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Chair: Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia



Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

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• (1100)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to meeting number 124 of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development.

I want to welcome all the members and witnesses who are in the room and all those who are joining us via Zoom.

Today, we are continuing our study of the factors leading to the recent fires in Jasper National Park.

For the witnesses who are online, if you do not have the floor, please keep your microphone on mute.

For the witnesses who are in the room, would you please, to avoid accidents—

[English]

Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC): I have a point of order.

We're not getting any translation.

[Translation]

The Chair: Is that working? Can you hear me in English now?

[English]

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): I'm on the English channel and all I hear is your voice.

The Chair: Can people hear me in French?

I guess we're waiting to get connected in some way.

[Translation]

Can you hear me?

An hon. member: No.

[English]

The Chair: We'll take a little pause.

• (1100)

(Pause)

• (1110)

[Translation]

The Chair: Resuming the meeting.

We are here to continue our study of the factors leading to the recent fires in Jasper National Park.

If you are online and you do not have the floor, we ask that you put your microphone on mute. If you are here in the room—I say this mainly for the witnesses because all of the members are aware of it—be careful not to be too close to the mike when you're speaking and not to touch the boom. If you want to remove your earpiece, I would ask you to please put it on the round sticker in front of you. We are doing all of this so as not to hurt the interpreters, out of respect for them.

Without further ado, we will welcome our first panel. With us are Mike Flannigan, BC Innovation research chair, predictive services, emergency management and fire science, and Christian Messier, professor of forest ecology, who are both appearing as individuals.

[English]

From Arctic Fire Safety Services Limited, we have president and Canadian registered safety professional Kristopher Liivam, and from the Tourism Industry Association of Canada, we have Elizabeth Potter, president and chief executive officer.

Each witness will get five minutes for an opening statement. We'll start with Mr. Flannigan, who's online, I believe.

Mr. Flannigan, go ahead. You have five minutes.

Your mic seems to be on, so that's no problem. Could you say a few words?

Can you hear me? Give me a thumbs up if you can hear me.

No.

Let's go to Mr. Christian Messier, then.

[Translation]

Dr. Christian Messier, professor of forestry ecology, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Christian Messier (Professor of Forest Ecology, As an Individual): Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. It is a pleasure to be here today. Thank you for inviting me.

The mega-fires that occurred in Jasper in 2024 were no accident; they resulted from a combination of anthropomorphic factors both inside and outside the park. The fact is that over the last 100 years there has been constant human intervention in the national parks and in many forests near population centres. While this intervention was intended to put out the fires that would normally have affected those forests, it prevented forest rejuvenation and the emergence of pioneer species such as poplar and birch that are more tolerant or reduce the risk of fire.

The reason for this human intervention is simple and is the same everywhere: to preserve glorious natural scenery and limit disruption. Doing this, however, tends to raise the average age of the trees and the number of dead trees and shade-tolerant conifers such as fir and spruce, which are often found in undergrowth and allow fire to climb from the surface to the canopy. It is common knowledge that these three factors increase the risk of fire.

Another important point is that because the climate is warming rapidly and Jasper is located at a high latitude in the northern hemisphere, where warming is more marked, the risk of conditions occurring that are conducive to mega-fires is rising. These include early hot, dry springs and the presence of fuel such as dead wood and softwood, along with the hot, dry summers with frequent thunderstorms that we are increasingly seeing.

In fact, some researchers had predicted what happened in Jasper. A number of scientific articles had been published pointing out that these kinds of fires were inevitable, since they are caused by the gradual degradation of our forests and rising tree mortality. This is something that is occurring not just in Canada, but all over the world. In fact, some scientists predict that with accelerated climate change, the number of fires will rise so much in the next 50 years that there is a risk that forests will emit as much carbon annually as all human activity in Canada combined. This means that even if human activities stopped emitting carbon, forest fires and the rise in tree mortality might result in just as much being emitted in the next 30 to 50 years.

I realize that the purpose of today's meeting is to understand the factors leading to the fires in Jasper National Park. However, I would like to speak more generally about the risk of major disruptions in our forests associated with global warming and the increasing introduction of exotic insects and diseases that are killing more and more tree species. Another important point is that our trees are becoming less and less adapted to the new climate conditions, which leads to a loss of vigour and makes them more vulnerable to insects and diseases that should not affect them in normal circumstances.

Climate change is accelerating to the point that some tree species are now outside what is called their normal climate envelope, leading to a loss of vigour on the part of these trees and to forest degradation. This heightens the risk of fire and increases carbon emissions from our forests, makes our forest industry more precarious, and increases the risk of losing biodiversity and all the services that forests provide us. It is important to point out that in the last decade, Canada's forest has emitted more carbon than it absorbs, and this contributes to the earth's warming.

So what can we do? Here are some suggestions.

First, we should encourage diversification of tree species that have varying functional characteristics and are capable of resisting all sorts of disruptions, just as we do by diversifying our pension fund investments in order to reduce risk and guarantee acceptable returns in the future.

• (1115)

We must also not routinely prevent the small disruptions that occur, such as small fires. In fact, we should even be carrying out controlled burning, to keep fuel load low and reduce the proportion of conifers.

Second, a systematic assessment of our forests' vulnerability to insects, diseases and fires needs to be done in all regions of Canada, so that forest management can be used to try to reduce these risks.

Third, we should also increase the speed at which our forests adapt to climate change and insects, by encouraging what is called the assisted migration of tree species: migration initiated by human intervention to bring species that are more southern to the north—

The Chair: I have to stop you there, but you will have an opportunity to add comments during the question period.

[English]

Mr. Flannigan, can you hear me now? No.

Mr. Liivam, I believe if you raise the mic, we might be able to hear you better. Why don't we try now for five minutes?

• (1120)

Mr. Kristopher Liivam (Canadian Registered Safety Professional and President, Arctic Fire Safety Services Limited): Okay. I can hear you. Can you hear me?

The Chair: That's fine. The sound quality isn't good enough, but we can hear you.

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Okay [Technical Difficulties—Editor]

The Chair: Just a moment, please.

Could you bring the boom up? I can't see where the boom is. That should be okay, actually.

Shall we try again? Could you take it from the top, Mr. Liivam?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Mr. Chair and committee members, the statement that I provide today will provide a shocking example of how mismanaged the Jasper fire was by Parks Canada and should warrant a deeper investigation into this agency's fire management and overall role as guardians of Canada's most important cultural and natural assets.

On the evening of Tuesday, July 23, 2024, Arctic Fire Safety Services was contacted by the Alberta Emergency Management Agency to deploy three type 3 fire engines and 11 firefighters to Jasper National Park. The request was later changed to two type 3 engines to Jasper and one to another fire.

The crews travelled up from Eckville by Highway 93 to Jasper. As well, some crews came in from Fort McMurray by Highway 16. We were informed that the crew were to bring tents and sleeping bags because there were no hotel rooms available for us in Jasper, so the crew had to sleep on the lawn of the Jasper fire hall for two nights.

On the night of July 24, in a verbal report, my crew informed me of numerous issues that occurred that affected the ability of fire-fighters to protect Jasper.

There was a back-burn that was under way by Parks Canada, and the status of the back-burn did not appear to be communicated to the structure protection specialist who was in Jasper from the ignition team with Parks Canada. All fire crews were sitting at the Jasper fire hall and were not at their preplanned positions when the main fire entered Jasper because they believed the fire behaviour observed was from the back-burn. It was not until reports that the buildings were on fire that fire crews deployed to save the townsite. The scene was described as extremely chaotic—

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, Lib.): Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Taylor Roy.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: I'm actually having difficulty hearing him in English here.

The Chair: Pardon?

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: I'm having difficulty hearing this.

The Chair: Yes, I am too.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Yes, okay.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Pauzé, are you hearing the interpreters when Mr. Liivam speaks?

[*English*]

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: I don't understand French.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Pauzé is indicating that everything is fine.

[*English*]

It seems to be the English that we have trouble understanding here in the room.

Please continue, Mr. Liivam, and maybe speak a bit more slowly.

Go ahead, Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): The English, the non-interpreted version, is very tinny. Possibly if he spoke more slowly, it might be easier.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: It's very hard for us to hear—

The Chair: Mr. Liivam, please speak a bit more slowly and we'll see what happens.

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Prior to the fire, Parks Canada ordered hydrants for Jasper with a thread on the side ports that was different from those used by all municipalities in Alberta and British

Columbia. They had only seven hydrant adapters available in order to go from their thread to BAT, the British Columbia and Alberta thread. Our crew observed a Petro-Canada and a mobile trailer park burn down, but we could not engage due to being unable to connect to hydrants.

Our crew was credited by the captain of the Jasper Fire Department for saving what was left of the downtown because we were at a hydrant that had an adapter. We were able to engage impingements on buildings.

No secondary water sources were staged in preparation for hydrants going down. A lesson learned from past wildland-urban interface events is that it's normal practice to have water supplies pre-positioned.

Once it was confirmed that Arctic Fire Safety Services was deploying additional fire crews on behalf of an insurance company and a resort owner, our two engine crews were released from the Parks Canada response, with no explanation given. The structural protection specialist asked my crew lead, "Does Kris really have 20 fire trucks waiting in Hinton to come in?"

On the afternoon of July 24, I was contacted by a company based in the United States called RedZone. They undertake wildfire analytics and wildfire dispatching for insurance companies. They asked if I had resources that could go to Jasper for one of their clients.

I let them know that I had three type 6 engines, one type 7 engine and a tactical tender available to deploy. We were hired and tasked with protecting the Marmot Basin ski resort and the Jasper tram.

Shortly thereafter, I was contacted by their client, Pursuit Collection. I told them I was fully deployed. They asked whether we could find resources to protect their properties. I reached out to my other firefighting contractors, through a Facebook page, for oil field firefighters. By that night, I was able to assemble a fleet of 20 fire trucks and 50 certified firefighters, all making their way to Hinton. I even declined additional resources from other companies, as I felt we had enough to meet our response needs. These other companies included Safety First from Drayton Valley, Safety Boss from Edmonton, New Venture from Whitecourt, Superior Fire Control from Grande Prairie and Elite Oilfield Services from Clairmont.

On the morning of July 25, most of our crews were assembled at the Hinton UFA cardlock so we could convoy into Jasper. All crews drove through the night to get to Hinton for the morning. At 9:11, we departed the Hinton UFA cardlock and made our way to Jasper with the understanding from Pursuit and the Parks Canada liaison that we had permission to enter. We got to the first set of roadblocks west of Hinton and were denied entry at the order of Parks Canada incident command and turned around.

We attempted again to make entry to the park after we believed we had the issue figured out at 15:42, but we were once again denied entry. At 16:49, we were finally granted entry to Jasper Park. At 18:55, we got to the Jasper fire hall and checked with the structure protection specialist.

