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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order. Good afternoon, everyone.

Welcome, Minister, to our committee today.

Before we start with the minister and the officials, I will ask the committee if it wishes to adopt the report of the steering committee.

I would just say that if we adopt the report of the steering committee, in the second hour we will not be reviewing the report on the profits and emissions reduction efforts in Canada's oil and gas industry, because the subcommittee report stipulates we're doing that on November 4. If we adopt the report as is, then we will not be studying that draft report in the second hour.

Let's do that as a first step. Is there agreement to adopt the subcommittee report?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I believe there is.

Okay, it's adopted.

I believe, Ms. Collins, you would like to propose something for the second hour.

Ms. Laurel Collins (Victoria, NDP): Yes. I was hoping to get unanimous consent from the committee to ask the officials to stay for the second hour.

The Chair: Do we have unanimous consent?

I think we do. Good. We're off and running.

We can proceed now with hearing from our Minister of Emergency Preparedness.

Minister, welcome to the committee.

Welcome to the officials. It's nice to see you all again.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of Emergency Preparedness): Thank you, Mr. Chair and colleagues, for inviting me here today to appear before you.

I know that honourable members and Canadians are seeking answers and want to hear about the events that unfolded in Jasper. I look forward to helping the committee members understand the Government of Canada's emergency preparedness efforts with respect to wildfire preparedness and management.

This year, Canadians witnessed more devastating destruction caused by wildfires. Over five million hectares were burned, and fires continue to burn across the country as we speak.

This past summer, right across the country, we saw fires and floods followed by hail. We're not done yet, with an active hurricane season. So far in 2024, fires have burned twice the yearly average, and Canadians are feeling the impacts on their communities.

We left no stone unturned to get Canadians prepared for the wildfire season this year, especially working with our provincial and territorial counterparts.

Following the catastrophic season in 2023, we worked with all levels of government, NGOs and private sector partners to prepare Canadians. As part of these efforts, I hosted round table discussions across the country with provincial, territorial and municipal decision-makers, first responders and experts in the field. We talked about capacity building and maintaining our response readiness. We spoke about how to best prepare, but also how to mitigate. We also spoke about the need to better integrate indigenous emergency management into our preparedness planning.

These conversations were critical in helping us strategize and coordinate this year's wildfire planning, response and recovery. We ensured open communication with provinces, territories and indigenous leaders, sharing forecasts in advance of the season and providing frequent updates as climate data became available to help form and share readiness and response across the country.

As you are no doubt aware, the government operations centre under Public Safety Canada is the lead for federal response coordination for emergency events. Throughout the wildfire season, the team worked non-stop to respond to emergencies in support of communities across the country.

That brings me to the tragic events that unfolded in Jasper and, frankly, to the reason we are here today, which is to help the people themselves and the rebuilding that is happening.

Jasper is a special part of Canada, which we can all agree on. It is a UNESCO world heritage site, a place where nature and wildlife are safeguarded, a carbon sink and a sacred land for indigenous communities. However, like anywhere in Canada, Jasper is not immune to the increased severity and frequency of climate change.

We were monitoring the wildfires in Jasper and also in northern Alberta very closely. I was in daily contact with Minister Ellis from Alberta as well, who is my counterpart there. Immediately following the devastating fire in Jasper, I toured the region with Premier Smith, Minister Ellis and other members of her government, alongside the mayor of Jasper.

Sadly, Mayor Ireland discovered that his home did not survive the fire. This had been his childhood home since the age of two. It was the home where he and his wife raised their two sons and where he had lived for 67 years.

Together, we all heard from the command leaders, which included Parks Canada members, many of whom lost their own homes and possessions in Jasper.

We heard from experts, from Calgary's heavy urban search and rescue team to fire chiefs, about what took place in Jasper. They described the wall of flames and the unpredictable wind conditions that led to the evacuation. Winds of 100 kilometres per hour with gusts of up to 150 kilometres per hour launched pine cones and branches that were on fire into the town. No fire team, no matter how experienced, could stop the fire's path.

Here I want to quote the deputy premier and minister responsible for emergency preparedness, Minister Ellis. He said that the actions first responders took saved lives in all communities. The preparation that the municipality, Parks Canada and partners in the region took in advance helped save the majority of the town through bravery and outstanding coordination on the ground.

I also want to take this opportunity to personally thank him for his efforts in working together to make sure that we had a very well-coordinated response. All orders of government stood with conviction and echoed this sentiment.

When the wildfire threatened the municipality of Jasper in July, the federal government received and approved a request from Alberta for Canadian Armed Forces support. Approximately 25,000 community members were also evacuated.

Over the course of 2024 wildfire season, we received two additional requests for federal assistance from Alberta, all in support of the community of Jasper.

Federal support included wildland firefighting resources, humanitarian and logistics support and assistance from the Canadian Armed Forces.

Support from the humanitarian workforce included wildfire mitigation and hazard cleaning support from Team Rubicon. The Canadian Red Cross provided support at reception centres to help evacuees and shared a donation-matching fund with the Government of Alberta to support their ongoing needs. The Salvation Army prepared daily meals to help first responders.

In addition to federal assistance, 850 firefighters were deployed to Jasper from other regions of Alberta and from across the country. The collaborative spirit and shared commitment in Canada to managing our fires together is in many ways our greatest asset in the fight against climate change.

We also called in additional resources from our international partners. Over 600 firefighters arrived in Alberta from Costa Rica, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, South Africa and Mexico.

In Jasper, all orders of government and partners committed to being there for the residents, and we are doing just that.

As of right now, the wildfire situation in Alberta is stable and the response is being effectively managed at the provincial level. Although we are now on the other side of the peak summer temperatures, we must remain vigilant. We continue to work on emergency preparedness measures with all our partners to further strengthen our resilience in the future. We all know we need to do more and collaborate more to ensure we can safeguard communities against increasingly active climate-driven hazards.

That is where we stand today. I'm focused on rebuilding and working with our partners on how to prevent this from happening in another town in Canada.

Again, this requires collaboration. It means having a real plan to fight climate change, because it is no longer a matter of "if" climate change will affect us. Normally we say, "But when?", but sadly it is happening right now. We're seeing this not only across our country but around the globe.

It is my goal to create a more resilient and sustainable approach to emergency management that will help Canada prepare for, mitigate, respond to and recover from disasters such as wildfires. That is why our government developed the country's first national adaptation strategy to support a shared vision for a resilient Canada. This strategy recognizes that it will take a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to tackle climate change and extreme weather, and we are committed to continuing this important work to keep Canada safe at a time when we need to come together to protect what we hold so dear in Canada and to protect communities, Canadians and Canadian businesses and livelihoods.

Climate change is not just real; it's causing our disasters, as we have seen in Jasper.

In closing, I would like to thank all emergency responders for their tireless efforts on the front lines and behind the scenes. I have another message to all the firefighters, which I said to them when I was in Jasper: It is their efforts that actually saved Jasper and allowed residents to move back in quickly and for the park to reopen.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll open it up to questions.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll start the first round off with Mr. Soroka for six minutes.

Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be sharing the last two minutes with MP Mazier.

Minister Guilbeault called the wildfire in Jasper a success, yet a third of the town was destroyed, thousands are homeless and there was nearly a billion dollars in damage. Did his failure to implement proper mitigation go against your job to prepare for this emergency?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: When I visited Jasper, I went to the command centre and the town itself with the mayor, the premier, our ministers, and Minister Ellis, and the briefing we got showed that the preparations Jasper had made, including the FireSmart program that was conducted and, more importantly, the coordinated training that all the different agencies had done just a few months prior, led not only to saving the town but making sure the evacuation was quick and very successful.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Okay.

The wildfire in Jasper was a disaster waiting to happen, with experts and officials raising alarms for over eight years. When were you first informed, either by Minister Guilbeault or any other member of the Liberal government, that Jasper was a tinderbox ready to ignite? When were you informed, and by whom?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, I wouldn't agree with that assessment. Across the country and in British Columbia and Alberta, in the forecast of extreme heat we were seeing, there were parts of the country we knew were prone to wildfires.

I believe I first learned of the wildfire just a few days before the evacuation took place. When we are informed of such an event, one thing we always make sure of through the Government Operations Centre is that all the resources are in place and that they have all that is needed. We were told at that time that additional resources were being moved in and things were being held at that time, until those gusts of wind I was talking about happened, which made the situation worse and had apparently never happened in Jasper before.

• (1640)

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Minister, I think you're forgetting the fact that with the mountain pine beetle, there were a lot of dead trees. I'm not saying there wasn't fire-smarting in town; the problem is that fire-smarting wasn't done further back, like a mile or two miles. That's where the problem was.

You had huge amounts of fuel sitting there, essentially, dead trees that could ignite at any time and, yes, once that fire started there, the problem was that you were not going to be able to stop it. That's our point. Why were those trees not removed? When and how were you informed that more should have been done?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As the Minister of Emergency Preparedness, my job is to look at responding to the emergency, but I'll tell you what I was briefed on when I was on the ground. I'll let Parks Canada and others explain further on this if they need to.

When I was briefed on the fire-smarting that actually took place, if it hadn't been for the fire-smarting that was done, the wall of flame that was reported would have kept going. It actually would stop....

It was because of those winds, which had never taken place before, of 100 kilometres per hour, which gusted up to 150 kilometres per hour, that launched those pine cones and branches that were on fire into the town and actually set the town on fire.

However, from everything we were briefed on, if it weren't for the preparation that had taken place, the situation would have been much worse.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Okay. I won't get into severe winds in mountain areas, but I'll pass it on to MP Mazier.

Mr. Dan Mazier (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): Thank you.

Minister, you're responsible for emergency preparedness. Do you agree that prescribed burns help prevent wildfires, yes or no?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First, I'm not the expert on how to deal with that. The experts would have to look at...because I have seen where certain places—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Minister, the question is pretty straightforward. Do you agree that prescribed burns help prevent wildfires, yes or no?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It all depends on which area. Each expert.... For example, in the Yukon they don't—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Minister, I tell you that they do actually help.

Documents obtained suggest that Minister Guilbeault's department was working against your mandate. A senior official at Parks Canada wrote in an email, months before the Jasper wildfires, "At what point do we make the organizational decision to cancel...prescribed burns in Western Canada?" Then the official stated, "political perception may become more important than actual prescription windows."

