



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, APRIL 3, 2023

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

5:10 P.M.

CHAIR
Kent Smith

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Committee of the Whole on Supply will come to order.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Mr. Chair, would you please call the Estimates for the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables, Resolution E15.

Resolution E15 - Resolved that a sum not exceeding \$142,579,000 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: I will now invite the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables to make some opening comments and introduce the members of your team, should you choose.

The honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables.

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to welcome Deputy Minister Karen Gaten this afternoon, and Michael O'Brien from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board to support as well. Also, the staff who are in the background supporting us here today - I recognize their efforts as well.

Good afternoon. I'm happy to join you here in Mi'kma'ki', the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaw people. I appreciate this opportunity to talk about priorities this fiscal year for our government and for the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables.

This budget considers the challenges of opportunities of our time. It's responding to the demands of a growing and diverse population. It's responding to the climate change. It's putting us on track for a sustainable future - a future where people and communities thrive from one end of this beautiful province to another.

We are making progress. Budget 2022-23 helps us move our province forward. It's investing in health care and many more things that are important to Nova Scotians. Our top priority is health care. Our government does have a plan to work on it and fix it - because that's what Nova Scotia families need and deserve, and because healthier people are the foundation of a strong economy. That strong economy, in turn, helps us pay for health care.

My department has an important role in propelling our economy forward, and making it a green and sustainable one. Our estimated budget is more than \$142 million. It reflects the resources needed to achieve our priorities for a sustainable, prosperous Nova Scotia.

Sustainability is at the heart of everything we do. We're protecting and managing Nova Scotia's natural resources in a sustainable way. We're making the transition from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy. We're creating a bright, sustainable future for Nova Scotians. This means supporting our traditional industries and environmental protection.

These objectives are not at odds with each other. In fact, they depend on each other. Let me explain. There is great opportunity for sustainable growth in the forestry sector. This sector drives our economy and puts food on the table in rural communities across the province.

Thousands of Nova Scotians make a living in the forests. In fact, hundreds are multi-generational foresters. These people care about keeping our forests healthy. They are making sure this sector is sustainable for the long haul. That's our goal too - conserving biodiversity, nurturing healthy forests and good forest management for a sustainable industry. That's where the triad model of ecological forestry comes in. As you know, this model was recommended by the independent forest practices review. Building this model on Crown land is the first item in my mandate letter. It's a bold, new approach to forestry management in Nova Scotia. The model includes the conservation zone, the mixed-use zone, and the high-production zone.

The three zones work together for a healthy forest and a sustainable forestry sector. There is more work to do, but I'm happy to say that as of January, the three zones of this model are now in place, and they can all stand united together.

[5:15 p.m.]

The first zone we established is the conservation zone. That is 35 per cent of Crown lands conserved in protected areas and old-growth forests. This zone may grow as we work towards our goal of protecting 20 per cent of Nova Scotia's land and water mass, but it will never shrink.

I want to note that in August we released the updated old-growth forest policy. It has a better, science-based definition, which includes more forest types, such as coastal old-growth forest. It renews our commitment to protect all existing old-growth forests on Crown land, and also areas that are approaching old-growth age and otherwise met the definition. Ultimately, it derives stronger protection for old-growth forests, and it supports our approach to ecological forestry where we prioritize biodiversity.

The second zone of the triad model that we established is the matrix or mixed-use zone. It makes up 55 per cent of Crown land. It is where timber harvesting is done with low-intensity practices. As of June 1st of last year, all but a handful of grandfathered harvest plans are following the new guide for this zone. To help with the adjustments, we've been offering more training for the forestry industry.

We are also developing a software solution that will help. It will translate data from the harvest proposals into final prescriptions that follow the new guide. That work should be completed this year. Between the conservation zone and the mixed-use zone, we are putting biodiversity first on 90 per cent of our Crown lands.

In January, we put the final zone in place. The high-production forest zone will be no more than 10 per cent of the Crown lands. High-production forestry is an efficient method of growing crops of spruce. It's a lot like agriculture: you plant, grow, harvest, repeat. Because you are adding nutrients to the soil and using faster-growing seeds, your crop is ready for harvest in about half the time. This method will mainly be used on Crown lands that have already been used for forestry or agriculture. It will not be done in places like parks and protected areas, old-growth forests or sensitive habitat, amongst others.

We released the first three areas of the zone in January. By the end of this year, we'll identify areas throughout the whole province. From there, licensees will work on establishing sites for tree farms, as we refer to it. This will take time. There's only so much you can harvest and so much you can plant in the run of one year.

Together these zones are bringing Nova Scotia into a modern, advanced approach to forestry management and conservation. They give the sector enough access to timber on Crown land to be successful. We can also be sustainable, promote biodiversity, and move towards our protected areas of goals. It is difficult to put an exact dollar figure on this work. Everyone in the department who touches on forestry, biodiversity, and conservation has a

role to play and is actively working on this. While the triad is in place, we still do have more work to do on the transformation.

In this budget, we're investing \$3.6 million more for silviculture on Crown land. This money helps licensees adopt the ecological forestry practices required in the mixed-use zone. We are also investing \$100,000 for archeological work that needs to be done with our Mi'kmaw partners, identifying sites on harvest proposals that may be of cultural significance.

One of our next steps is to consult on the draft forest stewardship planning guide. This guide will provide licensees with the direction for the 20-year management plans. Those plans will ultimately be subject to an environmental assessment.

While the triad model applies to Crown land, we also encourage sustainable practices on private land. Many foresters have been doing that for decades. They have a deep commitment to stewardship of this land.

We're offering opportunities for others to learn and adapt to these practices as well. We encourage that with annual silviculture funding. This year we're making a shift for the timing of that funding. We know that private woodlot owners and contractors need certainty earlier in the year about the amount available to them, so we gave \$3.2 million in March to let contractors get started as soon as the weather changes. They won't have to wait for us to finish the debates or pass this budget in April. In the future, the silviculture funding in one year's budget will work for the subsequent fiscal year. This change allows them to get started planning earlier and start the work a lot sooner. They won't lose valuable time in the woods or on the floor of this Legislature.

I heard this very loud and clear early in our mandate from some of the sector. This has been a request for some time. I am pleased to be able to provide this needed timing to this sector to allow our rural economies to keep moving at a positive momentum.

Private woodlot owners took quite a hit during Hurricane Fiona. In the Fall, we invested heavily to help them clean up. It is important to salvage merchantable timber and to clean up your debris that will pose a serious fire risk. We committed \$4.6 million in the Fall to help private woodlot owners recover. In March, we added \$2.5 million more, mainly to expand support for cleanup on industrial private lands. They can all apply for the funding through the Association for Sustainable Forestry. We've engaged them to administer most of these funds. Forest Nova Scotia is managing funding for the roads.

My department was heavily involved in helping communities recover from this massive storm as well. We had boots on the ground immediately in Cape Breton, Cumberland, Colchester, Hants County, Pictou, Antigonish, and Guysborough. Our staff helped clear downed trees and debris so the power could be restored. We had our incident command team physically situated with EMO. They worked lock, stock and barrel with

EMO and other partners every single day for several weeks to direct resources where they needed to go.

Mr. Chair, I can't say enough about this team. Together they coordinated more than 200 wildfire staff from across Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Quebec that came to assist. Then they gave a second wave of support in the hardest hit areas. They cleaned up hundreds of sites where trees impact public infrastructure and safety. They also cleaned up our provincial parks so they are safe for everyone to enjoy.

I should also note that some of these staff also battled the Horseshoe Lake wildfire last Spring. It was by far the biggest wildfire of the year, and it is hard, dangerous work. I'm very proud of our staff for the long, hard days they put in this past season. I know that Nova Scotians are grateful for their help.

I want to touch on a few things we're doing for healthy forests in 2023 and beyond. We know that trees are critical for wildlife habitat. They are also important for sequestering greenhouse gases to fight climate change. That's why we're working with our federal partners on their 2 Billion Trees program. It's one of many actions for my department in the Climate Change Action Plan. We're close to signing the agreement to implement the program here in Nova Scotia. Through it, we expect to plant 21 million trees across the province over the next 10 years. The rollout will be in the form of many projects, working with many partners. We're hopeful that project will get under way this Fall. This effort supports our approach to ecological forestry, it helps with green jobs to boost our rural economy, and brings us ever closer to our climate change goal of net zero by 2050.

We're also taking steps to help hemlock trees from the invasive pest, the hemlock woolly adelgid. We'll be signing a funding agreement with our federal partners on this as well. We're already working with partners like the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute. Together we are inoculating some stands of hemlock on Crown land. We're also acquiring more old-growth forest where hemlock tends to grow. This helps with our land protection goals and with carbon sequestration.

Our Shubenacadie operation centre and the staff who work there are critical for protecting our forests from pests and wildfires. The complex includes the provincial wildfire coordination centre. It also includes the Shubenacadie radio communications centre. The complex is a critical operational hub for our forest health, wildfire response, and public safety communication across the province. It's aging and it needs to be replaced to continue this important work for all Nova Scotians.

We announced in the capital plan that we're building a new facility over the next few years. The new facility will be climate-resilient and net zero for energy. It will allow us to consolidate our Truro office staff at Shubie. We have nearly \$2 million in the 2023-24 budget to get that exciting project under way.

Healthy forests support an abundance of wildlife. We take our commitment to protecting wildlife seriously. The people in my department are dedicated to excellence in wildlife management. As part of their many duties, our conservation officers help enforce regulations for wildlife and their habitat. We have a team of biologists and technicians who help manage wildlife issues every day. For example, our staff and the Mi'kmaw are working together to manage the Cape Breton moose population. Along with Parks Canada, they completed a survey in early March. Now our staff are crunching the numbers, and we'll use the information to help manage our moose population. I'm pleased to hear that at first blush the population looks healthy.

You will recall that last Spring we amended the Wildlife Act to address problems that stem from feeding wildlife. Many people love seeing wildlife in their yards or they think feeding is necessary for survival, especially in the winter months. However, feeding draws wildlife into populated areas and there's more risk of damage, injury or death. With amendments in place, we've been working on the draft regulations around appropriate feeding. We've reached out to engage some stakeholders and we'll be having public consultation this Spring so we can get the regulations in place. This effort will help reduce human-wildlife conflict and orphaned or injured animals.

Our provincial parks and protected areas promote biodiversity and conserve wildlife. They help make our environment more resilient in the face of climate change, and they offer loads of benefits for people. They are places to connect with nature and support our mental and physical health. We use them for recreation, nature tourism, and research. They contribute to a healthy environment, a healthy economy, and a healthy population - and we want more of them. That's why we're working on protecting at least 20 per cent of Nova Scotia's total land and water mass by 2030. We're working on this with colleagues in the Department of Environment and Climate Change, and with Mi'kmaw on Indigenous, protected, and conserved areas.

Last year, we designated three new provincial parks - Owls Head, Dunns Beach, and Monks Head. We continue to work to designate the remaining 89 park sites in the Parks and Protected Areas Plan.

Everyone should be able to enjoy these natural treasures. That's why we're making our provincial parks, beaches, and campgrounds more accessible to more people. This work includes things like rollout beach mats and adaptive equipment. It includes upgraded facilities such as comfort stations, washrooms, picnic shelters, and more. We're also making washrooms gender neutral at numerous parks across the province. These are things our parks need for a quality visitor experience - for both Nova Scotians and for our tourism industry.

To accelerate this work, we're injecting more money through our capital plan. Instead of the usual \$1 million a year, we are making a significant investment - more than \$10 million in 2023-24 for infrastructure upgrades. This year, we are planning to continue

multi-year redevelopment work at Blomidon and Dollar Lake, build a new, accessible, gender-neutral washroom at Lawrencetown Beach, make accessibility improvements at Rainbow Haven Beach, and add parking lot signage, public toilet, and beach access at Carters Beach, to name a few.

[5:30 p.m.]

There's always one caveat. We still need access to our parks each Spring to see how the Winter went and determine if there are any different requirements. We need to remain flexible.

When you add up parks, protected areas, and lands managed under the Crown Lands Act, only 35 per cent of Nova Scotia's land mass is in our hands. The vast majority of land is private. We need to be careful managers of Crown land to accommodate many things: parks and protected areas, forestry, mining critical minerals to support clean energy technologies; and clean energy technologies themselves like wind turbines and solar gardens - and there's a range of other uses.

The department gets more than 2,000 requests a year to use or purchase land under the Crown Lands Act. These range from small transactions such as a driveway crossing a rail trail, up to major commercial activities such as a wind farm or mines. So it's not simple and straightforward. There are many competing interests that we need to consider, and we work very hard to balance them. At the end of the day, Crown lands belong to all of us. Making sure Nova Scotians get the optimum benefit from them is always our goal, and in all cases sustainability is key.

On the money front, we're doing that by focusing on critical minerals. Some examples are lithium, rare earth elements, tin, and zinc. They are essential raw materials for technology such as wind turbines, solar panels, and electric vehicles.

We've been consulting with stakeholders on a new critical mineral strategy for Nova Scotia. It will help us make responsible, sustainable use of these natural resources, whether they are on Crown lands or on private. We aim to keep the value chain here in Nova Scotia. That's how we get the green technologies we need while also driving our provincial economy.

Another innovation that will drive our green economy and help us reach climate change goals is green hydrogen. When I took the chair in the Summer of 2021, green hydrogen wasn't even in my vocabulary. Now Nova Scotia is poised to become a world leader in this clean fuel initiative. That's because innovation often happens very fast, and we need to pivot quickly to take advantage. That's what we did with the process to set aside some Crown lands for onshore wind. It will help this industry get started, but it's offshore wind that will really help it scale up. That's why we also moved quickly to set a goal of offering leases for five gigawatts of offshore wind by 2025.

The world market is demanding green hydrogen, so there is lots of economic opportunity for Nova Scotia. This clean fuel will also help us move away from fossil fuels here at home, as will some of the renewable electricity from offshore wind. I noted that the federal budget last week includes support and initiatives for companies that are investing in these sectors. We welcome those investments and look forward to learning more.

There are important steps to help Nova Scotia have a sustainable, prosperous future. Like our forestry transformation, our energy transformation won't happen overnight, but it will happen because we have a responsibility to our children and our grandchildren. It's our job to make sure that they have a bright future, and we take that very seriously.

A big piece of the puzzle is changing how electricity is delivered in this province. We have some of the most ambitious climate goals in the country, and we intend to meet them. We're going to get off coal and reach 80 per cent renewables by 2030. There has been a lot of debate in this Chamber about how this will happen. I'd like to put some facts on the table. To reach these goals, we need to close eight coal-fired stations, and we need to develop renewable energy sources. There is no silver bullet here. It will take a suite of solutions to reach our goals.

The Maritime Link is our biggest chunk of renewable electricity. We're seeing signs that over the last few months issues are starting to resolve. Soon we would be getting our full share of Muskrat Falls, and that brings us to about half of our electricity renewables.

Wind power is currently the cheapest renewable for Nova Scotia. The RFP we completed last summer is bringing five new projects online. They will add about 12 per cent more renewable electricity by 2025. If you're doing the math, that brings our system to more than 70 per cent renewables and to that, about 3 per cent to 5 per cent through residential, commercial, and community solar. Another RFP for renewables to support the Green Choice program will add about 5 per cent to 10 per cent more by 2027, so we are on track to meet or exceed our goals, both in terms of the number of renewables and how fast we get them onto the grid.

You'll notice that the Atlantic Loop isn't in that list. That's not to say we are not going to do it. We still need to reach net zero by 2050, and it might help us get there, but it's not the sole solution that we're pinning all of our hopes on, as some of these have suggested. It will take a significant federal investment to make that happen.

