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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): I now call this meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone.

I would like to welcome the representatives of four departments who are with us.

Setting aside normal decorum, I will not name every one of you because that would take too much time. However, I would like to thank you for being here on quite short notice, since you received our invitation just last week.

This is the inaugural meeting for our much anticipated study, or at least it is for me, on federal freshwater policy. We will begin with opening statements, which will be limited to a maximum of seven minutes, starting with a representative of the Department of the Environment. I don't know who will be taking the floor. I assume Mr. Wolfish will speak for the department.

Is that correct?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Canada Water Agency, Department of the Environment): Yes.

[*English*]

The Chair: It's nice to see you again, Mr. Wolfish. Actually, Monique Pauzé and I saw you at the University of Toronto about a month ago.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Indeed.

The Chair: Please go ahead. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

As you said, my name is Daniel Wolfish and I am the acting Assistant Deputy Minister for the Canada water agency, a branch within Environment and Climate Change Canada.

Thank you for accommodating my travel to Winnipeg and for enabling me to participate virtually.

I am honoured to be joining you today from Treaty No. 1 Territory, the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Ininew, Oji-Cree, Dene, and Dakota; the birthplace of the Métis Nation and Homeland of the Red River Métis.

I am joined today by David Harper, Director General Monitoring and Data Services at the Meteorological Service of Environment Canada, Joanne Volk, Director General Water Science and Technology, Cecile Siewe, Director General Industrial Sectors and Chemicals, and Caroline Blais, Executive Director Forest Products and Fisheries Act.

No resource is more important to Canadians than fresh, clean water. Our lives and livelihoods depend on it.

For many Indigenous Peoples, water is sacred, a source of life that plays a central role in Indigenous cultures, ceremonial practices, governance, and welfare. This freshwater study provides an opportunity to continue to show our commitment and leadership in addressing freshwater issues.

The Government of Canada is committed to safeguarding freshwater resources for generations to come. Environment and Climate Change Canada has a mandate to work on freshwater under several Acts. The department has roles related to freshwater governance, policy, science, stewardship, monitoring and prediction, and regulation and enforcement.

Much of this work is done in close collaboration with provinces and territories, and Indigenous rights-holders, given complex jurisdiction for water in Canada. We are also committed to implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

Beyond Environment and Climate Change Canada, many other federal departments and agencies have freshwater-related mandates and I know the Committee will be hearing from some of them today and later this week.

This freshwater study comes at a time when the Government of Canada and many Canadians recognize that it is critical that we work together to find the best ways to keep Canada's freshwater safe and well managed. This includes engaging in a meaningful way with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis to advance reconciliation in relation to freshwater in a consistent and coordinated manner across the federal government.

In Canada, freshwater is integral to our economy, society, identity and culture, and is central to Indigenous livelihoods and cultural practices. Canada has the third largest renewable supply of freshwater in the world, about 7% of the global renewable supply.

While Canada is a water-rich country, a significant amount of Canada's renewable freshwater supply is not easily accessible. Much of Canada's freshwater is stored as ice and about 60% of Canada's freshwater flows north into the Arctic Ocean, away from the majority of the population.

• (1105)

Canada is also home to many unique freshwater ecosystems. For example, the Great Lakes watershed, shared by Canada and the United States, is the largest freshwater lake system in the world.

[English]

Canadians are concerned over the increasing frequency and magnitude of freshwater challenges due to climate change, particularly after experiencing the floods, the droughts and the fire events of this past summer.

Hence, in 2019, in his mandate letter, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada was directed to create a new Canada water agency to work together with provinces, territories, indigenous communities, local authorities, scientists and others to find the best ways to keep our water safe, clean and well managed. This commitment was reaffirmed in subsequent mandate letters, budgets and speeches from the throne.

Engagement over the past three years on the Canada water agency indicates strong support for federal policies to promote effective management and protection of freshwater resources, as well as for climate change adaptation. This freshwater study will help inform the best ways to achieve these goals.

I would like now to take a moment to highlight some of the work that the federal government is doing to protect vital resources, again noting there is a vast amount of work led by different parts of the government.

The Canada water agency has now been created as a branch within Environment and Climate Change Canada.

The federal government has also committed to introducing legislation that will fully establish the Canada water agency as a stand-alone agency with the headquarters in Winnipeg, where I am today.

The Canada water agency has a mandate to improve freshwater management in Canada by providing leadership, effective collaboration federally, and improved coordination and collaboration with provinces, territories and indigenous peoples to proactively address national and regional transboundary water challenges and opportunities.

To this end, the agency will deliver key elements of the strengthened freshwater action plan. This is a key freshwater protection initiative led by Environment and Climate Change Canada, with partners for decades, that received significant funding in budget 2023, including \$650 million over 10 years starting in 2023-24, to support monitoring, assessment and restoration work in eight water bodies of national significance across Canada.

Budget 2023 also provided \$22.6 million over three years, starting in this fiscal year, to support better coordination of efforts to protect fresh water across Canada, \$85.1 million over five years and \$21 million ongoing to support the creation of the agency.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wolfish. I think we will have to stop there.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Chair, I just want to note that the interpreter says that the connection isn't very good.

Were the tests done before the meeting?

The Chair: It appears so.

We will now hear from another witness, and we will check to see if the audio is satisfactory.

I assume that Ms. Ladell will deliver the opening statement on behalf of the Department of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard.

I couldn't see your name. My line of sight is blocked by the television screen.

Go ahead, Ms. Ladell.

Ms. Kate Ladell (Director General, Ecosystems Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you.

[English]

Hello and good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members.

My name is Kate Ladell, and I am the director general of ecosystems management at Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

I'm joined today by Hilary Oakman, the acting regional director for aquatic ecosystems in the Ontario and Prairies region. She is on the screen, joining us remotely.

• (1110)

[Translation]

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee on behalf of the Department to provide you with information about Fisheries and Oceans Canada's role in supporting the management of freshwater.

[English]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that I'm grateful to be joining you here on the unceded territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin people and recognize the long-standing relationship that indigenous people have with the lands and waters of Canada.

Canada is the steward of 20% of the world's fresh water, home to seven of the world's 15 largest lakes. This includes four of the five Great Lakes, representing 84% of fresh water in North America.

Canada's economy and its future growth depend on the sustainable use and management of our freshwater resources and the ecosystems on which they depend.

[*Translation*]

It is important to ensure that this valuable resource is managed sustainably to ensure that these benefits are maintained.

[*English*]

Freshwater management is complex, as it is shared between the federal, provincial and territorial governments and, in the case of transboundary waters, with international partners such as the United States.

Important consideration is given to indigenous peoples, and Canada's Constitution recognizes and affirms the existing aboriginal and treaty rights of first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada is one of more than 20 federal departments and agencies responsible for freshwater management.

[*Translation*]

Fisheries and Oceans Canada is responsible for the sustainable management of fisheries, the conservation and protection of fish and fish habitat, the protection and restoration of aquatic biodiversity, the prevention of aquatic invasive species, and the delivery of science to understand and protect the health of aquatic ecosystems.

[*English*]

There are key pieces of legislation that provide a legal basis for conserving and protecting fish and fish habitat. These are the Fisheries Act and the Species at Risk Act, as well as the aquatic invasive species regulations of the Fisheries Act. I will quickly provide a brief overview of how this works in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

The fish and fish habitat protection program is responsible for administering the fish and fish habitat protection provisions of the Fisheries Act, the relevant provisions of the Species at Risk Act, and the associated regulations, policies, guidelines and practices, to ensure compliance with development projects taking place in and around water.

