



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 2024

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUBSUPPLY

3:46 P.M.

CHAIR
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR: Order. The Subcommittee of the Whole on Supply will now come to order. It is now 3:46 p.m. The Subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates for the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, as outlined in E16.

Resolution E16 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$141,588,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, pursuant to the Estimate.

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

The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Thank you very much, Chair, and welcome, everybody. Just before I get started, I want to recognize my deputy, Karen Gatien, here with me today, and our finance person, Mike O'Brien, and some staff who are behind me, as well, whom we may draw on to get the updated information that everybody may ask through these questions.

It's an honour and a privilege to join you here today, giving an overview of our priorities for the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables. Through the breadth and depth of my department, we are doing our part to build Nova Scotia faster, to transform our communities and our province with clean, economic growth, to create opportunities to make a positive impact for as many people as possible.

There are challenges, to be sure, but we are always working to overcome them. We are making progress. This year's budget builds on work we've already started and sets a path for a year ahead that our province can afford. Our estimated budget for Natural Resources and Renewables, as it has been read, is more than \$141 million.

You'll notice a number of areas in the Estimates where funding will decrease in 2024-2025. That's mostly due to one-time investments or initiatives that ended in 2023-2024. You'll also see an increase in other areas. I'll explain a number of these shifts in my remarks.

We've had quite a year since the Budget Estimate last Spring. At that time, we were still working on getting a handle on the extent of the damage from Hurricane Fiona. A few weeks later, we were into unprecedented wildfires that caused so much devastation and damage and upheaval. Then we had the floods. All of us as Nova Scotians grieved the tragic loss of life. Those floods also caused considerable damage to homes and infrastructure.

Then we were into another hurricane season, with more damaging storms. Most recently, there was the heavy snowfall that was felt most deeply in Cape Breton, the Pictou area, and the northern mainland of Nova Scotia.

My department was involved in all these weather-related events. I'm very proud of our staff who were boots on the ground in these difficult situations, like staff who donned snowshoes to deliver medication and do wellness checks with snow-covered and buried-in seniors a few weeks ago in Cape Breton and, of course, our wildland firefighters, who were second to none.

We had 220 wildfires last year and you didn't hear about most of them because we were able to put them out quickly. Unfortunately, that was not the case in Shelburne County and in Tantallon. Between the two of them, those wildfires burned nearly 24,000 hectares and destroyed more than 200 homes in our province. That there were no lives lost was truly remarkable and we were so grateful for that.

Our wildfire team managed these fires professionally and effectively. We had a solid incident command system that calls in the right resources and deploys them on the ground and in the air.

They drew from 300 wildland firefighters across the province as well as municipal and volunteer fire departments. Our skilled pilots played an integral role in our four helicopter water bombers, and we used existing agreements to get resources from other provinces and the U.S. Those partnerships brought the people and equipment we needed to handle the task, although ultimately it was a change in the weather that helped us to get these fires under control. Firefighters didn't stop working for weeks until every hot spot was found and extinguished.

You will see \$12 million in the 2023-2024 budget forecast for varying expenses associated with suppression of larger wildland fires last Spring. The actual spend was about \$8.7 million for this season. The difference is because some of the expenses were recovered.

For example, the aircraft from Montana arrived in Nova Scotia around the same time as the rain, so they weren't used for our fires; we instead sent them to Quebec. We also sent our wildfire staff to Alberta and the Yukon when we weren't battling our own large fires. Obviously, that was far more than we could normally spend. You will see a \$1 million increase on this year's Estimates. That's a little more than we budget each year because it is unprecedented to set a higher amount.

As climate change progresses, we may look at changing that amount. Aside from that, we're taking advantage of federal funding to make wildfire investments over a course of five years. It started with \$1 million in 2022-2023 for equipment and training. It continues for four more years with another \$25.6 million. Half of that is from the province, and half of that is from Natural Resources Canada.

That will cover the cost of replacing our fleet of four helicopters, as well as securing other equipment and training. We pay for those things up front, and the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of Canada reimburses us up to half. We're replacing our helicopters now because we have this financial opportunity to do so before the maintenance costs really start to climb.

These aircraft support search and rescue efforts, transport people and equipment during emergencies, conduct aerial surveillance to support the work of several departments, and, of course, they serve us well as our water bomber fleet for wildfires.

To date, our helicopters have been able to meet almost all our aerial firefighting needs. We've only needed to borrow fixed-wing aircraft four times in the past 10 years. That said, we anticipate wildfire seasons to become more severe across the country, so it may become harder to borrow these resources if we need them in the future. We're looking at all options to make sure we continue and are well-prepared. That includes exploring what might be realistic for fixed-wing aircraft for Nova Scotia.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so we're putting more effort into reminding Nova Scotians what we can all do to prevent wildfires and how homeowners and communities can be prepared for the possibility. We know wildfire is one of Nova Scotia's top climate change risks. We expect to secure federal funds through another agreement to help with the prevention work. I look forward to sharing the details once the agreement is finalized.

Before I move on, I'll take the opportunity to ask all MLAs for their help with raising this awareness. Sharing our social media posts with your constituents would be a great help. Before the wildfires, we were motivated to help with the Fiona cleanup because there was merchantable wood lying on the ground and because private wood lot owners needed help with repairing roads and re-establishing boundaries. Then the wildfires reaffirmed the need to clean up and avoid fire risk.

We invested more than \$7 million in 2022-2023. That's been rolling out through the Association for Sustainable Forestry and Forest Nova Scotia. So far, more than 7,500 hectares have been cleaned up on private land. We also made cleanup a priority on Crown lands. More than 21 hectares have been approved for harvest since December 2022. Despite all the significant effort, there's still wood and fibre remaining on both private and Crown lands, so our government made another \$7 million investment in 2023-2024. Again, this was through the Association for Sustainable Forestry.

We're asking them to develop and manage the funding program to spur more cleanup. That's because several organizations have suggested different initiatives, so we're giving the sector an opportunity to consider ideas and develop their programs. I have confidence that they have the knowledge and expertise that will lead this initiative, and I look forward to seeing the outcome.

Last year, we were able to make a couple of one-time investments in silviculture. Our aim was to set the forestry industry up for success. One of them helped licensees adapt to the ecological forestry practices that are required in the mixed-use zone of the triad model. This is the zone where lighter-touch practices are used. It covers about 55 per cent of Crown land. While that was a one-time investment, we have an additional \$1.75 million in 2024-25. We plan to stay at that level for the following two years and then shift to a little over \$800,000 in 2027-28.

That's more than \$6 million over the next four years. This money will help us continue to implement the recommendations from *An Independent Review of Forest Practices in Nova Scotia*. It will fund research that supports healthy forests and wildlife, as well as our work on species at risk. It will help with the tree improvement. It will help with the adaptive management. All of these will help us advance in the transition to ecological forestry.

Another one-time investment last year was made: a permanent shift in the schedule of silviculture funding. Woodlot owners need to know the amount of funding available earlier than when the Spring budget is typically passed in the Legislature. Having certainty about funding amounts earlier means that they can do their job planning earlier and avoid losing valuable time in the woods in the Spring. Effectively, we doubled up the silviculture funding for 2022-23 to make this shift. Starting in the 2023-24 budget, the budgeted funding became dedicated to work in the subsequent fiscal year.

All of this support helps our forestry industry continue its role as a supplier of quality timber products that we all use every day and is also a key contributor to our provincial economy by providing jobs in rural communities and all around the province. There's no question that the past number of years have been challenging, but the people in this industry have been steadfast partners throughout the transition to ecological forestry.

With the foundations now in place, they're telling me that they're starting to see the fruits of our combined labours. That's good for our economy, and it's also good for our environment. The shift to ecological forestry supports a healthy forest. That's a priority for our government, because we need healthy forests for carbon capture and biodiversity. Our forests provide habitats for all kinds of species, and we're doing the work to support healthy ecosystems for that, especially those that are at risk.

We do this work in collaboration with many partners. For example, every year we distribute more than \$200,000 from the Habitat Conservation Fund for projects around the province. These projects focus on research, education, and land acquisition to help conserve wildlife and habitat. We expect that the Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement will be a big help with protection and conservation, as well as recovery of species at risk and their habitats.

The agreement brings \$28.5 million in federal funding. It will help us meet our goal of protecting 20 per cent of our land and water mass by 2030. We anticipate that it will help us acquire more land for protection. About 35 per cent of our triad model of ecological forestry is dedicated to conservation. My department contributes to that through our careful management of Crown lands. For example, *An Old-Growth Forest Policy for Nova Scotia* automatically protects any old-growth forest that's not already captured in our protected areas.

We also contribute through our provincial parks. Just last month, we announced 15 new and two expanded provincial parks. With those designations, we're more than halfway through the sites in the parks and protected areas plan. Designation protects these sites for Nova Scotians to enjoy for generations to come.

Our government is doing more through the new Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy. We joined the Department of Environment and Climate Change in this release in

December. It will further the Province's work, in collaboration with many partners, to reach our land protection goals.

[4:00 p.m.]

We're pleased to be making some significant capital investment in our parks. In 2023-24, we were pleased to receive \$10.2 million through the Capital Plan 2024-25, and we invested in a variety of projects around the province. Some examples include \$1.5 million for parking lot upgrades and improvement to beach access and washrooms at Lawrencetown Beach, and about \$1.7 million for trail planning, campsite upgrades, paving, and new nature-based play spaces at Dollar Lake.

In 2024-25, we have \$11.8 million through the Capital Plan to continue these improvements. Again, this funding will be spread all around the province for various upgrades. These are important investments to give our visitors a safe, enjoyable experience that's for both Nova Scotians and for visitors from out of province who contribute to the tourism industry and to our provincial economy.

Speaking of safety, we have two parks that won't be fully operational this season due to storm damage last year. Rissers and Smileys both sustained significant damage. We're doing a lot of work so that both parks can open, but they won't have as many campsites. We'll be doing management planning later this year to determine our next steps for these parks. There will be opportunity for Nova Scotians to participate in that process.

If the storms and wildfires we have experienced over the last year and a half tell us nothing else, they tell us that it's imperative that we continue to fight against climate change. We're proud that Nova Scotia has some of the most ambitious climate change goals in the country, and they are cemented in legislation. We're determined to reach these goals. Government actions to advance these goals are spelled out in our climate change plan for clean growth. We drilled deeper into actions for greening the grid last fall with the Clean Power Plan. It mainly outlines our path to 2030, and also shows some steps towards 2050. Our aim is clear: a clean, sustainable future for generations to come.

We need to get there without putting an unnecessary burden on Nova Scotians. They've already paid a great deal to move forward to clean power. We need to protect ratepayers while we keep this transition moving. Our plan gives Nova Scotia a clear and certain path to reach at least 80 per cent renewable electricity by 2030. We'll get off coal too, and then we'll keep moving toward net zero by 2050.

Our focus is primarily on made-in-Nova Scotia solutions to reach our goals and grow our green economy. Offshore wind, solar power, and batteries are a big part of our path to 2030. Investors are coming here to make them a reality because Nova Scotia is now seen as a province with opportunity.

We ran an RFP for renewables in 2022. The successful projects will be adding about 10 per cent more renewables to our grid by the end of next year. We launched another RFP in December. It will add another 10 per cent more renewables from 2026 to 2028 to support the Green Choice Program.

This program is for large-scale electricity users, mainly public entities like governments, Mi'kmaq band councils, schools, universities and colleges, and health care facilities. Some not-for-profit and a small handful of large commercial customers are also eligible. We're now taking applications, and I look forward to sharing the list of participants once those decisions have been made.

I want to note that an independent administrator is leading these procurements for us. They have expertise in this area, and they're securing the lowest-cost renewables for Nova Scotia ratepayers.

Solar is another made-in-Nova Scotia solution that will help us meet our goals. That's why we protected Nova Scotians from extra fees for net metering: so people can install solar panels at home. Then we set regulations to allow commercial net metering.

Earlier this month, we launched the Community Solar Program. It's for people who can't install their own solar panels, for whatever reason. Non-profits, co-operatives, First Nations communities, municipalities, businesses, universities, and colleges can all build and own solar gardens.

We're investing \$5.2 million in 2024/25 to help with the capital cost of these projects, and we expect to see private investments north of \$200 million in them. That's great for a green economy and it's great for Nova Scotians who want to support the move to renewables. New gardens should be up and running by the spring of 2026, and then people can subscribe to them at a slightly lower power rate.

Not every day the wind blows or the sun shines, so we need batteries to store some of the renewable energy for when it's needed. They're an important part of our Clean Power Plan. That's why we approved Nova Scotia Power to build three battery projects around the province. They're doing that with the support of the Canada Infrastructure Bank and in partnership with 13 Mi'kmaq communities. They aim to have the first site operational next year.

Another important part of the plan is the intertie with New Brunswick that has been discussed ever since the early 2000s. The recent outage is a prime example of how that is a vital project. We are advancing the project to strengthen this connection and making this discussion a reality. We need to manage the renewables and boost reliability. It could eventually become part of the modified Atlantic Loop in the future. In fact, it could even help Nova Scotia become a net exporter of renewable electricity from offshore wind.

That brings me to the incredible opportunity we have with offshore wind. Nova Scotia's offshore wind is among the best in the world. That's why we set a goal of offering licences for 5 gigawatts of offshore wind by 2030. We're planning the first call for bids next year. We want the world to know that we are open for business, not just for offshore wind, but also for green hydrogen. These sectors are tied very closely together.

We anticipate high demand for renewable electricity for the green hydrogen production, so developers know they can pursue offshore wind projects at a scale that makes them worth their investment. We're nurturing the development of both these sectors. They are key components of our plan to reach net zero by 2050. In 2023 we launched the first module of the Nova Scotia Offshore Wind Roadmap to help develop the sector. We're building the road map in partnership with interested parties and we're also listening to them through the regional assessments for offshore wind.

We're going to get this right. We need to get this right. We're going to make Nova Scotia a world leader in offshore wind, with a solid regulatory framework and an approach that doesn't pit one sector against another.

We're also poised to be a world leader in the production of green hydrogen. That's why we launched the Green Hydrogen Action Plan in December. Through this plan, we're continuing our work with businesses and communities to take advantage of this unique opportunity. It's going to help us and our global partners fight climate change. It's going to help us grow our green economy, and it's going to bring benefits to Nova Scotians for generations to come.

Offshore wind, green hydrogen, and other renewables are still pretty new industries for our province and people want to know more about how they'll be developed. That's why we're investing \$1.5 million in 2024-25 to support public engagement and increase awareness about renewable energy opportunities. We'll be sharing more of this information as the work advances.

While some green hydrogen will be exported, some will also be used here in Nova Scotia. We see opportunity in places like heavy industry and manufacturing, where it's hard to move off fossil fuels quickly. We're launching the Clean Fuels Fund to help with that. It will make cleaner fuel choices more affordable for industries, institutions, and businesses. We want them to adopt cleaner fuels such as green hydrogen, renewable natural gas, biofuels, and sustainable biomass, so we invested \$3 million through a quick-start stream in 2023-24 for companies that have shovel-ready projects. We have \$3 million in the budget for 2024-25 to advance the broader program. That will build on other work we're doing to change how people get from Point A to Point B.

Electric vehicles are great for the environment, and they can help Nova Scotians save as much as \$2,000 per year in fuel and maintenance costs. We want to make EVs an option for more Nova Scotians. We have an EV rebate program called Electrify that's run

by the Clean Foundation. People can get rebates of \$500 per e-bike, and they can get as much as \$3,000 per vehicle. That total goes up \$8,000 when you add the federal incentives. This program helped get more than 1,700 more EVs and 5,000 e-bikes on the road. Nova Scotia now has more than 3,000 registered EVs, including hybrids.

Now we're working on a rebate program for medium- and heavy-duty EVs in 2024-2025. That will be for things like delivery vans and work trucks. Stay tuned for more news.