Last week the federal budget included comments of support, but there is no dollar line figure tied to the Atlantic Loop. We have many other solutions for our 2030 goals - most of them made in Nova Scotia and fueling our green economy right here at home.

We are also looking further into achieving our goals of net zero by 2050. Natural gas is part of the energy mix we need to get there. We can't make one giant leap off of fossil fuels - we need to take steps away from it. Natural gas is a stable backup for

renewable energy, so it's an important part of our transition to a clean energy strategy. That's why we have to call for bids for offshore natural gas. We have one of the strongest offshore regulatory regimes in the world, so I have confidence that any activity will be done safely for both workers and for our environment.

Another long-term solution is geothermal. We've identified eight communities around the province where the geology suggests there is good potential. One of them is practically in my backyard. Springhill has been using geothermal for many years. Now we're supporting a study to explore how that could be significantly expanded. Other communities are less advanced, but I look forward to seeing the possibilities as we move forward. These are all potential solutions that we know about now, and more solutions may come along. If you recall, just a year and a half ago we never thought we'd be talking about green hydrogen and now it's a big part of our plan. We need to be nimble to take advantage of the best solutions for Nova Scotia.

At the end of the day, we want the most effective solutions at the best possible price for our ratepayers. They deserve clean, affordable, and reliable power. As we move toward our goals, I want to be clear that we will protect the ratepayers of Nova Scotia. We stood up for them and kept power rates lower than they otherwise would have been. We've been adding more performance standards that Nova Scotia Power must meet.

We're opening up the market to the private sector for renewable electricity storage. We're creating the partnership table that will bring ratepayers' voices to the table. We're looking at every option to make sure that this system meets the demands of today and tomorrow. All in all, we're changing our relationship with Nova Scotia Power and the way electricity is delivered in this province. Ratepayers remain the top priority as we shift the energy, because we believe they deserve it, and because they need our support for that more than ever.

We're in an affordability crisis. Nova Scotia families and households are hurting. Half of the homes in this province are still heated with oil, and the price of oil has skyrocketed, plus it's fossil fuel that contributes to climate change. That's why we invested \$140 million in energy efficiency programs in December. These programs help Nova Scotians save money on their energy bills. They make people's homes more comfortable, and they reduce the emissions that cause climate change.

You won't see that figure in the 2023-24 budget. It was invested in the 2022-23 fiscal year, and Efficiency Nova Scotia is rolling it out over four years. I want to thank them for their tireless effort in helping Nova Scotians find the right program for their situation for them to reach their goals along the way. They are helping low-income Nova Scotians get free heat pumps and other upgrades. They are helping others get rebates for investments they make. With bigger rebates going to middle-income households, along with the federal investments that followed ours, we'll help about 13,500 low-income and 30,000 middle-income households through these programs.

Last fiscal year we also invested \$12 million more for the second phase of the Mi'kmaw Home Energy Efficiency Project. With this fund, we aim to reach all the remaining Mi'kmaw homes in the province by 2027. All these programs support our green energy economy and workforce. That includes heat pump installers, lighting specialists, solar PV installers, and builders. They are employing more than 2,500 people in good-paying jobs, mostly in rural communities.

Later this year we look forward to launching The Green Choice Program that I mentioned earlier. This program is another one of our climate action plan commitments. It's for large-scale electricity customers. These are large commercial customers and public institutions like health care facilities, public schools, universities, and governments. The program will give them the option to buy some or all of their electricity from renewable sources.

We'll start accepting applications later this year. Although it will be some time before we have the renewable electricity projects, we'll run another RFP to secure those projects as well.

In addition to how we heat our homes and power our lives, we also need to change how we get from point A to point B. We're continuing in our efforts to encourage people to make the switch to electric vehicles.

In this budget, we're investing \$1.5 million to advance the work of installing charging infrastructure around the province. We're also investing \$1 million to create an incentive program for people to buy medium and heavy-duty EVs. These are mainly vehicles for work like dump trucks, transport trucks, and so on. This is on top of the \$16 million we rolled out last year to incent people to buy electric passenger vehicles like cars, SUVs and e-bikes.

We also continue to fund public transportation and active transportation projects with our federal partners. This is also an area where green hydrogen can help us. It is very hard to move off of fossil fuels for things like industrial processes, heavy transport, and the marine sector. Green hydrogen is a clean alternative that we can use to get off of fossil fuels faster.

All these things I've outlined are just the tip of iceberg of what my department is doing to combat climate change, and there's loads more across government. Take a look at the climate change action plan, and you'll see that many departments are doing their part.

Through this budget it's clear that our government is actively finding solutions to the great challenges of today. From our firm commitment to fixing health care, to climate change and renewable energy, to affordability to new, sustainable ways of supporting our traditional industries, we're building a brighter future for all Nova Scotians - and we're

doing it with our overriding commitment to sustainability. I would be here for days if I tried to cover everything we are doing.

[5:45 p.m.]

With that, I'll end my remarks and invite questions from my colleagues across the floor. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, minister. I'm sure everyone is familiar with the process. We go back and forth with an hour for each caucus, the Liberals and the NDP. We'll begin with the Liberal caucus and the honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: Thank you to the minister and staff for being here tonight. I don't have much time, so I'll jump right into it.

Within the Medway Community Forest Co-operative, the Nova Scotia Community Lands Trust, was developed, and developing and upholding the working forest community easements. The new trust will offer landowners an option to preserve the forests they steward. They'll maintain the economic benefits through harvesting forest products, and they'll provide access to carbon offset markets.

Tied to the property deed in perpetuity, the easement will require a certified forest management plan, and will prohibit intensive forest management land conversion and subdivision.

The Nova Scotia Working Woodlands Trust has supported a launch from several supporters, including the Forestry Innovation Transition Trust, the Canadian Wildlife Service, private land stewardship stakeholders, and over 10,000 acres of interested landowners, yet it is halted by delays within this department for being designated as an ineligible body in the Community Easements Act.

My first question to the minister is: Please explain in detail the steps required and the timeline for reviewing the application, and designating NSWWT as an eligible body in the Community Easements Act.

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, the applications go through the department. This is something that was in the Lahey review as well - about community working for us and such. When all the documentation is in place, that's when the application actually gets under way and is started. That was only about six months ago. The initiative started awhile before, but the actual process started only about six months ago. It is still under review with the department.

I do want to point out that they don't need the government to actually do the easements. They can have two lawyers actually do the easement for themselves on the outside of that. It's actually not a step that they need government to take place in.

CARMAN KERR: Has the department spoken to this group about the other options?

TORY RUSHTON: There have been ongoing conversations back and forth from the department to that group.

CARMAN KERR: DNRR and EEC having committed to preserving old growth hemlock forests. The minister mentioned HWA - the hemlock woolly adelgid - under the Nature Smart Climate Solutions Fund. Environment and Climate Change Canada has agreed to commit up to \$10 million, which will contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing carbon sequestration, while also providing benefits for biodiversity and human well-being.

The same group has been asked to help facilitate this program on private lands, but cannot assist the province until eligible body status is granted. The Department of Environment and Climate Change has asked them to help with this program, and I just heard from the minister that he is encouraging them to talk to lawyers.

Can the minister comment on this and on what he knows of the Department of Environment and Climate Change asking this group to carry on with this process?

TORY RUSHTON: Obviously, I can't speak for the Department of Environment and Climate Change on what the conversations are. I do realize there are some wishes for those groups that do want the easements, but there is legally nothing to stop the two parties from entering into an agreement without government action in the middle.

The applications are still with the department, and it is still reviewing those applications.

CARMAN KERR: Could the minister explain in more detail what the barrier is in that review or in that application?

TORY RUSHTON: It's still under review and, as a group, once it's on my desk with the final stages then it's appropriate to take to Cabinet. I don't want to speculate what would happen there. It's a process that's still under way, similar to any other application that would come to our table.

CARMAN KERR: Is it typical that process would take six months, as it currently stands?

TORY RUSHTON: What I would say is that there are some applications coming to my table that are six years old. Is it right? No. Is there some work to clean that up? That's not a point at any party - there are always government things that need to be cleaned up in any department.

Yes, there are things that could be cleaned up with the whole process, but right now six months is not unheard of.

CARMAN KERR: The minister mentioned hemlock woolly adelgid. I know that the HWA is destroying hemlocks. I've raised it at committee. Have any resources been offered for chemical bio-control efforts to combat this?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm not trying to pawn it off, but the money figure actually sits with the Department of Environment and Climate Change into the process of what is taking place, but we are actively working on the ground. Both departments are taking it. The financial is actually being allocated through the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

CARMAN KERR: I've got a lot of questions for the Minister of Environment and Climate Change at this point. I'll switch it over to high production. The landscape level assessment process is being applied to all eco-districts, last year and again this year. As assessments are completed and maps and information are released, there was talk of an online high-production forestry map. Is that online?

TORY RUSHTON: Is it just recently announced? No, that part is not online yet. As we move through this year, it's our hope to have the whole matrix and the high production on that map viewer, once it's established. Or - I don't want to tie that to it - another link where you can actually go and see where the zones are allocated for the high production.

CARMAN KERR: I'm sorry, to the minister, I didn't hear that last bit - no, but?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm just being corrected. The first three sites are actually on the map viewer now. The rest of them, as they come into works, working with the licence holder and the areas that are named, the rest of them will be on the map viewer as we allocate those sites.

This isn't going to be a flick of the switch. It's going to take a few years to get to that 10 per cent mark, but we do have a commitment to the sector that we're going to work with them, hand in hand, to make sure they're going to the right areas, for the right reasons, with the right aspects.

CARMAN KERR: The minister just mentioned it will take a few years to get to this 10 per cent, or no more than 10 per cent. Does that mean three years or does that mean more than that?

TORY RUSHTON: Just to give you an example, we're going to do as long as it takes. To give you an example of where we're at right now, we're at 0.5 per cent with those first three allocations, so it is going to take some time. I know the sector would love to have it done in two years. Others would like to see it prolonged even longer.

Obviously, it is going to take some time, but we are certainly committed to making sure that we allocate the proper lands, and not do it too speedily to allocate the wrong lands. It will be 10 per cent, it will be no more than 10 per cent. As we add more Crown lands through acquisitions or such things, you could see the land grow, but it will never be more than 10 per cent of the total Crown lands.

CARMAN KERR: The minister mentioned that the sector would like to see this grow faster. It's currently at 0.5 per cent. Can the minister explain how much growth the sector would push for?

TORY RUSHTON: Right away, 10 per cent, in all fairness. But in conversations with the stakeholders, especially Forest Nova Scotia, they understand the process that it's going to take. It's going to take us some time to get there, but we have a commitment with the licence holders, with the sector, and with the department staff who are working towards achieving those goals. Bear in mind that you can plant only so many trees in the run of a year - you can harvest only so much in the run of a year.

If you put it all in a harvest year this year and allocate all 10 per cent, and it was ready to harvest every 30 years, you'd harvest 10 per cent of that land every year. So it has to be allocated throughout the whole process of a growth cycle, if you will. I think I've said that right. Hopefully the team is listening and won't correct me later.

CARMAN KERR: I want to thank the minister for that, and we'll take any correction if that's what it takes.

Lahey's Recommendation No. 18 states that "DNR must ensure, as an immediate priority, that the Endangered Species Act is fully implemented on Crown land, including the completion of recovery plans that identify and make provisions for protection of core habitat for species at risk." The department's process for reviewing harvest plans has struggled with identifying important species at risk. One example would be Goldsmith Lake, in my back yard, in my constituency. Several members of the public have flagged the ecological importance of the forests there. It seems to have fallen through the harvest plan viewer process.

I think the Wildlife Branch at one point indicated that it will take time and more resources to develop better modelling. How does the department plan to address the documented - I'll call them failures - of the Integrated Resource Management system to identify that habitat of legally protected species?

TORY RUSHTON: In that Goldsmith Lake harvest plan, in the original application, there were pieces of land that were actually removed because of what we knew. As people went out in public and saw that the process actually did its job and started to remove those pieces - as the public started going out and visiting - we had staff and sometimes contractors go out to identify what was being reported back to the department. We mitigated that by actually applying the policies that needed to be applied for what was found, such as the lichen, and extended the boundaries around where they could harvest.

That original application actually had pieces of land removed from the application because of what we knew on the ground.

CARMAN KERR: Could the minister update us on where that approved original harvest plan sits? What was the original square footage or hectares or by acres of what was permitted or approved? Where does it sit now, given that adjustment?

TORY RUSHTON: It was actually approved under the previous government, so I'm not necessarily entitled to see all that detail, but I can try to get the staff to get back to that full square footage. But it was the previous government that approved that. Then when it came back to our table, we actually started removing the things that were reported, as we found it, as department staff went out and investigated.

I want to highlight the fact that the process actually does work. When something is reported back in and investigations are gone out and done, there's a way to remove those pieces of land that do need to be protected or species that need to be protected.

Another instance was the whitefish down in the Bridgewater area. When the application for that harvest came in and the department looked at it, it was essentially a no-brainer. The approval for that harvest was not moved forward. It was actually nixed, and it's highlighted that that will not be harvested in that area, to protect the whitefish in that area. It's an example of the process that actually does work for Nova Scotians.

CARMAN KERR: I would challenge the minister. Did the process work because of the department's work or because of volunteer residents who went out and identified species at risk, and therefore led to holds on certain harvests?

TORY RUSHTON: Completely. There's a process for the original application and as that goes in, you have to have people do the walks through the woods, do the software data analysis, and then put the applications in. Following that, it's an open window for approvals for the public to come in and make their comments. That's also a tool that the department uses to go out and investigate. If there's a report through hiking or a nature trail that might not be known by the department, they'll go out and investigate things that are reported.

That community feedback is actually part of the tools the department utilizes as well, so I would say it is two-fold. It is both the department's work and the public input.

[6:00 p.m.]

CARMAN KERR: The province's long-awaited Recovery Plan for the Moose in Mainland Nova Scotia was published in 2021, I think. It did identify - and the minister alluded to this in the opening comments - core habitats for moose. I don't think any of these areas have been designated for protection. Is that correct?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, that document did come to my table late in 2021/early 2022, the report back to the minister as required by the court action. Then the remainder of the conversation was that we have to identify those core habitats. As the report came back to me, the step was to accept it. Then the next step was for the team of biologists to come back and make a recommendation where the corridor would be, and the habitat. That work is taking place in different areas of the province right now. That report is still not back at my table yet, but it is something that we are working on very diligently.

CARMAN KERR: Almost two years for that review and the acceptance of that. Is there any timeline the minister can give on when that work might be complete?

TORY RUSHTON: This wasn't the only thing we were working on. We had to get to 100 per cent of the recovery plans as well, so it wasn't just as basic as the mainland moose process in the corridors.

There were a bunch of other things within the species at risk that the biologists were working on as well. The moose were a key component of that research and development, and the process it is undertaking. Right now, they are still working very actively on this process.

CARMAN KERR: The minister mentioned "a bunch of other things." Could he give more detail on that?

TORY RUSHTON: What we can say is that 100 per cent of the species that are under the Nova Scotia jurisdiction all now have recovery plans. Fifty-two of the 63 - so 83 per cent - of the plans have been prepared and adopted. There's still working going in place.

CARMAN KERR: Will the department require an environmental assessment, as recommended by Lahey and agreed to by the province, when deciding whether to renew Northern Pulp's utilization licence agreement - this July, I believe.

TORY RUSHTON: Sorry, I missed the very first part of that question.

CARMAN KERR: It's around the environmental assessment requirement as recommended by Lahey, agreed to by the province, when deciding whether to renew Northern Pulp's utilization licence agreement, I think by July.

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, it is recommended. I think it's number 18 in the Lahey recommendations. Actually, I believe you said that. Now that I'm saying that, I remember it.

