be more fully engaged. The team at Saint Mary's University led an information session with the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture in the Hants region in November and with the public, landowners, and farmers in December.

LISA LACHANCE: Is the purchase of land still halted?

GREG MORROW: Yes. We have committed to halting all land purchases until the consultation is done.

I just wanted to read some correspondence I received from Nicholas Juurlink from the Hants County Federation of Agriculture in response to what we heard in November at the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture AGM and worked with them through this:

On behalf of the members of the Hants County Federation of Agriculture, we would like to thank you for your decision and ability to pivot in relation to the TransCoastal Adaptations project. We are very pleased with the emphasis you are putting on the growth and sustainability of our industry at this time.

We would also like to thank you for the 2023 Season Response Program, allowing access to \$9.2 million for farms affected by the flooding and excessive moisture. The 2023 Season Response Program shows your commitment to agriculture and a forward-thinking attitude. This will alleviate some of the expenses and losses due to a devastating 2023.

Finally, we would like to commend you on returning the ag. reps to the Department of Agriculture. We find it a pleasure to work with our current representative and would like to communicate the excellent job we see through their work.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm wondering if the minister could elaborate on what the next steps are in this project or the decision to have halted the acquisition of land.

GREG MORROW: Yes, SMU will finish the consultation process before anything happens. They'll generate a report for my review, with recommendations - included in that the determination of whether we're going to purchase land or not. Then I'll work with my colleagues, the Minister of Public Works, and we'll review our next steps going forward. Right now, SMU is in the process of finishing their consultation and I'll await their report back.

LISA LACHANCE: I think part of the concern that was expressed at the AGM was this feeling that the land purchases were quite predatory, particularly for farmers who were perhaps not considering retirement or a transition, and what constituted marginal versus productive land. I'm wondering if the minister can comment on how that is determined, by what department, and how that will be implemented in this project.

GREG MORROW: We no longer use marginal in the assessment but rather a full set of professionally engineered criteria related to climate change. What may be marginal to one person might not be marginal to the other. That's part of SMU's work going forward.

Again, we heard those concerns that day at the AGM. We've listened, we've worked with industry. SMU has gone back and consulted and, based on the letter that I received from Nicholas Juurlink from the Hants County Federation of Agriculture, I believe we're moving in a positive direction.

LISA LACHANCE: Is there any money in this year's Estimates for the Department of Agriculture for dike system management?

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes time for this round for the NDP questioning. We'll move on to the Liberals' second round.

[6:30 p.m.]

The honourable member for Yarmouth.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Minister, thanks for taking the time to be here with us today. We are seeing staggering food insecurity numbers here in Nova Scotia. Food insecurity has been on the rise, which is a very terrifying prospect for a lot of families and for youth and children. We're seeing now one in three food bank visits being from youth and children.

We know that Competition Bureau Canada has pointed to one of the causes of this here in Nova Scotia as being that we are so heavily dominated by two big grocery store chains, and not having access to more local healthy produce. The Competition Bureau found that everyday consumers are directly bearing the brunt of increased food prices because of this lack of competition.

When you layer on top of that that the agriculture sector is under extreme stress - over the last 10 years, under the previous government as well, we saw an estimated retraction in the farming sector of about 21 or 22 per cent. We are hearing directly from farmers that they are very worried about the succession planning in their industry. It's an expensive business to get into. You have to work all the time, and the next generation of family-owned farms, the next generation of folks coming up, are looking at different opportunities. So we are at risk of losing even more of our farmland and our locally produced food.

Considering that we - if anything happens to the Chignecto Isthmus, where all of our food comes into the province - the majority of it - if anything happens to that, we are going to be in a pretty critical state here. I am certainly very concerned, again, about the trend that goes beyond this government's mandate into past governments' mandates as well, but the trend of losing large sums of farmland. I think we lost - it's going to be over 21 per cent of our farms. When you compare that to the number of farms that are being lost in the country, that's at less than 2 per cent. We are exponentially above the national average in losing farms and farmland.

One issue that's come up in particular has been the critical dikes in West Hants, and the need to preserve those where we have some of the most fertile farmland in the country. I know that the department has been involved in purchasing some of that dikeland with the intention of flooding that dikeland. That is something that we have a concern with, and we would certainly prefer to see that dikeland preserved as farmland, because it is the most fertile. If we are going to expand the agriculture sector, which is something that we need to do for a number of reason - for economic reasons, for food insecurity reasons - we need to make sure that we're protecting our farmland.

Can you please provide us with some comments on what you're doing to protect farmland in Nova Scotia, and particularly those lands in West Hants that have been used for farming for generations?

GREG MORROW: Our province's dikeland system protects more than 17,000 hectares of land, including agriculture, public infrastructure, cultural assets, and commercial and residential properties. The department is responsible for the ongoing maintenance of 239 kilometres of dikes and 248 aboiteaux. Complementary to the department's maintenance work, dikeland system upgrading is an eight-year, almost \$50 million project that began in 2019 to upgrade some of the most vulnerable dike systems in the province.

