HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

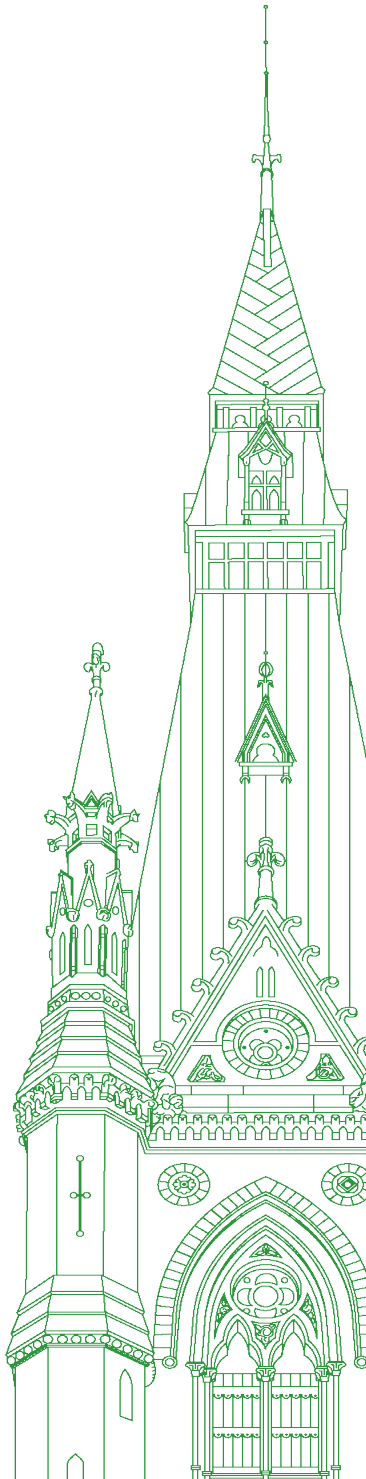
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on National Defence

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 040

Tuesday, November 22, 2022



Chair: The Honourable John McKay

Standing Committee on National Defence

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● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

This is the 40th meeting of the defence committee. We are continuing our study on Arctic search and rescue.

We have with us two witnesses in person. It's shocking. We're getting so used to having people online that we'll have to swear them in and all of that sort of stuff.

I will call on Neil O'Rourke, assistant commissioner of the Arctic region, to present for five minutes. I'm assuming that both Mr. Wight and Mr. O'Rourke will be willing to answer members' questions after that.

Go ahead, Mr. O'Rourke.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke (Assistant Commissioner, Arctic Region, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): *Bonjour* and good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members.

My name is Neil O'Rourke, and I'm the assistant commissioner for the Arctic region for the Canadian Coast Guard.

My colleague and I appreciate the opportunity to come here today to appear before this committee on behalf of the department and to have a conversation about icebreaking and then search and rescue.

I am accompanied today by Mr. Robb Wight, who is the director general of vessel procurement.

[*Translation*]

We are here today to talk about the Canadian Coast Guard's icebreaking capabilities in the Arctic.

[*English*]

The Coast Guard's mandate is to ensure the safety of mariners in Canadian waters and the protection of Canada's marine environment, as well as to support Canada's economic growth through the safe and efficient movement of maritime trade. We also contribute to our country's sovereignty and security, including in the north, through our presence in all Canadian waters.

[*Translation*]

The Canadian Coast Guard is mission-ready 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and operates in almost...

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): On a point of order. There is no interpretation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Are we good?

Please repeat yourself.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: The Canadian Coast Guard operates in almost any and all weather conditions during the Arctic shipping season.

[*English*]

This year, the Coast Guard is celebrating its 60th anniversary. Over the years, the Coast Guard has witnessed many changes in the north, partly due to climate change, a changing landscape, an increased international interest and a growing domestic population.

Through these changes, the Canadian Coast Guard has played and will continue to play a critical role in Arctic safety and security.

[*Translation*]

Our fleet is at the core of the delivery of Coast Guard programs, and our icebreakers are at the core of our current fleet. Up to 19 icebreakers operate each winter to make sure that marine traffic moves safely everywhere in the country, and their number ranges from 7 to 9 in the Arctic.

[*English*]

These same icebreakers also facilitate access to open waters in the spring so that the fisheries can be opened as early as possible, while not compromising the lives of mariners. In between what we call the “shoulder seasons” of spring and fall, a number of those ice-capable vessels, which range from seven to nine each year, travel up and down to serve the Arctic.

From facilitating critical resupply activities to surveying the bottom of waterways so that hydrographic charts can be produced, providing marine safety for search and rescue or environmental response missions, and contributing to Canada's Arctic sovereignty, these icebreakers have been and will continue to be of critical importance to Canada's north—

The Chair: Mr. O'Rourke, perhaps you could slow it down a bit. You're being translated simultaneously, and the translator is having a bit of difficulty keeping up.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I apologize for that.

The Chair: It's no problem.

Thank you.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Indeed, the criticality of these icebreakers cannot be understated.

[*Translation*]

As outlined in the recently published Office of the Auditor General report on the surveillance of Arctic waters, over the past 30 years, the number of voyages in Canadian Arctic waters has more than tripled, due to factors such as reduced sea ice cover and advances in technology, shipping and tourism. We know that increased traffic means more possibilities and more risk—and an increase in demand for CCG programs and services.

[*English*]

In response to this concern, one of the key actions we are taking is strengthening and renewing our fleet and increasing our capacity and presence in the Arctic in particular, thanks to the national shipbuilding strategy.

Investments for icebreaking and ice-capable vessels announced through the national shipbuilding strategy to date include funding for 16 multi-purpose vessels, six program icebreakers and two Arctic offshore patrol vessel ships. The Coast Guard will also be building two new polar icebreakers. They will be larger and more powerful than the current heavy icebreakers in our fleet and will enable the Coast Guard to operate in the Canadian Arctic throughout the year with enhanced capabilities to support a variety of taskings and provide a capability unmatched to date by the current fleet.

Since we know that not all of the new vessels will be ready by the time the new vessels come on line, we are also making important investments to extend the life of our current fleet. Known as vessel life extensions, or VLEs, we safely prolong the life of our fleet so that the Canadian Coast Guard can operate and have the proper equipment to perform their crucial work.