We split our teams up to do a hasty check of properties we were assigned to. We were not granted access to Marmot Basin, the Jasper tram or Maligne Lake Road. Of the properties we were able to access, none received damage. Of the properties we could not access, the Wilderness Kitchen was destroyed—an approximate value of \$12.5 million.

We did not see any signs of active fire behaviour at this time. We returned back to Hinton. Our crews were exhausted from driving all night to Jasper, and they were morally deflated from not being able to help in time.

Throughout the Jasper fire, we encountered numerous examples of Parks Canada fire management actively obstructing our activities and not providing us with relevant information on the fire. We were provided with rules of engagement that we had to accept or be escorted out by park wardens. It was reiterated twice by a Parks Canada operations section chief, the second in charge to the incident commander, that we were not legally allowed to be there.

These rules of engagement included not being part of the incident management organization. Wildfire Defense Systems from Montana, which was hired by other insurers, was allowed to be part of the incident management organization. During the impingement and these rules of engagement, we were also ordered to not fight fire. We were denied access to Marmot Basin and the Jasper tram until July 29. It was clear that fire behaviour still threatened those sites, and our delayed ability to access those locations put the economic viability of Jasper at risk.

We were denied access to the Athabasca River or to the hydrant system, or to No Surrender and Fire and Flood Emergency Services water systems to get water for firefighting. We had to bring in eight 400-barrel tanks from Hinton. We had to bring in numerous truckloads of water from Hinton. The approximate cost to our client was \$60,000 just to bring in water to fight the fire—

• (1125)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Liivam, but we're really over time here. There will be opportunities to answer questions.

Mr. Flannigan, can you hear me?

Dr. Mike Flannigan (BC Innovation Research Chair, Predictive Services, Emergency Management and Fire Science, As an Individual): I can hear you.

The Chair: Oh, perfect. Okay, we're in business.

Why don't you go ahead for five minutes, please?

Dr. Mike Flannigan: I'll just note that the interpretation in English does not work completely, and I had to turn it off.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me.

My name is Mike Flannigan. I am the British Columbia innovation research chair in predictive services, emergency management and fire science. Yes, that's a mouthful.

I am honoured to be joining you today. I'm in Kamloops, British Columbia, the traditional and unceded territory of the Tkemlúps te Secwépemc people.

I was saddened by the tragic Jasper fire, the loss of firefighter Morgan Kitchen, the loss of homes and businesses and the emotional toll on people.

Fire management is challenging, and it's becoming more challenging due to the increase in extreme fire weather and fire behaviour. Extremes drive the fire world. In Canada, 3% of our fires burn 97% of our area burned. Much of this happens on a relatively small number of days with extreme conditions, dry fuels and hot, dry, windy weather. A warmer world means more extreme fire weather and more extreme fires.

What can we do to be better prepared for future fire seasons? First, FireSmart should be mandatory in high-risk locations such as Jasper. Otherwise, that rain of embers that can travel kilometres will find homes and businesses to burn. We need structural protection and sprinklers in place.

Thanks to an enhanced early warning system, we know when extreme fire weather will occur and we have a good idea when to expect new fires. We need to get more resources to those locations ahead of time, not after the fact. Even when conditions are extreme, an aggressive initial attack while the fire is still small will be successful.

One approach would be to develop a quickly deployed national wildfire fighting force that would work hand in glove with existing fire management agencies. This could include a national firefighting air fleet as well as ground firefighting crews. Instead of just copying what other countries are already doing in emergency management, we could be leaders by acting before the disaster strikes.

On prevention and mitigation, human-caused fires are preventable, and the number of human-caused fires has been decreasing due to things like fire bans and education. Managing the vegetation—the fuels around communities—can help reduce the likelihood of catastrophic fires.

Wildfires and other potential disasters are multi-faceted issues, and we need multipronged solutions. There is no quick fix.

There are many challenges, but we should explore options to be better prepared to meet current and future fire seasons. We have the knowledge and expertise in Canada to be world leaders in this field.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1130)

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

Last but not least, we'll go to Ms. Elizabeth Potter from the Tourism Industry Association of Canada.

Ms. Elizabeth Potter (President and Chief Executive Officer, Tourism Industry Association of Canada): Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here with you today.

[*English*]

My name is Beth Potter, and I am the president and CEO of the Tourism Industry Association of Canada, representing tourism industry interests at the national level from coast to coast to coast.

Today I want to highlight the increasing risks that wildfires pose to our industry and how we can work together to mitigate these risks. Every year, the threat of wildfires grows more acute, devastating communities across Canada, displacing residents, disrupting businesses and discouraging visitors. This past summer in Jasper, we were reminded of how these events continue to threaten entire regions.

For Canada's tourism industry, these events are more than just operational setbacks; they jeopardize livelihoods. Nature-based tourism, the core of many of our members' businesses, depends on the well-being of our landscapes. Wildfires don't just disrupt this; they put the very environments that draw visitors to Canada at risk.

The reality is that incidents of extreme weather are occurring more frequently across Canada, and their economic and societal impacts are far-reaching. We must strengthen our collective response to this growing challenge by developing a national wildfire preparedness plan. This would ensure that multiple sectors, including tourism, are better equipped to protect Canadians from the environmental, health and the job security risks that come with these incidents.

Wildfire management is a shared responsibility. The tourism sector is committed to working alongside government bodies at all levels, whether they are local communities or agencies like Parks Canada, to be better prepared for wildfire threats.

Coordination between fire management agencies and tourism operators is crucial. Real-time information sharing, emergency planning and public education will ensure that both visitors and operators are equipped to act under dire circumstances. This collaboration is already proving effective, and the tourism sector will continue to play its part.

Looking forward, the creation of a national framework that provides support for individuals and businesses after extreme weather events will be a vital step. This would allow communities not only to recover more quickly but also to reduce mental health challenges and business losses. With suitable support, people are less likely to leave their communities in search of economic stability, allowing for a quicker and stronger recovery.

We know that the increasing frequency and severity of wildfires are largely driven by climate change. That's why sustainable practices within our industry are so important. Parks Canada has highlighted how reintroducing fire to landscapes helps create healthier ecosystems. Similarly, the tourism industry is adopting strategies that reduce our environmental impact and contribute to the long-term resilience of the natural environments we rely on.

In line with the investments made in wildfire management across the country, we can continue to strengthen our collective efforts. Initiatives that enhance our ability to respond to wildfire incidents, such as the national fire equipment cache, are essential. By continuing to invest in infrastructure, training and public-private partnerships, we can ensure that communities and businesses have the tools they need to respond effectively to wildfires.

In closing, we have a real opportunity to strengthen our approach to wildfire management. It requires the collaboration of government, communities, fire agencies and industries like ours. By working together to build a national framework, to commit to readiness and to support effective communities, we can enhance public safety, preserve Canada's natural beauty and ensure that tourism remains a thriving part of our economy.

Thank you.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Potter.

We'll go to questions now.

Mr. Calkins, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

I'm just going to check. Mr. Liivam, can you hear me?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Yes, I can.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you for your testimony here. I don't know if you've been paying attention to the committee business that's been happening, but at the last committee meeting, we had the Minister of Emergency Preparedness say to this committee that he "left no stone unturned" in order to do everything he could to prevent the loss of property in Jasper National Park.

Would you agree with that sentence?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: I would not.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The testimony that you've given before this committee today is actually quite alarming. Can you just confirm to me that in a short amount of time, you were able to muster 20 fire trucks and 50 professional firefighters? Could you tell me what the qualifications of those firefighters would be? Were they fire-tested firefighters?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Yes. I did have 20 fire trucks and 50 firefighters. The majority of the firefighters I had were NFPA 1001 or 1002, as well as numerous firefighters who were wildland firefighters, either wildland firefighter type 1 or wildland firefighter type 2.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Could you explain to the committee what that level of certification actually means? That's some fairly technical language. These are fully certified firefighters. You said that each of them has credentials and has experienced fighting fires before.

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: That's correct.

The NFPA qualifications are the same as any municipal firefighter's. This is similar to Calgary, Edmonton or any fire hall. The majority of the fire halls in Alberta do subscribe to the NFPA standard. The volunteer firefighters are trained to the same standard as a big city fire department.

The wildland firefighters are the same firefighters whose qualifications are recognized through ISFSI. The type 1 firefighter would be the government agency firefighter. The type 2 firefighter would be the contract firefighter.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: In your testimony, you said that the hydrants in Jasper National Park are not the same as the hydrants that are used virtually everywhere else in British Columbia and Alberta. Did I hear that correctly?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: That is correct.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: You also said that there were only seven adapters available. I'm guessing that when you say this, what you're meaning is that for the adapter you would need to plug into the hydrants in Jasper, there were only seven of these adapters. I'm guessing that the Jasper fire trucks, the ones that are there all the time, are probably able to tie in.

In my experience of being a warden in Jasper, there are only a couple of fire trucks in town. I'm not belittling their fire service; I think it's a great volunteer fire service, like everywhere else, but anybody else coming to the community to help would be virtually....

They have seven adapters. Basically, seven rigs could tie in. Is that right?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Aside from their mutual aid partners that they rely on, such as Hinton and Clearwater County, any other fire trucks coming at us that do not have a normal working relationship with the Parks Canada communities will not have these adapters on board. This is not part of the common kit.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay. That's certainly a factor that isn't helpful, but you were able to muster enough vehicles to provide water yourself, as a contingency. You don't necessarily rely on being able to tie into a hydrant. Is that correct?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: That's correct.

It's been my experience from previous fires that the hydrant systems cannot be deemed reliable. They're designed to have only one or two structural fires at a time. When you have numerous fire trucks tying in, it is not impossible for the water system to be com-

pletely depleted. That's why we now use secondary water sources to supply water.

● (1140)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: You had the fire trucks and the water trucks available in order to engage the fire in Jasper and the townsite. Am I correct?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: That's correct.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: You were told specifically by parks officials to not engage in fighting the fire in Jasper. Am I correct that you said that?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: We were able to use water from Pyramid Lake, but not from the Athabasca River, and we were not allowed to engage the fire.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Twenty fire trucks and 50 firefighters not allowed to engage the fire.

Is there anything in the statutes that you're aware of that would have allowed them to bring you under their incident command protocols and have you join the fight against the fire?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: In my previous experience, what they could have done was assign a task force leader to our group to act as a liaison to the incident command. This way, we could have a functioning relationship with the incident command.

As well, in dire circumstances, if a fire comes in and they are worried about the entire community, they do have the ability, under other legislation, such as the Alberta Forest and Prairie Protection Act, to use conscription to bring us into their command as well.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Do believe that if you would have been able to engage the fire, you could have saved some property in the town of Jasper?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Absolutely. Part of our arsenal that we had out there were two airport fire trucks, as well as eight industrial fire trucks. These are monstrosities large fire trucks that could have put out a lot of water to help protect communities on the front line. Then the smaller brush trucks could have been used to help defend the community from the impingements that landed.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: What did it make you and your crews that you had assembled feel like when you were told not to engage in the fires and you stood and watched properties burn down in Jasper?