Newly obtained emails now reveal that this discussion was so alarming that the executive director of conservation replied, begging Parks Canada to put forest management above politics, and I quote, “I hope we don’t get into a blanket shutdown,” she said. “It is critical to continue those kind of burns. It is how they maintain the [community firebreak], and when they fall behind, it is very difficult to catch up.”

When were you first informed that Minister Guilbeault’s department was discussing cancelling prescribed burns because of political optics?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, I think those questions were already answered earlier. What I can tell you is that when we were in Jasper—

Mr. Dan Mazier: I am asking you.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. van Koeverden, you have a point of order.

A voice: I’m not getting the French—

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: It just seems like the Conservative member doesn’t want to allow the minister to respond. He’s done his two-minute speech and he’s not provided the minister any opportunity to respond to his question.

The Chair: I don’t think he’s at all.... I’m sensitive to the badgering of witnesses. I don’t think it’s really that severe in Mr. Mazier’s case.

Go ahead.

A voice: There wasn’t translation.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): I think that there’s a slight issue with the interpretation.

The Chair: Can you hear the French interpretation? It’s fine? Okay.

Mr. Mazier, please continue, but give the minister the chance to respond.

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Mazier: Just for clarification, I ask you again, Minister, when were you first informed that Minister Guilbeault’s department was discussing cancelling prescribed burns because of political optics?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can only tell you what I was briefed on when I visited Jasper. I knew what the emergency response—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Were you aware?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I don’t get into what takes place in each community across the country. We look at responding—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Were you aware?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No, I wasn’t.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Taylor Roy.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you to the minister and the officials for being here again.

At the last meeting we heard about the heroic efforts and the amount of coordination that was done. We also heard from Mr. Landon Shepherd, who was on the ground in Jasper.

You talked a lot about the collaboration and coordination. We heard about that last week as well. We also heard that the Alberta government had decided to reduce its firefighting budget by \$30 million. Was that ever discussed, and did that have an impact? We heard that certain types of equipment that were there were not available. Was there ever a conversation about the need to keep increasing the budgets for firefighting, rather than decreasing them?

• (1645)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Alberta actually collaborates really well when it comes to not only wildfires but emergency management. In fact, in emergency preparedness, especially when an emergency is called, I’ve never had to deal with any partisan issues. We deal with the emergency and we work very closely together. I have to say that my closest relationship is actually with Minister Ellis. It’s one reason that when we were informed of what was taking place, I decided to go to Edmonton to work with Minister Ellis and to coordinate our resources directly.

They made all resources available as quickly as possible, and again I want to commend them for their efforts. The premier was with us when we got that briefing, and I have to say that the briefing we got, the preparation and the work done were actually far greater than I witnessed in any other place.

If it weren’t for the fire-smarting, preparation and training, the entire town could have been lost. The interesting part was that the Parks Canada folks had Canada task force 2 from Calgary there and also Alberta Wildfire working very closely. Very direct questions were asked. In fact, everybody talked about not only how well the preparation was taking place, but some members even talked about how they need to look at utilizing this in other parts of the province and even across the country.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Thank you. It’s fantastic to hear that collaboration was there and everyone worked together so smoothly.

There was talk of certain equipment, like water bombers, not being available—I guess they’re called water bombers or air tanker groups—from either Alberta or British Columbia at that time. Would that have made a difference if they had been there, given the nature of the fire?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No. In fact, water bombers were made available.

Deryck runs the government operations centre and can provide more details.

Water bombers were actually made available. Everybody looks at us, asking “Why weren't they used?” It's the incident commander on the ground who has to take a look at when it's safe to do so. When we visited, they clearly showed that it would have been absolutely dangerous for them to use the water bombers at that time. Helicopters that had night vision capability were also made available as well, but it's the incident commander on the ground who has to make the decision.

Deryck, do you want to elaborate on that?

Mr. Deryck Trehearne (Director General, Government Operations Centre, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): I'm happy to be here. I'm Deryck Trehearne from the government operations centre.

The minister is correct. Those decisions were made by the incident commander, and there was a unified command that was set up there with the municipality, the province and Parks Canada as well. They make those calls. There were no shortages of water bombers or equipment across the country this summer. We had a very significant fire season, which I'm happy to speak about at length, but there were no major gaps in availability of either firefighters or equipment.

We saw fires across the country, starting in the east and moving west. The west obviously got 60% or 70% of the fires this year, but Alberta, Saskatchewan, B.C. and others have some of the strongest emergency management agencies in the country and have significant assets at their disposal.

Those are decisions that are made on the ground, but we never saw any shortages during the season.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: I have just one quick last question about the prescribed burns versus mechanical clearing, because I think that was the decision being discussed by the Minister of Environment.

I understand 1,700 hectares were cleared. Would everybody who was fighting or preparing, who lived in Jasper and the area, have been involved in making those decisions about whether to do more and whether it would be done through burns, given the heat, or through mechanical clearing? Who would have made those decisions?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Our focus was on the emergencies, making sure that the resources were there.

Obviously Parks Canada can explain. However, I can tell you about the briefing that all of us received when we were on the ground. What I looked at, especially, was also from Alberta Wild-fire service. They were also there. The preparation made was actually quite extensive, and that situation would have been worse.

When it comes to the management of fire-smarting, decisions about the best way to do it have to be made by a community. I'll give you an example. Yes, controlled burns are done, but at the same time, in the Yukon, through their preparations they moved it mechanically and turned it into more of an economic opportunity.

Each community has to decide how they want to do it, but let's not forget that the vegetation—what needs to grow and how it

needs to be done—are also dependent on each area across the country as well.

• (1650)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Taylor Roy.

Ms. Pauzé, you now have the floor.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: I want to thank all the witnesses for joining us.

We need to understand what happened so that it doesn't happen again in other places, such as in our area. The events that took place affect everyone.

Minister, public safety is your specialty. Public safety is now confronted with multiple risks tied to the impact of global warming. I think that you touched on this topic in your remarks. A devastating event took place in a populated area that may face another major event in the future.

The document provided by the Library of Parliament analysts, whom I want to thank, refers to the testimony given to this committee last February by John Pomeroy, a distinguished professor and scientist. He said that this year's drought was alarming. He also said that the snowpack was 70% below average and that last year saw record glacier melt. He added that groundwater levels had never been so low, that water reservoirs in the Rockies were five metres lower than they should have been and that the level of some reservoirs was so low that municipalities couldn't draw water from them through their pipes and had to truck in water instead.

I think that this really illustrates the fact that climate change is upon us. We always hear that it's a few years away, but it isn't. It's here.

We should also keep in mind the mountain pine beetle.

How could the department provide room to manoeuvre and take concrete action in the years ahead?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, what I can tell you is that the mitigation and the fire-smarting are done by other departments. My role is to respond to the emergency, but what I can tell you is about the mayor of Jasper. He explained to us thoroughly that this was the number one concern, and they have been working on this for decades. The fire-smarting that has been done was done very professionally, and everything that they could do was being done.

When it comes to the pine beetles and the drought, we made it very clear from early on, as we were giving updates from the forecasts we were seeing, that it was going to be a devastating, very hot summer. In British Columbia, we dealt with the mountain pine beetle situation well before, and we've been dealing with a lot of these things. Sadly, in British Columbia, where I'm from, there have been a lot of wildfire situations that have been dealt with, and different fire-smarting has been done there.

Yes, there's a lot of work that needs to be done across the country, working with the provinces and territories, but I can't give you the exact answer on—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Thank you for your response. I'll stop you there, since I have two more questions for you.

In your opinion, what challenges has Public Safety Canada successfully overcome in Jasper?

What issues can be mitigated or avoided so that this doesn't happen again or so that the situation is less critical next time?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: When we visited, there were deeper lessons learned on Jasper. According to the forecast of where the winds and where the fire would potentially come from, all the fire-smarting was done, but we were told that the winds were higher than they had ever faced before. That was the reason for the pine cones and the dust. On the ground itself, which people got to see alongside the premier, there were trees that were knocked over because of the wind.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Yes, however—

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What can we do? In this case, in Jasper—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: What was done well?

What were the operation's successes and what could be improved in the future?

• (1655)

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The best is always, first of all, preparation. If a fire were to come, how do you prepare for it? In this case here, we were told by the experts on the ground that the fire itself was so enormous that there was nothing that could have been done at that time. Climate change and the extreme winds that they've never seen before had that impact.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Okay.

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The only thing that you can do is ask yourself whether you have a good evacuation plan and whether you have the right preparation in place. All of those things were being

done. What needs to be done is to ask what they would do as new preparation if they had to face wind patterns that were different.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Basically, if we wanted to, we could copy your preparedness measures and paste them in other parts of Canada.

Is that right?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I would say that one area can learn from another, but you can't copy and paste, because each area is going to be very different. For example, the fire that took place in Enterprise, Northwest Territories was very different, because a lot of the fire was actually going underground. West Kelowna was different.

Does Deryck, or anybody else, want to add into this? It's not my expertise.

Trevor, do you want to?

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: On preparations, at a macro level, there are a number of strategies in emergency management that Trevor can speak to as well. However, for us, the preparation for this season began last year. These have been the worst five years in emergency management in Canadian history.

The Chair: Thank you. I have to stop you there, unfortunately.

We'll go to Ms. Collins. Maybe Ms. Collins will let Mr. Trehearne finish. I don't know. It's up to her. There's no pressure.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to start with the minister.

We are in a climate emergency, and the Jasper fires highlight how this crisis is impacting everything that we hold dear.

I have formative memories of my time in Jasper, hiking and visiting friends who were working in tourism and hospitality there. I was in complete awe of the beauty and the power of that place.

These events are happening more frequently. They're going to get more severe. The area burned in 2023 was more than six times the historic average.

New Democrats have been calling for the establishment of a national firefighting force to deal with future wildfire emergencies. In my province of B.C., like in Alberta, we are dealing with multi-year droughts, which make wildfires even more likely.

We wrote to you calling for a \$1-billion watershed security fund. These two policies could protect watersheds, prevent disasters and tackle wildfires. I'm curious why your government hasn't implemented them.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, you're absolutely right: We do need to do more. It's a matter of how we do it and making sure that it's the appropriate action that we take, because in every single year we have been dealing with an increased severity of wildfires and also other emergencies.