We're also working on changing infrastructure. Clean Foundation runs our EV Boost program, which helps with the cost of installing Level 2 chargers, also known as destination chargers. They're for people who come and park for a while. We have helped get 250 of them installed in places like residential buildings, workplaces, and public places.

Level 3 fast chargers are mainly for people who are travelling and need a charge along the way. We're actively working with partners to increase our fast-charging network by 2025.

EVs, wind turbines, batteries, and other technologies that we need to reach our climate change goals depend on critical minerals. We also need them for health care, food production, and more. We have many of these minerals here in Nova Scotia, such as lithium, graphite, and copper. As countries work to reach net zero emissions by 2050, global demand for these critical minerals is expected to increase significantly. We can develop them sustainably and inclusively right here in Nova Scotia. That's why we launched our critical mineral strategy earlier this month. It will help us capitalize on economic opportunities as we work towards net zero.

We want to see the full value chain here in Nova Scotia, from the minerals to the end products, all with strong environmental regulations. That's how we gain the greatest economic benefit, while also achieving our climate change goals. We'll continue to support this sector as we develop our critical minerals potential. For example, the mineral resource development fund provides about \$1.5 million annually. This funding helps the sector with exploration, research, and more.

We're working on options to grow the circular economy. How do we recover critical minerals from historic mine waste in the province and put them to new use in new ways. We funded some work on this through a one-time investment of \$1 million in 2023-2024. About \$320,000 of it went towards building our mineral value chain and circular economy. We're doing that work with Invest Nova Scotia, KMKNO, and other partners.

Nearly \$500,000 went into activities to help raise awareness about radon testing. That's a health risk due to uranium in our geology, and we want to help Nova Scotians avoid it. That's why we're working with the Department of Health and Wellness and the Lung Association to promote this testing. You'll see those activities roll out as they are

developed, and there are still test kits that people can borrow in libraries and in some MLA offices.

While we work together towards our climate change goals, protecting the ratepayers of Nova Scotia continues to be a top priority. We need to make this shift without adding unnecessary burden, and we know people need help with the cost of living. We're listening to what Nova Scotians are saying about the pressures, and we're helping improve quality of life through the energy efficiency programs we support. They're delivered by Efficiency Nova Scotia. Since we came into government, we have invested more than \$250 million in these programs. That leveraged millions more in federal dollars.

[4:15 p.m.]

You'll see an increase in the 2024-25 budget related to the federal home heating oil heating program - say that five times - but it doesn't reflect any change in the total investment from that program. It just accommodates some shifts in when the federal money is flowing.

Our combined investments continue to roll out through the programs. They give free upgrades to low-income households, including free heat pumps; they give bigger rebates to middle-income households; and they give rebates to higher-income households. There's actually something in these programs for everyone, and I encourage Nova Scotians to contact Efficiency Nova Scotia and find the right option for them.

Ultimately, our move to clean energy is good for the ratepayers. It means we'll no longer be at the mercy of the volatile global market of the cost of fossil fuels, and we'll be benefiting from made-in-Nova Scotia solutions in many ways. The lower greenhouse gas emissions are the lowest-cost options for ratepayers right now, and they also grow our green economy all around the province. That's why we have ambitious legislated climate change goals. That's why we have the Clean Power Plan. That's why we're transforming the electricity system with our legislation. All of this work is in the best interests of our ratepayers.

Before I finish, I want to take a brief moment to shine a light on the fantastic work communities are doing to fight climate change. They're leading a wide variety of initiatives from one end of this province to the other. When you add up everything they're doing, their power to effect real change is tremendous, and we support that work in a number of ways.

In 2023-24, we invested \$3 million through the Clean Energy Fund. That money went into a wide variety of projects to help us reach our climate change goals, and we have the same amount for 2024-25. This money stems from the Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth, so it flows the Department of Environment and Climate Change to my department for investing in projects. We distribute it through the Low Carbon Communities Program and through strategic projects.

We also team with federal, municipal, and First Nations partners to support community projects through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program. For example, just last week, the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board announced about \$4.7 million from the Province for an active transportation network in Inverness. The federal and municipal contributions brought the total to \$14 million. We'll continue to work with our government and community partners to advance more projects through this program in the coming fiscal year.

I want to give a nod to the folks in my backyard who are championing geothermal. It already heats some buildings in Springhill, and we provided \$80,000 in 2022 for a study to advance its full potential in the area. That work is ongoing, and I can't wait to see and learn more. It could be a foundation of more opportunities in different parts of the province in the future.

I've been talking for a while, yet this is just the tip of the iceberg for all the good things my department is advancing for Nova Scotians. Everything we do is centred on building a clean, healthy economy, from protecting and managing Nova Scotia's natural resources in a sustainable way to moving to a clean renewable energy future. We're doing our part to build our province so that all Nova Scotians can live in vibrant, healthy, sustainable communities, and have the best chance to achieve their full potential.

The budget of 2024-25 is keeping us on a path for successful, sustainable growth. With that, I'll end my remarks and take a drink of water.

THE CHAIR: According to the practice that has developed in this Legislature, the Opposition caucuses take turns asking questions for approximately one hour each. During a caucus's turn, the members within a caucus may take turns examining the Minister on the Estimate resolution. Only the Minister may answer questions. Caucuses are also expected to share time fairly with the independent member.

I will make one other note before I begin examination: there are two staff allowed at the table. There is no passing of notes, but you can transfer staff if you need to.

To begin the examination, I now recognize the Official Opposition.

The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Welcome to our Department of Natural Resources and Renewables staff. I appreciate all the hard work you've put in to be here today and to help support your Minister.

I'm going to start off by questioning the Minister about some funding programs. Recently the federal government announced changes to the Canada Greener Homes Initiative that will reduce the program's eligibility. How is the department planning to do

more to encourage Nova Scotians to make energy efficiency upgrades to their homes, especially considering the unique home energy needs of Nova Scotians compared to the rest of Canada?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: I think the disappointment with the change from the federal government on that was shared by a lot of people throughout the province.

Over the last 2.5 years, we've invested around \$240 million or \$250 million into the heat pump programs and efficiency programs that leveraged some other federal funding that was incorporated into that system. The changes in the Canada Greener Homes Initiative didn't affect any programs we've already got in there. Our programs are still rolling out.

There's a lot of confusion and a lot of programs that are going out there. One thing I've started doing with my constituency office - I've talked to some of my colleagues and even some of your colleagues on your side of the House - is to encourage every resident to reach out to Efficiency Nova Scotia because there probably is a program that fits into their needs. There was some backlog with some of the phone calls. I think they're catching up to some of that. There are a lot of good programs. There's a lot of uptake on it, but the Canada Greener Homes Initiative didn't really affect any of our programs. It was above and beyond.

PATRICIA ARAB: So there isn't any intent of the Province to introduce a program that might help offset some of the loss that's going to be left from the federal program being ended?

TORY RUSHTON: My federal counterpart, Minister Wilkinson, and I have a great relationship. We certainly have an open line of communication. We agree on a lot of things and disagree on some things, but we do have a good working relationship.

Before we go too quickly on initiating another program, there is a federal budget coming down in about two weeks. I'm taking the notice from my own pocketbook. Stay tuned for the next two weeks to see what might be in that NRCAN budget that I can communicate with Minister Wilkinson on and how we can make the best benefit for all Nova Scotians.

PATRICIA ARAB: The department has announced this year that they're planning to spend \$5.2 million in 2024-2025 to help with the capital costs of building community solar gardens, something I know is of interest in my riding in particular. I'm curious: How many community solar gardens does the department expect to be able to build with that funding?

TORY RUSHTON: As many as possible is the sort of answer I want to give. Realistically, there's a big interest in this program - if I can inform the member of that.

Our \$5.2 million will be spread as far as we can. What we can build will depend on the uptake from the sector, though. There's a huge interest in this from the stakeholders involved right now. There was a lot of praise when this was finally announced. This is something the department worked hard on. Solar Nova Scotia has been advocating for this for some time.

As far as we can stretch the \$5.2 million, we will do our best with that. Hopefully, it's another success and we can sit here and talk about another investment a year from now.

PATRICIA ARAB: Not to belabour the point, but it's a big interest: Do you have any particular numbers, like ballpark figures or geographical areas within the province of stakeholders who have shown an interest in this?

TORY RUSHTON: To be official, there is not an official number yet. We know there is interest. We want to be able to invest the money right. As this gets built out - there are a couple of solar gardens within the province now. As we build this new program out, we want to make sure we do get it right.

We want to see interest throughout the whole province, to be frank. Realistically there are a lot of people who want to have the advantage of renewable energy but don't necessarily have the property they can put solar panels on - people who live in apartment buildings in HRM, or having said that, people who are living in a town core such as Liverpool and may not have the ability for the sunshine to come in.

This is going to be an opportunity for everyone. I must correct something: I believe you can live in Liverpool and buy into a solar garden in Antigonish - a subscription to it. If the solar garden were in Oxford, your residence wouldn't be eliminated from buying into that solar garden. Where the solar garden is located is not going to impact any Nova Scotian. If they have the opportunity to buy in, it's going to be open for them. I hope that answers your concern.

PATRICIA ARAB: It wasn't a concern. It was more curiosity, but that's pretty cool.

Let's talk a little bit about the Clean Electricity Solutions Task Force. Our caucus was glad to see that the report submitted last month already has action taken on it. The first recommendation has been done in this session. I'm curious if the Minister or his staff have any sort of a timeline on the remaining recommendations from that task force.

TORY RUSHTON: I would like to say as soon as possible. I think we all share that in the Legislature. Realistically, as the task force was doing the work, there was communication with my department staff. The last few months - the last few weeks, if you will - we had an idea what was coming. We knew Recommendation No. 1 was the biggest task out of that. We knew we had to tackle that to get things going.

While we're in the Legislature moving that legislation through the process, staff are still hard at work in the background discussing the other recommendations. Because we've talked about it on the floor of the Legislature a bit if I remember correctly, without having it in front of me - Recommendation No. 12 about affordability. We already have staff looking at that option in Ontario. What are they doing in Ontario? How do the affordability programs work in Ontario so they're not impeding other ratepayers? If you do put a program in there, somebody does have to pay for the fuel that's utilized to create electricity. We're looking at how the programs work and how can we make the best program work for all ratepayers in Nova Scotia.

[4:30 p.m.]

There is a lot of time and effort put in by the members of the task force. I want to recognize and thank them for their work on that as well as a lot of work that's taken part over the last few months within staff. We want to get this right, and we want to make this a long-term change in our electricity system. We need to get it right for Nova Scotians, so those other recommendations are being worked on even though we're sitting in the Legislature. There's a lot of work being done on that.

PATRICIA ARAB: Is it a fair statement to make that the intention of the department is to follow through on all 12 recommendations at this point?

TORY RUSHTON: I think you can appreciate, being in government before, that the staff are behind you with a good comment, so I had to make sure I had the right comment.

Not all the other recommendations do require legislation. But for some of those other recommendations we need to have the legislation in Recommendation No. 1 completed, so that new board can actually take on some of those other recommendations and champion those recommendations for government, if you will.

We did make a statement on No. 6 or No. 7 about the transmission and distribution lines. We took a stance on that right away. We have no intentions, at this time, to be taking that away from the utility. Are we going to accept all those recommendations? We accepted the report wholeheartedly, but we did come back out and make a stance that we're not taking that away from the utility. The utility needs to manage its own systems, and we're not looking to interfere with that at the present time.

Let's get Recommendation No. 1 down. That's the biggest bulk of it, and let's allow the board and the new directors of that help guide the next policies, if you will, as we grow that. Once legislation is done, to be very honest, it's going to be a year and a half to two years before that's actually in place. I think you can appreciate the timing of the legislation, the work that we need to do to get there, and through that development over the next year

and a half to two years I'm sure there are going to be recommendations coming from those professionals of what has to evolve under the other recommendations.

PATRICIA ARAB: I do appreciate that there's a lot of moving pieces and a lot of different steps that have to take place. I guess if we're talking about the utility, this has always been something that has been sort of - it confuses me a little bit, in terms of how the utility owns the grid that we exist on. When we're opening up other sources of energy, we're still going to be using the same grid. What costs do we think the department is going to have to either absorb on behalf of the utility, or is there a fear that those costs are going to be downloaded onto the ratepayer as we move towards this and we start using the grid a little bit more for more clean and sustainable energy? I hope that makes sense.

TORY RUSHTON: Don't get flustered because it doesn't make sense. I come from the electrical world, and some of the things are still confusing. If I could just take a second - I'm not trying to eat your time up, but if you think about our power poles and our distribution system, transmission system, Nova Scotia Power will be responsible for that, but the electricity flowing through it will be the responsibility of the independent operator, and the independent operator is already funded through the rate base and the power rates.

Actually, the new independent operator will be not-for-profit, so it won't have to be profit-driven there. It's already being paid out of there. There will be some transitional costs if that's moved over and things, but one thing I will say is that Nova Scotia Power has been very cooperative in these communications. I don't want to speak for Nova Scotia Power. I don't have their press release in front of me, but it said they were going to walk hand in hand with government through these transitions and further.

They will own the system, but the independent operator will decide where the power's coming from and then sort of push it through those lines and transmissions, but it's already being paid for through the rate base. New infrastructure that would go onto the system, Nova Scotia Power or the utilities would have to apply to the UARB or the new board, as that would be.

The other thing, the bonus, what we have here in Nova Scotia - if you look at the windmill projects that are coming, there's actually no cost to the ratepayers to install these, because these are stakeholders and investors that are coming to Nova Scotia to put onshore wind at a very cheap cost for ratepayers. Right now, I think the RFP that's out was 5-cent kilowatt hours. It's the cheapest form of power that we have in Nova Scotia right now. The sooner we can get more of that onto the system and stop relying on the fossil fuels that are 10-cent, 12-cent kilowatt hours, the better off all ratepayers are going to be, straight across the province.

PATRICIA ARAB: In another technical question, under this new reality of the independent boards, when it comes to upgrades to the system, who would be responsible for that?

TORY RUSHTON: That would still be as it is now. The utility will be responsible for the maintenance and the upgrades and any certain - I can't remember what the rule is. I don't know if you even know. There's a certain avenue there where it actually has to go to the board for application for installations. The maintenance, the pole replacement, the vegetation maintenance - that will still be the responsibility of the utility. They garner their return on the power bills.

PATRICIA ARAB: The department has stated a goal of ensuring that Nova Scotians generate 80 per cent of their power using renewable energy by 2030. I'm curious if the Minister can update us on what percentage of our power is currently generated using renewable energy.

TORY RUSHTON: I actually tabled this in the Legislature, I think last session. It's from our 2030 Clean Power Plan. I can make sure you get a copy of this, or table something when we're completely done here, or tomorrow, or whatever the proper process is, so you can have this in front of you.

Right now, existing renewables is about 30 per cent on our system. As I said, the RFP that we did in 2022 will be another 10 per cent and the RFP that's expected to take into place here very shortly is another 10 per cent on top of that.

Then you also count the solar projects that are going on people's roofs, so individuals could actually help us get to the renewables as well. Other components of that - we know there are large-scale users in the industrial world that are utilizing their own abilities to generate renewable power. That's why we're confident in saying we're going reach our 80 per cent by 2030 and probably succeed it even before 2030.

PATRICIA ARAB: Staying on renewables, let's talk a little bit about offshore wind energy. I'm curious - you gave a 5 cents per kilowatt - I guess I'll just ask the question: What's the cost per kilowatt hour currently?

TORY RUSHTON: Just for clarification, are you asking for onshore or offshore?

PATRICIA ARAB: I'm looking for the cost per kilowatt hour for offshore wind energy.