That is a process that is in the works, in collaboration with the Department of Environment and Climate Change, to set up those standards. Will they be enacted by the end of July of this year? I can't commit that they'll be finalized and finished, but that is the goal of this department - to get to the environmental assessment process. I actually made reference to that in my opening remarks, that eventually we want to get to that EA process and implement number 18, if you will.

CARMAN KERR: The question begs, why wasn't that process in place before Port Hawkesbury Paper's licence was renewed?

TORY RUSHTON: Very simply, it was a 20-year deal and there was an option to renew it at 10 years. That's when Port Hawkesbury Paper actually did. They came in and made the application to have it extended out for the 10-year review.

We updated some terms and actually it was a win-win situation for both of us because it allowed us to implement some of the ecological forestry aspects. It's also allowing us to have a learning block about the boreal forest and how we're going to develop ecological forestry into that aspect. Port Hawkesbury Paper is actually playing a big role as we learn and develop the guides of what we're going to be achieving in the Cape Breton area for ecological forestry.

It's a learning curve. It was sort of a good thing that at the end of the day they came to the 10-year conversation because ecological forestry - I believe we actually reduced some of the landscape that is allocated for Port Hawkesbury Paper. They still have a viable market. It's going to help the private woodlot owners in Cape Breton as well, because there's going to be more of a demand for private woodlot owners to get involved with PHP to ensure that business model survives, while still securing product from Crown lands.

CARMAN KERR: The government made a public commitment to protecting 20 per cent of Nova Scotia land by 2030. The minister mentioned this in his opening comments. This will require a substantial expansion of the conservation - I think it's 330,000 hectares of land into protection. How much land is currently protected?

TORY RUSHTON: Right now, we sit at 13.1 per cent. I can actually give you the hectares equation when we're finished here tonight.

CARMAN KERR: Currently at 13.1 per cent? Last year at this time I think it was 12.8 per cent, so a difference of 0.3 per cent. Given 0.3 per cent protected in a year, does the minister still believe that 20 per cent of land protection is feasible?

TORY RUSHTON: The political answer would be that we are still sweeping up the floors from the previous government - does that work? No - I'm just joking for your colleague to make sure he's paying attention.

We're working on the original Parks and Protected Areas plan to finish off those designations. This calendar year we're working with our colleagues at the Department of Environment and Climate Change to make up the development plan for the next stages and implementation. Am I concerned? No, not right now. We're working through pathways to get to that 20 per cent.

CARMAN KERR: At the rate we're going now it will be 2.1 per cent protected - give it some rough math - which isn't going to come close to getting to that goal.

Did any landowners work with the department to have their land protected this past year? If so, how much private land was protected?

TORY RUSHTON: It's not in our binder from the previous year because this is the year going ahead. If I remember correctly, I think it was three parcels of land that the department actually worked with to succeed. It would be like any previous government budget. We have an allocation for TCA to acquire lands and agreements on any donations of lands and such. I think it was three pieces of major land. I can get the verification and the proper locations for you as soon as we're finished.

CARMAN KERR: Does the minister have a target for protected areas in this mandate over the next two years?

TORY RUSHTON: In collaboration with the Department of Environment and Climate Change, our commitment was to finish off the Parks and Protected Areas plan and to develop the next stage plan for this calendar year, and start working on it right away. That was the mandate that was given to this.

CARMAN KERR: There are 89 pieces left, but going back to private lands, looking forward, how much private land is being purchased this year, or budgeted for, to reach that target of 20 per cent protected?

TORY RUSHTON: The allocation for this coming year is \$1.5 million, the same as it has been for the last little bit. To identify what lands are going to be, there's a living document and a list within the department that staff stay in touch with to see what criteria or what goals would meet the years' objectives throughout the process.

We always try to buy some that would be for protected areas - possibly recreational areas, protected areas, so on and so forth. It would always give an enhancement to what the Crown land is as a whole. It is \$1.5 million this year. That whole conversation would take place over the next few months to ensure that process is signed and done by this time - well, March 31st of next year.

[6:15 p.m.]

CARMAN KERR: Just to clarify, that \$1.5 million is assigned to purchasing private land to work towards that goal?

TORY RUSHTON: It's allocated to purchase Crown land. It doesn't necessarily mean that it is going to fit into the protected areas. It's to purchase Crown land and meet the goals of the year, if you will, or the mandate that the government is under at the present time. It could be \$1.5 million that we purchase for all protected lands next year. It could be \$1.5 million that we purchase for all forestry concept, or recreational. It's not allocated to any one given department. That's a conversation that happens throughout the year to ensure that we are going to meet the target goals that are set out through the process.

CARMAN KERR: I don't know the true number of protected areas still on that list for protection - 80-something, 89 maybe? Can the department confirm what the number is?

TORY RUSHTON: I couldn't even remember it from my speech. Eighty-nine is correct - 89 park sites that are still remaining.

CARMAN KERR: To the minister, any idea what those 89 represent in percentage of protected areas?

TORY RUSHTON: Not accurately, because after the designation is done and the surveys are done, that's when we actually find out the full hectares and percentages. If you recall - I think it was Monks Head that I did in Estimates - when we released that information, Monks Head was designated as a protected provincial park, or what have you.

I had a number that was in the press release, but after the survey was all done and completed, the number actually grew. I think it's very minuscule, but it actually does grow a little bit. To have a full number of what that hectare area or percentage is, we don't have that accuracy right now, but we can probably get a target number that we could share with you.

CARMAN KERR: Does this budget designate any new parks being added?

TORY RUSHTON: I could stand here and say no today. Obviously, if there's an opportunity that comes to government that would be a good proposition, certainly there would be a conversation. I think every government has to act on the proposition that we

enjoy our parks. The 89 parks that we've named are actually utilized right now. They may not be serviced, but there are utilizations - they may just not be designated.

If a piece of land were to come - not to say we'd say yes, not to say we'd say no. We are concentrating on the 89 sites to get those finished, and move on to the 2023 process. There have been conversations - people or groups coming to say, hey, this piece of land is up for grabs, it may make sense for the Crown to have a hold on this for whatever reason. There would be conversations. Usually, you try to pawn it off to the allocation for the \$1.5 million just because there's not a free roll of money rolling around right now. I wouldn't knock off any conversation that is going to benefit the province.

CARMAN KERR: What would the criteria be for advancing a potential area as a park to the department?

THE CHAIR: I recognize the honourable member for Annapolis to repeat the question.

CARMAN KERR: What would the criteria be for a group to present a potential area to the department? The minister mentioned he is open to groups or others bringing potential areas to the department. What is the criteria to do so?

TORY RUSHTON: They'd have to have some key aspects of what is taking place for the current government. We've committed to 20 per cent. We'd want an area that we'd probably be able to protect. We've committed to ecological forestry. We'd want an area that we can do soft-touch forestry, if you will. We're always looking at Crown lands.

Most of the conversations, though, end up going onto that living document to keep conversations going on for that transaction this fiscal year. It may not be for another year or two down the road, but there are always conversations. Just since being in this seat, I've had many conversations throughout Nova Scotia with people who are interested in selling their land to the Crown aspect for many different reasons. Usually, they get added to that list of a living document, if you will, to keep those conversations going on year after year.

CARMAN KERR: Has there been a decision about designating Archibald Lake as a wilderness area?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm going to punt it - no. That is an ongoing conversation. We have certainly heard through the consultation from the area of Archibald Lake and the interest. I can probably safely say that my colleague, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, and myself are probably in the final steps to making that final decision.

CARMAN KERR: The department is forecast to be \$56.4 million higher than budgeted estimates primarily due to \$53 million in abandoned mine sites remediation costs.

Could the minister provide a breakdown on that \$53 million - the remediation costs for abandoned sites?

TORY RUSHTON: Working on some of the high-risk processes in the previous fiscal year, we've evaluated the rest of the mine sites into high and low. As we work through that, we've got to finish the high-risk first and do the estimates of what is taking place. That \$53 million - getting it correct from my assistant. It's sort of the estimates is what we're expecting to see as we move through this calendar year of the work that needs to be done.

CARMAN KERR: Can the minister confirm, is that for one site, two sites?

THE CHAIR: I recognize the honourable member for Annapolis to repeat the question, please and thank you.

CARMAN KERR: My apologies. I'm just looking for more detail on that \$53 million. Is that for one site or multiple sites?

TORY RUSHTON: Multiple sites.

CARMAN KERR: There's mention of \$6 million related to Hurricane Fiona cleanup costs. Has the minister and his department considered establishing a permanent fund available for the purpose of addressing weather-related cleanup costs?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm assuming that when the member says a permanent cost, it's for future hurricanes as well. The conversation about climate change is taking place every day within the department. We look at many aspects of what the climate is doing to our forests. Is this going to be a permanent act of assistance? I can't stand here and say that.

Do we have to reallocate some of our funding within the department as the years come and the climate is changing? We know that we have to. Even some prescriptions of forestry that we see - how they were put into action in certain areas where hurricane Fiona hit. These are conversations that I've had with the technicians at a higher level who are more educated in the forestry than I am - as you, for example.

I am not a landowner, but I do look at those technicians and stakeholders. This is a conversation that is going across the whole sector. What do we need to do to invest - not just in Crown lands but all across the forestry across Nova Scotia - to ensure that when these storms do come, we're going to have a resilient forest in the future. We need to make sure that it is here, as I said in my opening speech, for our kids and our grandkids. This is an ongoing conversation within the department.

CARMAN KERR: There is mention of \$3 million for energy and resource development initiatives. Could the minister break down in more detail what these development initiatives are and what they're intended to accomplish?

TORY RUSHTON: This allotment of money is money that we set aside as we know we're going to have more renewables coming onto the grid. It's a possible study under the grid system accepting more renewables. It's a further study about different storage outside of the battery storage that we have. There are different initiatives that are coming to the door every single day.

I use the analogy that when I sat in the chair, I didn't know about green hydrogen. As we look at the renewable energy sector that's changing, it's changing every day as well. There are things that are being developed that my kids are telling me about when they come home from school. I'm sure you're in the same situation - did you know that this is taking place in a different jurisdiction? It's to alleviate some money so that we're able to go out and do some of these studies to see if this would fit into our grid system, and to guide us in some of those decision-making processes.

CARMAN KERR: Have these studies been procured at this point?

TORY RUSHTON: Not yet, no.

CARMAN KERR: There is mention of \$760,000 for offshore wind hydrogen production studies. Does the minister - I'm asking him to predict the future, but is there potential for the results of these studies to generate the same amount in revenue? What is the goal of that study?

TORY RUSHTON: With the big steps that our government is taking with the development of green hydrogen and offshore wind, that is specific to that Strait area: what is the capability of the grid system and what are the current conditions in that area?

That's very specific to that area - to help us grow the sector that we know. The whole world is asking for this green energy, so we know that this could be a driving force for our economy here in Nova Scotia. Once you scale it up, it could be a driving force for us to change our playing field here right in our residential sector and commercial sector on land as well, rather than exporting everything.

We need to get this right. We have said that we're taking off at big speeds to ensure that we're leading the pack. We believe we have great players who are knocking at our door, and wanting to come from other jurisdictions to Nova Scotia to be a part of this. We have people from all around the world knocking at our door about this sector, so we want to make sure we get it right.

It's site-specific about that, and to make sure that we're off on the right keel, and to answer questions. There are going to have to be further investments in that area to make sure that we're able to take off on the green hydrogen spectrum when things are ready to go. It's going to enhance government's ability to move.

[6:30 pm]

CARMAN KERR: We're running out of time. Lahey recommends more buildings converted to wood heat. Has the budget allowed for more public buildings to be heated with wood heat? If so, how many?

TORY RUSHTON: The way that is set up is more inclusive to our policy in our department rather than actually funding that. That aspect actually looks at public works and what projects can be approved in that fiscal budget. We are more policy aligned with the small-scale heat.

CARMAN KERR: What is the timeline to approve projects in the offshore with the new Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Energy Board?

TORY RUSHTON: The board is actually not finalized yet. We're waiting for the federal counterparts to finish their bylaws, so to speak, in their legislative process. Hopefully, we'll be able to have that process on the floor of our Legislature in the Fall to ensure the board's setup. We're hoping that the call for bids can actually happen by 2025.

CARMAN KERR: I'm going to skip around a bit in the last 13 minutes. There are five new wind projects that are adding more renewable energy to our grid, as the minister is well aware. As of Fall 2022, the projects still needed approvals and permits. Where do those projects stand today?

TORY RUSHTON: There were no actual applications for Crown land for any of those five projects. Currently, as I understand it, I believe all five have applied for environmental assessments. The Minister of Environment and Climate Change may be able to correct that for you, but those applications wouldn't be within our department because there were no Crown allocations or asks for any of those five projects.

My understanding is that all five proponents are moving forward and doing their application and permitting processes. I guess we're sort of waiting to hear back on how successful they are with their EAs. I believe that one or two of them might have already got through and finished some of the processes, so we're waiting for the next steps in the process.

We're also already looking at the future RFP because we know we're going to need more wind as we get off coal and need more renewables. So we're looking at how we're going to do the next RFP as well.

CARMAN KERR: As of last Fall - a few months back - work was under way, and I think the quote was 84 per cent of the Lahey report recommendations were complete. Can the minister update if that number has increased?

TORY RUSHTON: We're at about 86 per cent - when this document was typed up - on 45 initiatives.

CARMAN KERR: I'll talk to the minister afterwards about that.

Just skipping around again. Have any more Crown land sites been identified for affordable housing?

TORY RUSHTON: The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing actually does a wish list of lands back to Crown. We have an application in right now that we're looking at - going through the Integrated Resource Management process to see if it fits what they're looking for. Of course, nobody wants to give up land, but we also know that we're in a housing crisis in our province, and we know that we have to move forward.

These lands are considered very closely with every request that comes into the department - how can we work with other departments to ensure that we're meeting the needs of all the province in housing and such? There's an application right now within our department that we're reviewing right now, so there's an ongoing conversation.

CARMAN KERR: The mining industry has a proposal in for \$19.5 million in geophysical surveys across the province that would help them identify areas for critical minerals, and increase the knowledge of the province's geology. What is the department's position on that proposal?

TORY RUSHTON: We're excited about it. We're actually working with some of the stakeholders in that, and some of our federal counterparts, to get the Critical Minerals Strategy in place. We're looking forward in the very near future - in a month or two - to be able to announce what that strategy has put into place for the province of Nova Scotia, and how we can utilize our own resources right here as we move into that green sector, and keep the profits and our quantities here in Nova Scotia to help boost the renewable energy sector as well.

CARMAN KERR: To the minister, so the critical minerals strategy will most likely be complete in the next two or three months?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, in two to three months I'm hoping to have that out. Obviously, the in-house target was a month or two ago. We all know that you always want to add more, especially with something that's as exciting as this - that we're able to do something right here and keep our resources here at home where we know we are environmentally friendly, where we've sourced those out from other jurisdictions. We

don't necessarily always align with their environmental standards, but as we move the green sector, this is what we want for Nova Scotians. In the next two to three months, I hope to be able to share that with you.

CARMAN KERR: I want to thank the minister. I'm going to come back in the second hour. I'm going to hand it over to my colleague, the member for Clare.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Clare.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I don't have much time, so I'll jump right into it. I have a couple of questions related to exploration permits. I've had a number of calls, emails, and letters come in because some residents have found out that their properties are within exploration permit areas, so they've asked me to speak on their behalf.

The first questions they have for the minister are: Why would exploration permits be given on private lands where there are cottages? Why aren't they advised that permits are being issued on their land?

