



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

## **Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans**

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FOPO • NUMBER 007 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, April 12, 2016**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Scott Simms**



## Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Tuesday, April 12, 2016

• (1535)

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC)):** I call the meeting to order.

I've sat in on many committee meetings in my five years in Parliament, but this is the first time I've had the honour to be the chair, so I'd ask you all to take it easy on me.

Thank you all and thanks to the witnesses. Today we are talking about the closure of the Comox MCTS Centre.

Point of order, Mrs. Jordan.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.):** Before we get started on the actual agenda, there was a motion on the floor at the last meeting that was never voted on. I'd like to call for a vote on that, please.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** That is in order. We'll take the vote now.

Mrs. Jordan moved:

That the Committee invite the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, and departmental officials, to appear on April 19th for a two (2) hour meeting, to discuss his mandate letter and the Main Estimates 2016-17.

Mr. Strahl.

**Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In deference to your previous instructions, I will note again that this wasn't what we agreed to. We want to hear from the witnesses today on this important study, so we won't belabour the point. We had hoped the minister would make himself available for two separate meetings. It's clear that is no longer going to happen.

That being said, we're prepared to allow the Liberals to use their majority to get their way. We'll go with that.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Mr. Donnelly.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I feel that we do want to respect the time of our witnesses, so obviously, I won't spend valuable committee time talking about this. I want to express our disappointment that we weren't able to get the minister for the two meetings to come and talk.

We're now going to have half that time in a compressed meeting and that's unfortunate. We've talked about that. We've let our

intentions be known, clearly. Unfortunately, we're going to lose this vote.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Are there any other comments?

All in favour?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** The motion is carried.

Our first witness is Mr. Allan Hughes, Coast Guard communications officer and president of Unifor, local 2182.

Thank you, Mr. Hughes, for appearing. I will ask you to speak for 10 minutes.

• (1540)

**Mr. Allan Hughes (President, Local 2182, Unifor):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and committee members for allowing me to appear before you today. My name is Allan Hughes, and I am the President of Unifor Local 2182 representing 295 marine communications officers across Canada. I'm pleased to appear before you today and explain why the closure of the Comox MCTS Centre is a dangerous decision.

Before I begin, I want to say that since the committee commenced its work on this review of the planned closure, the Coast Guard seems to have accelerated its plans, and in fact staff members have already been informed the station will close in less than a month, on May 10. When the deputy commissioner was asked why the Coast Guard was proceeding ahead of this committee's recommendation, he responded, "anything committee comes back with is just that, a recommendation, not binding".

I'd like to provide you with a little information on my background. I grew up in Vancouver and I started my career with the Canadian Coast Guard in 1993 on the first and only ab initio course held at the Canadian Coast Guard College in Sydney, Nova Scotia. I began my career at Vancouver vessel traffic services centre and worked in the Tofino centre from 1994 to 2000. I have been at Comox ever since. I also have 18 months of experience working with the RCMP in their operations and communications centre on Vancouver Island.

Every year hundreds of thousands of boaters from the lower mainland, from the United States, and from around the world come to play in the vast cruising grounds of the inside passage. This traffic is in addition to the commercial fishing fleet, cruise ships, and other commercial vessels that support industry and tourism along the coast. It's an extremely busy waterway year around.

Closing the Comox MCTS centre is not only a bad business decision, it's a reckless one, without due consideration to the uniqueness of B.C.'s south coast. The risk is to commerce and the environment, and the danger is to the public we protect and the safety network we support. If Comox is closed, the 50 officers in Victoria would end up handling approximately 40% of all the marine search and rescue cases in Canada and regulating 40% of the shipping movements in Canada.

Not a single MCTS officer or manager with operational experience was consulted before the decision was made, and unfortunately this is becoming more evident at each phase of this four-year odyssey the Coast Guard has embarked upon.

Today I'd like to share the front-line perspective and explain why Comox should remain open. One of our main concerns, should Comox close, is that the workload shouldered by Victoria would be unmanageable and make it extremely difficult to certify officers in the future.

Currently out of the 6,000 search and rescue incidents that occur each year, approximately 1,000 of those are handled in Comox. Those calls will now move to Victoria. At the moment, Victoria monitors eight remote radio sites and 45 radio frequencies at a time. After the proposed changes, when Comox closes, they'll monitor 12 radio sites and 63 radio frequencies at once in the busiest search and rescue area in Canada.

Imagine the difficulty of picking up a weak distress call of a single kayaker from the din created by the volume of 63 channels on a busy summer long weekend.

I have some personal experience. Back when I started my career in Vancouver, the workload that existed there at the time was similar to what's being planned now in Victoria. Some say it worked before, but I was there and it didn't. A moment ago I referred to the course I took at the Canadian Coast Guard College, which was eight months of intensive classroom training. Then I began my field work at the centre in Vancouver.

Despite having passed all that training, two-thirds of my classmates, eight of 12, could not cope with the workload and the complexity, and were washed out. They didn't continue to work at the Coast Guard. One went to Iqaluit and another went to Prince Rupert.

If Comox is closed, we'll be taking a giant step backwards, as this overwhelming workload and complexity will revert to the newly consolidated centre in Victoria.

When Vancouver MCTS closed in May of 2015, they had something called the regional marine information centre. This operating position was a collection, dissemination, and alerting point for pollution reports, such as the ones with the *Marathassa*. It notified Coast Guard environmental officers and Transport Canada with regards to defects with shipping and provided significant event notifications for government agencies and our senior Coast Guard officials.

These vital functions are now administered in Comox because the Coast Guard couldn't find anywhere else to put them last year. They

tried to send them back to their original agencies such as Transport Canada.

Last week they announced they'll transfer these responsibilities to the regional operations centres, which are staffed by Coast Guard ship officers. They'll move that from a 12-hour operation to a 24-hour operation, and they'll have to hire more staff. That's going to increase the cost even further for this consolidation.

● (1545)

I'd like to address the flip side of the workload problem, which is of course staffing. Unifor predicts there will be a loss of approximately 20% to 30% of our current officers due to retirements and departures within the next two to three years in Victoria. The ability to train and qualify people to replace them takes up to two years. It will be nearly impossible, with the retirement bulge from now until 2021, to ever catch up, given that it takes two years to train them.

Year after year, MCTS officers work the highest number of overtime hours in the federal civil service. The closure of Comox will exacerbate an already tenuous staffing situation in the western region. Unifor estimates that this fiscal year there will be an overtime budget of approximately \$2 million in Victoria, and in subsequent years \$3 million. When this question was posed to Coast Guard regional management, the answer they provided was, "We'll just shut down operating positions." What this means is that where five officers would normally staff a busy long weekend, there may be only two officers on duty to respond to distress calls.

Assistant Commissioner Girouard and his HR staff are attempting to solve the current staffing shortage, without success. There is no plan on how to replace the officers who will leave in the next five years. For those 20% to 30% who will leave in the next two to three years, they haven't even started the hiring process, and it takes two years to train them.

In addition to workload and staffing, we have grave concerns about the technical problems with the new communications system that has been installed in every station on the coast, except Comox. To give you some background, on February 9, Victoria MCTS modernized, along with the already consolidated Vancouver centre. According to the Coast Guard, the transition to the new system went well, but within days our officers were reporting echoes through both the speakers and the headsets used to monitor for distress calls and regulate shipping movements. As a result, there are cases of vessels not hearing MCTS centre transmissions, and officers not hearing vessels. It appears that early on the Victoria single-site testing, before they energized the whole system, was fine. As soon as they put it all together, they ended up with the problems, which you can see in the email I obtained through access to information.

A major problem with the consolidated centre, if Comox is closed, will be the noise generated on the distress channel, channel 16, and on our working channels. Remember, that's 63 separate channels. Currently, at peak times radio calls can be missed, as simultaneous transmissions from other boaters cover distress calls. That's how busy it is. As our officers are attempting to call the vessel in distress, calls are often overridden by other marine traffic, including B.C. ferries just making blind safety calls entering Active Pass.

There are limits to the number of radio communications, sites, and incidents an officer can safely and effectively manage with a positive outcome. Passing out search and rescue information is vital to the successful conclusion of saving lives and protecting the environment.

The area of responsibility covered by Victoria, should Comox close, would encompass 40 dedicated search and rescue vessels, the 442 Squadron search and rescue aircraft, and over a dozen police and fire department resources. This is how busy that area is.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** You have two minutes.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** As I mentioned a moment ago, the audio problems continue to this day at Victoria, Prince Rupert, and Sarnia. During a visit to Sarnia in November, I personally witnessed officers, on nearly every radio call, use radio playback equipment to listen to recorded calls in an attempt to decipher what had been said, sometimes with success and sometimes without.

I'd like to refer you to the email, which is this one here, obtained through access to information and that was generated out of the Victoria MCTS centre with the new, modernized equipment. This also discounts the testimony previously provided by Coast Guard officials that the problems had been solved.

Our officers are fearful of what will happen after the May long weekend, which is the start of what we affectionately call the silly season due to the noise and the number of search and rescue cases in that centre.