TORY RUSHTON: Currently there's no anticipated price for the offshore, it's still something that's being developed and going through. We have the people out in the field right now. I think you're aware that we have the Atlantic Accord Acts legislation that's going through at the federal level right now, Bill C-49, that Nova Scotia is anticipating the passage of that bill so we can bring it here and do the mirror imaging so we can develop some of that. Right now, any of those conversations would be at the stakeholder level and the investor level. That wouldn't be at my desk as of yet. We're still getting off the ground, if you will, to build this out.

PATRICIA ARAB: Again, understanding that this is early stages, I'm curious: Do we have any numbers or estimates as to how much of the offshore wind energy will stay here in Nova Scotia and how much will be exported?

TORY RUSHTON: The quick answer is as much as we need, we will keep here. Also, offshore will be influencing our green hydrogen projects. Having said that, here's the opportunity where Nova Scotia is at: The export model will help make it affordable for domestic use as well. This is going to line up Nova Scotia to be an exporter of energy for once, where we can garnish some more money for our province and our economy, not just export of energy, but export of green energy that the whole world is looking for right now.

We are in the sights of many jurisdictions around the world because of our offshore winds, but also our onshore winds, and our potential with the Bay of Fundy tides. If we can harness that and capture that in a safe, meaningful way, imagine what we can do with our province of Nova Scotia. There is a huge opportunity here for our province, for generations to come.

I know there are still people who ask questions, but you look at any other industry when it started to be built - I use John Bragg as an example, in my backyard. I worked for John Bragg, but when he initiated the idea of freezing blueberries and shipping them all over the world, how many people do you think grinned and laughed at him? "You're not going to be able to do that." Look at where John Bragg is now. It has to start somewhere.

I'm looking at it and looking at how many jurisdictions from around the world are looking at us, looking at Atlantic Canada, but mainly in Nova Scotia, for this opportunity. Just imagine the economic growth that we can have by utilizing this opportunity offshore, but also exporting it to benefit our generations to come.

THE CHAIR: Just for clarity, you can table the document today, then it would be tabled as a document of the subcommittee, but you can also table it tomorrow. You can table it tomorrow.

PATRICIA ARAB: I'm very familiar with the Fundy turbine and very excited to see where that goes, where that technology goes and when, and very confident that one day we'll be able to harness that energy and turn it into something great. I appreciate that maybe the question I'm going to ask is unfair, because everything is new, but I guess one concern that I do have - and I've looked to other provinces where this has happened - is that the pull for an economic win in terms of exporting will come at the detriment to the actual access to it for the province.

Again, I know that it's all early stages and nothing is set in stone. Is that something your department is looking at in terms of finding the right balance so that we are making sure that Nova Scotians are benefiting from our natural resource and it's not just going to be purely motivated by an economic exporting mechanism?

TORY RUSHTON: Very fair question. What I will say is the department and the government are making decisions so Nova Scotians are not left behind. This is a natural resource that we are investing in as a government and as a province. We need to utilize that.

The 2030 Clean Power Plan that I will table again, probably tomorrow when I get a proper copy of it, because I will be quoting from it all afternoon does spell it out. When you look at that 2030 Clean Power Plan, it doesn't have the offshore wind in it. It doesn't have the green hydrogen in it. It's in addition to what the plan is to meet our 2030 targets. I call it the gravy. It's extras, a bonus that will get us to the 2035 goals and the 2050 goals.

Bear in mind, every decision and conversation we're having, we have to make it in the best decisions for our ratepayers, and in this case, for the economy, our taxpayers of Nova Scotia. We can't leave them behind. They have to very much be at the top of mind when we're making these decisions on how to transform this.

PATRICIA ARAB: I do appreciate the tightrope that government needs to walk at times. We want to make sure that we're engaging stakeholders and that the companies that are out for profit are able to be successful but also not come at the expense of Nova Scotians. I appreciate what kind of a balancing act that can be at times.

There's so much work we're talking about that's going on in this industry, provincially and federally. Maybe I'm incorrect, but it does seem that the department is cutting the budget for subsurface and offshore energy. I'm just curious why the decision was made to reduce that funding at this time.

TORY RUSHTON: Offshore actually fell under that division last year, and the offshore study that we did to get us where we're at today - that was a one-time investment last year to get us to where we're at today.

PATRICIA ARAB: Let's talk about population growth. Again, I'm always trying to think a few steps ahead of where we currently are, which isn't always very practical when you're drinking water from a firehose - is that the saying? We're set that, for the population to increase, we're on that trajectory. I'm just curious if there are any specific actions that your department is taking to ensure that Nova Scotians can access clean energy - not just for those who are living here now, but as the population increases.

TORY RUSHTON: As we build this out with onshore wind, with battery, with solar, the opportunity is before us. I think I talked about the 2050 goals of being net zero so that every Nova Scotian coming here can have access to renewable energy. By 2050, our plan is that it will all be renewable energy, if you will.

On the other side of things is that new Nova Scotians come or visitors come - I can remember in trades that many of my colleagues went west to work, and they were travelling

in and out. I foresee that Nova Scotia could be that new sort of come-in-and-out destination. That's part of building our trades as well.

[4:45 p.m.]

We're working with NSCC and the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. We are going to need a lot more trades to build this sector out, so that's going to bring in more Nova Scotians. As we bring them in, those technical jobs that are well-paying jobs to help build our economy and things - those people are going to be wanting renewable energy as well.

It's certainly the pathway as we grow this, and the utility takes care of their grid system. We have the battery incorporation starting next year; more wind coming onto the system next year. Renewable energy will be accessible to all Nova Scotians, but also newcomers as well.

PATRICIA ARAB: I love that. Honestly, if we can strive to be the new Alberta or to be that place where people want to come to, I'm all for that. Please don't take my next question as a criticism, because it's not. When we talk about new people coming in and we talk about the need for tradespeople, we are living at a time when accommodations - that is not your responsibility, I understand that - but is there any sort of collaboration that is happening across departments so that when we have these goals and we're setting these goals for people to come in, where are they going to live? How are we going to take care of them? Again, I understand that's not the responsibility of the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, but I think that unless we're working collaboratively and not working in silos, a lot of the issues we're facing aren't going to be resolved.

TORY RUSHTON: It's an important question. No, it's not my direct responsibility, but I think it's all our responsibilities as elected officials. Yes, this started as a green hydrogen conversation, knowing that we had to bring more people here. Now it's a conversation that is at the deputy's table and also Cabinet colleagues directed conversations such as this. It's very much on the radar that, as we build this out, we also need places for people to live, and not just for those technical people or those workers. We want their families to be here, too.

It's a whole realm of things. I can say - and I know you appreciate this, as well - there are a lot of hard-working people within every department in our province, and they are dedicated just as much as we are as elected officials. Sitting around that deputy's table, I know they spread things throughout every department, so I could probably say this is an all-department front.

We know we have population growth; that's a great thing. It's a great thing to be managing as the population grows. It's a great thing to be managing - from my perspective, in my department - a new industry growth and building things out. It's an exciting time and

a lot of work but something I am certainly dedicated to doing. Part of that is that we want more Nova Scotians to come. We want people to be able to call Nova Scotia their home and build it out and for the Nova Scotians who, for generations, have built this province to also receive the benefits of things such as renewable energy in the future.

You mentioned Alberta. I don't want to compete with another province, but when we released our 2030 plan in October - I forget what magazine it is and forgive me if I must table it - there was an author who referenced Nova Scotia as being a possible Saudi Arabia in 20 years. There's energy here to be shared, and it's here to be shared with the world. We must make sure Nova Scotians get it right and new Nova Scotians get it right; then we can reap the benefits afterwards, as well.

THE CHAIR: As a side note, you do not have to table anything unless you directly quote from it.

The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

PATRICIA ARAB: Well, to be continued - we'll see where we go. (Interruption)

I hope you're right. There always needs to be a quick turnaround. There needs to be consistent turnaround.

The Department's new Energy Reform Act has provisions that would allow for small modular reactors to operate in Nova Scotia, but there was no mention of nuclear within your opening remarks. I am curious where it fits in your plan for 2030.

TORY RUSHTON: It doesn't fit into the plan for 2030. Correct me if I'm wrong later - and I know you will - a friendly correction. In my opening statement for that bill on second reading, I think I referred to the nuclear for our system. The changes in that Act are to allow Nova Scotia to own an asset if the small nuclear - or small modular - reactor were to come on board. For example, if NB Power purchased something and partnered with Nova Scotia Power on the purchase, it allows for that technology to be part of the Nova Scotia Power system.

I don't mean Nova Scotia Power is the entity. I mean Nova Scotia Power as our province - the new process that's going to be taking place. It allows for that process. It wasn't about mining uranium. It wasn't about building a new nuclear processing plant. That's not the case, but if it were, it wouldn't be for us to oversee that. That's federal regulations under the Nuclear Safety and Control Act that would have to be achieved.

That was about the technology of small, modular reactors and allowing Nova Scotia Power - or the utility of any other source that's going to be coming in to break that monopoly - to be able to utilize that and be an owner of that process as well.

PATRICIA ARAB: Maybe because this is more enabling legislation so the entity can purchase or can have access to it, you probably don't know the answer: What does the department suspect the timeline would be for this to be available or to be part of our reality?

TORY RUSHTON: Decades. That's just my personal perspective in the conversations that we're having around our department. This is not something that's high on our priority list, but it's a technology that's being talked about throughout all of Canada by different colleagues I speak to.

We know from their press releases that different provinces are looking at small modular reactors. It's a technology that we wanted to ensure we weren't locking away. This is a huge change that we're doing with our energy system. We wanted to make sure that this was a technology that wouldn't handcuff any utility if they needed to have ownership of it.

I gave the example of NB Power and that's just an example. That's not necessarily something that's being talked about. It's just a hypothetical example that I wanted to throw on the table to spell out where that pathway is. There's no immediate forecast for this. When you look at Ontario and New Brunswick, they started talking about this two to three years ago and they still look to be a decade or more away.

PATRICIA ARAB: I guess it's fair to say then, if we're talking about it being decades away, if these SMRs are purchased they're going to need fuel. If we're decades away, is it safe to say that there's been no conversation about lifting the ban on mining for uranium?

TORY RUSHTON: That's not what this is all about. This bill is not about mining uranium here in Nova Scotia. That's not what it is. It's strictly about a utility being able to own part of an asset.

PATRICIA ARAB: It may be semantics, but I guess my question is: Has there been any discussion? Taking the legislation aside, has there been any discussion on the potential for lifting the ban on uranium mining?

TORY RUSHTON: Not at this time, no. It's just about owning the asset.

PATRICIA ARAB: All right. Let's transition a little bit. The department's business plan states that it's continuing to support Nova Scotia's climate plan implementation, including assessment of geological hazards, for example, coastal erosion and our changing climate. I'm curious: Does the Minister believe the department's ability to prevent coastal erosion will be hampered by the decision of the government to scrap the Coastal Protection Act?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess the quick answer is no. Even the previous government was looking at different adaptations of our land that is on the coast. I'll use parks for an example.

If you recall, many parks used to have the boardwalks. We know that storms are coming in and damaging more boardwalks. Even when I took this chair, some of those boardwalks were being incorporated into the pebble walking pathways. How can we incorporate our parks into being more climate-resilient? Not just climate-resilient, but also cost-effective when there is some damage. There is a cost to cleanup and rebuilding.

[5:00 p.m.]

We want our parks to be there forever, obviously. We've seen from the recent storms in the last few years that there's a major amount of damage that does take place. We already had a climate adaptation plan within the department that started a couple of years even before I was here.

PATRICIA ARAB: There's nothing in the department's business plan or budgeting documents about developing Nova Scotia's place in the critical mineral supply chain. As the world moves toward more renewable energy, critical mineral mining, manufacturing, and recycling present enormous economic opportunities. I'm curious: Could the Minister tell me what specific investments the department's making this year to move forward toward these opportunities?

TORY RUSHTON: Sorry, that took a few extra seconds. I don't want to eat away any other questions, but I did reference that in my opening remarks. It's about \$320,000 that we're investing this year, and it's partly to develop it and create the circular economy, bearing in mind that that strategy was just released two weeks ago. We're certainly looking for feedback from the industry as well.

It's also something that I'm very excited about, and I know that many of the staff is. How can this create some of the cleanups of some of our abandoned sites and help us clean that up as Nova Scotians as well? There's value there, I believe, from talking to some of the sectors. There's an opportunity there that we can gain value and also have some sites cleaned up.

PATRICIA ARAB: Is the Minister able to tell us if there's any sort of an update on mine remediation in the province?

TORY RUSHTON: I don't know if the member had a specific site they want to talk about, but in general, for all the sites, there is liability that's on the books. It's been on the books for a little bit. Currently, it's sitting at \$118 million, but as projects do get done and remediation does take place, that value starts to decrease.

At \$118 million, I wish we could do it all today, tomorrow, the next day. Quite frankly it does take some time, and some remediation is just posted signage and monitoring systems. With others, it's more extensive. Those more extensive things are where I'm energetic about learning more about how we can use this new process, and whether there are critical minerals that we can be extracting from that. By your motions, I think we share the same idea.

PATRICIA ARAB: Yes, we do. We were just talking about the amazing parks - we have incredible provincial parks in Nova Scotia - and the department's work in running those parks. Last year the government declared that Wetlands of Special Significance would only be designated if there may be a species at risk present in the wetland, or if the wetland is already a part of a protected area. My question is: Does the Minister not think that the government should invest to preserve wetlands unless a species is at risk? Shouldn't we be investing in them and protecting them all?

TORY RUSHTON: Just quickly, the majority of that would be through the Department of Environment and Climate Change, not our department. Having said that, there are different programs that protect different things. To answer your question, I believe we need to be protecting everything. I think you knew the answer before you asked.

PATRICIA ARAB: We need to be a little spicy every once in a while. I've got to make sure everybody's still awake during Estimates. The department's business plan indicates that they're working to develop a co-management agreement for the harvesting of moose in Cape Breton with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia. Could the Minister give us an update on how that process is going?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes. I think it was late last Summer I had a meeting with the two Chiefs responsible for the moose hunt, if you will, from KMK - a great meeting. We shared in the assessment that was last year. I think what I can say is both the First Nations and government are concerned about the population in Cape Breton, but having said that, they're ongoing conversations. We had a great meeting last Summer and look to have further conversations with my counterparts there as well.

PATRICIA ARAB: I'm going to let my colleague the member for Clare take the remaining time of my hour. I'll be back.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Clare.

RONNIE LEBLANC: As you know, I'm both fisheries critic and newly forestry critic. The departments overlap quite a bit. I might start by asking a few questions around enforcement unless the Minister would prefer I ask forestry questions.

I'll start with a few questions around the enforcement aspect, around fisheries. I've already been corrected twice by my colleague the fisheries minister. I want to try to get a better picture of what enforcement looks like.

I don't know if the Minister could provide the number of enforcement officers. It was mentioned earlier today that there are eight for Southwest Nova, for that area, but across the province, what does it look like?

THE CHAIR: Just a note before we recognize the minister that the minister might have to change out staff at times to answer some of your questions, maybe.

The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Yes, it's eight in your area, if you will; 54 all across the province. Out of all those conservation officers, they're all cross-trained in a multi-array of enforcement avenues.

RONNIE LEBLANC: That's part of where I'd like to go next: The enforcement officers are responsible to enforce a large number of Acts, and from what I'm hearing from the industry, and certainly from what I've seen and what I'm hearing is that it spreads them pretty thin. It's difficult to be everywhere.

When the Minister of Fisheries got up earlier to do the reply to the budget, he did mention that for one of the newest job postings, the title of the position had changed to be specific to the fisheries. Is that a change that your department is trying to implement slowly, where there'd be enforcement officers solely responsible for enforcing the Fisheries Act?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, that's partially right. The recruitment is to have one dedicated fisheries officer, if you will, who specializes in the fishery. Having said that, there have been many changes in our officers over the last decade. Our officers at one time were separate, and then they all went in under the Department of Environment and Climate Change. At that time, that's when the fisheries officers actually disappeared, when they got pushed over to the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

The transition for the officers - I think it was last April, maybe April 1st - they came back under the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and we're very pleased to have them. Quite right: There's a huge amount of enforcement that they are responsible for. There has to be some dedication. Quite frankly, we can't snap our fingers and rebuild it overnight when they did disappear. I think it was 2014 or 2015 when they all went under the Department of Environment and Climate Change. I might be wrong on that year, but as we start to build these out, you're quite right, we need to have some specialization.

