



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, MONDAY, MARCH 18, 2024

SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

2:54 P.M.

CHAIR
Lisa Lachance

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Subcommittee of the Whole House on Supply will come to order. It is now 2:54 p.m. The Subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates for the Department of Environment and Climate Change as outlined in Resolution E8, which reads:

Resolution E8 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$73,876,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Environment and Climate Change, pursuant to the Estimate.

THE CHAIR: I will now invite the Minister of Environment and Climate Change to make opening comments for up to an hour and, if they wish, to introduce their staff to the committee.

HON. TIM HALMAN: I am pleased to be here today to speak to the budget and to the work and priorities of the Department of Environment and Climate Change. Joining me today are the Deputy Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Lora MacEachern, and members of our executive team.

I believe family, health, and having a safe and affordable place to live are what matter most to people. In the context of my mandate, the Environment and Climate Change file, I believe people want to live in communities that are moving to clean, sustainable energy like solar and wind. As a matter of fact, I had an opportunity to visit the beautiful Annapolis Valley - Wolfville - on Saturday to meet with representatives of Nova Scotians Going Solar. There's incredible work being done throughout the province with clean renewables.

Some communities have proximity to protected areas like parks and wilderness areas where they can hike, camp, and enjoy nature. Nova Scotians want communities with clean drinking water and air and that are embracing a circular economy where little is wasted. Communities are taking action to adapt to climate change and keep their environment clean and sustainable. Nova Scotians want communities that know that caring for our environment and our climate is caring for ourselves and each other. Communities welcome new businesses but expect them to be accountable and responsible when it comes to environmental stewardship. These are all the communities that people want to call home.

If we think about the mandate of the Department of Environment and Climate Change at its most basic level, I believe our job is to help create these kinds of communities in Nova Scotia. Before I take your questions this afternoon, I'd like to share a bit of our work over the past year and a few things that we have planned for the coming year, all of which have the aim of creating healthy communities that people want to call home.

Climate change is the most pressing issue facing the global community. It also connects us to every other human being on the planet. No matter where you live, all continents, all the people with whom we share this planet, and indeed all living things are feeling the impacts of climate change. It requires a global response. Taking action in response to climate change is something we must do collectively and something we must do together. No one person can solve this issue. It is both a global issue and a community issue, and it requires a community-wide response.

Nova Scotians are experiencing the impacts of climate change. Last Summer was a heartbreaking reminder of that reality. However, we also saw the resilience, the grit, and the resolve that Nova Scotians are known for. Across the province, we are seeing municipal-, community-, and citizen-led leadership to mitigate the impacts and adapt to climate change. For example, in Mahone Bay, the Bluenose Coastal Action Foundation is building a living shoreline to protect the community, homes, ecosystems, and people from coastal flooding, erosion, and storms. Minister Corkum-Greek, Minister Druhan, MLA Barkhouse, and I had the opportunity a few months ago to visit the Bluenose Coastal Action Foundation in Mahone Bay. There is incredible work being accomplished there.

In Porters Lake, MusGo Rider is installing solar panels to power electric vehicle chargers to help the people who live in that area get to appointments, get groceries, and so on. Minister Kent Smith, MLA for Eastern Shore, and I had the opportunity, along with

HRM Councillor Tony Mancini, to see MusGo and the great work they're doing. In Pugwash, Sunset Community Incorporated is installing solar panels to power its building and reinvesting the money they are saving on their power bills into more programming and services for their clients.

These are just a few examples of community-led action that is creating a cleaner future, improving the well-being of the people who live in these communities, and creating a society that leaves no one behind.

[3:00 p.m.]

Municipalities have long been leaders in the response to climate change, and with jurisdiction for waste management, community transportation, land use, planning, building permits, zoning, and much more, they are the closest level of government to the ground, which is a great place to try new and innovative climate solutions that can then be scaled elsewhere.

Across Nova Scotia, people in communities are working to take control of their future in the face of our changing climate, rather than let climate change defeat us. The wildfires and flooding we and so many other Canadians experienced last Summer represent what we can expect to continue to see more of. Our province's climate risk assessment confirms this. As a matter of fact, this is Nova Scotia's first climate risk assessment since 2005.

Obviously, no one wants to see these events continue; however, we know that globally people will continue to be impacted by our changing climate given the level of greenhouse gases currently in the global atmosphere. That is why our government is taking action. That is why Nova Scotians are taking action. That is why communities are acting.

Nova Scotia is showing national leadership to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and decarbonize our energy and electricity sectors. We now have a fully funded climate plan with 68 actions to help Nova Scotians in our communities adapt to climate change and to mitigate its impacts. This is the first such plan in Nova Scotia's history. We know that Nova Scotians want to have confidence that climate action will be funded with certainty. That is why we have strengthened our climate change response by building the funding for it directly into our budget.

Previous work to help Nova Scotians adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change was tied to the volatility and uncertainty of cap and trade auctions. Our approach is to fully fund climate action up front in the budget and move to a new system to drive down emissions where success means no revenue will be generated. Work is well under way on the climate plan's 68 actions to grow the clean economy, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, support coastal protection, transition to renewal energy, help Nova Scotians

save on their energy bills, and prepare for the impacts of climate change and much, much more.

To date we have invested \$237 million from the climate plan to help Nova Scotians adapt to climate change and to mitigate its impacts - a quarter of a billion dollars - and we're not done. We feel the urgency to do even more. Budget 2024-2025 builds on the climate change mitigation and adaptation work we have already started and sets a path for the year ahead.

At the Department of Environment and Climate Change we will invest \$36.7 million in the coming fiscal year to build more climate-resilient communities, to help our key economic sectors adapt and thrive in the face of our changing climate, and to protect our coast and our coastal way of life. We are leading our province's response to climate change, but together all Nova Scotians have a role to address climate change and build green, climate-resilient communities where everyone has the best chance to achieve their full potential. That includes our coastal communities.

Mx. Chair, Nova Scotia is a coastal province and our government cares deeply about the coastline. We all want our beaches, coastal trails, and coastline to be protected so that we can enjoy and use them. The changing climate means, however, that we need to rethink how and where we live and build along the coast. Nova Scotians know this. They have lived by the ocean for generations and know the landscape and their properties best. We know Nova Scotians care about their communities, their properties, and their province, and will do the right thing when they have the right information and are empowered, trusted, and accountable for their actions.

There are many ways we can protect Nova Scotia's coastline. Legislation is not the only approach. Our government believes that rather than a one-size-fits-all approach of legislation, the best and most effective way to protect our coast and the homes and communities along it is to work with Nova Scotians, property owners, communities, and municipalities to determine what is best for each unique part of our coastline. That's why we have made the decision to trust local communities and Nova Scotians to make good decisions when it comes to coastal protection. Our plan empowers property owners and municipalities and gives them the tools they need to protect each unique piece of coastline.

Coastal property owners and municipalities know their communities best, and their leadership will be most effective in making sure our coastline is safeguarded from climate change. Nova Scotians and our government share the sense of personal responsibility and collective pride in doing what is right, whether it is protecting the coastline or supporting a neighbour.

Nova Scotians have lived by the ocean for generations. They know the landscape and their properties best and how to keep them safe. We need to listen to them, leverage their experience and knowledge, and empower them. They have the personal stake to do

this right. Our municipal leadership is key when it comes to coastal protection. They know their communities best and how to move forward, working with residents through zoning, bylaws, and building permits.

The Municipality of the County of Guysborough is an example of this leadership and, in fact, feels it is ahead of the game when it comes to protecting the 200 kilometres of coastline within its jurisdiction. Guysborough has had a climate adaptation plan in place for at least eight years, including a focus on coastal protection. I will table that.

I believe that with the right information, Nova Scotians will make the right decisions. We would never do anything, as a government, to jeopardize our coast. That isn't what's happening. We have a plan to empower our municipalities and property owners with the tools they need to make good decisions and protect our coast and our coastal way of life. We will get this right and continue to live by our coast and enjoy our coastal areas.

The Province will also continue to support all Nova Scotians and the communities they call home, both those along the coast and inland, by investing more in flood line mapping programming, which provides property owners and municipalities with information on flooding risks. Since we launched the climate plan for Nova Scotia, we have allocated \$8.6 million for flood line mapping. My team is also working on a province-wide erosion risk assessment, which municipalities can use in their zoning and planning work. We are supporting the greening of our grid as we move to renewable energy, as outlined in Nova Scotia's 2030 Clean Power Plan.

Over the past year, our government completed the largest-ever procurement for renewable electricity in the province, resulting in five wind projects that, when completed, will result in about 70 per cent of our electricity coming from renewable sources. We also developed the first module of the Nova Scotia Offshore Wind Roadmap, which sets the Province's vision for offshore wind with a goal to offer leases for five megawatts of onshore wind by 2030.

I had the opportunity in December of last year to go on board the *Orion*, the Belgium vessel that is installing offshore wind turbines off Martha's Vineyard - incredible technology. That is a key path forward. When we say Nova Scotia will emerge as a clean, renewable powerhouse by 2030, it is through means such as that for us to achieve those objects. Incredible innovation is taking place.

At the Department of Environment and Climate Change, we approved ten new onshore wind energy projects through environmental assessments in 2023, which will create enough clean, affordable, renewable energy to power the equivalent of just under 500,000 homes. We also issued environmental approvals for two green hydrogen facilities. Our vision is to not only green our grid but to make Nova Scotia a global leader in green energy production and to be a clean energy powerhouse. We are helping people make their homes energy-efficient, and since 2021, our government has invested almost \$300 million

in programs and services that are getting Nova Scotians off oil and making their homes more energy-efficient.

These are just a few examples of the work that is being done to make our people, communities, and province resilient to climate change. We will continue to invest in programs like the Community Climate Capacity Program and the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund, which supports grassroots community leadership in response to climate change.

The Community Climate Capacity program provides municipalities and communities with funding to bring on dedicated and skilled climate change staff and other resources to guide them through the climate and sustainability initiatives at the local level. Projects eligible for Community Climate Capacity support may include but are not limited to the development of a climate plan; implementing elements of an existing climate plan; undertaking adaptation or mitigation measures; improving asset management; or completing grant applications for funding to support climate initiatives. Later this Spring, I'll be announcing the first round of communities funded through the Community Climate Capacity program.

The Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund recognizes the communities that are the first responders to climate change. Together with the Community Climate Capacity Program, the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund is empowering people in communities to lead the action that is needed to tackle climate change head-on and reduce carbon emissions. That new program has been so effective that we topped it up by \$15.4 million last Fall.

To illustrate how our climate plan is a living, breathing document, always changing, always evolving: I can remember the exact moment you and I left a meeting, not long after the wildfires and the flooding, and both the deputy minister and I were saying we're going to need to top this fund up - increase it - because it's so critical for climate adaptation and mitigation for our local communities."

This is what great partnerships between the Province, municipalities, and communities can accomplish. I want to say a big thank you to Juanita Spencer and the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities for the great work in administering the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund. As MLAs, any time we can get you information on the application process for the fund, our not-for-profits, universities, and municipalities can benefit enormously with this local grant for climate action.

This past year, we also hired a flood management and adaptation lead to help municipalities adapt to climate change. We are in the process now of hiring a stormwater engineer to further support municipalities and communities in their work to adapt to climate change and create climate-resilient communities. Another way we are supporting strong

and health communities is by holding the electricity sector and large industry accountable for reducing their emissions.

Allow me to switch gears for a moment. I'd like to discuss with you our Output-Based Pricing System. The OBPS - the Output-Based Pricing System - does just that. Industry produces about 50 per cent of Nova Scotia's carbon emissions, and the large majority of that 50 per cent is generated by Nova Scotia Power. Nova Scotia's Output-Based Pricing System is driving greenhouse gas reductions. It's holding large emitters accountable and ensuring our businesses remain competitive, minimize rate impacts, and make life affordable for Nova Scotians.

Over the past year, we developed and adopted regulations that require participants, including facilities owned by Nova Scotia Power and six other large industrial companies, to reduce their emissions and meet new performance standards, measurements, and reporting requirements. The regulations will apply to roughly half of Nova Scotia's greenhouse gas emissions, driving them to reduce their emissions while supporting them to do this at the lowest cost to Nova Scotians.

As of January 1, 2023, registered facilities are responsible for their emissions. This means they must report their emissions and pay for any that are above their threshold. Facilities are required to report their 2023 emissions to us on June 1st of this year. Shortly after this date, we will know how much revenue is generated by the Output-Based Pricing System. Revenue under the program is difficult to project and will depend on whether participants reduce emissions as required by the regulations. When you think about it, no revenue is the win we are focused on. Participants that do not reduce their emissions will have to pay. The deadline for payment will be late Fall 2024. Another key date to keep in mind is December 1, 2024, when the facilities participating in the Output-Based Pricing System must report to us on how they are meeting their compliance obligations.

The Output-Based Pricing System complements other provincial policies and commitments to ensure that Nova Scotia Power stays on track to phase out coal and meet its 80 per cent renewable target in 2030 while minimizing the impacts on ratepayers. Together, these policies will reduce electricity-sector emissions by 85 per cent to 90 per cent by 2030. Once the Clean Power Plan is fully implemented, Nova Scotia will be a North American leader in emissions reductions from the electricity sector.

I will end my remarks on climate change in the same vein that I began. Climate change is the most pressing global emergency facing humanity. We will only be successful in reducing emissions, mitigating the impacts, and adapting to our changing climate if every single Nova Scotian steps up to take action.

In the coming year we will continue to work and partner with Nova Scotians, municipalities, the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, EfficiencyOne, Clean

Foundation, academia, the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia, researchers, and others to support the all-hands-on-deck approach that is absolutely essential in responding to climate change.

[3:15 p.m.]

As we know, the federal carbon tax will increase on April 1st, meaning Nova Scotians will pay even more for gas and home heating fuel. As a government, we stand firm that a strong and effective response to climate change doesn't require a carbon tax. Nova Scotia has a strong plan to address climate change that is not dependent on taxing hard-working people at a time when affordability is a concern.

We have legislated greenhouse gas reduction targets and we have a path to get there. In fact, we have one of the highest greenhouse gas reduction targets in Canada. We're exceeding our targets to move to renewable energy. We're helping more people every day move to solar panels and heat pumps, and of course, we are ramping up wind energy.