First and foremost, what we wanted to do... How we manage emergencies across Canada is based on the fact that the majority of resources are managed through the provinces and territories. Then we, as a federal government, provide additional resources if the resources have been exhausted.

The first thing that we have done here is to add additional firefighters. We have trained about 1,000 firefighters, as well as training supervisors via the incident command system. First and foremost, we want to make sure that the additional resources can be utilized immediately.

Second, we are looking at options at the federal level of what we need to do, but we want to make sure that what we do actually complements the work that's going to be happening on the ground, and that work is ongoing.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Minister, given the urgency and scale of the crisis that we face, there's kind of a wait-and-see attitude. When it comes to addressing wildfire emergencies, implementing a national firefighting force and protecting our watersheds, that is short-sighted.

However, I do want to ask you a question.

Over the past year, the residents of Fort Chipewyan have been raising the alarm. They still do not have a working dock or a way to safely escape the community in the case of a wildfire.

Today the nations of Athabasca Chipewyan, Mikisew and Fort Chipewyan Métis released a really shocking statement, stating that they were shocked to learn that your government concealed the existence of a federally contaminated site around the Transport Canada dock, known locally as the "big dock".

It's used to hunt and to trap. Local children learn to swim there. It is incredibly shocking and appalling that the information that there was a contaminated site there from 2017 was hidden from this community.

I'm wondering if you can speak to that, and also speak to the fact that they need a way to escape if there's a wildfire.

• (1700)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: To address your first question, I just want to let you know that we're not waiting; we're actually working with the provinces to make sure that the resources are there.

To your other point that you—

Ms. Laurel Collins: [*Inaudible—Editor*] you've only got a—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: To the other point you raised, one is that we work very closely with the other departments, especially Indigenous Services, on this. I'm not aware of the dock situation. Our team will take a look at it and see if our department has a role that we need to play, but we will work with them if we can get more information on this and get back to you.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Well, just so you know, in the spring the community had been facing historically low water levels and there were three wildfires that happened within two kilometres of the airports. They have been asking your government to dredge the dock and to make sure there is an emergency egress there, but the government refused.

Now they have found out, from a third party, that the reason is that there is a contaminated site the community was unaware of and that the government did not disclose. This is appalling. It is, in my opinion, an example of environmental racism, and I hope the government will connect with the community and be held accountable. This is completely unacceptable.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I think Andrew has more information that he can provide on this.

Mr. Andrew Campbell (Senior Vice-President, Operations, Parks Canada Agency): Yes.

Mr. Chair, I was just up in Fort Chipewyan and met with all three nations: the Fort Chipewyan Métis Nation, the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and the Mikisew Cree First Nation. The minister was there with us. They did—

Ms. Laurel Collins: When you were there—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: They did raise the issue.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Chatel.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: When there are many interruptions, I can't hear the interpreters properly.

The Chair: Okay.

We can keep going, but we could give the time—

[*English*]

Ms. Laurel Collins: Maybe, Mr. Chair, just because I have only 30 seconds of my time left—

The Chair: Actually, you have 40 seconds.

Ms. Laurel Collins: —I just wanted to make sure that the official answers.

They deserve answers. The contamination was withheld from them. If you met with them, if the government met with them very recently and did not disclose that, that feels even more appalling.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Well, we did discuss it when we were there—that there could be federal contamination—and we said that we would look into it and have, but I think your other question was on evacuation routes, and there was a commitment made between ourselves, the Alberta government—

Ms. Laurel Collins: No—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Sorry—you asked about if the dock could be used for emergency evacuation, and I'm just trying to answer that question.

We did say that an all-season road should be something that—

Ms. Laurel Collins: If I could just continue—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Sorry—

Ms. Laurel Collins: If you don't mind pausing on what you've said, the site was deemed contaminated as early as 2017, according to the statement from these three nations. Your government deemed it contaminated years ago, so...

The Chair: Our time is up, unfortunately.

We'll go to the second five-minute round. It's Mr. Lloyd who is leading off.

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Thank you, Minister.

You're experienced with disasters, Minister. You're a former military man. I'd like to get your perspective. I'm going to ask you a direct question and I'd like to get a direct answer.

Knowing what you know now about what happened in Jasper, was it a mistake for the government not to conduct more mechanical clearing operations and more prescribed burns to protect the townsites of Jasper?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What I can tell you, and what I was briefed on, on the ground with the premier and the Alberta Wildfire service, is that everything that could have been done was done, and I believe Mayor Ireland can attest to that.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Minister, I think you're avoiding the question here.

I understand that Alberta Emergency Management and the town may have done everything they could have done in terms of FireSmart and in terms of positioning emergency response equipment to react to a fire once it happened, but I'm asking about what happened before that, in the years before the fire started, in the years since 2017, when Ken Hodges and other scientists warned your government that not taking action on mechanical clearing and prescribed burns to protect the Town of Jasper was setting up the Town of Jasper for a catastrophe.

Knowing what you know now, Minister, and with your extensive experience, will you say whether or not it was a mistake for Parks Canada not to more extensively clear the forest and use prescribed burns to protect the Town of Jasper?

• (1705)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The only thing I can tell you is what I have been briefed on when we were involved with the emergency. What we were briefed on, on the ground, with the premier and other ministers, is that everything that could have been done was done. In fact, if the preparation hadn't taken place, the whole town could have been lost.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Well, Minister, we could have avoided the town being burned down at all if we had taken extensive action to clear the dead pine beetles that scientists warned your government needed to be cleared in order to prevent the fire in Jasper.

I'm asking you, Minister, one last time. You saw it with your own eyes. You saw what happened. Are you not willing to admit that

clearing more forest and using more prescribed burns could have prevented the Town of Jasper from being burned down?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What we will be doing is going through a lessons learned exercise to determine the lessons we can learn to apply not only for that area but also for the rest of the country as well.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Minister, it's pretty shocking that you won't give a direct answer to that question, but I will move on to my next question.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: I have a point of order.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Hold my time, please.

The Chair: Yes.

We have Ms. Taylor Roy.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: I just find that the member opposite is questioning the minister's integrity by repeating that question and then—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: That's not true, but that's not a point of order.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: —questioning that again.

It's Standing Order 18, by the way.

The Chair: It's not a point of order, but let—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I appreciate the break, though. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Let's continue, but let's be respectful.

Go ahead.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you.

I'll move on to my next question, Minister.

You did talk about a time of reflection, and I think that is important, but we need not just to reflect: We need to take action.

I've been told by scientists and people on the ground that the Town of Jasper is still at significant risk, particularly to the north-west of town, where there still are significant stands of pine beetle-infested dead pine trees that pose a significant risk to the town.

What is Parks Canada doing immediately to prepare the Town of Jasper to face this risk so that we don't have a repeat of what we had this last summer?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can only answer for my portfolio.

What I can tell you is that we have learned from Fort McMurray, West Kelowna and Enterprise, and we try to share those lessons. We will be making sure that all the lessons that have been learned here will be applied not only to that area but to others.

What I have also been assured of is looking at what else needs to be done. This is one thing I took away from Mayor Ireland, who has personally had to deal with the devastation of losing his own home and the work that needs to be done. They—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Minister, I'll have to cut you off because I've given you some time there.

What needs to be done is that we need to start clearing these trees and we need to take action to prevent the fires from hitting Jasper and other towns in the Rocky Mountain national parks and our other national parks that are at risk.

I'll move on to my next question, Minister.

From the way you're speaking here at the committee, I think it would be more appropriate if your ministry was the ministry of emergency response, because I'm not seeing a lot of preparedness from your government.

What role did you take in the years and the months leading up to this Jasper fire to prepare Jasper and other towns and national parks, which are under federal jurisdiction, for the threat of wildfires? As Minister of Emergency Preparedness, what did you do?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As to our role in emergency preparedness, one of the things we do is look at, one, the prediction of where potentially fires can take place. We made that information available as far as possible.

The other aspect, one of the things we prepare, is making sure that evacuees get what they need in support. That's one of the things that we also learned from last year, and the management workforce program played a very important role in that.

When it comes to the preparedness side, that's a responsibility shared with the provinces and the municipalities in being able to work together. I have been told—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you.

I only have 30 seconds left, Minister. I have given you some good time to answer that.

On what day did Alberta make a request for assistance with Jasper? What day did the request for assistance come to you?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Well, the actual first request that was made was actually not for Jasper. We were actually—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I'm asking for the one for Jasper specifically, though, Minister.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: But I need to....

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Okay.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm trying to explain to you how the situation took place. It wasn't just like one moment and then another.

When I was on the phone with Minister Ellis throughout the day, we were actually looking at providing support for northern Alberta, while literally at the same time the situation in Jasper was deteriorating. The actual.... We didn't even look at where the resources were going. We were dealing with Jasper, and then the decision was made during my visit to shift the resources, and that was their decision to make.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: What day, Minister?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What was the date on that?

The Chair: Thank you. The time's up. I'm sorry.

A voice: It was the 22nd of July.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. van Koeverden is next.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for joining us today.

I mean more than just thank you for joining us today; thank you for your work over the course of this very, very challenging wildfire season in Alberta and right across Canada.

Unlike the Conservatives, I want to commend you for your work and for the preparation you undertook. That work saved lives. I want to be very clear: The work undertaken by non-partisan officials, Parks Canada staff, firefighters, forestry workers and everybody who goes into those places to do that work saved lives, whether it was putting out a fire, creating an evacuation plan, talking to families or printing the literature and going door to door to make sure that families knew what the plan was.

I've found the over-politicization of this natural disaster over the last couple of meetings to be disgusting. It's a natural disaster impacted by human events like climate change. In this case, it wasn't impacted by arson. I believe we've heard that the wildfires were started by lightning, not by a campfire or a cigarette butt or something.

I've read what Mayor Ireland said. Mayor Ireland said they're devastated. He lost his childhood home, as you mentioned, Minister, the home of his whole life—but they can rebuild. They'll recover. Jasper will economically recover, because it's a place where everybody wants to go. It's beautiful.

We can't rebuild human lives. The work that was undertaken by your colleagues, by the staffs, by Parks Canada, by the Minister of Emergency Preparedness and everybody who focused on this problem, going years back, saved lives, so thank you.