The project underwent extensive public engagement. As of January, the Department of Public Works is now responsible for the project as it moves to the design and construction phases. Separate from the province's maintenance and upgrades work, Saint Mary's University is leading research looking at river dikes, wetlands, and the impacts of climate change. That research has funding from both the federal and provincial governments. Public and stakeholder engagement for their work is currently under way.

The Department of Agriculture, through its Land Protection and Field Services unit, is responsible for protecting agricultural marshlands along the Bay of Fundy through the Agricultural Marshland Conservation Act - approximately a \$2 million budget.

I guess also I would say that we talked about the dikeland system upgrades project, DSUP. Again, Public Works took over the implementation of the Department of Agriculture's dikeland system upgrades project awarded under the federal government's Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund. This aligns with Public Works' leading infrastructure projects in more than \$1 million. The budget for this is \$50 million and is cost-shared 50/50 with our federal government counterparts.

ZACH CHURCHILL: The question specifically about the dikelands in West Hants that had been purchased by the province - the community has been informed that they could potentially be flooded. If that happened, we would lose some of the most fertile farmland in the province, probably the most fertile farmland. Take that totally off the map for farming in Nova Scotia.

Again, considering the drastic state that the agriculture sector is in, and considering the situation when it comes to food insecurity in our province, because we are so dependent on importing food and are losing farmland and losing farming capacity here and producing less food in Nova Scotia, is this something that the minister is concerned about? Can the minister provide some answers as to what's going to happen with that dikeland that's been purchased by the province? Is it going to be maintained for farmland or is it going to be flooded as part of a coastal protection initiative?

[6:45 p.m.]

GREG MORROW: In regard to that land purchase, the Department of Public Works has purchased that land. It is being held. No action is being taken. There will be no flooding done until consultation with industry takes place in the community. We have committed to no new land purchases. We have farmers who are coming to us asking to sell their property, but we've committed to no new land purchases until consultations are done and no action is being taken on this land. In fact, I'm open to looking at ways to see how industry can use it moving forward, once it's determined the best path forward and how much land is needed.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I certainly appreciate that answer. One of the reasons, I would say, farmers are coming potentially to the minister or the Province to sell land is because of the dire state that the industry is in. Again, this is something where there is a public imperative, I believe, to pay some attention because of the food insecurity issue and, of course, the economic impacts that it can have if we continue to lose more of our farmland and our farming capacity in Nova Scotia.

I'm sure one of the reasons why farmers are looking to exit the sector, sell their land and get market prices for it is because they are having succession planning issues within their businesses. I think I've read a national statistic that 40 per cent of our farmers do not have succession plans and they are nearing retirement age. That number is probably higher in Nova Scotia. If the minister has any data on that, I'd be happy to know how many farmers are coming up on the age of retirement if we're tracking that. I certainly want to know what the plan is to help that sector do succession planning so that we don't lose more farms or farming capacity here in Nova Scotia.

There are issues other than the costs of getting into the sector. I was really surprised by the fact that the mental health issue in farming is very acute. I read a statistic provided by the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture that stated that farmers are twice as likely to have suicidal ideation. When you are looking at the economic pressure on the agriculture system, the climate pressure from extreme weather events and the uncertainty there, the increased costs and insurance programs, and when you're looking at the mental health issues affecting farmers from one end of the province to the other, you can see why farmers are going to be looking at coming to the department or the Province and wanting to sell their land.

That's a problem. We don't want them to sell their land for other purposes. We have to find a way to ensure that our farmland can remain productive. Can the minister, please, tell the committee if this is an area where he has concern, if he is paying attention to it? And what steps is the department making to support succession planning within our sector so that we don't keep losing drastically more farming capacity than other parts of the country?

GREG MORROW: I guess to start with support for new farmers and talking about succession planning, items that I touched on repeatedly in the first half of our time here, there are a number of supports in place to support new farmers in Nova Scotia, including funding programs, information, and business planning support.

Already tonight I talked a lot about Plant Your Roots, the program that I am so proud of that came from our minister's Nova Scotia Youth Council for Agriculture that I developed to get feedback from young people on what they need to recruit other young people and retain young people and keep them farming. Supporting the next generation of farmers is certainly key to the sustainability of the industry, no question. Again, Plant Your Roots recognizes the challenges that new farmers face in securing loans for farm start-ups. It provides eligible applicants with a rebate of up to \$100,000 in interest for the first four years of their loan.

The Get Growing Program helps farmers who have at least two years of experience running their farm to expand. That speaks to retention. Farmers can receive 50 per cent of costs up to \$5,000 for two years, or \$10,000 in total, for strategic equipment purchases that will support their business expansion.