We, along with Nova Scotians, are doing all of this and more without a harmful carbon tax. Nova Scotians and our government are proud of our prudent leadership in stepping up to protect the planet, our environment, and all that we hold dear. We will continue to demonstrate what true climate leadership looks like as opposed to just taxing people.

I'd like to take a moment to discuss land and water protection. The relationship between our mental and physical health and well-being and time spent in nature is absolutely clear. That's one reason why our government has prioritized protecting more of our land and water. There are many other reasons. Protected natural areas, as you know, give us clean drinking water and clean air to breathe. They capture and store carbon and help mitigate the impacts of flooding, which is critical in our fight against climate change.

Land conservation is essential for Nova Scotia's environmental and economic health and prosperity. Protected areas support healthy communities and help make our province's communities great places to live. That is why the climate plan has five actions to strengthen biodiversity, prevent further biodiversity loss, restore natural areas, and protect more of our land and water.

In 2023, I was proud to announce that the Department of Environment and Climate Change protected an additional 14,600 hectares of land and water. With land trusts and Department of Natural Resources and Renewables contributions added in, about 20,000 hectares of land were added to the network of protected and conserved areas in 2023.

In August, we designated 684 hectares of old-growth forest, hardwood drumlins, lakes, and wetlands as Archibald Lake Wilderness Area, a place that is now protected forever as habitat for many species such as the Canada Warbler, the mainland moose, brook trout, and Atlantic salmon.

In December, we designated Island Lake Wilderness Area, protecting just under 4,000 hectares of old-growth forest, lakes, wetlands, water courses, and wildlife habitat, including part of the lower Ingram River and Island Lake, a popular and beloved destination for hiking, canoeing, and camping.

I want to take this opportunity and give shout-outs to Scott Beaver, president of the St. Mary's River Association, Chris Miller of Canadian Parks and Wilderness, Ray Plourde of the Ecology Action Centre, and Mike Lancaster, executive director of the St. Margaret's Bay Stewardship Association, who worked tirelessly to make these two wilderness area designations a reality.

In addition to Archibald Lake and Island Lake, my department also designated an additional 13 new wilderness areas and nature reserves in 2023 and expanded eight existing wilderness areas and one existing nature reserve, ending 2023 with 13.5 per cent of the province now protected. About 13.1 per cent of the province's coastline is also protected from development inside the boundaries of provincial and national parks, wilderness areas, nature reserves, wildlife areas, and inland owned and managed by land conversation trusts and Mi'kmaw organizations.

In the coming fiscal year, we will continue work to reach our goal of protecting 20 per cent of land and water by 2030 and protecting more of our coastline by designating more coastal areas for protection. Our new Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy is now guiding Nova Scotia forward to further success with achieving this goal. This strategy will help us identify and designate new protected areas on both provincial and private lands. As we move forward to implement the strategy, our aim is to protect areas that represent the full diversity of Nova Scotia's natural areas, ecosystems, and species. To do this, we will work with Mi'kmaw communities, conservation partners, and land trusts, as well as municipalities, private landowners, and other stakeholders.

Obviously, we can't reach our land protection target alone. We need the support of all Nova Scotians. To this end, we will collaborate with our partners and stakeholders to achieve our shared land protection goals. In doing so, we will protect our environment both for our enjoyment and for the benefits it brings to our health, well-being, economy, and way of life. Once we adjourned for the March break, the first thing I did was get out into nature and take a nice hike at Hirtles Beach on the beautiful South Shore and up to Gaff Point. Nova Scotians - we so enjoy our protected areas.

All this will help ensure a sustainable and healthy future for our province, our people, and our economy. As we turn our attention to fiscal year 2024-25, my team will continue to work to designate protected areas from the 2013 Our Parks and Protected Areas Plan, implement the Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy, and support Mi'kmaq-led conservation. We have also signed the new federal-provincial Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement with Ottawa. This will speed up our land and water protection work by creating new wilderness areas and nature reserves, supporting Mi'kmaq-led conservation, and

accelerating conservation on private lands. We are in the final stages of negotiating the contribution agreement that flows from this nature agreement. The funding will support an increase in the amount of protected land in Nova Scotia by 82,500 hectares by March 2026 and allow Nova Scotia's continued national leadership in conservation.

I'd like to provide some comments on safeguarding our air and water. As many know, our government's top priority is health care. There is a direct connection between a healthy environment and healthy people. Having clean drinking water and clean, safe air to breathe supports public health and prevention of health issues. Nova Scotia is known for our clean air and plentiful water, and we want to keep it that way for generations to come. While air zones in Nova Scotia continue to meet the Canadian Ambient Air Quality Standards, we are continuing our work to update the Province's air emission targets and ambient air quality standards by 2025 to ensure Nova Scotians continue to have clean and healthy air.

This past year, we also published our Air Assessment Guidance Document, which helps industry understand the Province's expectations for assessing and reducing potential impacts to air quality. Many of the climate plan actions also support clean air. For example, increasing renewable energy and phasing out coal-fired electricity generation will improve air quality.

As Nova Scotians are aware, our government's top priority absolutely is health care, and access to safe, reliable water is very important for our well-being and health, whether it's for drinking, food production, recreation, or for uses in our homes such as bathing. Again, we are fortunate in Nova Scotia to have an abundance of clean water. To make sure that the water Nova Scotians depend on remains safe for humans and ecosystems, we are working on developing provincial water quality objectives. This work will help us set clear goals for water quality in lakes and rivers and make it easier for communities and all levels of government to protect them.

About 50 per cent of Nova Scotians depend on wells for their water. We know most of those wells haven't been tested for the natural contaminants that can make people sick. To help raise awareness of the importance of testing well water, we ran a public education campaign last Summer. The Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act commits Nova Scotia to addressing barriers that exist for people to test and treat their wells. In the coming year, we will pilot different ways to make testing more convenient and to promote public awareness and education so that people know how to test and why it is so important to do so.

Nova Scotians value and enjoy Nova Scotia's many beautiful lakes. I have the honour of representing a community in Dartmouth which is known as the City of Lakes. With more frequent occurrences of blue-green algae, it is important that Nova Scotians know what to look for and the steps they need to take to protect themselves and their pets and still enjoy our lakes. In the coming year, we will continue our blue-green algae public

education campaign, which has been very effective in increasing awareness, understanding, and action.

As our province grows, we are doing more and more to make sure our lakes and waterways remain healthy. Sediment and erosion are concerning, and that is why adequate prevention and control is so important. This is a complex issue and requires work by both municipal and provincial levels of government to protect our environment in areas where development is happening frequently. I want to assure all Nova Scotians that developers must comply with the Environment Act and its very stringent regulations. No one gets a free pass.

Before I leave air and water, I want to acknowledge and thank the Environment and Climate Change team who delivered the well-water tests for those who were impacted by last Summer's fires. I can recall - I think it was a co-op student or a Summer student who jumped in their vehicle and drove down to Barrington to deliver the well water testing kits. Just incredible initiative on the part of a young Nova Scotian, and I commend the entire team, many of whom are with us here today, who really stepped up to support their fellow Nova Scotians.

Bacteria and chemicals from a fire can impact home wells when they sit unused for long periods of time. To help make the return home easier for people with wells and to give them peace of mind about the safety of their water, we arranged at that time and paid for free testing for their well water.

I'd like to take a moment to discuss the circular economy. Creating a circular economy and cutting down on waste and litter is essential to helping to ensure the health and sustainability of our environment and our resources. Our waste management sector and the circular economy create jobs and business opportunities and drive innovation. Moving Nova Scotia to a circular economy is another legislative goal we are working to achieve. We currently have one of the lowest disposal rates in the country, at 400 kilograms per person per year, but our goal is to reduce this number to 300 kilograms per person per year.

One of the most effective ways to reduce the amount of waste that ends up in landfills is through Extended Producer Responsibility programs. As many know, over the past year we announced new Extended Producer Responsibility programs for batteries, lamps, and small household electric appliances, as well as packaging, paper products, and other blue-bag materials.

These new extended producer responsibility programs fall under two sets of regulations: the Solid Waste-Resource Management Regulations, which now include programs for batteries, lamps, and small household electric appliances such as irons, can openers, and hair dryers - something I don't necessarily need; just seeing if you are paying attention - and a new set of the Extended Producer Responsibility regulations to cover packaging, paper products, and materials in a residential blue bag recycling program.

Producers will have to meet recycling targets that encourage more eco-friendly packaging and reduce single-use plastics. Having producers cover the cost of recycling will save Nova Scotia municipalities around \$25 million annually.

[3:30 p.m.]

The new programs will take effect on various dates over the next 28 months. By adding four new Extended Producer Responsibility programs, we are reaffirming Nova Scotia's position as a leader in sustainable waste-resource management and building a cleaner, greener, and more sustainable future for generations to come. Nova Scotians have long been leaders in waste diversion and recycling, and we are proud of our record on solid waste reduction.

Our work in the coming year will continue to support and empower Nova Scotians and municipalities to continue this trend and will also modernize how we recycle. We highly value our partnerships with municipalities, waste management service providers, Divert Nova Scotia, and others to create greener communities and to support our respective waste reduction goals, and I want to thank them for all they do to make our communities green, healthy, and sustainable.

The Department of Environment and Climate Change is a regulatory department, as most are aware. Therefore, I want to take a moment and discuss client services - in delivering our services - and the expectation of delivering those services with excellence. My department works actively to protect our health through a rigorous set of regulatory responsibilities. The correlation is simple - a healthy environment equals healthy people. Our government has a vision to not only move away from fossil fuels by 2030 but to make Nova Scotia a leader in clean, renewable energy within the next ten years - energy that will power our grid and meet the needs of Nova Scotians, and energy we can export. We have what it takes to be a producer and exporter of wind and tidal energy, green hydrogen, and much more.

As the regulator, my role is to be a neutral steward of the environmental assessment process, which allows innovative projects like these to proceed while ensuring the environment is protected. We can do both and do both extremely well. Our department is making great progress in assessing our regulations and approaches to ensure requirements are clear, easy to understand, and can be met with a minimum amount of red tape. We want companies to spend less time trying to figure out our environmental protection rules and just be able to focus on knowing them, understanding them, and following them.

By streamlining and modernizing our processes, we expect to yield even better applications and reduce the amount of time staff have to spend explaining our laws and regulations. It is important, both for the department and our clients, that we set clear expectations and follow through to ensure these expectations are met. I want to assure all Nova Scotians that this doesn't mean we are compromising environmental protection. In

fact, it is the opposite. For compliance to happen, companies and industry must have clear knowledge and understanding of the requirements they must adhere to.

In the coming year, we will continue to modernize our department's regulations and processes to help make sure they can be met with a minimum amount of unnecessary red tape, and we are keeping Nova Scotians in mind every step of the way. This includes our ongoing legislated goal to modernize the environmental assessment process. We are applying this lens to all our work to modernize and remove ambiguity.

I want to take a moment and discuss the Environmental Racism Panel. Nova Scotia has a troubling history of environmental racism. To help address this historic wrong, we created a community-led panel to address environmental racism. The panel is completing its work now, and we look forward to their final recommendations.

With respect to the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act goals, I have mentioned many of the commitments that are contained in the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. I want Nova Scotians to know that we're making great progress on achieving these goals. In the coming year the department will continue our work to ensure a clean, healthy, and sustainable future for Nova Scotians. Every July, Environment and Climate Change Nova Scotia issues the annual update on how we are meeting our goals in the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act and Nova Scotia's Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth. As I said, the third annual progress report will be forthcoming, and we intend to release it before the end of July.

I want to conclude with some words of gratitude. First, to the incredible team at the Department of Environment and Climate Change: Their work is making our province one of the best places to live, work, and visit. I have to say that, as the minister, I have a lot of fun working with the team and learning from them, an incredibly talented group of professionals. I may be biased, but I feel I have the best team in the government of Nova Scotia. Every day, they are leading our province's fight against climate change to reduce gas emissions. I am very proud that Nova Scotia has the strongest greenhouse gas reduction target in the country - 53 per cent below 2005 levels.

The team's work is maintaining Nova Scotia's position as a national leader in land conservation. They inspect restaurants, cafeterias, and food trucks, helping to make sure our food is safe for incredible events that are held in our communities, like Ribfest, one of my all-time favourites. Because of them, Nova Scotians can have confidence that if they get a tattoo or a piercing there are safeguards in place to protect their health. They enforce our environmental laws and regulations to help make sure Nova Scotians have clean air to breathe and safe drinking water. Their work is moving us to a circular economy. Their work touches and benefits every single Nova Scotian, contributing to our well-being and quality of life. I'd like to thank them for what they do every day. They are a committed and passionate team and their professionalism and service to the people of Nova Scotia does not go unnoticed.

I also want to thank our many partners and organizations that hold us accountable for protecting our province's environment. I'd like to especially thank Scott Skinner with Clean Foundation, Stephen MacDonald with EfficiencyOne, and board chair of EfficiencyOne, Bill Lahey, and, of course, the incredible teams at both those organizations. They are key delivery partners that work directly with Nova Scotians every day.

Finally, I'd like to thank the members of the Minister's Round Table on Environment and Sustainable Prosperity and the Minister's Youth Climate Council for their leadership and advice. As a matter of fact, I had the privilege last week of meeting with Nova Scotia's Youth Climate Council, a council that was set up under our climate plan so that our youth have a direct say and a direct involvement in the development of public policy. I so enjoyed our discussions on housing, the coastal protection plan, and just a multitude of subjects. They are an impressive, incredible group of young Nova Scotians.

Our government is moving on solutions that work and we are building a province that thrives from one end to the other. We are making progress, building our province so that all Nova Scotians can live in vibrant, healthy communities and have the best chance to achieve their full potential. With that, I would now be happy to take questions from colleagues. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: According to the practice that has developed in our Legislature, each of the Opposition caucuses takes a turn asking questions for approximately one hour. During a caucus's turn, the members within a caucus make take turns examining the minister on the Estimate resolution. Only the minister may answer questions. Caucuses are expected to share time fairly with the Independent member. To begin the examination, I now recognize the honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect, from the Official Opposition.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I appreciate the opening comments from the minister. They were certainly very thorough and covered a lot of the areas that I'd planned to ask questions on. Why don't I just start with the coastal protection action item? I note that the minister referenced the climate plan a few times, and he said that this is a living document. Those words caught my attention, given that Action Item 12 spells out a commitment to implement new regulations under the Coastal Protection Act in 2023.