A couple of years ago, we saw the same thing happen. We've been seeing the proliferation of wildfires, the lengthening of the seasons and the severity of the fires increasing because of climate change, because of drier forests, because of infestations and because of a lot of other factors, but we've also seen an over-politicization of these fires.

A couple of years ago, we saw Donald Trump blaming Governor Newsom for not clearing dead wood from the forest bed. I've spent time in forests before. I know what a 30,000-hectare forest looks like. It's an enormous undertaking to suggest that any large group of individuals would go out into the forest and clear all that dead wood. Forest management is important, but blaming forest management for wildfires and for natural disasters in the face of a climate crisis is absurd.

What's more absurd than that is when recently a Conservative member included the name of a non-partisan official, somebody who works in this field professionally, in a tweet. What happened subsequently was that this professional Canadian, dedicating their time and their career to keeping Canadians safe, received death threats as a result of that tweet from a Conservative member. I'm not going to bring names into this—they're not important—but that's what we get when we overly politicize natural disasters, when we take things out of context and when we try to score points off of people's lives, livelihoods and homes that have been lost. I want to call that out as being inappropriate, unacceptable and disgusting.

Minister, I find the over-politicization of this natural disaster to be troubling, and I commend you on your cross-partisan work with Minister Ellis in Alberta. I was actually in Algonquin Park thinking about how beautiful it was when I heard on the radio that you were in Edmonton working with Minister Ellis. Thank you very much for that. On behalf of Canadians who love the outdoors and on behalf of Jasperites, thank you for the work you did that saved lives.

Minister, there is always more work to be done, as you said. What more can we do to prevent the over-proliferation of wildfires with that severity? What forest management techniques could be considered while we also undertake Canada's responsibility to mitigate climate change? We have such a responsibility to do so.

• (1710)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Absolutely. Thank you very much for the question.

In this portfolio especially, I make it a point, in any emergency I've dealt with or in conversations I've had, that we don't politicize. I work with many different provinces and various parties that are in government at this time. We work on dealing with the issue. If there's a concern, we deal with it directly. I have some very good relationships, especially with Alberta.

At the end of the day, climate change is having an impact. Whether you call it that or something else, reality is reality. It's going to hit. We all do need to be prepared for it, and that's what we have been doing. Based on what I saw in Jasper with Parks Canada and all the experts on the ground, all of them said—if you could have been there for that briefing—that they'd done everything in their power. It was Mother Nature. You could not have stopped what was coming—

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: —but yet there is work to be done all across the country.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Pauzé, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

We're here to talk about Bill C-76. We've talked a great deal about precautions and prevention.

Do you think that this bill will lead to more precautions and prevention measures to limit the impact of a potential fire?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes, I think Andrew can speak to that bill better than I can.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Under the bill, the minister could delegate certain powers to the municipality of Jasper, for example. The municipality could implement certain bylaws to improve the situation.

[*English*]

They could pass a bylaw that says there can be no—and the mayor had used this yesterday—cedar shakes on the roofs of homes in Jasper. They could put in those sorts of things, which would help to not have the fire spread from the new homes to other places.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Okay.

Bill C-76 is an additional tool to help take action in time.

Geolocation is also quite a powerful tool. Access to specific information on soil and weather conditions could provide an incentive to set up a protocol for immediate action.

Isn't that crucial in the event of a fire?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: We and our colleagues at the Government Operations Centre are looking at the type of tools that we could use. We've done this with Environment and Climate Change Canada. The department currently has a contract until it can acquire its own satellites for Canada, in order to obtain as much information as possible.

[*English*]

In fact, at the GOC meeting this week we just had a presentation on that very system.

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: I'm happy to jump in.

We have a number of initiatives. Environment Canada has installed a supercomputer to do risk assessments. NRCan, Natural Resources Canada, also has huge scientific satellite arrays that they focus on these issues, and we point out those high-risk areas. Those were all shared with the provinces, starting in February and March of this year.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madam Collins is next.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to follow up on the serious issues that I was raising.

Putting aside the fact that Transport Canada failed to notify this community about a contaminated site, it bears repeating that there is a children's playground close by and that children are playing in that water. This is seven years after Transport Canada was privy to the information that they failed to disclose the findings of the reports included in the Millennium EMS Solutions study.

One of the calls that the nations are asking for is to immediately present a plan and funding to allow for the evacuation by water of Fort Chipewyan in the event of a natural disaster, a wildfire, while the remediation and repair work that needs to happen is undertaken to install a temporary dock. I'm wondering if the minister can commit to do this for this community and make sure they are safe in the event of these kinds of wildfires.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What we'll do is definitely, now that we're aware of this, is work with Indigenous Services on how we can best help.

Each community needs to take a look at how best to evacuate. This has been a concern for us. We have also been trying to determine and predict what resources we would need if there were fires in certain areas where there was no road access, and then we'll add more resources.

Deryck, you want to add to that?

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: Yes. We're going—

Ms. Laurel Collins: Just before you to jump in, I just want to add that I sat down with leaders from this community not too long ago, and they talked about how they've already been evacuated, and they know that if the wind is blowing, air evacuation is not possible, so having water evacuation as a possibility is critical.

• (1720)

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: Yes, I'm happy to speak to that.

Indigenous Services Canada spends an enormous amount of money, effort and time working with communities to support them in every way possible. If there's an issue here, I'm sure they'll be looking at that, especially when it comes to egress and fires.

There is a study under way with them that we are working on for high, remote, fly-in-only communities to make sure they have multiple ways of getting out.

We had a significant evacuation of a first nation—the Buni-
bunibee—in Manitoba this year, where we evacuated 2,700 first
nations with the CAF's help—

Ms. Laurel Collins: In my last 15 seconds or so, I just want to impress upon the minister the importance of dealing with this issue of talking to the Minister of Transport as well as to the Minister of Environment to ensure that you address the environmental racism that has happened here.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Calkins is next.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I want to give you a heads-up that I'm very familiar with Jasper National Park, so I'm going to be asking you some fairly specific questions.

In your opening remarks, you said that the Government of Canada “left no stone unturned” when it came to preparing for the fire that destroyed almost a billion dollars' worth of personal prop-

erty, left a couple of thousand people homeless and resulted in the death, unfortunately, of a brave firefighter.

I don't believe that the statement you made in your opening remarks is actually true. We're—

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Who called the point of order?

Go ahead, Ms. Taylor Roy.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Standing Order 18 on order and decorum does say that remarks “which question a Member's...integrity”, including a minister, are not allowed.

I think that what that member just said directly questioned the minister's integrity.

The Chair: Yes. I wouldn't maybe be as direct as you were about that, Mr. Calkins, but you can continue.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I suppose in the quest for the truth, then, Minister, I take umbrage with the comment that you made.

The Chair: That's much better.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The “no stone unturned” comment is frustrating for me, because I am acutely aware of efforts that have been made.

You referred to private sector partners. Are you aware, Minister, that private sector partners were actually en route to Jasper and were actually turned away from coming to do fire suppression in the town of Jasper?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, to your accusation, that is actually wrong, because when I said “no stone unturned”, at that time I was talking about the emergency preparedness—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: —for the overall country, and what we were—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Let's explore that.

The Chair: Please, Mr. Calkins—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Mr. Chair, I've been very polite in trying.... Either I answer or I don't answer.

The Chair: —I'm interested to know what the minister's answer is, so Minister—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm trying to clarify, if you're accusing me of something.... What I was talking about is that from previous wildfires, we've been working on trying to learn the lessons from there and trying to share those across the country. That's when it comes to “no stone unturned”. It's obviously impossible for us to look at every single community across the country.

When it comes to those resources, yes, I can assure you that it was not the case. I spoke directly with Minister Ellis about this, and that was not the case. When those concerns were raised, they were addressed on the ground during the visit itself.

All of us.... As the minister responsible for emergency preparedness, we were there when they said that this was not an actual issue. Any resources that were needed were made available, and as we were briefed, they were put to use by the incident commander.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: On your comments, also, about saying that no fire team could have stopped it, if my allegation is actually true that fire suppression private sector partners were actually turned away en route to Jasper, how would you know if these folks wouldn't have been able to stop it at all? They have a very clear track record. As a matter of fact, they're under contract with the Province of Alberta. The Province of Alberta would not have stopped this company from coming into Jasper.

The fire started four days before it reached the town. It sat on somebody's desk. This company had years of negotiations with Parks Canada on fire suppression. They have mobile devices that can be deployed to this. They have told me specifically that they were turned around. As a matter of fact, they show on the video, on the footage of the news, where their fire suppression units were turned around.

Minister, are you very sure in what you're telling me right now that no stone was left unturned and that nobody who could have prevented the fire in Jasper from destroying those buildings was turned away? Are you sure?

• (1725)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, when it comes to the management of the fire, the incident commanders on the ground make the calls.

Also, when I was with Minister Ellis.... I think you also need to speak with Minister Ellis if you really want to be sure, because at the same time, he was also directly involved. I would say that some of the accusations you are making—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I used the word “allegation”, Minister.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Sorry. That's my mistake.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: If we're going to be nice to each other, it goes both ways.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I apologize. I take that back.

No, that was looked at. That was one of the reasons I went to Edmonton, to work with Minister Ellis directly to make sure that if there was any confusion, it could be addressed very quickly.

The Chair: What is it, Mr. Calkins?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I didn't want to interrupt. I can do two things at once. I was listening to the minister. I was simply asking you how much time I have left.

The Chair: Oh, okay. You have 45 seconds.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Please carry on, Minister.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: One of the key things was about what happens to the requests that come in. The incident commander on the ground is making decisions. We needed to make sure that the Alberta provincial operations centre had the right people. We actually, in speaking with Parks Canada, inserted people into their operations centre so that the appropriate people could make the appropriate decisions based on the resources on the ground.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Minister, will you undertake to provide to this committee all documents pertaining to the procurement of equipment, as well as contracts with private sector partners, relating to the fire suppression and mitigation in Jasper National Park since 2017?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Just to clarify here, the province is in charge of the management of the resources. We provide resources in addition to Parks Canada—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The Government of Alberta does not run—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: —and then we also provide—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: —the national parks, Minister.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm just telling you what was taking place on the ground. I'm sure Parks Canada can provide the appropriate information.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Will you undertake to make sure that those documents are provided to the committee?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can't give you that, because I am the Minister of Emergency Preparedness, right? I don't have the authority to provide any of that type of work. We can only provide documents based on what my responsibility is.