The Chair: Answer briefly, please, Mr. Liivam.

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: We were deflated. We felt that our mission.... We could have gotten more results.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Longfield, the floor is yours.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses.

Thank you to our tech crews who keep these committees going with the support that you provide to our witnesses and to us as parliamentarians.

I want to start with you, Mr. Liivam, just to expand on your involvement that night. Were you on the ground that night when things were all happening?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: My intent was to be there that night, but when my crews got split up, I had to take my senior firefighters with me, including one who was a former deputy fire chief for the Enoch Cree Nation.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Okay. You're passing on information, and part of the information you're passing on isn't connecting with some of the information we have from the night of the fire about what was happening on the ground.

I know there will be other hearings. Hearings have been scheduled. This committee is looking at some of the governance issues and what we could do as members of Parliament to support future firefighting efforts.

Regarding the role of the unified command and the governance around that, I asked a question—

The Chair: Excuse me. I have to interrupt for a second.

Mr. Liivam, your sound is not of sufficient quality for the interpreters.

Mr. Longfield, I'm sorry to interrupt your question, but you'll have to direct it to someone else, I think.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: If it's okay with you, Chair, I'll ask the question and ask for an answer—

The Chair: You'll ask for a written response. Okay.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: —and then I'll go to another witness after that.

The Chair: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: In terms of coordination of efforts, unified command really are the ones who are doing command and control on the disaster as it's unfolding. We did bring in firefighters from other countries, following governance through unified command. How was this group brought into the fire?

I understand there was an insurance company involved from the States. How did they tie into unified command? Who asked them to be there, and how did that then unfold in terms of governance?

Thank you for the answer and thank you for the role that you played in saving some property. Obviously, I think there's some coordination between your group and the unified command structure that needs some further work.

I'd like to take my question over to Mr. Messier.

You mentioned the pine beetle. I was involved with the forestry industry, supplying hydraulic equipment, back in the 2000s. In 2004, that outbreak happened, and the fight went on for years—actually, for more than a decade—to try and get pine beetles under control.

One of the theories at the time was that the pine beetle survived winters that used to be a lot more harsh before climate change affected weather patterns. Is that how, maybe directly or indirectly, climate change is affecting forests by allowing different types of

species to attack trees just by their nature of living and what they do to survive? They take the life of the tree.

Could you comment on the role of climate change on the invasive species that are affecting our forests?

• (1145)

Mr. Christian Messier: In the case that you brought forward, there were actually two causes of this increase in pine beetles. One was the fact that we planted a lot of lodgepole pine in British Columbia and in Alberta through forestry. I think we have created large monocultures that are actually much more susceptible to the pine beetle.

You're right in that scientists have also shown that when we get winter temperatures below -30°, it usually kills the beetles or reduces the number of beetles, and with climate change, it's getting warmer.

There were two factors, as you can see: survival of the beetles during the winter and the fact that there are a lot more pure lodgepole pines across B.C. That has created this epidemic.

Actually, this species was native to B.C. but not to Alberta, and it has crossed the Prairies because of this very large amount, and it's actually spreading toward the east and threatening all of the pines in Canada.

This is one example out of many other insects. As I said in my statement today, we shouldn't be worried about only fires; we should be worried about drought and about various types of insects that may not have been doing a lot of damage before but will do more damage now because the trees are getting weaker and becoming maladapted. We need to look at the question in a very broad way rather than just looking at one disturbance or one factor at a time.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I think the danger within this committee is that we are focused on Jasper as part of our study and we have legislation that has gone through the House on the Jasper situation. The broader picture of healthy forests and healthy biosystems becomes the bigger picture, and climate change is part of that, as you said; biodiversity is another big part of that, and the national government could have a role to play.

Am I understanding that properly in terms of rolling out better ecosystems for the forestry industry?

Mr. Christian Messier: Yes, that's actually what I think we should do. We should use forestry as a tool to help diversify and adapt our forests to climate change and other disturbances.

I just got a big grant from NSERC and a lot of partners in Canada and provinces to test this across Canada. The idea will be to use forestry not just to simplify the forest and produce only a few species that are useful for the industry, but really to make the forest better adapted and more diversified. I think that if we do this, we will be able maybe to reduce the risk of having wildfires like the one in Jasper.

I will finish by saying that it should also be done in parks, not just in forests that we cut. Even in parks, the species are maladapted to what's happening and the risk of dying and burning is increasing.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you for your testimony.

Thank you, Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The floor is yours, Ms. Pauzé.

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): Thank you to all the witnesses for being here with us.

Mr. Messier, your testimony only goes to show the extent of the problems caused by climate change. You spoke about fires, insects and diseases. You put it very well when you said the problem is not unique to Jasper, it is everywhere on the planet. This is not good news, but I think it is very real.

We know that smoke knows no borders. We remember the fires of the summer of 2023 in Quebec, when the smoke travelled as far as New York, and even to the entire northeastern United States. As well, Mr. Flannigan talked about ember showers, which can start fires in other locations. Certainly improvements can be made over what was done in Jasper.

Do you think there needs to be better integration and analysis of provincial and federal environmental monitoring data?

• (1150)

Mr. Christian Messier: I would say that the provinces and the federal government are already working together very well when it comes to researchers collaborating and data being shared. One thing I mentioned was the DIVERSE project, which I am currently leading, in which we are collaborating with provincial and federal government researchers. We are trying to put all this data together so that we have tools we can use to better measure the vulnerability of our forests and determine what we can do to reduce the risks involved in managing them. Those risks go beyond fires, and this is a point I like to stress. There is also the growing risk of mortality caused by exotic insects or diseases and by drought or wind, among other things.

I think we are seeing a good level of co-operation. Obviously, it can be improved, but I think there is already very good collaboration, at least when it comes to research.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: You spoke earlier about the problem actually being planet-wide. Are there things happening in other places that you are aware of that could also improve forest management or emergency management?

Mr. Christian Messier: One of the positive aspects of research being done worldwide is that we are all working together. There are no secrets; the research is public and it is being published in publicly available journals. There are numerous collaborative projects. In fact, in my DIVERSE project, I have collaborators in the United States and pretty much every country in the world. We share our information, our data, and our experiences, to try to develop approaches that will be useful in every country on earth. This kind of collaboration is happening on a large scale. I would even say that Canada is a world leader in this area.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Of course, we are talking about climate change. We constantly hear about mitigation and adaptation. We can see that as climate change accelerates and temperatures rise, we also have to adapt faster. What can or should a government do in this regard to help plan the allocation of emergency services when multiple catastrophic events occur? That is what we are facing now.

Mr. Christian Messier: That is a very good question, but it is a bit outside my area of expertise.

I think we need to try to move away from the way we are doing things now. We need to realize that we have always thought that the forest was relatively stable, it did not change, climate was constant, and we could predict what was going to happen in the next 150 years. That is no longer the case. Change is also happening fast. The level of uncertainty is rising. So the situation is going to call for completely different approaches and also for changes to our laws and regulations.

Every province of Canada has regulations requiring that the same tree species or group of species be planted as were cut. If we continue doing forestry this way, however, we are going to ensure that our forests are ill adapted to future changes. So I think there should be major regulatory changes to facilitate adaptation. We also need to expand forest diversity, not just within a stand, but also in the broader landscape. Doing this would reduce the spread of insects and fires.

We have to adopt a variety of approaches. In fact, when I give my presentations, I often say that we absolutely have to almost completely change the way we manage our forests. The good news for the forestry industry is that logging could help to speed up the adaptation process. In that case, however, diversification would have to be encouraged.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: On the subject of forestry practices, when the minister appeared before this committee, he said there were buffer zones, firewalls, that were important and might be necessary in the future. Briefly, what are the characteristics of an effective buffer zone?

• (1155)

Mr. Christian Messier: Certainly it is becoming increasingly common to suggest planting deciduous forests around municipalities. Obviously, we could remove the forests completely, but that would create somewhat desert-like landscapes. So we need to have more deciduous trees. In the boreal forest, this means poplars and birches, in particular, which go a long way to reducing the risk of fire. Adding deciduous trees would go a long way to reducing the risk of fire in our forests just about everywhere around municipalities.

The Chair: Thank you.

The floor is yours, Ms. Collins.

[*English*]

Ms. Laurel Collins (Victoria, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here.

My first question is for Mr. Flannigan.

We've seen that climate change is making our wildfire seasons more intense and longer. They're having a devastating impact on communities.

Dealing with wildfires in the past has primarily been left up to the provinces and territories, with some support from the military. Earlier this year, the chief of the defence staff talked about how they won't be able to fill the gaps and the increasing need as a result of wildfires.

You mentioned a national firefighting service. This is something that my New Democrat colleagues and I have been pushing for.

Can you talk a little bit about the need for a national firefighting service? What would that mean when it comes to fighting wildfires in Canada?

Dr. Mike Flannigan: The United States has something called FEMA, or Federal Emergency Management Agency. We have nothing like that in Canada.

Fire management is the responsibility of the landowners—provinces, territories and Parks Canada, and the Department of National Defence does a little bit as well. They help each other out. It's a brotherhood, but sometimes you get overwhelmed and you need extra resources.

What I'm suggesting is a national agency to work hand in glove, as a unified command system, with Parks Canada and B.C. and Alberta or whoever, before emergencies actually arrive.

We have the capability to know when extreme fire weather is coming, and extremes really do drive the fire world. Simply, there are three ingredients for a wildfire. It's the vegetation, which is the fuel; ignitions; and the weather.

I'm biased, but I think weather is the key driver. We're seeing more extreme fire weather and we're seeing more extreme fires, and we're going to continue to see that. Seven billion dollars was spent on disasters this summer in Canada alone—that's from the Insurance Bureau of Canada—and that's only increasing. We need to deal with this—

Ms. Laurel Collins: Mr. Flannigan, I'm sorry to interrupt.

When you talked about weather, I overheard one of my Conservative colleagues say that it's the one you can't do anything about, so focus on the others.

This is something we've heard when it comes to combatting climate change—that somehow we need to throw up our hands.

Can you speak a little bit about how climate change is an existential crisis and that we need to be doing everything we can to combat the climate emergency?

Dr. Mike Flannigan: In Canada, our area of burn has quadrupled since the 1970s. My colleagues and I attribute this to human-caused climate change. It's not just fire; it's flooding and a rise in sea levels. We are changing the climate because of our human activities, primarily greenhouse gases. Until we do something as a society, a global society of people, as communities, states, provinces, territories....