During the March 10 hearings Coast Guard management were asked if the new communication system had ever led to a safety incident. A few months ago, on February 2, there was a near miss incident involving a U.S. tug towing two barges with a deep-sea vessel. A collision almost occurred and this was during a prolonged communications outage at Mount Ozzard in Ucluelet. Officers in Prince Rupert sat helplessly and watched on radar and transponder as a collision nearly occurred and they could not intervene due to that outage. This highlights the dangers of consolidation.

I would also like to address the additional point that was made on March 10 by Assistant Commissioner Girouard when he appeared before this committee. At that time, he discounted the tsunami threat to that centre. I have a graphic here provided by Fisheries and Oceans showing the tsunami wave entering Juan de Fuca Strait and bombarding the area where Victoria MCTS centre is located and the four-metre risk zone.

Lastly, I'd like to point out that the Comox MCTS centre building is not closing. It's not being sold. In fact, it will remain in place along with the technicians that work there. The equipment that is modernizing Victoria is already located in Comox. This is the

newest building that the Coast Guard has for MCTS. It was built in 1993 to post-disaster standards.

In conclusion, we believe that closing Comox and moving it to Victoria is not in the interest of public safety, fiscal prudence, or operational feasibility.

I have one more overhead for you to look at. This is a map of the Saanich Peninsula put out by their emergency planners. This area is where the Institute of Ocean Sciences is located and where the centre will be located, which is in the tsunami planning zone, four metres above sea level, which is an evacuation zone.

• (1550)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you very much, Mr. Hughes, for a very comprehensive presentation.

On the phone, we're going to hear from Vancouver, British Columbia. Mr. Fred Moxey, you have 10 minutes.

**Mr. Fred Moxey (Retired Coast Guard Commander, As an Individual):** Thank you, sir.

I first want to give you a bit of my background. I've been working at sea for 40 years. I started at a very young age, attending the Prince of Wales Sea Training School in Dover, England, at the age of 15. I completed my marine training and went to sea at 16 years old in the merchant navy, working for the P&O line. I returned to Canada and joined the Canadian Coast Guard in 1972. I have worked in most Coast Guard stations on the west coast, and I've also opened four stations. I also sailed on offshore petroleum vessels. I was a superintendent of all Pacific Coast Guard stations and also superintendent of the office of boating safety.

I opened the Campbell River Coast Guard station, which is just north of Comox. Local knowledge is so important to have. When you open a station, you invite the public to an open house. You start to meet people. These people in your community are the ones who will quite often help you do your job in a more effective way. You get to know the mayor and the council, the police chief, the EHS, the fire department, and Customs, all of which are very important. You could get a call or get somebody reporting something on another side of the island, and you could probably phone a citizen and ask them to take a look out their window to see if there's anything going on. That kind of knowledge is vital in operating a station, and if you're not there, you're not going to get that rapport with the public anymore. It will be gone.

As for Campbell River, north of Comox, we used to call that "heaven or hell". The two tides that meet from the north end of the island and come up from the south end of Vancouver Island meet right outside Comox. You can get 20-foot standing seas there and a 16-knot run in the narrows, and the narrows are only 700 metres wide. Captain George Vancouver once said that it was the most hazardous body of water he was ever in.

You have a million passengers going through that pass every year to Alaska, plus all the fishing vessels and all the public vessels. The American vessels come up here. This goes on year-round. I know that sometimes when I used to take people from Ottawa on a tour in February or December, they'd see all those vessels out in English Bay. That goes on all year. Nothing shuts down here in the winter.

I don't know how Victoria radio is going to handle all that marine traffic, particularly in the summer, when we have events like the Symphony of Fire, which is a big fireworks challenge. That brings 400,000 to 500,000 people to Vancouver, and a lot of them come in boats. We did a count in English Bay once, and there were 1,700 vessels. When it's all over with, they all decide to go home, and there are collisions and accidents, and maydays going off all over the place. Plus, now Victoria radio is going to have to look after Comox and Tofino. I really think they've gone too far with the cuts already.

I'd like to tell you what it's like at the other end of the microphone and being on the Coast Guard cutter. You have those engines running and you're trying to do your job at a mayday. I'd like to share an experience with you. I went out once in a terrible storm at night. It was blowing 60 knots and gusting to 80. We were out for about nine hours. I lost all my antennas, and we were starting to flood. We were down to one radio, a portable radio with low wattage. We called the Coast radio station and told them what our problem was. I had the crew members tell them that we would call every 15 minutes, and that if they didn't hear from us, they would know something was wrong. We need clear, precise communications, particularly in those kinds of conditions.

The other thing I'd like to share with you is that quite often when we go out, everyone's coming in. We go on a long search. We could more than likely be the on-scene commander, and that means you're in charge of fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, various surface vessels—up to 20 or 30 surface vessels—and you have to plot all those positions and log all the search areas that they're doing.

● (1555)

Then we do what we call a sitrep, a situation report that goes through Vancouver Coast Guard radio, or Victoria Coast Guard radio now. And all that information is vital to get to the rescue centre so they can start doing drift plots. Coast radio station is my lifeline. If I am in trouble, we'll be calling them just like I did when I almost lost the cutter.

Comox, as far as I am concerned, is a lifeboat, a ship's lifeboat. If we lose one of the radio stations or if we lose two of the radio stations on the flood plain they are on, we're going to be down to nothing. We need Comox in there as a backup. As Allan said, it's been seismically upgraded and would withstand a major event.

The other thing is if we lose communications after a disaster, the Coast Guard's responsible for reopening the traffic lanes, repositioning buoys, the signs on the water, and to get the commerce going and to get the help in that is vital to do our job. Without communications, you have nothing.

I believe I've said just about what I really wanted to share with you on how it was for us at the other end of the line. I guess it all depends on how much risk the government is willing to take, and the thing that concerns me is that the very people who are making this

decision are the very people who advised the former government to shut down Kitsilano Coast Guard base, the busiest Coast Guard station in Canada. Then we had that oil spill, and there was no response. Those are the people who are making decisions now. I briefed the Prime Minister of Canada, and he reopened Kitsilano.

I hope this can be turned around, and thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to all of you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you, Mr. Moxey. You're three minutes under the limit. We really appreciate that.

Now we'll turn the floor to questions, and the first questioner is Mr. Hardie from the Liberal Party, and you have seven minutes.

**Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Hughes and Mr. Moxey.

There seemed to be a number of layered issues here.

One is the quality of audio that's reaching the sea and the quality of audio that's being returned to the centres that are monitoring what's going on at sea.

The second is the number of ears actually listening to that audio. And I want to start there. Before the cuts started taking place...and I believe the Vancouver centre which was on the Guinness Tower, as I recall, monitoring Burrard Inlet, was the first to close. Then a number of others have since. If we look at post-closure of Comox versus what we had before the closure started, do we essentially, though, have still the same number of ears listening to marine traffic on the west coast?

Mr. Hughes.

● (1600)

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** First of all, the Vancouver MCTS centre was originally located at Kap 100, at the north end of the First Narrows Bridge, Lions Gate Bridge. During the consolidation during the nineties, it was moved to the Sears Tower, Harbour Centre in downtown Vancouver. The reason that was done was to basically monitor their harbour because there's a lot of blind areas with radar for that area.

With regard to the number of ears, before consolidation we had five safety desks. We had one in Vancouver; two in Comox, which included one that was staffed with a supervisor; and two in Victoria. That's five operational desks to handle the search and rescue load for that area from basically the north end of Vancouver by the inside pass, past Victoria.

Post-consolidation, it could go down as low as two, and that's being driven basically by the number of staff who are going to be available to work at that centre. They have five desks, but one is going to be dedicated to something that was supposed to be automated, which is recording the weather onto the continuous marine broadcast. That's actually more labour intensive now, and they're still having to manually record that weather. It was supposed to have all the time savings involved when they modernized their centres across Canada. There's also a need for those officers to have a relief break during their watch so they can take care of personal needs and also eat a meal or two because they're there for 12 hours, and at that time the positions would again drop down because we provide our own breaks.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** So in terms of the number of years then—and let's include Prince Rupert in this— what number of officers would actually be involved in monitoring marine traffic, before and after?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** I'm only speaking to the safety, the search and rescue marine incident side of the house.

In Victoria there's an addition to that. There are four vessel traffic monitoring positions. There's one that will be coming from Comox, one that came from Vancouver, and two that were already in Victoria.

In Prince Rupert, they've actually reduced the number of officers monitoring that marine traffic, actually to the point where the monitors, the contact is wider than the marine waterway on the graphic chart. We had a situation where a fishing vessel went aground. The officer couldn't even tell, and it had stopped there. It never called us. For an hour it sat there and took on water and never called us. We couldn't detect it because the waterway is that narrow on the chart, because they've reduced—again, by one person—the number of people who are monitoring that marine traffic and regulating the movements.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** I was looking for a number—

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** Yes.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Obviously you don't have that at hand.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** I do. The Prince Rupert centre has one less person monitoring traffic and one less person monitoring radio.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** And for the metro Vancouver, Vancouver Island?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** It will be one less.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** One less.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** Because they have one person dedicated to manipulating the weather, putting on the continuous marine broadcast.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** So actually overall, then, the number of people who are actually engaged in monitoring traffic or broadcasting to the ocean are maybe a few less than before the consolidation.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** True. However, the ability for those officers to be able to pick out a distress call, due to those 63 channels coming through one speaker, is going to be greatly diminished.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Did they use the signal strength of the individual towers to triangulate the location of vessels?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** There are a number of direction-finding sites located on the coast. There are three in the Victoria area. Comox didn't have it because of the placement of the radio towers, and Prince Rupert used to have a significant network of them. They've slowly diminished over the years, so again, the direction finder is only good as long as you have a strong signal and a continuous signal that can lock on the position, because in the summertime in Victoria you may have 30 transmissions going out on distress and call-in channel 16 at any given time.