The Chair: We'll go now to Madame Chatel.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you.

I was a bit shocked to hear that some public servants received death threats as a result of tweets from Conservative members of Parliament. Every member of Parliament bears the responsibility of protecting all Canadians. Public servants are Canadians too, and many of them live in my constituency.

I would like to ask the members of Parliament to be careful when posting tweets. I know that they like to play with this toy. However, sometimes, it can be serious.

[*English*]

Minister, what do you make of some of the claims we've heard in the House of Commons by a Conservative that fighting climate change actually will do nothing to stop wildfires?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I would say that right now, in our country and the rest of the world, climate change is having a devastating impact. We need to fight it. If the situation gets worse, how does our preparation end up keeping up with Mother Nature? We have a responsibility. It's going to be too late if we don't end up fighting climate change.

Just look at the last 10 years. Canadians are seeing towns that are being completely evacuated. Our towns are being burned. People are being devastated by this. We have to fight climate change. If we don't do as much as we can, just imagine the pattern that we're seeing now getting worse.

My worry is that we will run out of resources, and then what will we do? Last year was a perfect example. Fortunately, we had a lot of international firefighters. We are adding more firefighters as needed.

In addition to wildfires, we're dealing with not just regular floods with atmospheric rivers; one of the bigger concerns I have right now is actually flash flooding because of climate change. To add even greater complexity to it, in places where the ground has been burned four or five feet deep into the ground, with additional rain you now have an additional flood risk as well.

This whole situation will be compounded even further. We do need to do our part to fight climate change. Otherwise, let's put it this way: By the time certain people realize it, it will be too late.

• (1730)

[Translation]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: We may be the first generation to experience such dramatic climate change. We may also be the last generation that can take action to address it. I heard your colleague say that this was the worst fire season ever and that you were already preparing for next year. I'm quite concerned about this.

I'll focus on the town of Jasper and the next steps. We have a disaster financial assistance program. I want to make sure that the town can access that funding. Fortunately, given the joint efforts of federal, provincial and municipal authorities, we saved lives.

That said, the town must be rebuilt. Will this program work for Jasper?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes. The disaster financial assistance arrangements does apply, and it will be working through the province for any resources. We have provided the mayor and their team with staff who can provide additional information on how the disaster financial assistance arrangements work.

The Province of Alberta already has a good track record on how that's going to work. We had some discussions on this, and we'll provide any additional resources to make sure they have the full breadth of the information on that.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Okay. Can you confirm that the funding application has been received and approved?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes. As to how it works, it's an ongoing process. We have received a letter and we'll be working with them, but absolutely, Jasper does qualify for the disaster financial assistance arrangements.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: How much does this program cost the federal government?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Because of different disasters, we're up to about \$7 billion right now already, since its inception, but most of that has been paid out for the last 10 years.

That said, just keep in mind all the different disasters that have taken place. In some cases, the advance payment has gone. Some of this work will take years, so the true cost has not even fully matured just yet. It will be much, much higher than \$7 billion.

The Chair: Thank you.

That completes our first hour.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us, answering questions and providing some clarity on what happened during that terrible disaster.

I believe the officials will be staying with us for another hour to answer further questions. We will continue with two more rounds. We will be able to get in two more.

Again, Minister, thank you. It's always nice to see you.

The third round is a five-minute round. We're only doing five-minute rounds. We have Mr. Leslie, who is...

Actually, while we have a changeover here, in terms of the schedule on October 9, we're planning on doing perhaps two hours on the Jasper National Park fires, but we only have one hour scheduled because we don't have enough witness suggestions. We're missing witness suggestions from the Liberals and the Bloc, I believe. If we don't get more suggestions for witnesses, we'll do one hour on the Jasper fires on October 9 and one hour on the sustainable finance study.

I would ask that any witness suggestions from the Bloc or the Liberals arrive at the clerk's desk or by email by 5:00 p.m. this Friday.

Go ahead, Madame Pauzé.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pausé: Mr. Chair, you spoke about October 9. I noted that we would do two hours on Bill C-76 on October 7, and one hour on sustainable finance and one hour on Bill C-76 on October 9, regardless. There weren't two hours—

The Chair: We're an hour short. I believe that we wanted to do a total of six hours on our study of fires in Jasper National Park.

Ms. Monique Pausé: Yes. We wanted to hold three meetings.

The Chair: We've already talked about the topic for one hour. We'll do two hours on it today, and then another two hours on October 7.

Ms. Monique Pausé: Yes, and then one last hour on October 9.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Monique Pausé: That's what we noted.

The Chair: I misread the schedule. Sorry.

We'll move on to the third round.

Mr. Leslie, you have the floor for five minutes.

• (1735)

[English]

Mr. Brandon Leslie (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Campbell, I would like to start with our conversation last week that you had with my colleague regarding that email exchange with two of your employees. One said, and I quote:

At what point do we make the organizational decision to cancel planned prescribed burns in Western Canada? As more and more media articles raise public concern...public and political perception may become more important than actual prescription windows.

Have you reviewed the entirety of those email exchanges since we chatted last week?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Yes.

Mr. Brandon Leslie: Okay.

Now, you claimed that at the time that the email exchange was regarding a debate between mechanical clearing and prescribed burns—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: That's correct.

Mr. Brandon Leslie: —but we have a copy of the ATIP here, multiple pages—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Yes.

Mr. Brandon Leslie: —and there is no evidence to back up that statement. There's no mention of “mechanical”.

That was, to me, a very misleading statement. I would offer you, first, the opportunity to clarify, now that you have read that particular transcript that was publicly released by the environment minister's office, and the opportunity to explain what that possibly meant.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: It means exactly what I said. There was a discussion between them on two different approaches, one being mechanical and the other being prescribed burns.

Mr. Brandon Leslie: So—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Mr. Leslie, if you could....

Mr. Brandon Leslie: Go ahead.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: We had earlier in that day, or the day before, a meeting of my operations managers. In that meeting of the operations managers, there was a discussion around the number of politicians at the local level and the number of articles across the country and in every type of publication. It was around the public saying that they were losing faith in people starting fires, prescribed burns—

Mr. Brandon Leslie: So—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Just wait—

Mr. Brandon Leslie: I have limited time, Mr. Campbell.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: If can finish on that, though, on that.

That began the process. Then they had the discussion—

Mr. Brandon Leslie: Okay—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: I'll just ask you a question back, because the question might be to me—

Mr. Brandon Leslie: That is not how this works. You do not ask me questions. I ask you questions.

The Chair: Wait. I think there is a bit of.... We're not—

Mr. Brandon Leslie: Mr. Campbell, the evidence....

Could you table the briefing, the minutes of that meeting—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: We don't take minutes.

Mr. Brandon Leslie: —and any exchanges on WhatsApp, Signal or any other platform you use to try to clarify the evidence?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: We don't take minutes.

Mr. Brandon Leslie: The ATIP we got does not back up what you were—

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Order.

We're just going to pause. This is getting a little too argumentative.

Go ahead, Mr. van Koeverden.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: My point of order pertains to hostility, which leads to unsafe working conditions for both translators and officials, as we've seen.

A literal death threat came to a Canadian government official—

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: They are non-partisan workers, by the way.

Mr. Brandon Leslie: [Inaudible—Editor]

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Nobody here is on trial. The work of these individuals is to save lives.

The Chair: I do want to focus on the health of the interpreters.

When there is intense arguing like that, they can't hear and they can't interpret, and it's probably not great for their hearing.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Precisely.

The Chair: Ms. Collins, do you have a point of order too?

Ms. Laurel Collins: Yes.

I just want to raise the point that I really don't want to see any badgering of witnesses, but I do think it is important to acknowledge that the time we have to question is our time. Maybe the witnesses could be reminded that when a member is interrupting, it's often because we have a limited amount of time. Perhaps you could just pause and let us jump in to redirect, as it is our time to ask the questions.

The Chair: I would agree with you, Ms. Collins, but I also think the witness has to be given an opportunity to answer the question.

At any rate, why don't we try again? I'll restart the clock. I don't know where we were. Was it Mr. Campbell who was answering or Mr. Leslie who was asking?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Mr. Leslie can....

The Chair: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Leslie.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Thank you, Mr. Campbell.

I'll pick up where I left off. I'll get into the quotes from the ATIP that was released publicly by your department to the public. This is not some sort of nefarious thing that we've unleashed; it was publicly released under ATIP under access to information, and it was regarding political purposes.

One participant in that debate disagreed. They said they hope we don't get into a blanket shutdown. Prescribed burns are important for both ecological and risk reduction reasons.

It gets better. That employee said that it is critical to continue those kinds of burns because when Parks Canada falls behind, it is very difficult to catch up.

I'll ask a very straightforward question: Did you ever inform the minister that one of your employees, or perhaps a group of you in a closed-door meeting without minutes or notes, was contemplating ending prescribed burns due to political perceptions, as per this ATIP?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Nope.

Mr. Branden Leslie: You did not inform the minister of that, so he had no chance of knowing that Parks Canada was unilaterally making these decisions.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Again, there was a discussion, and it came up.

The question that I would love to answer is this: Did we cancel a single prescribed burn in that year? The answer is no.

• (1740)

Mr. Branden Leslie: Here's a question I'd like to ask, then. Did you, in your view, do enough prescribed burns—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: So was I in any of those—

The Chair: Mr. Campbell, I—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mrs. Chatel.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Mr. Leslie, would it be possible—

The Chair: You'll need to address your comments to the chair, Mrs. Chatel.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Mr. Chair, could my colleague, Mr. Leslie, take a deep breath and let the witness answer his question?

The Chair: Mr. Campbell answered the question. Mr. Leslie has the floor.

Mr. Leslie, go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. Branden Leslie: I will take a deep breath. Thank you to my colleague across the way.

I'll ask for a yes-or-no answer. Do you think it's appropriate that Parks Canada considered giving greater weight to political perceptions as opposed to the proven science when it comes to protecting communities from devastating burns like we saw in Jasper?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: No.