We have to solve this problem. The scary thing is that even if we stop producing greenhouse gases today, we'll continue to warm for 20 or 30 years. A warmer world means more disasters.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Thank you so much.

Ms. Potter, you talked about the need for a national wildfire preparedness plan. We know that Canadians expect their government to protect them from wildfires. Businesses expect the government to protect the economy from the impacts.

Can you talk a little bit about what is needed when it comes to a national wildfire preparedness plan?

Ms. Elizabeth Potter: Thank you for the question.

I think a coordination of effort is something that we are looking for here. From an industry perspective, we are doing that ourselves. We wanted to make sure, especially following 2022 and 2023, when we saw devastation and mass evacuation, that from the tourism perspective, while residents and employees were looked after, the visitor was looked after as well. We came together as an industry to create our own national plans. I think that needs to happen as well.

• (1200)

Ms. Laurel Collins: It's surprising that even after the devastating, record-breaking wildfire season of 2023, this government hasn't actually created a national wildfire preparedness plan that is adequate to protect our communities and protect our economy. They haven't filled the gaps that will be left by the military not having the capacity to respond to these fires.

Maybe I'll go to you, Mr. Messier. You talked about the need to change our forestry management practices. This seems like another gap that has been overlooked, given that year after year we're seeing the increases. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Mr. Christian Messier: Yes. Actually, I wrote in a newspaper that we need a Marshall Plan. We need the same level of effort we had after the Second World War to transform Europe. We need a Marshall Plan in terms of how we manage our forests, not just in Canada but in the world. A lot of scientists are showing tree mortalities increasing in all our forests. Forests are dying. I was in Germany three years ago when there was a drought. There was not one drop of rain for five months. More than 30% to 40% of the forest is now dying.

We will have droughts in our forests more and more. We have more and more insects and disease coming from all over the world. I think we need a really big effort. This is what I'm advocating here. We will have more fires, but we will have more droughts, more mortality and more insects—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Christian Messier: It's all of this that we need to address.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We'll go to the second round, which will be reduced to four minutes and two minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Soroka.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start off with you, Mr. Liivam.

You said that you were not legally allowed to be there. Could you explain why you were not?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: I'll explain what was explained to us by the operations section chief, the second-in-command to the incident commander. As far as I know, we were allowed to be there, because this was through the Parks Canada liaison person and our client who made these arrangements for us to be in there. I guess there's no legislative process to allow contract firefighters to be in there on behalf of other parties.

That must be the reasoning for that, but we did not show up there unanticipated. These were arrangements made on behalf of our Pursuit Collection client and Parks Canada before we showed up. It's not as if we showed up at the door and demanded to be let in like barbarians. It was our expectation that when we got to the gate, we were supposed to be permitted to go in and do our job to help protect the economic engine of Jasper.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Mr. Liivam, one of the concerns was that when the houses were burning, they were releasing toxic fumes. Did you have the proper self-contained breathing apparatus to deal with a fire like that?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Self-contained breathing apparatuses in WUI events—wildland-urban interface events—are pretty much ineffective. You have only about 30 minutes of air, and these trucks don't carry enough air on them to manage this kind of workload.

My recommendation for all fire departments would be to get powered full-face air respirator units with a battery-powered assist, but I don't believe any fire department has any of that equipment on the trucks. We had respirators on our trucks that had the P100 filters for our crew to use, and that's what the majority of the fire departments were using for that event.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Were you qualified to do structural fires or not?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Yes. The crew we had in there were all NFPA 1001 firefighters. The majority of them are part of active volunteer fire departments. The crew I had in Jasper that night had all qualified 1001 firefighters.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: You were all qualified, yet you were asked to leave and not assist with any structural fires.

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: Yes.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Wow. Do you have any reason that they did this?

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: The only reason I could think of is that because we were coming in with another party, they didn't want to have...I don't know— leakage, or.... I really have no idea. They never explained that to me.

They just released my two engines as other fire trucks were coming in, so I took those two engine crews and put them on with my private response for the insurance company.

• (1205)

Mr. Gerald Soroka: They didn't say anything about your not having the capabilities to tie into the hydrants or the proper fittings or anything like that. There was no reason other than just, "Please leave."

Mr. Kristopher Liivam: That's right.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Wow. That's quite interesting. I don't know how to follow up on that questioning, to be honest with you.

I'll go to Monsieur Messier. You spoke about how man intervenes in forests by putting out forest fires. Do we need to start controlling or managing our forests a lot better to clear out the deadfall and make sure that we can protect communities, not just within FireSmart—we're talking about the close proximity—but a mile, two miles or three or four kilometres away to manage the forest a lot better?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Messier, please answer in 20 seconds.

[*English*]

Mr. Christian Messier: Yes, absolutely. I think we need to talk to the first nations. They've used wildfires for a long time. They know how to do it. I think it could have a big impact on communities.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

The floor is yours for four minutes, Mrs. Chatel.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to welcome our witnesses.

Mr. Messier, you are very familiar with Canada's forests, including the ones in the Outaouais and in Pontiac, my riding, so I am very happy to have you with us here.

You have often talked about resilience-based forestry. As you say, our forests, including our own in the Pontiac, are threatened by insects and diseases, with climate change being among the causes. You have proposed solutions to these problems that are based on science and experience. I have two questions for you.

First, in concrete terms, how could this resilience-based forestry approach be implemented at both a national and local scale, to strengthen our forests' capacity to cope with climate change?

Second, what role should the federal and provincial governments be playing to support this important transition to more resilient management of our forests?

Mr. Christian Messier: How many hours will you give me to answer that question?

I am going to tell you about the DIVERSE project, which I referred to earlier. This project is national, from British Columbia to Nova Scotia. We will be working closely with all stakeholders—the provinces, the federal government, industry and environmental groups—to see how to improve forest management in order to reduce the risk of losing large swaths of forest and to see what entirely new approaches to planting are possible by introducing new species that are better adapted to the new conditions.

To summarize, the science is very clear: Our best ally against the uncertainty of the future is diversity. Increasing species diversity in our forests will therefore provide significant benefits. We can do it, and we can use logging to try to encourage it.

Another important point is that forest management is under provincial jurisdiction, and so the provinces are responsible for the legislation and regulations. We are going to examine each province's laws and regulations and determine what changes could be made.

The good news is that a majority of the provinces and of forest industry stakeholders are on board with the project, as are environmental groups. So I think we can develop a world-class project to try to adapt our forests to what is coming.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: As you said, the purpose of this kind of forestry management is to increase resilience, which is what will save our cities and towns. A project like this has the potential to protect our cities and towns from forest fires.

Mr. Christian Messier: I would also include our industries, our recreational sector and everything we do. We have to try to preserve these natural environments, since human beings are heavily dependent on the services they provide. You are absolutely right.

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

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Chatel.

The floor is now yours for two minutes, Ms. Pauzé.

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

Mr. Messier, you spoke earlier about species diversity in fragile areas and about deciduous forests around cities. I don't think cities are considered to be fragile areas.

Are they? Do you think this is an example where species diversity, which you spoke about earlier, comes in?

• (1210)

Mr. Christian Messier: In fact, cities are considered to be fragile areas because there are lives and structures there that have to be protected. It is very important to take action in those areas first and start planting around cities, to diversify the forests and make them less vulnerable to insects, diseases and fire. These are actually places where action is going to have to be a priority over the next few years.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Earlier, you said that there were laws that have to be amended, because they require us to replant exactly the same species of tree. Are governments and elected representatives listening to you on this subject?

Mr. Christian Messier: Frankly, the forestry industry and environmental groups are doing more listening than governments. I have to say that I have no idea why. The provincial governments seem to want to keep doing things the same way.

Most of the provinces require that forest composition be kept as it is for the next 150 years, and that makes no sense to me. There is going to be so much change in climate and environmental conditions by then that the forest has to be able to adapt and change. When I am asked what regulations should be changed, that is the first one that comes to mind. I hope we can get it done, but there is resistance.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left, Ms. Pauzé.

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Does Mr. Messier have any studies or documents to give the committee so that we, as elected representatives, can bring more pressure to bear?

The Chair: That is noted, Ms. Pauzé.

The floor is now yours for two minutes, Ms. Collins.

[*English*]

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

Mr. Flannigan, in your research you talk about how fire management policies and effectiveness will continue to change. Can you talk a bit about what the government needs to do and what actions need to be taken in order to prevent wildfires in the future?

Dr. Mike Flannigan: As a quick aside, there needs to be an independent and complete review of the Jasper fire. In large part, what happened was a result of a pyrocumulonimbus, a fire-generated thunderstorm. This is the most intense display of Mother Nature's energy, in terms of the fire world, and that, in large part, was the reason that we lost a third of the town.

What can we do? There is, as mentioned, FireSmart. Jasper is at the confluence of three valleys, a high-risk location: Valleys act as corridors, wicks and pathways. They knew it was a high-risk location and they had been doing a lot of work, but those embers can travel kilometres: The West Kelowna fire jumped over Okanagan Lake in 2023.

These are three ingredients: vegetation, ignition and weather. Let's say we can't do anything about climate change and extreme weather. Okay, fine, we can't do anything about lightning and weather ignitions.

People cause fires; we can and are doing things on that front.

Then, the last thing is the vegetation. Managing vegetation in high-risk areas and around high-risk communities will help reduce the likelihood of extreme and catastrophic fire, but will never eliminate it. When things are extreme, as long as there's stuff to burn, even if it is leafy, like aspen—in Fort McMurray, we're surrounded by aspen and we saw what happened there—fuel is fuel is fuel, unfortunately: It burns and can burn at a fairly high intensity, even if it's not a conifer.

The Chair: Thank you.

We go to Mr. Leslie for four minutes.

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

I will start with Mr. Liivam.

You mentioned in your opening remarks that Parks Canada—

The Chair: I'm sorry; is that directed at Mr. Liivam?

Mr. Branden Leslie: Yes.

The Chair: Unfortunately, the interpreters can't interpret him. You could still ask him to submit something in writing if you wish, or make a statement, but he cannot—

Mr. Branden Leslie: Can we let him try to answer?

The Chair: No, it's not going to work.

Mr. Branden Leslie: Okay. I will ask Mr. Liivam to answer in writing if it is possible.

Mr. Liivam, you said in your opening remarks that Parks Canada ordered hydrants for Jasper Park that were different from all of the rest in B.C. and Alberta, and you had only seven adapters that could be used on a moment's notice. This is shocking evidence that Parks Canada officials certainly didn't say last week. Minister Guilbeault and Minister Sajjan certainly made no mention of that.

What was the impact of that failure to order aligned fittings for hydrants? Please provide that in writing to this committee.