It also provides funding to indigenous communities to participate in the conservation and protection of fish and fish habitat.

[*Translation*]

The Species at Risk Program works to implement the provisions for the protection, recovery and conservation of listed wildlife species and their critical habitats and residences.

The program also provides funding through transfer payment programs for projects that contribute to the recovery and conservation of species and their habitats, while encouraging partnerships between different organizations.

Aquatic Invasive Species Programs work to prevent, control or eradicate aquatic invasive species.

[*English*]

Fisheries and Oceans Canada also plays an active role in the development, support and implementation of internationally coordinated programs in the Great Lakes and other boundary waters. Canada and the United States have a long history of successful cooperation, with 10 water management treaties in place. Fisheries and Oceans Canada plays an important role in the majority of these international agreements, including the binational Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.

Environment and Climate Change Canada leads the implementation of this agreement on behalf of the Government of Canada. Fisheries and Oceans Canada is an active partner and co-leads the aquatic and invasive species annex with the United States to meet Canada's commitments.

Regarding the binational treaty on the 1954 Convention on Great Lakes Fisheries, which established the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, DFO supports the work of the commission. It is a signatory to the joint strategic plan for the management of Great Lakes fisheries, and it delivers the Canadian portion of the binational sea lamprey control efforts.

We contribute to Canada's work under the Boundary Waters Treaty in areas associated with fish and fish habitat. We participate on domestic transboundary water boards and in agreements that support regional freshwater management in transboundary basins such as Lake Winnipeg. For example, the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health is the domestic agreement between Canada and Ontario. It supports the binational Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement to restore, protect and conserve water quality and ecosystem health in the Great Lakes. DFO co-leads the aquatic invasive species annex and supports the habitat and species annex of the protecting habitat and species priority.

● (1115)

[*Translation*]

In closing, the Government of Canada, including Fisheries and Oceans Canada, is committed to working with other federal departments and agencies, provincial and territorial governments, Indigenous peoples, and other partners to fulfill its commitment to protect, enhance, and restore the biodiversity and health of Canada's freshwater environments through an integrated ecosystem approach that supports the sustainable use of aquatic resources.

[*English*]

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Ladell.

We'll go now to Mr. Sumit Gera, senior director of Canadian geospatial data infrastructure under the Department of Natural Resources.

Mr. Gera, go ahead, please.

Mr. Sumit Gera (Senior Director, Canadian Geospatial Data Infrastructure, Department of Natural Resources): Good morning, Chair and committee members.

First, thank you for giving Natural Resources Canada an opportunity to speak on its role on fresh water. I'd also like to recognize that I am speaking to you from the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people. We recognize indigenous people as the customary keepers and defenders of the Ottawa River watershed and its tributaries. We honour their long history of welcoming many nations to this beautiful territory and uphold and uplift the voice and values of our host nations.

As noted, I am Sumit Gera, the senior director for the Canada centre for mapping and earth observation, which is part of the strategic policy and innovation sector in Natural Resources Canada. Today, I can speak to CCMEQ as the lead in providing authoritative and core geospatial data and flood plain mapping. While we don't specialize in fresh water, we have many directly and indirectly related initiatives.

For example, through our emergency geomatics services, NRCan provides critical, near real-time emergency mapping and information to Public Safety Canada and first responders during ice breakups and flooding events.

Aside from emergency flood maps, NRCan is also responsible for the flood hazard identification and mapping program known as FHIMP, which aims to meet mandated commitments to collaborate with provinces and territories to complete engineered flood hazard maps and innovate with supporting partners to advance flood hazard information coverage throughout Canada.

The distinction between that service and the emergency program is that the emergency services are more of a reactive response, and the flood hazard mapping program is an area of proactivity. Many flood maps and studies will be located along freshwater—

Mr. Dan Mazier (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): On a point of order, can we get the right name in front of the witness?

The Chair: It is, I—

Mr. Dan Mazier: It's Taylor Bachrach, from what I see.

The Chair: Oh, no, it's Sumit Gera.

Mr. Dan Mazier: It's a different guy.

I know it's not Taylor. If you want to change it, go ahead.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Gera.

Mr. Sumit Gera: Many flood maps and studies will be located along freshwater bodies throughout Canada and will use further existing research at these locations.

We have recently launched our flood mapping portal, in which flood hazard maps and information from the FHIMP will be publicly accessible to inform local decision-making in support of land use planning, flood mitigation, adapting to climate change and protection of lives and properties.

NRCan hosts much of its flood mapping data on the open geospatial data portal, geo.ca, with other foundational data. Such data includes the Canadian hydrospatial network, formerly known as the national hydrographic network. It provides foundational base data that represents Canada's surface water features such as lakes, rivers and watersheds and the connections between them, which is intended to inform water and watershed management. Also included in the data on the portal is the flood susceptibility index, the FSI, which uses innovative machine learning to showcase flood-prone areas. Eventually, a pan-Arctic wetland inventory map, which we're working on, will also be provided on the portal. It will provide a more accurate understanding of the extent of coverage of wetlands across the Arctic using standardized data structure and management protocols.

Aside from hosting core data and geospatial layers, tools and freshwater and flood-related research, NRCan also hosts and leads the creation of the federal flood mapping guidelines series with the flood mapping community and is developing flood mapping standards.

Notably, CCMEQ has long been informed by its work with the Canadian Council on Geomatics and the Canadian Geomatics Accord. The Canadian Council on Geomatics promotes co-operation with provinces and territories and the exchange of geospatial data to reduce the duplication of efforts and facilitate easy access to information for all Canadians.

Under the Resources and Technical Surveys Act and the Department of Natural Resources Act, NRCan follows its duties towards completing technical surveys, developing and using remote sensing, and furthering the sustainable development and management of natural resources.

Work is also under way within NRCan's Geological Survey of Canada. For example, NRCan has conducted a national level groundwater assessment using regional and national-scale groundwater and surface water modelling and remote sensing technologies. The Geological Survey of Canada has also partnered with Canada1Water, which is a fully integrated surface and groundwater model demonstrating water interactions and balances, which can be used to inform adaptation decisions.

I am also joined by my colleague Sylvain Vallières, who's online from Sherbrooke. He's the program manager for the flood hazard identification mapping program and a deputy director in the branch. We are very happy to support the committee and will endeavour to answer any questions you may have regarding our work.

Thank you.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Gera.

We'll go now to the Department of Transport, and I believe it's Isa Gros-Louis who will be delivering remarks, for seven minutes.

Ms. Isa Gros-Louis (Director General, Indigenous Relations and Navigation Protection, Department of Transport): *Kwe, bonjour.* Good morning, Chair and members. I too want to recognize the unceded territories of the Algonquin and Anishinabe peoples on whose land we are meeting today. I want to recognize past, present and future generations, and I ask permission to leave my footprint on their territory.

[*Translation*]

My name is Isa Gros-Louis, and I am the Director General of Indigenous Relations and Navigation Protection at Transport Canada.

I am pleased to be here today to speak about Transport Canada's role and commitment to keep our water safe, clean, and well managed.

I am joined today by my colleague Joanna Manger, Director General, Marine Safety and Security.

As the lead department for all transportation issues, policies and programs that promote safe, secure, efficient, and environmentally responsible transportation, Transport Canada recognizes the value and importance of freshwater to the economy, health, and well-being of Canadians. To support these goals, Transport Canada administers several Acts, supported by comprehensive regulatory regimes to protect this valuable resource.