New farmers also have access to information and farm-planning and business-planning supports through ag. reps. We've heard time and time again from industry how pleased they are to have ag. reps return to the sector. That's something that our government did - and not just have ag. reps in place, but the quality of the work that they're doing in support of their industry. It blows me away. Industry is so appreciative of that. They have that support.

We have some fantastic business development officers in our regional offices. We opened a new office in Nappan to support that area of the province, as well as the THINKFARM website, which is in the process of being updated. Perennia Food and Agriculture Corporation hosts the nsnewfarmer.ca website. There's a lot to go through.

Talking about farmers coming to sell land - we're talking about land that can no longer be farmed in its traditional sense. It's assessed by an engineer before purchase. It's land that is heavily impacted by climate change.

Again, going back to recruitment and retention - I mentioned this in my opening remarks - the average age of farmers in Nova Scotia is 58. That's high. I'm sure we all know farmers who are older than that, for sure. We are working on succession planning with the federation. I talked about Plant Your Roots.

I do want to touch on mental health. It's an important part for me. I always tell the story of what I've learned in my few years in this role. I was always under the impression growing up that the farmers I knew wouldn't say anything if they had some sort of issue. They'd just kind of suck it up and continue on with their work and not pay attention to that.

I've learned that's not the case. Farmers are struggling with their mental health. I've talked about all of the challenges that the sector's facing: labour challenges, rising costs, labour. These are in addition to the weather events that we've seen in the last 16 months, whether it's Fiona, whether it's the polar vortex, whether it's wildfires, floods, just an incredibly rainy season that we just went through. These are all real things that are impacting farmers.

Part of that learning for me was leaning into our Atlantic colleagues. We have a minister in P.E.I. who has done great work on this front through the Farmers Talk initiative. This is a topic that we discuss every time we meet at the Atlantic ministers level, at the federal ministers level. That colleague actually was shuffled out for a brief period, and we said, We've got to pick up the ball for our colleague here and continue this important work, because it is so important. He speaks very passionately about it. I've seen the impacts of mental health first-hand when I visited farms after these events.

We provided \$90,000 to the federation for mental health, supporting each year for five years. Another key piece of that is that, again, there are important pieces that need to be industry-led. I really do believe that. Not everything can be industry-led, but I believe that mental health is one that should be, because who are we, as a government or a bureaucracy, to go in and tell farmers what they need? They know what they need. They know how to handle these situations, these questions. That's why we are working with the federation to allow them to develop the programs. We'll continue to work with them.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I would argue that it's not the agriculture sector's responsibility to provide mental health. That would fall under a very clear mandate of the province where there is an Office of Addictions and Mental Health. Certainly, I don't think we can lean on the sector to provide those supports. I hope those would be coming from the Province, especially considering there was a commitment made in the last election for universal mental health care coverage.

I think it would be beneficial to have a specific strategy for mental health around farmers, considering they are dealing with a much greater acute mental health issue than the average Nova Scotian, again, twice as likely to have suicidal ideation than the average worker. That's a startling statistic and, again, one of the reasons why we're having succession issues as well.

I don't think more bureaucracy is going to deal with this issue for us. What we need is bigger margins and a greater domestic market, as well as an export market for our produce. The province has been sitting on a food and beverage strategy. I'd like to know when the minister plans on releasing that and what we can expect to see in it that will help increase local food consumption.

Again, the situation with local food consumption has been so bad that a previous government had to legislate increasing local food consumption to 20 per cent because,



according to the Ecology Action Centre and the agriculture sector, consumption of locally produced food has been on the decline.

Certainly, I know there are things that advocates in the sector have been asking for - the Food and Beverage Strategy, I would like to get an update on that, as well as if the minister is considering increased funding for the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program to make locally produced healthy food more accessible to low-income Nova Scotians. Again, there's an intrinsic link between access to local healthy food and healthy outcomes and better health outcomes for people and better outcomes for our health care system.

Considering that we have seen a decline in local food consumption that is linked to poor health outcomes, and that advocates in the sector have been asking for a food and beverage strategy that has been promised them and are wondering if the government is going to support their Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program, I'd like to get some answers from the minister on if and when the province is going to move forward with those.

GREG MORROW: I just want to clarify, going back to the mental health piece, that I certainly would never download this responsibility to industry. The point I was making was that industry knows industry best. We will be there to support programs that they develop. We'll work with them, but I see our role in that as funding what they bring forward and we've done that. We had our Minister responsible for the Office of Addictions and Mental Health meet with me and Farm Safety Nova Scotia to hear their concerns and that really precipitated our funding in those programs. That was the catalyst for that.

On the Nova Scotia Food and Beverage Strategy - there's been lots of work done on the development of this strategy. As I mentioned earlier, 12 to 14 departments, really a cross-government approach at various stages, and others were consulted. The working group did a review of existing food-related initiatives in government, with more than 90 identified. They talked to key partners about what should be included and then did the public consultation of potential focus areas, talked about the public consultation. There were 1,900 responses from Nova Scotians. We were very appreciative of their input, and we put together a What We Heard report, which was released publicly this year.