● (1605)

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Let's talk then about the radio system itself. It has been described as 21st century and I gather that this could conceivably apply to some of it but not all of it.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** The technology they've instituted, we had touch screens in Vancouver and Victoria. It's just an updated touch screen to select the channel and the ability to be able to take the signals, say, from Tofino and move them to Prince Rupert using data compression. I don't want to get into too many technical details, but they're susceptible to land line failures. If a telephone pole goes down they can sever everything else off downstream.

Really, this consolidation project is a leveraged technology that was unproven, certainly in our domain, to the extent that it's being implemented, and was rolled out before being fully tested, as my colleague Scott Hodge testified before about the issues that happened up in Iqaluit. The audio issues continue to this day in Prince Rupert and Victoria, in Samia—

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Describe those audio issues.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** It's like an echo, and because you hit numerous radio sites it may come in on the recording device. Somebody may come in and play it and it will sound fine, but if you're sitting in the room and there are six speakers feeding everything in, there's a time delay, and it almost sounds like you're talking in a garbage can. There have been search and rescue cases where we didn't even know they were trying to call us, and I witnessed that in Samia. A search and rescue aircraft was flying over Lake Winnipeg, and of course at altitude they hit numerous sites, and I said to the officer, "What the bleep was that?" and he said, "I have no idea." He hit his call check recorder and it was an aircraft dropping flares over Lake Winnipeg.

So I've witnessed those. Those challenges are still there for our officers, and there seems to be a real disconnect between the regional Coast Guard and Ottawa with regard to addressing those issues.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you. Time's up. Exactly seven minutes. Congratulations to both of you.

Mr. Strahl.

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** Thank you, Mr. Hughes and Mr. Moxey, for your testimony. I find it interesting that Mr. Moxey closed with it. Of course, as the Conservative member I find it amusing that the new government has wholeheartedly rejected the advice of the Coast Guard to close down the Kits Coast Guard station and has wholeheartedly embraced the closure of the Comox MCTS station with the same advice from the same people, as Mr. Moxey said.

We're here to talk about that second part, the closure of Comox. In previous testimony, in a meeting quite some time ago now, on March 10—this question is for Mr. Hughes—Mr. Lick, director general of operations of the Canadian Coast Guard, said that they estimated closing Comox would save \$500,000 to \$700,000 a year. Unifor countered, saying that it would cost up to \$1 million to \$2.2 million per year in extra overtime charges for the new centres.

Then a response to a question I asked to Mr. Hodge, your colleague, indicated that Unifor wasn't opposed to consolidation, but just to doing it this way, and he talked about Unifor's recommendation as being to move Vancouver to Victoria, Tofino to Comox, and make no change at Prince Rupert.

That was Unifor's recommendation. He indicated to me, after the meeting when he looked at some preliminary data, that he thought it would actually be cheaper to maintain those three stations than to consolidate, as is now planned. I'm wondering whether you have had a chance to reflect on that idea. Do you concur with it?

Obviously this consolidation was done. There are 22 stations going to 11; there's an attempt to save the government money—or at least that used to be a priority with the Conservative government. But perhaps you can talk about whether there will be any cost savings and, if not, why not.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** The Coast Guard has embarked on many studies over the years—it could be concerning light stations—and certainly they have looked at MCTS in earnest ever since our last consolidation, which was our union members' initiative—to go from 44 to 22 back in the 1990s to save about \$14.7 million a year. We're not opposed to consolidation, but it has to make sense.

The Coast Guard did a study in the early 2000s. They called it the least cost analysis—LCA, we called it. It was studied. They went to their integrated business management unit at the time, and the response came back that three centres was the least cost solution, and it was just what you suggested. Vancouver obviously had a high least cost, at \$800,000 for that building at Harbour Centre and least cost as well on the roof for the antennas. Closing that and moving it to Victoria obviously financially made sense.

Prince Rupert is a problem, because nobody wants to live there. We hire officers, and as soon as they get in, they try to get out as fast as they can. If they're not successful in the MCTS world, they leave. When we talk about least cost, we have to factor in everything. It costs \$100,000 to train one of our officers, over the course of about eight months. When you have 40 officers go through that centre in a period of 12 years and the staffing complement is only 30, you have a retention issue, and it's because of where it's located.

We wouldn't want to expand or exacerbate that staffing situation up there. The simple operation would be to put a microwave link in to send Tofino over to Comox. Through access to information I obtained information that part of the decision-making process was that the assistant commissioner at the time didn't feel there was adequate space for one more desk in Comox. That centre was built for expansion; this was always something that they studied. Then in the early 1990s they knew something was going to come to consolidate things.

There's plenty of room in that centre for another desk. It's a desk with some monitors.

• (1610)

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** Unifor, then, maintains still that this is going to be an additional cost to the government, to the tune of half a million to one and a half million dollars per year.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** If you're just looking at absolute fixed costs—salaries, number of people—sure there might be, on the books, savings of half a million dollars, because you're saving an officer in charge, and they cut six supervisory positions. Those are among the safety positions they eliminated that they thought they could get away with because the weather information was being automated.

At the end of the day, however, if you're going from a \$400,000 overtime budget in Victoria to something that exceeds \$2 million every year and will for the next six years, what's the haste in closing the centre? You're going to lose 200 years of experience when that centre closes in less than a month. These are people who are not just going to retire. These are people who are literally putting themselves out on the street without work. They're fearful of the situation that's developing in Victoria with the concentration of noise and the complexity and what's going to transpire down there.

Flight service went through a very similar situation a number of years ago. The former commissioner was part of that project with NavCan. They consolidated too far. They've looked, and they have to expand it again.

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** The final question is on the study. Obviously it's time sensitive. There was agreement from this side of the table and one of the members on the other side to move ahead to study this as well.

To say that it's just a recommendation and essentially the members of Parliament don't matter in this case, and that they will proceed without the recommendation of this committee I think is contrary to what we heard in the House, and what the spirit of the motion is so it may not meet the criterion for contempt of Parliament but it certainly is contemptuous to have heard the things we have heard. Since this study started there has been an acceleration of this move to consolidate.

Maybe you could talk briefly about that.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** Our regional management in Victoria was very clear even as far back as December when the minister came out to visit the Coast Guard base at Huron Street to meet staff and see the new helicopters.

Speaking with them informally, because we're all colleagues, we talked about the closure. And I went into one of the manager's offices, and in October 2016, he had a date up there for the Comox closure.

We don't want to rush this closure. We want to make sure the equipment works properly, and that our staffing situation is sustainable.

This came out of the blue. We really thought the time for this committee to study this closure would give us some breathing room to take us over a second look at the closure, and why the uniqueness of the B.C. south coast warrants the situation.



**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** I'm afraid time's up. Thank you very much.

Mr. Donnelly, you have seven minutes.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I'd like to thank Mr. Hughes and Mr. Moxey for your years of service and dedication to the Coast Guard and to our country, and definitely for your testimony here today at our committee. I do agree it is alarming that you're hearing the words from management saying we're going to accelerate this program while it's being studied by this parliamentary committee.

In my short time I wanted to focus on workload and training, some of the issues you brought up. I have a map that shows part of the area. You brought to the committee's attention that this area we're looking at takes over 40% of the nation's traffic on the water. That's a huge amount of traffic, over half of British Columbia's traffic in this area.

You have mentioned workload issues. We've talked about technical issues. We've heard those problems in past testimony. We're going from five stations in terms of this modernization and consolidation down to two. The concern here for public safety is with that one closure. That's what we're down to, closing one centre. What you're saying I think in a very reasonable and modest way is going to two is too much. We've heard from Mr. Moxey who has said the Comox station is like a lifeboat.

I want to come back to your comment about training. It takes two years. What we've heard from this committee is management has said they can be ready for the transition now. Can you comment on that? We also heard in the past about echoey transmissions. The question was why couldn't we have heard more recent submissions on these echoey transmissions? Why so far back?

Could you comment on those two things?

•(1615)

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** Certainly.

Unifor has filed lots of access to information requests. For anybody who's gone through that process, they're not always timely in their arrival. I was hoping to have some recordings of that equipment for you today. I could certainly walk out onto the operations room floor in any of those centres with my cellphone and record something, but that's not accessing it through the proper channels. Those communications are privileged, and certainly they have to be screened before they're released for public consumption.

With regard to the training, and then the staffing plan for Victoria, Coast Guard management doesn't even know how many people are actually coming from Victoria. They handed out to our officers two weeks ago letters that had a reporting date of last year. We don't even really have a firm date of when we're supposed to report. Nothing's been told to those officers.