[*English*]

Allow me to provide you with an overview of this regime. The Canada Shipping Act, 2001, governs the safety of marine transportation, recreational boating, and protection of the marine environment, including bodies of freshwater where shipping or recreational boating activities takes place.

There is a comprehensive set of regulations in place, the vessel pollution and dangerous chemicals regulations, that address vessel operations that could impact aquatic environments.

These operations include discharges of oil and noxious liquid substances, air emissions, sewage and grey water, garbage, antifouling marine pollutants and pollutant substances. These regulations are modelled after the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, also known as MARPOL, developed by member states of the International Maritime Organization.

In addition, the Minister of Transport can make interim orders under the Canada Shipping Act to implement further protections when priority issues arise, such as the recent measures to address discharges of grey water and sewage from cruise ships in nearshore waters.

Under the ballast water regulations, domestic and international vessels are required to manage and treat their ballast water, which is used for safety and stability, to reduce the inadvertent introduction and spread of invasive species. These regulations include spe-

cial protection for our valuable freshwater lakes and rivers, notably the Great Lakes.

• (1125)

[*Translation*]

On this issue in particular, Transport Canada is contributing up to \$12.5 million to industry-led research and development projects to optimize ballast water technology for the conditions found in Canada.

I should also acknowledge that Transport Canada and our American counterparts cooperate under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement on compatible rules for vessel discharges, notably oil, ballast water, wastewater and sewage to ensure protections for one of the world's largest freshwater ecosystems.

For oil spill response, the Canada Shipping Act along with its Response Organization Regulations and the Environmental Response Regulations provide for preparedness and capacity to respond to spills on the Great Lakes and inland waters. The regulations have led to the establishment of industry-funded and government-certified Response Organizations that ensure readiness to respond to marine oil spills.

The Canadian Navigable Waters Act allows the department to take meaningful actions to protect the environment and to safeguard the social and cultural value of all navigable waters in Canada.

Transport Canada supports environmental assessment processes led by the Impact Assessment Agency, provinces and territories, and Indigenous governments and works in collaboration with other federal departments, including Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Environment and Climate Change Canada, to ensure that potential impacts on the environment, including freshwater ecosystems, are mitigated, and that the constitutionally protected rights and interests of Indigenous peoples are addressed.

[*English*]

Additionally, the Canadian Navigable Waters Act supports the protection of freshwater ecosystems by prohibiting the actions of throwing or depositing various materials in waters that flow into navigable waters and prohibiting the dewatering of a navigable water.

Under section 26.1 of the Canadian Navigable Waters Act, Transport Canada continues to advance research, including indigenous-led studies such as the navigational study within the Moose Cree homeland, to identify the sources, risks and potential mitigation measures for navigability and usage impacting access to fish and hunting grounds.

A key measure under Canada's oceans protection plan, the Wrecked, Abandoned or Hazardous Vessels Act is central to addressing vessels of concern, including wrecked, abandoned, hazardous, worn-down or dilapidated boats that can create issues for local public health and safety, the environment and the economy. They can also contaminate our waters, impact local tourism and shipping routes, and affect the marine ecosystem.

Under the act, Transport Canada and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans through the Canadian Coast Guard work together to take proactive actions to address or prevent the negative impacts of vessels of concern on Canada's coastal and shoreline communities. Most importantly, the act strengthens vessel owner responsibility and liability; addresses irresponsible vessel management, including a prohibition on vessel abandonment; and enhances federal powers to take proactive action on hazardous vessels.

• (1130)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gros-Louis. You have exceeded your allotted time, but you will definitely have an opportunity to explain the work your department does in response to the many questions asked.

I want to thank all those who have made opening statements. You've managed to provide us with a helpful overview of a wide-ranging issue.

Now it's time for questions. We will begin the first round with Mr. Mazier.

[English]

Mr. Dan Mazier: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for coming here today.

This is for ECCC. As of today, does the government continue to authorize the dumping of raw sewage into Canadian lakes and rivers?

Ms. Cecile Siewe (Director General, Industrial Sectors and Chemicals Directorate, Department of the Environment): Thank you for the question. I think the short answer is, no, we do not.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Is it allowed?

Ms. Cecile Siewe: Under the current regulations that we have for waste-water effluent release—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Is that sewage?

Ms. Cecile Siewe: No. This is just releases from waste-water treatment and municipal facilities.

Mr. Dan Mazier: What are they dumping?

Ms. Cecile Siewe: I'm sorry. Can you say that again?

Mr. Dan Mazier: What are they dumping? Is it sewage?

Ms. Cecile Siewe: They can get an authorization, if they need to do construction, repairs or maintenance of their facilities, to bypass treatment for a short period of time. With that authorization, we can undertake an assessment to understand the impact on the receiving environment. That mitigation is in place to manage the receiving environment or the environmental impacts of that.

Those are the only conditions under which undertreated waste water can be released into receiving bodies.

Mr. Dan Mazier: The answer to the question, then, is yes, you still authorize the dumping of sewage. That was the original question.

That's good. That's fine. Thank you.

How many litres of raw sewage have been dumped into Canadian waterways since 2015?

Ms. Cecile Siewe: I'm not able to give you an accurate—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Just an approximate....

Ms. Cecile Siewe: I don't think I would even be able to hazard a guess on that, at this point in time.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Does anybody have any idea? Can you table those numbers?

Ms. Cecile Siewe: We'd be happy to get back to you with some numbers on that.

Mr. Dan Mazier: You just informed us that actually you have to authorize it, so you should monitor how much. It should be there. There should be some kind of information that the department would be aware of, and you can table that information to the committee. Is that correct?

Ms. Cecile Siewe: Absolutely.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Thank you.

This is for anyone. The Supreme Court ruled that the government's Bill C-69 was unconstitutional because it interjected on provincial jurisdiction. Provinces are rightfully worried that opening the Canada Water Act will also intrude on their jurisdiction.

Did anyone here read the Supreme Court's decision, and can they share what they learned from it so that the government doesn't intrude on provincial jurisdiction again with the changes to the Water Act?

I'll start with ECCC.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: I'll start with that answer. I'm Daniel Wolfish, and I am the acting assistant deputy minister for the Canada water agency. I'll note that the reference is being read and studied, and we are working with our colleagues across government around what the implications would mean.

The government has noted that we accept the court's opinion while affirming the right of the Government of Canada to put in place impact assessment legislation and to collaborate with the provinces on environmental protection. It's in that context that we want to work within the Canada water agency to respect provincial jurisdictions while continuing to facilitate coordination across the provinces and territories, with indigenous peoples and within the federal government.

The reference on the Impact Assessment Act does demonstrate the need to be respectful of the federal-provincial framework and the constitutional division of powers in the areas where jurisdictional coordination is needed, including in the management of freshwater.

The Chair: Excuse me for just a moment. There's a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: The interpreter can't work because the connection isn't good enough. Can we solve the problem?

[*English*]

The Chair: Unfortunately, we don't have a very good connection, so we'll have to stop there, Mr. Wolfish. This is a very important issue for—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Could we get a written response?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Absolutely.

The Chair: That would be great.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Chatel.

Ms. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): I had some questions for Mr. Wolfish too. Could he get help from a technician to improve the connection?

• (1135)

The Chair: The request has been made. I've stopped the clock.

Would another departmental representative like to speak at this stage or should we move on to another question?

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): After all, Mr. Chair, he's an important witness who's unable to comment right now.