We're getting this one officer off the ground right now. Let's get to work on how to process that as well and give you some assistance in your area, because we're all well aware of what's going on.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I appreciate the answer from the Minister. I realize answering these questions is not an easy task and it's very difficult, but at the same time the industry - every single person or organization you talk to, they're raising the concern around enforcement and access to enforcement, where it be rather proactive rather than reactive. You have enforcement officers out in the field. I don't know if they'd be auditing those buyers or at least show a presence, where now mostly it's complaint-based. The Minister could correct me if I got that wrong.

How long do you think that transition will take? When does the Minister believe there will be a visible improvement so that fisheries organizations and fishers will actually see a difference?

TORY RUSHTON: Hopefully you'll start seeing some change this Spring with that one transition. Bear in mind that they're all still cross-trained. They're all still there to take the responsibility of the calls and complaints, but the one thing the member and myself and the Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture all agree on is that the DFO has to step up to the plate here too. We've all had the concerns, the complaints, to the DFO. We're making our investment as a province to adapt to situations, create change in the environment. The DFO has to step up to the plate here as well.

That's a pretty bold statement, but I know my colleague at our provincial fisheries department is having those conversations with his federal counterpart as well. I know the member has reached out as well.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I think across the province we all agree that the DFO has to step up and take a greater responsibility for the illegal fishing and enforce the laws of Canada, essentially, that they have on the books.

I don't raise these points to be political. For rural Nova Scotia, this really matters. When I go home on the weekends, these are the questions I get, so I just try to really bring across the point that it is important, and the quicker it can be done, the better, realizing that these things take time. Any change is good change, so I'll leave it at that. I wanted to really push that part.

Maybe I'll raise a question still in my fisheries critic role, on offshore wind. When the original offshore wind map came out, I believe there was a section or a line in there that discussed putting offshore wind in bays such as Chedabucto Bay and St. Mary's Bay. The last time I did look at that document, that line had been removed.

I'd appreciate if the Minister would comment a little bit on why that was in there. I appreciate that it's not in there, so it's not a criticism, but how you came to that decision to remove it, and if that's completely off the table.

[5:15 p.m.]

TORY RUSHTON: This is a very important question. It was in there. There was interest from different key players of bays, so it was put into the Nova Scotia Offshore Wind Roadmap, but in conjunction with the release of that road map, the regional assessments had started. One of the things we were hearing from different sectors was "Let's not get carried away here." There's the legislation, the Atlantic Accord Acts going through the federal level that we have to mirror the image here in Nova Scotia. One of the asks that we were having at conversations through the regional assessment - communications we were having back at the department - was to put everything on hold until the legislation is in place and we can get the regulator in place to oversee that.

Very quickly, we heard that as a government. We heard it loud and clear. I wasn't aware that it was taken off the website. Kudos. That's a good thing. We put a pause on that. We heard it loud and clear: Let's wait until there's a regulator to oversee some of this. We made that decision as a government. This is what we've heard. Let's put a pause on it.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Honestly, to me that's excellent, that that was taken off. Those bays are essentially some of the most lucrative fishing grounds. I think that's the right approach.

You mentioned the regional assessment. I did attend a few of those meetings, the regional assessments for offshore wind development in Nova Scotia. I do like their approach, where they're mapping wind and then they're looking at fishing effort and trying to cross reference, to try to focus on the areas where maybe there's less fishing activity.

I just want to maybe ask the Minister if that's the approach or if that's the preference that your department is going to take moving forward.

TORY RUSHTON: I don't think there's a whole lot of time left, but very quickly, both industries have to co-exist. We do not want one industry pitted against the other. Fishing's been here for decades - hundreds of years - in the economy of Nova Scotia. It's not the intent to pit them against each other.

I'm glad to hear you say you attended the regional assessment. I'm glad to hear you say you liked that process, because I am getting feedback that - this is just the first step of consultation for the fishers. We're listening loud and clear. We do not want to pit them. I got to speak at a summit yesterday about ocean technologies that are coming on board. Fishers will also have other opportunities to play a key role in this transition in this industry.

Look, it's the first part of a process in consultation. We are not ignoring the fishers. They're going to have many other avenues to have a voice at this as well, but the regional assessment is there for a reason. I'm glad to hear you say that you attended and that the process looks, right now, like it's working. That's good feedback for our department to hear.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Maybe I'll just finish on this. If - correct me - not long ago you came back from Europe - to look at offshore wind. Maybe you weren't part of that delegation. Okay.

TORY RUSHTON: My wife would be surprised if I was in Europe. I'd be surprised. I wasn't. The staff were there.

Just because of legislative process, I haven't had a chance to get a full briefing, but I know that many of those jurisdictions have already been to Nova Scotia to talk to our department, some of them directly to me as Minister. There's a lot of enthusiasm all over the world, and lots of excitement about renewable energy, and offshore wind is part of that.

Certainly, looking to carry on this conversation over the next few years as well, but I'm sure in the next few days in the Legislature too.

THE CHAIR: I don't know if the member can get a question in in 10 seconds or not. If not, we'll just say that the time for questioning from the Liberal party has expired.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thanks, Minister, and all the staff. I just want to say I'm a big fan of a lot of the programs the department is working on. I'm a big believer in efficiency, and in spite of the political circus in Question Period around the NDP not wanting money to go to EfficiencyOne, et cetera, I will say that that's absolutely untrue and that I'm a huge fan and user of the EfficiencyOne programs. In fact, I've had three energy home assessments because I can't get my life together enough to get all of the work done with one assessment. So I'm keeping them in business.

I'm going to start with energy poverty questions, but I want to start with this one. Recently the federal government put a stop to the Greener Homes Grant because it was oversubscribed, which is great because people are taking advantage of it. I, in fact, squeaked in there to get my solar panels on my house.

I'm wondering - it's a big chunk of cash, and people - because it was promised by the federal government and now it's being stopped, when in fact people might not have started their projects yet but they're thinking about how to make their homes more efficient in conjunction with all the good programs that we have in the province. I wonder if there

has been any discussion of the province backstopping that \$5,000 grant until the feds can get it started again.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: I appreciate your uses, and you and I have talked a little bit about your use of efficiency programs. I get that. I also did hear you say the good programs that we've put into . . . (interruption).

I just had to point that out. We did have this conversation earlier about the Greener Homes program. It was stopped because of the applications. It was a federal program, but what I will say is Minister Wilkinson and I do have a very good relationship. What I'll say is there's a federal budget coming up in two weeks. I don't know what's in that federal budget, but before we go too quickly to adapt another confusing efficiency program that would confuse EfficiencyOne a little bit more, let's wait and see what's in that federal budget for efficiency programs. With that relationship that I do have with my counterpart, we will be asking for the best benefit that we can get for Nova Scotians. Let's see what happens on April 16th with the federal budget.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Well, that's fair enough. I can always write you a letter, because hopefully we won't be here in two weeks when that budget comes down. But maybe we will be around. Maybe I'll be able to ask you.

I wanted to start my questions around energy poverty and affordability. The climate action plan set the goal of helping Nova Scotians save more than \$180 million on their electricity bills annually. Many Nova Scotians have seen their electricity bills increase, in some cases dramatically. Some people even have seen, lately, their electricity bills double. How exactly is the government working to reduce electricity bills?

TORY RUSHTON: Just quickly on the previous question, one thing that didn't stop through the Greener Homes was the \$3,000 for solar homes. That still does exist from the federal government. There are still some programs that can be optimized.

Something I missed saying that I shared with the Liberals was something that I've adopted in my constituency office. I'm directing everybody to go to EfficiencyOne. There are so many programs out there. There's probably something for everybody. I'm asking people to reach out and EfficiencyOne people will actually work with you to get you into the right programs - now I lost my train of thought. The affordability: How are we decreasing? We have the programs out for heat pumps, low income, upgrades to electrical systems, and other efficiency programs. These are all programs to reduce the energy costs of all ratepayers.

I know some personal examples, but I'll use a more personal example: I was on oil in 2015. I switched over to a heat pump - for two years, solely a heat pump. The heat pump at the time was about \$2,500 to install. In the first year, I stopped using oil completely at \$3,200 to \$3,800 - depending on what the energy cost or the oil usage was for that Winter.

Initially I got the repay back in one year. That's just one example. That may be a perfect example.

My point is with the infusion of these programs to get the heat pump programs, the insulation updates, the new window programs, and different programs we've invested in with Efficiency One, it may not see some usage - the number of electricity bills - but if you're going over to a heat pump to switch off some oil, you'll see the total energy costs come down. There's some investment in that.

I'm using myself as a prime example. Right now, I'm probably heating my house for about \$1,800 for the Winter. As we do see some warmer summers, there's also that comfort we're seeing when you are able to cool your home down a bit more, so your electronics aren't suffering through 32-degree weather. Your refrigerator utilizes more electricity trying to keep up. If your home is cooler, you are saving more energy that way, too, and lowering your own power bill with decisions you make.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I did the same thing, although my heat pump was considerably more expensive than yours. I also heat cheaply now, and now I have solar panels, so I'm completely off oil. Now I'm generating some of my own power, which is awesome, but I've got a low-interest loan for the heat pump from the credit union, and then I've got my solar panel payments. I can pay those. Even if I calculate in the payments for both things, plus the usage, it's still way cheaper than it was, but I had to have the money up front to do that or the ability to access credit.

I'm talking about people who don't have that opportunity. How are we working to reduce their electricity bills? I'm also talking about people who don't own their own homes. In Dartmouth North, for instance, there are two big communities of people living in - one is a full market rental place. It's a community of townhouses where people are renting them. The townhouses are extremely leaky and expensive to heat. Then there are the public housing townhouses.

Is there any attention being put to retrofitting public housing? In fact, many of the people who come to us with exorbitant power bills are living in public housing. They are heated with electric heat, but there's nothing efficient about them.

TORY RUSHTON: There are some programs that are taking place, some of them that were here when I sat in here, and we extended them, like the Mi'kmaw initiative for heat pumps in their homes. That will be completed this calendar year, I believe, or next calendar year, and it should have every Mi'kmaw home completed.

The African Nova Scotian community retrofits - but more so, I think specifically what you're talking about for your constituency is the affordable multi-family housing and non-profits can apply to programs as well. Furthermore, about the public housing: There are continuous conversations through the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing that

there are programs that are initiated to go through there. Efficiency Nova Scotia can walk these people through some of these applications.

[5:30 p.m.]

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to clarify, because I didn't know - people who live in public housing, in townhouses, can apply to do retrofits through Efficiency Nova Scotia?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, if they qualify for affordable multi-family housing and non-profits - a phone call conversation with Efficiency Nova Scotia. As far as the public housing goes, I'd probably direct you to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing about that one, to see what is off the ground and what's taking place on that.

There have been conversations with that Minister and the department - because those are questions that I hear in my constituency as well - I live in public housing, but I want to do the right thing and be a part of this. Also, those rental homes - they want to do the right thing, or they're responsible for their power bill - how do we get the power bill down a little bit? There are programs that we talk them through with Efficiency Nova Scotia as well.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. The question that's written here is: Will the Minister commit to further rebates or subsidization, subsidies, for low- and moderate-income households? We've talked about what's in place now, but is there a plan for expansion of that budget line and those programs?

TORY RUSHTON: I think what the Minister will say is, "I'm always listening, always looking to improve anything that we can put into place." Part of that listening is also talking with EfficiencyOne and hearing their feedback. What are they hearing on the ground? What can make some of these retrofits better? Is there another type of technology that is being talked about out in the field that we can incorporate into some of these programs as well? In short, I'm always listening, always willing to explore something and I have some great staff behind me that will do that investigation for us. If there's a program we can put in place that's going to better the energy usage for Nova Scotians, we're certainly listening.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Well, that segues nicely into my next question, because it is that a recent report from EfficiencyOne recommended the establishment of an energy affordability program for moderate-income renters, citing that:

There is a notable gap in support for these renters. Energy efficiency funding should also be provided to landlords and building owners who have rental rates geared towards moderate-income Nova Scotians.

We heard a similar thing in Committee last year from the Ecology Action Centre calling it a split-incentive scenario. This was in the news. I'm sure you were all following it. How is the department addressing this? Are you looking into energy affordability programs for renters? I know you just mentioned the multi-family housing thing, but how is the issue of the landlords being incentivized to actually use some of those programs? Because if they're not paying the bills, then they're less likely to be incentivized.

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, part of the affordability, for the electricity anyway, as you're aware, was on that task force Recommendation No. 12. That's the electric side of things. We're looking at what the recommendation was, looking at what the program is in Ontario, and how we can adapt that to better the ratepayers of Nova Scotia.

As far as the renter side of things, we're talking with Efficiency Nova Scotia regularly. Affordability is something that is a topic. We do have the conversations around Cabinet as well. We recognize there's affordability. Wherever there is an avenue that we can put a program into place to enhance the programs that are out there already, we certainly will.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Can I take from that answer a commitment to making sure there's a program to help people who are renting? I'm talking now about buildings where people pay high electricity bills and where the landlord would be responsible - these are market buildings - for applying for those programs. What are you doing to make sure the landlords are incentivized to do that?

TORY RUSHTON: One of the things is that we can't force a landlord to do something. One of the options that is out there for the renters - and I know I've had some constituents reach out to me already about this - is community solar, where they can buy into these programs. We've kick-started that. I think it's \$5.2 million that we're investing in that to take off.

There's a lot of excitement in my area among people who rent, who want to buy into that, so their power rate is going to go down, and they are going to get a better rate on their power bills. There's huge excitement on that. That's part of what the conversation that's going on. How can we invent more programs like this that will help those renters who don't necessarily own their own property, house, or dwelling, or quite frankly, people who own their own infrastructure but don't necessarily have the infrastructure that's designed to adapt to the renewable energy they could be utilizing on their own?

SUSAN LEBLANC: I wrote down that question from your opening comments because I was thinking about Highfield Park and places in my community that would be perfect, where buildings are close together, there's some empty space, and that kind of thing. What is the deal with solar gardens or that program? Has it started? How can I help that happen in my community?

TORY RUSHTON: This is just getting off the ground. As the developers get going, you'll be able to subscribe to it. This is an exciting change in the solar industry and something many of my colleagues are excited about. The guidance you'd be able to share with your constituents as this does get rolling out and how to subscribe to are things we'll certainly be sharing with every MLA office.

How can we all promote that as an elected body and as municipal government as well? How can we get that information out there so people know it's there and know, even though they can't do it on their own rooftop that may shelter them, there is opportunity out there for them to have ownership in here and receive the benefit of it?

SUSAN LEBLANC: The Energy Reform Act is in response to the Clean Electricity Solutions Task Force report, which was released this past February and included a key recommendation to address energy affordability:

The Nova Scotia government should evaluate the Ontario subsidy programs, as highlighted by the Affordable Energy Coalition, and other programs to determine the best way to deliver a "Made in Nova Scotia" suite of programs to help with residential electricity costs.

You said you are looking at it, but why did the government choose not to address that recommendation in the current legislation?

TORY RUSHTON: Out of the discussions with the members of the task force team, the biggest recommendation was to get Recommendation No. 1 off the ground and to get things working. Quite frankly, most of the rest of the recommendations don't need to see legislation done. As I had the conversation with the member from the Liberal Party - Recommendation No. 12 - staff are already looking at that because we're moving more quickly on No. 1, because we were able to table legislation right away. We were having conversations with the task force members. We knew what was coming over the last few weeks of their study and reviews and things, so we were able to enact that.