The bottom line is that they need 50 officers to make that run on a 1960 staffing standard. It doesn't take into account anything like maternity leave, paternity leave, care and nurturing leave, or any of those extra provisions that have been granted to working people over the last 40 years. The staffing factor of 5.5 per operating position is out the window. It should be up around seven. This committee heard

testimony with regard to that in the early 2000s, saying it should be increased to seven.

So running short...we have a lot of part-time staff who work in Victoria. To train people up to be ready to go, it takes two years at that centre. We have officers who are 20-year veterans and have never worked at Vancouver harbour. They haven't even started their training, and it takes months just for that sector in Vancouver harbour because of the complexity and what's involved in actually making sure those tankers get through, and get through safely, without incident.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** If they haven't started the training, and it takes up to two years, and we're less than two months away from closing the station, how is it that management can say that we can safely do this and still keep the safety on the waters?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** I have no idea.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** How are they going to do it?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** They're going to do it with massive amounts of overtime and reducing the number of people who are on each watch.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** Okay.

On the echoey transmissions, I know that my colleague Nathan Cullen, the MP from Skeena—Bulkley Valley, was up in Prince Rupert over the two weeks we were at home in our ridings. He visited the station, and he heard the echoey transmissions happening while he was there. I don't know if you can provide any comment on what he heard. I know there was also a team that was flown in to be with him at that time.

Do you have any comments about that?

•(1620)

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** A search and rescue case unfolded that day in Prince Rupert, during that visit, and the distress call that came in was garbled. It was unintelligible. It was only through quick acting by our officer that we were able to play back and actually get the position of that vessel. The lifeboat communications out of Tofino were terrible.

It's one thing to pull a recording up on a piece of recording equipment that's sitting somewhere else and listen to one radio site, but our officers aren't listening to one radio site. They're listening in Prince Rupert to 22 on over 80 separate channels. When it hits multiple sites on the same channel, it comes in as garbled.

That's the issue we have that has not been addressed. There have been some other minor technical issues. I don't know why they haven't been addressed. There seems to be a disconnect between what our officers are reporting to management and what's being done to actually correct the problem.

Will they correct the problem? Even if the contractor doesn't do that, I have full confidence in our technical staff, who are amazing, to eventually address that. But the fact that it was rolled out, putting mariners' safety at risk, before it was fully operationalized? It's dangerous.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** In the half a minute I have left, it seems like the workload, and also the amount of noise you'll have with more desks and monitors, will be intense for this Victoria station once Comox to Vancouver is consolidated in this one area.

Just as a final comment, Mr. Moxey, you mentioned that the Comox station is like a lifeboat. I'm wondering if you could elaborate in a couple of sentences on why the Comox station is so important.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Very briefly, please.

**Mr. Fred Moxey:** Yes, sir.

As I say, it's seismically upgraded and if we lose Prince Rupert—or Victoria, that one is more likely to survive a disaster—I feel that we need to have a backup, and that would be the lifeboat of MCTS.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you very much.

Mrs. Jordan.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** Thank you, Mr. Moxey, and thank you, Mr. Hughes, for coming in and sharing with us today.

I have a number of questions. I'll try and put them in some semblance of order. You said at one point that Comox is a good building, lots of space and you said that it already had the new equipment. If it already has the new equipment but the equipment is a problem, why is it better to keep Comox open?

You mentioned that one of the big issues you have is the quality of the equipment, but if Comox has that same equipment, how is that not a problem?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** I'll back up and I'll look at the St. Lawrence Seaway. We monitor all the shipping and boating activity that occurs down the St. Lawrence.

The radio sites are maybe 1,000 feet, 500 feet, or even at sea level, or whatever it is for the river, and they're basically stationed in a linear line.

Vancouver or Victoria are not like that. They're in a big circle. When you receive on multiple sites, which is the norm there, you end up with this echo. As I alluded to, the technicians, I'm sure, if it's not part of this contract that has been let to the company, are pretty resourceful. They'll figure it out. But I don't know why we have to modernize a modernized centre to make the equipment work to a standard.

In Comox, with the equipment being there, it's in preparation to move the signals down a phone line to Victoria. The desks, and literally a touch screen, is all that's separating the equipment from working in Comox.

Our gravest concern is the amount—even if the technical issues are fixed, which I'm sure they will be eventually—will be the noise level in that operations room and being able to detect a kayaker who has rolled over into the water and is calling for help on a one-watt handheld. Meanwhile, ferries are calling each other and yachts are calling each other. Our ability, once you have that all coming through one speaker in Victoria once Comox closes, is going to become more challenging and it may get missed.

We have a difficult time doing that already.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** You said that we were going basically from five to two in terms of the safety desk.

• (1625)

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** Potentially.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** Potentially. Is that what you said?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** Yes. Short staffing.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** Short staffing, but that three you could see possibly working. That would be a little bit easier. Is Prince Rupert staying open?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** Yes, Prince Rupert is one of the two super centres, I guess.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** But you said that nobody wants to be in Prince Rupert.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** No, nobody wants to be there. Well, there are a couple of people.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** I'm sorry, I'm from the east coast, so you'll have to bear with me while I ask these questions. What's the difference between closing Prince Rupert or closing Comox? If they said, "Okay, let's keep Comox open, but we'll close Prince Rupert," what's the difference there?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** I can only hypothesize why that decision was made. I suspect it was something to do with the concentration of marine traffic anticipated to increase around Kitimat and the LNG portfolio that's going on in British Columbia. I don't have that information of why those chose it, but they did.

They came to the union and they came to some managers and supervisors in the Coast Guard in MCTS early on when this was announced and said, "Where are we sending everything?" There was a lot of debate and we actually came to that meeting and we were told not to take notes over this three-day meeting, by management.

We all came out of there, even the managers, and we all agreed that two isn't going to work. One or three centres.

When they talk about the number of desks, it's just like this. So, going from five desks, operating positions, down to two, would be because of the short staffing that's going to occur down in Victoria.

We've already seen that in Halifax. They actually have operators sliding between traffic-regulating desks back and forth, and they are U-shaped consoles. They have to push back over, answer the call, and they're looking at anywhere from eight to 12 monitors. So they're constantly looking, giving their traffic and wheeling back and forth and that's what we don't want to happen.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** You are the national president for Unifor, is that right?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** For our local. Yes.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** This is one of the last amalgamations or closures for the MCTS stations.

Have there been problems with the amalgamation in other areas? If Comox did stay open are we going to get calls that we need to reopen St. John's? I have not heard that there's been any problem with those since they've closed. I'm wondering what the situation is across the country with other MCTS stations.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** We certainly questioned why certain centres stayed open and others were closed, St. John's being one of them. We had the MRSC issue, which you're well aware of. They closed that MCTS centre and they moved it to Placentia. It was a head-scratcher because it was a fairly old building and people lived in St. John's. It seemed to be the vacancy rate; it was very difficult for people to get accommodation there. There were some head-scratchers. When they closed St. Anthony and they moved it to Goose Bay up in Labrador some of the comments I heard anecdotally were that it's a lot quieter. Maybe it's not picking up as much traffic. As I say, the reports are anecdotal. There are problems in Sarnia with the audio issues for much the same reason there are audio issues in Prince Rupert. They have 22 or 24 remote sites going into a single centre. Between the U.S. Coast Guard using their high-powered sites in the States and hitting their multiple sites with the echo it just exacerbates the situation.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** You said that you had a meeting and they said don't rush the closure. They put a date on the board and then you were quite surprised to find out that the date had changed.

What was the date they put on the board?

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** October 15.

**Mrs. Bernadette Jordan:** My understanding is that there hasn't been any expediting of the closure and that this was the date that was set in 2014 by the former Conservative government.

**Mr. Allan Hughes:** The closures were announced in May of 2012. There was no communication to our officers in Comox. On April 1, 2015, the date passed when we were supposed to close without a single word. We asked questions. People are trying to plan their lives; do they remortgage or finance? They had lots of questions. Nothing. There was no communication.

The last discussion we had, and Scott Hodge has those within the region now, we were down to meet the minister. They showed us on the board that they're really trying to push this back to October. Suddenly in the last two weeks, boom, it has to happen immediately. Our regional management has concerns about that and perhaps it's a question for them.

• (1630)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you.

I'd like to thank you, Mr. Hughes and Mr. Moxey, for your testimonies. They were most illuminating and will help the committee greatly.

We have three other witnesses coming, but we'll suspend until they take their chairs.

**Mr. Fred Moxey:** Mr. Chairman, could I say one more thing?

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** I will let you do that. Yes.

**Mr. Fred Moxey:** Thank you.

I'll be very quick.

You're talking about closing it earlier. What happened with the Kitsilano Coast Guard station was that the Coast Guard was getting so much negativity. They had a date well into the summer to close it. But in February a delivery crew came down to the station with senior management. They took everyone's cellphones away, had padlocks,

and said you're no longer working here. They jumped on the Coast Guard cutter, locked the gate, and left. That was it. Everyone was told to go home.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Okay. I'll have to stop it there.

Thank you for those comments, Mr. Moxey.

Colleagues, we'll suspend for a few minutes while our next witnesses take their chairs.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Could we reconvene, please?

We have three officials from the department. Ms. Jody Thomas is the commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard.