TORY RUSHTON: This is where we rely a great amount on our team. This is not something I am necessarily up to date on. There are other things within our department. The mineral licences are for sub-surface rights only. They still have to work with the private landowner to get required access.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I admit that I am not an expert, by far, but the questions are coming in. One area they are very concerned with - and I won't read it - is when you come to the Mineral Resources Act, Section 26, where the minister has the ability to basically grant access to somebody's private land when a landowner and the business can't come to an agreement. There's a lot of concern around that clause because there are some residents who are thinking of building cottages - and one I've heard may be a house - and now they're contemplating that it's too risky since they are within that zone.

I don't know if you'd like to comment on how often the minister would override it. Is that something you are contemplating at this time?

TORY RUSHTON: Just to follow up on the previous question, there's also a public online form that shows all licence holders that are within the province as well. That may be helpful. We can narrow down a conversation.

Also, I think your question was how many times I have been asked to override that. Since sitting in this chair, I have never been asked to override any of those rights. To say that it won't happen in the future, I can't predict the future, but I thank the member for bringing this to the table to have that conversation.

RONNIE LEBLANC: From my understanding, individuals or companies can just stake out areas within the province for possible exploration. The question I often get is that with new technology, GPS and everything, companies and individuals know exactly where homes and cottages are situated, and the importance of the lakes and rivers in those areas. Is the department looking at maybe examining this Act, and looking to modernize it so that this doesn't happen in the future?

TORY RUSHTON: Once the strategic plan comes out, obviously we want to look to the legislation to see if it lines up with the plan and what's put in place with it. I wouldn't want to commit to anything here today on the floor of the Legislature, but as things are changing, we certainly do want to open up that legislation, and make sure that it does align with where we need to go in the future to secure some of those green initiatives that we do have.

RONNIE LEBLANC: This may be my last question. I have been referencing a letter that Claude Comeau wrote to the minister on March 15th. I can table that. He did give me his permission to speak about it here today. He did email me a few times asking if the minister will commit to answering his letter.

TORY RUSHTON: Thank you for bringing that up. I can tell you to go back and share with your constituent that the letter is in the department - we can't confirm that. It hasn't made it to my desk yet, but there is a draft in the process. That way you can go back and tell your constituent that you have had the conversation with the department.

I don't want to presuppose what's going to be on my desk, but the conversation is taking place and the due diligence has been done - so that letter will be responded to.

RONNIE LEBLANC: In the final minute, I want to thank the minister for taking those questions and providing those answers. I'd say mining is fairly new, and it was a bit of a surprise for residents. In terms of communication, I think it's important that the department really reach out and try to come up with better ways to communicate with residents because it is an area of deep stress for a lot of residents. I have had multiple constituents come in.

Again, I want to thank the minister and the department for answering those questions.

TORY RUSHTON: What I'll just say in the last few seconds is that I don't want to presuppose what is in that strategic plan as we move forward, or get a certain area stressed over what could potentially happen.

I do know, in talking to some of the experts taking part in this strategic plan, is that some of the mining is less invasive than it ever was. There are different, environmentally

friendly ways of doing things to extract some of the strategic materials that we're looking for in the province.

[6:45 p.m.]

It's not the intent of government to stress people out over this. We want to make sure we get the strategic plan in place, then we can outreach to Nova Scotians and have that conversation. We do talk to the licence holders to ensure that they do talk to the private landowners before any development or process ever takes place.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allocated for the Liberal caucus has elapsed. Before I turn it over to the NDP caucus for their hour, I'd like to recognize the honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: Thank you very much, Mx. Chair. I'd like to ask members to glance up at the West Gallery where we're being joined today by a young MP who has continued the tradition of strong and solid leadership in Kings-Hants. He is my MP - smart, energetic, hard-working, chair of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture. I want to thank him for joining us this afternoon. I ask him to rise and receive the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Kings South.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you for the supplementary on the introduction, Mx. Chair. It is the MP, Kody Blois, from Kings-Hants.

THE CHAIR: Welcome, and thank you for joining us.

The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I want to thank the minister, the staff, and the other staff for being here tonight, and for all the work I know has gone into preparing for this. I'm going to ask a few questions in this hour on behalf of my colleague, the member for Dartmouth North, who in our small caucus has lots of critic areas taking place at one time. I might skip around just a little bit, but you've got all the big brass here, so I'm sure you'll be able to answer my questions.

The minister has previously indicated that a hydrogen action plan would be released this year. I was in Port Hawkesbury recently. I know there's a lot of excitement from communities, but we also need a plan. I'm wondering if the minister can provide an update on when this will be released, and what kind of consultation has taken place.

TORY RUSHTON: This is a plan that I am eagerly awaiting as well. I am staying steadfast to say that it is this calendar year. There have been conversations with other stakeholders - people coming into this jurisdiction with conversation.

There have been conversations with the local area where the green hydrogen is going to be taking place. We have some great conversations with the local municipalities as well. Out of that, I also was very clear when this whole conversation started. There are many aspects of consultation, yes, but we have to make sure that we do the Mi'kmaq consultation.

When we talk offshore wind, it's the environmental aspect, but it's also a fisher's livelihood. I lived through this when FORCE was developed in the Parrsboro area, where the fishers didn't get a conversation right off the bat. There were a lot of unknowns and a lot of negativity, quite frankly, built up over that. To this day, most of those fishers have learned how to live and work in and around, and actually collaborate with the people of FORCE. It's a building relationship, but that relationship could have been from day one. That's part of what I want to see for that area. I believe our federal counterparts are on the same wavelength as well.

This is going to be a process that is not just this government. This is a huge step forward for the green world, if you will. The world is knocking at our door. We are one of the frontrunners of developing some of the first, biggest exports of green hydrogen. We're setting the stage to that.

What I would say is that we have to make sure we get it right. That is through conversations and this action plan coming out this calendar year, if we are going to put the right steps forward, if you will.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Leading along from that, I'm happy to hear that those conversations are happening. Is there a formal consultation plan? The minister listed lots of folks he is talking to, which is great, but I'm curious how that input comes into it. Also, just to clarify, my understanding is that there are projects being green-lit in advance of a plan being instituted, and whether the minister can confirm that's the case.

TORY RUSHTON: What has sort of been fast-tracked was the onshore wind aspect of the green hydrogen. They need to develop this, get this process moving. That's the aspect that has sort of been fast-tracked, if you will, to get them off on the right steps. We are part of the leading pack on it - not necessarily the components of the structure, the buildings. They are still going through the application processes and their environmental assessments, and through that are some public consultations.

Yes, as we're moving forward in some of this, the public has to be part of that consultation process - whether it's through a permitting process, an environmental

assessment process, or just consultation and conversations that are taking place with the Strait Region, which already has a task force in place.

We have pulled a lot of their conversations and resources. They've been in place for many years, about the offshore. The green hydrogen was new to them, as well - almost at the same time as it was with us as a government. These conversations were taken into a package. Through that whole development, there does have to be public consultations.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'll leave it at that, but I guess I'll ask if it's possible, after Estimates, if there is some kind of plan around consultation or record of it, if the minister could provide that. That would be really helpful. I see the member for Richmond nodding along in the background. I know there's lots of excitement in his region, and I certainly heard that excitement as well.

We have heard concerns raised that one of the large hydrogen facilities plans to begin producing and exporting prior to the availability of enough wind - so therefore, not green. I'm wondering if these projects - are there are hydrogen projects that are going to draw from the Nova Scotia Power grid before they can be fully sufficient on their own wind power?

TORY RUSHTON: What I would say to that is that's a business decision on their part of what they're doing. What I can say is that the people who are coming worldwide to our department and our government are looking for green hydrogen. That would be a business decision and conversation they must be having. We're looking at deriving green hydrogen, at the end of the day, that we want to export from the province. That may be a business decision or a question for some of the developers.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Then I guess I can just put a finer point on it. Can the minister confirm that hydrogen projects that draw power from our grid - not very clean, hence the desire to have greener energy - will not be considered green hydrogen for the purposes of any marketing on behalf of those companies?

TORY RUSHTON: In order to be green it has to use green energy. If they are going to kick-start something earlier in the day, they would have to have an agreement, such as Green Choice or something. That would be a business decision that they would have.

Our goal as a government is to get green hydrogen produced in Nova Scotia, to help export into the jurisdictions that are coming to our doorstep, if you will.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I understand those will be business decisions ultimately, but is there any thought that the government would regulate the sort of carbon intensity of hydrogen - what's called blue or grey? I think we know what's green, it has to be green, but the rest of it's a tiny bit murky. Will there be any regulatory consideration of that, or is that just left up to industry?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess what I would say to answer that is that as a government, we are looking for green hydrogen, and that's what we want to export.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think I'll have a few more years to stand up here and ask that question, so we'll leave it there for right now.

I want to ask - and I apologize if there is some repetition, but just to be clear for us. We know there have been some Crown land grants for wind production onshore. I know there has been some controversy around that, as there has been in lots of jurisdictions - in particular, about location selection, transparency in that location selection, conversations with community. Some groups, like the Ecology Action Centre, have asked for a comprehensive land planning process so that the public can be more educated, more involved, have a better understanding of these projects and also their impact. We are huge supporters of wind and of green energy generally, but we also understand the ways that some of those installations impact neighbouring communities.

I'm wondering if the minister can tell us if he is considering, or can even commit to, some kind of process like that, to add some transparency and communication to the process of when and how Crown land gets used for those wind allocations.

TORY RUSHTON: What I do want to say is that the RFP process was all private lands. So under those five projects that were announced, there are no Crown land applications for those projects. Those are all on private lands.

What I will say about the Crown lands planning action - I think just after I sat in the chair when you came over for an initial meeting, this was one of the conversations we had. We did agree that we do have to have a formalized plan of what are we doing with Crown land, so to speak. We do have somebody allocated in the department who has started that process to bring something back to the minister's chair in government, if you will.

How quickly that takes place? In my opening remarks - there are 2,000 asks a year. Some of those get documented and a process actually started. We have to go through anything that has already been activated for a request, whatever that may be, on Crown land, and get that plan put into place. It's not going to be a flick of the switch, if you will. I'm pleased that at least the momentum has started that we need to have a plan on how we're going to manage our Crown assets. That includes the land that we're trying to protect, have recreation on, have an economy driven on as well.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: That's great. I remember that conversation. Whenever a minister of the Crown tells me they think something is a good idea, I just keep asking about it until it happens - so I will keep asking about it until it happens. I would really urge consultation, particularly in the siting of these kinds of projects. I think it's important and it saves headaches down the road, obviously.

In the last session, there was the creation of a hydrogen innovation program in legislation, but there were not very many details. I'm wondering if the minister can provide an update on this. What is it? What conversations have taken place?

TORY RUSHTON: That's at a smaller scale than what we're talking about. It's going to be an H₂ produced for more domestic use. If you recall, under that legislation, I spoke about how we already had the pipelines that are enacted. I think 95 per cent or 93 per cent of our infrastructure was already enabled to accept hydrogen aspects. So we're steps ahead of different jurisdictions. The regulations are still being developed to finalize that process. I do know there are companies within the province that are doing some testing of their own as well, to move into the next steps.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think we'll move on to a few more specific questions about the budget. We see a reduction in the budget for clean growth and climate change, and also an underspend last year of \$13.7 million. I'm wondering if the minister could comment on that.

TORY RUSHTON: It was a decrease within the department, but it actually wasn't with the government in the hole - \$10.9 million was shifted over to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Just so you're aware, that was part of the ICIP funding spending, so they actually took over some of the projects. A lot of that went over. That was ICIP. There were other things - \$2.8 million was a cash flow to further years down the road in the budget line, so that's \$10.9 million and \$2.8 million for a total of \$13.7 million.

There was also the Clean Growth as well - climate change, ICIP funding. That's the Estimates for this year. That would be \$14.3 million for ICIP spending; \$10.3 million for efficiency and low-income; \$200,000 for various operating savings; \$20.2 million for federal off-oil programs - that's a three-year running total as well; and \$1.8 million due to division recognition for FTEs and operating.

I don't know whether that answered all your questions. A lot of the shift change was the ICIP programs.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Just to be clear, the basket you're talking about right now is the underspend of last year? That's where that money would have gone? That \$2.8 million to further years, that's an underspend, isn't it? That just means you didn't spend it and you're going to spend it in later years? Just to clarify.

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, the \$2.8 million would have been an underspend that shifted over. The \$10.9 million would have been shifted over to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Will that be an ongoing budget line or was that just a flow-through federal money for a particular program? We see a reduction this year, so I just want to understand where we are now.

[7:00 p.m.]

TORY RUSHTON: It was just because of the flow back and forth with ICIP funding. I don't want to presuppose what the federal government is going to initiate into the ICIP funding. It is anticipated that this would have been a this-year-only sort of thing.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: So then the reduction in funding this year just recognizes the absence of that program existing any more?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Then we saw that the regional services administration was over budget by \$57 million. I'm wondering if we could get a breakdown of that or understand why that is.

TORY RUSHTON: The vast majority of that would have been the \$53 million for the mine remediation. Also, \$3.7 million of that was for Hurricane Fiona cleanup. Part of the process is right off the bat, as soon as we had people, boots on the ground, removing downed trees so we could get power back on. There was also another spin where we ended up doing a second cycle where we started moving trees away from infrastructure and stuff. That would have been the bulk of the spending.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think the minister may have gotten into this in the last hour, but we know from committees and from the department that \$57 million is going to be a drop in the bucket, in terms of the costs of mine remediation. I'm wondering, is that just going to always show up as an overspend in the departmental budget, or are we going to contemplate our massive liabilities in that regard in the budgeting process?

TORY RUSHTON: It sits on the expense sheet as a liability, and as we draw from it and do some of the work, that's when that starts to deplete.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I guess the answer sits somewhere, but it's not being allocated as a piece of a budget in any given year, it sounds like to me.

TORY RUSHTON: As that \$53 million does sit there - it's allocated in this year's expenditures - as we draw down from it. It's also going to help us as we move into those sites, do the estimates on the future cleaning up as we have to do, and remediate all the sites.

As we deplete that and work on it this year - obviously we're not going to get all that work done this year and complete that \$53 million. But it's also going to allow us, as we're doing the work, to forecast on the next level - high, medium categories. I think you might have been out of the room. You probably know this from committee - high, medium and low risk. As we do the evaluation work, we can estimate what is going to be in the future projections as we move forward.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Sadly, we know that Hurricane Fiona probably wasn't the last of its kind. Is there a way in which the government or the minister is budgeting for these kinds of extraordinary events?

TORY RUSHTON: What I did say in the previous hour is that these are conversations we're having - not just about the events but the impact they're having on our infrastructure and the forests. What do we need to change as a department, as a government, to combat that and ensure that we are resilient against these storms that are coming?

In my opening statement, I wanted to make sure that this province is here for my kids and my grandkids and, likewise, your kids and your grandkids. There's a reason we are sitting here in the Legislature. We all believe that we have the best province and the best ??? in the world, but we need to protect it. These are conversations we are having.

Is there a budget process in place to forecast that? No, not as of yet. Will we get there? I believe we're not going to have any choice but to get there and have a line item eventually, in collaboration with all departments - and as close as what we work with the Department of Environment and Climate Change - and sort of spear out a future path, if you will, not just on Hurricane Fiona but future hurricanes.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I appreciate that, and I think I'll just take a moment to encourage. We've been very critical of the unallocated funding that happens at the end of the year - the \$1.4 billion that we didn't talk about last year in Budget Estimates. We know that lots of that was for things like Hurricane Fiona, but as the minister says, we will be facing these events on a regular basis. I think the Department of Environment and Climate Change, the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and Department of Housing and Municipal Affairs - these departments are going to continue to have major expense lines, anticipated or not.