Mr. Branden Leslie: It is not appropriate that you are weighing political decisions. Is that an accurate assessment?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: It is not appropriate that we would weigh a political decision more than science. That's the question you asked me.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Why did you?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: We didn't because we continued with all of the prescribed burns that we had planned, full stop.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Did Parks Canada undertake an adequate number of prescribed burns in addition to the mechanical removal of dead wood that the department, Parks Canada, had been notified about for eight years as being a huge problem, a tinderbox waiting to explode—that it was not a matter of if but a matter of when? Do you think, honestly, with a straight face, that Parks Canada did enough in the lead-up to prevent this from happening?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Did we take every prescribed burn in every year in every burn window that we had available to us since 2014? Absolutely.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Do you think it was enough?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Did we do 6.4 million dollars' worth of mechanical removal in and around the cut blocks around Jasper prior to 2024? Yes, we did that.

Your next question was whether it was enough.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Yes.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: It's always hard to say—and I will say this—that it is ever enough. We do as much as we can in the control windows that we have, so there is—

Mr. Branden Leslie: Could you do more if you had more funding?

The Chair: Okay, the time is up.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Is there a lack of funding available for this?

The Chair: The time is up.

We'll go to Mr. Ali.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here today, and I apologize for the way you've been treated here by my colleagues. This is a committee. We ask questions, and you respond to those questions. If you're not given an opportunity to respond to the questions, I don't think there's a point in asking questions.

First of all, I want to give you an opportunity to respond to those questions asked by my colleague, if you have any questions to respond to, so that you can give your side of the story, please.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: I'm happy with the responses I gave to Mr. Leslie. I'll turn it, though, to my colleague, Ms. Upton, to further elaborate.

Ms. Darlene Upton (Vice-President, Protected Areas Establishment and Conservation, Parks Canada Agency): Yes, I can just give a few statistics.

I have a list of over 14 projects from 2018 in Jasper related to mechanical tree removal, as well as prescribed burns that have been going on. We do, on average, about 12 to 13 prescribed burns per year in Parks Canada. We plan for those. We have a directive. Each site has fire management plans and outlines its prevention and fire reduction strategies. That includes prescribed burns. Those are planned for annually at the local level, with support from the national level.

We take every opportunity we can. Prescribed fires, however, are dependent on particular conditions—like prescriptions, to be correct—in order to light those fires. That has become more challenging recently with the fire season starting earlier and going longer. Prescribed fires take place in the spring and the fall. We've invested a lot of money, and we've had an additional \$52 million over five years to help us continue to do more work on the prevention side, as well as the suppression side.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you.

How did the lessons learned process from the 2023 wildfire season aid in the preparation and mitigation measures for this wildfire season?

Anyone can answer that.

• (1745)

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: I'm happy to elaborate.

As everyone recalls, last year was the single worst fire season in Canadian history by any number of measures, such as smoke. There were 200,000 folks evacuated. We had 15 million hectares burned. We had 5,000 international firefighters arrive to help us, so last year, obviously, was very significant. The implications of that for a repeat this year were not lost on anyone.

Our colleagues at Environment and Climate Change Canada and NRCan predicted, unfortunately, that the drought conditions we're seeing in the west—pervasive drought, pervasive heat—were going to continue this year. The only variable that can change is the amount of precipitation.

Therefore, very late in the season last year when the fires started to die down, which was October, which is extremely unusual—and, as you'll recall, there were 100 fires that continued burning underground under snow, which we call zombie fires, in B.C. and the Northwest Territories—we took lessons learned and started very early last fall. It was a national consultation. We talked to every province, to CIFFC, to NRCan and to indigenous groups, and we came up with a series of lessons learned that we presented to the government in the fall. We also then accelerated everything we do in terms of preparation for this year.

Normally, we go to cabinet in May with a risk assessment that's provided by the best available science, federally and provincially. That happened, I believe, in March of this year. To bring that science up by three months is a very difficult thing to do, and we did that. We engaged every province. We know that CIFFC and others looked for international assistance much earlier than normal.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: I have a couple more questions.

I wanted to ask about the people who are making decisions on fire suppression. Do they live in that community, and would they be affected by the wildfires?

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: If you're talking about Jasper, go ahead, Mr. Campbell.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: The person responsible for wildfire management, the person responsible for vegetation reduction and the person responsible for the FireSmart program all live in the town. Two of those individuals lost their homes.

When you live in a town and your family lives in a town and when your life is in that town, I have a hard time imagining the motivation of anybody not to do everything possible in order to protect your town.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to Madame Pauzé.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have the floor for two and a half minutes, Ms. Pauzé.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Okay, thank you.

The growing threat of forest fires means that we need the opinions of a number of people, a number of experts. The people around the table must have a great deal of knowledge. We've heard a lot about trees and controlled burning, for example. I would like to hear about structures. We heard that some people lost their homes.

Have people been brought together around a table to discuss structures, equipment, services, systems and protocols? There are also other concerns, such as the insurance implications for a public or private structure. Everything is at risk these days.

Have people been brought together to discuss distance requirements, for example, or to start a review of protection systems in urban and suburban areas?

[English]

Mr. Trevor Bhupsingh (Assistant Deputy Minister, Emergency Management and Programs Branch, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Thanks very much for the question.

[Translation]

The question is quite important.

[English]

It's an integrated committee, with federal government representatives, the province and also the municipality. It's set up to govern, now that we're out of the response and into the recovery, and to deal with all the issues that you just mentioned in terms of the recovery aspects, whether it is to build back better the structures or whether it is to discuss issues around assistance.

With respect to the federal government and Public Safety Canada, the disaster financial assistance arrangements were mentioned earlier. Those discussions are taking place there.

I want to assure you that there is a governance structure that has been formally set up, and discussions are taking place around all of the issues of recovery that are going on there.

Again, it's ongoing. It's early days as we move into the recovery in Jasper—

• (1750)

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: We always hear that people work in isolation. It's time to overcome this isolation and get people around the table to discuss the best approaches for forests and structures.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Collins, you have the floor.

[English]

Ms. Laurel Collins: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the officials for being here.

I am thinking about the people who were evacuated and thinking about what it must have been like to have to flee and then return to their community devastated by the wildfires. I think we all need to come together to support the town of Jasper and the rebuilding process.

Can you talk a little more about the rebuilding of the town of Jasper and the consideration of the option of a firebreak buffer zone, the space between the forest and the town?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: There already is a very large and significant firebreak around the town of Jasper, much like there are large blocks— and in fact, the blocks are growing, and we need to have those blocks grow—around the town of Banff as well, and there is a firebreak between Banff and Lake Louise.

In the Mountain Park area, and certainly all across the country, as Ms. Upton had noted, we are making larger blocks. We are doing more prescribed burns and more mechanical removal all across the country because of exactly what you said.

Ms. Laurel Collins: We know poor air quality from wildfire smoke hits the most vulnerable the hardest. Oftentimes, they are seniors, children, pregnant people and people working outdoors. Smoke from larger and more frequent wildfires is having an impact on asthma, cancer and mental health.

I'm curious about this: In your emergency preparedness and disaster management, are you connecting with the after-impacts of

both post-traumatic stress and the clear impacts on health and well-being?

Mr. Trevor Bhupsingh: Yes, we are. The emergencies' impacts on people are of grave concern to us. We are doing a lot of work in terms of post-traumatic stress. We have some programs. I can turn to that in a second.

With respect to the smoke, we're connected with our colleagues in the health portfolio to talk about the impacts. When there are wildfires, we have data and information on smoke and just how bad it is. Some of the impacts of smoke are also communicated to the general public through health messaging.

We know it's an issue that has to be addressed.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Trevor Bhupsingh: Just to assure the member, Chair, yes, we are connected to the public health portfolio as part of our regular—

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Trevor Bhupsingh: —meetings, in terms of managing emergencies.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Chair. My question will be for Parks Canada.

My colleague Mr. Leslie was just asking about the emails, and we had a conversation about this last week.

If what you're saying is true, Mr. Campbell, why is there no record of any discussion of mechanical removal of trees in any of the information this committee received through the access to information request?

It would only seem reasonable to me. I'm a former Parks Canada and Alberta Parks person. I worked for the public service for most of my life prior to becoming a member of Parliament. I know exactly how these conversations go.

If what you're saying is true, it should be clearly outlined in a document. Why is it not in the document? You say it's about mechanical removal. There is nothing here that suggests to me that any conversation, at all, was happening about mechanical removal.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: I guess you'll have to look at what was in discussion at Parks Canada at that time. If you look, we always have a number of different techniques that we employ. That's what, in fact...

What Mr. Leslie read in the second email was from the head of the fire group, Tamaini Snaith. At that time, Dr. Snaith said, in fact, that we wouldn't be looking at that. For Darlene and myself—

• (1755)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I want to home in on one part of that conversation.

This sentence is very important, because we were just talking about firebreaks: "It is critical to continue those kind of burns. It is how they maintain the [community firebreak], and when they fall behind, it is very difficult to catch up."

Mr. Andrew Campbell: It is one of the methods of the community firebreak. I think we can all agree that mechanical removal is another method for creating firebreaks. What Dr. Snaith was saying was that we were still going to move ahead. That was the advice that came up to Darlene and me—that we would continue. That is what we agreed to. We would continue to do that.

Now, can I just—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Pardon me. Can I—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: —give you, in one second, one slight piece of context?

Is the individual who sent that somebody who had been evacuated for four weeks the year before and had just gone through a town council meeting—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: That's—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: —with Fort Smith? At the meeting, they questioned whether we should still be doing prescribed burns.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Yes.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: That's the political pressure he is discussing.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The reality is that we had a billion dollars' worth of assets burnt in town. The firebreaks did not work. The prescribed burn conversation made it very clear that there were political considerations and factors involved.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Can I just—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I haven't even asked my question yet, Mr. Campbell.

I mentioned this earlier, when Minister Guilbeault was here: The Excelsior fire had the wind blowing the other way. It would have come right down the Maligne Valley, and you would have had this problem 10 years earlier. The pine beetle infestation is leaving virtually every pine tree in Jasper National Park as standing as dead, dry firewood. It burns fiery hot. To say that you've never seen or couldn't expect a fire of this magnitude.... When somebody says that, I call BS. That's simply not true. You ought to know. Everybody knows. The people who live there know. People who live in the woods know. People who start campfires know that a dry, standing dead tree is exactly what you go and look for.