In 2018, the Government of Canada awarded a contract for the acquisition and conversion of three commercial medium icebreakers. They're helping to ensure the continuity of service for the Coast Guard's icebreaking operations and the safe passage of marine traffic through Canada's waterways.

This year, we've also had the benefit of seeing the acquisition of a fourth commercial light icebreaker that will be ready to serve for the 2023 icebreaking season.

These vessels will ensure uninterrupted service by the Coast Guard while existing vessels are taken out of service to undergo vessel life extension work. One can view these four icebreakers called “interim” as car loaners—the principle is that we bring an existing vessel into the shipyard, but we have the use of these interim vessels in the meantime, just like you would do at a garage.

To top this up, we have also started making use of third party vessels, or what we call “spot charters” through established standing offer contracts that allow us to draw down on these services if and when required. This allows us to supplement our fleet when demand exceeds our capacity.

In closing, I am also proud to inform you that the Coast Guard is working to develop our first Arctic strategy based on four years of collaboration with Inuit, first nation and Métis partners as we stood up the Arctic region. This will provide strategic direction to our Coast Guard members for the coming decade.

We're aware that the decades to come will bring many more changes to the Arctic and the development of such a strategy will be ever-evolving. That being said, it is with this strategic planning that we position and strengthen the Coast Guard for the long-term. The Coast Guard's working to ensure the organization is well placed to meet the expanding needs of our partners and clients.

Thank you very much for your attention. Rob Wight and I would be very pleased to answer your questions.

Thank you.

● (1105)

The Chair: Thank you, Assistant Commissioner O'Rourke.

The first questioner is Mr. Bezan for six minutes, please.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our commissioners for joining us today and for their testimony.

We are now seeing increased near peer and geopolitical powers congregating in the Arctic. There's the build-up of the Russian military in their Arctic with more capabilities for protecting their Arctic sovereignty and projecting that power. We're also seeing China investing in their own People's Liberation Army Navy with heavy icebreakers even though they're not an Arctic nation. They're a near-Arctic nation and have interests there through the “belt and road” initiative and, of course, their interest in establishing their own strategy in what they call the “polar silk road”.

Has as the Canadian Coast Guard provided any input or made any requests to the Government of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: With regard specifically to the Indo-Pacific strategy, it is not something that the Coast Guard has been very involved in.

I would need to confirm with some of my counterparts in headquarters to see if we have been engaged. I am responsible for all of the operations in the north, but of course that kind of initiative would be managed out of our headquarters.

While I do not, to the best of my knowledge, believe that we have been participating in the development of it, we would need to confirm and get back to you.

Mr. James Bezan: Has the Canadian Coast Guard been engaged at all in discussions with other Arctic Council members as to how we deal with a more aggressive Russia in the Arctic, as well as the growing interest of the Communist Party of China in our Arctic by using both commercial vessels and scientific research vessels that have been transiting through the Northwest Passage, as well as their People's Liberation Army Navy icebreaking capabilities?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: With regard to our international collaboration, we do in fact work extensively with the other Arctic nations. Up until the beginning of 2022, when there was the Russian reinvasion of Ukraine, we worked with a total of eight Arctic nations—so seven others, including ourselves and Russia—as part of both the Arctic Council and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum.

Under the Arctic Council, as you are likely aware, there are different committees or themes. One of them, the EPPR or the environmental protection group, is something that the Canadian Coast Guard leads on behalf of the Canadian government. There are multiple departments that sit there. We, as the Coast Guard, are kind of the lead agency as part of that work.

The Arctic Coast Guard Forum is a forum that exists between the coast guards of the eight Arctic nations. Again, like with the Arctic Council, the work was paused in early March, following the reinvasion of Ukraine. We continue to have dialogues and conversations with the six other Arctic nations, both under the auspices of the Arctic Council—led by foreign affairs and GAC, of course—and the ACGF, with the coast guards more specifically, about a way forward in this changing environment. We participate as part of those two fora.

In addition, we have bilateral relationships with all of the other Arctic nations, minus Russia. We work very closely, including with our next-door neighbour, the U.S. Coast Guard of the 17th District in Alaska. I work very closely with the rear admiral who's the commander there. We talk about everything, including some of the issues you've raised. We also work very closely with the Danish Armed Forces and the Joint Arctic Command base in Nuuk, Greenland.

Essentially, for me, those are our next-door neighbours from an operational perspective. We compare notes on maritime awareness and such things related to the two countries that you mentioned.

● (1110)

The Chair: You have about two minutes.

Mr. James Bezan: I want to switch over briefly to shipbuilding. You're saying that we have orders for 16 mixed-purpose vessels and six icebreakers. Does that include the two new polar icebreakers, or is that six plus two? There are also the two AOPS.

What's the timeline? Especially with the polar icebreakers, are we going to be able to get them in the water before the *Louis S. St-Laurent*'s life expectancy expires?

Mr. Robert Wight (Director General, Vessel Procurement, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you for the question.

To answer your first question, the two polar icebreakers are in addition to the six program icebreakers that we have. The first polar icebreaker will be built out in Vancouver Shipyard. We are currently doing the engineering work on that, and construction is slated to begin in 2025. We're currently looking at delivery in 2030, so it will be in time to relieve the *Louis S. St-Laurent*.

We are now doing some vessel life extension work on her in her off-season, which will keep her going. We hope to get her through the 2030 season, because she'll be 61 at that point.

Mr. James Bezan: On top of that timeline on the polar icebreakers, what about the replacement on the other ships?

Are we going to see any gaps in the ability to project both search and rescue, as well as the enforcement of Canadian law in the Arctic, if we don't have our vessels and platforms to work off of?

The Chair: Answer very briefly, please.

Mr. Robert Wight: Very briefly, the big risk in all of this is the retirement of the *Louis S. St-Laurent* before the polar icebreaker come on line with the vessels that Neil mentioned that we've bought. We can handle the low- and middle-Arctic well without that, but it's the high-Arctic with the polar icebreaker that we're worried about if it doesn't get delivered, because the only two ships that can get up there are the new polar one and the old *Louis S. St-Laurent*.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

Madame Lambropoulos, you have six minutes, please.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here with us today and answering some of our questions.

One of the first questions I'm going to ask is what the main challenges are that you experience in conducting search and rescue operations in the Arctic.