Given that this is a living document, my question really is: What is the minister's plan in terms of updating the 68 actions that he references repeatedly, when in fact there are only 67 action plans, if I'm reading that correctly? You can't conceivably say you're replacing Action Item 12 without a specific amendment that speaks to this new plan the minister is deciding to embark on when it is not vague. It is a specific action item that the government will be enacting regulations for when you're proclaiming the Act.

It was just a couple of days before the House started this session when the minister removed that action item in practice. I wonder if he will be explicitly removing it from the

Climate Action Plan. I want to remind the minister that this is something he supported in Opposition, voted for, and was supportive when multiple rounds of consultations have gone through. While he answers that question, maybe he can give a specific reason as to why this will be removed as part of the climate change plan, at what date the Department began creating this coastal climate change plan, and if that was during the consultations.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: I want to thank the honourable member for the question on the Coastal Protection Action Plan. When I say these plans are living documents, they absolutely are. We need to pivot and adapt quickly at times. Last year, Nova Scotians' lived experience with the climate change was eye-opening. I want Nova Scotians who have been impacted by wildfires and flooding to know the government will do all we can to support you and help you adapt to the realities of climate change. You saw that embodied in our climate plan, where we topped up the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund by an additional \$15 million to support residents with adaptation and mitigation programming.

When it comes to reporting, under the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act, we have the obligation to report annually, by the end of July, on the outcomes that are being achieved under the Act and the climate plan. The previous government, for whatever reason, stopped that annual accountability to the Legislature. By legislating our climate targets, we provide annual updates to Nova Scotians and will make sure all MLAs receive a copy of that.

Not only that, but with respect to the climate plan, this is a five-year plan where, at the end of those five years, we intend to review and intend to expand that climate plan. We know from the risk assessment - our first risk assessment since 2005 - that there are going to be a number of challenges impacting our province: wildfires, flooding. We know in the out years that extreme heat is going to be very, very challenging, so we adapt accordingly.

Now, with respect to Action Item 12, we have definitely taken an approach here that I think takes coastal protection out of isolation. In 2019, when the Act was passed, we certainly supported the spirit of that Act. We all agree - and I think in Nova Scotia, there is a strong consensus - that we need coastal action. That specific piece of legislation was very much in isolation, very much in what I categorized as a silo, because in 2019 you didn't have what we have today. You didn't have legislated climate change goals, but we have that now through the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. We didn't have a climate risk assessment; we didn't have Nova Scotia's Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth for clean, renewable growth; we didn't have the Clean Power Plan; we didn't have the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund; we didn't have the Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement; we didn't have a collaborative, protected area strategy.

We have embarked on implementing a plan that is very much focused on municipal leadership, that is very much focused on empowering and working with municipalities to ensure the proper zoning, to ensure folks don't build in hazardous areas - in areas that we

know are prone to coastal erosion and areas that are identified as hazards, and they are the boots-on-the-ground municipal units. They're responsible for the zoning, so we'll be working with them, collaborating with our municipal units to have this enforced, but we also have great confidence in Nova Scotians. We believe empowering them, supporting informed decision-making - all the tools are out there now. There's no excuse. One just needs to utilize the online maps to get information. If there are challenges interpreting that information, the Province has set up navigators.

[3:45 p.m.]

We've put in place personnel to help support residents interpret that information, and not only that, we're the first government in Nova Scotia to take coastal protection and put it into place, to take action. We've immediately deployed resources for coastal protection - an additional \$3.2 million to help municipalities with flood line mapping. The honourable member is probably aware that by 2027, partnering with the federal government, we intend to have all of Nova Scotia mapped out in terms of the flood hazards and risks. The action plan is being put into place. Even as of this week, there will be meetings with the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities to discuss the best path forward, working together, consulting with them to help them design the bylaws, the example bylaws that are going to be required for zoning.

We are moving forward with our climate action plan. All of this together, I think, positions Nova Scotia for a strong leadership role in Canada for climate action.

IAIN RANKIN: I think I'm struggling with trying to figure out what the reason is. The minister talks a lot about municipalities taking leadership, and then we hear the answer, which I think is more ideological, about letting the property landowners figure out what they want - I think he said the words "leave us alone," which are two very different answers. The minister said in the opening remarks that the property owners know their properties best. I find that hard to believe, that a property owner would know the science, would know more than engineers and the multitude of people who are educated in climate science and erosion better than anyone else, but that speaks to the ideological reason.

The reasons that he's giving to let municipalities organize and implement their planning is exactly the reason why we needed a Coastal Protection Act: It's because municipalities weren't doing that. Some of them didn't have capacity to do that, so they're asking through the Federation and other groups that have been working on this for some time.

His answer about trying to still keep Action Item 12 in the plan, but actually going against what Action Item 12 says, I don't think is acceptable. I wonder how this implicates other policy decisions. Does the minister support minimum planning standards with municipalities? Does he take the ideological position to leave landowners alone when it

comes to straight pipes, following the logic allowing the property owners to know their waste systems best and allow raw sewage to continue to be dumped into rivers?

I don't think it's clear, and I don't think it's of the timing of when this decision was made. In 2022, the Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth mentions the Coastal Protection Act several times as an important piece of this climate action, and then the 2023 progress report the minister referenced doesn't mention it once.

I'm going to ask the minister: Did he make the decision not to proclaim this Act back in 2022, prior to the last round of consultation, given that it was not referenced? And if he's willing to provide, since his budget estimates the full amount the department spent on planning for this Act and reversing the Act - so that includes the social media campaign that is ongoing right now, that includes the glossy booklets that are going out to MLAs' offices, significant funding. We know about the \$100,000 as the latest round of consultations.

Surely, before coming to the house for Estimates, the Minister can identify how much money has been spent in this area and when exactly the decision was made.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: I'm as ideological as my kitchen toaster. I suppose if you had to brand me, I'm just a classic pragmatist, a centrist, so I don't accord values to policies. When it comes to the carbon tax, for example - a premier was called "immoral" because of their opposition. What we're talking about here are policy tools. All governments have many tools at their disposal to implement outcomes that they're trying to achieve, and legislation is one tool that could be utilized.

In this particular case, we determined that the best approach here would most certainly be an action plan that is comprehensive, an action plan that very much informs local decision-making, supports local decision-making, supports our municipalities who have the very important job in Nova Scotia of zoning. They have the expertise. In areas where support is going to be needed, the Province has committed to those municipal units that absolutely, we will be there. We will be there to support.

You saw that immediately when this plan was released a few weeks ago - I believe it was on February 26th. We saw that with the deployment of the map, with the navigators, with the flood line mapping investments, in the flood management and adaptation leads, and in all the financial resources we've deployed right away. This will continue to get scaled up as time goes on.

When it comes to any policy, there's always ongoing analysis and reviews in terms of arriving at a decision point. A lot of discussion went into this with my department, my team, and my colleagues in government, because Nova Scotians want coastal protection. There is a broad consensus for that.

There's certainly a diversity of opinion, in my estimation, on what tool is the most effective. We've made the decision that this 15-point action plan is the best approach, because it will empower that local decision-making, support our coastal property owners, support our municipalities, and as I've indicated, provide resources right away for coastal protection.

With respect to the member's question on the coastal action spending thus far, it's public knowledge that the targeted consultation was \$100,000. The mailouts related to that were \$45,000. If we look right away at the key parts of the plan, we've invested \$6.6 million for the community capacity coordinators. We have \$30 million for the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund. All of these are key components of our plan. With respect to municipal flood line mapping, we'll be investing \$10.4 million up until 2027 for that.

These are wise investments, I believe, for Nova Scotia, because we need coastal protection. It is a component of a 68-point plan that we have in our climate change plan. When I say this requires an all-hands-on-deck approach, that's not just rhetoric. I mean that as a leader in Nova Scotia. We require everyone - individuals, the not-for-profit sectors, and all levels of government - to work together on climate action.

You just saw that recently. To borrow a phrase from Minister Rushton, we had a joyous occasion in Bedford a few days ago when the federal government, the provincial government, and the municipality announced the new net-zero high-speed ferry - a classic example of all three levels of government working.

I'm of the opinion that climate action, coastal action - anything related to climate change - requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. You certainly saw that play out when we announced, jointly with the federal government and the municipality, those high-speed ferries. I want to send a shout-out to my stepson Christopher. He thinks it should be called the *Bedford Bullet*, but we'll let the process play out for the naming of that ferry.

IAIN RANKIN: I did get some cost estimates. I appreciate that. I didn't get an answer as to when the decision was made.

Was it not the plan to look at the regulations around having certified professionals determine whether it's safe or not for people to build? Does the minister not think that at a certain point - whether it's next year or the year after - the government has a role to play to protect neighbouring properties for the collective good?

You can provide all the education you want. I think the minister is spending \$3 million to build a website for municipalities to look at and an app. At a certain point, given there was consideration for grandparent clauses, everybody who had a permit - when I was in the department, we had all these discussions - or a notice period could still build.

At the end of the day, shouldn't we try to protect communities from insurance rates that will inevitably climb. The Government of Nova Scotia will incur extra costs. We talked about all the natural disasters that are happening. Is there a forecast for disaster financial assistance to communities that will continue to grow because we are not saying no to building at a certain point in time?

[4:00 p.m.]

I do think it is ideological to put the interests of a private owner ahead of the collective public interest. I think that's what we're seeing here - a lack of willingness to take a leadership role in saying at a certain point, knowing what we know today, knowing the science, allowing professionals to determine for the public good, but even the private landowners' right to be safe - I don't know who's winning here, other than perhaps a millionaire who wants to continue to build unnatural rock right up to the coastline that could prevent public access, that could prevent erosion, and then having to rebuild that wall again in 20 or 30 years because they have the money to do so.

I'll leave this topic soon, but I'm still not hearing a legitimate reason to backtrack on something the minister had supported. Given all those considerations that would have been given during consultation - we need more time; we have a building permit; will you let us build? - I'm just trying to figure out where the minister can actually justify that position of his government. When did he make the decision? At the very least, release the findings of the consultation. What's the harm in just allowing the public to see what Nova Scotians actually think instead of concluding what the silent majority have to say?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Our commitment to coastal protection is unwavering. What's changed here is how we're going about coastal protection. That piece of legislation was very narrow in its focus, and it took a one-size-fits-all approach. We feel we need to respect the diversity of the coastline, and that's why we've come forward with this action plan that has 15 really strong goals to help empower local decision-making.

I can tell you that we take a very practical and realistic approach to all that we do. You see that in our policy development on a number of files, whether it's health care, whether it's climate change. I believe Nova Scotians and Canadians want practical and realistic solutions. We want practical and realistic alternatives to fossil fuels. We want to be able to still live along the coastline but do it in the safest way possible. This action plan very much acknowledges and respects the fundamental role of our municipalities in delivering climate action, in delivering climate policy, in protecting our coastline.

I have a great respect for our municipal units, and I've had the privilege and opportunity, serving almost three years as minister - the former minister and premier right in front of me here. The member knows the challenges and opportunities that come with a leadership position like that, and I've had such an opportunity to see the incredible municipal leadership on climate change. I think of a community like Clare, and meeting

with Allister Surette at Université Sainte-Anne and just seeing the incredible work that municipality, that university, is doing. I think that was voted by the David Suzuki Foundation as one of the greenest universities, greenest communities, in Canada. Incredible work.

You think of the great work being done in Bridgewater, the great work being done in CBRM, and, of course, here in Halifax Metro, the great work that's being done with Halifax. Municipalities have demonstrated time and time again that they are climate leaders. That's why one of the key aspects of this plan is helping areas that need support, getting those community leaders into those communities, those climate leaders.

We'll partner with our municipalities. They have the expertise. They have the know-how. They're responsible for zoning. We will collaborate and work with them to ensure that municipalities are set up for success. You look at a municipality like the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg - incredible work that they're doing there. Guysborough, Halifax - we commend them for that. For areas that are going to require additional resources and support, we'll definitely be there to work with them and work through the issues, because coastal protection is absolutely key.

With respect to disaster relief, the honourable member knows that there is ongoing work between the provincial government and the federal government. We're awaiting word. We're awaiting a response from the federal government, hopefully in April of this year, with respect to disaster relief and the go-forward on that. Again, another example of when it comes to climate change, when it comes to how we adapt and mitigate, it really is an all-hands-on-deck approach.

It really is the constant collaboration between the federal government, the provinces, and the municipalities. I've seen that first-hand, and I know the former minister saw that when he attended CCME, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment - incredible collaboration around that FPT table. Quite frankly, in many respects - we had an FPT meeting last May, and out of that, we really started to see the momentum on the Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement, which is going to help us to preserve a lot more land and water by 2030.

In summary, what's changed here is how we're going about coastal protection. We think we have a very balanced plan, a common-sense plan that's rooted in the practical and realistic, that supports informed decision-making and immediately deploys the necessary tools for a coastal property owner, or any Nova Scotian, to make an informed decision about that particular piece of property and not to build in an area that is unsafe.

And, of course, working with our municipalities so that they can enforce this, because what may be appropriate in Par-en-bas in Argyle may be different in Clare and it will probably be different in places like Inverness and Guysborough. It's making sure that our municipal units have the resources they need to set up the residents for success and to

live along the coastline if they so choose, to live along there in the safest way possible. They now have the tools to make an informed decision and to work with municipal units.

IAIN RANKIN: I guess what I would just say to that is that the science is consistent across the province and how we deal with coastlines. It doesn't have to be the same setback, and there were certainly flexibility mechanisms that were planned for in the Act.