I have questions for him too, and for Mr. Mazier as well.

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Mazier: I can continue on. I mean, I agree.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Deltell: If we can't establish a high-quality connection, let's suspend until the problem's solved. He is the assistant deputy minister after all.

The Chair: All right. We will suspend briefly and see if we can solve the problem.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Mazier, with questioning other witnesses, please.

Mr. Dan Mazier: I'll ask the same question of the witnesses who are front of us and can communicate with us today. Did anybody read the report and assessment, and what did they learn from it?

Ms. Ladell, I see you're interested.

Ms. Kate Ladell: I can tell you that I did read the report. Similar to ECCC, we also accept the decision, noting that any amendments that would be needed fall within the purview of ECCC and the Impact Assessment Agency. We will absolutely consider any implications to any legislative changes and regulations that we could contemplate flowing from it. Thank you.

• (1140)

Mr. Dan Mazier: Just give a yes or no. DFO, did you read it?

Ms. Kate Ladell: Yes, I read it. That's me.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Are you DFO? Oh, okay. Who's around the corner here? Who is Taylor Bachrach?

Mr. Harper, have you read the report?

It's the same response. Okay. I'm on to another question.

ECCC, what is your plan to deal with non-point source pollution?

Ms. Cecile Siewe: Could you clarify if that's to...?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: I'll start with that question.

Can you tell me what you mean by non-point source pollution?

Mr. Dan Mazier: Non-point sources would be fertilizers on agricultural lands, pesticides on agriculture lands and forests, contaminants in rain and snow, and dry atmospheric fallout.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Thank you.

I'll start and then will invite my colleagues from other parts of Environment and Climate Change Canada to engage.

From the perspective of the Canada water agency, part of the freshwater action plan is that we've established five freshwater ecosystem initiatives. The purposes of those freshwater ecosystem initiatives are to work with a variety of partners, provinces and territories, and indigenous communities around understanding sources of—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Excuse me. I have limited time here.

Have you done anything, or is it just a plan?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: We are continuing to take actions through the—

Mr. Dan Mazier: What kinds of actions? Tell us specifically one action.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: We're working on creating ecosystem initiatives across the country to work with partners on where the sources of pollution can be and how we can restore habitat, each place requiring its own initiatives and plans.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Thank you.

Again, this is for anyone.

Harmful algae blooms in Lake Erie were much larger than predicted this last year. A recent report by York University noted that more algae blooms are likely in Lake Erie.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: I'm sorry, Mr. Mazier. I hate to interrupt, but is your question for Mr. Wolfish too?

[English]

Mr. Dan Mazier: It was for ECCC.

[Translation]

The Chair: We don't know whether he can answer it.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: That's because the connection still isn't good.

[English]

Mr. Dan Mazier: This current one is for anyone. Which question is she talking about?

The Chair: The one you're just asking now.

Mr. Dan Mazier: This question is for anyone.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Wolfish's connection isn't working. I don't think we can go back to Mr. Wolfish.

Mr. Dan Mazier: How am I doing for time?

The Chair: I'm giving you extra time because of all this interruption.

Mr. Dan Mazier: I'll start from the top again, then, sir.

Harmful algae blooms in Lake Erie were much larger than experts predicted this last year. A recent report by York University noted that more algae blooms are likely in Lake Erie.

What is the government doing about this?

The Chair: Ms. Volk.

Ms. Joanne Volk (Director General, Water Science and Technology, Department of the Environment): Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chair and members.

At Environment and Climate Change Canada, I'm the director general for water science and technology.

As my colleague, Daniel, mentioned, we are undertaking a number of ecosystem initiatives—including in the Great Lakes Basin and including in Lake Erie, specifically—to address algae blooms.

I can point to action that the government took in 2016 to sign a binational reduction of phosphorus in Lake Erie with the United States government. We're currently monitoring, on an annual basis, the amount of phosphorus flowing into the lake and into the basin, to know if it's in line with the targets that we predicted in our ability to manage phosphorus.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Can they table those annual reports?

Ms. Joanne Volk: I'm happy to follow up for members and provide information that is available to you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. van Koeverden.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the officials for joining us today and for their speeches if they were able to give one earlier. I appreciate all of your insight and all of your hard work in protecting Canada's greatest natural asset, which is not just my opinion but something that I believe we all have to recognize. We're unique in the world, as a country, to be the stewards of so much of a vital resource that the world depends on. We're sort of like guardians in that regard.

I'm fortunate enough to have spent a lot of time out on the water in Canada, as I paddled a kayak for Canada for many years. I guess that helped deepen my profound appreciation for how our built environment can have an impact on the clean water resources that the country relies on.

This study is really important to my community. It's part of the Lake Ontario watershed. I was part of the group that advocated for more money for the Great Lakes in the previous budget, and I was really proud to see an incremental \$650-million allocation for Great Lakes restoration, for the elimination of invasive species, and for the protection of that most vital natural resource.

I have a very basic question for anybody who would like to add a little insight.

We're starting this freshwater study. It's going to be rather lengthy, which I think is important given how enormous our country is and what an incredible privilege and obligation Canada has to protect this natural resource.

What can we all learn about the federal obligations of the Government of Canada with respect to protecting our environment? What can we know a little more about with respect to jurisdiction and our abilities to protect this most vital resource?

My question is for anybody, as it's very general.

● (1145)

The Chair: Who would like to take that?

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: I'll just ask if you can add some specific threats to fresh water, perhaps the most significant threats to fresh water from your departments' perspectives.

What is putting our freshwater system in peril, if anything, and how can we act and legislate to protect those things from happening?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: I could jump in to start, but I'm worried that you can't properly hear me because of the interpretation.

[Translation]

The Chair: I don't think so. What do you say, Ms. Pauzé?

[English]

No, we're getting thumbs down on that.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I'd like us to see why we can't hear him very well. I was looking at the screen with my colleagues, and the connection seemed good when Mr. Wolfish appeared on it, but the interpreters tell us it isn't. I wonder if they're on another channel.

Is it a hardware problem? Would it be possible to do some tests to check it? I'd really like to know why we have good reception but not our interpreters.

The Chair: They actually tested the system.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: There's no problem when we look at it.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Wolfish, apparently your phone is off and we're trying to reach you.

That might help, because the technician's trying to reach you and maybe he can solve the problem.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: I was turning my phone off so I would not be disturbed, but I have the number here and I can call the technician.

The Chair: They'll call you I think. They're trying to call you.

Would anyone here at the table like to answer Mr. van Koeverden's question?

Mr. David Harper (Director General, Monitoring and Data Services Directorate, Department of the Environment): I can start, Chair. Thank you.

Certainly, as we try to manage water, climate change is putting increased stress on our water resources. There's increasing variability in the water cycle. It's inducing a greater number of extreme weather events and reducing the predictability of water availability, which, in turn, can affect sustainable development, biodiversity and the enjoyment of water by humans.

That's our main concern.

Ms. Kate Ladell: We all have an important role to play, and, as you heard from the opening remarks, we all have our distinct mandates. Within that, I think we need continued co-operation and collaboration across all federal departments on the multiple threats—and I think there are many threats.

My colleague mentioned climate change, aquatic invasive species and multiple stressors, so there are cumulative effects of multiple stresses coming in all at once. I think nutrients are another big threat that has been identified, so there are many, but I think there are also opportunities to combat those threats.

Thank you.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Could you elaborate on nutrients? I don't know if everybody's aware of what that means.