I think that if in the budget process we can start to try to digest that, it will really help us understand what that monetary impact is and where it lands - how much of it lands in forests? How much of it lands in infrastructure? If we're budgeting ahead of time, we can trace that money. I take the minister's answer, but I would really encourage the minister to bring some of that - and guess what? If it gets underspent, hallelujah. Nobody is going to criticize.

I think it's really important to know that we have the fiscal capacity to do that, and that we have the opportunity to be proactive in thinking about that.

Another budget line, resource management, is also over budget by \$10 million. Was that also related to storms or were there other issues?

TORY RUSHTON: Just for clarification, do you know what branch or what page it might have been on in the documents? Is it forestry that you might be talking about? I'm going to speculate. A majority of it might have been Hurricane Fiona, but I want to make sure I give you the right answer.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Maybe we'll come back to that, and I'll get the page number, unless the deputies found it.

I'll move on to some questions about efficiency. I know that we're kind of crossing departments when we talk about some of the efficiency stuff. The minister's department has made some welcome investments in new efficiency programs, but at a constituency level we still get a lot of complaints that it's really hard to navigate the programs.

We know that on the South Shore, Bridgewater has been a leader in climate action across the province. One of the things they've done is provide navigation services for residents. I think that's one of the reasons their community has such high uptake of these programs. People can call them, and they kind of lay out all the programs that are available, they help with the applications - all of that.

Is the department working on similar navigator services or contemplating how to make these programs as accessible as possible, in terms of application and how residents can avail themselves of those opportunities?

TORY RUSHTON: That's good feedback. We are in the early days of a three-year project. This is certainly feedback that I want to take back to Efficiency Nova Scotia. I'll be quite honest, we don't have the FTEs right now to have navigators to assist, unfortunately. I wish we really did.

We're very fortunate to have partners in Efficiency Nova Scotia who are navigating through this on a daily basis to assist us - to get the money in the right homes at the right aspects. When these announcements were first made, I encouraged everybody to reach out to Efficiency Nova Scotia and out of that I was quite pleased to hear that, no, I didn't necessarily meet into the criteria for the free heat pump, if you will, but Efficiency is coming to do an assessment of my home, because there are other processes and projects that Efficiency can do.

That concern you're hearing back from your constituents, that they're having a hard time navigating, I certainly want to take that back to Efficiency Nova Scotia. If there are

any particulars you want to bring to me offline, I'll certainly advocate to Efficiency Nova Scotia. They are great people. They want to make sure they get it right as well.

[7:15 p.m.]

This is a program that we've seen a lot of interest in all across the province. We have interests from other colleagues in other jurisdictions who want to know how we were so successful in ensuring that our money got right out the door. I believe we just had a member who was introduced from the federal level, who was at one of the announcements that shared the federal funding as well. There are projects that can be built on top of each other. Efficiency really is the one to do that. That feedback has to come back to us. I appreciate you sharing, and I look forward to talking to you offline about that so we can improve that process. Let's face it, we're in year one of this whole process. There are multi-faceted years that are going to move out and, let's be frank, who knows what else we're going to invest in in the future.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'll just add to that. I'm not going to leave the topic, but just to say that one of the things we've specifically heard is about folks not having access to the internet - particularly lower-income people, older people. They are just looking for a piece of paper they can fill out, someone to help them do it. I wonder if you know of any plans to make that possible for people.

TORY RUSHTON: I believe there is a paper application. I'll double-check with my SA and make sure that is shared around. The other update I was going to share with you is getting the information right now. Efficiency Nova Scotia is looking at having program navigators. Fantastic. It's probably because of feedback like this. They get it. They do this on a daily basis.

As soon as somebody picks up the phone and they are talking with Efficiency Nova Scotia - I've heard from constituents that they knew right off the bat their income, what type of house they have. They were almost rhyming off the programs that they were sending this information on, and an assessment was done to get it. Albeit, even in the minister's constituency there's still a waiting list as well. These programs are being driven, and there's a want for these programs, which is good. It's a success.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: That's great. You heard it here first, I guess. It's also a good segue to actually meeting our climate targets. By our estimation, there is some pretty massive retrofitting that needs to happen between now and 2030, which is like 10 seconds in government time. I am just wondering how the ministry and the government is looking at scaling up efforts at retrofitting to get there, because there are a lot of deep retrofits that need to happen in this province.

Is there a big, concerted effort to do that, and what does it look like?

TORY RUSHTON: I just wanted to find the right number. I knew it was in my opening speech. It's sort of an initiative we took to make sure that the \$140 million that was announced in December, the bulk of that was for middle incomes for retrofits and upgrades. Over the three-year period, we're looking at 30,000 just with this project alone. Thirty thousand middle-income homes are going to be able to be retrofitted and meet some of the new standards. They'll be able to keep the money in their pockets while they're insulating their homes - while they're taking out the old lighting and putting in new lighting.

I could sit here all day and talk about the programs that Efficiency Nova Scotia has to offer but I guess what is encouraging is that we are taking those steps. The middle income was the biggest bulk of that \$140 million that we announced in the Fall to start taking those steps.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: This is slightly off topic, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention that I met with the Canadian Lung Association today, which really wanted to advocate for taking radon testing into account in this whole process. Often if there is a radon problem, efficiency efforts can compound it because there's no breathability in a home. I do think there's an opportunity that is probably pretty low cost to combat the issue of elevated levels of radon across the province. As we touch so many homes with Efficiency programming, even though it's not specifically an Efficiency issue, I think there's some collaboration that could happen there. There you go, Robert. Radon on the map.

I want to switch to biomass for now. I think there were some regulations in December that increased the amount of biomass used to generate electricity in the move towards renewables. We also heard in the minister's opening comments a conversation of natural gas or fossil gas in the move towards renewables.

This really is cause for concern. I understand that forest by-products may be considered renewable fuel. Our understanding of what actually gets burned for biomass in the province - we've had this conversation, the minister and me. He says that no logs are going to be cut down and burned for energy, but our understanding is that logs are being cut down and burned for energy.

The first question I would ask is: Is there a plan to end the use of biomass in electricity generation at some point, acknowledging that at the very least it is controversial to call biomass a renewable energy source?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess what I would say is, yes, we have had conversations. There are points that I think we'll have to agree to disagree on. There are jurisdictions that do recognize biomass as being renewable - there are some jurisdictions that don't.

It is a factor of our renewable electricity standard in the province right now. We did highlight a different change in December, that the fuel had to come from low-grade wood fibre, or ecologically sourced fibre. It had to be low-grade wood fibre or the result of ecological forestry practices - the pulpwood that didn't necessarily have a home, the by-product of sawmills. When you take into account all that, this is part of what Nova Scotia Power does need to meet the renewable standards right now. We know from the media that they didn't meet the renewable standards last year, even with biomass as one of their usages.

Is it on the radar to take out of the equation over the next period? I can't commit to that on the floor here today. It is a process that Nova Scotia Power still utilizes at the present time. Until such a day that we are able to eliminate that usage that they utilize the biomass for, for the renewable, I don't really think we are going to have that conversation. I'm just being very honest with you.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I appreciate that. I expected that answer. But - notwithstanding that some jurisdictions will call biomass renewable, we know that it produces large amounts of greenhouse gases. We just do. I guess our argument would be that those people are wrong, and Nova Scotia should be right.

I think the minister has been clear on the position. I wonder - when we look at our plans for decarbonization and our plans to get to our targets - how dependent is the department on the burning of biomass to get there? What is the biomass proportion going to look like when we say we've reached our targets?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm just looking for the numbers to make sure I give the right numbers. Biomass is actually less than 5 per cent of our energy production right now. We do realize that it is a market for small, private woodlot owners who do get some buy-in to their product for their low-grade wood fibre. That's why we want to make the shift. We want to see the small-scale wood-heat initiative take off even further. We know there are other jurisdictions that look at district heating, but what does that look like for the province?

I get it. Our conversations before have been that we know the efficiency isn't there for generating power and electricity. I get that, 100 per cent, but it is a fact that we do utilize this product right now to meet some of the renewable standards that are in the province.

Let's work to get off that, but let's also find another home for this product. Let's be very honest on the floor of the Legislature. The product they are using does allow the purchase back and forth. A lot of it is off private woodland owners. Let's work on finding the initiatives to get more smaller-scale wood-heating initiatives into the province.

What does that district heating look like? I know there's a municipality in the province right now that is doing studies and research. Another example - which a member from the previous government would be very familiar with - is the Dalhousie co-gen plant

in Truro, which I understand is working very efficiently right now. What will those look like in the future? I'm not saying never - just let's explore as we move away from that in the years to come.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I absolutely acknowledge the need for secondary markets. I absolutely understand the financial predicament of woodlot owners, support diving into an economic analysis of what those secondary markets should be, including district heating. I don't think that fudging our definition, just to be frank, of what is renewable is the way to get there. I completely acknowledge the need for private woodlot owners to have a market for that. Maybe that market is even biomass, but I don't think we should be counting it as a renewable energy source.

With respect, I think those are two slightly separate issues, and I don't want to conflate them. We're not saying there shouldn't be a market for that wood. We're just saying we should be clear on what we call it.

I guess I have two follow-up questions. The minister said it's less than 5 per cent now, but my question was: What amount of the mix is it projected to be in 2030 to get us off of coal? Is it going to be more than 5 per cent? Less than 5 per cent?

TORY RUSHTON: We're not looking for that number to grow at all. As we move forward to 2030, it's probably going to end up decreasing as we're going to be fortunate enough to find different markets and homes for that product.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Just to finish this - maybe I don't get an answer tonight - our view from looking at biomass, looking at the evidence and trying to understand the lifecycle of the product, as I've said, it's not renewable. That is, as the minister has said, a matter of some debate in different jurisdictions.

I guess I would ask that the department commit to actually conducting a lifecycle analysis of biomass in Nova Scotia, and making that publicly available. If the department still wants to call it renewable after that, fine, but we'll have the information so that we understand what that definition means. As is evident in this conversation, it gets all mixed up into livelihoods and economic opportunity and different things.

What we really want to understand is: Is biomass renewable? We would request that the department actually conduct an analysis that shows whether or not it is.

TORY RUSHTON: What I'll say is - not to prolong the conversation or the debate about whether it is or isn't - your point is taken. As we move with the climate plan, there are many conversations that have to take place - many departments and many things that aren't listed in the environment and climate change plan. There does have to be the proper conversations. There does have to be the proper planning.

We certainly note your concern and comments, and we'll certainly take that back for consideration.

[7:30 p.m.]

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I thank the minister for that and for answering those questions. Maybe it could even be peer reviewed, that analysis. Let's see. Shoot for the stars.

This budget shows a drop in coal royalty revenues. Great. I mean, bummer - not as much money. Good - less coal activity. Presumably, this is due to decarbonization efforts and a larger focus on wind. This kind of begs the question: Is the government looking into levying a similar type of royalty for wind farms on Crown lands? I know that's done in other provinces. Is that something that would be anticipated as we switch to that being the bigger part of the mix?

TORY RUSHTON: Regarding onshore wind - there's already a fee for Crown lands. What we are discussing is what that may look like in the offshore wind regime, but also with something that is more liking to coal are the royalties that we already get for the minerals that are already on our provincial ground. We're doing a review of all the royalties, if you will. That will also include some conversations around fees, which may charge for wind or offshore wind.

We are doing a review of how we would make up that number, if you will.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: My memory is a little fuzzy, but I do remember seeing a report from the Fraser Institute, of all places, several years ago that did show that our royalties on minerals are comparatively quite low. I will say that our party supports - as long as we're going to be mining these minerals - the public getting some benefit in terms of revenue from these companies.

I do want to go back again to the minister's opening comments around natural gas being an important part of the path. I wonder if the minister could talk a little bit more about that, because natural gas isn't natural. It's a fossil fuel. It is, of course, less energy- and carbon-intensive than coal, but the production is very carbon-intensive and destructive.

I think in the light of the IPCC report that came out recently, experts would agree that there is no time to waste on bridging. I know that comes up against the reality in a province like ours, of how we get to where we need to be, but I'd like to hear more from the minister on where natural gas falls in that. We've also heard this from Nova Scotia Power, and with the Atlantic Loop in question. Not having heard a lot around what plan B is, it's really concerning to think that we're trading one fossil fuel for another, and we're not actually moving towards our international climate commitments, or our climate commitments to our children, as the minister put it.

TORY RUSHTON: Part of it is the flexibility for the transition. I appreciate that you recognize that this it is not just as quick as flicking a switch for our province. It's less carbon-intensive than some other fossil fuels during that transition. That's what I'm highlighting. It is going to be part of that.

When we meet our 2030 goals, it's 80 per cent renewables off coal, we still have to have that reliability as we finish the gap, to get to the 2050 goals. That's where I'm highlighting the fact that it's going to be a stepped process. As we get the coal plants to gas, if you will, the next step is allowing it to utilize for hydrogen, when the green hydrogen comes online.

It's a stepped process as the transition goes. It's not just provincially. The federal government has also recognized that natural gas is part of the transition to their 2030 and 2050 goals.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Just to be clear, is the notion that an existing coal plant could be retrofitted to natural gas and then retrofitted again to green hydrogen? What does that look like, and what's the research that has gone into that, just for our understanding?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm not that technical. These are conversations that we're having with Nova Scotia Power as they are stepping away from coal, and their plans to potentially eventually burn hydrogen to produce electricity.

Are there factors that are finalized and into that place? No, we know that. There are stepping stones they have to take. How much change does have to take place in their turbines and their boiler systems to enable this aspect? Quite frankly, they're conversations we're having with the power generation sites right now, that coal is being utilized as fuel. There's a step to natural gas and then conversation. Maybe it's a wish list, but a planned approach that allows green hydrogen to be the next fuel as we do that next transition away from the natural gas.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Can the minister give me a sense of what kind of ballpark spending or - if we can't get that fine a point on it - what sort of project scope we are looking at around creating infrastructure for natural gas in the next few years, knowing that's not what we want to be using to power our province?

TORY RUSHTON: What we're being told is practically no new infrastructure investments from Nova Scotia Power - utilizing mechanisms that are already in task and infrastructure that's already in place.

Just another note about the previous conversation. You can install gas- and hydrogen-burning systems on existing sites now, so it's two-fold. I didn't know that until just now, so it's interesting. I've probably been told, but it's like drinking from a fire hose at times, as you can appreciate.

They are saying minimal investment to utilize the natural gas. As I've said before, that new future with the hydrogen in our transitional system where there are pipelines, is that what that looks like? I don't want to suppose what the future is going to take but I think there are a lot of good people in our province right now who are looking at these initiatives. As I've said, it's not just a flick of a switch. It's a matter of how we get to where we need to be in 2030 and 2050 to achieve that in the right manner.

A lot of these things - we know that some of them are being implemented right away. They're not even waiting until the deadlines. People want to move quicker than just waiting for the deadline goals to say that on New Year's Eve 2029, "Oh my gosh, we've got to flick the switch to get off coal." We want it as soon as possible.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I know my colleague is going to get to some questions about Nova Scotia Power in the next hour, but I might just move into that a little bit by asking about the grid. We've talked a lot about the massive uptake on heat pumps. We could talk at some point about electric vehicles and that strategy. We also know that our grid cannot handle it. Maybe that's in dispute, but I feel like I've heard that from the horse's mouth.

I know the government did make some effort in their bill, pegging profit to investments in reliability. Is there a conversation around whether ownership of our transmission and distribution system properly lies with a private company? Or whether, as we diversify our electricity mix, as we move towards our targets, the government wants to be able to control and maintain that distribution and transmission system so they can bring different things into the mix and not have to - as this government did when there was a retaliatory tariff on solar - stand up and legislate against it? I don't think that will be the last fight of its kind. So I wonder if there are conversations happening in the department around that.