Government continues to review all the work to see how it aligns with existing priorities and initiatives. In the meantime, we are working on projects to enhance awareness, increase production, and improve access to healthy local food. For example, we're promoting local foods here and abroad, as well as agricultural awareness through Agriculture in the Classroom - Nova Scotia, something I talked about in my opening remarks, encouraging technology and varieties to help extend growing seasons, supporting value-added products in both large- and small-scale processing, and implementing pilots in a variety of public institutions to encourage use of food products grown here in Nova Scotia.

[7:00 p.m.]

Again, I will repeat that the Food and Beverage Strategy is important. We continue to work on it, but that's not stopping us from bringing in programs and supports that are important to Nova Scotians. As a government, I'm so proud to announce our school lunch policy. A key part of what we heard is getting more local healthy food into our schools and in our institutions in general. Again, I talked earlier about this, but the question was raised: Putting more local food into our institutions - why were we not doing this before? - and into our government-owned hospitals, our long-term care facilities, our schools, our correctional facilities.

We introduced a pilot at Northwood, the largest long-term care facility in Atlantic Canada, and we saw an increase of 3.5 per cent in their local buying. To you and me, Chair, that might not sound like a lot, but when you're talking about the largest long-term care facility in Atlantic Canada, it is a big difference. It's changing patterns.

We introduced a pilot at the IWK Health Centre and we've heard about how excited the kids are about getting local apple slices from the Station Food Hub Company in the Windsor area, or the Made with Local bars that are being made available to doctors and nurses when they're on break. When they don't have time to sit down and have a full meal, they can grab something quickly. These are local products we're putting in that are making a difference in our institutions: our school food pilot, our fresh food carts in Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education and recently the Strait Regional Centre for Education.

We heard that some people felt these might be patchwork, but what they've done through their funding is help institutions learn how to take down some of the barriers that come with purchasing local food. Again, I go back to our stats from Northwood on the successful Northwood pilot, we are seeing that. Now, as we roll out a school lunch program, they already know how to find local.

I believe it was at Northwood, that I mentioned in my opening remarks, we replaced 13 imported food categories with local products. That is substantial. We are doing the important work that is included in a fuller food and beverage strategy. We're doing that work now, we'll continue to do it, and we'll continue to work on the overall strategy.

On the question of the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program, that is administered through the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. It is not something that the Department of Agriculture plays a role in. It's done through Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Certainly, that would be a program I think the agriculture sector would benefit from and I know they'd appreciate some advocacy from the minister at the Cabinet table on that, recognizing that it is being administered by a different

department, but it is one government. I believe, hopefully, that it has an agenda here to increase local food consumption.

We are hearing from the agriculture sector and advocates that local food consumption has been going down. I know that the minister has been promoting data related from a survey that suggests the numbers are above the 20 per cent of the legislated mandate. Does the minister have confidence in those data?

GREG MORROW: I just want to touch on the point about advocacy around the Cabinet table. I remember a question raised at one point: Can this minister advocate on behalf of industry? Well, the answer, first of all, is yes, but I say secondly, it isn't just me. We've got great colleagues across Cabinet and all of government who are advocates for industry. I'm certainly not alone in that. I look at my colleagues in the room. I know how much it means to them.

But the proof is in the pudding. Every time industry has needed us, when it's a severe weather event, we've been there: \$19 million post-Fiona; \$15 million for the polar vortex; funding following wildfires in HRM and the South Shore area; and just recently, the 2023 Season Response Program, \$9.2 million. We've been there.

I've talked about budget increases in the last couple of years. That's something that industry is very appreciative of. Industry has said, We need you to invest in us, but we need you to listen. So I've mentioned the investments. We've listened. We've brought back the ag. reps. We've brought meat inspectors back into the department. That's been so appreciated.

When I talked about Hurricane Fiona, I talked about the need for a simple application because farmers were faced with unimaginable loss - the biggest hurricane in terms of agricultural impact in the Province's history. They told us, We don't need to jump through a bunch of hoops; we need it to be simple. So, that's what we did as a department. We did a one-window application. We've taken that approach forward with our federal-provincial programs to make them easier for people to apply to. And we've done it with this new 2023 Season Response Program. We are listening and investing in industry.

In terms of the baseline methodology - so for background, in September of 2022, the department hired the Canadian Agri-Food Foresight Institute, or CAFI for short, to create a methodology and conduct an analysis for measuring the baseline consumer spend in Nova Scotia toward local food. In January of last year, CAFI ran a preliminary test of this new local food measurement model by conducting a survey of 500 Nova Scotians through the polling firm Angus Reid Institute.