I want to talk about waste and the circular economy, the reference to that piece. We talked about targets. The minister has said that there were never targets before, which is inaccurate. There were targets brought in by his own party in 2007 and updated in 2012. We brought in the greenhouse gas reduction target in 2019, which the minister has repeated in his legislation and which leads the country. We had renewable energy targets that were repeated in that legislation. The solid-waste target that has been around since 2007 has been the 300 kilograms per person. I've asked about this. Obviously, the Otter Lake landfill sits in my constituency, so I have a great interest in following the target itself, but operations - and last year, the minister reported at Estimates that, really, no movement - 400 kilograms per person - and we seem to be stalled there. The July 2023 report referenced 417 kilograms per person, so arguably it's going in the wrong direction.

The minister referenced that he's been in the department three years. I don't see any downward trajectory of getting even close to the order of magnitude of that target that has been around for a long time. The minister did say last year that the department would be designing a plan that would help us get there. I want to ask the minister: Where is that plan?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Certainly, the 300-kilogram target is very, very important to our government. I think any sort of travel throughout Canada, travel throughout the world - I think we'd acknowledge that Nova Scotia is a pretty special place. When it comes to the circular economy, we have, since the 1990s, shown a very strong leadership role in the circular economy. You think of some of the incredible work that's come out of Divert Nova Scotia over the years - it's just fantastic work that's being accomplished.

As the honourable member probably knows, we currently have one of the lowest waste disposal rates in the country - that's at about 400 kilograms per person per year. We've set the objective to improve that by 2030, because we know we can do better. We know there is a desire on the part of Nova Scotians to constantly improve that. I know the four kids that I have at home - I shouldn't call them "kids"; three of them are teenagers now and I'm going to pay the price for that - they're very passionate about this. I think the next generation of Nova Scotians are always looking for that area where we can improve. I've had my kids stateside. Some of the different states have different approaches to recycling, to their horror in some states. I can't believe that they don't have robust recycling and circular economy approaches like we do in Nova Scotia.

We're proud of what we've accomplished here. We can always do better, and that is why we've established that 300-kilogram target. Certainly, there are always many

different variables you're utilizing to analyze a policy. Right now, the number one concern on the minds of Nova Scotia and all Canadians is affordability. The Government of Nova Scotia is certainly always very mindful of anything we may do. Will this create a further burden? Will this create a further cost of living on Nova Scotians? I think a whole generation now knows what inflation is. We haven't seen it since the 1970s, early 1980s. These are very inflationary times.

To answer the member's question, the work is ongoing on that strategy, utilizing an affordability lens. We will have more to say in the months ahead on this strategy. This is a very important strategy that I've received briefings on, and it's a strategy that I believe in because it's absolutely critical, and it's very much in line with the regulations we put in place for extended producer responsibility.

[4:15 p.m.]

I can remember the first phone call I took from an HRM councillor. It was maybe a few hours after we had been elected government, and the honourable member, having served in government, knows the multitude of things that are coming at you. I remember getting the call and it was like, "What are you going to do with extended producer responsibility?" I wasn't even sworn in as a minister at the time. I had no idea where I would possibly be sent, but people are passionate about it. The regional chairs, as the honourable member knows, are very passionate about extended producer responsibility, which is a key plank in us achieving that 300-kilogram strategy. The work is ongoing on that plan and there will be more to come on that plan in the months ahead.

IAIN RANKIN: Just one further element to the waste questions. I want to table some information from an audit at the Otter Lake facility, which is the host of all of HRM's residential waste. As the minister knows, there was authorization of removing the sorting line and the facility that stabilized organics. While I was opposed to that decision, and the minister knows that, there was a condition in the approval, which I referenced last year as well, that looks to achieve less than 10 per cent organics entering the landfill without treatment.

Obviously, the minister knows how important it is to try to keep organics out of the landfill, that it does cause odour issues, and I appreciate the minister's attentiveness to that issue when it arose this past Fall. When looking at these audits since the shutdown of the sorting line in 2022 versus today, in 2023's numbers there is virtually no progress. They are looking at an average of 11.62 per cent organics still flowing in in 2022 and 11.7 per cent in 2023, so virtually unchanged. I'll give that to the minister to look at.

I do believe HRM has an obligation, and I understand there is a timeline in the amended permit that gives HRM until March of 2026 to achieve less than 10 per cent. I'm not optimistic, seeing no progress. I wonder if the minister can tell the community what happens if this is not achieved. The minister has different options within the permit, and I

wonder what happens if HRM continues to not achieve the objective laid out by the Province to lower the amount of organics flowing through, which will help the targets as well.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: I want to thank the honourable member for the question and certainly thank him for the advocacy he does as an MLA for his area. My primary duty as a minister is to ensure the protection of the environment, and as the regulator, it's to make sure that the processes are being followed. Certainly, the Inspection, Compliance and Enforcement Division of the Department of Environment and Climate Change diligently does that each and every day.

The member is absolutely correct that when issues arise, as MLA for the area, he can certainly reach out to me at any time, reach out to my team, to work through any concerns, certainly as we did in the Fall. That goes for every MLA: You can reach out to me - you can reach out to our team with the Inspection and Compliance Division and our regional offices, whether it's Bedford or Pictou County or Yarmouth. Reach out to your local offices. These are the frontline folks who can absolutely get you the information you need.

As the honourable member knows, yes, the HRM is the owner and operator of the facility and is responsible for the operations. Their compliance plan is meeting their current operating approval obligations. As the member indicated, yes, they have until March 31st of 2026 to reduce that to 10 per cent.

The first annual report will be due to my department in April. Following an analysis of that report, as minister, I'll receive a briefing from staff in terms of what's contained in that report. I want to assure the honourable member that we are constantly monitoring. If at any time there are concerns that the member wishes to discuss, he can reach out to me and absolutely reach out to our Bedford office, because I recognize this is very important to your community.

We have standards at this site that are above the other standards, but it's part of the terms and conditions that were put in for a transition of that facility. The channels of communication are open, and I look forward to getting a briefing on that first report, which is due in April.

IAIN RANKIN: Yes, there are more stringent operating procedures at that site. One of the reasons why - not to get too far into the history - is that in the mid-1990s, when no one wanted to accept a landfill after what happened in Sackville and the issues there, the community demanded certain conditions be put in place the entire time we were in government, and the Dexter government and the PC Party, while in opposition, always supported all the community efforts to keep the front end processor and the weight stabilization facility in place to ensure that we didn't have more issues at the site.

Things like a public hearing were actually exempted from the process because of signing on to an agreement with the community. I just think the context of that is important, and the community does demand to have that in place so that we are protected.

I'm going to jump to protected land. A year ago, 13.2 per cent was protected, and I believe now it's about 13.5 per cent - the minister can correct me if I'm wrong - but we're still under 14 per cent. I want to acknowledge the protection of the Ingram River area adjacent to my community. I think that was a very positive step. I appreciate the invite to the announcement in Upper Tantallon.

Looking at the pace of land protection since the minister has been in government, we're looking at less than 1 per cent in three years of the mandate. I want to ask the minister if he anticipates this pace picking up over the next year, or at least before the next election, if he believes that the government will be able to protect more than what has been achieved since they're taken power, despite the well-known names of some of the areas that have been protected. In terms of quantity of the percentage of land protection, we are looking at less than 1 per cent, and the minister needs to fulfill the obligation of 20 per cent by 2030. That's another six-point-something per cent, and we're talking about 55,000 hectares per percentage point. That is a massive endeavour.

I note that the plan that came out basically says that we can't do it alone, and we now need help from private landowners to help the minister achieve this 20 per cent. The question is: Will the pace at some point start to pick up? Perhaps he could forecast where this government may be before the next election, and potentially if he could shed some light on who's going to pay for all this investment. I think we're talking about hundreds of millions, if they're serious about protecting large percentages of private land.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: I guess one of the greatest moments I've had serving as a minister was the opportunity to attend COP in Montreal on biodiversity and watching the federal government work with global leaders throughout the world to secure a biodiversity framework. I have a great interest in all topics related to climate change, but there's something very particular about land and water conservation that's very near and dear to my heart. Being out in nature is so good for your mental health and spiritual well-being. As I said, the first thing my wife and I did as soon as the Legislature adjourned was to go out on a hike. The kids didn't want to join us - I think they were more interested in hanging out in front of the TV - but it's continuing to encourage that.

I think there's a lot of agreement, a lot of consensus, on land and water conservation in Nova Scotia. We all benefit from it. Certainly, completing our Parks and Protected Areas Plan of 2013 is an ongoing priority of the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables and as the former minister and I would know, it's the ongoing collaboration between our Department of Natural Resources and Renewables to achieve these land and water conservation targets.

There was a great interest in this coming out of that biodiversity conference in May of 2023. The deputy minister and I had the opportunity to be at a biodiversity FPT in Ottawa with the federal minister - a very productive meeting. Out of that meeting, I could tell the federal minister saw the momentum Nova Scotia has on land and water conservation, because we're the only province with climate change targets legislated. We're committed to 20 per cent, and at that time the work was ongoing in developing what would eventually become the Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy.

Jurisdictions like British Columbia, jurisdictions like Nova Scotia - around the CCME, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, the federal-provincial territorial meetings, we're seen as a leader on land and water conservation. That is something we can all be proud of. Previous governments and all Nova Scotians collectively were making some very important gains.

[4:30 p.m.]

Since having the honour of serving as minister, we've created 22 new and 16 expanded protected areas since 2021. Currently we're at about 13.5 per cent land and water along with 13.1 per cent of our coastline being protected within our nature reserves, our wilderness areas, our provincial parks, and, of course, our national parks. A lot has happened on this file.

The Premier of this province often says, "More, faster," and that relates to just about everything in government. Definitely, when it comes to land and water protection, the Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement, once operational and flowing the \$28.2 million, is going to help speed things up.

In the Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy, we have put in place an interim goal: 15 per cent by 2026, and by conserving, I think it's 82,500 more hectares, we're going to be able to get to that 15 per cent. We have a plan that focuses very much on preserving more Crown land, preserving more private land. I've been clear with Nova Scotians that it's going to be an all-hands-on-deck approach to get to that 20 per cent. It's ambitious, but it's doable. We've got the plan to achieve that. We take it very seriously. Just last fiscal year, you may recall, for the first time in a decade, we were able to top up the Nova Scotia Crown Share Land Legacy Trust with \$20 million to help the Nova Scotia government and all our partners reach that 20 per cent target.

I think we've really moved the needle on this - incredible collaboration between the Department of Natural Resources. I want to thank colleagues over at that department and my colleague Minister Rushton - I've got the better haircut, in my estimation - but just great work is taking place. This is something I think Nova Scotians can take great pride in, in terms of the work that's ongoing, with the nature agreement, the implementation of our Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy.

We were finally able to resolve a lot of outstanding issues. One of the early - there are many files that landed on the minister's desk on Day 1, carbon tax and cap and trade being one of them, but also Archibald Lake and the outstanding issues related to Archibald Lake. I was very pleased to work with the team to resolve those issues and get protection for that pristine piece of wilderness. A lot of work went into that, and it's an example of a minister working with a local MLA to resolve some of the issues, some of the concerns. It's remarkable what can be accomplished when we work together and no one really cares who gets the credit because we just want to get it done, get it taken care of. Land and water conservation mean so much to Nova Scotians.

Just in terms of what we've accomplished to date, in summary, you look at one of the first actions we took was designating Owls Head as a provincial park. In August 2022, we approved new provincial old-growth forest policy. In October 2022, we approved Monks Head and Dunns Beach as provincial parks. In November 2022, we designated six new nature reserves and one new wilderness area and expanded eight existing wilderness areas, representing 9,300 hectares of protected land. Then, of course, in December 2022, the \$20 million to the Nova Scotia Crown Share Land Legacy Trust.

One of the things I've really enjoyed about being a part of this process is just seeing the Walter Regans and the Mike Lancasters and the Chris Millers and all the key stakeholders - the commitment they have, as the member would know, to land and water conservation. While we in government have the opportunity to announce these things, it is the folks on the ground, community members, who are leading the charge on land and water conservation. A lot of great things happening.

I have to tell you that, looking back, one of the most powerful moments I had was in January of last year, when we had the opportunity to sign a shared understanding agreement between the Province and the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources outlining the terms and relationships for the governance of the Kluscap Wilderness Area.

For many, you're aware of the Kluscap creation story and how sacred that is to the Mi'kmaw people. The deputy minister and I had the opportunity two years ago now to hike with Clifford Paul - just how spiritual and how powerful that was. To the Mi'kmaw, this conserved area is often referred to as the centre of the universe, and you can see why. It's that strong connection that we have with the land, and Nova Scotians feel that strong connection.

That was one of the greatest honours of my life, sharing that governance and understanding agreement with the Mi'kmaw. They are going to be our key partners moving forward. If you look at the Collaborative Protective Areas Strategy, it's a great read because it outlines with clarity the pathway to get to that 15 per cent.

That was why signing that Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement - it was Andy Fillmore and I who had the privilege of announcing that back in October of last year at

Blue Mountain-Birch Cove. Seeing that finally getting operationalized is going to be a game-changer for us to get to that 15 per cent and the overall strategy to get to 20 per cent by 2030.

It's a bold, ambitious target. It's a doable target. I can confirm that the work is absolutely ongoing between these two departments, the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables and the Department of Environment and Climate Change, and all our stakeholders.

IAIN RANKIN: What investments are being made this year to ensure the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove National Park, the first urban national park in Atlantic Canada, comes to fruition from either the Department of Environment and Climate Change or anywhere in government? Where are the investments in this budget to make sure that happens? If the minister can speak to anything on access points, that would be great.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Blue Mountain-Birch Cove is such an incredible place to visit. I've been out there many times with the federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change, with members of parliament, and with other MLAs. What an incredible place.

Blue Mountain-Birch Cove in many respects is an epicentre of municipal, provincial, and federal co-operation, and the energy that's out there is fantastic when people get together to talk about this. So much work has gone into this. I lost my glasses out there, by the way. If anyone is ever out there on a hike and you find a pair of glasses, I'd like them back. It's an incredible spot...(interruption).

THE CHAIR: That concludes our first round of questioning with the Liberals. We'll pass it on to our NDP colleagues. The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I will be returning to several questions around the Coastal Protection Act. I want to start with questions around consultations - that consultation, that third round, but also consultations in general in the department.

It's probably no surprise that I disagree radically with the minister's assumption that 39,000 people were silent because they didn't want the Coastal Protection Act. I spent a lot of time leading national and community-based engagement processes for different organizations before being elected. There's lots that I would have advised against in the process that was led.