But we heard very loud and clear, from looking over that task force report, that we had to get No. 1 going. It's going to be a year or two before that's actually off the ground and in implementation processes. A lot of those other recommendations will be the responsibility of the new board set up. Having said that, No. 12, staff are very much looking at what's going on in Ontario and other jurisdictions so they can report back to my desk.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes, because it seems like when that new body is in place, its terms of reference would have to include that. It seems like it may not be required in legislation, but I'm glad to know that it is being looked at quite closely because by the time that a system operator or the new regulator, whoever it is, will have to have a rate or a low-income rate, or whatever it is, within its terms of reference. Anyway, you know that.

Speaking of task forces, can you provide an update on the work of the Energy Poverty Task Force? Do you expect recommendations from that work soon? Are you in conversation with the Energy Poverty Task Force in the same way that you've been with the other task force in terms of being ready to accept recommendations and get moving? Is there a timeline to introduce any of those?

TORY RUSHTON: That task force wasn't actually our task force. It was a different body that created that task force. We were a liaison on that task force. I met with a couple of members from that task force, and what I did hear from that meeting, and I saw it in media afterwards, is that those members were very happy with the programs that we have put into place last year.

What I will say also is that one of the members of that task force actually fed information to the Clean Electricity Solutions Task Force on Recommendation No. 12 and guided them toward that direction. So there's cross-involvement, but that affordability task force wasn't actually our task force. I'll add one more thing. I'm just getting clarification. We haven't actually received the final report from them.

SUSAN LEBLANC: This is a question that we talked about in Question Period today. We know that Cape Breton households in particular are disproportionately experiencing energy poverty. And in parts of Cape Breton it's just really, really bad. Eskasoni is the community with the highest energy poverty in the province. But it may be even one of the highest in the country.

Has the Minister looked into this area in particular, into why the energy poverty rate is so high in Cape Breton? And are there special things being looked at for Cape Breton communities to affect that rate?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, I'm aware of it. I don't want to say the wrong thing here and offend the wrong person. I don't want to make it sound like the government is not doing something. But I guess it would be for our department to take the lead in the conversation from Department of Community Services on this one. We are aware of it. We do have a new Minister of Community Services whom I've had the opportunity to spend a little bit of time with over our break last week. There are conversations ongoing about energy affordability, that, quite frankly, are important. It was a question on the floor of the Legislature today. I hope I put it across there that I recognized that fact. We're hearing it in my constituency and across the whole province. This is something that would in be conjunction with more than one department.

It's our department's role to put out the programs as we receive feedback through communications from other departments - something we do, and as Minister, I do have my eyes on it.

[5:45 p.m.]

SUSAN LEBLANC: The last thing on this subject: The Minister has said the Energy Reform Act will ensure ratepayers get the lowest-cost options. Does that mean when this Act gets passed, proclaimed, and set in motion, that ratepayers will see a decrease in electric bills? If so, when will ratepayers see a reduction in their costs?

TORY RUSHTON: As I did say during the initial second reading that we get to speak, this is going to be a transition over a year, a year and a half, or two years. Quite frankly, that independent operator will have to make the decisions to select which power generation is the most affordable and at the right time for the ratepayers of Nova Scotia.

If I can use a hypothetical example here, if the operator has a choice to take that 5-cent kilowatt hour and distribute it through Antigonish County or to utilize 12-cent coal generation, they must take the best option for the ratepayers at that time. That's where we need to get to.

I'm not indicating that's not happening right now. As I indicated earlier in conversation, when we released the task force findings, Nova Scotia Power responded quite positively about our process. They are going to be working willingly with government. I've had some great conversations with Nova Scotia Power in the process of doing this. That's what the independent operator will be able to do: make the right decisions for the right affordability and the right energy at the right time. That is how we are going to see the most affordable power going into the grid system at that time.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. I'm going to change topics to renewable energy questions. I wanted to start by asking a couple of questions related to your opening statements. The Minister mentioned that there had been two RFPs for renewable energy. One was a year and a half or two years ago, and there were 10 projects, I believe. Then there is a second RFP, which is still open.

When all those projects are up and running, where are we expected to be with our renewable energy goals for 2030?

TORY RUSHTON: I have a quick correction: It's only five projects from 2022, so you have the right number there. By the time we calculate the current renewables, including the Maritime Link that has the renewables coming onboard now and hopefully getting better every day, but I don't want to jinx it, and with the next two projects - the current RFP and the Green Choice - that will be about 70 per cent that is renewable onto our system at that point.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The Climate Action Plan notes that we should be at 70 per cent by 2026. Does the Minister figure that all the things he has just said will be in place by 2026 to meet that interim goal?

TORY RUSHTON: That is the intent. Recognizing that if supply chain issues do stagger on, there could be a percentage here and there that we're off by. We absolutely anticipate that we will be able to meet that by 2026.

Even further to that, the commitment that we made of 80 per cent renewables by 2030 - we believe we're going to meet the 80 per cent before 2030 with the processes and projects that are in the queue to line up with further green choices and things. We believe that we're going to exceed our 2030 targets.

SUSAN LEBLANC: What are we currently at with renewable resources? What percentage?

TORY RUSHTON: I have to stand corrected for the answer that I gave the Liberals. I'd answered the Liberals that we're at about 30 per cent. I didn't include the Maritime Link in there, so we're at about 41 per cent right now with the Maritime Link.

SUSAN LEBLANC: So the Minister is telling me, and I hope that he's right about this, that in two years we're going to go from 41 to 70 per cent. It's in two years.

TORY RUSHTON: The RFP that was done in 2022 - we're already seeing progress on those. That will be a 10 to 12 per cent increase, probably within 12 or 14 months. The Green Choice Program - we're going to be ready. We don't make the decisions. The proponent does the deciding for us. The procurement manager makes the decisions for us and makes those decisions. In two months, I think the recommendations or decisions will come down. Those projects will be getting off the ground.

The bonus with the RFP in 2022 is that some of those proponents already have a lot of their homework done because they were applicants before 2022. They might not have met the criteria earlier, so a lot of the homework is already done for the Green Choice Program. We know that there are many projects still in the queue that can come to the table and meet those requirements, if you will - the 5-cent per kilowatt hour that we need for ratepayers.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The Minister mentioned in his opening remarks the independent administrator who is dealing with all those RFPs. He just now used a different term, but I think it's the same person. You said "independent," but is that someone in the department or is that someone whom the province has hired? Who is it?

TORY RUSHTON: I probably did refer to it totally differently. I'm sure the staff get frustrated with me all the time. I don't use the same language.

They are independent. They're outside of government. Their expertise is actually outside of the province, but they do have boots on the ground in the province. That was one of the requirements that we made. We had to have somebody in the province having

communications and decision power within the province. It's away from government. Those recommendations come to us, and those are the decisions that are made.

I'll give you the definition of what the acronym Coho stands for: Coho is the company that oversees it and decides what the five projects would be, for example, in 2022.

SUSAN LEBLANC: How much time?

THE CHAIR: You have a total of 26 minutes.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The department is committed to increasing onshore wind generation to power 50 per cent of the province's electricity, up from 20 per cent. When does the Minister expect this increase to be complete? What's the timeline? Does the Minister know exactly how much the expansion will cost?

TORY RUSHTON: I am going to table this chart at the end of the day. I tabled it in the last session as well. It's a flowchart of how we are going to get to 2030, and it spells it out. Sorry, I regret to inform you that when you asked your last question about what percentage we were at with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables today, I didn't speak about the solar that is already out there: individual solar on rooftops, the solar garden in Amherst. There are different things that are out there. There are also individual industrial customers who are generating their own renewable energy that I didn't speak about. That 41 per cent - we are probably actually over 41 per cent already.

The timeline of the flow you asked about: Our target is 2030, and we believe we are going to meet that target well before 2030 to have 80 per cent renewables. You asked about a cost. It was very easy to do the cost estimates for the 2022 project, and we actually said that those projects couldn't exceed - I think it was 5.3 cents per kilowatt-hour. How that is dictated is the cost of infrastructure and labour and things is incorporated into it. To be very frank, it could be 6.3 cents per kilowatt-hour for the next project, which is still one of the cheapest forms of energy all across Canada.

There is indication of what the influx is of material cost, labour, and quite frankly, getting the equipment here that is needed. The cost of that is up to the investors. This is not something that the utility would have to go to the UARB with because these are investors who have come to Nova Scotia who want to take part in the renewable energy spectrum and receive their rate of return on the five cents per kilowatt-hour, if you will, which is a benefit for all ratepayers and a benefit for the utility because they are generating that power.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I was actually asking specifically about onshore wind, so is that what you are talking about when you answered that question? Okay. Will the expansion interfere with the province's protected area goals?

TORY RUSHTON: The quick answer is no, and I will speak a little bit as to why it is no. It is not going to interfere with our protected areas. It's something we are doing within the department now. There is a lot of interest in Crown land. And it is one of the challenges that we deal with: How do we manage our natural resources and also have those conversations with other stakeholders who are interested in utilizing some Crown land? Twenty per cent is what we have committed to protecting of our Crown land, and we are going to get there. We are going to get there, but there is also industry.

[6:00 p.m.]

The conversation that we have switched to is how things can co-exist on our lands, but the protection is aside from that. How can co-existence happen on the other 80 per cent? Further to that, the recent Green Choice Program that was announced - we knew from the 2022 RFP that there was a lot of interest from the public ownership of land, that investors were already set up and having conversations with the private landowners. I guess the question is: Why should we compete with private landowners if they are going to reap a benefit as well? There is no Crown land being utilized at all for the Green Choice Program.

We believe that it is going to be very successful on private land. It is going to reap a benefit for the energy generated at a reasonable rate for ratepayers. It is also going to reap benefit for the local areas with taxes for the municipalities, but also for the rentals or whatever the agreements are that those investors have made with the private landowners as well. Nova Scotians are going to reap benefits with those as well.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Can the Minister talk a little bit about the consultation that will happen in communities affected by new turbines or turbine developments? Will the consultation process include efforts to uphold Mi'kmaw sovereignty and interests?

TORY RUSHTON: To unpack it a little bit, I think every investor that's interested in coming to Nova Scotia to create the renewable energy already has a partnership or is working with the Mi'kmaq on some sort of partnership. We're hearing that loud and clear and we're hearing that back from the stakeholders at the First Nations that they're interested.

Secondly, there's a requirement through that Coho process that there has to be public engagement. There has to be public consultation, and there is some money in the budget for renewable energy that's going out through the community process. I guess what I would say is the stakeholders and investors that are coming to our province, the ones I want to hear from are the ones that want to include community and be involved with the community through the development of this and have those conversations. Those are the ones that I can get excited about. The aspect of coming in with demands, I don't buy that. I encourage the investors if you want to come to Nova Scotia and do that and have

community engagement and work with the community throughout the life of the wind farm, if you will, that's what I want to hear as Minister.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. The Minister mentioned a little bit about this when I was asking about efficiency projects, but I just wanted to check in with this specifically. The Climate Change Plan noted that the Mi'kmaw Home Energy Efficiency Project was still in a pilot stage. I believe this is what the Minister was referring to when he talked about every Mi'kmaw home, or most Mi'kmaw homes, having efficiency work done. Anyway, is the program still active and does it have long-term funding from the department?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess the reference to the pilot - that must have been printed a couple of years ago, or a year ago. What was it?

SUSAN LEBLANC: It's referring to the Climate Change Plan.

TORY RUSHTON: I guess what I'll say is that it's not a pilot anymore. We are looking to fulfill it and to fulfill the commitment. It is an ongoing engagement and it's our intention as a government to fulfill that whole process and project. Quite frankly, it wasn't this Minister who started it, but when I did have the opportunity to take this seat, I certainly heard from one of the previous ministers, who was quite excited about that whole project and encouraged it to carry on - 2027 is when it looks to be wrapping up, 2027, so it is funded right straight through. This program we're not looking at changing at all. We're looking to carry it through.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Can you tell me what percentage of privately owned and band-owned homes have benefited from the program to date?

TORY RUSHTON: Just quickly, we will reach every Mi'kmaw home. We don't know the division between private ownership versus band-owned, if you will. That would be something we'd have to go back and find out, quite honestly.

SUSAN LEBLANC: My next question was whether the department was looking into expanding the program, but you may have already answered that in saying you are looking to take this through 2027. Is the goal every home?

TORY RUSHTON: We are looking to reach every Mi'kmaw home. To give you a quick number, we are over 50 per cent now. That funding will go through to 2027. I'll be biased, but I'll still be sitting here in 2027. We'll make sure the rest of the 50 per cent gets done. Is that fair?

SUSAN LEBLANC: The federal government previously partnered with Indigenous groups across the province, including The Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, to sustain Nova Scotia's forests through traditional practices. Is the Minister or the department

working with the federal government and Indigenous partners to support this initiative, and is the Minister looking to expand it to better preserve Nova Scotia's natural resources?

TORY RUSHTON: We have an initiative to work with our Mi'kmaq in the forestry. We are carrying that on. I understand the federal one is coming to an end.

A year and a half ago, I had the opportunity to do a trip through the forest with some of the Mi'kmaw partners and learned a lot. One of the things I heard loud and clear is that they are appreciative of the openness and the conversation. The ongoing conversations do take place. With the need to manage our forest in an ecological way, they are a willing partner on that side and here to carry on conversations. This is how can we improve these programs with our Mi'kmaw partners.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm glad to hear you did tour the forest. Can I take from that answer that there are - are there any meetings in the near future planned to continue that work?

TORY RUSHTON: I don't know when our next meeting is. I am being honest, but there is also a representative on my Ministerial Advisory Committee who does work with the department on a regular basis. I think I am slated to meet with them in a couple weeks, if the Legislature has wrapped up, but the conversation is ongoing. I can honestly say I feel it has been a positive relationship.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I want to turn to a few questions about wildfires and forests. I meant to say this in my introduction, but on behalf of our caucus, I also wanted to say thank you to the many staff people who fought fires last year, the people who fly the water bombers, and all the things employees of the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables do for our province. I hope it was a blip, but unfortunately, I'm sure we will be seeing more and more.

The Minister is trying to recruit members of the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia to ensure the Province has a larger reserve of wildland firefighters. The deadline for applications was March 1st. How many firefighters did the Province recruit with that, and what is the rate of pay being offered to reserve wildland firefighters by the department?

TORY RUSHTON: I am going to try to be quick. I can talk about the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia for a long time, but I will try to make it short for you. The adaptation of the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia into recruiting some of the volunteers for last year - we got just over 40 last year for the recruitment call that we did then to help fight those wildfires. This was something that I have advocated for years. Fortunately or unfortunately, however you want to look at it, the Premier and I were in a position where we could ask for that to happen. It did happen. This year there were just over 100 applications that have been accepted, and the rate of pay that they receive is the same entry pay that would be received by our entry-level firefighters at that level.

What I can say quickly is since that incorporation it has created a bigger relationship for other things with the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia and was very well received throughout the fire service spectrum. This is something they really enjoy. They want to take the training and they want to help. It's fantastic. And I just want to say thank you for the recognition of the staff and the commitment that they made last year. It was a huge commitment on their part.

SUSAN LEBLANC: It's nice to see, obviously, that you went from 40 to 100. That is pretty amazing. Yes, thank you to all those people who applied too. The Ecology Action Centre has called on the department - and I was thinking this when I was listening to your opening comments - to create a provincial emergency fund of at least \$10 million in addition to funds provided by the federal government over the next several years - sorry, pause that question.