Also, you started talking a bit about a strategy and working with indigenous communities in the north, and increasing their involvement in the way you do things. Could you elaborate a bit on that and let us know how the collaboration may also help with some of the challenges that you are currently experiencing?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Maybe I'll start with the collaboration. We work very closely with other federal departments, as I think you're aware, for search and rescue. We work closely with the Canadian Forces as well. What I want to focus on is our work with Inuit specifically in the north.

We've made significant investments over the last few years to develop and expand our Coast Guard auxiliary, which are essentially volunteers across the country who participate formally in the search and rescue system.

In the north it looks a bit different than it does elsewhere in Canada, where it's typically leveraging people who are already on the water—fishers and others. In the north there are a lot fewer community boats, if you will.

We have also had a very successful program over the last few years where we've been able to provide funding to communities to procure a search and rescue vessel to become part of the Coast Guard auxiliary. We're very happy now to have 32 communities participating in this—46 vessels and over 430 volunteer—as part of our auxiliary in the north. This is a really great asset for search and rescue, especially when it comes to community-based search and rescue.

When you talk about some of the challenges, there are many in operating in the north. Right off the top of my head I'll start with the distance. The Canadian Arctic is huge. On the one hand, it's a small place where Inuit travel from community to community, and it is very well covered; but on the other hand, people don't necessarily appreciate that moving ships or assets from one part of the Arctic to another can take days at a time.

In addition to the distance, one of the challenges is the communication. In most of Canada we have what we call VHF radio, which essentially allows mariners on the water to communicate with the Coast Guard and our emergency services should they get into trouble. Outside a few pockets in the north, that doesn't exist.

What happens is that we respond to many missing hunter reports, where a community is expecting a group of hunters to come home on a specific day and they don't. Then they call us, and most of the time the hunters are fine. They have simply decided to delay their trip home, but they have no way of communicating with their home community, so the community will end up calling the search and rescue system. We deploy assets at a huge cost to the Government of Canada ultimately, and all of this, in theory, could have been avoided if there were communication. That's one challenge we see that's a bit unique to the north.

In addition, we have infrastructure and assets. Again, as much as we talk about the icebreakers—we have seven to nine operating in the north—when you look again at the vast geography, they aren't that much when you're talking about coverage for search and rescue. We have limited other supports. We have the auxiliary, which is really great and strong. In the rest of Canada, we have a layer of local search and rescue stations. In the Arctic, we have one Arctic marine response station in Rankin Inlet.

I'll stop there, but hopefully that gives you a bit of a sense of some of the challenges we deal with.

● (1115)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Yes, it helps a lot. Thank you.

I guess the main thing is limited infrastructure, limited connectivity.

Can you speak a little bit to how increasing infrastructure investments in the north, especially during this period, would benefit the communities there as well as our defence position?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Yes. I know there's a lot of conversation, of course, here as well as in the north about building multi-use infrastructure. We're certainly on that page.

I know in talking with our partners at National Defence and the Canadian Forces, there are possibly opportunities as there are investments in the modernization of NORAD.

At the community level, we also have those conversations. We're very well aware of some great work that has been done by ITK, the national Inuit organization, and NTI, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated—just to name two organizations—on actually mapping out what the infrastructure gaps look like.

From our perspective, the areas that are aligned with the Coast Guard and essentially marine infrastructure, we're very much in agreement that that kind of infrastructure would best help us as well, as a Coast Guard to deliver services.

From our perspective, part of our standing up an Arctic region and having permanent capacity in the north was about changing how we did business, and that's really looking at doing everything in partnership with Inuit, first nations and Métis.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you.

You've mentioned how climate change also has changed the reality in the north and has made it more accessible.

What are the plans going forward to make sure we still are able to protect the Arctic, and Canada, I guess, through the Arctic? How are we involving the indigenous communities in that plan?

The Chair: There are two questions to answer in a little less than 30 seconds, please.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I'll touch on that. There's a lot of stuff in there.

The first thing I'll say about climate change is that things are changing. There sometimes is a misperception that melting ice means there's a much longer navigation season. What we're seeing actually is increased risk, because multi-year ice that used to stay much higher north is now breaking off and coming south.

We don't necessarily know week to week. One week in a specific area historically the conditions would be pretty much the same. Now we're sometimes seeing ice in one year, no ice in the next year. That's really complicated for voyage planning.

With regard to how we—

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're going to have to leave it there.

Thank you.

Ms. Lambropoulos is young, but she's learned. She's very clever.

● (1120)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, welcome to the committee.

You have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank our guests.

Good morning, colleagues.

I would like to ask a few brief questions, but the answers may have to be longer.

Mr. O'Rourke, of the 19 icebreakers, how many are operational during the winter?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: The national fleet has 19 icebreakers. The number of icebreakers in operation depends on the month or week. As a rule, we try as much as possible to maintain ships in the spring and fall, when there is no ice on the St. Lawrence, in southern Canada and in the north.

Mr. Luc Desilets: How many are functional during the coldest time of the year?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I'm going to have to send you the information about the year 2022.

I am an expert on our Arctic activities; the 19 icebreakers are part of the national program and the number in service varies from year to year. If you want the numbers for this year, I don't have them, but we can certainly get back to you on that.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you have any idea of the number? Is it half? I personally have no idea.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: It's much less than that.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Is less than half enough to keep Canada safe?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Once again, I will talk about the Arctic. In our view, the vessels currently available are sufficient to deliver our current programs in the north.

Mr. Luc Desilets: What do you mean by “sufficient to deliver our current programs”?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: In principle, it starts with icebreaking. Every year there are between 50 and 80 icebreaking requests in the north, which require a number of ships. Normally, four or five ships are needed. In addition, our platform helps scientists in Canada, in our own department and elsewhere; a few ships are focused on that. For us, the magic number is between seven and nine vessels per season, and the Coast Guard is able to provide them.

Mr. Luc Desilets: This was alluded to earlier, but I would like to follow up on it. The Auditor General's report identifies a number of deficiencies with respect to infrastructure projects. Obviously, this is detrimental to the proper functioning of the fleet. It would involve procurement risks, she says.

Do you agree with this finding?

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Wight: Yes, there are risks in the provision of the new fleet and there will continue to be, bringing on Davie, when they get under the umbrella agreement and start building our program icebreakers. There will continue to be risks, but there is sufficient mitigation put aside in the purchase of the “new to us” icebreakers that Neil mentioned.