You also mentioned that you were threatened with arrest or removal, multiple times. Could you further identify what those instances were? Do you know which officials with Parks Canada decided to intentionally turn away 20 trucks and over 50 firefighters? They were well-trained firefighters, and not only were they turned away but they were turned away with the apparent threat of force. Please provide a little bit more detail to the committee on that.

Also, as an expert who works regularly in the field on the ground, please provide a little bit of context as to whether or not, in your view, prescribed burns and mechanical removal are effective tools to mitigate the potential heat sources and damage caused by wildfires, particularly the one in Jasper. In your expert opinion, was enough of that done by Parks Canada to prevent that fire from happening?

Lastly, in your view, was Parks Canada in fact negligent in its responsibilities, leading to the disastrous fire in Jasper?

If you could do all that, I would appreciate that.

I'll move back to Mr. Messier.

You mentioned an increase in pests. How is the transmission of pests happening in our forests?

• (1215)

Mr. Christian Messier: I was part of a national committee and I can send you the report.

We are doing a lot of trade with Europe, the U.S., Asia and China. Interestingly enough, they have the same kind of climate and the same type of trees. The risk of bringing in insects and pests from these areas is very high. We are doing that almost every day.

That's actually one of the clear problems. It is that we are trading with regions of the world that have similar species, and there is a risk of bringing in species that the trees have adapted to in the original country, but here, they have not adapted. This is what's happening, and it's increasing.

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

I want to give the rest of my time to Mr. Deltell.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds, Mr. Deltell.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Thank you for your very practical approach, Mr. Messier. You take a concrete view of matters that is very impressive. Earlier, you heard the firefighter's testimony, as did we. I saw that you were listening very closely to what he said. Can you share your feelings about that?

The Chair: Please answer in 30 seconds, Professor.

Mr. Christian Messier: In fact, that is quite a ways outside my field. I have to say I was surprised to learn that people might not have had all the firefighting resources available. I imagine there are structural problems in the way various kinds of organizations are managed, but I really can't say more than that.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: You were completely surprised and outraged, as were we, to see that firefighters were ready to act but were told to go home.

The Chair: We have gone over four minutes.

The floor is yours, Ms. Taylor Roy.

[*English*]

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

Thank you to all the witnesses.

I realize, Mr. Liivam, that you can't respond, but for the record, I was hoping that you could verify for us that your company is a for-profit company, that it's not volunteer, and that you were on the ground hired by insurance companies or contractors.

You mentioned that you don't understand why private or independent firefighters are not allowed to come in and fight the fires and why there is legislation preventing that. Do you really believe that allowing independent firefighters, who may be hired by multiple different sources, to come in and do what they want to do in the area when there is a major fire like this going on would be safe and would lead to a coordinated effort? Perhaps you could answer those questions for me in writing.

The other question I have is for Mr. Messier and for Mr. Flannigan.

We have two different conversations going on. One is really about what exactly happened in Jasper. I believe that the firefighters did an amazing job. They collaborated, and we've had plenty of witnesses from all parties on what was done beforehand to prepare for this fire.

Mr. Flannigan, I believe you said that fire-smarting was important—doing the burns, mechanical clearing, etc. You said that you felt that they had done a good job. Now, I understand that they could do more, given the conditions now.

There has also been a notion introduced that because forest fires are still happening, somehow our efforts to reduce emissions have failed, that even though we've bent the curve on bringing emissions down, forest fires are still happening, so it's not worth it. I was wondering if you could comment on that in the larger picture when you're talking about what's happening to our forests and on whether that's a fair assessment.

• (1220)

Mr. Christian Messier: Do you want me or Mr. Flannigan to start?

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Mr. Flannigan, I think you've had fewer questions, so—

Dr. Mike Flannigan: Emissions due to forest fires were 647 teragrams, approximately, according to a new study, which is about the size of India's fossil fuel emissions. Our forests have become carbon sources due to fire and insects, and I don't see that changing in the short term as we continue with climate change.

However, the international agreement on reporting of emissions is for a managed forest fire. That greatly reduces the international reporting. To be honest, the atmosphere doesn't care if the fire is burning in a managed forest or an unmanaged forest. It's still emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Ms. Leah Taylor Roy: Absolutely.

Given that forest fires are still happening, do you believe that a price-on-pollution program is necessary and that it can be working to reduce emissions, but that forest fires could still be happening? Is that possible?

Dr. Mike Flannigan: It's challenging. We try to manage fires. To be honest, we're not doing a great job. You just have to look at all the disasters that we have seen in the last few years, whether it's Nova Scotia, B.C. or Alberta. It's going to continue.

The scary part is that our peatlands are vast legacy carbons that have been storing since the last ice age. A fire can go through and emit enormous amounts of greenhouse gases. They're becoming

more vulnerable as these peatlands thaw and the permafrost thaws, and they become available to burn.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have for this first panel, which was extremely interesting.

I want to thank the panellists for making themselves available.

We'll have a quick break to set up our next panel and then continue for another hour.

Thank you very much.

• (1220) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1225)

The Chair: I'd like to welcome our second panel.

We have with us, testifying as an individual, Lori Daniels, Koerner chair, wildfire coexistence, forestry, University of British Columbia.

From the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, we have James Gault, vice-president, northeast region.

From the Forest Products Association of Canada, we have Kate Lindsay, senior vice-president and chief sustainability officer.

We have, from the Government of Alberta, Minister Mike Ellis, deputy premier and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services, and Minister Todd Loewen, Minister of Forestry and Parks.

We'll start with you, Ms. Daniels, for five minutes. The floor is yours.

Dr. Lori Daniels (Koerner Chair, Wildfire Coexistence, Forestry, University of British Columbia, As an Individual): Thank you very much for the invitation to be here.

My name is Dr. Lori Daniels. I'm a professor of forest ecology and the Koerner chair of wildfire coexistence at the University of British Columbia. I'm coming to you today from the ancestral territory of the Musqueam first nation.

I have studied historical fire regimes and their impacts on forest dynamics in western Canada for the past 20 years. Thank you for the opportunity to share insights from the research we have conducted, both on the factors that contributed to the Jasper wildfires and also the strategies that are urgently needed in order to make our ecosystems and communities more resilient to future fires and climate change.

I have three core messages for you today.

First, the Jasper wildfire complex was a century in the making. Our research shows that the historical fire regime in Jasper began to change in the early 1900s. Over several centuries, from the 1600s to the 1800s, low-severity fires burned somewhere in the Athabasca Valley once every 20 years on average, scarring trees but not killing them. Patches of high-severity fire would kill trees and provide openings where grasses, shrubs and broadleaf and needle-leaf trees regenerated. Landscape photos from the early 1900s show a diverse mosaic of ecosystems.

The fire scars stopped in 1915. This is the beginning of the fire suppression era, when indigenous people were removed from their land and their good fire stewardship was terminated. Ignitions by lightning and people were suppressed to protect the forest. The paradox is that this good intention has had unintended consequences. Without repeat low-impact fires, the forest simultaneously matured, creating a uniform landscape of continuous needle-leaf forests with abundant flammable fuels, strongly contrasting with historical landscapes and fire regimes.

These mature forests were also optimal habitat for the mountain pine beetle, which spread into Jasper. The beetle is native to western North America, but it is novel to forests east of the continental divide. Its eastward expansion was facilitated by climate change, and the beetles have caused high tree death rates in Alberta. Field surveys and experiments conducted with Parks Canada have shown that abundant dead lodgepole pine trees and logs contribute to fire intensity and rapid rates of fire spread and emit large amounts of heat, smoke and carbon, so the stage was set, after 100 years, for the fire this summer.

My second message to you is that Jasper is not an anomaly. Disruption of indigenous fire stewardship, fire suppression and widespread forest health problems have cumulative effects across the forests in Canada. Climate change is now superimposed on vulnerable landscapes and amplifies the effects. Mountain pine beetles impacted 19 million hectares of forests in western Canada; fires burned 15 million hectares across our country in 2023 alone.

My third and final point is that transformative changes are urgently needed. We need to diversify our approaches and amplify the pace and scale of our response to recent wildfire extremes and climate change. We also need to recognize that specific strategies are as complex as the diverse ecosystems and forests across Canada.

Proaction requires support from all levels of government, including the federal government. Strategies include, but are not limited to, investing equal amounts in emergency response to wildfires and proactive management to mitigate future wildfire effects through mechanical treatments and prescribed and cultural burns. This is an underfunded and underutilized approach that is costing Canadians billions of dollars due to the direct and indirect effects of wildfires.

Second, we can invest in FireSmart programs at home and community levels to expand education and actions to improve resiliency; we need to support indigenous-led programs, given that fires are disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples, communities and territories; we need to implement landscape fire management to reduce the negative consequences of catastrophic fires, improve ecosystem resilience and sustain a forestry sector; we need to support the bioeconomy and bioenergy to overcome economic barriers;

and we need to invest in post-secondary training to build much needed capacity in pyrosilviculture, and prescribed and cultural burning.

• (1230)

These transformative actions are urgently needed to mitigate climate change, adapt our forest management and proactively prepare for wildfire impacts on Canadian ecosystems and communities.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Daniels.

We'll go to Mr. Gault.

Mr. James Gault (Vice-President, North East Region, Alberta Union of Provincial Employees): Thank you very much for the opportunity to address this committee today on the matter that has impacted Albertans and people around the world—the wildfire in Jasper.

My name is James Gault. I'm one of six vice-presidents of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. I represent the northeast region. That region includes Lamont, Slave Lake, Fort McMurray, Lloydminster and everything in between. I also work closely with local 005, which is the Alberta national resources and conservation officers.

Alberta's wildland firefighters and conservation officers, many of whom are part of local 005, were essential in the battle against the Jasper wildfire. They were joined by colleagues from across Canada and from countries like Costa Rica, Australia, South Africa and Mexico. The Canadian Armed Forces also provided support. These brave men and women risked their lives to contain the fire, and their commitment is beyond question.

While their efforts were heroic, the reality is that they have been operating within a system that has failed them, not through lack of dedication but because of poor policy decisions that have reduced the resources they need.

Wildfire management in Alberta requires a collaboration between provincial, municipal and federal authorities. However, this system only works when all levels of government provide the necessary resources. Sadly, this has not been the case. The strain is not due to the efforts of our firefighters and support staff, but due to the lack of investment in their work in the province of Alberta.

Last year, 1,088 wildfires burned through 26,000 square kilometres of land in Alberta and displaced 38,000 people, yet we went into 2024 with no better preparation. While the spring was quiet, July brought back fires in full force, with Jasper being just one of several that endangered Albertans. Our firefighters worked tirelessly, but the resources they needed to effectively manage these fires were systematically cut.