The fact that the timing was in December when things are really busy, and things get lost. Most of the times people never do public consultation or engagement sessions in December or the Summer. It's just not a great time to find people. It was also a really passive outreach, mailing out postcards to landowners. I've received letters of coastal

property owners who did not receive copies and I've seen copies of letters from coastal property owners in *allNovaScotia* and in *Saltwire* who didn't receive copies.

I honestly just imagine it was very confusing to be hearing time and time again the assertion that this government originally supported the Coastal Protection Act and that this in any way was to suggest that this would lead to a complete turnaround. I really cannot agree with the process or the interpretation of that process. I don't think anybody who does community engagement or stakeholder would agree with that assumption that you didn't hear from people, so they didn't want it.

There are other public consultations under way - waste reduction, the Environmental Assessment Act. I guess I'm wondering, Minister: Why would anybody bother responding to another consultation from your department if it's not going to be listened to?

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: A lot goes into the decision-making process. For any Minister of Environment and Climate Change, any decision you make, it's very polycentric. There's a lot of different variables you take into consideration. I wanted to solicit the feedback of coastal property owners, so in point of fact, this went out on September 29th. It wasn't December. So in point of fact, it was early Fall when that targeted consultation went out. We made a very strong effort to engage with coastal property owners; 40,000 direct mailers to coastal properties. We also did a media campaign at that time advising of this consultation.

That's one element of the feedback. As I indicated, for any minister, you've always got a lot of moving parts that you're taking into account and what I mean by that is that there are lots of different perspectives out there.

We are moving forward with coastal protection. We're the first government to move forward with coastal protection. For five years, two Premiers didn't do anything with that Act. We knew we had to bring forward an action plan that presents a suite of options, a suite of actions, to protect our coastline.

Most certainly, this is a file that I've worked on for a number of years, and there's definitely a diversity of opinion on how coastal protection should be implemented. We've arrived at a plan that is very balanced in its approach. What it does is support informed decision-making and deploys resources immediately for that informed decision-making. We know the areas that are going to be hazardous in 100 years' time. That information is accessible now to Nova Scotians, and that information will be scaled up by our coastal protection team as time goes on, and along with that putting the personnel in place to make sure Nova Scotians get the information they need if they need help in assessing the risks. Absolutely, there will be navigators to help them with that.

[4:45 p.m.]

Municipal leadership is absolutely key when it comes to coastal protection. That is the level of government where the area of expertise lies when it comes to zoning. I know that as an MLA in the area that I represent, when I get questions on that I reach out all the time to HRM staff and the local councillor to get information on zoning, and often referring residents from my MLA office to municipalities, to the HRM, when there are questions on zoning.

That is one thing I have observed, is just how strong our municipal units are when it comes to climate action, whether it's the Municipality of Guysborough that's doing some incredible initiatives and work, whether it's the HRM, whether it's Bridgewater, whether it's Inverness, whether it's the CBRM. I'm very proud of our municipal units, and I respect their municipal units. That's why on February 26th when we announced our Coastal Protection Action Plan, Minister Lohr and I did not impose the example bylaw. If you look at the plan, we will work with our municipal leaders, collaborate, partner with them, to develop the tools they need to make sure their residents in their area don't build in an unsafe area.

We believe a one-size-fits-all approach isn't the way to go. What is the way to go is to empower municipal units that have the knowledge and expertise and the know-how, and, as I've indicated, where necessary - if necessary, if they require support - that the Province will be there to support them in the actioning of this coastal action plan.

I can assure members that that work is ongoing, that work has commenced. One of the first meetings I took was a meeting with 40 or 50 councillors, wardens, and mayors. This was only two days after the announcement of the plan. There was disappointment, but I got the sense there was a desire to move forward together, especially in the context of the Province providing the necessary supports where required.

There's going to be different degrees. Certainly, you look at the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, Mayor Carolyn Bolivar-Getson and the work they're doing there - incredible stuff. Other municipalities will probably require more, and Minister Lohr and I have committed to being there to support them.

We're also working with our municipalities now, making sure they have the information for flood line mapping. We're partnering with the federal government to have the entire province mapped out by 2027, and our commitment in the plan also for coastal erosion assessments that we'll be doing with the municipalities.

For the first time, we have coastal action, we have coastal protection. How we are going about it, that's what the difference is here, and certainly we recognize there's a diversity of opinion on this, there's a diversity of the coastline on this. Our municipalities

are key partners in how we implement this, and I look forward to working with our municipal units.

LISA LACHANCE: With regard to the public consultation for the waste reduction plan, can you describe the consultation process? How many responses did you receive? What was the cost of the consultation process? Will you release the results of the consultation process? When can Nova Scotians expect to see the plan?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: As I indicated to the Liberal caucus, a question on waste reduction on the circular economy, this is something very important to Nova Scotians. You think of the incredible work Divert Nova Scotia has done over the past number of years for waste diversion. With respect to that consultation with the \$300,000, that was an in-house consultation, and staff are telling me we had 60 to 80 responses from that consultation.

Consultations are one tool utilized by a minister, by staff, to develop policy. The work is ongoing with the waste reduction strategy. We're fine-tuning; we are continuing our analysis of that strategy. Obviously, just in the last year or so, we've made big gains on waste reduction, especially with the implementation of extended producer responsibility for paper and packaging and so forth, and I think that makes Nova Scotia now the eighth out of 10 provinces to bring about extended producer responsibilities.

The work is ongoing, and I can assure the member that we'll have more to say on the strategy as we complete our work moving forward.

LISA LACHANCE: Just to remind the minister of a couple of the questions which were: Will the consultation results be released publicly? When will the plan be released?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: The work is still ongoing with that. Once we complete our work on the 300-case strategy, we'll have more to say with respect to that strategy.

Any consultation and any responses we receive will be taken into consideration. I always appreciate the diversity of opinions on all the subjects we engage in. Believe me, there are a lot of moving parts at this department. Whether it's output-based pricing, land protection, carbon pricing, or the circular economy, lots of work is being done. We'll have more to say on this item once the plan is ready.

LISA LACHANCE: Going back to the Coastal Protection Act process, the most recent round of consultation, and the changing of government direction on proclaiming the Act, I'm wondering if the minister - he refers to diverse perspectives - could elaborate specifically on any meetings he had between September and February with municipalities, community-based organizations, and developers on the Coastal Protection Act.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: On a multitude of issues, there's a diversity of perspectives that I've listened to. I'm always doing that. That's such an important aspect of leadership,

that ability to listen to different perspectives. There are a lot of different perspectives on this. There are passionate perspectives on coastal protection.

I value that because the coastline is ingrained in our identity as Nova Scotians. We've lived by the coastline for generations. It's something we're passionate about. I certainly heard that passion not only with the launch of the Coastal Action Plan but also prior to that.

[5:00 p.m.]

One of the key advisory mechanisms I have is the Round Table on Sustainable Development and Prosperity. It's a diverse group with different perspectives. This was a round table that I believe previous ministers - they didn't meet very often. I've established as minister that the round table meet every two months. It's an opportunity for me to hear from different sectors of Nova Scotia society: their take on sustainable development, their take on climate change policy. That's always an excellent outlet for me to listen to the different perspectives.

The new mechanism that's been created by our government is the Youth Climate Council created through our climate plan. It seems like a lifetime ago - a different life ago - but at one time, I was a high school teacher, and I can remember vividly what we could classify as climate anxiety that many young Nova Scotians have. I wanted, as a minister, to make sure that youth have a formal voice in the development of public policy - having access to the minister, having access to senior staff who advise the minister, and we work together to develop public policy for Nova Scotia.

Also, I am part of a government that has MLAs from all the different regions, from Cape Breton to southwest Nova Scotia to central Nova Scotia. I've certainly listened attentively to my colleagues. Often any minister, a decision that they'll make is you listen to Opposition. Opposition's been loud and clear on their perspective on this. While I disagree, I respect their position. Legislation is just one tool that can be utilized for coastal protection. I think we brought forward a very balanced plan that will provide Nova Scotians the necessary information that they need for coastal protection.

I've appreciated the perspective of government MLA colleagues as we work together as a team. Government is a team. They are connected to their residents, and they've told me that, yes, there's a diversity of perspectives out there. There are some who wanted the Act proclaimed, and there are some who didn't. No matter what decision I made, I think there would have been a lot of passion, but I think we have a really good, balanced approach here on our plan.

Organizations - I just recently met with the Canadian Association of Retired Persons. I appreciate their perspective. I've met with the Ecology Action Centre. I know

their perspective on that, loud and clear; but I also know the perspective of the MLAs I work with and the communities they serve.

At the end of the day, this is about supporting municipal leadership. At the end of the day, it's collaborating and partnering with our municipal units to help bring about coastal protection, to help enforce coastal protection, so that our residents can live safely by the coastline and do not build in hazardous areas. The zoning and enforcement of that is going to be the responsibility - is the responsibility of municipalities in partnership with the Province of Nova Scotia - and then, of course, supporting informed decision-making. During March Break I had the opportunity to visit my second home in Nova Scotia: Clare, a coastal community. Just chatting with a lot of folks there, how the high tide mark in la Baie Sainte-Marie - in Saint Mary's Bay - how it's changed by leaps and bounds in the last number of years.

Coastal protection is absolutely critical, and I think listening to those Nova Scotians who live by the coastline, making sure that they have the information they require to make an informed choice, and if they need assistance, we have navigators in place to help them get the necessary information that's required.

There are always ongoing discussions. There are always multiple voices that, as a minister, I listen to. There is definitely a diversity of opinion that exists on this, but we're moving forward. We're moving forward with a very strong plan, the first plan in Nova Scotia's history devoted to coastal protection. I'm very keen to get to work on this. My staff is now working with municipalities to bring about the Coastal Protection Action Plan.

LISA LACHANCE: There's a lot to unpack in that answer, so I'm just going to answer some factual questions.

The minister referred to the Round Table on Sustainable Development and Prosperity as well as the Nova Scotia Youth Climate Council. I also met with the Nova Scotia Youth Climate Council, and I would not say that I heard any voices in that meeting saying that they didn't want the Coastal Protection Act. In fact, what I heard was great concern that it wasn't being proclaimed.

I'm just curious: Did the minister meet with the the Round Table on Sustainable Development and Prosperity and with the Nova Scotia Youth Climate Council, specifically between September of 2023 and February of 2024, to specifically discuss the Coastal Protection Act, and is the minister implying that one of these two bodies said they didn't want it?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: In the final analysis - and I've been saying this consistently - there's absolutely a diversity of opinion on coastal protection. I'm interested, as minister, in moving coastal action forward. There are always many voices that we're listening to.

There's a lot of passionate voices, and I've listened, and that's why I know a balanced approach with this action plan is absolutely key.

In no way have we abandoned coastal protection. We've enhanced coastal protection. We've brought about coastal protection with a plan that has 15 strong actions to guide us over the next number of years. A plan that is funded right from the get-go to support municipal leadership on this, along with making sure Nova Scotians get the information they need about their coastlines. I'm very proud of this plan. I think this plan, as it gets fully operationalized, is going to set Nova Scotians up for success.

We have to make sure folks are not building in unsafe areas, but we also have to recognize that the solution that may be required for coastal protection could be different in southwest Nova Scotia versus, say, parts of Cape Breton. So how do you best facilitate that diversity? How do you best facilitate that coastline, that 13,000 kilometres of diverse coastline? You work with your municipalities to implement this in partnership, in collaboration. The work is unfolding. Our work will continue with the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities. Our work will also continue with the federal government in terms of the disaster relief that they'll be highlighting, hopefully in the next few weeks, in terms of a new path forward.

This is what it's about. It's how we're implementing coastal protection. At the end of the day, we have arrived at a plan that is a very balanced plan, I think a very strong, comprehensive plan that respects the municipalities, that works with the municipalities, that respects coastal property owners. They know their properties, they know the diversity that exists on their properties, and we need to make sure that we get them the information to make the most informed decision moving forward for coastal protection.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm really just searching, and the minister didn't respond to the last couple of questions, so I don't know if we'll get any more direct answers. I understand this idea of a balanced approach for diverse perspectives, but I personally have not seen any of those perspectives, other than to proclaim the Act. Whether it has been through letters that have been sent to the minister and copied to me - it went to all of us, really - I haven't seen any municipality come out against the Coastal Protection Act. In fact, what I heard from municipalities is that they wanted it. Even the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, which was absolutely doing their own work and spent an enormous amount of time and resources, predicated on passing the Coastal Protection Act, now must revisit and re-evaluate what they have invested so far.

I am literally searching for the minister to identify one person, one organization, or one municipality that said they needed to throw out the Coastal Protection Act and what they wanted was a plan.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: At the beginning of my opening remarks, I tabled an article that outlined that the Municipality of Guysborough was pleased with the Coastal Protection

Action Plan and that they look forward to working with the Province to bring about coastal protection. We are moving forward with this Coastal Protection Action Plan. It's a balanced plan. It is a plan that I think has great merit and certainly a plan that will enhance and work with municipal leadership on this.

Legislation is one tool, as I mentioned in previous remarks. There are many policy tools available for Nova Scotians, and this has not been developed in isolation. It has been developed in consultation with MLA colleagues who have the privilege of representing coastal communities in Nova Scotia, and it is recognizing, as well, that our municipal units are responsible for zoning and for enforcement of zoning. As this new layer of expectations emanates from the Province, we will be working with our municipalities to ensure they are set up for success.

Again, we decided a one-size-fits-all approach in a province with such a diverse coastline was not the way to go. The way to go was to come forward with an action plan that supported informed decision-making, immediately got information to residents, and immediately put personnel in place to help residents interpret the hazardous areas.

Let's keep in mind that this is one component - an important component - of the overall climate change strategy implemented by this government. We now have a multitude of tools at our disposal to not only address coastal protection but also to address overall climate change.

We have the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. We now have our first climate plan since 2009. We have issued the first climate risk assessment, which outlines the challenges Nova Scotians are fully aware of with respect to the extreme weather events we are encountering due to climate change. This action plan is in line with the overall vision of government - empowering local communities to take climate action. That is why the establishment of the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund, which supports not-for-profits, universities, and municipalities in accessing funds - I think it is up to \$75,000 to \$1 million for local climate adaptation and mitigation programming.