• (1150)

Ms. Kate Ladell: I think it's nutrients that are flowing into water, so often land-based nutrients.

I would turn to my colleague in the Ontario and Prairies region. I don't want to forget about her. I think she also could elaborate more fully.

Ms. Hilary Oakman: Thank you.

From a DFO perspective, while we don't manage nutrients coming into the water, we are actively working and doing some science to understand what that impact might be on fish and fish habitat.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you.

Is there anybody else?

Please.

Ms. Joanne Volk: Thank you, again, from ECCC's science and technology branch.

To give just a quick summary from a science perspective, some of the more important issues.... I would echo my colleague from DFO, focusing on the importance of collaboration given the complexity and shared jurisdiction of fresh water in Canada.

From a science perspective, certainly climate change is at the forefront, as identified by our colleagues. The input of excess nutrients, both phosphorus and nitrogen, is important.

Pollutants and toxic chemicals, as well as plastics, are also important issues, as demonstrated by investment from the government in this area.

I would finish by noting, just generally, that aquatic ecological health, including biodiversity loss, would also be another important focus for us.

Thank you.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: I heard a lot of important comments with respect to biodiversity and habitat. These are all very important. Like my colleague Mr. Longfield from Guelph, I'm a big fan of the "one health" approach with respect to looking at climate change from a human and animal health perspective.

Lastly, perhaps for DFO, regarding toxins in the food we eat that comes from the Great Lakes, I would love to hear about any research you've seen on how fish and our food chain are impacted by pollutants in the Great Lakes.

The Chair: Answer briefly, in maybe 15 seconds.

Ms. Kate Ladell: I'm going to defer to my colleague in the Ontario and Prairies region, Ms. Oakman.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Oakman.

Ms. Hilary Oakman: Actually, Fisheries and Oceans Canada does not have the responsibility to assess the amount of toxin in fish.

I'd refer that back to Environment and Climate Change Canada or the Food Inspection Agency.

The Chair: I don't think we have time to get into it, but it raises an interesting point: There's a lot of coordination required in protecting our fresh water. There may be gaps in coordination, which is what we're trying to ascertain.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Pauzé.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to see if Mr. Wolfish is connected. I think he has to do it through his cell phone.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. We'll try Mr. Wolfish.

Can you tell us what the weather is like in Winnipeg today?

We'll see whether he comes through.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: It's a sunny day in Winnipeg today.

I changed my connection. I'm hoping you can hear me better.

The Chair: Are we getting...?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Could he speak a little more?

[*English*]

The Chair: Could you talk about tomorrow's weather, based on the forecast?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: I'm hoping that tomorrow's weather will bring sun, with the appropriate amount of freshwater rain.

The Chair: How is it looking?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Natalie Jeanneault): Could we have his mike more between his nose and his mouth?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Is that better?

I'm hoping this works better for you.

[*Translation*]

You're showing some real patience today; thanks for that. I know the process is a bit frustrating.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're having trouble interpreting the signals from the booth, I think.

Is it good?

A voice: Keep going.

The Chair: Keep going, you say. Let's see what we're....

[*Translation*]

We're going to run a test.

Go ahead, Ms. Pauzé.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: I'll wait for a signal from the interpreters.

That's good. So getting back to the coordination issue, the Canadian water agency was created to ensure better coordination, wasn't it?

The creation of that agency was mentioned in motion M-34 of 2020-2021.

Under that motion, the committee was to study the creation of the Canada water agency. However, it was ultimately created without the committee studying the matter.

I'd like to know if the federal government intends to listen to Quebec, which has more than 60 lakes with areas greater than 50 square kilometers and a long and rich history of protecting that vital resource.

I ask the question because I remember that the Quebec government wrote to Mr. Wilkinson in 2021 to say that the Canada water agency encroached on Quebec's jurisdiction.

Mr. Wolfish, have relations improved at all since then with Quebec's Ministère de l'Environnement, de la Lutte contre les changements climatiques, de la Faune et des Parcs?

• (1155)

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Thank you for your question. I'll answer it in English, but I can comment in French if you wish.

[*English*]

We have been in touch with the Government of Quebec. We received the letter about their concerns around the creation of the Canada water agency. Our goal is to make sure that in the implementation of our programs and policies we continue to respect the federal framework and the roles and responsibilities of the province's territories, as well as the role indigenous peoples can play in the management of fresh water.

In addition to that, we are keen to continue to work with Quebec—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Wolfish, but I'd especially like to know, yes or no, if the people at Environment and Climate Change Canada have contacted those at Quebec's Ministère de l'Environnement regarding coordination issues and the creation of the Canada water agency.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Actually, I'll be meeting with the Quebec government on that matter next week, and I intend to address those issues.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: As I understand it, the Canadian water agency was created without the government knowing Quebec's position on the matter. As I told you, Mr. Charette wrote to Mr. Wilkinson two years ago to tell him it encroached on Quebec's jurisdiction.

I therefore conclude that this hasn't been done yet.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: The agency is a branch within the Department of the Environment and Climate Change. It isn't currently an independent agency.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: I see. If that's the case, when will we know what the Canada water agency's actual responsibilities are? It's administered by a number of departments. What responsibilities will be assigned to the agency so it can carry out the mission that it thinks it can accomplish?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: There's an agreement between Quebec and Canada, the St. Lawrence River Action Plan. The Canada water agency team, cooperating closely with Quebec, is responsible for implementing that agreement. We intend to renew it over time together with the Quebec government.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Here's another example, Mr. Wolfish.

I met some people in Quebec who work in river basins, and they told us that \$650 million has been allocated to the agency over 10 years. They said that \$150 million of that amount was earmarked for seven transboundary basins, and they couldn't understand why none of those basins were in Quebec.

They think there won't be any money for those in Quebec. And yet Lake Memphremagog and Lake Champlain are transboundary freshwater basins located in Quebec.

Why has Quebec not received a share of that \$650 million?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: That's a good question.

Efforts are currently focused on the St. Lawrence River, with the St. Lawrence River Action Plan. We want to talk to Quebec and the other stakeholders about implementing the Freshwater Action Plan, which is a federal plan.

We'll be able to assess and modify our activities going forward in close cooperation with Quebec and our other partners.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: As you can see, my questions definitely concern constitutional jurisdictions. I don't think that comes as a surprise to you.

Does the Canada water agency have any plans to establish mechanisms to ensure effective governance consistent with constitutional jurisdictions?

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: The aim is to comply with the constitutional framework.

We want to use existing mechanisms, such as the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment. We also want to use bilateral mechanisms to coordinate our programs and activities with those of Quebec and other authorities in accordance with the jurisdictions of each level of government.

• (1200)

Ms. Monique Pauzé: How will the money be allocated? I mentioned the \$650 million to you earlier.

What programs and protective measures are concerned?

The Chair: Please answer briefly.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Thank you for your question.

First of all, the government has made a commitment with the United States to protect the Great Lakes. A large portion of that investment will be allocated to those programs. We are allocating the rest of that funding to the other seven initiatives across the country, including the St. Lawrence Action Plan.

The Chair: Thank you.

It's your turn, Mr. Bachrach.

[English]

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all of our witnesses. We apologize for the technical difficulties.

I think this is an important study. It's a very broad topic, and as you may be able to tell, I think the committee is struggling a bit to define the scope and focus in, because we have only 13 meetings to look into what is a very broad topic and series of subtopics.