I am going to ask one more question about wildfires. In your opening comments you mentioned there is about \$1 million in the budget for wildfires. Of course, this past year there was around \$8.7 million spent. Maybe that was on all of the natural disasters or maybe it was just fires. In any case, it is interesting to hear you say that you may expand that budget line in the future as climate change progresses, but for now you are leaving it the same. Normally, when a budget line is way overspent, the next year that the budget is determined, you go a little bit up from that, even if you know it's because of a certain occurrence which, of course, was the fires. I am surprised to see that you have left the budget line at \$1 million. Can you comment on it?

TORY RUSHTON: It actually is an increase for this year. It used to be \$800,000, and we do have authority in an emergency situation to overspend. But it is actually going up to \$1 million this year, and that's why the comment that we project in years to come it will change and certainly recognize the fact that it is expected Nova Scotia is going to have to combat wildfires. I certainly hope not, but it is something that we need to be prepared for. Hopefully this year is a quiet year, but time will tell, and we do have the authority to overspend if need be.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. This is the question I was just going to ask, which is not related. The Ecology Action Centre has called on the department to create a provincial emergency fund of at least \$10 million in addition to funds provided by the federal government over the next several years to save hemlocks from being wiped out in Nova Scotia from the invasive hemlock woolly adelgid. Is the department acting on that recommendation? And, if yes, when can we expect action to be taken on the matter?

TORY RUSHTON: It's mostly being led by the Department of Environment and Climate Change, but yes, we are activating. We did get some funding through the Canada - Nova Scotia Nature Agreement, I believe, for research and doing some treatment, but the majority is being led through Environment and Climate Change Canada. We are responding to the issue with the hemlock woolly adelgid. I got it right. You did too.

[6:15 p.m.]

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes, you're responding. Is there any money in the budget for it and when is action being taken?

TORY RUSHTON: Our federal partners have been very gracious with this, so that's what is kick-starting our response, but there's nothing in our budget per se. The budget is with ECC. I'm reading your mind.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The Minister also mentioned in his opening remarks about new provincial parks - 15 new sites as parks and then two expansions. When can we expect to see more sites added to the list to bring it up to the goal of having 205 total provincial parks?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm trying to get an answer before her time runs out. We're 72 per cent through that 2013 PAPA Plan. That is what we're mandated to focus on. There is some more work being done to, hopefully, announce more of those properties this Spring, but it is certainly in our mandate that we need to finalize the properties that can move on from that 2013, and we're very much dedicated to try to get that off the list so we can start generating the new list in conjunction with ECC in the next round of properties that we're looking at.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I want to go back to just a couple of random questions. When we're talking about efficiency and moving forward and meeting our goals and acknowledging that efficiency is the cheapest way to keep energy bills down and also meet our climate goals - and that's well-proven - why are we not changing the building codes in Nova Scotia so that we're now building only highly efficient homes? We're going into a building frenzy - at least I hope we are. Why would we allow all of that new build that we need to make happen happen without being as efficient as possible?

TORY RUSHTON: If I go down the pathway of trying to answer this question, I am going to lead you astray, but it is the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing that actually oversees the Building Code. You'd have to have a conversation with that Minister, I guess. I don't want to lead you astray.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Well, maybe this is also for them, but too bad I didn't ask them that when they were up. I understand that in some new buildings - new planning - also we're roughing in natural gas lines to new communities. Again, the question is: In this day, in 2024, why would we rough in natural gas lines when that's a non-renewable, greenhouse gas-emitting fuel?

TORY RUSHTON: Again, the Building Code would oversee that. What I will say is the federal government does recognize that natural gas is part of the pathway to get to our 2050 targets, but also provincially, as we look at the green hydrogen aspect, we have a

pipeline system that will accept the green hydrogen aspect. There are tests going on right now at Dalhousie University and there are other educational institutions that are looking and working with Eastward Energy on how our system can adapt to the green energy spectrum of renewable fuels, but also green hydrogen.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allotted for the NDP caucus has expired. We will take a five-minute recess.

[6:20 p.m. The subcommittee recessed.]

[6:25 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allotted for the NDP caucus has expired. It is 6:25 p.m. The Liberal caucus has up to one hour.

The honourable member for Clare.

RONNIE LEBLANC: In my short time as forestry critic, one thing I did notice is that it doesn't matter if you speak to mill owners or if you speak to cooperatives, one subject that always comes up is low-grade wood and the market for low-grade wood. I have a few questions around that. I don't know if you could talk for a few minutes about what the department's plan is to try to address that situation because it seems to be something right across the board that everybody in the forestry is looking to address.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: For my first three to three and a half years as an elected official, I was sitting in your shoes as the critic. I got educated quickly by the industry. I have a lot of respect for the industry and a lot of friends and family who worked in the industry. When 2020 rolled around and Northern Pulp was closed under the previous government, there was a huge impact. Being able to sit in this position now is something I certainly took to heart. We need to help find some markets.

One thing I have been very clear about is that I don't believe in government creating industry - to be an industry just for the sake of being an industry, if you will - if that makes sense. We need that private sector investment. We need that private sector energy to be rolling around. One thing I did support 100 per cent with the previous government was the Small Scale Wood Energy Initiative, and I would like to see that rolling around. I also see the private sector has taken some initiative in doing their own small scale wood heating initiatives now.

We see private sector doing a study in New Glasgow about district heating with low-grade wood fibre. There are also the things we are entertaining and having conversations about - although my department is not necessarily the lead, but it would be the Department of Economic Development - like biofuel and mass timber. How do we incorporate more forestry sector products into our normal everyday life in Nova Scotia?

There is ample opportunity here. What I've said over the last 12 months or so is that we've been climbing over a mountain ever since 2020, and we have been beating that mountain down and trying to define a pathway to success. Maybe that mountain is down to a mole hill right now.

I heard it loud and clear at the meeting of Forest Nova Scotia. I think the member attended Forest Nova Scotia when the president got up and acknowledged that we are going through some hard times right now, but for the first time in a long time we are seeing the light of day. I think that is because of the work, commitment, and support the sector sees all around. We have some good-paying jobs.

One of the other bonuses was that I had an opportunity to speak at the Registered Professional Foresters Association of Nova Scotia this morning in Truro. On Monday morning I get to speak at a school at River Hebert. For the first time since being elected, while in a school talking to a class - an O2 Program - there were people there who were talking about forestry being a career opportunity; not just a passing Summer job but an opportunity to have a career in the forestry world. Why? That is partially because one of the instructors in River Hebert got to go on that Atlantic Teachers' Tour that the forestry sector puts on every Summer. I certainly encourage anyone who knows a teacher to get those teachers out and take an opportunity to do those tours because there is a huge career opportunity out there in our forestry sector.

It's not just sitting in a harvester, selecting trees that have to be harvested to go to a mill. There is mapping that takes place. There are soil nutrients. There are so many opportunities in our forestry sector. We've built our province on the three Fs: forestry, farming, and fishing. There is no reason for forestry not to be a part of that for the next 100 years. I certainly appreciate your recognition. I know your support, and the sector knows your support as well. I certainly hear that when I go around to talk to them - the support that they receive from you.

I think we have to still keep our arms around the sector to make sure it stays on a path, but I do share the president of Forest Nova Scotia's ambition that we can finally see some light at the end of the tunnel and celebrate. How soon that will happen I don't know, but we know that there are some serious conversations taking place. Hopefully, we can all help push them over that molehill so that maybe we have an anthill in a few months to a year.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I want to thank the Minister for the response. I know there are no easy solutions out there, but the forestry sector is important, and I will keep saying it. I know for rural communities, it's resources - fishing, forestry, agriculture - those are the things that keep our communities going. So I do appreciate the Minister's interest in trying to push forward solutions although they are not always easy to find.

You did raise the clean wood heating point. I think I raise that every year in Question Period, but I do have resources who are very interested in that in my area. I know there was, I'd say, a commitment or at least interest when I asked the questions to look at that in the past. From my understanding, it sits with the Department of Public Works, but there was the idea that they identify 100 public buildings that could be - I don't know if the word is "transferred" - my French is trying to come out - changed to clean wood heating. I don't know if there has been any progress on that or if that is something the Minister or the government is still considering as a priority.

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, it is still a priority. What I would say is that we've done our homework. And you are correct: I think part of that sits with the Department of Public Works. I also think part of that is a private issue that government wouldn't have any hand in except in helping to guide where to look and assist in that matter. The public buildings would sit with the Department of Public Works. We've done our homework too, but one of the things that I think we can all advocate for - it doesn't matter where we are, in rural Nova Scotia or urban Nova Scotia - is for any new construction builds, larger-scale builds. We need to look at this as an option. It is not only affordable fuel for heating, but it's fuel that is made right here and renewable right here in Nova Scotia.

When you look at the projects, and I'm sure you've watched the video on YouTube from the school in Cape Breton where they are putting wood chips in and utilizing the low-grade wood fibre and the residuals, if you will. They have utilized it for two years and completely replaced all the bunker C oil that would have typically been burned in that system and replaced it with cheaper, readily available fuel that is right here in Nova Scotia. We are keeping that money right here rather than off-coast somewhere with a different company. I think that is something we can celebrate.

Even more importantly, when you look at that and look at the emissions that are coming out of it - a small bucket of ash that can be utilized in agricultural settings - the majority is water vapour. It's a good news story. I think the member knows - the member is asking the questions - to advocate for his area, and I know the member appreciates that the government is advocating for this too.

If the member knows of any new provincial buildings that are being built, not just in his constituency but in neighbouring constituencies, feel free to give a shout-out to us to make sure it was on the radar for a comment. Have they looked at the wood heat initiative program to ensure we are capturing every available opportunity we have?

RONNIE LEBLANC: Certainly, I am advocating for clean wood heat. You hear the question: Is it green energy or not? Once you have visited a site and looked at the equipment they have - like the Minister mentioned - you'll see there are very few emissions, and it is very efficient. I am hopeful that can move forward, and I appreciate the fact that the Minister still has that as one of his priorities.

Maybe I will switch a bit to silviculture. Again, I am somewhat new in the role, but I had some conversations where the rate for private land has not increased since 1999. There is a review, and the Minister can correct me if I don't have it right - that should be done by 2025. Could the Minister speak a bit about that?

TORY RUSHTON: I still don't have it right. I still have to bring staff in every time I get a briefing note on this. We have upped the planning rate for this year, but the stumpage rate is probably more of what you are trying to get at. My first briefing or two, when I sat in this chair - I still don't have my head wrapped around it 100 per cent, I'll be honest - I heard from the sector that there were potentially some issues.

Staff are working hard. How can we reflect the current live action of what is going on on the ground in Nova Scotia versus a yearly or every-six-months update? Staff are reviewing that right now to bring a more proper silviculture system on our Crown land aspect that we can all work with and be competitive. Maybe competitive is a bad word. We don't want to be competitive with private land - we still want the private landowner - but to be more equal in comparisons and to be fair. It is something that a lot of work goes into from the staff.

The other things we do have to be cognizant of are the tariffs and the trade deals. Everything we do within the department does have to be looked at from the lens of the trade lawyers whom we do communicate with regularly. It is not just as simple as saying we can do the same thing as what's happening on private land. There are a lot of wheels and cogs in motion within the Crown land aspect we are looking at. We have invested heavily in our silviculture program.

One of the things I heard when I first sat here was the silviculture budgeting. They had no idea what was taking place for the first part of their year. They couldn't plan a year ahead because they didn't know until April or May sometimes. The budget process is a little earlier this year, but they could never know what they could plan on budgeting for, and the nurseries couldn't plant an accurate number of trees for the next year ahead.

We were able to double up on the funding last year to ensure the silviculture can get that year ahead. We were able to release a double budget last year, so they knew what was coming next year offset into this year. They got a bit of an update the previous fiscal year to carry them over. I heard today at the Professional Foresters Association of Nova Scotia meeting that they appreciated that last year, because what was in the nursery last year and going through the cycle was able to meet the ground when it was needed. They can do better predictions of that.

Change and growth are always needed. We are responding to the accurate things, but there are things constraining us such as the trade deals that we really can't oversee. It is a work in progress, and quite honestly, I'm still wrapping my head around it.

RONNIE LEBLANC: For my own clarification, was I correct that the review was supposed to be done in 2025? Is there any chance that will be completed earlier? One thing that was raised was that any increase must be legislated, if I understood that correctly. Is that correct?

TORY RUSHTON: No legislative change - it is a change in the regulations. The target of 2024-2025 - this is a living program that can have changes put into places. We learn, grow, and have conversations. The 2025 target is the hope to have that new process in place if we can get to that point. Right now, the review is taking place to see where we can manoeuvre, react where we need to react, and respond when we need to respond, so 2025 is the target to have everything completed. It is a change in regulations not legislation, so it doesn't have to wait for a legislative process. It is paperwork back at the department between staff and the co-existing departments that oversee that.

[6:45 p.m.]

RONNIE LEBLANC: I'd like to thank the Minister for the clarification. Maybe I will switch over to provincial parks. This is partly a local question for me. In your opening comments, you did mention 15 new parks to expanded parks and \$11.8 million for capital across the province. I'd like to ask the Minister how the department decides and why those investments are made. For communities that are interested in ramping up or getting their parks up to standard, how does the department look at that?

TORY RUSHTON: The member mentioned there might be a local comment in there. There are some recommendations that are at my desk right now. I know the member has been eager to talk to me, and we haven't had the time to exchange conversation about that, but there are some recommendations. We also have an advocate for that park in the member from Argyle, who has had a conversation with me. I know there is an important celebration coming for the Acadian community this Summer, so we will have a conversation about that park if you like.

The other aspect about all the parks in general - you mentioned the parks I had mentioned, 15 new and two additions to two others - not all our parks are day use or campsite parks. Some of the parks we announced are just that - parks that have availability for the public to go explore - but there would be no facilities and no parking lots.

As for the ones we do take care of, I will quickly make a few comments. When I first sat in this chair, the annual capital budget wasn't \$11.8 million. It was \$1 million for the whole province. We are proud that we have been able to increase that because our parks do get utilized. Our parks are utilized a lot and not just by our residents but by tourists and visitors who come to our province because we have a beautiful, scenic ocean playground, if you will, to paraphrase our licence plates. It's a bit of a cliché.

How does that get divvied up? There are a few things at play in that decision factor. One of those that is important is the safety of parks. As you are aware, there has been a lot of damage to a lot of parks in the last two to three years because of storms. We do have to invest in some repairs. Unfortunately, it is the nature of the beast. Some of the parks do have to take their place in line. Which are the biggest safety concerns that must be investigated first? Can some of the other parks take some temporary fixes until we can get there? How long does a planning process go?

There is a working plan for all the parks to ensure there is investment going through all the different regions throughout the whole province. That working plan is a living document, such as we saw with the two storms. Rissers Beach, for example: How does that play into the role of what we planned on doing last year versus what is actually going to happen this year in terms of storm damage?

There is also the accessibility component. We want to be accessible to as many people in Nova Scotia and as many visitors as possible, and the accessibility factor plays a key role in that. The municipalities have played a role in assisting with our parks as well. I know the member knows that all too well with the relationship with the park down there in the municipality. It is something we are proud of - the budget going from \$1 million per year to \$11 million. To be honest, there is a long working list of projects that must get done to ensure we have a safe, beautiful area to play in when we allow our visitors and our residents to be moving in there.

Here are a couple of numbers for you: There are 130 operational parks - yes, 130 parks - there are lots of places for us to do the investment in as we spread that all over the whole province. I would like to say we ensure there is a park in every constituency, but we have to be realistic about where we can make the safety and accessibility investments and make sure there is a place for everyone to visit throughout the whole province.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I do appreciate the increase in the budget. There is a great deal of pressure, I imagine, on the department because every community wants their park well-maintained and brought up to standard. I will go a bit further on the question. One park that I know in the Municipality of Clare - we touched on the other one - is the Mavillette Beach Park, and I raise this maybe on behalf of council, but I think council had undertaken a study for - the Public Spaces Master Plan beautification study.