TORY RUSHTON: One of the bills is on the table. We just passed it on Friday. The storage is going to help tremendously. I had a conversation with Nova Scotia Power last week. They are enthused about that process because it's certainly going to help them move things forward - and the performance standards to hold Nova Scotia Power accountable to that. I don't even think they showed up at Law Amendments Committee, so there's a signal there that they must agree with us that there are initiatives that can be taking place.

The new loads for the heat pumps and things are actually offset with some of the initiatives in efficiencies. As you get the heat pumps, you're not utilizing as much as you would with the baseboards because you're getting the heat pump and insulation put in - so there are some offsets there. I don't remember the exact number. I don't have it right here with me, but it was one of the questions I had asked - how much more loads are these heat pumps going to put onto our system? It's still actually very minimal in comparison to what is taking place. I was actually surprised at how low the demand was taking off on that.

You spoke about the electrification of transportation as well. That is going to be a spike. We actually do have some money allocated to do some grid studies this coming year on what we can expect, how much more in renewables, where these storage batteries should be - different things we have to do to ensure that our grid system is able to handle it, and also be able to provide residents and our commercial sector what they need to live and survive in a warm and healthy environment, but also drive the economy in our province.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: It's great to hear that there's a study. You could just take our bill and incorporate a question around who should properly own the grid. I think that the minister's answer sort of highlights the issue, because it's Nova Scotia Power's grid but the businesses in my district are really impacted by the lack of reliability of that grid. The individuals in my district and across the province, as the minister knows, are very impacted by the lack of reliability of that grid.

We increasingly hear things like, "Oh, we know that person on the Zoom call is from Nova Scotia because their power is always out."

I would hope that would be a serious consideration, and/or that the province seek to recoup funds from Nova Scotia Power for doing that work because if they are going to own the grid then they ought to maintain it.

As the minister said, I think the bill that came forward - yes, everybody agrees that Nova Scotia Power should be fined when they don't perform properly. We'll see if that actually happens. Our understanding is that the fines that exist now have rarely, if ever, been levied. Maybe widening the criteria for those will get us a little further down the line.

In general, I think if anything has become clear over the conversations of the last couple of years it is we have a utility that pretty much acts with impunity in our province and that Nova Scotians in general would like to change that dynamic. That's why I bring this question forward about the grid, because this will be crucial to our future.

I'm happy to hear the answer about the loads from heat pumps. That makes sense if you are switching from baseboard to heat pump, but we know that a lot of people are using oil. I'd be interested to see those studies because we do know that in that oil to heat pump transition, you are also often getting baseboards and things like that, so there is an increased load.

Storage sounds great. We need the science to keep up with the need to keep up with the legislation but we're all crossing our fingers there. We know there are people in the province doing really great work on that.

Yes, I'll just leave it with thanking the minister and thanking the staff and asking, particularly around that grid, is the minister working with Nova Scotia Power to look at

that reliability and to look at that study? Is that the department? Is that independent? And who's going to pay for it?

[7:45 p.m.]

TORY RUSHTON: Recognizing your time, we're still looking at what studies need to be done. We do have money allocated in our grid. Conversations are going to have to happen with Nova Scotia Power. Part of the thing with the performance standards that we introduced with the bill is that we want to make sure that the Utility and Review Board has the tools they need to hold the penalties and Nova Scotia Power to account.

As the regulations develop there will be conversations that have to be had to ensure that we have the right penalty with the ratio of allocation to what that performance standard is...

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The time this hour for NDP questioning is over. At this point I would like to offer the minister and our guests a five-minute recess to take a break. When we return, we'll come back to the Liberals.

[7:46 p.m. The Committee recessed.]

[7:52 p.m. The Committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. It is time for the Liberal hour of questioning.

The honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister, for answering a few questions.

I just want to get a little bit into the numbers on land protection. Perhaps you can correct me if I'm wrong. First of all, just to be clear, there's a commitment from you to have a plan in 2023 to reach the 20 per cent target for protected land. (Interruption) No, the plan is coming by 2023 to protect land by 2030. Am I correct? Are you still on track to meet that commitment of a plan by 2023?

HON. TORY RUSHTON: Yes, that was a commitment that was made by our department and the Department of Environment and Climate Change to work on that plan this calendar year and have that out by December.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, Minister. So we will see that plan before December, is that correct?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm better than that. I didn't say before December, I said by December. This calendar year it is our plan to have it out.

KEITH IRVING: Terrific, thank you. So, the target is 20 per cent. We are in and around 13 per cent, meaning we need to protect another 7 per cent of the province. Under my calculations that would mean we need to protect another 387,000 hectares. Am I in the correct ballpark there, to reach 20 per cent?

TORY RUSHTON: As I said to one of your colleagues, we have a percentage in here. We don't necessarily have the hectares in here. I can certainly get that back to you in due time. You could very well be right, or you could be off a little bit. I can get you the numbers afterwards.

KEITH IRVING: Right, so we have 5.527360 hectares in the province and 7 per cent of that is 387,000 hectares. Minister, that is equivalent to 9.6 Kejimikujik parks. Could you confirm that we are looking in that order of magnitude to protect that area by 2030?

TORY RUSHTON: Again, I'd have to do the calculation but we're staying committed to the 20 per cent. If that's the land mass - and I have no reason not to believe your numbers, I can't rhyme off numbers that quickly - but if that's the land mass, that's what we're working with, with different counterparts - colleagues in the Department of Environment and Climate Change. Other partners are at the table as well. Ducks Unlimited comes to mind, as well as the Nova Scotia Nature Trust. There are many other partners who are at this - I call it a game conversation to ensure that we're going to reach our targets as a province.

KEITH IRVING: A couple of years ago when I looked at this there was a little over \$1 million in the land acquisition budget. I didn't get a chance to check the book this year but presumably it's somewhere close to \$1.5 million that you have to spend on land acquisition for the purposes of protection.

Do you have a sense of how much land, how many hectares, your budget will be able to purchase this year?

TORY RUSHTON: It's 1.5 million in the budget. It's an ongoing line item. I believe the Department of Environment and Climate Change has a line item for acquiring lands as well, so it's two-fold. Our department is not just acquiring land for protection, it's also acquiring lands to meet the other needs for the Crown land asks.

We have a living document, as I said in the first hour, and we look to add to that. I encourage every Nova Scotian who is interested and has a wish for their land to reach out to the department. It has been an ongoing list for many years. Quite frankly, there are some lands that have been on there for a long time that just don't meet the needs of what Nova Scotia's goals would be. I encourage anybody who is looking to do this to reach out.

KEITH IRVING: From my perspective looking at these numbers and to underline the challenge that you have, when I did this calculation last year, I didn't have an opportunity to present it. Under the costs of the lands that you acquire each year and the average prices, to purchase 9.6 Kejimikujik Parks in this province will cost the taxpayer, I am going to suggest, about \$1 billion, if you can find people to sell you that amount of land.

[8:00 p.m.]

Can you tell me if that is in the order of magnitude, or where you think the challenge lies with you in the department?

TORY RUSHTON: Some of the land that's coming is also donated, so there's a donation aspect. There's a purchase aspect.

Let's be realistic. This was a commitment that I believe many parties made, that we need to achieve a certain percentage of protected areas. It is going to cost some money, but let's be honest - if we don't spend the money to protect our province and ensure that biodiversity is a steadfast in our province, we may not have a province to call a province.

This is an investment we're making for Nova Scotians, for the future of Nova Scotians. It is going to be a line item for years to come, to ensure that we get to that level.

As said in my opening remarks, we have many demands on Crown lands - 2,000 in the run of a year - an average year is 2,000 requests into Crown land usage. We need to ensure that the wants of Nova Scotians are also understood. There are also other areas of conversation that we have with the Department of Environment and Climate Change about what areas can be protected that may not already be protected. This is an ongoing conversation with my colleagues. It's an ongoing conversation with non-government groups as well. I mentioned the Nature Trust and the different partners at the table. I think the common goal - I think even your goal - is to support protection in our province. It's a work in progress and it's something that we're going to stay committed to.

KEITH IRVING: I fully agree. I think we are all committed to biodiversity and protection of land. My comments and the number crunching are telling the story that you have an immense challenge. This province has only 30 per cent - I think it's 29 per cent - of Crown land, so making large commitments - I know in Canada we're trying to reach 25 per cent. If we're in B.C., 95 per cent of the province is Crown land. For Nova Scotia and P.E.I., commitments of those large national numbers of 25 per cent are extremely difficult for us to do.

I guess by sharing these numbers with you, and you reiterating your commitment to 20 per cent, I'm just putting a note and a marker on the table so that we can see in the

plan that is coming forth by December how this is realistic and that it is going to be adequately funded to meet the promise that your government made to Nova Scotians.

I am not questioning your or your staff's dedication to this. I'm underscoring the challenge of the promise I think you've made to Nova Scotians. I will leave it at that and turn it over to my colleague, the member for Timberlea-Prospect.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the minister's time this evening, and of course the staff and all the hard work they are doing. I'll ask a few questions. It won't surprise you that the topic of interest for me is the way that we have a path forward to get off coal in a way that protects people and protects ratepayers. I think we share that goal.

It's something that is very personal to me because I made a commitment way back in 2020 when I first ran for leadership. We have commitments from the federal government, speaking in their Throne Speech three years ago, to help our province with our individual characteristics and the need to help finance moving away from coal and upgrading our transmission lines here in the province.

I have questions. Some of them are technical, just based on my memory of where we were when we left government back in 2021. We're approaching two years going by, so we're almost two years closer to that time of 2030. I think it's in everyone's interest to keep the pressure on, ensuring that the government is doing everything they can, having all the conversations they can, exploring all the funding opportunities they can - especially when it was mentioned again in the federal government's budget - in the actual budget document - that they are committed to advancing the upgrading of the interprovincial transmission lines within our region, including Nova Scotia.

I think it's important for environmental reasons of course - health reasons, the air quality. One of the main reasons I think we need to get moving is economic - the cost of fuel that we're burning - especially coal, but other fossil fuels - in our province. That's the theme of the questions.

I want to preface it so that people know that I very much care about the 300-plus people working at these eight coal units, that their jobs are valued, and I hope the province has actively created a plan for them as we go forward with that just transition. The federal government would certainly have to be part of a large package. I know they were considering in the order of magnitude of not millions but billions, towards ensuring that we have money for our workers who work for Nova Scotia Power in these coal facilities.

My first question is: What are the plans for our workers in these coal facilities? We should have a plan, or at least part of a plan now, that we can share, given that we are past

the time where at least two coal plants should be closed. I hope we have a plan, whether it's training, whether it's compensation, and what kind of package do we have for our workers?

I know that at one point there was a significant percentage that were nearing the age of retirement but there certainly are young people my age and younger who are working in these areas. I want to ask the question to start: How are we protecting our workers as we start to close down coal over the next seven years?

TORY RUSHTON: I know his concern is the sort of preamble into what his questions are going to be and I look forward to having a conversation back and forth over the next little bit.

To answer your question, this was actually a bit of a question that was put on the floor - I believe last Fall, maybe last Spring - during Estimates, I can't remember exactly. The Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration is actually part of the lead on that, but we are having conversations with Nova Scotia Power to ensure that those processes are taking place. As we're moving into a green economy and there's a need for more tradespeople and reskilling, if you will, one trade may not fit the suit for the next green initiative job or where we're headed, so we're encouraging those conversations.

I think that would be a question more suited for the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, and a question that's suited around Nova Scotia Power. I do know that those conversations are taking place. You're quite right. I know from a comment Nova Scotia Power has made to me directly that attrition is part of that. There is a small percentage nearing that retirement factor by the 2030 goal, as the coal does disappear. It's an ample opportunity. We have large markets for skilled trades in the province. I know through the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration that there's ample opportunity for retraining. If you're under that age of 30, there's ample opportunity to keep you right here in Nova Scotia as a skilled trade worker with the MOST program.

It's not that the doors are closing. There may be doors opening for the future for some of these employees.

IAIN RANKIN: I'm glad to hear it's on the radar. It's just something I think we need to start looking at funding and training opportunities for right away.

Nova Scotia Power has a 10-year Capital Expenditure Plan that is public. I'm wondering if the minister can share how much maintenance cost has gone into our coal plants since they've taken over government. Since 2021, what can he share in terms of the dollars that end up in rates that are actually spent to maintain our coal plants? Can he share anything about plans over the next couple of years that would be within his mandate - the past two years, the next two years - dollars that are going into the capital?

TORY RUSHTON: You're right, we certainly appreciate our staff, but even this is a question that he has to go back and get some numbers for you. We will provide that. It's not something that's tracked on a regular basis. The future investments are to ensure that the coal process is there for the reliability of the grid system and our network while we work and achieve the goals for 2030. We can get you that information right now.

IAIN RANKIN: While that information is gathered, I'm particularly interested in the plants that are at the Langan facility. One, or at least two, are due for decommissioning, and also the Trenton 6, as those are three old plants. I'm just curious how much funding is going into maintaining those plants that are either overdue for closure or coming up for closure.

What I'm getting at is: How much of a sunk cost is going into these plants for maintenance when we could be investing that money in renewable energy? I don't expect to have that right away, but if I could get some answers on that.

Another question I have is about the costs of getting off coal. When we were in government, we had estimated \$1.2 billion. That was part of the request when we looked to the federal government to help us transition. I wonder if that cost has changed and if the minister can share what's the commodity cost for coal now. We talk a lot about how wind is the cheapest form. I note that from the intro remarks. It has been the cheapest form of energy for awhile, down towards the 5-cent kilowatt hour.

Just so people understand it's the delta between the coal that we're burning here, anything that the minister can share. What do we pay for coal in this province now? Is the cost still \$1.2 billion for coal retirement?

TORY RUSHTON: If I heard that right, there were a couple of asks in there. Basically, the main gist of the question was the comparison of wind to the comparison of where coal is.

With the RFP - which I know the member is very familiar with - that was awarded the five projects last calendar year, we actually went in a little bit different than what the previous government did. We actually maxed it out because we knew what it could be, so we maxed it out so it was 5 cents per kilowatt-hour - that's what the maximum bid did to the power purchase agreement.

To put it in comparison for that, at the peak for coal, which has come down slightly, at its peak was 15 cents per kilowatt-hour. We know that was in the last calendar year and there's still some fluctuation. It is trending down a little bit right now. I think the point you're trying to make is that renewable is cheaper than coal right now and we certainly agree with you on that side.

IAIN RANKIN: That is one part of the question. I think it does underline the point and the need for speed on this important area.

[8:15 p.m.]

The other question was the coal retirement costs. In the request to try to get some help from the federal government, whether it's called the Energy East project, the Atlantic Loop - really, we just need to start upgrading our grids. The coal retirement cost was \$1.2 billion: Is that still the estimate? Is the request from the federal government still \$2 billion to help offset the impact it has on rates?

I think these are fair questions, given that this conversation goes back to when the Premier asked for all parties to help. All the MPs from Nova Scotia were at the table, I was there, the member for Halifax Chebucto - all these numbers were shared. These aren't secret, confidential numbers.

I think Nova Scotians deserve to know if we are still trying to attain at least \$2 billion in federal support to help with that \$1.2 billion of coal retirement costs. Is there anything else that Nova Scotians should know? Have those numbers changed with our asks from the federal government?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, it was an all-party meeting. It was a great meeting that was initiated. I think the member would appreciate that costs have driven up because of some unknowns that we didn't know about, even in 2021, and the high prices with things going up.

Yes, the investment that's being asked for, even from the not-so-detailed scope of what the Atlantic Loop would look like, it has gone up drastically.

We have heard the federal government talking about it, but as of yet, even through the regular meetings that our department had with Nova Scotia Power, with the federal government, with the Canada Infrastructure Bank loans and programs, there still has not been that firm number that the federal government has come out and said, "Yes, this is what we would support."