We are confident that we will be able to continue to send seven to nine vessels to the Arctic as required and keep the St. Lawrence open, as well, down into the Great Lakes, until the new fleet arrives.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. O'Rourke, given everything that's going on right now geopolitically and the Russian arsenal, which is quite large compared to ours, are the two polar icebreakers that are being ordered going to be enough to keep Canada safe?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Thank you for your question.

As you know, the Coast Guard plays an important security role in the Arctic. However, we are not a military organization as such. Obviously, we work closely with the Canadian Forces and the RCMP. In answer to your question, I cannot necessarily answer for everyone. However, in terms of our responsibilities for economic and environmental security, among other things, I believe that the two polar icebreakers and the rest of the investments that are being made now will allow us to meet the needs in the years to come.

Also, over time, we have worked with Russia by participating in the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. Last year, all the Arctic countries, including Russia, participated in an exercise at the North Pole. What we learned there is that no country, not even Russia and its capabilities and investments, would be able to organize a search and rescue mission for a ship at the North Pole, for example, on its own. This is the reality that the seven remaining countries are working on. There is going to be an incident, because already this year the cruises are starting to go up to the North Pole.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

Unfortunately, your time is up.

[*English*]

Ms. Mathyssen, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): It's a good segue because I was interested.

Thank you for being here today.

We've heard a lot about that increase in traffic and as it relates to cruise ships. Ultimately, as that Arctic opens up, the interest in the extraction of natural resources is going to be very high. Do you believe that it would be beneficial for the government to start to limit what that traffic looks like, including commercially and in terms of that extraction and that tourist aspect, considering also the environmental impact it has on the Arctic itself?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I don't think it would be necessarily appropriate for me to weigh in completely on all aspects of it from my role in the Coast Guard. That being said, I certainly can speak a little bit about vessel traffic.

One of the things to keep in mind is that we often hear about big percentage increases in the OAG report. Very accurately, it says it's tripled. What we're talking about when we say doubling and tripling is maybe instead of one vessel coming by a day, two are a day. It isn't the 417 or the 401. I think that's important to keep in mind when we talk about vessel traffic.

Transport Canada has rules in place with regard to the carriage of AIS, which essentially allows us to track vessels. The rules that are in place right now do not require small vessels to have it. Any ship that has fewer than 12 passengers or any smaller sailboat or yacht or those kinds of, what we call, adventure tourists in some cases are not required to carry any AIS or have that on board.

We see that some of those folks who come through the north will work with us. They'll actually check in on a daily basis to let us know where they are for safety purposes, but others don't. They'll just come into our waters, and we don't necessarily know where they are. Sometimes they get into trouble. From a search and rescue perspective, we'd certainly be in favour of having a better capability of knowing where some of these smaller vessels are at all times so that if and when there is a problem, we can kind of skip the search part and get right to the rescue part, which in the north in cold waters can make the difference between life and death.

Hopefully that gives you a bit of a sense of what we're talking about.

I might also just mention that any conversation about limiting ship traffic in the north would probably be viewed by other nations, which I know have made it very clear to us in the Coast Guard and to others that they have different views on the Northwest Passage.... They're internal waters, of course, for Canada, but not everybody has that perspective, so they might have things to say about any additional changes to the regime in the north with regard to ships.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: You talked about that relationship in terms of the Arctic Council. Its being on hold has caused a lot of issues, even just in terms of gathering data and research.

We've talked—and we've had witnesses come forward in this committee—about how Russian people see their Arctic as a vital part of their identity.

In 2023, there will be a change of leadership. What do you think of that relationship going forward and the continuation of the Arctic Council without Russia's involvement? What do you foresee in terms of problems with that?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: With regard to the Arctic Council, ultimately it's not for me to weigh in on exactly what the future should look like. However, I will talk about it from our coast guard perspective.

I'll come back to that example I gave about the cruise ship at the North Pole.

Our reality right now is that if there is an incident at the North Pole that requires an evacuation of a cruise ship, we will have to work with Russia because, as some of you may be aware, Canada and all the other Arctic nations have signed on to an international search and rescue and environmental response agreement, or MOSPA agreement, which essentially has the Arctic divvied up amongst the eight nations. We have a responsibility internationally to deliver on search and rescue right up to the North Pole. So do the Russians on the other side and then, of course, the Americans and the Danes.

Realistically, if there is an incident that happens at the North Pole, we will need to work with them. From our perspective, while appreciating and understanding the geopolitical reality right now, we come back to that reality that, whether we like it or not, we may be put in that situation. As a general rule for us, exercising and communicating with partners in advance of an incident is going to likely lead to better outcomes in the incident.

● (1130)

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: In the very limited time I have left....

Across the board, and certainly in terms of the CAF, we've seen the recruitment and retention numbers declining. Are you seeing the same in the Coast Guard?

Also, you mentioned that you supplement your fleet with third party vessels. What sort of training is expected of them or provided to them when they're dealing in such dangerous waters?

The Chair: There must be a pattern here: two questions in the last 30 seconds.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I'll get into the personnel one a little bit.

We're in a bit of a different situation from the Canadian Armed Forces. We haven't seen a declining number. That being said, in the last few years, the number of Coast Guard members has actually increased.

We still have, though.... There's an international shortage of mariners. Certainly, recruiting and hiring enough people to be able to operate all of the new vessels that we talked about is, really, one of our top priorities, if not our top priority, at this point in time. Certainly, it's something that's top of mind because, again, we're operating in an environment where, internationally, there's a dearth of mariners. We also know that the navy is recruiting domestically, as are we, but at the same time, we don't have a situation where we necessarily see a decline.

I will say that there are situations right now where we are short in specific trades, such as engineers and cooks. We have sometimes been forced to tie up ships because we are short a cook or an engineer and are just not able to find one within our complement. It certainly is an issue for us, and we are very focused on trying to make improvements.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathyssen.

Mr. Lewis, you have five minutes.

Mr. Chris Lewis (Essex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's an honour to be here at the committee today.

I would start off by saying that, ironically, I used to sit on the international trade committee before I was transferred over to the transport committee. Right before I left the international trade committee, we were actually studying the Indo-Pacific strategy. I know there's a lot of discussion around that.

By the way, gentlemen, thank you very much for your service to our country.

The first question I have, through you, Mr. Chair, is for Mr. O'Rourke.

It's a follow-up to Mr. Bezan's question earlier. It's specific to the Indo-Pacific strategy and our northern gateway with Russia and China. I know that you mentioned you didn't have an answer to that question. Perhaps this committee could get a written response. Would you be willing to do that, sir?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Yes, absolutely.