If people say that we've never seen trees blown down in a national park before, it is simply not true. I've ridden my horse through the Boundary Trail in Jasper National Park—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mrs. Chatel?

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: When somewhat vulgar words are used, the interpretation isn't very—

The Chair: Please continue, Mr. Calkins.

[*English*]

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

It's simply not true. I was a North Boundary warden in Jasper in 1995. I rode through the Welbourne blowdown. Swaths of trees were all blown down in the same direction. Winds go through the

mountain parks. They howl through the mountain parks. They howl through the mountain valleys. To suggest you don't know the wind is going to push the fire is simply not true.

I have several examples of private sector companies that were in discussions to provide relief and could have provided relief to the town, and they were either turned around or ordered to leave town instead of providing fire protection.

I want to know if you, Mr. Campbell—I asked the minister previously if he was going to be able to do this—will undertake to provide to this committee all documents pertaining to the procurement of equipment and private contractors, as well as anybody involved in fire suppression and fire suppression planning for Jasper National Park since 2017. Will you provide them to this committee within the next two weeks?

The Chair: We're way over the time.

We'll go to Mr. Longfield. Maybe he will ask Mr. Campbell to continue with that.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you, Chair

Again, thank you to the witnesses for stepping into the political arena here and trying to help us with our job, which is one of governance and making sure that questions are being asked. We're not the professionals who know whether mechanical removal or burns are the best decision of the day. We employ people to make those decisions based on their expertise.

For us to say we're experts, we're not experts. I've done a lot of canoeing and I've got lost a few times. I've missed a few portages. I know there's a lot of dry wood in any bush I've ever been lost in.

It reminds me of the conversations in the United States when Donald Trump was president, saying that in Finland, they go in with rakes. I'm trying to picture somebody with a rake trying to solve the problem. I think that's the problem when we politicize discussions like this. Non-experts are providing what they believe are expert opinions, so thank you for your expert opinions.

I mentioned Finland. Somehow, other countries are fighting the same challenges with the climate crisis, but they still provide firefighters to Canada. Could you describe what that process looks like? How do other countries pitch in? How does Canada pitch in when needed?

• (1800)

Ms. Darlene Upton: I'll start with the CIFFC.

The Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, which Parks Canada is a member of, is the coordinating body. It has three main goals: resource sharing, mutual aid and information sharing. We have a mutual aid resources sharing, or MARS, agreement with it. It provides equipment, personnel and aircraft. That is very well coordinated in Canada.

Parks Canada also has agreements with Australia, the United States and others for forest resources. Parks Canada forest firefighters have gone out and led firefighting incidents in the States and in Australia. There's a great deal of coordination within Canada for all these resources. They operate seamlessly. We all use a similar command system, so we speak the same language when it comes to an incident.

I'll stop there and allow my colleagues to add a little to it.

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: I think you covered it—

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I have one or two more questions, please.

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: Go ahead.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: No, please provide your details. That would be great.

Mr. Deryck Trehearne: Sure.

That's absolutely right. My colleague is spot on here.

Last year, as I said, we brought in about 5,500 international firefighters. Some of those were from countries that have never come here before, including South Korea, France, Spain, Portugal and others. NRCan helps partially fund CIFFC, which is made up of a consortium of all the provinces. CIFFC is a jewel in the crown here of forest firefighting in this country. It's a very small but powerful organization and has huge partners for us.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Could I dwell on that for two minutes? I don't have two minutes. I have one minute.

The mining sector in Canada is globally recognized as a centre of excellence. We provide mining expertise around the world. Mining crews from around the world also come to Canada to provide their expertise. When it comes to forestry, Canada and countries like Finland and countries with lots of forests are naturally going to be in the lead role. How does Canada stack up globally in terms of our forest management and our governance over forest management?

Maybe that's for Mr. Trehearne.

Ms. Darlene Upton: I'll just share from my perspective, being a member of a community of national parks internationally. I was actually in Finland this year.

We can always learn from each other, but Canada is looked to for its expertise. It's why we're able to seamlessly send resources to other countries and participate. Our forest management, our planning, is looked to from a national parks perspective, certainly, but we also look to learn from others as well.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Rather than blaming you, I want to be supporting you, and I appreciate the support you're giving us. I hope we can give you some in return.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Longfield.

We'll go to a final round. We'll make it a four-minute round. We'll start with Mr. Leslie.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to continue on a couple of topics that we've touched on.

First, my colleague here, Mr. Calkins, asked you, Mr. Campbell, about private firefighting services and whether or not they were allowed—more or less—to enter.

I will be tabling another witness, because we have received some really interesting information from the president of the Arctic Fire Safety Services, which hopefully you were engaged with, because there are some incredible accusations regarding Parks Canada's denial of their ability to enter the premises, particularly from park warden Scott Murphy from Parks Canada, in preventing them and suggesting that they would be escorted out or arrested if they were coming in to work.

First, are you familiar with this company at all?

• (1805)

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Absolutely not.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Okay. I look forward to having him join us as a witness so that we can hear a bit more about that, but going back to some of these emails that you are so firmly confident are either out of context or you can't provide any other context to them, would you be willing to table any conversations written down, in any way, that do back up the claim of what happened behind this closed-door meeting?

Could you table something that would alleviate my concern that this was in fact about political pressure, not about a debate of mechanical removal or prescribed burns? Is there anything you could provide me to ease my mind?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: I don't know what could ease your mind, and we do not take notes at my operations team meetings, full stop. I couldn't provide it for any meeting. We had one today, and I have no notes.

Mr. Branden Leslie: That's interesting.

Before a prescribed burn is carried out, who has the sign-off?

You mentioned the numbers. Who actually signs off at the ground level, and what is the time frame in that sign-off?

Ms. Darlene Upton: Prescriptions are written for prescribed burns. There's a planning at the beginning of the year. Then there's the actual planning that happens and there's a sign-off, but on the day of, it's signed off locally, based on the local factors, just to ensure that all the preconditions are met for the prescribed burn. It's signed off very soon before it's actually undertaken.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Since Minister Guilbeault has been appointed, are you aware of any times that he has asked specifically to understand the use of prescribed burns in Jasper and/or any other national parks, or has he been directly briefed on the repeated warnings since 2017 on the tinderbox waiting to burn? Has he been directly briefed, or has this document made it to his office? Does he have deniability that he has seen the documents, or has he actually been directly briefed?

Ms. Darlene Upton: During the fire season, the minister and the minister's staff are briefed regularly on the status, I assume.

Mr. Branden Leslie: They were aware of the repeated warnings of the tinderbox that was the deadwood in Jasper National Park.

Ms. Darlene Upton: I can't speak to that.

Mr. Branden Leslie: You don't think that was worthy of the minister's awareness?

Ms. Darlene Upton: That situation is replicable in a lot of places in Canada. It's....

Mr. Branden Leslie: Okay. I'm going to change directions here.

There was a Blacklock's article that came out in August about the department refusing to provide a piece of information that I'm hoping can be tabled, whether through Parks Canada and/or ECCC. That relates to how many hectares of dead pine are now left standing in Jasper National Park. I understand that there were small amounts of prescribed burns of 1,700 acres and some mechanical removals—

That's 1,700 hectares. I'm sorry.

I'd like to know how much is left now. I'm sure we have the technology to do a reasonable assessment. I don't need a specific number, but you wouldn't release that to the media in August. Will you table it with the committee so that we can have a real understanding?

Our “emergency response minister”—instead of preparedness minister—should probably be aware of how much deadwood still exists. Is that information that you can you share with this committee within the next week?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds. I'm really going to run the clock tight right now.

Ms. Darlene Upton: I'm not sure if we can have what you ask for in that time frame—

Mr. Branden Leslie: That seems like a problem to me.

Ms. Darlene Upton: No.

Mr. Branden Leslie: That's not a problem?

Ms. Darlene Upton: No.

The Chair: Ms. Taylor Roy, you have four minutes.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Campbell, we spoke earlier about the people who are on the ground in Jasper. I want to go back. There have been allegations and insinuations that not enough was done to prepare for and to deal with this fire, yet I've heard from you and from the minister that there was incredible collaboration between all levels of government and that the people on the ground were working really well together.

I'm just wondering if you feel that there was any lack of co-operation or collaboration, or do you have this impression that everyone on the ground was working together for the same goal?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: Yes, we had excellent collaboration on the ground.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Is there anything, learning from this experience, that you would have changed about the way that it was handled? I know you had the incident commander, and you had a lot of different parties working together under his command. Is there anything there that you would have changed?

Mr. Andrew Campbell: We've done the initial view of what has gone on, but we are going to do a deep dive with our colleagues within the Government Operations Centre on what we can learn.

There are always things to learn out of every situation. We would be foolish to say that there was nothing to learn or nothing to do better. We always do a post-review to learn, to do better.

• (1810)

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Great. Thank you. That's important.

Go ahead, Ms. Upton.

Ms. Darlene Upton: I would add that all of the prep and everything we do is based on the norms, the science and the data. What this fire has shown us is that there are things happening that are completely outside of the norm.

There are researchers now studying fire tornadoes. It's only been documented once. They believe it happened in Jasper. Will that, in the future, change how we prepare? Potentially it will, but these are new phenomena that we don't know a lot about. We can only prepare based on the best available data and by looking at where the values at risk are. There is deadwood in forests around the world. We can't clear it all, so we're focused on priority areas and risks.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Thank you very much.

I was wondering about the people on the ground in Jasper who work as the experts, the people who are managing forest fires. We've heard comments that combatting climate change isn't working because there are still forest fires. What is the general feeling of the people in Jasper or of the people who work in this area? Do they believe that fighting climate change is necessary to actually curb further fire tornadoes or cyclones or whatever you want to call them? Do they believe that the action the government is taking to fight climate change is necessary to help them?

Ms. Darlene Upton: I think it's hard to say what people believe, in answer to that question. The incident commander noted that in his experience, which is vast, things are different. Things are more intense. The seasons are longer. The evidence we're seeing on the ground is that things are changing, and they're changing rapidly.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paupé, you have the floor for two minutes.

Ms. Monique Paupé: Ms. Upton, we've heard about fires and structures. I would now like to ask you about insects.

The fact sheet provided by the Library of Parliament analysts talks about mountain pine beetle infestations, which eventually kill the host trees.