At the heart of the issue when it comes to Alberta is the underinvestment in Alberta's wildland firefighters, conservation officers and the other essential staff. These professionals are underpaid and undervalued. While firefighters in other jurisdictions receive benefits like presumptive cancer coverage due to the risk they face, Alberta wildland firefighters do not. This discourages experienced personnel from staying in Alberta, leading to a recruitment and retention crisis that has left us all vulnerable. Our most experienced firefighters are leaving for better opportunities, and those who remain are stretched thin. This is not their fault. It is a failure of a system that does not prioritize expertise and safety.

The tragedy in Jasper is an example of what happens when the system fails to provide necessary support. Firefighters and support staff on the ground did everything they possibly could, but help came too late. The system did not act quickly enough to prevent the fire from spreading. Despite the heroic efforts of our firefighters, the lack of timely action and inadequate resources allowed the fire to grow out of control.

While the premier had powers to intervene at her disposal, we heard reports that the federal government had requested help from the province, but the response was that Alberta was too busy fighting other fires around the province.

This tragedy is not just one of poor funding, but also of damaging rivalry between governments, where jurisdiction disputes have caused the people of Alberta to suffer. When governments fail to collaborate effectively, it's the people on the ground, both the residents and the frontline workers, who bear the brunt of that failure.

The death of 24-year-old firefighter Morgan Kitchen in Jasper underscores the risks these professionals face. He was a hero, but his loss should remind us of the government's responsibility to ensure heroes are supported and equipped to do jobs safely. How many more lives will be at risk before we ever take action?

The issue isn't just about wildfires; it's about the choices we make as a province. Years of cuts to funding and resources left Alberta vulnerable to the growing threat of wildfires that stretched in to the town of Jasper.

The solution is not only investing in equipment. More importantly, it's the people who make our wildfire response system work. Our firefighters, our conservation officers and the support staff have proven their dedication time and again. Now is the time for governments to match that dedication and allow an interco-operative group to be able to work when it comes to fighting fires in Jasper and throughout the province of Alberta and Canada.

Alberta's future depends on these choices. If we're serious about protecting our communities and our environment, then we must rebuild and properly fund a system that safeguards all of them.

Thank you.

• (1235)

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

We'll go to Ms. Lindsay from the Forest Products Association of Canada next.

Ms. Kate Lindsay (Senior Vice President and Chief Sustainability Officer, Forest Products Association of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to be here.

I'm happy to speak to you today on behalf of the Forest Products Association of Canada.

FPAC represents Canada's forest sector nationally, with members operating in nearly every province across Canada. Our members are leaders in sustainable forest management and are committed to ensuring that our forests continue to provide environmental, social and economic benefits to Canadians.

The impacts of climate change, including more extreme wildfires, pose a significant threat not only to our forest ecosystems but also to the communities that depend on them. The tragedy that unfolded in Jasper is a sobering reminder that our forests and the people who live and work in and around them are at growing risk.

I have three main points I want to share with you today.

First, there is a need for proactive action. You've heard this from other panellists. We acknowledge that the federal government has made efforts to address wildfire risk and to enhance resilience, including the very recent investment in the wildfire resilient futures initiative. However, this funding, which included greater support for FireSmart and scaled-up preventive measures, such as fuel reduction, are likely insufficient to address the magnitude of the challenge before us collectively.

The second point I want to talk about is awareness. Again, this is a role the federal government can play: understanding vulnerability and wildfire exposure and landscape-scale solutions. You heard from Dr. Christian Messier about the "Diverse" project. Change is under way in forestry and forestry practices and in the role that forests can play in mitigating climate change and increasing resilience to it.

The concept and approach I'll refer to as "climate-smart forestry" can play a role in both mitigation and adaptation, and it can help the resilience of our forests. Climate-smart forestry adopts a holistic lens, focusing on three key pillars: mitigation potential, unlocking the ability of forests and forest products to reduce emissions through increased carbon uptake and storage; resilience, enhancing forest health and reducing susceptibility to disturbances like fire and pests through adaptive management—think fuel treatment, such as thinning and burning, and adapted silviculture; and product substitution, using forest-based products, such as forest residues, as bioenergy, which helps to displace more carbon-intensive energy sources and materials.

Lastly, there is an urgent need for policy to support and enable these proactive measures. We urge the federal government to elevate fire prevention and forest resilience as a national policy priority and to provide the necessary regulatory flexibility and support to implement these initiatives on a larger scale.

Undertaking this type of strategy or action plan will also identify the lack of a fire lens on existing federal government priorities and policies. This could take the form of a wildfire crisis strategy or could become a dedicated pillar of the national adaptation strategy.

We also recognize and support the critical role of indigenous peoples in returning good fire to the landscape in the form of cultural burning practices and management leadership.

In closing, while the road ahead is challenging, I think we've heard both from Dr. Flannigan and Dr. Messier that for the next 30 to 50 years, we're into very extreme conditions. However, Canada's forest sector can be a key partner in this whole-of-society approach, and FPAC remains committed to working with all partners to develop solutions that enhance the health and the resilience of Canada's forests.

Thank you for your attention today, and I look forward to answering any questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lindsay.

We'll go now to Deputy Premier Ellis for five minutes, please.

Hon. Mike Ellis (Deputy Premier and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services, Government of Alberta): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity for Minister Loewen and me to provide Alberta's perspective on the 2024 Jasper wildfire.

I want to begin my remarks by first expressing my thanks to all of the first responders who were out on the front lines during the incident. They put their own well-being on the line to protect Jasper, to help evacuate thousands and to help to rebuild. Their hard work and fearlessness was an inspiration for the whole province, so I do indeed thank them.

I'd also like to express my thanks to the Jasper mayor, Richard Ireland, who displayed tremendous leadership throughout the incident, despite even losing his own home. Thank you, Mayor.

This wildfire season in Alberta was challenging for many communities. We continue to be there, of course, to support our residents as needed. The Government of Alberta contributed to strengthening Jasper's emergency management system through annual reviews of its emergency management plans, training for various operational emergency management functions, advice on bylaw and legislative amendments, functional emergency management exercise support, and, finally, support during the 2024 wildfire.

This contributed to a successful evacuation of Jasper residents. A combined total of 10,000 Jasperites and upwards of 15,000 tourists

were evacuated through British Columbia and Alberta to reception centres in Grande Prairie, Edmonton, and Calgary.

I'd also like to extend my thanks to federal Minister LeBlanc, the public safety minister, and Minister Sajjan of Public Safety Canada for their prompt responses to our requests for assistance, and we do indeed thank them. This included, of course, support from the Canadian Armed Forces.

In addition to collaboration at a federal level, Alberta is currently working with the Canadian Red Cross to establish the terms of matching agreements and to provide assistance to those impacted by the Jasper wildfires.

However, I would like to take an opportunity to discuss issues with you regarding the unified command that had control over the jurisdiction during the Jasper crisis.

The fact is that Jasper is surrounded by a national park where the fire originated, presenting a very unique challenge. This challenge was that the park superintendent has oversight for all emergency management decisions for both the park and the municipality. This places the province in a position of being able to certainly influence but not decide, yet the Province of Alberta is responsible for most of the bill with regard to the recovery.

During the crisis, there was a unified command between the town and Parks Canada, wherein each was represented by its own incident commander. With that said, the issue that rises is that the superintendent remains responsible, unless willing to delegate his authorities, responsibilities and accountabilities.

We also had issues on jurisdictional responses to communicating to those who had been evacuated. With all levels of government having defined roles, communicating to Jasper was very difficult. Because of this, the Government of Alberta took it upon itself to organize and hold town halls to keep evacuees informed. The response to these town halls was that they were greatly appreciated by affected residents, who were wanting answers in their time of crisis.

As Alberta's Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services, I can say that there are two items that could assist Alberta with both Jasper's recovery and with recovery from future disaster events.

First, while the wildfire in Jasper originated within the Jasper National Park, Alberta has approved a disaster recovery program with a budget of about \$149 million to support Jasper's recovery. However, under the federal disaster financial assistance arrangements, the DFAA, only a portion of Alberta's costs are eligible for reimbursement, and we certainly ask that the DFAA cost-sharing formula be waived, given that this fire originated in the national park, which is federal jurisdiction. This is a fire that originated in the national park and then spread to the town of Jasper. Therefore, we need to have a discussion on the costs and that the federal government may be responsible for the costs of this fire.

Second, Alberta appreciates the revisions to the DFAA that were announced earlier this year, particularly the increased focus on mitigation and prevention. We would, however, request that the implementation be delayed from the current date of April 1, 2025, to the end of September 2025 to ensure that we're not implementing these changes in the midst of a future disaster. This short delay will also allow us time to change our policies to match the new guidelines and train up our local authority partners on these new guidelines.

In closing, I just want to say thank you to all who are very focused on making sure that we're all working towards a very common goal, which is, of course, the safety and security of Albertans.

I'll hand it back to you, Mr. Chair.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Deputy Premier.

We'll go now to Minister Loewen for five minutes.

Hon. Todd Loewen: Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to begin by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to all the firefighters and frontline responders who bravely faced the Jasper wildfire. Their courage and dedication has not gone unnoticed, especially during such devastating times.

Thank you to the committee members for the opportunity to discuss this event.

As we reflect on the tragic events surrounding this disaster, we must acknowledge the profound loss and devastation experienced by the residents of Jasper. Many have lost their homes and cherished belongings and the familiar landscapes they love.

I would also like to take a moment to thank Mayor Richard Ireland for his leadership and communications throughout this crisis, especially given his own personal loss during these events. It is a testament to his commitment to the community.

We will assist in the cleanup and restoration of these areas. Together, we can strengthen our wildfire management efforts and protect our landscapes for generations to come.

In light of the severity of recent wildfires, Alberta's government has implemented a unified command approach with municipalities across the province through Bill 21. We believe this strategy should also extend to federally controlled lands to ensure a coordinated response in the future without delays.

We are eager to lend our expertise in battling wildfires. It's clear that proactive forest management plays a critical role in safeguarding both our natural landscapes and the communities that depend on them. Alberta's approach to managing our forests exemplifies how dedicated attention to insect and disease management, carefully planned commercial harvesting, and prescribed burning and community fireguards can make a significant difference in reducing wildfire risk.

Alberta's government takes a comprehensive approach to protecting our forests. We have invested millions of dollars in mountain pine beetle control. Our mountain pine beetle control program leveraged the proactive harvesting of high-risk forests with an aggressive survey and control of infested trees. Infested trees pose a

major risk because they contribute to wildfire fuel loads. By cutting and burning these problem trees, we've made great strides in reducing the beetle population by 98% since 2019, showing that targeted resource management can make a significant impact.