The preliminary findings estimated that on average, a little more than 27 per cent of participants' food spend, not including restaurants or take-out meals, was spent on local food products in the last 12 months. This survey also confirmed that this methodology

would be easy to replicate going forward. To gain confidence in the model, a second test was completed in April involving 511 Nova Scotians. It found a higher average, just over 34 per cent for local food products. A third test of the model was completed in October involving 500 Nova Scotians. The results then were an average of almost 33 per cent. These results are consistent with the two previous tests, providing us with an overall range of 27 per cent to 34 per cent of participants' food expenses being spent on local products in the last 12 months.

All three surveys drew upon the local food definitions that were developed by the Department of Agriculture and Perennia in collaboration with industry. The differences between the surveys can likely be attributed to seasonal variation in the types and amounts of local food available to consumers. This methodology was the first of its kind, so Dalhousie University's Agri-Food Analytics Lab, on behalf of CAFI, submitted a scientific article to a peer-reviewed journal. The article was published in *Foods* on September 19, 2023.

Going forward, we plan to continue running this model a few times per year to track the Nova Scotia consumer spend on local products. We feel confident in the process and results and will look forward to growing the percentage for our Buy Local marketing efforts and the assistance from all of you supporting the growth of our agriculture sector. Nova Scotia-grown or -produced foods are widely available throughout the province at meat shops, fruit and vegetable shops, grocery chains and farmers' markets.

**ZACH CHURCHILL:** If the minister has confidence in the survey data, that makes me worry because the authors don't have confidence in this. I'll read specifically the words, verbatim, from the authors on this method of collecting data on consumption.

The authors note:

When utilizing surveys prompting participants to recall local food purchases in dollars or as a percentage of total expenditure over a specific period, biases come into play. Notably, the desirability bias is manifested, where individuals tend to over-report socially desirable behaviors while under-reporting those deemed less acceptable . . . Therefore, it is assumed that people tend to over-report their local food consumption due to its societal desirability.

The authors continue:

It is imperative to underscore that our findings predominantly portray the consumer's perspective as opposed to reflecting actual consumption patterns. Given this premise, coupled with inherent sources of bias such as desirability bias, fallible recollection, and

inaccuracies in food reporting, the resultant percentage projection is inclined toward overvaluation relative to authentic consumption . . . the yielded figure predominately encapsulates the consumer's perception, illuminating their conception of local alimentary acquisitions rather than accurate manifestation of real-world purchases.

Here's the issue we have here. We've got a government that is saying, Check the box. We have already exceeded our legislative percentage points based on the study. And the authors themselves are saying you can't use the study to tell anybody that. The study is inherently flawed. I think we can sit around this table, and if somebody asked any one of us how much of the food that we consume is locally produced, how many of us are going to know the answer to that? I don't know. I don't know if the shrimp that I eat in my local chowder is locally produced or if it's coming from Thailand. That isn't something that people generally know, which is why I think there's a major discrepancy in what the minister is saying and promoting publicly with his data and what the agriculture sector is saying and what the advocacy sector, like the Ecology Action Centre and the farmers' markets, are saying. There's a major discrepancy here.

We're hearing that the consumption of local produce has gone down around 10 per cent. The problem is that we don't know because the minister is actually not tracking what the consumption data is; he's tracking what people think they eat locally.

Does the minister see the inherent flaw of using this survey-based data over actually using consumption data? Will he reconsider his methodology of collecting this data?

I also want to ask the minister, related to the poultry sector, because I may not have time to get another question in . . .

THE CHAIR: You've got time.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Okay, I'll have one more question after that. We've got a real problem with leaning on survey data to try to answer this question. Is the minister actually going to change that so we can get hard data that is based on reality?

GREG MORROW: The data was generated by a reputable research team and they will continue to advise us on improvements to the methodology. We're also working with industry to capture feedback and how we can continue to improve on this critical baseline number.

This methodology is the first of its kind. Is it perfect? No. Is it better than we had? Yes, it sure is, because we had nothing. We had nothing to start with. We are starting - and we'll use these numbers to identify gaps and where we can do better, where we can make

improvements. If there's a suggestion that we've checked a box and we're just going to put our feet up and be done, that is certainly not the case. I've always said the 20 per cent goal is a floor, not a ceiling. Now that we have the number, we'll continue to work on improving it to identify those gaps and see where we can do better.

[7:15 p.m.]

Now that we have the baseline, we'll work with industry. We'll continue to update the number. We can run the survey numerous times a year and we will do that. We'll track it going forward and continue to make improvements.

ZACH CHURCHILL: That's the issue, that we don't have an accurate baseline here. According to the authors of this report, these numbers are going to be overestimated, so we don't know what the baseline is. Again, there's a discrepancy between what we're hearing from the sector and what the minister is reporting publicly as fact. That variance is 17 per cent, which is humongous.