They knew they didn't have any control over provincial parks, but they added those in there just to see, as an exercise of what it could look like, and the Mavillette Beach - which is very well used by not only people from Clare but across the region - the issues of washrooms and accessibility is huge. I guess I'm just making a little pitch to the department to keep that on their radar on behalf of the municipality. If while the Minister does budget deliberations on where investments go, that would certainly be a welcome asset for us in the region.

TORY RUSHTON: I know it's supposed to be questions this way, but I'd like to counter just so we can have a little bit of a dialogue so I'm up to date here. I'm just wondering if the member would be able to get the municipality to share that review that they did with us, and if the member knows exactly what's being asked for that specific beach this year - or park, I guess - if I can sort of counteract the question so I can have a better answer for the member.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I can certainly get that study to the Minister. I think the idea of the municipality undertaking that study was not to just ask the Province to do all the work themselves but to look at ways to partner with the department to get some improvements to the area. I'm certainly more than happy to get that from the municipality and share that with the Minister.

TORY RUSHTON: The municipalities have great relationships with our parks, and there's dialogue on many parks throughout the province. Does the member know specifically what the municipality might be asking for this year?

RONNIE LEBLANC: I would have to look at the study again, but certainly the priority would be washrooms at the Mavillette Beach and improvements to the boardwalks, for sure. There hasn't been much work done there in the past, and I think this might be an opportunity to at least look at it, especially with the World Acadian Congress. That was part of the impetus to try to get the study going, in hopes that they could get some of those public spaces improved. They are working on their own parks, you know, so they have done quite a bit of work. I'll get that up to the Minister.

TORY RUSHTON: What I can say is that this is a very important celebration that's coming to Nova Scotia. It's going to celebrate some of your heritage, but the history of Nova Scotia as well. I'm looking forward to it. I hope the member from Argyle can make sure we're all invited down for some celebrations and rappie pie and maybe some visits to some of those parks this Summer.

What I can tell you, without giving out too much information until the budget is passed, and I know the member will be very happy: There is some investment. As we look at \$11 million, it doesn't go very far from Yarmouth to Cape Breton. We're looking at doing some investment everywhere, but I can tell you there's some investment coming to that park this year. I know staff are back here listening, they know that the celebration's coming, and what I would say is "No promises." We will certainly do our best to see what we can do with the weather that's coming and everything, but knowing that that celebration's coming this Summer, there is some investment coming and I know you'll celebrate that.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I want to thank the Minister for considering that infrastructure, and as well thank the Minister for giving me the opportunity to ask some questions. I thank all of the staff. I know, watching Estimates the last few years, how much

work it must be, so thank you to all the staff who make the minister look good. With that, I'll pass it off to my colleague for Cumberland North.

THE CHAIR: The Liberal caucus has ceded their time to the independent member, with 29 minutes remaining.

The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you to the member for Clare. Good evening, Minister, my colleague for Cumberland, and everyone in the department. Most of my questions, I'm sure, will be very familiar to the Minister, and most of them will be around very specific questions for Cumberland North.

The first question, Minister, is around the Tidnish pedestrian bridge. I know this is a topic that you have looked at previously, as the former Minister from the former government had looked at as well. The Tidnish Bridge is a pretty special piece of infrastructure in Cumberland North, in the community of Tidnish. It's part of the trail system. It's been in need of repair for quite a period of time. I know previously the department had shared with us that they were not able to find the money in the budget to do the necessary repairs that had been estimated by a consultant. I know there's been some work with local non-profits, but there is a feeling that the government should be paying for the repairs to this piece of infrastructure; that it shouldn't be downloaded to the community and to non-profits. I'm wondering if the minister has an update on that piece of infrastructure, the Tidnish pedestrian bridge.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Yes, I'm very familiar with the bridge - still have not gotten there myself, and I regret to say that, being from Cumberland County. But I've heard a lot about the bridge, and yes, when I was critic, I advocated very hard for the people in Tidnish to get the repairs done to the bridge.

As Minister, you do learn some more information. There was a deal with one group. I don't think it was the ATV group. I think it was the snowmobilers group. They took full responsibility out of that deal. The community group has come to the department now, and they want full ownership and are willing to put their part into it and do some things. I believe the community group has been informed that that transition is trying to take place right now and move forward. I do know that I have a letter from the community group directly asking for some funding. Unfortunately, it's not my department that does the funding anymore - or fortunately; it depends on how you want to look at that. There is some dedicated funding that does go out to trail systems. It will connect a lot of our ATV trail systems throughout the network of Cumberland, but also into another economic benefit to bring into not just Cumberland County, but Nova Scotia, through the New Brunswick trail system.

This is an important piece of infrastructure. To be very honest, it's a huge number that was put into place to have the repairs. Having said that, the community group has been very active in getting some quotes, working hard on that. Before any of that can take place, that transition does have to happen. We have to have all parties . . . (interruption). Excuse us, we're trying to have a conversation over here.

All parties have to be privy to that conversation and be in agreement, so what I would say is that there is some movement on this file, and I do feel positive that - I don't know how quick it's going to come as an out-turn but there is a plan ahead in the community, and certainly I think the residents of Cumberland know that whatever I can do, I'm going to try to push this through to see that connection.

[7:00 p.m.]

As we all know, ATV traffic and snowmobile traffic is a huge economic benefit that we're missing in Nova Scotia right now. We did have the opportunity to change some of the share-the-highway laws. Actually, there's a meeting in Oxford in two weeks. Oxford wanted to be an ATV-friendly community. Just a little bit of a pitch for my own hometown. This has been something that they've asked for for about 10 years. There's an opportunity now to reap some of the benefits and share that. There is infrastructure out there. This is a vital link to bring some more of that economic benefit from another province. Not that we're competing, but that link does have to get repaired, and I do have a commitment there to keep pressure on that.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I think the minister probably is on the same page as me with this. That is for probably two or three decades we've seen Cumberland not receive its fair share of infrastructure money in many different departments. I think this is an example of that. It is a lot of money. I did see the consultant's study and did see the quotes that came in, but I don't think we should make any apologies for that. I think Cumberland County has a lot to offer, and our trail system should be invested in, just like in other areas of the province. I know that that is in the works, but the only reason that's in the works is because the government hasn't come up and invested in Cumberland County. The non-profits are saying the only way this bridge is going to get repaired is if we find a way to take the leadership of it. I am very grateful, and I'm sure the Minister is as well.

Having said that, I think there's a lot of potential in Cumberland County. If this government could see that potential and invest in Cumberland County, I have no doubt that the financial and economic spinoffs would far outweigh the investment that actually was put in place.

Another topic I wanted to ask the Minister about is around our provincial parks. We're very blessed along the Northumberland Shore to have several provincial parks. It starts at the Malagash end - and sitting across from me, I see a former Minister of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. He might remember when I did a tour of

Cumberland North, and it included the provincial parks. We started at the Malagash end of Cumberland North. The first one is Fox Harbour. Actually, the first one is Blue Sea Beach. Then we come up to Fox Harbour, then the Gulf Shore picnic park. We have Heather Beach, Northport Beach, then Amherst Shore Provincial Park, which is actually a campground, and then Tidnish Dock. We have several beautiful provincial parks in Cumberland North that allow tourists and locals to enjoy the beautiful Northumberland Strait.

I really don't get many complaints about our provincial parks. I've gotten some about Blue Sea Beach, but the Cumberland County manager has been really great to work with - I think the Minister knows that - has been very good with my constituency office staff and really just is helpful in every way. I think the Minister is aware there is one beach that I have gotten, consistently over the last five years, a lot of public feedback that they're not happy with the condition of that provincial park, and it's Heather Beach.

Last Fall, we did have a public meeting. Unfortunately, it was after many of the seasonal residents had gone home. Having said that, we did have a very significant turnout. I believe there were around 35 or 40 people who came and provided feedback on what they would like to see. I said, what do you want as the public? What do you want to see at Heather Beach? They wanted to let me know that there are many more year-round residents now living at Heather Beach.

They also feel that their beautiful provincial park has kind of fallen into disrepair. The manager, Reg, did take me out, and we did a tour, and he was very good to explain to me all the work that has been done, especially after Hurricane Fiona - I think it was Hurricane Fiona, not Hurricane Dorian. There was a lot of damage done at that park, and the staff and the department built it all out, put in a lot of fill, and rebuilt the shoreline there. Having said that, though, there are still a lot of rundown areas.

The public group - what I recommended for them was to ask for a meeting with the minister directly. I can convey their concerns on their behalf, but they're a strong, vocal group. They want to see improvements in their park. I did recommend they request a meeting with the minister to convey their concerns. I'm wondering if that's something the minister would consider.

TORY RUSHTON: I'm well aware - I have some family who live at Heather Beach, although not right on the park. The damage at Heather Beach started during Hurricane Dorian. There was substantial damage then and substantial damage in Hurricane Fiona.

The benefit or not benefit, depending on how you look at it, with travelling around all the parks and being responsible during Hurricane Fiona - although there was a lot of damage to Heather Beach - I don't remember if you were here or not for the previous conversation I did have, so I'll repeat a bit. Part of what we did have to look at was the

safety aspect. Some of the repairs that were done at Heather Beach were somewhat temporary, if you will, to get it to a safe avenue for a play space or access to the water.

After Hurricane Fiona was when I was minister. I wasn't minister for Dorian. I did have some meetings with residents and some tourists who come to the area. I had some meetings down in that area. You mentioned that some of the seasonal residents weren't there for our community meeting. I certainly heard from them that they weren't involved with this meeting.

Also, staff have had conversations at the site with the year-round residents. There is some investment coming to Heather Beach this year out of those conversations and some of the ideas. For us as a government and us as residents in that area - we want to see the investment to damage stick around - there must be better protection on the banks. We will be doing some investment this year - quite a substantial investment in Heather Beach this year - as we roll out.

I do want to be clear because I'm sure the member gets phone calls as well. Part of the damage is not actually on public land. Part of the damage is still on private land. I get those phone calls too. Unfortunately, we don't have the ability to go on those private lands. We still get disappointed residents. There are some sites there that they don't necessarily want to see after the fact. Unfortunately, there's nothing the member or I can do about that. We are going to be investing in that beach. Some of the ideas that were shared with our staff are going to carry on into the next - Phase 2 and Phase 3 - as we look to further investments each year of this.

Also, a quick shout-out that we talked about accessibility too - part of that accessibility is the investment the municipality and the government made to have the Mobi-mat put in. I think it was one of the first Mobi-mats in the province at a provincial beach. If not the first, it would have been probably the second. That's something we heard loud and clear, too, after the damage of Hurricane Fiona. Not all the repairs were done, as we had an early Spring last year. We heard quickly that the Mobi-mat wasn't put in place. I know staff responded to calls that I sent to them: Did we get that Mobi-mat put in place? We already have users going out and wanting to access the water. We know from being in Cumberland County that the Mobi-mat has drawn more uses from families that typically wouldn't have been able to go there.

Yes, I'm sitting here as the minister, and no, Heather Beach is not in my constituency, but it's just down the road. This beach is important to me. It did unfortunately have to wait its turn because of safety. There was a lot of damage during Hurricane Fiona that created a lot of safety concerns. There were probably some temporary repairs that were done until we can get to this next season, where we can do some permanent repairs and then look at Phase 2 and Phase 3 to complete the other aspects.

Certainly, a lot more can be done with all of our parks. You talked about investments, and \$1 million was not a lot to spread around the whole province. We're very proud of the \$11 million that we can put into this budget - \$10 million last year, and \$11 million this year - to spread around the whole province to ensure that not just every constituency but every area of the province has somewhere that people can access our parks and waterfronts.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: If I could, I'll just read through some of the notes from the meeting, so that the staff have an idea as well, just to give you a heads-up. Some of the feedback at the public meeting was about handrails needed to prevent falls. There were some concerns that the beach wasn't accessible. There was no ramp. I know one of the things the manager had shared with me is that they're trying to go with more of a natural approach to our provincial parks, but the concern that residents had shared with me is that there are a lot of seniors in our area who want to be able to access the beach, and they felt that because there was no ramp, and because the walkways out to the beach were so rocky, they were not able to access the beach. They felt the walkway to the beach was dangerous.

In fact, right before the meeting, there had been someone who had fallen and broken - I can't remember if it was a leg or a hip - as they were trying to access the beach. They had said in the past there was a wooden walkway and a ramp, and they would like to see that return. That's no longer there. They said if you can't use wood, please use something other than gravel and sand.

They would like to see covered picnic tables as they've seen in other provincial parks. This is something that we addressed with the manager. The last armour rock that was placed there was a little too small, so it didn't take long before it was actually spread from the tides onto the sand. One of the most beautiful aspects of Heather Beach is that it was always the sandiest beach along the Northumberland Shore, and now much of that beach has a lot of small armour rock that's all been pulled down, so the locals are not happy about that. Everyone did agree that the last time - I can't remember if it was after Hurricane Dorian or Hurricane Fiona, but the armour rock that was put in place was really too small. I think I was told, like the minister mentioned, that there was a plan to do some work to replace with some larger armour rock there to protect the wall.

Sandy Beach has been ruined, as now rocks from armour rock are covering the sand. The toilets: The cement base is cracked, and there are concerns that sewage is draining into the well. They feel that that's an environmental concern, the fact that the cement base for the toilets is cracked. The water fountain has had a sign on it for quite a while that people shouldn't drink the water, and they're asking if that's because the toilets need to be repaired because of the crack in the cement. They're wondering if there is sewage seeping into the water there and if that is why people shouldn't be drinking the water. They would like that to be fixed so that there is a drinkable water fountain there at the beach.

They would like to see dog poop bags. I don't know if that's okay to say in the Legislature, but again, that was something that they'd seen at another beach. I think that may be available at Blue Sea Beach. They're really pleased that it continues to be lifeguarded, and they're very appreciative that it is a lifeguarded beach. I think that covers much of it.

I believe there is some provincially owned land that's part of Heather Beach on the other side of the provincial road that a lot of people think is probably privately owned. They said they'd love to work with the department to see if that piece - it's all grass - could be also developed either with a playground or maybe more parking. They could work with the municipal government. On a really busy day at the beach, it doesn't take long for that parking lot to fill up, and then people start parking on the road. Anyone here who has been at Heather Beach would know what I mean. It's a very narrow road. It's more narrow than most provincial roads. It's not safe to have people parking on the road there.

[7:15 p.m.]

That was one thing the group asked: Could we look at finding ways to use that piece of land that's on the other side of the road? I'll just share that with the minister. Those are just a few comments that came out of the meeting.

How much time do I have left, Chair?

THE CHAIR: You have nine and a half minutes.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Minister, I would like to ask a question: Has the minister and his department considered the request to provide free fishing and hunting licences for veterans? That's something that some people had brought forward, and I had brought up last session. I think that goes through this department.

TORY RUSHTON: Thank you for that information. We're going to take that back to staff and investigate even further. I've visited the site a few times with our area manager. One of the things that I've also learned - my uncle doesn't live too far away from that area and ever since Hurricane Dorian, the sand is missed from that whole section of beach. Although I agree it's sad to see the sand go, and I was not minister during Hurricane Dorian, but it wasn't necessarily the repairs that actually disappeared the sand. The sand did disappear during Hurricane Dorian along a lot of that beach. Maybe not all of it, but what the reason was at Heather Beach I don't know.

Also, when you put retaining walls up, it does put the sea action to a different area. Every time you try to do a good deed, you're creating harm in another way. When I visited with our area manager, we wanted to make sure that the first phase of the proper repair was the proper thing. Can we allow the sea action to maybe bring some of that sand back, in the hopes? Time will tell, I guess.

We do currently offer some discounts for veterans and seniors - camping, sorry - for veterans. I'm trying to think of two or three things in my head at the same time - sorry. I'll start over.

Fishing licences aren't this department. That would be Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, not here right now. We do offer discounts for veterans. Any changes to the hunting licence do go through a sort of consultation with our partners at Nova Scotia Federation of Anglers & Hunters, but also our Mi'kmaw conversations. The advocacy of any changes would come through those conversations.