I'm going to start by diving into this issue around waste-water effluent, because it's something that hits close to home for communities in the region I represent in northwest B.C. My home community of Smithers is a town of about 5,000 people. Its waste-water effluent goes into the Bulkley River, which is part of the Skeena watershed. This is British Columbia's second-greatest wild salmon watershed. It's home to a world-renowned steelhead fishery.

Smithers has been getting letters from Environment Canada saying it's not in compliance and that it's violating the Fisheries Act. The town has done its due diligence. It's created a plan. It's submitted it to the federal government for funding, and the federal government has been sitting on it for a year and a half. It won't give them an answer as to whether they're going to get the funding. There's a very short construction season in northern B.C., because the ground freezes and gets covered in snow, so every year that goes by and every construction season that gets missed means another year that the fish in the river and the water quality of the river are potentially compromised by the effluent.

The question here is really around the communication between ECCC and Infrastructure Canada, whether ECCC creates a priority list of waste-water projects that it feels should be prioritized for funding, and how we break down those silos so that we don't have communities that rightfully feel frustrated because they want to address this very serious situation. Rather than getting support from the federal government, they're actually getting threatening letters saying that they're contravening the federal legislation.

Perhaps one of the witnesses could speak to this and help us understand how ECCC works to ensure that Infrastructure Canada gets the money to the projects that are the most important for protecting fresh water in our country.

Ms. Cecile Siewe: I will start, and then I will allow my colleague Caroline Blais to add any details that she's available to add at this point in time.

Infrastructure Canada has jurisdiction over its budget, so we can be invited to provide input as to some of the projects that they have. With respect to a prioritization list, I will have to undertake to get back to you on that, if one exists. It would not reside with us; it would probably reside with Infrastructure Canada.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Does Infrastructure Canada solicit input from ECCC as to priority projects or particularly serious situations?

Ms. Caroline Blais (Director, Forest Products and Fisheries Act, Department of the Environment): Yes, we do have communications with our colleagues at Infrastructure Canada. We provide them with information as to which communities are not complying and, if they have a transitional authorization, how much time they have. Our colleagues at Infrastructure Canada then do their own analysis, so we do not have control over where they send the money, but we do provide information.

• (1205)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Do you provide recommendations along with that information, in terms of where the greatest risk to fresh water might be?

Ms. Caroline Blais: At this point we don't provide recommendations; we provide only the information.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay.

Do you know if the federal government has a dedicated fund for ameliorating these waste-water issues?

Ms. Caroline Blais: Environment and Climate Change Canada does not have a fund for that. Infrastructure Canada has a number of funds, and some of them go to waste water, so it would be in a better position to answer that question.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I think the frustration that communities are feeling is a result of the silos we've built up in government and the fact that they aren't talking to each other about priorities. The communities themselves are the ones that are caught in the cross-fire, because they want to address this issue; they have a plan; they've invested money in the design of the project, yet the federal government is sitting on their application and hasn't gotten back to them and can't provide any information about where the project stands or when something might get fixed.

How do we do a better job of approaching these kinds of situations, which are happening all across Canada in communities of all sizes? The federal government doesn't have a dedicated fund for waste-water infrastructure, so waste-water projects are having to compete with every other kind of infrastructure project you can think of.

From a clean water perspective, from a fresh-water perspective, from an aquatic ecosystem perspective, how do we do a better job of addressing this issue? It seems as though right now the system isn't working. It's not working for Smithers, because they can't tell where the funding is or whether they're going to get it or whether they're going to be able to fix the problem.

Ms. Caroline Blais: That's a good question. I think that breaking the silos between the funding and the regulation would be something we would take into account and look into. For today, I don't have anything else to add.

Ms. Cecile Siewe: If I could add to that, I think you've just highlighted for us an important point that we will definitely be discussing internally, as well as with our colleagues in Infrastructure Canada. It's how we can create a working group or some mechanism for ensuring that we have line of sight, paying attention to prioritization and impacts on freshwater bodies that may be impacted.

I thank you for raising the point.

The Chair: Thank you. That was an excellent question, Mr. Bachrach. It's precisely the kind of thing we're trying to discover through this study, as far as I'm concerned.

We'll go to our second round now and Mr. Deltell.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the committee, everyone.

I'd also like to welcome Ms. Gros-Louis, who comes from Wendake.

Greetings, madam. Welcome to your House of Commons.

Mr. Chair, as you can see, we're very much interested, and rightly so, in waste-water effluent. We're all aware that water is essential to life and that we must make every effort to safeguard it. When we discharge waste-water into the river, that raises a number of issues.

In November 2015, the government authorized the discharge of eight billion litres of waste-water into Canadian waterways.

Would the deputy minister please explain to us the scientific evidence that such discharges do not harm the environment?

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Wolfish.

Mr. Daniel Wolfish: Since the question referred particularly to waste water, I think that Cecile, who is at the table, would be best to comment.

The Chair: I'm sorry about that.

Go ahead.

Ms. Cecile Siewe: Yes, I'm sure we can respond to that question.

Caroline, can you answer for us?

Ms. Caroline Blais: First of all, I want to go back to 2015, and you're correct that there was an order that was signed by the minister then. I just want to clarify that the order under section 37 of the Fisheries Act is not a mechanism to authorize the release of a deleterious substance. It did, however, set a number of conditions that the city had to meet if there was a release of a deleterious substance.

There was a panel that was set up before that final order, and there were three academics who looked at information, including the impact on fish and the impact on flora, because there are a lot of plants that are used by—

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Deltell: With your permission, Ms. Blais, I'm going to interrupt.

Mr. Chair, I'm thinking of another discharge that occurred near my home in the Quebec City region this past summer. On August 25, Radio-Canada reported that 760 million litres of waste-water had been discharged into the river in the second week of July. That had nothing to do with the discharge authorization that was issued in Montreal, even though it clearly had a very significant impact.

At the time of that discharge, André Bélanger, a citizen involved with Fondation Rivières, said it was a major incident. In addition, Satinder Kaur Brar, an environmental biotechnology and decontamination expert from York University, in Toronto, said that the discharge would have deleterious effects on the river for years to come.

Why does the government authorize things that can have harmful effects on the river in the future?

• (1210)

Ms. Caroline Blais: In the situation...

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt you for a moment to clarify a point.

You said there was no authorization, didn't you?

Were there any authorizations or not?

Ms. Caroline Blais: I was referring to a specific example, the discharge in Montreal. I thought that was the focus of the question.

The Chair: All right. That's just for my own understanding.

Ms. Caroline Blais: As regards the discharge at Quebec City that Mr. Deltell mentioned, Quebec's sewer systems are governed by Quebec's Regulation respecting municipal wastewater treatment works. According to an equivalency agreement between Quebec and the federal government, it's the Quebec regulation, not the federal one, that applies to Quebec.

Consequently, in the example I'm referring to, the federal government had no approval authority. That waste-water discharge would have been subject to the general prohibitions of the Fisheries Act.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: The fact nevertheless remains that waste-water contains chemical contaminants, pesticides, pharmaceutical products, contaminants such as plastic, pathogenic agents, coliform bacteria and other harmful bacteria and that they may be deposited on riverbeds, as mentioned in the section.

Mr. Chair, I wish to introduce the following motion, notice of which was given last week.

That the committee report to the House that the first environmental act by this Liberal government was to approve the dumping of eight billion litres of raw sewage into the St. Lawrence River and that the committee agrees that the dumping of wastewater into our waterways goes against Canadian efforts to promote clean water.