If we're actually going to get to the bottom of this, if we're actually going to know if our efforts are succeeding, we have to have a better model of collecting the data that actually is data-driven, that's based on consumer behaviour, not on consumer perception of their behaviour. Again, I could not have said it better than the authors of the report themselves, who said this cannot be used as an accurate reflection of what's happening locally.

My last question to the minister - before I get to that, if we're going to use data, this is not a baseline. That has to be recognized. This is not accurate information. It's survey-driven and based on what people are guessing, not about what they're actually doing. If we're going to spend more money on this, I'd like to know why.

However, my last question to the minister is: Has he met with Eden Valley Poultry? They are one of the most crucial poultry-processing companies in the province, and I know that they've been trying to get a meeting with the minister. Could the minister please inform the committee, yes or no, if he's met with Eden Valley?

GREG MORROW: I would just disagree, for the record, that we don't have a baseline. This is a baseline. We can disagree on its accuracy, but this is a baseline. We had nothing before; nothing to start with. We'll continue to run the model going forward, numerous times a year. Again, if the number isn't perfect or exact, we can certainly see the trends of where it's going. If it's going down, then yes, that's a concern. If it's improving, then we know we're doing something right, and that's how we'll use it going forward.

Now that we have the methodology, there is no more money to be spent. We have this; we have this going forward. Again, no other government has done anything like this,

so we have it in our back pocket now and we'll continue to use it to influence how we support our industry.

The consumer bias was factored into the methodology to the best of CAFI's ability. The model provides us a tool that we can use to track local spending going forward. There are no stats available to track actual spending in this way, which is why we went to this approach. There are lots of issues with point of sale or how it will be done, so this is how we decided to go forward. I guess we can disagree, but I am confident the number will help us support industry going forward.

On the question of Eden Valley Poultry, I have been to the facility with the member from Kings West, who is a great advocate for that facility. I talked with them several times and realize their importance, not just to the region and to where the member represents but to the entire province in terms of what they buy from farmers right across the province. They are also a key driver in supporting local. I believe it is 150,000 chickens per day that go through that facility, and we see them in our local stores, in Sobeys, in Costco, and in our fast-food restaurants. I certainly recognize the importance of Eden Valley.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I will yield my time, but before I do, I would like to say if the government had executed on their platform commitment with the Nova Scotia Loyal Program - which was, I think, a credit-based, reward-based system to track local buying of local produce - then they would have a direct way of knowing what the point of sale is on these things. That's a commitment that was made by the government. I think that would be one that would be a good one to move forward with and to get a data point on that. They must meet with our processors.

We are in a processing crisis as well. We are losing abattoir capacity; if we keep losing that capacity, we are not going to be able to process food here in our province. We've lost the abattoir in Yarmouth, and we can potentially lose it in other parts of the province. I know Eden Valley is worried about their long-term competitiveness. That is something the minister needs to pay attention to.

With that said, I will yield my time to the member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

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

LISA LACHANCE: Could you clarify how much time is left?

THE CHAIR: In the entire four-hour span - 25 minutes, 40 seconds.

LISA LACHANCE: I will perhaps table my remaining questions as written questions for the minister. I do want to hop in on this question of the study that was done in determining a baseline for local food consumption. In fact, I can recognize a risk section of research that outlines the different biases, and that sort of stuff. That's how you produce a

credible research report: You consider what the weaknesses might be, and then you try to account for them. I also think there were other sources of data that could have been replicated, and we did have earlier data that was developed by the Ecology Action Centre and others in partnership using Statistics Canada farm sales data.

I am curious about why that wasn't suggested as a way. Perhaps you wanted to do the survey, but other bits of data could be used to triangulate the results. You could have looked at what people reported, then you could have looked at what Statistics Canada has as farm sales, and that could have given you an idea of where the consumption is. Why weren't other methodologies chosen?

GREG MORROW: The prior approaches did not include everything we wanted to count as local consumption. Every group had a different method; that's problematic. They couldn't necessarily agree. There is some data that is only reported every two years, not every year. Again, this is what we felt was the best methodology to determine this baseline.

LISA LACHANCE: I cede the rest of my time to the honourable member for Cumberland North.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you to the minister for this time to ask some questions. I know he has been up in Cumberland with my colleague for Cumberland South, and we thank him for coming up to our county.

Cumberland has 30 per cent or more of the arable farmland in Nova Scotia, and agriculture is an important industry for us in that area. We have Maritime Pride Eggs, and they process 14.5 million eggs per month in our industrial park. It is amazing. They are bringing in robotics and continually expanding. They are doing amazing. We have Cavendish Farms now. They grow many of their potato seedlings in our area. We have a large maple industry and would love to invite the minister to come up and enjoy some of our maple syrup in the next few weeks, if he is able. We also have a large blueberry industry, beef, and produce - some organic, some not.