At the end of the day, we need to ensure that, yes, we're on track for renewable green energy, but we also have to ensure that the ratepayers in Nova Scotia aren't going to be biting off more than they can chew, so to speak.

We're still at the table, having those conversations about the Atlantic Loop. We're disheartened that the price tag is sky-high, but we would certainly encourage the federal government to show their cards, if you will, and start talking about an actual number.

You've indicated that in your time in government, this was one of your wish lists and I totally respect that but there have been a few years since then. Let's put the numbers on the table and let's have the conversation to see if this is an affordable path forward, not just for the pocketbooks of ratepayers but also for the other parties involved. Put the cards on the table and let's make a decision.

I want to backtrack to some of my opening comments. With the process of the RFP for the wind, with those five projects, when they get on board, we are almost nearing that 80 per cent mark of renewables by 2030. A few more - with the Green Choice Program, another RFP for wind coming out, I certainly see a pathway of meeting and achieving our goal of 80 per cent renewables, maybe even before 2030. At the end of the day, I think the member opposite and I can agree that once you achieve that goal, there's more to do as well. You can still set new goals, if you will, or surpass those goals.

There's a march in motion but we really need the federal government to come to the table and talk about the hard number that they're willing to commit to for this project - not just to Nova Scotians but the whole Atlantic region.

IAIN RANKIN: I think that's what I'm trying to get at tonight, getting as many cards on the table as possible. The original plan was to close five coal plants by 2025 - out of the eight coal units, I should specify. Is that still the plan? We're getting closer and closer. We're at 2023 and we're behind in schedule, I think mostly due to the Maritime Link not coming online totally. I just want to know if that target has moved. Are we no longer able to get to five units by 2025?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess what I would say is we want to close the coal plants as soon as possible. We've heard the narrative in the media that Nova Scotia Power is putting a halt on some of their green initiative projects. Does that include getting off coal?

What I do want to reassure you of is that in my conversations with Nova Scotia Power, that's not the narrative being discussed. They want to get off coal as well. The Atlantic Loop is one piece of the puzzle. Is it the be-all and end-all to get off coal? No. Those conversations have taken place about the storage - battery storage and energy storage. That's one of the conversations where Nova Scotia Power is going with us at the table.

I don't want to speak for Nova Scotia Power, but I think everybody at that table with the Atlantic Loop and back to there, we all need to know the numbers that are being offered, so we can make a hard and fast decision - are we going to invest in the Loop or are we going to invest in more made-in-Nova Scotia solutions?

IAIN RANKIN: I guess part of my concern is that I believe the tendency for politicians - any stripe, any level of government - is to make flashy announcements, wait

for the multi-billion-dollar infrastructure projects, get it out there, and sometimes the perfect can be the enemy of the good.

There are multiple envelopes of programs through the federal government. Some of them increased even more in the last budget. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't see a scenario where we're going to be completely off of coal. Set aside the 80 per cent renewable discussion because I do see the path to 80 per cent renewable when you include the Maritime Link at 60 per cent, the wind tender goes over 70 per cent. I think it's pretty easy to find a way to 80 per cent before 2030.

To close, especially the last three coal plants, with all those things, with battery storage, I don't see a path where we at least don't have the upgraded line between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, which is part of the Loop, too, if you do the whole package together, the so-called Onslow line.

I just wonder why aren't we at least building that and applying for existing federal funding? The last estimate I had was \$340 million. It's probably close to double that, given what I'm hearing from the minister about costs driving up quite significantly.

My fear is that we're going to be sitting here next year and the year after, still talking about a Loop project that was talked about since 2020, with no real increase in investment in our transmissions lines that's absolutely required, whether Nova Scotia Power owns it or not. I am not advocating for the utility. I'm advocating to ensure that we have the required infrastructure investments and are not leaving any money on the table. There certainly was funding available through multiple federal programs to get that funding in.

In that meeting when the Premier had all of us there, including the minister, he said we needed a decision before the end of that calendar year. It was that time-sensitive, before 2021 ended. Nova Scotia Power said the same thing. Somehow, we're in 2023 and we all think it's still possible. Why aren't we upgrading our transmission lines now with federal funding that's available?

TORY RUSHTON: Let's go back in time a little bit. You know that I'm an electrician by trade. The intertie with New Brunswick is something I advocated for in the early 2000s and we're still here today talking about it. That's disheartening, really. That's not a pun at any government. Every stripe in this Legislature has had government. That's something that Nova Scotia Power has to own. It should have been done in the early 2000s. We would have been that much closer to having the Loop investment already made.

I can say something on that intertie. I believe it was this week, maybe next week, there are actually consultations starting with the communities where that intertie has to go. I think it's a second round of consultation. Nova Scotia Power has started that consultation - I don't know what they're actually calling it in public - but that conversation is taking place.

My last meeting with Nova Scotia Power was prior to the federal budget. We speculated in that conversation what might be in that budget, but also the team that meets on a regular basis, to the member opposite, their last meeting was prior to the federal budget as well. What new money is allocated through initiatives and programs? I know the team is looking at that from all different levels - our department, the federal levels. I know that Nova Scotia Power would be filtering through that as well.

The actual investment that has been said from the federal government about the Loop, there's been no hard and fast number in any of those conversations yet of what they would invest into it. Nova Scotia Power doesn't have that asset and they have to back charge the ratepayers and see the rates go sky high.

I think we can all agree that we need the investment to ensure reliability, the greening of our grid, but how far of another rate can the ratepayers afford to go right now? We need our federal counterparts to share what number they are willing to invest out of their budget for that. Those are the conversations that are taking place right now.

IAIN RANKIN: Again, there are existing programs. I wonder if the minister has made any applications at all to the federal government for any funding to offset the capital costs on this required upgrade. I appreciate that the minister, even in his prior life, was advocating for that specific piece, but also the offset to the fuel costs.

I've heard the minister talk about not having any control over the fuel cost adjustment that has been the topic of discussion here. The 7 per cent this year and next year is virtually what Nova Scotia Power had asked for originally. Legislation passed that capped the rate part but still doesn't control what they're able to charge on fuels. That goes back to our original discussion where I started: What is the cost of coal here in the province? Well, it's more expensive, three times the cost of wind, as stated by the minister this evening. That's why the fuel costs are so high, with the commodity pricing in the markets, whether it's oil, whether it's coal. We need help in this province because of our scenario and our energy mix.

What applications have been officially put forward with the federal government to offset fuel costs and to upgrade our transmission lines?

TORY RUSHTON: There have been many things. Let's back up a little bit. Part of the conversation is about the affordability and the fuel costs for Nova Scotians. When we compare that, if we weren't put up with the process of paying for the link from Newfoundland right now and not receiving the power, we might not be having this full discussion. I think we'd still be having some of the discussion because there would still be coal on the system. We were essentially paying for a system that we weren't receiving renewable energy from for a period of time, albeit in the last couple of months they're getting back up and appreciating that.

The Premier actually wrote to the federal level making the argument where there was - I don't want to call it a bail-out - but there was assistance that went to Newfoundland because they were seeing the exact same thing.

We've advocated to different levels of the federal government for that. There has been no official response back yet. I do know there are still conversations ongoing about that. We coordinated \$250 million for the wind and the battery storage, where we've coordinated some investments with the CIB to assist in all of our proponents for the wind and some of Nova Scotia Power for the transmission into that process. Also, the \$140 million that we put into the heat pump process - the feds came back with their programs and doubled that. There are always ongoing conversations at the federal level to assist with the nature of affordability and to ensure that we are getting our fair share with the thing.

[8:30 p.m.]

That letter that I speak about, that we should be put on par with what took place in Newfoundland, that is an ongoing conversation. I know my department and I speak with our counterparts at Natural Resources Canada on a regular basis, advocating for that.

Look, now that the new budget has been announced, I certainly look forward to carrying on those conversations and what other investments that the federal level can put into Nova Scotia to ensure that we are getting our fair share of that money.

IAIN RANKIN: Hopefully we have some relief for the 14 per cent power bill hike that we'll see over two years.

I want to ask about the output-based pricing system that we'll have in Nova Scotia to replace the cap and trade program. Can the minister share how much that will drive up power bills, given that Nova Scotia Power - I know that it's cheaper than a carbon tax but the output-based performance standards will put a cost on Nova Scotia Power that they have a right to push onto ratepayers.

I know there is revenue associated with that, too, but I want to know what the cost is on power bills. How much will they increase with the output-based pricing system?

TORY RUSHTON: With that new development, those conversations are still ongoing. I think your question would be better directed to the Department of Environment and Climate Change at the present time.

IAIN RANKIN: Green Choice Program could certainly be part of moving towards what we all want to see and going to the 80 per cent target and beyond. When will that be officially live?

We know that a lot of big companies, like Michelin and others, were interested in using the Green Choice Program, but I think it's fair to say that developers in this space, renewable energy, need the certainty as soon as possible, so a timeline on Green Choice?

TORY RUSHTON: I'm told that I'm going to have some work sitting on my desk in a couple of weeks. That's how close it's coming to making the next step announcements, if you will. Something we had to be very cautious about as we go in was ensuring that we had enough work talent in the area to put up the next set of windmills.

I do want to highlight, as we're moving into those next steps, this is something that we are very committed to taking on. We hear from those stakeholders who want access to renewable energy for their businesses. It's the right thing to do. There are other businesses that are taking on their own initiatives.

In and around the Green Choice Program, I would certainly hope that by the middle of this year we'll be able to announce a solid stakeholder and move forward with the next steps.

IAIN RANKIN: Another area of renewable energy source is solar. The government did step up with solar and they made some legislative changes that were helpful to the industry. Under our government, we had started community solar opportunities. I wonder when we'll actually be able to get to a point where we'll see dedicated community solar programming in Nova Scotia, if that's a possibility.

TORY RUSHTON: By Q3. I'm being told that there's more work coming, so it's that close again. I think that reads the narrative that we're not sitting on our hands. It's something that we're all very interested in, and we need to get them out the door.

Again, the same with this sector. We want to make sure that we have the ability to get the work done when we make the announcements and that we're not flooding the market with announcements where a lot of the workers would already be tied up. Then it would be an announcement where we may not get any uptake because people are already occupied or there's a supply chain demand. It's something that's coming this calendar year.

IAIN RANKIN: Good news for Green Choice, good news for solar. What about offshore winds, in terms of the context of being ready, not sitting on our hands? I was aware that Minister Wilkinson recently said he will be tabling legislation this Spring on the board that's going to operate for renewables and broaden their mandate. I thought I heard you say we're looking at Fall for our legislation.

I wonder, given that it is a bit of a jurisdictional race around the world to hydrogen - that and offshore developments - is the minister concerned that we're not ready to have legislation introduced in this session and wait until the Fall for regulatory certainty for that environment?

TORY RUSHTON: It is a joint submission, joint party or group associate, but because of the hierarchy, the federal level has to do their regulations before we can table ours. We were hoping they would have had theirs done by this Spring so we could table it, as well, to have those processes.

We do have a regional assessment that's going on in the area as well. I believe Newfoundland and Labrador is also part of the same announcement that we're doing it. It's not necessarily a race that we can achieve without the federal level approving that process first. As soon as the federal level gets theirs approved, as Minister Wilkinson has said, this coming Spring sitting, we'll hopefully be able to bring it in on the first day of the Fall session and hold Minister Wilkinson to account.

It's a good relationship. We need him to do his homework first, so we can bring our homework here and get it approved.

IAIN RANKIN: I guess, given the amount of capital we're talking about - billions of dollars, different jurisdictions offering tax credits - I actually introduced a tax credit in this House before and now the federal government has introduced theirs.

I'm just not sure if it's in our best interest to wait until the Fall, given that there's so much interest and we don't want to lose out on any opportunities - or the best opportunities that come forward.

Would the minister consider asking his colleagues to recall the Legislature in the summer, if it is something that his department feels needs to get passed before the Fall and we may lose out on a big economic opportunity?

TORY RUSHTON: It's mere legislation and it's actually not slowing us down, because we have to do the offshore assessment, the regional assessment anyway. That's why both parties got together and put that step forward even before the legislation was all done. We actually are steps ahead by doing that assessment.

Quite frankly, I'll be honest, if I thought we were going to lose time I certainly would go to the Premier and say, "Hey, we may be interested in losing this." I know that the Premier's huge interest is in green hydrogen. It was one of the announcements that the Premier actually took from the department.

I'd never want to sit in the chair of the Premier. You've had the ability to sit in the chair. There are certain announcements that you have ministers make. That was an announcement the Premier wanted to make, and rightfully so. It was a huge announcement for the province - 5 gigawatts to the offshore. We are in lockstep with the federal government.

I honestly don't think we're losing any time at present. Rest assured that if I did think we were going to, I'd certainly be pulling at the Premier's ear. We need to make sure that we get the regional assessment off the ground, which was announced in March Break or last week, so we're off to the races. All the indications I'm having from the stakeholders and from the worldwide market show we're leading the pack. We certainly are leading the pack on this.

It begs the question, with all the coastline that Canada has, why is this the first-ever investment or announcement that we have on offshore wind? That's not a dig at the previous government, by any stretch. I know that was on your mind when you were in the leadership race and in there as Premier.

This is something we have the ability to do in Nova Scotia. I'm quite proud of that. I know that many Nova Scotians are proud of this aspect. We're off to the races. We aren't necessarily waiting for the legislation to get our feet on the ground, so to speak.

IAIN RANKIN: Thanks to the minister. When we were thinking about how we would reach our renewable energy targets, we looked at onshore because of the significantly lower costs. We are talking about the 5-cents per kilowatt hour that there's no chance you can get on the offshore, but now that there are export opportunities through hydrogen, I think it is a bit of a different landscape and opportunity for the province.

There has been an invitation-only process to date to apply for a lease for Crown land for wind to power green hydrogen. We know there is a long list of interested developers. I wonder how the government is proposing to move forward with utilization of Crown land. Is there a number the minister is thinking of, given the percentage of Crown land that is protected? How much Crown land do you think we are looking at and what kind of a process can we look at, in terms of fairness?

TORY RUSHTON: I don't want to take up too much time, but I do want to talk through a little bit of this. When we originally did that RFI - I believe that is what we called it - there were four components that were at the door asking for Crown lands. We had to do it in a fair process.

I know that you, previously sitting in my chair, can appreciate the process of allocating Crown lands and such. The four proponents agreed to the process we put in front of them. At the end of the day, there was going to be winners and losers, unfortunately. That's the process of where we are today with the developments that are taking place.

Currently there are conversations within the department that are taking place of what we are going to do next. We know there are going to be proponents that ask for more. How do we get to a place where we can have that plan for Crown lands, for certain aspects and certain wishes of what we need to see for all Nova Scotians? I don't want to say that

we're in a place where I could put that number out today, but we are having those conversations.

The other conversation we're having and throwing it out to interested stakeholders, is that things can coexist on Crown land. We know that Port Hawkesbury Paper has the FULA within the department. Some of those windmills, onshore wind, can actually be set up and coexist on that forestry land, if you will. Those are conversations that are taking place.

We're also developing the plan for the next step of that intake of asks, if you will.

IAIN RANKIN: In the interest of time, I want to jump down to the demand side of electricity. I notice that wasn't mentioned in the EGCCRA - I think that's the acronym. Certainly we do track the energy savings year to year, or we did at one point. I know this is very much under EfficiencyOne, but the minister works with EfficiencyOne and I wonder - it likely isn't a target, but maybe the minister can share any information on what demand percentage was achieved in the last year or the last two years. Do we have any of that?