We are very much aware that water is of course a very important part of our ecosystem. The dumping of waste-water into the St. Lawrence River directly threatens the nature and quality of life

of the people who may consume that water. Not for no reason do leading Canadian experts, such as the one from York University whom I cited earlier, say that it can have long-term effects. They also say that, in the long run, a large quantity of pollutants may limit access to the river and the number of days during which people can swim in it. These contaminants may be found at the bottom of the river and in the food chain and may be absorbed by fish, microorganisms, animals and human beings.

The Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development is studying water management, a fundamental issue. The federal government agreed to allow eight billion—

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I have a point of order.

Mr. Gérard Deltell:—eight years ago. Furthermore, as stated in the motion, we're talking about the first environmental action taken by this government. That is why we're introducing this motion.

The Chair: We will suspend because I need to consult the clerk.

• (1210)

(Pause)

• (1215)

The Chair: We are back.

Mr. Deltell, it's your right to introduce this motion, and we will debate it.

However, since it will take up an hour of meeting time, I will simply add an hour to the meeting and ask the witnesses to come back for another hour at a suitable time.

In the meantime, we will debate your motion.

[English]

We have to. Those are the rules.

Mr. Dan Mazier: We can deal with it in five minutes.

The Chair: I don't think it's going to happen.

Okay. That's what I'm going to do. Since we've interrupted the meeting, which is Mr. Deltell's right—and quite frankly I think it's an interesting debate—we've basically lost an hour of our 26 hours. What I will do is invite the witnesses back for one hour at some point, and we can now debate Mr. Deltell's motion.

Mr. Deltell, would you like to continue?

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Deltell: I think I've said everything I had to say. You missed some good prose, but—

The Chair: All right.

[English]

I have Madame Chatel, Mr. Mazier and Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Actually, Mr. Chair, on a point of order, if we could not dismiss the witnesses—

The Chair: I agree. We should not dismiss the witnesses, but as I say, we're carving out time here, and we're going to make it up.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I appreciate your allowing me to suggest—

The Chair: Witnesses, please remain with us, because we could have some questions. It's a very important topic.

I have Madame Chatel.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm delighted with my colleague's motion. Being a Montreal native myself, I grew up near the river and am aware of its importance. All Quebecers agree that the river is a true gem and that this study is an important step toward protecting this Quebec jewel, among other things. In recent decades, much has been done to protect our rivers, streams and lakes, as a result of which I've seen increasing numbers of beaches previously forced to close opening up again.

I'm also concerned about certain problems, and I would like to know what else can be done. We can't deny that it's our responsibility to leave our children healthier aquatic environments than what we have now. That's our duty, which is why this study it is so important.

Being a Montreal native, I witnessed the dumping of wastewater into the river in 2015, although it actually started in 2014. This is a concern for all Quebecers, particularly those living along the river.

I know that it's for Quebec to decide, but I'd like to know what would have happened if the City of Montreal hadn't received that authorization in 2015. What were the issues?

The Chair: Pardon me; I have a point of order.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Yes, I don't understand what we're doing here.

The Chair: We are debating a motion.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: We're debating a motion, but the witnesses are here.

The Chair: Yes, because debate might raise some questions.

I would like to point out that an authorization in 2015 has been mentioned twice, but from what I understand from Ms. Blais, it wasn't an authorization.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: My question concerns the Government of Quebec. As I understand it, Quebec's environment ministry gave the City of Montreal that authorization.

Was that in fact the case?

The Chair: I don't know. Perhaps Ms. Blais could answer the question.

• (1220)

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Whatever the case may be, the City of Montreal had options, such as repairing the infrastructure network. I'd like to get a clear understanding of the circumstances. Montrealers and everyone living along the river may not understand either.

Would you please tell us more about that, Ms. Blais?

Ms. Caroline Blais: Of course.

Going back to 2015, I'll start with the part about the Quebec government's authorization.

Yes, the City of Montreal was in possession at the time of permits issued by the provincial government. That was 10 years ago, and the federal regulations had been in force for only a few months. It wasn't yet clear to the municipalities that they had to contact the federal government to acquaint themselves with the regulations.

A stop-work order had been issued so the federal government could form a clear idea of what was going on in Montreal.

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Mazier: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, is this—

The Chair: Yes, this is extremely relevant, Mr. Mazier, to Mr. Deltell's motion, and I'm going to listen to Madam Blais.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Caroline Blais: The other part of the question concerns what happened and the city's choices. The City of Montreal had some work to do because the pipes where all the sewers converged were damaged. A lot of debris had built up and the city had to discharge water in order to clear the pipes and remove the debris.

The city had its works planned at the time, had all the necessary labour and equipment and was able, for example, to control the number of days to be allocated to the work. Failure to perform that work would have been risky because any breakage would have resulted in a spill in any case, and the city wouldn't know how much time was needed and wouldn't necessarily have the required equipment.

As regards the third part of the question, the final order, which the government issued under section 31 of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, included conditions that the City of Montreal had to meet if it decided to proceed with the discharge. It wasn't an authorization to proceed with the discharge.

The Chair: Thank you.

Please continue, Ms. Chatel.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: The department amended the waste-water regulations to permit certain repairs to the sewers, as you mentioned.

Would you please explain the reasons for the amendments to the regulations and the current state of those amendments?

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Mazier: We are supposed to be debating the motion and whether we want to have the motion or not. If we're all in violent agreement, let's have a vote on it and let's continue with interviewing our witnesses who are here today.

The Chair: Well, I think—

Mr. Dan Mazier: It doesn't matter if it's relevant or not. This is a committee discussion.

The Chair: Yes, but when we're discussing a motion, there is no time limit. Madame Chatel can take—

Mr. Dan Mazier: We're supposed to talk amongst committee members, not with witnesses who happen to be here from the street.

The Chair: I think the witnesses can enable us to make a more informed and enlightened decision. This is why I want them to stay.

Is this a point of order?

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, Lib.): It's in response to that.

The Chair: Well, I don't think I can entertain a response to Mr. Mazier's point of order.

It's your right to raise a point of order, Mr. Mazier. I acknowledge that.

Madame Chatel, could you finish with Madam Blais? Then, we have Mr. Mazier, Mr. Bachrach, Madame Pauzé and so on.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I still have a question. I'm asking my colleagues for a little patience. I want to make sure I really understand the nature of the motion that's been introduced.

I'd like to know whether, since that incident in 2015—

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Mazier: I have a point of order.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Pardon me, Ms. Chatel. Mr. Mazier has a point of order.

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Mazier: I would like to ask the clerk what the standard process is for debate on motions.

The Chair: When you are debating a motion, you can debate a motion for a month if you want.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Well, I am asking the clerk. What is the standard?

• (1225)

The Chair: Is there an average? It depends whether you're PROC or ethics, or whether—

Mr. Dan Mazier: What is the standard? Do we normally debate amongst our committee members?

The Chair: Pardon me?

Mr. Dan Mazier: What is the standard? What is the normal practice?

We introduce the motion. Does the committee debate it, or do the witnesses?

The Chair: We should all know the normal practice, Mr. Mazier.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Do we? Okay.

The Chair: Yes.

The normal practice is that when somebody has the floor, they have the floor until they've stopped talking. We've seen this in other committees.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Yes, so she stopped talking—

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: No—

The Chair: It was on a point of order, Mr. Mazier.

I'm going to move on now to Madame Chatel.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you.