This action plan, the coastal protection action plan, is not in isolation. It is part of our overall framework for climate action, along with us, as a Province, transforming how we produce and use energy in Nova Scotia. Just in the last year, as the regulator, I approved 10 onshore wind projects that will absolutely be a game-changer for us getting to that 80 per cent renewable target. Once those are fully operational by 2026-27, they will deliver baseload power - clean, affordable, renewable power - to 500,000 Nova Scotian homes.

I mention these things because our coastal protection action strategy is part of an overall strategic approach to adapting and mitigating the impacts of climate change. Again, we are going to be deploying some things very, very quickly. Part of the plan is to put up signs in areas that are hazardous areas that we know you shouldn't be building in. We've taken a very balanced approach. We have taken an approach that respects the diversity of

the regions, that respects the diversity of the municipalities, that respects the diversity of the coastline, and recognizes, on many issues confronted by Nova Scotians, that there is a diversity of opinion.

[5:15 p.m.]

LISA LACHANCE: With respect, I was in the Chair when the minister tabled the article from March 13th regarding the Municipality of the District of Guysborough's reaction to scrapping the proposed Coastal Protection Act. I wouldn't say that anywhere in this article the representative in any way, shape, or form endorses what was presented by government. I can be pedantic about this and read this through, but literally, it doesn't say that. It does say they are not concerned because they have their own climate protection act - or coastal protection plan - which is exactly in line, but it certainly does not anywhere say that they support your plan.

I think one of the challenges with this is that it raises issues around trust and accountability and transparency. I absolutely recognize that this is one piece of other things that are happening, but it is a pretty important piece, as you know. I guess we don't know if any municipality said they didn't want the Coastal Protection Act. But between September and February of 2024, and this could be like an easy yes or no answer to save us some time, but did the minister meet with the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, or with any individual municipality, and announce the intention to scrap the act? And let that be shared?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: There is always ongoing engagement with all key stakeholders. I believe I attended the AGM for the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities last Fall. And I want to highlight our incredible relationship with the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities. They are tasked with delivering one of our key programs - the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund.

I'm focused on moving forward. I'm focused on advancing this coastal protection action plan, not only this as a plan but our overall 68 goals that are outlined in the climate plan. Nova Scotia is a strong leader on climate action and coastal protection. The action plan is absolutely key as we move forward.

This is the thing: As a government, we trust Nova Scotians. We trust their knowledge of their coastal properties. Our duty as government is to make sure they have the most up-to-date scientific information about the hazards and risks along the coastline. We trust Nova Scotians and trust is absolutely key. We trust our municipalities to deliver key programming to the million residents of Nova Scotia. That's why that partnership will continue. That's why on Day 1 when we announced this plan, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and I didn't impose an example provincial bylaw in the plan. We wish to collaborate and work with our municipal units because this is such an important piece of our overall climate action in Nova Scotia.

At the end we can conclude - I mean, there's a diversity of opinion on how coastal protection should be enacted. The way we are enacting coastal protection in Nova Scotia is by taking a very balanced, measured approach that very much respects coastal property owners and gets them the information they need to make the appropriate decisions.

As the Premier has indicated, there is an element of personal responsibility and that's absolutely key. The single greatest investment a person can make, certainly outside of having children, is your property. We trust Nova Scotians to make an informed choice about their property.

As I've indicated, the role of government, in our estimation, is to make sure that we get the appropriate scientific information, and we've accomplished that. It's out there now. It wasn't out there three weeks ago. Previous governments never put that out there. Previous premiers never put that out there. We did. We've taken strong coastal action.

Along with that, when I say working with our municipalities, it's absolutely leveraging the expertise they have. As I mentioned, just as a provincial MLA, at times residents will confuse the role of the Province and the role of municipalities. I've even had questions about national defence, as a provincial MLA, which, as we know, is federal. I get questions about zoning. It's not the scope of the provincial government; it's the scope of municipalities.

I take great pride in developing a strong working relationship with our municipal units, not only here in HRM with Mayor Savage and councillors such as Tony Mancini. I wouldn't be able to do and support my residents without that ongoing collaboration with our municipal colleagues. I see them as a key partner in the governance of this province. That's why in this action plan we not only empower municipalities, but we have the strong commitment to work with them, to make sure residents, as they build or choose to build, they do it in a safe area.

When you talk about climate action, you think of a community like Bridgewater and Energize Bridgewater. You think of Halifax, here in HRM, and the incredible work that's being done there and all over Nova Scotia. Incredible work is being done in New Glasgow by the mayor and council there. They often have been leading the charge on climate change until we had the privilege of forming government, because we brought about the first climate change sustainable development legislation since the mid-2000s. The previous Environment Minister, Mark Parent, created the Sustainable Development Goals Act. That served us well, and certainly we revived that through the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act.

When you think about - we didn't have a climate plan. The previous government didn't bring about a climate plan. The government of Darrell Dexter didn't bring about a climate plan. We did, because it was an absolute necessity, and what a game-changer within the calibration of government: a climate plan having legislated targets that impact all across

13 departments. I can tell you authentically that the climate lens is being utilized when we make major public policy decisions.

This Climate Action Plan frames really well with that overall strategic vision we have of Nova Scotia being leaders on climate adaptation and mitigation. That leadership is out of necessity, out of complete necessity. We have to do it for the here and now, and we have to do it for future generations, and then of course making sure that this coastal action plan - we move forward together. It's such a key component, and our municipalities are a key partner as we work together to make this action plan come alive, to make sure our municipalities have strong zoning rules, to make sure that our residents of this beautiful province are not building in unsafe areas.

LISA LACHANCE: I am hoping that maybe we can do some quick yes or noes so that we can make the most of the time together.

I'll ask the minister: Have the navigators to implement the Coastal Protection Action Plan been hired?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: The Coastal Protection Action Plan was ready to go on Day 1 when we announced. The online information that outlines the hazardous areas along our coastline - we know from staff who have just indicated to me that there's been quite a bit of traffic on that, quite a bit of hits, and that's good. That's what we want. We want Nova Scotians engaged.

Along with that, there's some very technical data that exists on that. We knew how imperative it was to put the personnel and staff in place to ensure that there was correct interpretation, correct analysis of this. We have four navigators in place.

Many of our climate change adaptation and mitigation programming is facilitated through not-for-profits like the Clean Foundation. When I served in Opposition, I had the chance to get to know the Clean Foundation and the great work they do. As a minister, I can tell you they are a key partner in the delivery of many of our climate adaptation and mitigation programs. I think, for example, there's the incredible work that the Clean Leaders do every Summer - I think I'll have the chance in April or May to visit with them as they begin that journey of going out into the different regions of Nova Scotia, delivering incredible, on-the-ground work for climate action.

The Clean Foundation is a trusted partner of the Government of Nova Scotia and certainly that trusted partnership has emanated in different iterations of government. Oftentimes when government is looking for a strong not-for-profit that has a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge, we often turn to the Clean Foundation and that's what we've done here. They had the in-house expertise to help support these online tools.

[5:30 p.m.]

I think moving forward, I encourage residents of this province, if they are gathering information, using these online tools, if they need assistance in interpreting the information, they can reach out to our navigators.

There are also other resources out there. Certainly, CLIMAtlantic has mapping tools that can be utilized as well. The Insurance Bureau of Canada - this is the thing, it's not all about government; it's about empowering all the different stakeholders. That's what you see with this action plan, Chair, empowering local decision-making, getting information as quickly as possible to Nova Scotians along with, of course, the mapping tools and the navigators that are in place.

We also put out a resource guide for property owners and there's lots of information on that new website. I am pleased to hear that we're seeing that uptake, that interaction of residents. Not only that, when the plan was released, I asked staff to send to all 55 MLAs of Nova Scotia a copy of the plan, a copy of the resource guide.

Our role as MLAs on the ground is to connect our residents with the appropriate level of government departments so that they get the correct information. At any time if you have questions on coastal protection, certainly as MLAs - I know we all know a lot but we're not always subject matter experts - please reach out to the navigators. Please reach out to our department, reach out to CLIMAtlantic, utilize the resource guide.

This is a strong, balanced plan that I believe will stand the test of time in our overall framework of climate action. Remember, this is not in isolation, this action plan - it's in the overall strategy of government, through the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act, through our climate plan, through our risk assessment, through the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund, through the Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement, through the Clean Energy Plan. We need to scale up and transform how we produce and use energy in this province. Certainly, we are in that period of transition, that process of transition of changing how we produce and use energy.

All these things are interconnected. Prior to all these initiatives you did not have pre-2021 climate change targets that were legislated. You didn't have a climate plan. Where was the previous government's climate plan? Where was the NDP government's climate plan when they had the privilege of serving government?

A lot has changed. A lot of that change has absolutely come out of necessity but also out of a bold vision for the province. That vision very much, as I outlined in my opening remarks, is to live in clean, renewable communities - communities that Nova Scotians wish to take enormous pride in. Let's not forget we are in a period of unprecedented change for Nova Scotia. I think you have to go to pre-Confederation census data to see as much population growth as we've seen in the last 10 years.

Again, a lot has changed in five years, and you have a plan, I think, that really reflects the realities of where we are now, not in 2019 but where we are now in 2024. Moving the province forward with the coastal protection action plan, moving the province forward utilizing our much bigger strategy through the Climate Plan and the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act.

LISA LACHANCE: I actually think it was 1961 that was the last time we had the type of population growth that we've experienced recently, so it's not so long ago as pre-Confederation. The minister talked about this plan based on science. There was a huge discrepancy between the safe storm surge amount calculated by the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, when they undertook all the work that they undertook at their expense. They were very supportive of the Coastal Protection Act and had asked for it to be implemented. It hadn't been implemented. They were doing their own work.

The minister never sought to engage them or advise them, as far as I can tell from today's conversation, that there was not going to be the same approach. So we've arrived at a case where a key municipality has much different mapping information than the province. I'm wondering what happened here - I guess the department didn't consult with the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg. What has the minister done since then? If it's about the science, then here's an example of where the science doesn't line up, and what are we going to do about it?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: The action plan is coming alive. It's being implemented. I have the utmost respect for the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, and I commend them and many other municipal units for the incredible climate action, climate initiatives, coastal action that they're taking. We have a situation here where staff at my department are discussing with staff at that municipal unit to work through these things.

In terms of this plan, this illustrates that the plan is being implemented and that conversations are taking place, and we will continue to work together. In terms of the online mapping tools that have been put out to Nova Scotians, the primary sources of information utilized for climate projections for sea level rise are from the Geological Association of Canada. The projections based on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report, and certainly the coastal protection team used storm surge data from Dalhousie University and also ocean levels from the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

IPCC data is globally recognized for its accuracy. In terms of the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, I'm glad we're having the conversations moving forward. Because we...

THE CHAIR: Order. That will conclude the round of questioning for the NDP. (Interruption)

We'll take a quick five-minute recess for now. We're now in recess.

[5:40 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[The committee reconvened at 5:47 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Order. The Subcommittee of the Whole House on Supply will resume. It's now time for the Liberal round of questioning. We'll start with the honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you, Minister, for being here, and to the staff as well. I really appreciate your time.

I have a couple of brief questions - a cameo appearance - and then I'll turn things over to my colleague from Annapolis.

I just wanted to ask, Minister, about Sandy Lake, which is in my riding, and which is a unique, interesting area. The Sackville River watershed - there's a lot of interest in protecting that area as much as possible, as I'm sure you know. Part of that area is within a special planning area for housing development of 6,000 units. It's the biggest special planning area.

There have been several studies done over the years. There's a recent study that's been done by McCallum, I believe. I'm just wondering: Has the department had any involvement in that study, specifically or more generally, in the potential protection and environmental value of Sandy Lake?

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: When it comes to sustainable prosperity, when it comes to sustainable development, it elicits a lot of passions. In my previous professional life, I thought education made people very passionate, but certainly when it comes to anything environmental - land conservation - our residents of Nova Scotia are very passionate, as the member knows.

In Nova Scotia, as the member is aware and his colleagues are aware, we are a proponent and advocate of sustainable development, and development in such a way that things are left better for future generations. We have this concept framed up in legislation. It guides us in all that we do in the context of climate change and now, of course, in the context of unprecedented population growth. Nova Scotia has won the lottery, because people, as you know, drive the economy, people advance and move society forward, and we are so lucky to have so many new Canadians in this province making their contribution.

We all know, as MLAs, the challenges around housing, and as a government we are moving as quickly as possible, working with multiple entities, whether it's market housing or the not-for-profit sector, to get more housing. When it comes to special planning areas, and I have one in my area as well, the Port Wallace area, so the pressures - I'll be blunt: I can remember when Port Wallace was getting site-ready, and how upset folks were that the trees were coming down to make way for a site area, to make way for the thousands of homes that will be built not only in the special planning area for the MLA for Bedford, but also in my area.

A lot of times, it's reminding folks that we are a province that can build housing, grow the population, but also, at the same time, do this in a sustainable way, a responsible way. Housing is not a threat to the environment. Housing is an absolute necessity in a time of unprecedented population growth. The issues the member has outlined with respect to Sandy Lake we're aware of, and I encourage the member to reach out to my department at any time. I'm happy to connect the member with our director of Protected Areas to engage in conversations, because I know there are probably a lot of members in his community that want to engage in that conversation.

As we move forward, we know there are going to be a lot of MLAs who will come forward, utilizing our collaborative protected areas strategy to discuss what areas should be designated. As we all know, these designations do not happen overnight. A lot of work goes into those designations, and as we move forward together, I encourage the honourable member to reach out to my department. I'm happy to connect the member with some of the key staff in my department who can help the member. It just highlights how passionate folks are, and just how committed they are to land and water protection. It's such a key part of our identity.

Moving forward, reach out any time. We're aware of the issues that the member has raised, and we have a very strong collaborative area strategy - a protected area strategy - to help facilitate a lot of these discussions to help us get to 15 per cent by 2026 and 20 per cent by 2030.