I was grateful, as the farmers were, that the minister opened an agriculture office in Cumberland. That is something we've been asking for - or I've been asking for since first elected in 2017. I know many people have been asking for that, so we are grateful to have that. I'm sure the minister will be happy to know we were recently able to help - that office was able to help - a local organic producer in the Wallace area to get some licensing that was needed, and we are grateful. They were grateful. It is so nice to have someone local who could help us with that. Also, I have to say thank you to the Buy Nova Scotia First Act. It was an act I first tabled back in 2020, and it was something the PC party had supported me in tabling. It was so hospitals and local institutions would buy local food. I was so encouraged to see the government put that into action not too long ago. Something else



we've been asking for that the minister recently did was supporting our Maritime Beef Sector Expansion and Development Strategy - very important to Cumberland County. I wanted to highlight all those things. We are grateful for the department's work in our area.

[7:30 p.m.]

I'm taking it easy on you. I did have a question about the Maritime beef strategy. I am wondering if the minister could highlight what the funding was for and what the future plan for the Maritime beef strategy is for our government to support that.

GREG MORROW: When the member started talking about all the great things that are going on in Cumberland County, I was furiously making notes about all we've done in the last two and a half years. Then the member listed them all for me, so that's great. I don't need to go through them all. I don't need to talk about our new Nappan office. I don't need to talk about our ag. rep, who is so appreciated by industry. I've heard nothing but glowing reviews from this ag. rep, so industry really does appreciate all the good work that she's doing.

In support for the beef sector, we are working to increase local food consumption and the percentage of Nova Scotians' food budget spent on locally grown and produced foods. I really believe that Nova Scotia is in a great position to be competitive in the beef market. Consumers want quality and affordable, local products. Our producers are ready to meet that need by increasing the number of cattle raised here at home.

In my travels across the province, I've heard from many farmers about what's next for Nova Scotia. There is so much agreement that we are poised to be a major player in beef in this province. I'm happy to support that. That's why we're investing in new programs and projects to help beef farmers.

To assist with this, we're working with beef producers on new initiatives that increase beef production here in Nova Scotia and help the industry stay competitive and consumer focused. We're collaborating with other departments and industry, academic, and marketing partners on the Nova Scotia Beef Initiative. That includes more investment in the Nova Scotia Cattle Producers' Nova Scotia Elite Sire program - that's the bull bonus. It encourages the purchasing of high-quality sires, an updated forage production guide with information about optimal diet and cost of production to raise more cattle locally, addressing training needs of Nova Scotia meat processors. Certainly, that's something we're hearing and working with our colleagues in the Department of Advanced Education on in filling some of those gaps. Support for cattle producers to adopt new management practices and farm innovations that will prepare the industry for climate change, provincial marketing to drive consumer awareness of the value of consuming healthy local beef along with other Nova Scotia products - this one's so important.

We do have a great beef industry here. They're ready to expand, they're ready to grow, but they need some help. That's what we're doing with this \$950,000 over two years. All these are so important, but we have to do a better job of making Nova Scotians aware of what great quality beef we're producing here at home. That's a key part of it. As well, a new feedlot pilot program to encourage producers to grow their cattle in Nova Scotia instead of shipping out of province.

On the processing side of it, I've certainly toured the Atlantic beef facility in Borden - or maybe it's Albany - P.E.I. They're a willing partner. They're ready to work with us. They say that they have capacity to take in more Nova Scotia beef, so they're right there with us. We want to trade more at home as well.

We also have the new Nova Scotia Beef Initiative steering committee, including representatives from the department, Nova Scotia Cattle Producers, the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board, Perennia, and industry. We have different members of industry from across the province. They'll work to inform the work with the province investing, as I mentioned, close to a million dollars over two years.

I think that's what I would have to say about the beef sector. Just going back to my notes, there was a comment about maple syrup. Nobody enjoys a nice glass of maple syrup more than I do. I look forward to that. (Laughter) I look forward to one at the end of the night.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Well, you know, I grew up drinking maple syrup, too, so I can appreciate that. My Uncle Wendell - who passed away three years ago - was the largest producer in all Atlantic Canada for several years, and probably - I think back to my age - 40 years ago, he had over 60,000 trees tapped. He was one of many producers here.

I wanted to ask the minister a bit more about the beef industry regarding processing and inspection. Has there been any work done to try to work more with our Maritime partners? We do have a unique situation in Cumberland, being a border community, and the interprovincial barriers we have are frustrating. The inspection laws can be a real barrier. Many people believe if we could work more collaboratively, even if it was just with New Brunswick - but I believe if we worked with P.E.I. and New Brunswick on this, we would be able to increase our local food production and usage dramatically. Beef is one of those things - but all meats. For example, one local business owner I knew a few years ago had brought in some New Brunswick sausages and ended up having to throw them all out because they had come across the provincial border. That business owner lost thousands of dollars. There is no need for that, but it was because of our interprovincial barriers and because our provinces are not working together.