I will say those were not high on their list when they came to have their annual meeting with me. It's not that the department is ignoring veterans or anything. Once you're a senior, you receive your free hunting licence and, I believe, fishing licence. That's certainly something that we can have a conversation about again too, with that group. We sort of take the lead from the Federation of Anglers & Hunters on what their biggest advocacy would be for that.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Just going back to the sand at Heather Beach. Actually, we talked about that: how the whole landscape really changed after the hurricane. What they had asked me if it could happen is the armour rock that had gotten pulled down over that sandy area that they have always loved - could that armour rock be picked up and moved so that at least they'd have some of their sandy beach back? That's what I was referring to.

Another topic that I've had quite a few constituents come to me about, and the minister is probably well aware there's a very organized group. That is there's a very strong group that wants the department to take a look at glyphosate spraying in Cumberland. I don't have all the stats, but they did share with me that Cumberland gets a very high percentage of any spraying that happens in the province. There are concerns that they shared with me - they shared a lot of data with me. They have a lot of health concerns, and certainly I am not an expert in that area at all. I'm very supportive of our forestry industry.

I'm wondering if the Minister would be able to comment if there's been any consultation with the people that have concerns, and is there any work being done on that area to just ensure that this wet spraying is being done, that it is safe? I don't know if the minister could comment on why Cumberland has such a high percentage, because there's so much forestry and woodland across the whole province. I believe the number they gave me was something like 80 per cent of the spraying that's done in the province is done in Cumberland, but I could be wrong with that number.

TORY RUSHTON: Quickly, yes - a lot of forestry in Cumberland County. Three years ago, I think 23.5 per cent of wood fibre came from Cumberland County, which we're very proud of, and I know the member is too. It's a huge employer in our area.

Unfortunately, the spraying is not regulated by our department. It is the Department of Environment and Climate Change, and regulations through the federal government as well.

What I can say about the spraying is that when we announced the ecological forestry practices, it was a tool in the box that was recognized by that process. What we did was adopt the same thing that the previous government did. If there was a wish for the licensee to do spraying on any Crown land that they were responsible for, they would have to go see Environment and Climate Change or the federal regulation, whatever that is. We don't regulate it in our department, it is regulated through Environment and Climate Change. Like I said, on Crown land they would have to go through the same processes, and the provincial government doesn't provide funding for that on the Crown lands.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Does the minister's department control or have any work with off-highway vehicles and trails now, or is that a different department?

TORY RUSHTON: The reason I was chuckling is that this is spread over three departments. We're not responsible for the funding anymore. We oversee the Act. Funding and the trail overseeing would be the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. The Department of Public Works has some of the rights overseen now with the shared highway and some of the trails. We do have a responsibility with our conservation officers with some enforcement, but it's also shared enforcement with the RCMP or local municipal police forces.

As I said before, the trails are something that's very important. We are working hard to try to get that under one umbrella. I've heard many times from different ATV associations, different utilizers, different snowmobile clubs: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could go to one department and get an answer? Wouldn't it be wonderful?"

So we actually are undertaking that, and a lot of the movement has moved towards Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. We are trying to put it under one umbrella for one conversation, one-stop shopping.

It's gotten much better - there is still room for improvement. But most of the trails would be Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, especially for the funding aspect - the designation of roads would be us.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I'm assuming my time is almost done, yes? I don't know if the minister could comment on the off-highway vehicle trail system in Cumberland. My understanding is that one of the things holding us back is that we don't have a connection across the Trans-Canada Highway, or we don't have a safe passageway there. What the associations have told me is that because of that, they can't do proper maps and do proper marketing to bring more business to Cumberland. I don't know if the minister can comment on that or if he has any insight into whether we can get that connection between Cumberland North and Cumberland South.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allotted for the Independent member has now expired. It is time for the NDP caucus with 20 minutes.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just to confirm: Is that 20 minutes minus five for the resolution?

THE CHAIR: Sorry. Twenty minutes plus - so you have 20 minutes.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great, thank you. I don't mind if the Minister wants to answer the question from the Independent member.

TORY RUSHTON: It depends on which member of which association you speak to on connections. I know the huge investment that was shared between the federal and provincial governments - 2008, 2007 maybe - where the infrastructure was put in at the Oxford Bridge that connected from one side of the road to the other and was able to link a lot of traffic from Cumberland South to Cumberland North, if you wanted to split that up.

If you went back far enough, there is another bridge under the highway that can link you to the other side of the Trans-Canada Highway. It's inconvenient, and that's why I say - and it's not to pit one association against the other - the advocacy in me for Cumberland County would be to put a bridge over top of the highway. Realistically, it is a lot of money. There is one member sitting at the table who does have one over a highway that we could use as an example, if I were advocating for it - which I certainly would - but there is a lot of money. When I talk to the associations throughout, they are looking to invest in that. They are also looking to invest and maintain the routes they do have and look at it as an inconvenience at the present time - not that they are not asking for that.

There are great maps that do exist. I say that because there is a group from PEI that comes to advocate every two weeks in the Summer with their ATVs as to why they don't have a network of ATV systems in PEI. They come to advocate every two to three weeks with their ATVs. They come here because they have a map system in the back of their ATVs that they can use to cruise from Cumberland County to Colchester County and even into Pictou County if they take the right routes. There are maps existing, but I've heard from some of the presidents of the local associations back home that there is a lot more work they could be doing. There is a lot of work that has been done and a lot more work that can take off. I know we all support that, and we can grow that sport.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I am going to ask some questions on the aspect of the bill before us in the Legislature on the nuclear and uranium subject. I know you answered some questions from the Liberal Party, but I didn't hear them. The ban on nuclear power in this province dates back to 1992. What was the rationale behind lifting the ban in the legislation? (Interruption)

TORY RUSHTON: I thought I misheard you - that's why I asked you to repeat that. Strictly, the whole rationale about this is that when we are looking at the new legislation we put forth, it is a huge piece of legislation. It is going to take a year or two to get into place. Part of that is we wanted to ensure we were not ignoring any of the new technologies. We are looking at other jurisdictions. There are a lot of jurisdictions in Canada that are looking at the SMR; specifically, our neighbours in New Brunswick are looking at SMR for power generation. This will allow the utility to be part owner in that power production.

[7:30 p.m.]

A hypothetical example: If NB Power was to invest and asked Nova Scotia Power to invest in something in Ecum Secum, New Brunswick - I don't think it's even a place in New Brunswick, I'm just trying to be hypothetical - it would allow the utility to be part owner in that process. It's not going to happen anytime soon. It's decades away.

This is not allowing mining of uranium or anything like that. Any new construction of nuclear that were to happen in Nova Scotia - and that's not what we're looking at, I'm just being hypothetical - still has to go through federal approvals. I don't even have the right Act to name. That was not the intent. The intent was to allow a utility to be an ownership in some of these new technologies with the SMRs that are coming online.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Right, I understand that. I also know that 10 years down the road if something happened and the utility wanted to become a part owner, we could just amend the Act then, right? I understand that that technology is being looked at. I understand that it's 10 years away. I understand that maybe, if we're going to meet all of our goals by 2050, there's something to that, but couldn't we have just waited until the time came, with more information, instead of passing this giant piece of legislation with this in it, which basically undoes decades of advocacy and safety in Nova Scotia?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess what I would say is that I hear you. The technology is moving very quickly. Two and a half years ago, green hydrogen wasn't even part of the technology in Nova Scotia. Part of the decision factor in this is the investments in some of these technologies and investments into some of these projects are happening right now. We did not want to handcuff any utility that wants to be a part of what New Brunswick or Ontario or whatever is taking place - just using that as an example. Investments are taking place now for 10 and 15 and 20 years out.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Can the Minister table any backgrounders or consultation reports that influence the decision?

TORY RUSHTON: I don't want to waste time to see if it's actually in the task force recommendation. It actually was in the task force recommendation to allow this. We were trying to see whether it was in the conversations and consultation that we had with the task force members, but it was in the report back to us to look at this technology as well.

SUSAN LEBLANC: It's definitely Hour 4. The Minister previously said that the intention of the Act was not to open uranium mining, but the Premier has said that he's personally in favour of uranium mining. Has the minister had conversations with the Premier to establish a uranium mining industry in this province?

TORY RUSHTON: No.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Okay, great. The Canadian Critical Minerals Strategy states that the categorization of uranium as a critical mineral can be reassessed during the biennial review of the Nova Scotia Critical Minerals List, but in the event of significant changes to the critical minerals landscape, the Province of Nova Scotia may increase the frequency of these reviews. When is the next review of the strategy for the list?

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Dartmouth North, to repeat her last question for Hansard.

SUSAN LEBLANC: When is the next review of the list?

TORY RUSHTON: Page 36 is the task force recommendation on the nuclear, if you wanted to look that up. It's a recommendation there. Regarding the list that we look at, it's an ongoing thing yearly. The next time the list will be looked at is December 2024.

SUSAN LEBLANC: So is the categorization of uranium being actively reassessed, or will it be reassessed in time for the list review?

TORY RUSHTON: It's on the national list, not actively being reviewed at the present time for the Province. After December 2024, it will be every two years after that.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Are there any plans in the near future, i.e. between December 2024 and two years after that, to reassess the categorization of uranium?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess what I could say is that if there were any interest in changing it, it's a change in legislation that we'd have to bring to the floor of the Legislature.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Well, to be honest, that doesn't fill me with much hope, because we see changes brought to the floor of the Legislature with one day's notice. I would feel better if you were like, "Yes, in two years we're going to review it." Then we'd have a little bit of time. But good to know.

I just want to go back to the nuclear power for a second. It was a recommendation in the task force report, on page 36, to look at nuclear. Basically, I'm wondering who the task force might have cited in terms of conversations or consultation, and were there any environmental groups consulted?

TORY RUSHTON: Wouldn't it be easier if we just had a conversation? Wouldn't it be so much easier? The list of consultation is in the back of the task force. I just want to be clear: It was a recommendation to lift the nuclear aspect for ownership. Not for mining, not for anything else - just ownership of an asset, if you will.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm sorry, I don't understand this so much. Ownership I understand, but that would mean ownership within the territory of Nova Scotia, yes?

TORY RUSHTON: Not necessarily. As I said earlier, if it was the utility's interest to build a new nuclear plant, it wouldn't be this government that would be looking at it. There are a lot more federal regulations that have to be overcome and achieved. This was strictly about owning an asset and receiving that nuclear power if they were to be an owner of an SMR. It's basically stemmed around the SMRs.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. I just want to ask a couple more questions. An official with the minister's department - I don't know who that was - estimated that the cost associated with the Energy Reform Act would add pennies to individuals' power bills. I have a document I can table with that. Can the Minister elaborate on this? Does the Minister know for certain that it will only have minor impacts on power bills?

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables, with three and a half minutes left.

TORY RUSHTON: Three and a half minutes, thank you. The independent system operator is already being paid through power rates, so basically taking it out of the asset of Nova Scotia Power - not even taking it, it's the same building, its terms. It's already being paid through the power rates of Nova Scotia Power. The bonus of having this independent is that it will be a non-profit entity overseeing this. There's no guaranteed rate of return; there's no asset. They have to make the best decisions possible for the ratepayers of Nova Scotia, and the payment is already built into our power bills. It's already something that's being paid for through Nova Scotia Power, so it's just going to be this new non-profit entity that will take over the finance generated from the power bill to pay for that, if that makes sense.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. I guess I'm finished my questioning. I just want to end by saying again that I really do think, and I say this every year, that we want to be talking about power bills, not rates. Efficiency is the way to go. I would love to see the government - when we talk about affordability and we talk about reaching our goals, which we have to do, it feels to me like the perfect marriage of those things is a massive investment in efficiency wherever we can.

To me, a major retrofitting of all publicly owned buildings should be happening - should have happened yesterday - including public housing. Especially public housing, because that's the affordability part, but anywhere we can. Let's electrify our government-

owned fleets. I guess that's for the Department of Public Works, but let's invest in electric ferries and buses. Anyway, you know what I'm saying. I just want to take up all the time I can, but I do think efficiency is the way to go. Does the minister have any last comments on his hopes and dreams for efficiency in this province?

THE CHAIR: With 58 seconds remaining, does the minister have any comments?

TORY RUSHTON: How many?

THE CHAIR: Fifty-two. Do you have any comments?

[7:45 p.m.]

The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

TORY RUSHTON: Yes. First off is, part of the announcement that we're proud of is the first major investment in public housing in 30 years. There will be energy efficiencies put into this new housing. There has to be. The other thing is that the Clean Power Plan will also incorporate the demand side management of the system. That pays for some of the programs that we have in place. It's our intention to carry that on. EVs and the time-of-day charging, but also putting back into the grid system.

There are a lot of exciting things happening in the electrification of our world . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allotted for the NDP caucus has now expired. You have six minutes for a closing statement and for your resolution, if you would like to finish your train of thought.

The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: I forget where I was, but I guess my final comment would be that that's why we need conversation back and forth. We get interrupted here.

There are exciting things happening: time-of-day charging; time-of-day use; time-of-day heaters on the wall. There are so many things that can be intertwined now in saving energy, but also saving money for the users. It's an exciting time to actually be sitting in this chair, and to be part of this government that is going to be able to make some decisions on the right path.

We may debate on what that path is, but I think the ultimate goal we all agree on. I don't think there's any debate on that between us, so certainly, it is an exciting time. The programs that we've looked at - certainly any time that something is thrown our way we look to expand them and grow them, or new ideas that do come from us.

Out of this conversation, I think what I would say is that from everybody around the table, it's been a great evening. I know that we have some notes and some homework to take away and share some thoughts.

In the last few minutes, it's been a very exciting year for the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and a lot of transformational change has happened. I'd be remiss if I didn't take a few minutes to recognize the communities that I spend a lot of time in in the last two years, and that would be Shelburne County and Tantallon. I spent a lot of time there in the last two years. I never made so many trips to Shelburne in my life. It's a beautiful part of the province.

I just want to recognize the traumatic change that has gone on in those communities over the last two years. I certainly know that we're here with all those community members as we come out of those transitional climate change changes, and staying ready for what may, hopefully not, come to us in the Spring of 2024.

I'll also give a huge shout-out to our staff. They've been deeply ingrained in every weather event that has taken place over the last two to three years. Some things our department staff have never really been adapted to, such as snowshoeing through the snow in Cape Breton to take seniors their medicine.

It's not just the ones that are boots on the ground. We have a great resource in our Incident Command System within our Department of Natural Resources and Renewables and that staff. I know they're recognized by many departments throughout the province, but I also want to give a shout-out because they're recognized right straight across our country for some of the best wildland firefighters and people whom we can share with the rest of our country.

It's not just those firefighters. It was a whole department staff response when we were asked through the EMO and the Premier's Office to go and assist our fellow Nova Scotians through all these weather events. I'd be remiss if I didn't take a few minutes just to say a special thank you to all the staff within our department. Thank you for being there for our Province of Nova Scotia and responding at the time needed.

With that, I think I have one minute left to read my resolution. I'm not going to go slow. You can fill the time with a little bit of the speech. A special thank you to all those staff and also the volunteers who helped us out throughout those weather events.

Resolution E16 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$141,588,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, pursuant to the Estimate.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I'd also like to thank you as a constituency that is right next to Tantallon. I know that the community on both sides dealt with a lot during

those fires. I appreciate your words and I'm sure the communities and the firefighters do as well, along with Shelburne.

Shall the resolution stand?

The resolution stands.

It is now 7:51 p.m. and that concludes the subcommittee's consideration for Estimates for today. The subcommittee will resume consideration when the House again resolves into Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

Please return to your seats in the Legislative Chamber. The Committee of the Whole must rise and report before the House concludes its business for the day.

[The subcommittee adjourned at 7:51 p.m.]