I will just note that we do work.... I mentioned the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. We also have a North Atlantic Coast Guard Forum and a North Pacific Coast Guard Forum. There is engagement and discussion, certainly, with all of the partners around that, and that includes China and Russia, at that forum.

We'd be happy to provide you with a more detailed written response.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you so much.

How many times a year does the Coast Guard interdict foreign vessels that are in our Arctic waters without permission?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Under our Coast Guard mandate, we don't have the authority to do that. We are essentially the civilian fleet for the Government of Canada. Other departments might look to us for anything that would not require an intervention from the navy or a military vessel.

We do work very closely with Transport Canada and the RCMP for this kind of situation. For example, in the last couple of years because of COVID and the pandemic, there were restrictions on cruise ships and adventure tourists being in the north. We did work closely with Transport Canada and other federal agencies. However, at no time were we required to do an on-water interception of a vessel.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Mr. O'Rourke, I'm sorry. My time is limited, and the chair makes sure that we stick right to it. It's all good.

Does the military ever go on the Coast Guard, or does the Coast Guard ever assist the military?

The reason I ask this, Mr. O'Rourke, is that ironically I'm from the Florida of Canada. That's my riding. Our Coast Guard works incredibly closely with the U.S. Coast Guard. Our officers work incredibly close. That's why I'm trying to figure out if there's been an opportunity, or if there is an opportunity in the future, for various agencies to work together. Does it happen today?

● (1135)

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: It does. I think there's always opportunity to do more of that kind of thing.

I'll start with the U.S. Coast Guard. What you see in the south is also similar in the north. We work very closely with them as a partner.

With regard to the Canadian Armed Forces, we've had navy personnel on board our icebreakers, learning from our captains in advance of the launch of the AOPS. Certainly, there's an agreement between the navy and the Coast Guard to develop our personnel and do exchanges. Again, we're looking at expanding that relationship. That does kind of happen today, yes.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you, Mr. O'Rourke.

How often does the Canadian Coast Guard interact with the U.S. military and our Canadian military? Is there aligned training? Are there set dates for training, or is it just kind of pie in the sky?

If it is pie in the sky, that's okay, but what needs to be put in place so that we can leverage both opportunities?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: First of all, with regard to the Canadian military, we work very closely with them. For example, my office in Yellowknife is a five-minute walk from the commander of the JTFN, who I know will be here on Thursday. We have formal, set meetings, and we have informal discussions. That's just my relationship with the JTFN.

Here in Ottawa, we also have a relationship with CJOC, and I could go on. Suffice it to say, there is a very strong relationship between the Canadian Coast Guard and the Canadian Armed Forces. We certainly do work together, but we're always looking at new opportunities to strengthen that collaboration.

Mr. Chris Lewis: I'm into my final minute, and I'm only going to ask one question, Mr. Chair, to make your day better.

What's the protocol for vessels operated by foreign state actors versus commercial foreign vessels?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I'll start off by saying that it's Transport Canada's responsibility and mandate, essentially, to look at a lot of this stuff. Where the Coast Guard comes in is when vessels actually show up in the Arctic. We have a marine communications and traffic services centre in Iqaluit that monitors all vessel traffic in the north. From our perspective, we wouldn't treat one any differently than the other. We monitor all vessel traffic that goes on. That information is, in part, used for safety purposes. It's also sent to the MSOCs. The east coast MSOC in Halifax is responsible for all the Arctic and has multiple departments sitting there. That information would go to them and is then used by a myriad of departments and agencies in Canada for different purposes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lewis, for adhering to the time. I guess we now have to look in our sock drawer to find out what's going on.

Mr. Fisher, you have five minutes.

That was pretty bad, wasn't it?

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): I didn't get that joke. For a guy who delivers a lot of bad jokes, I didn't get it.

The Chair: That was a lame dad joke.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you, gentlemen, for being here.

I'm going to pick up on some of the things that Mr. Lewis was talking about. He went back and forth between the U.S. military and the Canadian military, so I'm going to try to sew it up a little bit and get some of your thoughts.

You talked about how you work with Transport Canada and the RCMP. You said you're a civilian fleet and that by virtue of being a civilian fleet, you're not a military outfit. Maybe you can tie up in a nice bow how the Canadian Armed Forces and the Coast Guard do work together in the Arctic for Canada's interests in the north and for the Canadians who do live there. I know you were back and forth a little bit with Mr. Lewis on the U.S. comparison. I'm a big fan of comparing U.S. Coast Guard, which is a military organization, with the Canadian Coast Guard, which is not. I've often joked that if we threw a pistol in the glove compartment of every vessel, we'd hit our 2% pretty quickly.

I want to know if you could tie that relationship together for me.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Okay. With regard to the Canadian military, the relationship is both at the strategic and policy levels. As a starting point, we have one day a year where the senior command staff of the Coast Guard and the RCN get together and have conversations about things we have in common. In the last conversation we had, we spent half the time talking about the Arctic—just to give you a sense. It flows all the way down to, at the more junior operational levels, Operation Nanook, which I'm sure is something you're all very familiar with. It's run by the Canadian Armed Forces but is very much supported—some elements of that—by the Coast Guard, so our planners work directly with the JTFN planners, for example, to develop those scenarios and those exercises.

Hopefully that gives you sense of the really broad relationship. As you might suspect, our relationship with the navy is a lot closer than it is with the army and the air force just because of our mandate. We all operate on the water, and we have a lot in common as the two federal organizations responsible for being on the water for Canada.

Hopefully that answers the question. I know you mentioned the military and law enforcement and all the rest. I'll point out that, of the eight Arctic nations—and I am including Russia in this—Sweden and Canada are, in fact, the only two that don't have a constabulary role or some kind of military or law enforcement role. We're very familiar with the conversations, both international and domestic, because, again, that Arctic security conversation that's happening in the North American north is happening in Alaska with U.S. military, U.S. Coast Guard, our Canadian military, our Canadian Coast Guard, and it's a conversation that happens.... It's an ongoing conversation through governance, conferences, formal bilaterals, etc.

Thank you.

● (1140)

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you for that.