I am wondering if the minister could maybe speak to that. Is there any work being done that could try to remove some of the barriers between at least Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and P.E.I.?

THE CHAIR: Minister, before I recognize you, we have about nine minutes before we would conclude our four hours. I am not sure how much you need for closing remarks.

The honourable Minister of Agriculture.

GREG MORROW: About ten minutes or so (laughter) - about a minute. I'll start with an overall philosophy when we talk about Atlantic partnership. I talked earlier in my remarks about learning a lot in this role in respect to mental health. One of the first things I understood was the need for Atlantic co-operation, because I realized right off the hop that individually we're a small province - as is New Brunswick, as is P.E.I., as is Newfoundland and Labrador - when you compare agricultural juggernauts of Saskatchewan and Ontario and Alberta and places like that out west.

The very first conversation I had with my colleague from New Brunswick, the Honourable Margaret Johnson was, We really do need to find a way to work together on a number of issues. We've taken that philosophy forward to the FPT table. I believe it was the first time that we know of that we met as Atlantic ministers to discuss challenges and opportunities within the Atlantic sector. That's been so valuable going forward. Our federal colleagues call us the East Coast Mafia, as a matter of fact.

So we've done a lot of work on that, and I mentioned earlier as well, about our most recent meeting of the Atlantic ministers in January in Charlottetown and the challenges facing the movement of meat and beef were discussed. The interprovincial movement, as a member mentioned, just has so many barriers that need to be addressed and we'll always pursue what's possible. I think I'd say we're probably in the early stages of that, just based on the different levels of inspection when you're talking about different provinces.

Those are all things that have to be addressed, but all to say that we recognize the opportunity that is there for Atlantic collaboration in promoting our beef sector as a whole. We're working toward livestock price insurance as an Atlantic region. The Maritime Beef Sector Expansion and Development Strategy is a pan-Atlantic initiative that we collaborate on with P.E.I. and New Brunswick. We're committed to the strategy to support their efforts in beef production and herd health.

I always say, with the Atlantic region, there's no need to reinvent the wheel. I talked about the good work being done by P.E.I. in mental health. There's already the Atlantic beef facility in P.E.I.; we don't need to stand up another one of those. It really is finding ways to work together with our Atlantic colleagues to promote Nova Scotia, not just beef, but all Nova Scotia products within the Atlantic region.

[7:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: With approximately five minutes left, you may have time for a quick one. The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I will make a couple of comments and just ask a question about them. I'm glad to hear that the department is working on that. I wanted just to put a plug in for the farmers' market program. I know that other members have already brought this up - and I believe it's administered through the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage - but I just wanted to emphasize how successful that program has been up in our area. The village of Pugwash has a very successful - maybe one of the most successful farmers' markets in the province.

One of our community leaders, Jennifer Houghtaling - she's a local councillor - she's really spearheaded a lot of the work there, and they've recently put solar panels on the farmers' market - but they've been administering the coupons and they've had an incredible number of people who really were in need who were able to buy local food who otherwise probably wouldn't have.

About two weeks ago, I had a really difficult conversation with a senior who is having a lot of difficulties trying to put food on the table. She cares for her disabled husband, and she was saying, How are you going to help me? I suggested her getting in contact with the farmers' market and trying to get some of these coupons so that she can have healthy local food. I just wanted to ask the minister if he does support this program and will he work with his colleagues to try to grow access, knowing that it will help both people in need and also our local farmers?

GREG MORROW: As the member highlighted, this is a program that is administered through the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, but that doesn't mean we're not working with our colleagues across Cabinet and across government. Obviously, food security is a mandate of the Department of Community Services. We work with them. We work closely with CCTH. We have heard the importance of this program from members opposite through the last year or so, so that's not lost on me.

We support farmers' markets in a number of ways. They're vital for food security in our smaller communities, supporting our local farmers, and getting more local foods on the plates of Nova Scotians. I would continue to advocate with my colleagues on not only this program but any program that would address food security and local food consumption.

THE CHAIR: I would now invite the honourable minister to make some closing remarks and to read the resolution. The honourable Minister of Agriculture.

GREG MORROW: Chair, I'd like to thank you for your stewardship of this process and the members for their questions about the department and the industry we support and we're so passionate about. We may not be the biggest department, but we play a big role in supporting communities and the economy through working with industry to promote exports in the production of healthy local food for Nova Scotians.

We certainly recognize there are challenges, with climate change, inflationary costs, and labour being some of the big ones. We're working closely with the sector and our partners to face these challenges head on. Again, I want to thank Deputy Minister Robichaud Mike O'Brien and the team for all their support. We have dedicated people who are working hard and are committed to supporting and building the sector, and together we will continue to do just that.

THE CHAIR: Shall the resolution stand?

The resolution stands.

That concludes our four hours. We will meet back in the main Chamber.

[The committee adjourned at 7:53 p.m.]