Commissioner Thomas, would you introduce your colleagues?

**Ms. Jody Thomas (Commissioner, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Yes, I can Mr. Chair.

I'm here today with my deputy commissioner of operations, Mario Pelletier, and superintendent Brian Bain, who is the superintendent for MCTS in western region.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you.

I understand there will be one presentation, and then we will have the normal question and answer session. We can now begin the presentation.

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is my pleasure to be here today to discuss the planned closure of marine communications and traffic services, MCTS, in Comox.

I have introduced, but I'd like to again introduce my two colleagues. Canadian Coast Guard's deputy commissioner of operations, Mario Pelletier, is with us today. Deputy commissioner Pelletier joined the Coast Guard in 1985 as an engineering officer cadet and has served in various positions, including director general of fleet, as well as assistant commissioner for central and Arctic region before becoming deputy commissioner of operations.

Brian Bain has joined us from Victoria. Superintendent Bain is an expert in marine communications and traffic services in the western region. He is superintendent of the MCTS program, and he has spent his career in MCTS, beginning in 1988 when it was called Vancouver Coast Guard radio. I am pleased to have his operational and regional expertise here today. I don't believe there is a job in MCTS that superintendent Bain has not done.

My remarks today will cover the following themes: the role of our MCTS centres across the country, the history behind the decision to modernize and consolidate our centres, the steps taken to ensure employees have been well served, and the audio quality in our modernized centres. Following my general remarks, of course, we'll be happy to take questions.

The Canadian Coast Guard's MCTS centres play a pivotal role, as you've heard, in saving lives, protecting our waters, and assuring the safe and efficient movement of vessels for the smooth functioning of Canada's maritime economy. Navigation and communication technologies have advanced significantly in the last decade. In 2007 the Coast Guard began to make significant investments to modernize our MCTS systems to bring them into the 21st century.

The implementation of the new technology not only allowed for greater reliability of our systems, but it also allowed for increased efficiency of the overall MCTS program. We were able to merge 22 of our centres into 12 without changes in service to mariners. To date the Coast Guard has successfully consolidated nine MCTS centres and transferred their operations to newly modernized, state-of-the-art centres in locations across the country. The consolidation of MCTS Comox into MCTS Victoria represents the final element in this long-standing project and is on track for May 2016.

The work Comox has been doing will continue to be delivered in Victoria, and our newly modernized MCTS centre in Victoria is ready to accept this expanded area of operation.

Building on the lessons learned from success at nine other centres, we will continue to provide the high level of service that mariners and Canadians have come to expect from the Coast Guard. Modernization and consolidation is providing us with the tools that are cutting edge. We have systems that are not only more reliable, but flexible and adaptable. Due to these new systems we have the infrastructure in place to continuously modernize in the years ahead. I want to emphasize that consolidation does provide Canadians with a better, more reliable service.

When we talk about MCTS our focus is always drawn to systems, screens, cables, and wires, but I want to take a few minutes to talk about and recognize our people. All Coast Guard officers, including those who work in our MCTS centres, represent the finest in their fields. As the Coast Guard has undergone these changes, we recognize that the impact on employees has been significant.

Since I have been commissioner, we have worked regularly with unions to ensure a smooth transition. All employees at MCTS Comox were notified about the consolidation in 2014 and were offered positions in Victoria or Prince Rupert. Anyone who opted to move to another MCTS location was offered relocation assistance. We have ensured that staffing levels and workloads at the modernized centres were appropriate for the areas they cover.

The new technologies will ultimately reduce workload for our employees, and we have added surge capacity at each centre to deal with peak periods and various crises. This is something we did not have at all of our previous centres.

As we have modernized and consolidated our centres, have there been technical issues? Yes, absolutely. Technical problems are expected in a project of this size. Have we tested the system rigorously? Have we worked to find solutions to problems as they were reported? Yes, absolutely. The excellent working relationship that exists between our contractor, Frequentis, and employees has allowed us to work together to find solutions throughout the consolidation project at each centre.

We understand this transition has been difficult for our employees. They are adjusting and adapting to many changes, and these adjustments take time. Change is difficult. I remain committed to an approach that ensures changes are implemented smoothly and successfully. In short, we all want this project to work. I believe it will. It is already working.

• (1640)

I would like to address statements made by Unifor about the technical issues in Prince Rupert leading to safety concerns for mariners.

Following these statements, the deputy commissioner of operations initiated a technical review of audio quality issues that had been reported in Prince Rupert. A team of technical and operational specialists from outside the region of B.C. were brought in to assess the quality of radio communications and examine how issues are logged, communicated, analyzed, and resolved.

The technical review allowed us to engage in a dialogue with staff and to understand exactly when and how these issues are occurring. Audio quality issues such as echoes, reverberation, static, and speaker feedback, were uncovered, similar to findings at every other centre when they were in the early stages of their modernization. I'm confident we will resolve the technical issues in Prince Rupert, as we have successfully done in other centres across the country in early stages of the project. In fact, we already have.

Management is working closely with staff to address how these issues are reported, so that we can support our employees in a timely way. MCTS officers are trained to handle situations professionally when there are reception issues, ensuring proper communication with the mariner. Many factors can affect the quality of audio, such as the vessel's radio and antenna, weather, wind and waves, electromagnetic interference such as solar flares, and the geographical location of the caller. These factors have always existed and are not consolidation outcomes.

There have been comments made about MCTS Victoria and Prince Rupert being located in tsunami zones.

MCTS Victoria is not located directly in Victoria. It is located in a sheltered bay west of Sidney. Nor is it in a tsunami planning zone for the province. It is situated some distance from the beach, with an elevation higher than four metres above sea level. A report made by the Capital Regional District, which includes Sidney and surrounding communities, indicates that in Sidney the maximum water level of a tsunami is projected to be two metres in height.

Like much of the coast, Prince Rupert is located in a tsunami planning zone; however, the location of the centre is sheltered, due to the number and location of islands at the entrance to the port. The MCTS centre is located at the extreme inner end of the port, and the largest wave in that area, produced by a 7.7 magnitude earthquake in 2012, was less than 0.7 metres.

As we do today, Coast Guard's MCTS centres will continue to play a role in communications early warning systems for tsunamis and earthquakes.

Allow me to address the claim that visual monitoring is required for MCTS centres to carry out their functions. There are no instances in which line of sight is required today. Radars and other electronic surveillance systems such as an automatic identification system, or AIS, provide us with the eyes on the water. If MCTS centres required line of sight, they would be unworkable in a country frequently susceptible to rain, fog, and blizzards—sometimes all on the same day.

In conclusion, members of the committee, we will analyze the results of your study with great interest. As with any national, long-standing project that has been in play for almost 10 years, there have been lessons to learn and improvements to be made. There is no reason to delay the consolidation of Comox into Victoria. Delays will result in significant financial pressure and cost to the Coast Guard and will postpone key decisions for employees. To be specific, the operating costs of keeping MCTS Comox open would be up to \$1.5 million a year, and the one-time cost to modernize and reopen the centre would be much higher.

I'm proud of the results of the project to date. From day one, the project has been rooted in the principles that there would be no change in existing MCTS coverage and services and no disruption to services as we transition into the new system. Our MCTS officers themselves have been integral to this project. Across the country and throughout the project, they have contributed their expertise in testing the new system. It has not been done in a laboratory; it's been done by employees in the centres to ensure that the systems meet their demands for what they know they face daily. I thank them for their efforts, and I know that this collaboration will continue as we near the final stage of the project.

This project has allowed the Canadian Coast Guard to continue in our unwavering commitment to provide reliable, safe, and vital services to mariners in Canadian waters.

Thank you. We are pleased to take your questions.

• (1645)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you very much. You're right on time.

Mr. Finnigan is the first questioner, for seven minutes.

**Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Thomas, Mr. Pelletier, and Mr. Bain, for protecting the people who are navigating upon our waters. We appreciate it very much.

I have a few questions.

Coast Guard officials have indicated that staffing levels and workloads at modernized MCTS centres are appropriate for the area they cover, even as the level of traffic has marginally increased. Given that one of the benefits of implementing new technology in the centres is to reduce workload, can you tell us how modernizing

the centres would result in not meeting traffic workload requirements?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** I'll ask Superintendent Bain to speak specifically to what we're doing on the west coast. We did a workload study in 2009. We had outside resources help us develop the methodology for the study.

The number of stands or desks that manage a particular area or particular task in the MCTS centres are unchanged. They're still commensurate with the workload levels, the volume of traffic. If we had two in one location and two in another, and we merged them, the number of stands, people managing that traffic, would be what is required based on this study for the volume. That's scalable, of course, as volume goes up and down.

If we see a huge increase in traffic, we would start to staff, to prepare to add people to the station. Victoria is our largest station in the country and it's sort of our baseline level. The number of calls, the amount of traffic, that they have to manage within that station is absolutely within the norm of this study.

I'm not sure if Superintendent Bain would like to elaborate.

**Supt Brian Bain (Superintendent, MCTS Western Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Yes, when the 2009 workload study was conducted, Victoria was considered to be the threshold centre, meaning that this is the workload that we would set as a standard across the country at a maximum.