We also proactively reduce wildfire risk by directing companies to focus commercial harvesting on old, high-hazard stands and beetle-killed stands, and using prescribed burns to effectively reduce the fuel load. This is an important point that I want to emphasize again: Proactive, managed disturbance can be, and is, good for the environment and people. Contrary narratives that frame disturbance as negative are simply oversimplistic and fail to recognize the very valuable aspects of carefully managed disturbance and how it has played an important part of our landscapes for thousands of years.

At a community and homeowner level, we use fireguards—pre-built, cleared strips of land—to act as barriers between forested areas and communities. These buffer zones help slow the spread of fires and allow firefighters an anchor point to plan burnout operations, as well as providing safe access points for containment efforts. We also provide funding for communities to plan and prepare and implement FireSmart principles.

In contrast, Parks Canada's approach, though well-intentioned, has drawn criticism for being reactive. The tragic events in Jasper highlight the importance of proactive measures in forest conservation and fire prevention.

Trees killed by the mountain pine beetle undoubtedly contributed greatly to the tragic events in Jasper. The vast number of dead trees accelerated the wildfire, making control actions difficult and arguably impossible. No small-scale, community FireSmart efforts would have helped with such an intense fire.

The wildfire that ultimately reached Jasper's townsite was within Jasper National Park, where Parks Canada has responsibility. Alberta and Parks Canada have a mutual aid agreement, and Alberta stepped in to assist from the very beginning. Alberta's government supported the response by sending firefighters, helicopters and heavy equipment. In fact, during the wildfire, we had more than 70 firefighters, multiple helicopters and critical equipment working alongside Parks Canada to fight the flames.

Our collaboration included real-time communication and strategic resource-sharing, with Alberta wildfire resources deployed to support the response from day one. At the time, Alberta was already battling several other large fires across the province. With over 160 active wildfires and over 50 classified as out of control, our priority was protecting communities and infrastructure, yet when Parks Canada needed help, we made it our top priority, and at no time did we suggest we were too busy, as has been purported. In fact, as we increased our wildfire budget by 55% in this last year, we had even more resources to share this year.

This wildfire posed serious risks for the crews on the ground, and sadly, we lost a true hero on August 3. Morgan Kitchen lost his life while fighting the fire. He was deeply committed to keeping our communities safe, and he gave everything for a cause he believed in.

• (1250)

Without the hard work and dedication of Morgan and all the wildland firefighters, the situation in Jasper could have been much worse. I know that I speak for all Albertans when I say that we are incredibly grateful for their efforts to protect our beloved mountain town.

As we look ahead, it's important to recognize how well Alberta's proactive forest management strategies are working, with more to do. By investing in prescribed burns, fireguards and harvesting practices, Alberta not only protects its natural heritage but also helps protect the safety and well-being of its citizens.

The wildfire in Jasper reminds us of how critical it is to focus on prevention and not just reacting when things go wrong. By pushing for robust forest management policies, we can create a future in which our forests thrive and our communities remain resilient in the face of wildfire challenges.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go to our six-minute round, and it is Mr. Lloyd who leads off.

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

Minister Loewen, will you table the records of Alberta's spending on wildfire management going back 10 years for this committee to review?

Hon. Todd Loewen: Yes, I will, absolutely.

Again, we increased the budget by 55%. We went from \$100.4 million to \$155.4 million, and we also increased our contingency amount that was available. Last year, it was \$1.5 billion and this year it was \$2 billion, so there's another 33% increase there.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you, Minister.

Minister Ellis, you alluded to issues with unified command. I was told that Alberta was not invited to join the unified command until July 27, I believe. Is that true? If so, why was there the delay for Alberta to be included in unified command?

• (1255)

Hon. Mike Ellis: That's a good question. I think it's a question that you should probably ask the minister or the national park.

We of course wanted to be included in the unified command from a decision-making perspective right from the very beginning. At this point, we were only in an advisory role, but believe me, these are conversations I had with Minister Sajjan, who did his best to try to get us into a decision-making position.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: The minister didn't seem opposed to you being in unified command, but was somebody within Parks Canada or the town, presumably, who was leading the unified command, involved?

Hon. Mike Ellis: In the conversation I had with Minister Sajjan, he did not seem opposed to our being in a position of unified command from a decision-making perspective, but he's not the decision-maker as the minister when it comes to who's on that.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Who is the decision-maker?

Hon. Mike Ellis: Well, it's the minister, I'm assuming, who is responsible for the national park.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: That would be Minister Guilbeault.

My next question is for our Alberta Forest Products Association witnesses.

Back in 2017, the Alberta Forest Products Association; the Conservative member of Parliament for Jasper, Jim Eglinski; and numerous forest scientists, including Ken Hodges, wrote numerous letters to the minister of environment at the time in this Liberal government—Catherine McKenna—about the catastrophic threat of a wildfire to Jasper.

The responses given to them at the time in question period and in letters were that “the ecological integrity” of the park must be protected. Your organization has to abide by regulations involving sustainability in all these matters. In your opinion, does it maintain the ecological integrity of a national park to maintain large swaths of dead pine beetle-infested forest?

Ms. Kate Lindsay: Thanks for the question.

I can't speak on behalf of Parks Canada because there are laws around what type of management can take place, but I can say it was known that.... I think what Minister Loewen said was that the forest product sector and the Province of Alberta were starting to implement the healthy pine strategy and actually targeting pine stands to reduce the risk of flammability, and that same level of intervention was not taking place within the park—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: To simplify my question, is it promoting ecological integrity to let stands of dead mature pine beetle-infested trees stand in a national park? Is that promoting ecological integrity?

Ms. Kate Lindsay: Well, I think it comes down to what level of risk we are comfortable with, based on where we live today, and that risk is increasing.

In the past, I think having static reserves was meant to act as essentially something that could be monitored in time, almost like a test case—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Would you say that young forests, though...? When a forest company replants a forest and puts in new trees, they're more resilient to forest fires. Is that the case?

Ms. Kate Lindsay: Yes. Essentially, you want to manage the level of fuels—

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you.

Ms. Kate Lindsay:—so reducing the fuels and replanting a forest will be more resilient, yes.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: You alluded to federal policies that are impacting wildfire risk, not just in national parks but outside of national parks, and you don't think a fire lens is being included.

Is the Species at Risk Act one of those policies? Is that contributing to wildfire risks in Canada?

Ms. Kate Lindsay: There is growing concern.

I've actually had the opportunity to fly over parts of Alberta, because I have been working on caribou recovery across Canada. There's growing concern that these older stands that have been set aside for caribou pose increased risk of burning, which will actually not be helpful for caribou recovery and not be helpful for communities that live in and around those areas. A fire lens is something that we are recommending.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Back in 2017, the Alberta Forest Products Association, in a letter in the Edmonton Journal, said it believed it would cost about \$85 million to combat the mountain pine beetle. It specifically cited the pine beetle being allowed to run rampant in Jasper National Park.

What do you think the cost would be to the federal government to manage the forests in Canada's national parks?

Ms. Kate Lindsay: Are you asking what would it cost?

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Maybe you can send that to me in writing, because I only have about 30 seconds left.

Ms. Kate Lindsay: Okay.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: One of my Liberal colleagues said the other day that they didn't think it was really feasible to do active forest management techniques in national parks and that it wouldn't really do much to prevent fires.

Do you agree with that assessment?

• (1300)

Ms. Kate Lindsay: There's actually a video that has been made showcasing how Canfor was brought in to do some thinning. I think it was effective in saving parts of Jasper. If that could have been deployed in a larger area, that could have been effective for mitigation. It is possible.

I think it will take some cross-learning between park staff and commercial forestry.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. van Koeverden, go ahead.

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

Minister Ellis, thanks for joining us today at the committee.

Our colleague Minister Sajjan, the Minister of Emergency Preparedness, was here last week, as you're probably aware. Minister Sajjan assured this committee that coordination between his office and your office and his officials and your officials was consistent and steady throughout the horrible event this past summer.

It's kind of gross to talk about jurisdiction when we're talking about people's lives and livelihoods, but that's where we are, I suppose.

It's my understanding that with respect to the unified command, Alberta was at the table immediately, from the officials' perspective, and that Alberta was the first call from Minister Sajjan's office.

Was that your understanding this summer?

Hon. Mike Ellis: From an advisory perspective, yes.

Minister Sajjan and I worked very well together. It was that working relationship that worked very well for the people of Jasper and the critical incident we were facing at that particular time.

My comments are really only in reference to the command and the decision-making ability. We were only there in an advisory capacity; we were not there in a decision-making capacity.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: I understand. Thank you, Minister Ellis.

Hon. Mike Ellis: Thank you.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Last week, I asked that the Parks Canada staff here relay this committee's collective sympathy and gratitude for all of the work that they did. Indeed, the work that was a collaboration between all of these various groups saved lives. I don't think I have to ask for unanimous consent in this committee, but I hope that you could express the same to your colleagues and staff. What happened this summer was a tragedy, but the preparatory work undertaken by Parks Canada, by your colleagues and by the ministers as well saved lives. Collectively, we'd like to thank you for that.

Mr. Gault, we've heard some conflicting reports regarding how well various levels of government and jurisdictions collaborated. We've also heard conflicting reports with respect to funding for wildfires in the province of Alberta.

Could you highlight for us, from the perspective of the employment of firefighters and teams of first responders, what we could all be doing better to ensure better-resourced personnel when it comes to both avoiding these disasters and responding to them?

Mr. James Gault: Thank you for the question.

What it boils down to in the province of Alberta is this: We have wildland firefighters who are seasonal. A lot of them are students. If you look back across the news, you can see that Minister Ellis said that we would be ready by March and then that we'd be ready by April. We were still not ready by May.

I'll point out that our wildfire staff make \$22 an hour, with no benefits or pre-cancer coverage. Other provinces are offering it. It's similar in Ontario, which is offering a \$10,000 signing bonus. If we look at this year alone, we didn't get the people who chose to go to Ontario for a \$10,000 bonus and become a wildfire fighter there. We brought 174 people back from Ontario to help fight the fires in Jasper and across the province.

The government can say they are putting in \$151 million, which they did, but that's over three years and goes towards tankers we can't use and towards helicopters we can't use when we're flying in smoke. It is not going into the resources on the ground, and that is what is needed. They are undervalued, underpaid and just not coming back.

I believe the government cut 247 positions in 2021, including 57 in wildfire management. This means that in 2023, we started out a serious year with no staff at all.

• (1305)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Okay. That's very clear. Thank you very much.

It's my hope that this government's Bill C-224 will help unify the inclusion of various cancers linked to firefighting right across the province, because I know that unfortunately there are provinces that treat various cancers differently. We know that when these heroes are exposed to those toxic chemicals, it's an employment-related illness. It should be treated as such.

Thank you for your work. This has been a tough couple of meetings for anybody who has ever spent time battling a fire. I talked to a couple of my friends who, after leaving sport, went into firefighting. This summer was very devastating for Albertans. I have family in Jasper, and it was a very emotional time. If you could also relay our collective gratitude and sympathy to the folks you represent, I'd really appreciate it.