With regard to the capabilities that the DFO and the Canadian Coast Guard bring to northern operations, can you brief the committee on those and the roles that these capabilities would play in marine surveillance, navigation and—as I think you were talking quite extensively about with Madam Lambropoulos earlier—search and rescue? I don't know if you had a chance to finish your thought in the comments you had with her.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Those are a lot of excellent questions and there is a lot of information I could share here.

Talking about our capabilities, it's going to start with our people and our assets. I also want to talk about relationships quickly, so I'll try to squeeze that.

On the assets, you've heard about the ships. We have radar towers. We have a series of aids to navigation, like buoys and other such things, to either assist with communication or try to avoid navigation accidents. That's a lot of the asset side of what the Coast Guard brings to the table.

We also have a permanent Arctic region set-up as of 2018, so we have a permanent presence all year round in the Arctic.

Building on the relationship side of it, we've talked a lot about the international and domestic federal relationships, but we also have very important relationships with the territorial governments. Very importantly, we have relationships with Inuit, first nations and Métis communities and also with their indigenous and/or Inuit governance structures, which include land claim organizations in many parts of the Arctic.

I think we have very strong relationships across the board with all those different leaders and levels of government, right up to the international and then we also bring people and assets there.

DFO has some of the same. We are one of the most present federal departments in the north along with, perhaps, the Canadian Forces and RCMP. We are often asked by other federal departments.... Sometimes it can be simple questions around relationships. Other times it could be whether it possible for them to do a certain thing that's part of their mandate off of our ship.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fisher.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. O'Rourke, as I understand it, you said that if there were a major problem on a cruise ship, the Coast Guard would not be able to assist it in certain places in the Arctic. No other country would be able to do that. Do I have this right?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Yes, you've got it right. I was talking specifically about the North Pole. Last year, an exercise with PONANT showed that for all the countries in the Arctic, it would take four days for a ship to get there. That's why I said that about the ability to respond. It is so far away. It would take at least four days to get to those places. That's where there could be a problem.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Are there any cruise ships that end up so far away?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Yes. This year a few cruise ships have gone up there.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Could we think about a helicopter service to help them?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Absolutely. The Canadian Forces are also part of Canada's national search and rescue program. In principle, if there was a problem, there would probably be a Hercules transport aircraft that would go up there and drop off personnel and equipment until the ships arrived. However, we certainly couldn't proceed with the rescue of hundreds of people without having ships to transport them.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand.

Have there been any incidents like this or anything close to a situation like the one you mentioned?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: There have been similar incidents. The largest recent search and rescue operation took place in 2018. It involved the passenger ship *Akademik Ioffe*, but it happened much further south and it was not the same situation at all. However, there were still a few hundred people at risk on that ship. In the end, the situation had a happy ending.

● (1145)

Mr. Luc Desilets: There were no consequences.

I don't know if it was you or Mr. Wight who alluded to the fact that the CCGS *Louis S. St-Laurent* would not be replaced until 2030. Did I hear that correctly?

Is there a contingency plan if this Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker cannot remain in service until 2030?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: In principle, there is indeed a contingency plan, which is the interim capacity and life extension of the vessel, which we are working on. We know the ship very well, because it has been in service for over 50 years. We are confident that with this work we will be able to keep it in service until 2030.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Mathyssen, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to go back to the question that I wasn't able to get in or that you didn't have time to answer. You mentioned that you are supplementing your fleet with third party vessels. How do you ensure that they have the training that's required? Do you need more supports for that, or is it sort of a take-it-as-it-comes kind of situation?

Mr. Robert Wight: The vessels that we are contracting out for that are southern vessels as opposed to northern vessels. They would operate principally along the St. Lawrence River. Within the contract that we let, we specify that they meet Transport Canada guidelines in order to operate within Canadian waters. They are independent from us; we are just contracting them.

Typically, we cascade our vessels in such as way that these are smaller. They are given things like breaking out ferries, or breaking across ferries, while our bigger ships may be taking a larger ship down and breaking a track for it down the St. Lawrence or across the Gulf. When we have more ice than we can deal with, we contract with the smaller ships and they do the smaller stuff for us.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: So that doesn't happen in the north where there are potential dangers in any way, shape or form?

Mr. Robert Wight: No, we do not contract for third parties in the north.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Okay, that's good to know.

We heard at the last meeting about the Nanisivik Naval Facility. Do you have a lot to do with that station? It's not open that often—I think only four weeks of the year. With regard to the money that's being put into it and the expectations of it, how do you work with that station and how can we ensure that it's more useful to you?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: The Nanisivik refuelling station is not yet open. The plan is that it's going to be open for a period of time, maybe four or eight weeks, depending.... As you are well aware, it's a DND project through and through. From the Canadian Coast Guard perspective, though, we've actually been using that location for years to lay down equipment, especially for some of the operations that we have to do in the high Arctic.

The way that we are working with the navy and DND is that we will also use it as a refuelling station, and we will in fact close down the refuelling station towards the end of the season because we are typically up there longer than the navy is. We have an agreement with the navy that we will close down to take the fuel out at the end of the season. That's essentially the relationship.

At this point in time, we aren't using the facility for refuelling. Right now, we essentially refuel ship to ship in the north, and we're going to be able to at least remove some of that ship-to-ship refuelling that occurs today by using the Nanisivik facility once it's open.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathyssen.

Ms. Rempel Garner, welcome to the committee. You have five minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for being here. Earlier in testimony, I think I heard something about how your agency may have to rely on Russia for rescue should a major incident requiring rescue occur if your agency didn't have the capacity to reach the vessel. Is that correct?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: To reframe, it's not that we would need Russia's assistance, but if something is happening at the confluence of where our areas of responsibility are, which is the North Pole, we would likely need multiple countries to respond. It's really specifically with regard to an incident at the North Pole. I don't think any of the Arctic countries has the capability alone to take care of it.