This is another impact of climate change. There are more fires, but also more insects. Times are changing when it comes to climate and biodiversity. We must always be ready to respond.

How has the mountain pine beetle infestation in trees affected forest fire risks and forest fire behaviour in Jasper?

[English]

Ms. Darlene Upton: We've been working on managing the impacts of the mountain pine beetle in Jasper since 1985. In 2016, a mountain pine beetle management plan was created for Jasper in collaboration with the Canadian Forest Service and Alberta Agriculture. We received funding of \$6.9 million that allowed us to start to implement some of the actions in that plan. A lot of the fire-break...

Again, the actions are focused where the greatest values at risk are, so a lot of that work was focused around the townsites to build the breaks and clear the forest.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Before my time runs out, I would like to ask another question.

You have been conducting research since 2016. What does this research show about the impact of climate change on insect infestations?

The Chair: Unfortunately, the time is up. However, I'm almost certain that climate change is affecting infestations.

Ms. Collins, you have the floor.

[English]

Ms. Laurel Collins: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We know indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by wildfires. I think indigenous people make up less than 6% of the population, but more than 42% of wildfire evacuations have been from majority indigenous communities.

These communities have also been leading on solutions. Jasper is on Treaty 6 and Treaty 8 territories. The lands have been used as meeting grounds and travelling routes for many nations, and they have been home to nations since time immemorial. According to the Municipality of Jasper, over 26 indigenous partners are connected to the area presently.

Many indigenous communities in Canada have used controlled fire as a traditional land management practice. Supporting these cultural burning practices can help reduce the risk of out-of-control wildfires. Can you tell us a bit about the role of indigenous guardians in managing wildfires in Jasper?

• (1815)

Mr. Andrew Campbell: In Jasper specifically, there is no indigenous guardians program doing part of the controlled burn.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Can you tell us whether there is a plan to look into incorporating some of the nations connected to this land?

Are there lessons learned from neighbouring regions about how this could help improve our management of wildfires?

Ms. Darlene Upton: We recently brought in an indigenous fire specialist at Parks Canada. They're helping us take a look at the program through that lens. There are places where cultural burns are happening, which are quite different from prescribed burns. They are actually very different.

We are consulting. We have an expert who will help us look at indigenous practices and how we can incorporate some of those into our fire management program.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is it Mr.—

Ms. Laurel Collins: Is that specifically for Jasper?

The Chair: I'm sorry. Give a quick answer.

What's the question?

Ms. Darlene Upton: It's national, so it will—

The Chair: Okay, it's national.

Mr. Leslie, go ahead for four minutes.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to pick up on the last question I had regarding an assessment of the remaining deadwood.

Is Parks Canada planning to undertake that assessment?

Ms. Darlene Upton: Thanks for going back to that question.

Yes. We manage a lot of land. We do fire management planning for all the sites that have fire risk. The focus of some of the more detailed work is on areas where the high values are. We're very focused on values at risk. This informs planning and where we invest in prescribed burns and mechanical removal and just the planning in general.

Mr. Branden Leslie: How long—Mr. Campbell, can I get you to commit to this once it is completed?—will it take for this assessment to be completed, and can this committee have that assessment tabled so that we can understand the risk of deadwood remaining after this tragedy?

Ms. Darlene Upton: I'm not sure exactly what you're asking. I'm sorry.

Mr. Branden Leslie: How long will the assessment take, and when can this committee expect to receive a tabling of that information so that we can understand the risk?

In the northwest, as my colleague representing that region pointed out, there is still a severe risk to the area. I understand there needs to be a thorough assessment done. How long will that take, and when can the committee receive that information?

Ms. Darlene Upton: I'm sorry. I can't answer that question at the moment.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Okay. I'll pivot, then.

Mr. Campbell—

Mr. Andrew Campbell: If I may, I think we would be more than happy to give you the Jasper fire plan, the fire prevention plan we have for Jasper and the resources timeline—

Mr. Branden Leslie: I'd like to know specifically about the deadwood.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: It's online.

Mr. Branden Leslie: I appreciate that you can point me to a website.

I'm going to pivot a little here. I'll go back to what I mentioned about private security.

I understand that you are not familiar with the specific company, Arctic Fire Safety Services. Reading through this email, it is pretty remarkable that there were 20 fire trucks and 50 firefighters denied entry.

Will you commit to doing a full investigation into how on earth—when resources are deployed with all the equipment necessary to help suppress a major fire catastrophe—that could happen, and what operations need to change within Parks Canada to prevent them from being denied entry into the park?

Ms. Darlene Upton: I can say two things about that.

I don't have knowledge of the situation, but resource requests come via CIFFC. We work with them because there are protocols and controls on that.

There's also a time element, potentially, to this. I don't know.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Yes. It looks like they were delayed in getting entry for about three days.

My question is, will there be an investigation so we can better understand? Can you report that information back to this committee so that we can better understand how this could happen and how it could be prevented by lessons learned for the future?

Ms. Darlene Upton: There are always lessons learned and after-action reviews on any major fires we have. There absolutely will be something, and we will look to learn lessons from that. We will take a look at what that situation was.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Okay.

People have talked about our great public officials doing great work. The people on the ground who were fighting that fire are the heroes. That was an incredibly.... Hearing those stories from on the ground through GOC and things like that, we know that it was a devastatingly difficult fire. My point is that it didn't need to be that devastating.

The real hero is Morgan Kitchen, who lost his life fighting that fire. These are the real heroes on the ground, and we should all have the utmost respect for the work they are doing.

We had the Minister of Emergency Preparedness come here and tell us about emergency response. They need to change the name of

that department if it is going to truly begin preparing for emergencies. It was extremely disappointing.

My entire concern is with Parks Canada lacking the humility to say, "Maybe we could have done a bit better. Maybe we could have prevented the high level of heat burning through that forest." They should just admit that they can do better. Although it's politically not a great attribute of the current government, I expect our officials can say—not just lessons learned, but have a little humility—"We could have done better." Just take a bit of responsibility.

● (1820)

The Chair: The time is up.

We'll go to Mr. van Koeverden, please.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thanks very much, Chair.

Once again, thank you to the officials who have spent the last couple of hours here.

Our collective dismay, on this side at least, is that this issue continues to be politicized. I just want to say that I don't believe natural disasters and wildfires are a political issue. I think they need to be managed and dealt with by government officials, and that's a completely non-partisan thing.

Nobody—no politician, regardless of their party, background or region—believes we shouldn't do more to prevent and respond to these natural disasters or that we shouldn't invest more money in wildfire services. However, I think it's worth pointing out that those institutions—Parks Canada and the national wildfire services through Parks Canada—and climate change mitigation efforts were all starved by the federal government under Prime Minister Harper. We've invested billions of dollars in measures to ensure that Canada is more resilient to climate change and to ensure that we save lives and prevent these horrible catastrophes from impacting human life.

My question is simple. I appreciate Mr. Leslie referring to the firefighters as heroes, because I completely agree. However, they're hometown heroes, because the people in Alberta who were fighting those fires were doing it in their own backyard. People who manage the forests were doing it in their own backyard. They were cleaning up and preventing the loss of life in their own communities.

I know this has been a really difficult and devastating time for folks, and to make matters worse, now we're politicizing it—or at least the Conservatives are politicizing it and making it seem as though....

Obviously, in retrospect, there's always an opportunity to reflect and say that there are things we could have done a bit better, but I want to once again commend you on your work. I want to ensure that Canadians are aware of how prepared Jasper was and how prepared Parks Canada always is in the face of these types of disasters to respond quickly, efficiently and effectively.

I think we're probably getting to the end of this meeting. I would love to hear from you about anybody who's been personally impacted and you've discussed this with, whether that's one of the officials or the firefighters, or any of the families who have been impacted, and what they would like to see. I'm asking in good faith for you to amplify the voice of somebody on the ground who's been impacted, because, frankly, I've had enough of this overly politicized perspective.

What I'd like to know is what a Jasperite wants us to do next.

The Chair: Answer in 45 seconds, please.

Mr. Andrew Campbell: I have staff meetings with the 500 employees we have on the ground there. It's devastating to see that 200 of them have lost their homes. It's devastating to talk to them. It's devastating that they were the ones who were helping to get everybody else out. They were the ones fighting the fire. They were the ones running the incident command centre. They were the ones providing meals. They were the ones making sure that people got in.

I think the thing they are looking for—and, certainly, what our employees are looking for—is that there is and will continue to be a Jasper that they can call home going into the future. They are resilient for that, and they are looking forward to everything we can do to help them do that. That is why the piece of legislation before you is important. It provides a North Star for how the rebuild will happen.

• (1825)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Mr. Campbell.

If I could, I would just ask for a brief indulgence. I would like to simply ask the committee for unanimous consent that the next time you meet with the 500 staff in Jasper, the next time you communicate with them, you express both our gratitude and our sympathy for what they've gone through in the last year.

Thank you.

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent?

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: That would be from the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development.

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent to Mr. van Koeverden's request? I think so.

I'll adjourn the meeting.

Thank you, witnesses. Thank you for being here, not only today but before.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order before you adjourn.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Branden Leslie: I don't want to be long here. I appreciate that we got clarification from the clerk regarding the previous motion from the spring regarding the redacted and unredacted documents on the accelerator fund. We have times available. I have not yet made it over there.

I would like to clarify, because the language of it didn't seem clear to me if in fact there were two versions. Looking back at the motion we passed at that time, it was very clear that the committee had passed a motion—

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Branden Leslie: —asking for complete and unredacted signed contributions agreements, fully unredacted, as well as five redacted public versions.

I guess my question to the chair is on whether you know or you can get guidance from—

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I move that we adjourn.

The Chair: Sorry. I can't—

Mr. Branden Leslie: Perhaps we could get clarity on it, Mr. Chair. In your view, has the motion as passed by this committee been honoured by Industry Canada?

The Chair: It's a complicated question. I haven't seen the documents.

An hon. member: It's not for right now.

The Chair: I'm going to adjourn. We can discuss this maybe on the sidelines.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Can we have it in public at the next meeting, then?

The Chair: Let me look. I'll have to speak to the clerk about the documents. I haven't seen them.

Mr. Branden Leslie: I appreciate that.

The Chair: For now, I'm going to adjourn the meeting.

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