I ask you please to be patient. I really want to take part in the debate based on a clear understanding of the motion you've introduced. I think that's important. I'd like to debate it and take advantage of the fact that we are here with people who can provide clarification to the members of this committee. I don't know why you're preventing me from getting that clarification.

So my question is this: what regulatory amendments have been made since the incident in 2015 to provide municipalities with more direct lines in order to perform more of this kind of work on their infrastructure, while properly safeguarding our jewels, such as the St. Lawrence River?

Ms. Caroline Blais: We've started the process—

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Mazier.

Mr. Dan Mazier: On a point of order, I'll ask the clerk again: Who is normally involved in the debate on a motion?

The Chair: We are going to break for a few seconds.

• (1225)

(Pause)

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We will resume.

I will ask Ms. Chatel to complete her intervention so that Mr. Mazier, Mr. Bachrach and Ms. Pauzé can speak. I believe we have until 1:00 p.m. This is a very interesting discussion.

Please continue, Ms. Chatel. You have a little time left if you want it.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think this subject is very important. I've discussed the matter with my colleague Ms. Pauzé. It's clear that wastewater treatment is included in the freshwater study we propose to conduct.

I don't think we need a motion specific to Montreal, but rather one that applies to all cities and to all discharges that may occur across Canada.

I would be satisfied if that's already part of the study. However, with your permission, I'd like to hear Ms. Blais' response.

The Chair: All right.

Ms. Blais, it would be good if you could conclude your answer.

Ms. Caroline Blais: Since the Aquatic Invasive Species Regulations were adopted, we've realized that discharges have occurred in places other than at the destination, as in sewer systems. No provision was made in the regulations for monitoring those discharges. Consequently, efforts were made to update them to include provisions for better monitoring of those kinds of discharges.

The new regulations, which should be enacted in 2024, will include provisions requiring that all regulated persons and organizations request authorization before performing works that may result in any discharge of waste-water at a location other than the destination. It will also establish more conditions and will apply to all municipalities.

The Chair: So we want to improve the existing regulations.

Ms. Caroline Blais: That's correct.

The Chair: Have you finished, Ms. Chatel? All right.

Go ahead, Mr. Mazier.

[English]

Mr. Dan Mazier: Thank you, Chair.

I'll just repeat the motion so the committee is up to speed on what the actual motion said. It reads:

That the committee report to the House that the first environmental act by this Liberal government was to approve the dumping of eight billion litres of raw sewage into the St. Lawrence River and that the committee agrees that the dumping of waste water into our waterways goes against Canadian efforts to promote clean water.

I think that everybody sitting around this table can completely agree with this—that it's not a good thing.

I also want to bring this to the committee's attention. It's actually from 2020. It's from *The Canadian Press* and it's entitled "Canada dumped nearly 900 billion litres of raw sewage into waterways between 2013 and 2018". It reported that:

Data Environment Canada posted to the federal government's open-data website earlier this month shows in 2018, more than 190 billion litres of untreated wastewater poured out of city pipes that carry both sewage and storm water.

That's 190 billion litres. I'd asked the question earlier if you have any idea.... This is from 2020. This has been going on, and it's a big problem.

It goes on to say:

That is 14 per cent more than in 2017, and 44 per cent more than in 2013.

I don't know what the government is doing about it. This is why we MPs are so worried about this. Action is required.

The article continues:

Mark Mattson, president of Swim Drink Fish Canada, said the amount should shock people.

I agree. It goes on:

"It shows you the problem," he said. "It should wake people up."

"There's lots of holes in the data," he noted.

The number does not include wastewater that leaks out from systems that don't use combined sewage and storm water pipes or any data on non-sewage related pollution that isn't treated by wastewater plants, such as pharmaceuticals. Quebec is also excluded from the data in 2018 because that province signed an agreement to report it to Ottawa in a different way.

That's why I was very concerned about the provinces and how this opening in the Canada Water Act involves all this as well.

That's what I have to say about this. I think it's a very important study. I'm hopeful that the committee can support continuing on with this motion and we can vote to approve it.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mazier.

Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate that the motion that's been tabled with the committee today is related to the study in front of us. My colleagues have highlighted the fact that we have a whole theme within the study dedicated to the topic of waste water. My questions were related to waste water as well.

I think it undercuts the ability of the committee to hold our hearing today if this motion takes precedence over questioning the witnesses. The goal of this meeting was to hear from witnesses and to gain information that will help us with the scoping of this study.

As much as I'm fascinated by what happened in Montreal—4,000 kilometres from where I live—10 years ago, and I'm sure it's very pertinent to this committee's work, I'm not sure that I'm in a place where I can vote for a motion that expresses a specific opinion to the House.

My preference would be that we deal with this over the course of the study and look at recommendations in the report that would remedy underlying problems that may contribute to similar situations in the future. We can do forensic work and look at what happened 10 years ago, but in my view, that has utility only if it informs what we're going to do in the future.

I think very much that it's the kind of focus we could bring to this study to make it useful to Canadians and to the protection of fresh water.

Having said that, I'm going to move a motion to end debate on the motion before us in the interest of returning to the work of the committee on the freshwater study.

The Chair: I think, for today, we're done with the.... I don't see how we....

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Chair, I wanted to ask more questions of the witnesses. I have a whole list here. We've been thinking about their appearance, and I would like to get to those questions.

The Chair: I'm going to invite them back for an hour.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: If you invite them back for an hour, Mr. Chair, it postpones what is already a fairly lengthy study.

The Chair: I understand.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I appreciate that you want it to be lengthier, because you're so passionate about this topic, but we're just kicking it down the road because we've allowed a motion to derail this meeting, which was intended to be about hearing from and asking questions of the witnesses.

The Chair: I appreciate your—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Having said that, I'm now debating an undebatable motion, so—

The Chair: Okay. It's my point of order, I guess.

There's a motion. It's to...

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: It's to adjourn debate.

The Chair: It's to adjourn debate, but it's dilatory.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

The Chair: The debate on this motion is adjourned.

I'm still going to invite the witnesses back for an hour, because their last hour was turned completely upside down. We can—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Not by us.

The Chair: Everyone exercised their rights. There's no recrimination for anybody.

The point I'm trying to make is that the last hour was not productive and it did not conform to the aim of the agenda that was circulated to members. I will invite the witnesses back at some point for one hour of questioning.

Somebody may decide that we should adjourn, since it's—

Mr. Dan Mazier: We have 15 minutes left.

An hon. member: Why would we?

• (1240)

The Chair: Okay. We'll go back to the motion.

I had Madame Pauzé—

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Chair, just to be sure of where we're going.

[*Translation*]

I won't repeat what you said, which is that the debate we had earlier was a waste of time. I don't think it was at all.

The Chair: It wasn't a waste of time. I thought the discussion was very interesting.

It's more that the time allotted to the witnesses was wasted, but that's not a serious problem.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: You suggested that it wasn't productive. I don't entirely agree with you.

The discussion lasted roughly 20 minutes. If we extend the meeting by about 20 minutes, that will take us to 1:20 p.m. I think we can all do that.

The Chair: The discussion lasted more than 20 minutes or so. It lasted at least a half-hour.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: It ran from 12:13 to 12:37 p.m.

The Chair: That's pretty much a half-hour.

I don't mind if we continue until 1:30 p.m., if committee members so wish. That would mean the witnesses wouldn't have to come back and testify.

I'm told that unanimous consent isn't necessary. We still have to see whether the resources are available.

• (1240)

(Pause)

• (1255)

[*English*]

The Chair: We're back in order, and I am adjourning the meeting.

Thank you very much.

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