● (1150)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Has your department conducted any analysis on how likely this is to occur?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I don't think we have detailed assessments. Essentially, at this point in time, we've seen this year two cruise ships go out for the first time. One of them went last year but with no passengers.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Is there a reason why you don't have regular analysis of the likelihood of an event like this ever occurring?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: It really comes down to the fact that we've had three ships go up there, ever. It's something we would do in the future as we would see increasing vessel traffic, but right now there haven't really been any vessels transiting.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: In what timeframe are you anticipating increased vessel traffic to the point where that type of regular analysis would occur?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: It would be hard to say. We do kind of informal risk analysis at all times. We have a very detailed system for search and rescue called the RAMSARD, which we use as a tool to look across the north. That's something that we're going to be launching in the Arctic for the first time as of next year.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Is our existing fleet of surveillance equipment ships etc. adequate to meet the potential demand of, let's say, 10 to 15 years in the future in that type of scenario?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Right now most of our monitoring is not actually done using the ships themselves. They do have communication equipment, but we use satellite-based and shore-based technologies. Yes, we do believe so, as the OAG report has pointed out, and we certainly provide some leadership in the federal family around the Arctic maritime security strategy.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Has anyone in your department provided advice to the government regarding contingency plans should the existing fleet of key satellite ships or aircraft cease to operate before they are replaced?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I think through the shipbuilding program we have absolutely provided some contingency. That is kind of what led to the three interim icebreakers in the—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Have you recently provided specific advice to the government regarding contingency plans for critical failure on any of the existing fleet of critical infrastructure as outlined in the OAG report?

Is there a reason this hasn't been provided?

Has the government asked for contingency plans for potential failure of infrastructure like satellite ships or aircraft for monitoring?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I might propose that we get back with a written response to that. I think ultimately on the ship side we did provide that advice. There was an investment made, and so the mitigation we requested has now been addressed.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: When was that developed?

Mr. Robert Wight: The plan for fleet renewal was developed in 2018-2019.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Has it been updated since?

Has any advice on contingency plans been updated over the last couple of years?

Mr. Robert Wight: No, we still consider the plan to be a solid one. We have not updated it past that point.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Has it been updated in the context of an increased use of asymmetric competition by China and Russia with regard to Arctic strategy?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: No, it hasn't. I think our focus has been on our capabilities to deliver the programs we're mandated to do here in Canada. That's how we've been using it—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Has China's focus on asymmetric competition informed any contingency planning for critical failure of key equipment in your department in recent years, since 2019?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I'll say yes to that. I think something we have certainly seen from other countries is some of the technological capabilities—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Can you share that analysis with the committee?

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, if I may be recognized, I know it's Ms. Rempel Garner's time, but she's asking a litany of questions. I believe our witnesses are doing their best to respond. Before the witness is even able to get through the answer, he is being interrupted. I would like to be able to hear the answer to the question. I know there's a careful balance that needs to be struck by the chair to make sure she has her time to ask questions, and I hope we can find that balance so we can actually hear the rest of the answer.

The Chair: Generally, I regard the member's time as the member's time, to ask questions as they see fit. I must admit that given the rapidity of the questions, I wasn't even sure I was understanding the questions.

We'll finish off the five minutes, but I take note of it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Well, Chair, it's not the first time I've been shut down by a Liberal. I'm sure it won't be the last time I, particularly as a woman, will be.

Thank you.

Would you be able to table with committee any analysis or advice that your department has provided the government with regard to contingency planning for critical infrastructure failure, particularly in the context of an increased posture of asymmetric competition by Russia and China?

● (1155)

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Yes, we'll be able to go back and provide what there may be.

Just on the last point, I talked about our having a policy of using new technology and also of using old school ways of doing things. We don't have a specific analysis that tells us what we should do, but understanding the capabilities of other countries to interrupt things like AIS and GPS, we're ensuring that our mariners are familiar with the old methods of doing things without technology.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Mr. May, you have the final five minutes.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our witnesses for being here and for providing their amazing testimony today.

Going last in the panel means I tend to have heard many of the questions I was hoping to ask. Thank you to those who covered a lot of what I wanted to speak about.

I would like to bring us back to the Coast Guard and particularly how you're adapting to the changing climate in the north. What trends are you monitoring and planning for in terms of vessel traffic, protecting the marine environment, ensuring public safety and supporting Canada's security and sovereignty?

I know there's a lot there and you may have touched on much of it, but I want to give you an opportunity to kind of summarize all of that.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: With regard to climate change, I would say we continue to monitor the actual conditions. Specifically our interests are in the ice conditions with respect to navigation capability, so I think that's where a lot of the focus is. We work very closely with, as I mentioned, Inuit, first nations and Métis, and we listen a lot to their perspectives on what they're seeing in their individual communities. We are incorporating that feedback into any conversations around new infrastructure that could exist in a certain location and even places where we might make future investments to support our polar icebreakers or the fleet of the future, and where the best locations would be, given the understanding that the climate is evolving.

The other thing I would say specifically with regard to our national shipbuilding strategy is that we're building ships for an uncertain future. We have a very good sense of what our mandate is today, but we also appreciate that over decades that might evolve and change, so we're trying to build ships that are going to be adaptable with the modularity that's essentially going to allow us to have the right asset for whatever the Government of Canada asks us to do in the future.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you for that.

I want to maybe use the last couple minutes of my time here to ask you to follow up on some of the questions that were asked by both Bloc and NDP colleagues about tourist traffic in the north. I've been seized with this issue since long before I was even on this committee. My riding of Cambridge has a company called exactEarth, which is in the business of tracking vessels. A number of years ago, I was in their operations room watching the first-ever crossing of the Northwest Passage by a cruise ship, and there were several federal departments that were very keenly focused on that and concerned about that.

When we're talking about this type of travel, you talked about there being an issue of distance and capabilities and how it could potentially take four days to rescue a vessel and how it seems to be growing in terms of their capacity and size given that the ice is melting and they're able to actually navigate these waters. Is this a conversation we should be having at the Arctic Council to say, look, we understand the rules of these types of passageways and that we can't necessarily say no to these types of passages, but should we? It's not a question of whether one of these larger cruise ships will run aground; it's a matter of when, so should we start having that conversation? There is not a cruise line in existence today that has a perfect record. Every single cruise line has had a situation in which a ship has run aground—every single one of them. What can we do? Should we be having that conversation at the Arctic Council or somewhere else?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I think with regard to decisions on whether or not Canada wants to change rules, that question might be better directed to foreign affairs—GAC—or Transport Canada. What I can talk about is more the response and the planning side. We work extensively with the cruise ship operators, so we have a relationship with all the cruise ship companies that are operating in the Canadian Arctic right now. Over the course of 2020 and 2021 when they were not allowed to operate in the Arctic, we actually kind of doubled down and did a lot of tabletop exercises with them with regard to getting back to regular business for them this year. We expect that those relationships will certainly pay dividends if and when we get into a situation where there's a real live exercise.

● (1200)

The Chair: Mr. May, your time is up.