I know we were trying to get to 1 per cent a year, around that range. I was just wondering if there is any progress that the minister can share on demand-side electricity to reduce - the reason I say that is because it is actually the cheapest way that we can move forward. It's certainly cheaper than bringing in tidal energy and upgrading the transmission lines that we spoke about. The demand side is very important, and we're seen as one of the leaders in the country, I think second only to B.C. now. I wonder if there's anything to share in terms of demand-side progress in the last two years.

TORY RUSHTON: I think the member opposite is probably aware that it's about 12 per cent since 2008. In the last calendar year, it was above 1 per cent, between 1.1 per cent and 1.2 per cent in the last calendar year.

IAIN RANKIN: That's good. We should put a target in that bill for 1 per cent. That's pretty good.

I wonder if the minister can share when Nova Scotia will adopt the updated National Building Code of Canada 2020 and have net-zero energy ready adopted. I know B.C. has - even New Brunswick and some others - have committed to a year where they're going to adopt net-zero energy ready. I'm wondering if the minister has comments.

TORY RUSHTON: Just very quickly, and I think the member is aware, the building code application actually falls under the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. It's not our choice to go with it or not go with it. What I can say is that we are already making investments to achieve some of those goals that are in that standard. I think, as you

can see, some of the investments and initiatives that we've taken on, we're certainly trying to reach those 2050 net-zero goals as well.

[8:45 p.m.]

IAIN RANKIN: I wonder, along the same lines of efficiency, we found out about a year ago that EfficiencyOne cancelled the New Home Construction program. There was no big announcement, there were just a couple of emails that went out. We've heard from some people who have since started constructing their homes that if you started after a certain month, you really didn't have opportunity for any rebates.

I wonder if the minister can explain how that benefits Nova Scotians in making the right choices to build new homes. We have some provinces that are looking at not allowing fossil fuels at all in homes, and I'm not advocating for a certain regulation in that area. Certainly we should have some incentive for people to add insulation, heat pumps, those types of things.

We had a long-standing program where you could at least get \$2,000, I think, up to \$5,000 to offset costs that you incurred. I think they were modest at best at the time, and actually needed to be increased to make it worthwhile. In our new construction, to upgrade your heat pump or to go to ICF or some of these other types of significant costs to homeowners, I think there's a reason why we continue to see people in all these new developments across the HRM just building to code.

Code has certainly improved over the years, but you don't see passive houses being built as much as I think they should be, because there's no incentive for people to do so. Now we don't have any incentive for new home builds.

I know it's under the mandate of EfficiencyOne, but I think the minister would agree that we need something to entice our new home builders. Especially in this housing boom where we have all these new homes being built, it's a lost opportunity if you don't at least work with EfficiencyOne to get a new program in place.

TORY RUSHTON: Just in recognition of the time, I don't have the dollar figure. EfficiencyOne ran out of the funding, that's why the program was cancelled. It wasn't that we just cut the funding for that specific thing. Further, there is money there to incentivize new buildings in this current budget. We recognized it in time, we're just having a hard time finding that number for you. I'm sure you have some more questions that you want answers to.

IAIN RANKIN: I appreciate the time. Those are actually all the questions I have for tonight. I'll give it back to my colleagues in the NDP. I really appreciate the time and the candid conversation. Keep up the good work.

TORY RUSHTON: Just to verify, it's actually not in our budget. It's \$12 million through the climate plan. I think over four years for housing initiatives.

Just to time check as well. (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: We're finishing at 9:17 p.m.

The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you, Mx. Chair. I'm going to turn it over to my colleague, but just to circle back to a question I asked in the last hour, I think I had asked about the resource management line. That's \$17.5 million.

If the minister has an answer for that now, great. If not, maybe we'll see that in the future. I just wanted to clarify where we were pointing.

TORY RUSHTON: Can we just get a clarification of what the question was? We did find the page, sorry.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Yes, that the resource management line was over budget by \$10 million. I'm asking what that was. Then the budgeted amount goes back to regular, so is it an expense that won't be incurred next year?

TORY RUSHTON: You won't hear me say it too often, but you were correct, it's Hurricane Fiona money. Also the announcement - I believe last week or two weeks ago - New Dawn, the housing initiative and solar project in Cape Breton. That was the addition. The majority of it was the Hurricane Fiona cleanup.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: That's great, although I would go back to my previous comment that I suspect we should continue to be budgeting for events like that, noting that the budget goes back to flat this year. With that I'll yield the remainder of my time to my colleague, the member for Dartmouth North.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you Mx. Chair. Hello, everyone. I'm going to ask a couple of questions about Nova Scotia Power, to start. Then if I have time, I'll spread my wings.

It has been an eventful year with respect to this government's regulation of Nova Scotia Power, most notably being Bill No. 212, introduced in the Fall. In response to the bill, Nova Scotia Power walked back on its plans to invest in renewable infrastructure, jeopardizing off-coal and reduction targets.

Did the department anticipate this kind of blowback from the bill?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess what I would say is I don't want to presume what we thought. We knew they wouldn't be happy, but we were very clear with them, that Nova Scotians couldn't afford a rate increase. We did table Bill No. 212. It was a unanimous decision here about Bill No. 212.

The UARB found that without Bill No. 212, rates would have been double digits each year. They admitted in their findings that Bill No. 212 did the job. As recent as last week, with an information brochure that went out from Nova Scotia Power to all elected officials in the province, they recognized the fact that Bill No. 212 did its job as well.

Yes, there's a vast concern in the media that Nova Scotia Power would be walking away or backing off some of these renewable projects, but they never said they were going to cancel any. I think the wording they used was "pause."

I can say that my conversations with Nova Scotia Power this calendar year have been very optimistic, as recently as about the storage bill that we passed a few days ago. They are very encouraged about what initiatives we set across for - being very blunt, we have targets; 2030 is coming and we expect to hold Nova Scotia Power to account with the legislation that is before them. I think they understand now that they have a government that is going to hold them to account.

Were they going to be upset? Yes. That rate increase they applied for, the majority of it was about profits, so of course they were going to be disappointed.

THE CHAIR: Before I pass it back to the honourable member for Dartmouth North, would the minister like some time for closing remarks this evening?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes, about 22 minutes and 26 seconds. (Laughter) No, maybe two minutes at the most.

THE CHAIR: Okay. The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: So far, the only performance standard the government has put forward in the regulations has been to protect the interests of large industrial companies. Last week in the House, the minister stated that his staff has begun working on writing some of the standards and that minimum mandatory fines might be included for some.

Can the minister confirm if there will be standards created regarding energy poverty? Also, while I'm still up, energy poverty, environmental performance, or reliability.

TORY RUSHTON: I hope you were humming something upbeat to wake me up here. We are developing regulations for all customers, not just commercial. We're working on that process. As you recall, we did pass the legislation about the Performance Partnership Advisory Table. Those regulations are almost done.

I own the fact. I said that last calendar year I wanted to see that announced. I own the fact that that's not done, the Performance Partnership Advisory Table. That is actually what is going to be assigned about the affordability and the conversation is going to be taking place there.

[9:00 p.m.]

I just wanted to make sure that you understood it's not just the commercial customers that we're looking at. There are regulations being developed and considered for all customers. Also, we want to make sure that we're giving the tools to the UARB that are needed to ensure that the processes are working.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I have a part B: How are the regulations being developed? Is there any consultation taking place? Since you mentioned the UARB, I'm wondering also, one of the features of our framework with Nova Scotia Power is that they are guaranteed a band of profit from their operation in Nova Scotia.

Other jurisdictions are implementing frameworks where returns are tied to performance - performance-based regulations, we've talked about this a lot. Are there discussions at the department about this idea? Is it something the department is exploring?

TORY RUSHTON: I guess what I would say is that we're not looking at that whole process right now. What we are looking at is to hold Nova Scotia Power to account, as we move down to put appropriate penalties in the appropriate positions. But to call it rate-based penalties - performance, sorry, I'm losing my train of thought here tonight - that's not what we're discussing.

We want to make sure that Nova Scotians have reliable power and are receiving what they're paying for. We were against the rate hikes, so now with the rate hikes, we want to make sure that Nova Scotia Power has to provide the reliable and quality power that Nova Scotians deserve.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Well, we've already seen the government somewhat reluctant to impose penalties on Nova Scotia Power. In light of Nova Scotia Power's recent pausing of their decarbonization plans, how does the minister plan to hold Nova Scotia Power to account for the climate goals that we've all passed together in this House?

TORY RUSHTON: The only actual penalty we can impose is the RES penalty. The rest of the penalties are imposed by the UARB or, if it's a climate standard, that would fall under the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

The RES is the only one that we can actually impose. What we're trying to do is give the UARB the tools they need so that not only government can hold them to account but the UARB has the ability to hold them to account for full factor as well.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I had a question about that. I just need to know what RES stands for.

TORY RUSHTON: That's the Renewable Electricity Standard.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Last year the government forgave Nova Scotia Power \$165 million in compliance costs. Is that what you're talking about? The RES? Okay, that's something different.

Was there a reason the government couldn't legislate a requirement that this cost be borne solely by the shareholders?

Again, the minister has just said he wants to give the UARB control over how to regulate the utility, but we know that legislation can affect all of that stuff anytime we actually want to. Is there a reason why we couldn't recoup costs like that \$165 million through legislation - or not recoup it, but that it would be borne by the shareholders, that it wouldn't be passed on to ratepayers?

I guess that question goes across the board when we're talking about the UARB. Can we not legislate that the UARB, when they are regulating, makes sure that the penalties or whatever are coming from the shareholders, not the ratepayers? Does that make sense?

TORY RUSHTON: The credits you're talking about, it wasn't a money exchange. That actually came from Environment and Climate Change, that didn't come from our department. I believe it was 165 million credits, it wasn't actually a money exchange, it was a credit to better the odds that the rates stay down for the ratepayers of Nova Scotia.

To answer your question about where the penalties come from and who pays them, none of it comes from the ratepayers. It all comes from the shareholders. not the ratepayers. When Nova Scotia Power gets a penalty, they can't up the rates to offset the penalties. I want to make sure that's very clear for anyone listening because that has been a bit of a debate in the House since the bill has been tabled - who pays the penalties, and it's the shareholders who pay if Nova Scotia Power does receive a penalty from the UARB for any of the targets that they don't meet or the Renewable Electricity Standard from the government. That's the one the government does. The other ones are the UARB, but it all comes from the shareholders.

SUSAN LEBLANC: It's really difficult to tell from what we have in front of us whether or not we're on track to meet our renewable energy targets. We have already seen the scramble that happens when, year over year, we don't meet the regulated targets.

I'm wondering if the government will release a year-to-year plan that explains, on the path to 80 per cent renewables by 2030 and the phase-out of coal, what proportion of energy will come from what source each year?

TORY RUSHTON: The quick numbers, recognizing that you probably have a few more questions - we're now at 40 per cent. (Interruption) With the Maritime Link, we'll be another 10 per cent and with everything else we'll be at another 10 per cent. As we get the RFPs for the wind and everything else going, it's quite clear that we can reach the 80 per cent targets with where we're going now. That's not to say that we're going to stop.

SUSAN LEBLANC: That's great to hear, but my question was actually something a little bit different, which is that I'm just wondering if the department would commit each year to producing a document - a flyer, a chart, a graph, whatever - that shows what proportion of renewable energy is coming from what sources, as we go towards 2030.

TORY RUSHTON: This is something that is actually in the climate plan report. Nova Scotia Power is going to be held to account to actually keep that updated as to where the power is going to be coming from. It is a plan that is in place to start getting that information.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Great. I'll finish with this. Our caucus welcomed the overdue release of the climate plan and the climate change risk assessment last year, which came on the heels of a devastating hurricane, and we saw widespread damage to homes and businesses. The climate plan was vague about the Atlantic Loop when trying to explain how we will meet our renewable energy targets.

The Ecology Action Centre's response to the climate plan said that "Nova Scotians deserve clarity on the status of these discussions and a timeline for the release of a decision."

My first question is: What is the timeline for a decision or update on the Atlantic Loop?

TORY RUSHTON: I want to be very clear. We certainly believe we're going to meet our renewable targets without the Atlantic Loop. For us to make a decision and a full, hard, and fast commitment about the Atlantic Loop, we need the feds to actually come to the table with a dollar figure, not just a commitment that we're going to do it or anything like that. We need a hard and fast commitment of the finances that they will invest to ensure the ratepayers don't have to bear the brunt of this.

The other aspect of that is there are different groups of government that are involved with this. It's three provinces and the federal level as well. We all need to be on the same page as we play the game with the conversation back and forth with the Atlantic Loop. I just want to reiterate for the House, our conversations are still ongoing with that. We're still advocating for as much money as we can get for that.

At the end of the day, we don't necessarily need the Atlantic Loop to meet the goals that this government has set out before us. It's another piece of the pie for renewable energy, back and forth energy, but it's not the pie in the sky answer that we need to ensure that we meet it.

As I said, we're going to meet our 80 per cent renewables and we're going to keep on going from there. The Atlantic Loop will be part of that process.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you very much. One of our goals is to have 20 per cent of land protected by 2030, but we need to do some work on this and we need a plan.

My understanding is that we haven't finished the plan that was supposed to be finished in 2013 - or maybe it was started in 2013. I'm wondering if the minister can tell us if there's an updated plan on the way for Crown land use planning and when we will see it, and will it get us to the 20 per cent by 2030?

TORY RUSHTON: Yes. We're still working on the PAPA list and the commitment that my colleague at Environment and Climate Change and I made for this calendar year. We will have the plan on the future forecast of where we're going with that. In this calendar year we'll have the plan.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm wondering if the minister can talk about any programs that might be on the horizon for electric vehicle and solar panel battery storage projects. When Hurricane Fiona happened, when I went out the door after everything got quiet in my house, I went out the door and it was like zhzhzh because everyone's gas or diesel generators were running. Obviously, that added fossil fuel in the environment is a bad idea, but necessary.

We know there is technology to use electric vehicles or solar powers as battery storage. Can the minister talk at all about that for Nova Scotia?

TORY RUSHTON: Here we go with the acronyms again. We've invested in the V2G - Vehicle-to-Grid study - and the solar and battery incentive through the Efficiency Nova Scotia program as well.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Has the department received a proposal from Cabot Links to build a golf course at Mabou Provincial Park?

TORY RUSHTON: I did not ask today but as of last week when I asked, no.

SUSAN LEBLANC: One last question. I am wondering about the Environmental Home Assessment Program. We used to have a program and it ended in 2013-14. Essentially, it was like the efficiency programs where there were rebates for doing efficiency upgrades on your home. In terms of things like healthy well water, healthy septic, healthy oil tanks, free products like water-saving taps and septic pump rebates and that kind of thing, environmentally friendly laundry soap - it all used to happen. It doesn't happen anymore. Is the department looking at bringing that back?

[9:15 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: I recognize the honourable Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables to respond to this question and perhaps then to continue into closing remarks.

TORY RUSHTON: Just very quickly, I appreciate what you're bringing to the table, but I think it's the wrong department, though. Part of that would actually be the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Part of it, with the well water, may even fall under the Department of Environment and Climate Change. It might all be Municipal Affairs and Housing, but it would be worthwhile to carry on a conversation. With that, I'll carry on to closing remarks.

Thank you very much, Mx. Chair, and thank you everybody for the conversation this evening. We shared a good story of what's going on in the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables.

Resolution E15 - Resolved that a sum not exceeding \$142,579,000 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: Shall the resolution stand?

The resolution stands.

Order. The time allotted for the consideration of Supply today has elapsed. I thank the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables and the department staff for attending today.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Thank you, Mx. Chair. I move that the committee do now rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again on a future date.

THE CHAIR: The motion is carried. The committee will now rise and report its business to the House.

[The committee adjourned at 9:16 p.m.]