BRAEDON CLARK: I agree with the minister, in the sense that it is always a difficult question and people always feel strongly about it. I think one of the most important ways to ease some of that pressure, that tension, is to have all the facts on the table and make sure that people understand and feel that issues have been studied properly. This is a difficult one in my mind, and Sandy Lake in particular is an area that a lot of people feel strongly about from an environmental standpoint. On the other hand, just as a human being but also as the housing critic for the party, I believe strongly that we need to build more housing in Nova Scotia, and particularly for people of all ages. Everyone thinks about their own age group first, I guess, and people my age and younger are in a very difficult situation when it comes to housing, and so that's kind of the balance we need to strike.

Just so I understand as it relates to Sandy Lake in particular: Prior to it being designated a special planning area or at any time since, I guess, has the Department of Environment and Climate Change ever given an opinion on the suitability of Sandy Lake for development to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and his department?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: I hear a multitude of perspectives, as I've said throughout the afternoon, on many issues and certainly on this one. I'm aware of the various perspectives. As the regulator and the neutral steward of any environmental process, I make myself aware of the different perspectives that are out there in terms of any decision I would make.

We have a real appetite in this province to discuss protected areas. Not only whether Sandy Lake is a candidate but other areas of the province that MLAs have talked to me about, that their residents have approached. I want the honourable member to know that my team is accessible.

The Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy is going to guide us as we designate new areas. As minister, I'm fully aware of just how passionate people are on this topic. I think that we've created a great platform, a great mechanism to facilitate more protected areas faster.

The Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement: I just want to take the opportunity to thank the Department of Environment and Climate Change Canada for the incredible work that they've done with us on this. This is going to be very, very helpful in operationalizing us getting to that 15 per cent.

As a department responsible for our wilderness areas and nature reserves, we'll take all submissions into consideration. The decisions that we make as government always attempt to be a balanced approach that maximizes the public good - good public policy, not only for the here and now but for many years out.

If I can tell the story, in Canada, we're going to be honouring Prime Minister Brian Mulroney on March 23rd. One of the early conversations that I requested was to speak with the former prime minister, who was a very strong leader on environmental issues. He encouraged me at that time to take bold steps but to also focus on the practical and realistic as well.

I think when it comes to land and water protection, Nova Scotians absolutely love this. One of the greatest ways that I think you can be involved in climate action and sustainable development is being involved in a local community group that's advocating for land protection. I've had the privilege of meeting many of these groups and meeting many key leaders on this over the years and learning a lot from them. I think of someone like Chris Miller, Walter N. Regan, whom we all know is very passionate and will not be shy to tell you what he thinks.

As a minister, I appreciate all those voices. Those voices are absolutely key in the development of good public policy. As requests come in, I encourage all MLAs to reach out to the Department of Environment and Climate Change if it relates to a potential wilderness area or nature reserve. We have a strong Collaborative Protected Area Strategy to guide us to get to that 15 per cent by 2026, and then in the out years to 2030 - 20 per cent by 2030.

[6:00 p.m.]

BRAEDON CLARK: I would reiterate to the minister, to the department - to all departments really - that whenever issues boil over or become controversies, oftentimes it is because people do not have access to information that would explain a lot of their issues if they had access to it. I would make a plea for - when decisions are being made around all these things - to be as open and transparent as possible. The absence of information leads to big problems across the board. That's a plea more than anything.

I want to thank the minister for making the staff available. I know the minister and I have also been out at Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes, which is also, at least partially, in my riding. Hopefully, we will see that as a national urban park soon, because I think that would be a wonderful thing for HRM.

With that, I will pass my time over to my good colleague from Annapolis.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: Nice to be known as a good colleague. Welcome to the minister, and welcome to staff. Thanks for being here.

I have been back a few years in a row now. I don't have as many questions as I did last year, but I want to start with the crossover between the Minister of the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, who happens to be here, and the minister with whom we are discussing things.

High-production forestry is going to be phased in over 35 years at a rate - back-of-the-napkin math - of 5,000 hectares per year. Both ministers are tasked with moving 300,000 hectares into protection within the next seven years - I think 82,500 within two years. Enough of the math.

In Annapolis, we see high-production forestry areas being identified, but we see zero new protected areas identified. Maybe the minister could assure me, assure people in Annapolis, or both, that potential protected areas that are not currently identified won't be affected by the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables' ability to identify potential sites for high-production forestry and other forestry practices.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: First, I can assure you the Department of Environment and Climate Change and the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables work well together on a multitude of issues. It also helps that the minister over there is not that bad a fellow. He's all right. He sits there and thinks he's got a better haircut than me, but he doesn't.

We have a great collaborative relationship. Our respective staff members are always working together on a multitude of issues, whether it's on the regulatory side or on climate change initiatives. As a matter of fact, when we launched the Climate Change Plan in December 2022, 70 per cent of that plan - the execution of the plan - fell to the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables. I highlight that because whether it's at the ministerial level, at the deputy level, or between senior leadership teams in both departments, there is always ongoing discussion and collaboration.

One of the key things I want to highlight in our Protected Areas Strategy is the word "collaboration." When we attempt to analyze something and when we attempt to arrive at a decision point, there is always lots of collaboration, and that's why that's the operative word in that plan, as we work across departments to achieve that 20 per cent target.

Just recently, the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables announced 15 new and expanded provincial parks. While that's the scope of the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and wilderness areas and nature reserves are my scope, I can tell you that there's constant back-and-forth discussion between the two departments. That Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy was a classic example of two departments working together to get what I think is a really strong plan out to Nova Scotians to signal that we have a very strong path forward.

I think it's really important that as minister I highlight that while we are absolutely committed to strong land and water protection targets, we're also a government that very much supports our traditional industries and sectors. In an incredibly beautiful area like yours, that you have the privilege of representing, you see those traditional sectors. You see agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Our fisheries are a \$2.5 billion sector for Nova Scotia.

While we have these strong targets, we also utilize the concept of sustainable development. That means chatting with different forestry organizations and foresters to get their perspectives and their take on how things should move forward.

I'm a minister. I know that my colleagues - all MLAs - want to listen to our residents and find that consensus and that balanced approach. It's not always easy, I can tell you that. It's not always easy, but that's the task - to try to advance things that we know are right for Nova Scotia, that are best for Nova Scotia.

That 20 per cent strategy is going to guide us. At any time, I encourage all MLAs to reach out to our staff. We have a really strong staff in the Protected Areas office under our Sustainability and Applied Science Division, as does the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables on his side.

In summary, nothing happens in isolation. There's always ongoing collaboration within the government of Nova Scotia among government departments. There's always ongoing collaboration with the multitude of stakeholders that are out there - and there's a lot, because people are very, very passionate about land and water protection.

CARMAN KERR: I certainly don't doubt the collaboration between both departments. I've worked with the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables as critic for natural resources and renewables for the last year, so I'm aware of that.

My question was, specifically, if you do the math identifying 82,000 hectares to be protected in protected areas versus 10,000 hectares to be identified for high production, that's an eight-times higher rate to be protected than the high-production area.

Friends and family and I have worked in the woods and in forestry. I'm the current agriculture critic, so I certainly know the value of traditional industries because I work in them or have done so. My question was specific. We aren't seeing protected areas be identified in Annapolis, but we certainly see support for industries such as forestry that deserve that support. I'll move on to the next question. That one wasn't answered, but maybe one of the minister's staff could follow up with a more specific answer.

Lahey suggests a Class 2 environmental assessment for forest planning. Part of that, I believe, will replace the map viewer, which I think is a dismal tool. Has the department agreed to add this Class 2 EA to forest planning? If so, what is the plan and when will this plan take effect?

TIM HALMAN: The Lahey Report is very important for the overall sustainability of the sector, the ecological forestry matrix. I certainly had some really good chats with Bill Lahey over the years, always learned a lot from Bill Lahey and the great perspective that he has.

In the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act, we committed to, in 2024, modernizing our environmental assessment process, having a look at that. I can tell you the work is ongoing with that environmental assessment process. We have to have that completed by the end of this year. There's a multitude of things that we're looking at in terms of modernizing the environmental assessment process. That again is coming out of complete necessity in a time of unprecedented growth in the province, which is going to have an impact on our traditional sectors, as you know.

Yes, it's on the radar screen. We have a strategic lead for environmental assessment. We've certainly done consultations on that, and now the work is ongoing and developing with what that will look like, environmental assessments moving forward, utilizing the Mi'kmaq concept of Netukulimk, and climate change, and also just the vast amount of onshore wind projects, clean renewable projects. Environmental assessment is a tool used to assess the extent to which a project is going to have an impact on the environment, as you know, the steps that will be taken by a proponent to mitigate the impacts of their project to the environment.

I believe the last time that was modernized or reformed was in the early 2000s, maybe earlier. It's absolutely time that we do this, and I can assure the member that those conversations are taking place in the overall framework of that EA modernization which we have to, under the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act, have out to Nova Scotians. I'm very excited for this. Certainly, as a minister, I didn't get into public life to mark time or advance the status quo. We certainly want to move things forward all the time.

In a time where we're transforming and producing energy, our environmental assessment needs to keep pace. Just in the last year, on the regulatory side, as I've indicated, I approved 10 onshore wind projects. The environmental assessment branch, our policy branch, I can tell you is working flat-out. I think we do have some data on the number of projects that we've had to analyze and make decisions on, which can range from an approval, a non-approval, and a more-information request. It's time to modernize that very important process, and it's happening, and we'll have more to say on environmental assessment modernization, along with that recommendation from Bill Lahey, as we move forward.

CARMAN KERR: The minister mentioned - I think we're around 13.5 per cent of areas protected, and the minister just mentioned 2026 to get to 15 per cent. The minister has mentioned the Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy, which I'm aware of; I think it was published at Christmas, or just before. It didn't seem to establish any formal process for Nova Scotians to propose areas of protection. Is that correct?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: It is correct to say that both the Department of Environment and Climate Change and the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables have the in-house capacity to facilitate, to listen to the suggestions. At any time, if you have a resident who wishes to advocate for a certain area to be designated as a wilderness area or a nature reserve, reach out to my department, and if it's a provincial park proposal, reach out to the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables. We have the capacity in-house.

The strategy that we announced - I think it was December 22nd of last year - it is very much a collaborative approach. It's a road map, it's a framework to guide us to get to that 20 per cent strategy utilizing Crown lands, private lands. You have a lot of different

solutions outlined in this plan, along with utilizing what is known as OECMs - Other Effective Conservation Measures. When I had the opportunity to visit Montreal in December of 2022 for the Biodiversity Conference, the deputy minister and I had the chance to learn about other effective conservation measures, which is a very interesting approach to land conservation.

[6:15 p.m.]

I think in a jurisdiction like Nova Scotia, we have to be creative, we have to be collaborative, and OECMs offer a big part of that. This actually came up as a topic at the last federal-provincial meeting on biodiversity in May of last year, where a number of the provinces and territories engaged with the federal minister on the topic of Other Effective Conservation Measures, and we'll be utilizing that moving forward, along with our ongoing partnership with the Mi'kmaq, working with our partners on Indigenous land conservation - IPCAs - and that's a key component of the plan.

I have to say, on a personal level, as I've mentioned before, the opportunity in January of last year for the deputy minister and I - and at the time, Minister MacFarlane, who was the Minister of L'nu Affairs - to sign a co-management, a co-governance agreement with the Mi'kmaq for the Kluscap Wilderness Area, that is so key with reconciliation. There's a big component of reconciliation in our Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy.

In summary, if at any time you have a resident whom you represent and whom you wish to connect, we will connect them with our Protected Areas folks at the Department of Environment and Climate Change and certainly over at the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables. We have the capacity in-house to engage in those conversations, and we want to hear from Nova Scotians - their ideas of what areas should be conserved. Oftentimes as MLAs, you meet with a resident and you just want to make sure you connect them with the right level of government. So if you ever have that resident coming in and wanting to talk about a certain piece of land, a piece of water being preserved, by all means, my department and Minister Rushton's department are ready to engage in those conversations. We want to engage in those conversations because they're so important. Land and water conservation is a big component in our overall climate change strategy.

CARMAN KERR: What I'm trying to get to I still didn't hear it in that answer. I know the minister has been copied, so has the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables on - I don't want to say hundreds, but dozens and dozens of suggestions for one particular area in Annapolis.

The minister just suggested to have Nova Scotians reach out. They have reached out. Does that mean that's the formal process? They've reached out. They've identified

one particular area. I agree about certain parts of that area being protected, if not all of it. Is that enough?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Absolutely. As I said, we have the capacity. I don't want the member to think that the recommendations that come in from community are lost in a black hole or an abyss. We absolutely take this into consideration within the framework of that Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy.

If you look at the four pillars or solutions outlined in the 20 per cent strategy, Solution No. 1 is to "identify, protect, and manage provincially administered lands and inland waters." We highlight a number of key actions to achieve that goal.

Pillar No. 2 is "We will work with people and groups to support education around the expanded conservation of private lands." In the plan, as you know, you see actions that we'll take. I've highlighted the support of Mi'kmaw leadership in conservation.

But also, Pillar No. 4 very much relates to the member's question. That pillar or solution is "We will foster partnerships to highlight community and economic benefits derived from our protected and conserved areas," such as "exploring with government and non-government partners how best to position our system of protected and conserved areas and branding Nova Scotia as a great place to live, work, and visit."

To the honourable member, I would say to absolutely continue to reach out, continue to advocate, continue to have meetings. The process of getting a designation, a lot of work goes into it. As the member knows, both the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables and the Department of Environment and Climate Change are finishing up the 2013 PAPA Plan - Parks and Protected Areas plan.

The work is still ongoing 11 years after that. One of the early files, as I mentioned, that was brought to my attention and got my interest was Archibald Lake. We designated that as a protected area last Summer, but that was almost two years of work. This is the thing: I really applaud the land and protection folks out there. They are champions of patience. You're dealing with land transactions. They're very complex - a lot of passion around it and a lot of opinions. Both the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables and I know that moving a designation forward has its challenges and opportunities. The bottom line is continue to encourage your residents to engage with my department and Natural Resources and Renewables.

In some cases, it's years in the making when we finally get something across the finish line. Do I want to go faster? Absolutely. I work with the Premier, as do my colleagues. It's in my nature: go fast, get it done, and get it done effectively. With this Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy, we've got a great road map and a great framework, and we have the capacity at both departments to facilitate these discussions and to reach out at any time to our Director of Protected Areas at both departments.