The perspective of... How we value and see biodiversity in Canada has also been highlighted by various academics and witnesses on this committee. With wildfires and natural disasters increasing, I think we have to step up as a committee and as a government. When we lose nature, we jeopardize a lot of things we rely on and take for granted. Those include clean air, clean water, flood regulation and climate regulation. In Halton, we rely on our conservation authority. I know that would relate to this.

Mr. Chair, if I may, I'll put on notice the following motion.

"I move that that this committee undertake a pre-study on Bill C-73, an act respecting transparency and accountability in relation to certain commitments Canada has made under the Convention on Biological Diversity; that to this end, the committee hold a minimum of eight meetings; that the committee invite the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada and officials; and that the last two meetings be dedicated to clause-by-clause consideration—

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: It has been emailed.

The Chair: You're not moving it.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: No, I'm just making a notice of motion.

—"and that this study begin within 10 days of the adoption of this motion."

The Chair: Okay. If it has been circulated, we can stop there. It's just notice.

We'll go to Madame Paupé.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Paupé: Thank you to the witnesses for being here with us.

A lot of figures have been going around regarding what climate change may have cost. Those figures are a good indication that it costs a lot. We do not talk about that enough to my liking.

Ms. Daniels, you may be the best person to answer my question.

In 2023 in Quebec, there were 566 fires in what are called intensive protection zones and 147 others in what is called the northern zone. An area of over four million hectares was burned. In 99.9% of cases, the fire was started by lightning. The number of such fires is higher than the total number recorded in the last 20 years from all causes.

When we go to the website of SOPFEU, Quebec's organization for the protection of forests against fire, we learn that it has enough capacity to fight 30 fires at a time, or one fire covering more than 1,000 hectares. On June 4, 2023, there were 155 active fires at the same time. When we see these figures, we grasp the magnitude of what is really waiting for us.

What do you think a government can or should do to help plan the allocation of emergency resources when there are multiple catastrophic events happening at the same time? That is exactly what happened in Quebec: Even though there were people fighting the fires, the number of fires was far too high.

Do you have any advice about what a government could do?

• (1310)

[*English*]

Dr. Lori Daniels: This problem of multiple fires at the same time causing a crisis is not limited to Quebec: We are finding it in provinces across the country. We know that wildfires and extreme wildfires are overwhelming our suppression capability and exceeding all modern technology. This is a global problem, which is why we are also advocating proactive and transformative forest management to ensure that our landscapes and communities will be resilient to future fires through fuels mitigation and prescribed and cultural burns concentrated around communities, but also expanding onto the landscape.

The forest industry and forest management have the greatest impact on our landscapes across Canada. It is critical that our forest management be transformed in a way that ensures that we have resilient ecosystems into the future, which involves diversifying our silviculture and harvesting practices and the trees that we replant, and also modifying the way that we allow fire to interact with those forests.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Thank you, Ms. Daniels.

Mr. Loewen, you are a member of the Government of Alberta. As you know, Bill C-76, An Act to amend the Canada National Parks Act seeks to eliminate barriers to rebuilding the town of Jasper, one element being to allow for rationalization of local authorities' decision-making process. Do you believe that this bill will facilitate rebuilding Jasper following the forest fires?

[English]

Hon. Todd Loewen: I think it will be interesting to see how Bill C-76 works out when it's actually implemented. I think Bill-76 is a good start.

We would like to see fewer barriers and have more autonomy within Alberta and within the town of Jasper itself. We have a municipality there that's capable of making decisions and a provincial government that has its Municipal Government Act, which I believe is capable of taking care of things there too, so I would love to see fewer restrictions from the federal government and Parks Canada when it comes to rebuilding Jasper.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Thank you.

Mr. Gault, you are the spokesperson for employees, for union members. Do the members of your union often talk to you about the extent of climate change-related problems?

[English]

Mr. James Gault: Yes, our members talk quite frequently about climate change, how the fires act and how they have been growing every year.

The fires are getting harder and hotter to fight. In some of the areas we never had fires before, but with climate change happening now, these are new areas where the pine beetle infestation was before. Everybody knew the fire would start there at some point, but I don't think anybody took into consideration that climate change would increase that.

We are now facing the reality that for those who don't even want to agree with climate change, the fires are getting hotter and harder to fight, and our members are facing that as their resources are being stretched thin.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Pauzé.

Ms. Collins, we are going to conclude with you, given that the meeting has already gone on for two hours and we do not have the resources needed to keep it going much longer. The floor is yours.

[English]

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here—

Mr. Dan Mazier (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Just hold on a second. I have a point of order.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Do we not have resources until 1:30?

The Chair: Yes, but we're already at 1:15.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Yes, so we have some more rounds....

Oh, I hear what you're saying. Okay.

The Chair: Yes. We're going to have only 30 seconds. It doesn't make any sense to—

Mr. Dan Mazier: Will we do another round, though?

The Chair: Well, we have resources only until 1:30.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Okay, so are we going until 1:30, then?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Okay.

The Chair: Well, I mean, if we have five minutes left, we can't have.... You know, we can talk about—

Mr. Dan Mazier: We'll keep on going, though. Okay. Very good.

The Chair: No, I didn't say we'd keep on going. I'm saying that we can't start another round if we have only five minutes.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Maybe we could discuss this after my round.

The Chair: We're not eating into your time. I've been asked a question by Mr. Mazier.

The time is really tight. There's no way we can have another round of questions.

Mr. Dan Mazier: Then after Ms. Collins....

• (1315)

The Chair: That will take us to almost 1:25.

Mr. Dan Mazier: How? It's only a quarter after.

The Chair: She has six minutes and it's now 1:21.

Let's see how it goes.

Mr. Dan Mazier: The more we talk....

The Chair: Let's see how it goes, okay?

Mr. Dan Mazier: Maybe we can do another round.

Thank you.

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

My first question is for you, Mr. Gault. I want to echo the thanks to your members. Their heroic action is constantly keeping communities safe. We've heard a lot about the courage of your members. We've heard politicians thank them, but oftentimes those thanks ring hollow if there isn't the support and the resources they need.

Before the Jasper fire and leading up into this wildfire season, what you were hearing from firefighters? Can you talk a little bit about what concerns were being raised?

Mr. James Gault: Thank you very much for the question.

We have this conversation every year that they are understaffed and underappreciated and that there's a lack of respect from the government. They are constantly receiving cuts.

As I said, a couple of years ago they received a few cuts, and that follows in. It is very hard to do a job in any province when you are stretched thin but are being asked for more and more. It becomes frustrating.

Our members have no benefits. If they're sick, their choice is to not to go to work, but if they're on a camp, they're staying at the camp because they need the unemployment benefit. Fire season is lasting longer, but our season isn't lasting longer. We are now down to maybe 50 or 60, and I'm sure Minister Loewen, if he wants to, because we have contract firefighters now.... Last year we had 64 carry-over fires, well over the number that we normally have.

What's happening is that there's a feeling of "Why am I doing this?" They're doing it because they love the job and because they love Albertans and because it's something that they want to do, but you can only ask people paid \$22 an hour to go in and risk their lives.... The loss of Morgan Kitchen was a drastic loss felt through the Alberta wildland. It's something that will take a while to get over.

For us, the complaint is the finger-pointing. We are just going in to fight fires. We have to remember that on the 24th, we were removed from Jasper. We do not fight structure fires. The smoke was too bad and we don't have respiratory gear, so they were moved to Hinton for their safety, but they wanted to be in there fighting. We have members who are municipal firefighters, so they can continue to fight.

At the end of the day, they're frustrated and tired.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Yes. It feels like we've heard from the province that there were delays in being invited into unified command in a decision-making capacity. We've heard complaints that the provincial government didn't have capacity or so on, but really, it's the failure to collaborate effectively.

People don't care, necessarily, if it's provincial or federal jurisdiction; they want their communities to be safe, and firefighters want to make sure that they are safe, or as safe as they can be while they're fighting these fires.

Mr. James Gault: What I'll say is that the issue that's going on is that Jasper is a municipality inside federal land, but it's been a municipality since 2001. The province has a responsibility to those members. If they're not choosing to use it, there are reasons or legislation that she can use. There are new legislation powers that she gave.

This isn't a slight on just this government; it's any government. They have the ability to step in earlier. They chose not to. They put our firefighters at risk. They say, yes, we're so thankful for you, but then they say in the paper that you're not worth a raise. You're not worth anything else.

That's the battle we have in the province as we move towards privatization.

Ms. Laurel Collins: You know, \$22 an hour for a wildland firefighter and no health benefits is appalling when you think about the fact that these men and women are risking their lives to keep communities safe, but it's also a practical challenge when it comes to retention. Can you talk a little bit about the impacts you've seen when it comes to recruitment and retention?

Mr. James Gault: When it comes to recruitment and retention, the issue we're having is that we work on a scale in the province. Every year you work, you go up a scale. When it comes to firefighting, you have only a four- or five-month season, so it takes you three years to move up. You come into Alberta, you get the experience and you move on to another area. That's what's happening. We're losing the depth of knowledge we need to fight these fires. We have people with two or three years of experience who are doing the best they can. They are working hard and they are saving people's lives and property.

What it boils down to, when you look at it, is that every year it's the same thing. Last year Minister Loewen was supposed to have them hired by March. It was still well into May when we had brand new people going into fires. It wasn't just the Jasper fire. Remember, we had 55 out-of-control fires across this province and evacuations in Fort McMurray and different areas.

• (1320)

Ms. Laurel Collins: We know that firefighters are dying at higher rates of cancer than they are of fighting fires. That is pretty appalling, when you think about the fact that you are talking about firefighters who don't have cancer coverage.

Can you talk about the importance of that in particular?

Mr. James Gault: Other provinces, like B.C. and Ontario, are starting to give pre-cancer coverage. You hear on the news that the smoke is so bad in Fort McMurray that people need to be inside because the smoke can cause cancer. Then you hear that the people who are actually fighting the fires don't have that coverage. It really makes them feel like they are not appreciated.

There was a minister—and I'm not sure if it was a minister, but it was somebody from the government—who was talking about our wildland firefighters. Firefighters understand the act of fighting fire. They are supposed to be behind the smoke plume. If they are in front of the smoke plume, they're in the wrong spot.

That is not on the firefighter. That is on wind and different things that are happening. The government continues to say to firefighters, "It's up to you to be responsible." With no gear, no nothing, why stay? Unfortunately, they stay, because they love Albertans, and many of them have memories they want to protect.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Collins.

We have no time left. Our resources are up at 1.30. We have no time for another round that would equitably treat six questioners.

I'm going to thank the witnesses, both online and present.

The meeting is adjourned.

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