When we have eight operational positions in Victoria, four of those will be what we call the vessel traffic positions. Those are the ones that act proactively to ensure that commercial shipping remains safe. If there's any risk of conflict or if there is an incident that's reported to us, then the idea is to ensure safe passage for these larger ships. Those operating positions will not be touched. They will be identical to the way they are now in terms of their areas of responsibility.

There are four more positions that we call the safety positions. Those are the Coast Guard radio positions and there are four of those. Right now, in the structure that we have, there are three from Victoria and Vancouver together. There are two at Comox. One of those will be reduced, so we'll have a total of four rather than five.

I wasn't the one who did the workload application; however, my understanding is that because of the automation of the contiguous marine broadcast, which is a weather service that we provide on behalf of Environment Canada, it will allow us to combine those five positions into four.

There are some other positions, supervisory, managerial, administrative assistants, and one operating position that we call the regional marine information centre that are also going to be reduced. The supervisory positions are going to be absorbed into the one left at Victoria. Will that create extra workload for the supervisor? Yes, it will, but with the regional marine information centre, that was the one I had the greatest concern about when I first looked at the study.

When I looked at the whole coast, there is one aspect called offshore reporting that we gave to Prince Rupert. That's operating now and there are two more. One was the alerting service which is for environmental response and another called notices to shipping. Those were more difficult and I identified those as two that should really go either somewhere else or have some additional support.

That went up to national. They heard that and now those two services are going to what we call the regional operation centre. That concern has been addressed in my mind. What we end up with in terms of operating positions are the four traffic positions remaining intact, the Coast Guard radio positions reduced from five to four, and the administrative positions reduced as well.

• (1650)

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** I have a follow-up to that question and I'm referring to the earlier presentation. Apparently, nobody wants to stay at Prince Rupert and it costs \$100,000 to train an employee there. How is money going to be saved by transferring the workers to Prince Rupert?

**Supt Brian Bain:** We have had retention problems at Prince Rupert for those who come from outside of Prince Rupert into the centre. Those who were born and raised in Prince Rupert have no problem staying there. That can be a problem with national recruitment. If somebody comes from, say, Peterborough to Prince Rupert, then it's not going to be too long before they are going to want to transfer out. That creates a retention problem.

What we did last year was say, okay, we recognize this. It would make a lot of sense for us to hire in Prince Rupert for Prince Rupert. In fact, in the early stages of this, we thought we could even marry this with the employment equity program, so that we could look at aboriginals in the area and offer employment to them as well. They are in Prince Rupert; they want to stay in Prince Rupert; and it just happens to tie into some larger government objectives with Aboriginal Affairs and elsewhere.

We went through that process. About halfway through, we ran into a little snag, because our employment equity gap had gone from negative 1 up to plus 18, which created a problem for employment equity, but it didn't create a problem for local recruiting, so we went ahead with that. We've been able to hire three employees. They will be going to the Coast Guard College in July. Also, there is another process in place now, a national one, where any person who was not successful in that process could be given a second chance. That is the way we are going to address the retention problem in Prince Rupert for the long term.

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** We had a video of a tsunami, apparently from Fisheries and Oceans, that showed the tsunami going way up inland. I heard you say that there was absolutely no problem. What's the real movie? Which one is the right one?

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Could you make a very short answer? You can elaborate for the next questioner.

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** I didn't see the video, but DFO does modelling all the time of various scenarios, whether they are the most likely or the most extreme. The models of Capital Regional District, which is responsible for the lower island—the south coast of the island—and that area of Victoria, say two-metre storm surge,

two-metre tsunami surge, and we are at four metres above. We don't think it's an issue.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you very much.

Mr. Arnold, go ahead.

**Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC):** I'd like to thank everyone for being here, including Mr. Hughes. I didn't get a chance to ask questions of him earlier.

I have a number of questions. The first few will be really to the point, and hopefully we'll get just a short answer, and then we can get into some of the others, which may need a little more detail.

Is this consolidation being done safely? Are there any safety concerns, from the Coast Guard's viewpoint on this, for public safety, shipping safety, and environmental safety?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** We believe in the Coast Guard. Absolutely, this consolidation is being done safely. I say this and have evidence of it.

We intended to release the software in 2013 and start the modernization. As I said, Coast Guard employees tested the software. We received the software from the contractor. Our people, playing with the software and doing free play as you do when you test software, found a bug. We stopped all plans to roll out the software until we were satisfied, and they were satisfied, that this release of the software had corrected all the problems.

We would not put something into the public domain that is not safe. There are anomalies that occur. We have to continuously revisit the stations and ensure that nothing new has popped up—something in the hardware or in the station itself—but the software is working very well. I assure you it's safe.

• (1655)

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

Will this end up costing or saving money in the long run?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** We had a \$47-million budget for the MCTS program. We saved \$7 million, and we've turned that over to the centre as part of the deficit reduction action plan, so that money is gone from the Coast Guard budget. Long-term, it will save money, based on the number of people we employ in the consolidated centres and all the associated costs of real property and having 22 locations.

It also saves us money because—as I am told by my technical folks—the system is future-proof. It works backwards compatibly with old hardware and old technology, but it's also ready so that, as new technology and new innovations come along, we can upgrade the system as it exists now. It's not a two-year or three-year system; it's a 10-year or 15-year system. That saves us money.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Earlier, I think we heard testimony that the operators are monitoring up to 80 channels at a time. Is there not a dedicated distress channel, a mayday channel, that emergency calls come in on? Have there been any problems identified with those emergency calls on those dedicated channels?

**Supt Brian Bain:** There is a dedicated channel, channel 16.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Okay, channel 16.

**Supt Brian Bain:** It's an international calling and distress channel. Anytime there's a boat on the water that wants to call another boat on the water, they call on channel 16. If there's a distress call, that happens on channel 16 as well, but everybody else has to keep quiet. If they don't keep quiet, the Coast Guard radio, MCTS, will tell them to keep quiet. It will be *seelonce mayday*, which is an adaptation of the French expression. It's the message that everybody who has taken their restrictive operating certificate will understand to mean, "Keep quiet. Mayday in progress."

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** I've seen in some of the information prepared by our researcher today that Unifor is recommending seven-person support per position in the new Victoria base. That seems high to me.

How might this compare to a similar situation in the private sector, as far as number of staff per position?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** There isn't really a private sector equivalent, but that study of seven persons was done in 2003 and I'm not sure what the methodology was for it. The standard that we're using now is based on our 2009 workload study.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Which recommends how many per position?

**Mr. Mario Pelletier (Deputy Commissioner, Operations, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** It depends on the size of the centre. For a centre the size of Victoria's, it is 5.5 employees per position.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** That's for one position, one desk.

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** One desk at a centre like Victoria is 5.5. That's a multiplier of 5.5.

That's the same standard we use in our joint rescue co-ordination centre and other similar centres.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Further down in the information we were provided here, it's been indicated by Unifor that the relocation of staff and equipment to Victoria could cost up to \$1 million.

Is there any equipment being moved with that, and if so, what would the cost of that equipment be? Moreover, how many FTEs would be involved in this \$1 million?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** I don't know where that number has come from.

Within the project budget, because this was a national project started in 2012, we estimated a one-time cost of \$50,000 per employee for relocation.

There is equipment in Comox, but that's the banks of servers, the racks of computer equipment needed to power the back end. That's not the front-end modules, computers, and so on, that our operators use. They are in Victoria now.

As far as the relocation of employees, there's a fixed cost for that across government and we've applied that within the project.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** How many FTEs would be included in the move?

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** In 2014, we went to the employees and nine of them confirmed their desire to relocate to Victoria. One of them is already retired; one of them has taken a job with another department; and the rest are using the workforce adjustment policy and are opting.

● (1700)

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** We heard earlier that you're having trouble finding staff or filling these positions.

Could you explain if there have been any delays in the hiring process or what they might have been?

**Supt Brian Bain:** I don't know what that's referring to exactly. I can say that we just mentioned the situation in Prince Rupert, and that we want to hire in Prince Rupert for Prince Rupert.

The other advantage of that is that the people who come from outside of Prince Rupert into the centre have expressed an interest in leaving the centre. In two cases, they've expressed an interest to go outside of the western region, and in other cases to go to Victoria. If we hire people in Prince Rupert for Prince Rupert and we have a few extra, which we will, then that will give the opportunity for others to go to other regions, or to the Victoria centre. That's part of the staffing plan.

The other thing we've noticed, which we were not anticipating, is that there have been some people from Vancouver and Tofino, which is already closed, and they were on—as was mentioned by the deputy commissioner—opting status. However, they discovered that they were unable to make it work, so they came to us asking if they could have a job.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Sorry, your time is up. You can elaborate perhaps during the next questioner.

Mr. Donnelly.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** I'd like to thank the commissioner, Mr. Bain, and Monsieur Pelletier for your service to the Coast Guard and our country, and also thank you for your testimony here at the committee for this important study on the closure of this centre.

We've heard from earlier testimony that the Comox MCTS station is like a lifeboat to the others, Victoria and Prince Rupert, but we also heard testimony that anything that this committee produces in terms of a report or a recommendation is simply that, and that the Coast Guard is moving forward with plans to close, regardless.

I'm wondering if you could comment on that.