CARMAN KERR: I have reached out to the department several times. There is a volunteer group - Citizen Scientists of Southwest Nova Scotia - in Annapolis. They have proposed the Goldsmith Lake area. I think the minister has seen those same dozens of emails. They've done the engagement. They've organized music festivals. They've organized letter campaigns. They've organized community town halls. There's no end. They will continue to organize. They're that passionate and committed to this area.

I've been there. I've walked it. I grew up on a farm, and we had a woodlot and worked in the woods. The only reason I mention that is that I mentioned in my previous preamble that I have experience working in those traditional sectors. My career before coming here was owning and operating tourism companies. If you're looking at areas that are considered tourism opportunities or economic development opportunities, this area is it. Along the lakes - some of the oldest trees I've seen in the area. I can understand industry wanting to be in there, as well, but there's got to be some kind of compromise. This area, Goldsmith Lake, has up to 40 identified species-at-risk lichens and counting.

I guess it's a rhetorical question, but when is enough enough? The community has put on all of these events for years. They've highlighted the fact that tourism operators want this to be looked at as a wilderness area or protected. People who work in the industry agree; some don't.

My question is: What will it take, specifically - knowing full well that the minister and his staff are working through the previous list - to flag this area on an interim basis? I've asked the department before. There is no mechanism to flag a piece or keep it in an interim process. I want to credit the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables - this area was on hold for harvesting. It's been approved to be harvested. It's now on hold because of all these species-at-risk areas being identified.

If the departments are collaborating - and I've spoken with the minister in the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, who says to talk to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change - where does this piece fit with SAR occurrences and with the community that wants to identify this area? They're looking for action and some kind of movement on this piece.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: I know for you, as a leader in your community, and for me, serving Nova Scotia as a minister - it's not lost on us, the incredible work our residents do in advocating. You were just highlighting some of the different events that folks have engaged in to raise awareness. That's not lost on me. That's passion. We see that from one end of the province to the other, the advocates for various areas to be protected.

I would say, though, I'm confident in the road map that we've put out with our Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy - four key solutions or pillars to that plan. I want the honourable member to know that everything you've said is absolutely duly noted. I don't want anyone to ever interpret that I'm being flippant when it comes to these things.

I've so enjoyed getting to know a number of the advocates for land and water protection in Nova Scotia, so it's duly noted.

[6:30 p.m.]

As we manage all these proposals, it's an exciting time in the sense that never before have we had a framework like this, a legislated framework, a road map. It's a good time for land and water protection in Nova Scotia.

To your point, absolutely, so many folks who come to Nova Scotia, specifically from other parts of Canada - we are renowned for our pristine ecosystems and the love of our coastline and living beside that coastline in a safe way. It's not lost on me at all. Certainly, with your professional background, you saw that play out time and time again.

There's definitely a lot of work that needs to be done on this. I think establishing that interim target of 15 per cent by 2026 is going to be key. Along with that Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy, the federal government sees our beautiful province of Nova Scotia as a leader on this. That's why we were one of the first provinces in Confederation to enter into a nature agreement with Ottawa. One just needs to go to some of the various proposed areas and see the people around those areas. They are very passionate, very committed, and I respect that. I want to work with that, as do our respective teams at Environment and Climate Change and at Natural Resources and Renewables.

CARMAN KERR: I'd like to switch topics. I don't have very much time, maybe 15 minutes or thereabouts. This is concerning the community of Arlington, around the C&D site, "the dump," as the locals call it, but either way my first question would be: Is the site currently under investigation for any infractions?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Certainly, this is a file I'm aware of. I can tell you that staff in the Kentville office is following up on all matters on this file that are brought to our attention. I know the member has a good working relationship with a number of the staff there. I think he grew up with some of them. It's such a Nova Scotia thing, the degree of separation.

This is an issue I know staff in the area are taking very, very seriously. I want the member to know that a few weeks ago, through a meeting with the Nova Scotia Environmental Network, I had the opportunity to meet with Beth Cranston from the Annapolis Waterkeepers, and at that meeting I encouraged Beth and all the Waterkeepers to keep engaging with our Kentville office. Rightly so - she's very passionate on the issue. I listened carefully to those concerns in that meeting. I told Beth in the meeting that as the regulator, this is a role I take very, very seriously. As the regulator, I'm very confident in our Inspection, Compliance and Enforcement division, and confident in the ongoing investigative work that they're doing, ongoing analysis, and again, just encouraging members of that organization to keep reaching out to staff.

These are highly trained professionals with very strong backgrounds in environmental enforcement. As the regulator, I'm very confident in that regulatory framework that we have to protect our environment. That interaction is definitely encouraging, and the member knows with me and, of course, the staff at the Kentville office to reach out.

I know from an MLA perspective, your role is to obviously give voice to the concerns you're hearing. As the regulator, on my side, it's ensuring due process plays out, as the neutral steward of the regulatory process. I can assure the member that staff are following up on all matters brought to their attention on this file.

CARMAN KERR: I will continue to reach out to staff. It's the third year I've brought this issue up, three years in a row, and there doesn't seem to be a lot of movement. Beyond Beth Cranston and the several others who are part of this group - the Annapolis Waterkeepers - it's gone well beyond that group.

There's an email here, and I'll table it, from Fred Weidhaas. Fred and his wife have owned a farm for three generations. The smell is so bad at the dump that they're selling their farm that's been in their family for so long. When a farm complains about smell from a dump, you know you have serious issues. This isn't just a small group. This is everyone in that community. They leave the community for days at a time when the wind's in a certain direction. They don't go back to their property. It's gotten worse.

I've reached out to the company. Unfortunately, they've said there is no problem, so I need to lean on the department to try to fix this. Is the minister aware of this particular issue, and what can we do so that farm families aren't selling their farms and other families aren't leaving the community to get away from the smell? It's become unbearable.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Yes, absolutely I can facilitate that an Environment officer go out to meet with your resident and investigate that. Obviously, issues such as that, we very much want our residents to know that they can reach out to our regional offices throughout Nova Scotia. That's absolutely key. As I indicated, these are trained professionals who very much have a very strong commitment to ensuring our laws and our regulations are being adhered to. I will ensure that happens for the honourable member, for their resident - that we will send an environmental officer out to investigate.

CARMAN KERR: Just before Christmas - I forget the exact date, maybe December - I met with the regional director of the Western Region in Kentville alongside one of our county councillors. That issue was raised at that meeting, along with several other issues. I learned in that meeting that there was an investigation happening - that smell - and the inspectors had gone out to the site and talked to the ownership about that. But we are now four, five months later, and people are now, after having a home for three generations, just giving up and saying, "I'm selling. I'm out." I appreciate the minister agreeing to send, or

the regional director sending another inspector out, but enough is enough. It's already happened, and nothing is being fixed, so I just wanted to flag that.

My last question, and then I will hand it over to my colleague from the NDP, is around water monitoring. I guess my comment would be that the residents have mentioned poor water quality in their homes due to this facility being there. They can't afford to get water tests done on a regular basis. I actually went on a four-wheeler a few months ago, I guess, on one of their excursions on private land to test the water. I wasn't testing, I was just observing and checking out what they were talking about. It is a lot better to be there in person than read emails and hear it on the phone.

My question is: Where does that stand if residents around this site are saying their drinking water is contaminated and they can't afford, and there doesn't seem to be any program to pay for, their own tests? Would the minister or the department be willing to test that water on private land, should those private landowners give permission? Would the department fund that testing?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Our executive director will follow up on this. I know you know our executive director quite well. As the member knows, all the decisions on the ground and as a minister that are made are - as regulator - based on the science and the data. That's what our environment officers utilize when making a decision on the ground. I am very confident in the regulatory framework and the professionalism and competence of our environment officers. Absolutely, yes. This is duly noted, and the executive director will be reaching out to you on this, and your suggestion related to water testing will be taken under advisement.

CARMAN KERR: Thank you to the minister and staff. Have a good night.

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

LISA LACHANCE: Can you tell me how much time is left, in total?

THE CHAIR: We have approximately 16 minutes and 38 seconds.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to ask about the sort of concern and confusion around changes to the Nova Scotia Wetlands Conservation Policy or perhaps changes in how the Wetlands Conservation Policy is interpreted. I've heard from a lot of folks from around Nova Scotia, a lot of folks in science and folks at the Ecology Action Centre.

I have asked the minister in the House before about this. I do think there is something new, and we did see that from a FOIPOP. Why were the guidelines updated, and in particular, why were they revised to exclude vulnerable or special concern areas?

[6:45 p.m.]

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Thank you very much for the question and the opportunity. As a government, we certainly appreciate and understand the significance of wetlands, the ecological service they provide, whether it's related to species at risk, and in capturing and storing carbon. We utilize, as government, a multitude of tools to protect our wetlands. We use regulations, we use legislation; we have the Nova Scotia Endangered Species Act; we have the Nova Scotia Biodiversity Act; we have the Species at Risk Act; there's also the Canada Wildlife Act.

Along with that menu of regulations and legislation, we also have the Nova Scotia Wetlands Conservation Policy. This is utilized as an internal guidance document and, as I've highlighted, it's one of the many tools we use to protect wetlands in Nova Scotia.

To be crystal clear, and as I've mentioned in the House in the Fall, not a word has changed in that policy. Nothing has changed. The policy has always said that a wetland of special significance can be altered for a necessary public function. What we clarified to staff was the importance of a consistent application of the guideline throughout the policy. That's what was clarified.

Nova Scotians again, coming back to land and water protection - this is absolutely something they are very passionate about and rightly so. We take great pride in our conserved areas, in our wetlands. Obviously in terms of climate action, climate policy, the Wetlands Conservation Policy is one tool utilized in a menu of things that we utilize to protect wetlands.

In summary, nothing changed with the policy. Direction was given by me as minister. The importance of a consistent application of the policy as we move forward in a time of, again, unprecedented population growth, a time of unprecedented economic growth. That brings itself the challenges and opportunities. Certainly, policies such as this, as I said, are one tool we use out of many tools to protect Nova Scotia from environmental damage.

LISA LACHANCE: I understand the minister says not a word of the policy was changed, but I believe there are updated guidelines published in September 2023, and within those, I understand the direction in several areas changed. Just off the top of my head, one of those was not to include species of vulnerable or special concern but only endangered species.

The other part I understand is that if you had an area you would want to protect adjacent to an area where it wasn't deemed to need a special level of protection, or it wasn't a wetland of special significance under the old interpretation, the entire area would be protected. What I understand, under the new interpretation, is that only the area that is the

wetland of special significance - no adjacent or connecting wetlands - would be included in that protection.

I also understood that the determination of wetlands of special significance would previously be based on a variety of information, and what that could mean is that species could be spotted seasonally or from time to time. What I understand now is that the interpretation is based on a one-time survey done by a land developer.

This is what I understand. Stakeholders who also understand how this policy has been used have explained this to me. I'm wondering if the minister could clarify those three points.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Again, to be clear, there hasn't been any change to the guidelines. If you look at the guidelines for the Wetland Conservation Policy, it's the same now as it was eight months ago on the website.

As I highlighted, when it comes to the protection of wetlands, we use multiple laws and regulations to protect these important wetlands that Nova Scotians are - they're near and dear to their hearts. We've got the Endangered Species Act, the Biodiversity Act, the Species at Risk Act, and the Canada Wildlife Act. In fact, all those pieces of legislation and regulation supersede the Wetland Conservation Policy, which is part of a suite of actions that we take to protect wetlands in Nova Scotia.

Again, nothing's changed. We're moving forward, with the clarification that a consistent application of the Wetland Conservation Policy - my expectation is that a consistent application of that policy throughout the regions is important.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm wondering if the minister can clarify: The determination was made that the minister wanted the department to consistently administer the existing policy and guidelines. How was this communicated to staff? When was it communicated to staff? What inconsistencies were you trying to clear up by this?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: It's pretty standard operating procedure for executive leadership teams in all our government departments to regularly provide updates and expectations to staff, in terms of clarifying certain expectations.

The Nova Scotia Wetland Conservation Policy is a very important policy that is in the toolbox that's used to protect wetlands. We have very strong regulations and laws on the protection of wetlands. It's actually one of the key things that our environment officers are monitoring throughout the province. They're utilizing that, for lack of a better term, toolbox that we use to protect wetlands.

Moving forward, we have clarification on the wetland policy and a consistent application throughout the province. We still have a number of bills, as I've outlined, that

protect these wetlands. Moving forward, we want to ensure protection of this. Moving forward, this is also part of a very strong road map that we have for the 20 per cent land and water conservation target. We've got lots of tools at our disposal to protect these things that Nova Scotians hold very precious to them.

THE CHAIR: Before I recognize the honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island, there's about four minutes left if you wanted to wrap up tonight.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I think that the intent is to wrap up tonight, so I assume you'll call order when the four minutes are up.

THE CHAIR: When the four minutes are up, we'll hit our four hours. You might need a minute.

LISA LACHANCE: What I was going to say is that I appreciate the clarification. Often senior management gets together and makes decisions. I have worked in a number of government departments, and usually that involves a memo, or something like that, that seeks to clarify. The minister didn't want to answer the question. I just wanted to put that out there that I was asking a pretty easy question.

With that, I'll cede the rest of the time to the minister to close debate.

THE CHAIR: I recognize the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, with about 3 minutes and 16 seconds.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: I want to thank all members for engaging in a very productive conversation this evening on environment and climate change policy. I want to take a moment and thank the deputy minister of our department: Thank you, thank you, thank you. And of course, our incredible executive leadership team and everyone that's here with us. It is truly a team effort in all that we do in protecting our environment and advancing climate change policy that we know will be absolutely key for future generations.

I also want to thank our colleagues at the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. The other hat that I wear within the Government of Nova Scotia is Chair of the Treasury and Policy Board. Again, just a big thank you to our incredible team at the Department of Finance and Treasury Board that does such an incredible job in managing the finances of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Shall the resolution stand?

The resolution E8 stands.

That would conclude our time allotted today for Estimates, so with that, we're adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 7:00 p.m.]