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** I'd like to refer back to the staffing, if I may, for one second—

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** I'm sorry. I only have seven minutes.

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** Okay.

I'm not sure about the lifeboat analogy for Comox. I didn't hear it. I can review that quote and get back to you, if you would like. But the network as it's structured means that we will have zones within the Prince Rupert and the Victoria stations that will monitor specific areas, just as if the Comox station were still open.

So there's no diminution of service from that perspective. If the people who learned about Comox don't move to Victoria and take up their new duties there, we will train new people in the local knowledge that's required for the Comox area. That's what we do everywhere across the country as we hire new employees. Nobody comes to a station knowing a specific geographic area in the detail that is needed to do this job. We train people to do that.

In terms of the outcomes of the study, I think Mr. Pelletier would like to clarify that statement because we did hear it being made.

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** Yes, thank you. Indeed, when I called Mr. Hughes to inform him of our intention to close the MCTS, as per the plan, he asked about the study done by this committee, and I agreed that every recommendation would be looked at and duly assessed. But meanwhile, we need to have a plan. The technology is ready to go. The staff has been waiting to know a little bit, and the busy summer season is coming as well, so we need to move forward. We need to have a plan, and if some recommendations can change this plan, we'll assess them.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** So even though the government has indicated that they want to review this decision, you're saying that you're going to go ahead with plans? You've already provided notice to workers that their jobs are gone there. How is that consistent? What are you going to do with this report and these recommendations? What if the recommendations say to keep the centre open?

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** We can speculate as much as we want. We'll assess the recommendation and we'll evaluate the impact that it has on the decision. The employees were notified back in 2012 when it was announced that the station was going to close. In 2014, once we accepted the software, we communicated the time frame during which we intended to close the station. It was known back then, in 2014, that it was to close in the spring of this year.

• (1705)

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** The employees at Comox were notified two weeks ago.

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** Of the specific date of May 10, yes. But in 2014, they were notified that the consolidation with Victoria would happen in the spring of 2016.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** I'm not sure we'll even have the recommendation by that date.

In terms of the transmissions, we've heard a lot about the echoey transmissions. I'm wondering if the minister has actually heard live transmissions versus recordings.

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** The minister, I believe, has been to MCTS centres, and so, yes, he has heard transmissions.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** So he's heard these echoey transmissions as early as when?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** I can't say that he's heard one of the transmissions that has reverberation or feedback on it. I wasn't with him when he was on his regional tours.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** Was he in Prince Rupert?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** He has not been to the MCTS centre in Prince Rupert that I am aware of.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** Which one was he at?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** I believe he went to Halifax and Quebec.

Because there is no consistent reverberation, no consistent echo, no consistent static, but rather specific transmissions that have problems, we're looking into why. It's not the software. Echo problems in the software have been corrected. There are problems occasionally with configuration, and there are some concerns about hardware, particularly in Prince Rupert. That's why we sent the team

up under deputy commissioner Pelletier's direction to see what was going on. We were hearing through this committee that there was a particular problem with this transmission, which we weren't hearing through reporting and logging. We needed to see what it was so we went and did that, and we found some issues that could be fixed. They were issues that were found in other stations. The way the stations configured some of the hardware, the way the system was installed, those are all being corrected now as we speak. We have a team of technologists looking into it. Every single problem should be logged, and then we investigate what the problem is.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** Thank you. So the problems do exist. They are still there, and you are working through them.

I just want to finish with a question. If tanker traffic triples on the west coast and if we have consolidation of these MCTS stations from five down to two, are you saying that a fishing boat or a kayaker sending out a distress signal among all this noise consolidated down into one centre in Victoria is going to be able to be heard? Are you going to be able to reassure me, as a recreational kayaker who is relying on my fishing boat and the Coast Guard to help be part of that rescue service, that the person who will be listening to all these increased screams and noise in half the province's busy traffic and almost 40% of the country's busy traffic is going to hear and respond in time?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** Yes, Mr. Donnelly, I'm assuring you of that. The system's been tested. The number of people responding per volume is unchanged. We have surge capacity if there is a major incident. We also have expansion capacity within the centres as traffic increases. We monitor these things just like the number of people we have working for us, and the retirements and all that attrition management information. We also manage operational information, and we do have—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you. I'm afraid time is up.

Mr. McDonald.

**Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.):** Again, I'd like to thank the witnesses for coming here today to talk to us on this important matter.

We've heard a lot over the past month or so, I guess, with different presentations. At one time we did have a recording or two that we listened to, and it was quite hard to understand anything that was being said on it. It's my understanding that the same technology used in one station is the same as all of the stations with the new technology. Do we have a recording from another station, Les Escoumins, possibly, in Quebec, just to compare? If it's the same technology, why is it working so well here versus some of the recordings we've heard from the centres out west?

• (1710)

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** We have thousands of hours of recording, very, very good quality recording, including Les Escoumins and other centres that had been consolidated earlier. Any issue that they might have had or realized with the configuration was corrected. That's why we have good quality audio, yes.

**Mr. Ken McDonald:** Are we able to hear the higher quality?

[Audio presentation]



**Mr. Ken McDonald:** That's a big difference from what we heard earlier. I know you stated that you're still working to get some of the echoing kinks out.

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** Yes, as we do with any other system and as we did in the past when we installed previous versions of the communication control system.

**Mr. Ken McDonald:** Thank you.

Next is kind of a correction, I guess, on a statement from Mr. Bain. You mentioned that the weather being put into the system is automated. Mr. Hughes, when he was here, said that's not the case, that it's being put in manually. Which is it? Is it going in automatically or is somebody actually sitting there and having to enter the weather? This is just for clarification because it seemed to conflict with the testimony earlier.

**Supt Brian Bain:** In Comox right now the system is put in manually. In the early stages of the Prince Rupert modernization, it was necessary because the automated feature did not work properly. However, the integrated technical service hired one of their technologists to create a system that would work with the Frequentis system to allow for automation of the weather, so that is happening now.

**Mr. Ken McDonald:** Thank you.

**Supt Brian Bain:** And that will be plan for the Comox weather as well, once it gets to Victoria.

**Mr. Ken McDonald:** Again, there have been concerns that MCTS coverage and services to Canadians will change after consolidation when the Coast Guard has stated that coverage and services will remain exactly the same. Would you be able to explain if and how the coverage and services will change after modernization of the centres, and is it safe to say that there will be no change to MCTS coverage, and that there will be no disruption in service to Canadians?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** Comox is the last consolidation so this system is rolled out across the country. Canada is a maritime nation. Along the St. Lawrence in the summer we have the highest density of recreational vessel traffic anywhere in the country and the system is functioning perfectly, and in that situation, in two languages. We have English and French mariners constantly up and down the river. You just heard Les Escoumins broadcast from that station, so I can confidently tell you the system is functioning. We have one more station to consolidate and then we will have completed the project. There has been no diminution of service. We are in fewer locations. We have the same number of desks responding to the same volume of calls, and we've achieved some efficiencies in that.

**Mr. Ken McDonald:** We've heard about the training and certification program that the employees go through and the costs associated with it, and the concern of it being harder to get people in Prince Rupert. What other plan do you have? If you come down to it and can't get people to stay in that facility, what would your backup plan be, versus trying to get people who reside in the area to take these training courses and be successful?

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** In the last three years we've trained 53 new marine communications and traffic services officers. In the next year we have plans to train 30 of them. So anybody who would presume that the succession plan is not there would be wrong. We have a

plan. We've upgraded our facility and our systems at the college. We updated the curriculum so we do have a plan in place but maybe for the specific question, I'll turn it over to Superintendent Bain.

• (1715)

**Supt Brian Bain:** Sure. Plan B would be to go back to the national hiring process, the one that we've done for many years. There's one taking place right now, and we plan on selecting from that group anyway, and there could very well be some from Prince Rupert who qualify.

I would like to get back to this plan. We have a couple of people, one here in national headquarters and another in the region, who have been working with the Public Service Commission to see if the employment equity program can be adjusted to allow for aboriginal hiring even when the gap is not what it is right now, the reason being that about 40% of the population in Prince Rupert is first nations. If we go with a national figure that doesn't work as well in that area.

The Public Service Commission has been very co-operative and there might be an avenue for that, so we can go with that angle as well in the future. We're looking at three aspects. The local hiring would be taking place, whether candidates be first nations or not, but we're hoping for more first nations candidates. Then the last plan would be for the usual national hiring process.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Time's up. Thank you very much.

We're going to five-minute rounds now. Mr. Strahl.

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I first want to say that I'm a little troubled that Mr. McDonald was able to prompt the witness for an audio recording that I had no idea was going to be made. Obviously there is some awareness on that side of the table—but not on this side of the table—that those would be made available. I think that should have been done during the witness testimony, as opposed to during the questions and answers. It certainly raises a number of questions for me, I'll put it that way, that this was done in that manner.

Secondly, I'm a little surprised that we're even here today given what Liberal members of Parliament were saying in British Columbia during the campaign. I want to quote from Hedy Fry's speech, a response in reply to the Speech from the Throne, in which she said, "What is really important is that the people of Vancouver Centre who re-elected me will be pleased" with the throne speech and "some of those promises, especially the ones we have heard... that we will reinstate the Kitsilano Coast Guard base and the marine communication segments that were cut to British Columbia". That was on December 7 of last year. She said that this would be overturned from the previous government. That's obviously a broken promise there, and, I would say, misleading the House.

Anyway, that has nothing to do with the witnesses who are here today.

My question is for the commissioner. We've heard testimony—and it's troubling testimony—that after this committee embarked upon this study there was in fact an acceleration of the effort to close the Comox centre, while there had been a previous indication that there would be at least an extension until October. We subsequently heard that in the last two weeks while we were on a parliamentary break that the timeline was moved to May of 2016, five or six months earlier.

Can you assure this committee that this timeline was in fact not affected by our decision to study this closure?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** Mr. Strahl, I can assure you that it was not affected by the decision to study. The May date had always been on the books. We can't close stations, we can't consolidate, and we can't do work on the stations through the busy summer boating season, so we closed them all, and we've done all of this work from January to May. We're starting again in about November.

On this one, for the reasons I've stated, it's been on the books since 2014, and this date, May 2016, was known. For budgetary reasons, we've always intended to close at this date. I was never approached with an October date.

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** So for the October date, there's no verification of that. Okay. We'll have to determine where that came from or if it can be verified at all.

Mr. Arnold quite succinctly summarized that it is your belief that this can be done safely and that it will save taxpayers money, on both accounts.

• (1720)

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** Yes.

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** The next question is on timing.

We've heard from Unifor that the workers just aren't there, and that as much as you might want to consolidate as of May 10, there simply aren't enough employees ready to work in those new stations, or it's going to result in massive amounts of overtime to make up for the shortfall in staff at this point.

Is that an accurate statement? If so, when do you think you will be able to move away from perhaps an overtime model to a normalized operation?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** At its core, one of the reasons for consolidation was to look at the amount of overtime. We had individual stations across the country where there were one or two stands. It was difficult always to stop them during silent hours or off-peak hours, and we ended up having people work an excessive amount of overtime. We knew there would be overtime through the consolidation, but we expect it to normalize within six to eight months after we have standardized the system across the country and finished with the consolidation of Comox.

On staffing, vacancies, and moving people around, that's part of management, and we do that all the time, whether it's our MCTS stations, our shore staff, the people who go out and fix the aids to navigation, or even the people who go to sea on our major ships and our fleet. Rotating staff and ensuring that we fill in vacancies is what we do.

There is a robust plan to staff, as Superintendent Bain has told you. We have a national staffing strategy. We also have local targeted ones to ensure that we have people who want to stay and work in a community.

We also have the opportunity for people to apply for jobs and move around. There's value in that, because they see different parts of the system and different parts of the country, and they bring different elements and knowledge to a station. The more people we can cross-train, I think, the more robust a system we have, and a richer system, in fact.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Our time is up.

Mr. Morrissey, for five minutes.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.):** The comment was made that the decision to consolidate could be compromising safety as well as increasing employee burnout.

Could you comment on that?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** As I've said, I don't think it's compromising safety. Comox is the last station we need to consolidate, and there has been no indication that safety has been compromised anywhere in this country. As I've said, we are a maritime nation. The flow of vessels in and out of this country is a daily, hourly, minute-to-minute occurrence. No, I don't believe that safety has been compromised.

With employee burnout, I'm very concerned about the health of our employees. We require an enormous amount of resilience of Coast Guard employees. They are dealing with difficult things all the time. It's something we watch carefully. Superintendent Bain knows his employees in his region. He watches them, and works with his officers in charge of the station to watch for that. That's an essential element of good management.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** You're confident these decisions are not leading to stress or burnout within your ranks at these stations?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** I think there is stress and burnout. There was previous to consolidation, because it is a high-demand job. People do occasionally need a break from it. They will go forward as well. It's something we accommodate. The provisions of a public service employee allow for that, and people do have to go on sick leave every now and then.

If they find they can't come back to this kind of work, we find other work for them through an accommodation process. We do pay attention to our employees. Their physical health and their mental health matter to us.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** My question is blunt, but it's not meant to be that.

Would you defend a decision at any cost?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** No, I would not. I have looked very hard at this. I've had discussions with my management team. My assistant commissioners, my deputy commissioners, the directors, and the superintendents know I am engaged in what's going on in the Coast Guard, down to the person.

Mr. Hughes knows that. I work with him on complex labour relation cases down to the person in the organization. No, I would not, but this is a reasonable decision.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Could you define a “reasonable decision” a bit more?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** It's a reasonable decision in that it doesn't compromise safety. We have implemented a new system that allows for a reduction in the number of locations from which we offer the service. It hasn't compromised safety. It has reduced the workload for the employees at the station through the continuous marine broadcasts. They are getting used to the new tools. They are starting to like them across the country. This is the feedback I'm getting.

It is a system that allows us to continuously modernize, innovate, and keep up with other countries in terms of the robustness and the tools within our system. I think that's important.

• (1725)

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Could you briefly compare the system we are moving toward to that of other countries?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** I'm not the technical expert, but the Frequentis system is used in many other countries. We've been to their plant in Vienna, and we've seen the countries they are doing the system for. We can get you a listing of who they are.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** This is not unique to Canada?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** It is not. Our old system was outdated. It was falling apart. It was failing, both the hardware and the software, the hardware in particular. We had technology going back to the 1970s, and it was inconsistent across the country, so that it made it difficult to maintain.

You had technologists who were working on something that was bought 10 years ago one day and something that was bought 30 years ago the next day. That doesn't make for a system we can easily maintain and ensure the consistency of and the reliability of. With this new system we can.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** In your assessment, as we move down the road and this consolidation if it is deemed to proceed and is completed, will the service that the Canadian Coast Guard provides be an on par service, or an enhanced service?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** The service provided by the MCTS officers, pre-consolidation and post-consolidation, is world leading. We train them to an extremely high level at the Coast Guard College, and then they go through a rigorous checkout process in each individual station. We have given them now better tools, but the individual MCTS officers were always world leading.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Could you define a bit? I find that intriguing, world leading.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** You have 10 seconds.

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** They respond to vessel traffic. We have combined vessel traffic and safety into consolidated stations. I was visiting Finland, and they have now done the same thing. They have seen that as a model to follow.

Our advancements and ways of making this—

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Finland is following us?

**Ms. Jody Thomas:** They have done the same thing in their MCTS stations, combined vessel traffic with safety.

We have a vast country, a vast coastline. We've looked at ways to make this work constantly—since the beginning of the Coast Guard.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** Thank you very much.

I'd like to return to the issue that Mr. Strahl raised regarding the use of a recording.

The clerk has pointed out to me rule 299, also found in O'Brien and Bosc:

There are no specific rules governing the nature of questions which may be put to witnesses appearing before committees, beyond the general requirement of relevance to the issue before the committee. Witnesses must answer all questions which the committee puts to them.

Again, these are rules that I'm not aware of, but you know, the recording could be considered in nature part of a question. I would probably recommend that in future, if something like this is done again, the whole committee be forewarned. I don't think this should be a regular practice. It's the first time I've ever seen that done, but it would seem to be within the rules. At any rate, as a courtesy to your fellow members, I'd recommend that we be forewarned.

We probably have a couple of minutes left, Mr. Arnold. It's not much time.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** I'll give my time to Mr. Donnelly.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** You can take a couple of minutes, Mr. Donnelly.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** Thank you.

One of the concerns I have, as you mentioned, is training and workload, and the standard you want to continue it to. You've said that you're looking to do that in July, to send folks to the college, yet you want to go forward with this in May. My understanding is that you were at least looking at the fall. There seems to be shifting deadlines in terms of what actually is happening on the consolidation and how you can actually be ready with trained people who could be in these centres maintaining all this traffic and providing the safety we need for mariners.

I'm wondering if you could comment on that.

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** Maybe I can just start by saying that the people who will start their training in July will not be ready until the next year.

**Mr. Fin Donnelly:** Two years.

• (1730)

**Mr. Mario Pelletier:** No, one year. They spend six months at the college. Then they get on-the-job training and familiarization. On average, it's about six months by the time they get familiar with the geographical area or with the station.

So it is one year. It could be a little bit more than a year, but typically it's six months at the college and six months of on-the-job training.

With regard to Victoria's plan, I'll turn it over to Superintendent Bain. He can speak a little bit more to the HR plan.

**Supt Brian Bain:** I can clarify where the two-year figure came from.

Once a vacancy has been identified, it takes about two years to launch a process and then do the hiring, do the selecting. Then we have to wait for the Coast Guard College to have availability in order to get somebody in the college. Over the past year, all that planning has taken place. Over the next year, the training will take place. So it is about two years from the time a vacancy has been identified.

The people we're talking about in July, as the deputy commissioner has said, are the people who will go to Prince Rupert. The people who are in Comox now and have accepted jobs.... All have been offered, and nine have accepted. One person is on long-term

sick leave, but eight will be coming to the centre. A number of others are interested in coming to the centre on travel status to help out.

Right now—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck):** You'll have to end it there; sorry. This is the official closing of the committee. Perhaps you can help Mr. Donnelly out later.

Thank you for making my first chairing job so easy, colleagues. This was a most interesting meeting.

We are adjourned.

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