On behalf of the committee, I want to thank both of you, Assistant Commissioner O'Rourke and Director General Wight, for your testimony before the committee. It was informative. It was very rapid at some points, and we thank you for your willingness to share your insights with the committee.

With that, colleagues, we will suspend and re-empanel once we are all connected up with technology.

Thank you all again.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1205)

The Chair: Colleagues, we're resuming.

I understand that Mr. O'Rourke is up for a second round of punishment, and he'll be staying. Joining us now is Dale Kirsch, president of the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association; along with Bill Ralph, national administrator; and Dave Taylor, director, who are all here by video conference.

Welcome, gentlemen. I'm assuming that Mr. O'Rourke is not going to make a second five-minute statement, so I'll call on one of you to make your five-minute statement, and we'll go from there.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Wilson): He does have a statement.

The Chair: Oh, he does have a statement.

Well, I'll call on you second.

With that, one of you is going to make a five-minute statement, and we look forward to it.

Mr. Dale Kirsch (President, Civil Air Search and Rescue Association): Do we just go ahead and start?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Mr. Dale Kirsch: Hello, everyone.

My name is Dale Kirsch. I'm the president of the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association, CASARA, in Canada. CASARA is a Canada-wide, 1,700-member, aviation-based volunteer association. We're dedicated to providing air search support services 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year, primarily to the Royal Canadian Air Force. This includes searches for downed aircraft. Recently, we've been doing more humanitarian efforts, and we help promote Canada's search and rescue program across Canada.

Our volunteer makeup includes search-and-rescue-trained pilots of civilian aircraft and remotely piloted drones—RPAS units. We also provide navigators, spotters and other various key roles in our organization.

Since 1986, our challenge is to provide search support services for Canadians that cover the entire approximately 9.985 million square kilometres of our nation. However, our operations provide a large economic benefit for Canada through our lower-cost, quick-response, aviation-based organization.

For example, one of the RCAF's CC-130H Hercules can cost approximately $13,000 per hour to operate versus our cost of around $250 per hour to operate a small aircraft that can have a full search crew up in the air in a fraction of the time that it can take the military.

Our membership is spread out into each member organization, which we call MOs, of our association. We have one MO per province and territory across Canada to run our search operations. This allows us to be prevalent in each section of Canada, including the large and vast northern areas like the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

For example, this past summer we had various member trainings in the north conducted by our MOs and the RCAF for upkeep and readiness, which included Gjoa Haven, located far north in Nunavut above the Arctic Circle on King William Island.

In 1986, CASARA was incorporated and formed as a national association. The directors of the provincial and territorial associations met in Ottawa with representatives of the two federal departments that were sponsoring CASARA: the Department of National Defence and the Department of Transport. All parties signed the agreement that listed the support that the federal government would provide to the association and what the association would provide in return.

From there, we have continuously provided search support and have explored innovative ways to be more effective, expanding our capabilities and looking at different ways that we can be of service to the RCAF and the rest of Canada.

For example, our most recent activities include being at the forefront of implementing remotely piloted aircraft systems, RPAS—or drones—in search and rescue. Paired with Loc8 imaging/video software and other third party applications, we now have another method for us to be effective at meeting the needs of various search conditions: by embracing and adapting new technologies into the world of search and rescue.

That being said as an overview of who we are and what we do, a more detailed showcase of our organization and other related information about us can be found on our website at www.casara.ca.

Thank you.

● (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kirsch.

Mr. O'Rourke, you have a second five-minute statement?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With your permission, some parts duplicate my first opening statement, so I could skip over those.

The Chair: In the interest of economy of time, we would appreciate that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members.

My name is Neil O'Rourke, and I am the assistant commissioner of the Arctic region at the Canadian Coast Guard. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee on behalf of the department.

I am here today to speak about the Canadian Coast Guard's icebreaking capabilities in the Arctic.

[*English*]

The Canadian search and rescue system is a co-operative effort between federal, provincial, municipal and territorial governments as well as volunteer organizations. It involves searching for and assisting people, ships, aircraft and other craft that are or that are believed to be in imminent danger.

The Coast Guard supports on-water safety and security by providing a first response to mariners in distress, marine disasters and emergencies nationally, with one of the most effective maritime search and rescue systems in the world. However, the ability of the Coast Guard to conduct search and rescue in the Arctic is hampered by the vast geography, freezing temperatures, changing climate and lack of physical infrastructure.

The Canadian marine SAR system is a shared responsibility supported by the air assets and personnel of the Canadian Armed Forces along with the maritime and air assets of the Canadian Coast Guard and volunteers of the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary. The maritime component of the federal search and rescue system is the responsibility of the Coast Guard, and this includes federal waterways and oceans in the Canadian Arctic.

In co-operation with partners, the Coast Guard operates the joint rescue coordination centres in the coordination and conduct of maritime SAR incidents in the Arctic through the provision of expertise and resources, such as maritime mission coordinators, icebreakers, helicopters, small craft, as well as communications and alerting services to provide rapid response to marine incidents.

[*Translation*]

In the Arctic, over the past five years, the Coast Guard coordinated an annual average of 36 maritime SAR events. Nationally, the Coast Guard coordinates 19 maritime SAR incidents on an average day. The centres in Trenton and Halifax provide services to the Canadian Arctic.

In response to the concern of increased vessel traffic in the Arctic and increasing demand for our search and rescue services, one of the key actions we are taking is strengthening and renewing our fleet, as previously discussed.

[*English*]

The Coast Guard works closely with the auxiliary to enhance local incident response capacity. The auxiliary is a key partner in ensuring the safety and security of users of the Canadian Arctic waters in relation to maritime search and rescue.

In July 2018, the Coast Guard opened its first-ever inshore rescue boat station in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, providing seasonal primary search and rescue coverage in the Rankin Inlet area. Since then, local crews have developed the capacity to respond to search and rescue incidents. Building on this previous investment, the 2022 oceans protection plan renewal is providing the Coast Guard with funding to be able to expand this successful initiative into the Arctic marine response station, including the procurement of a new vessel. This funding will support the employment of additional crew members from the local community, extend the station's operational season and procure this additional dedicated search and rescue vessel for Arctic operations, which will allow for an enhanced coverage area. This will also allow for the undertaking of additional infrastructure improvements to enhance operational capabilities in the area.

The Coast Guard is committed to meeting the expanding need for search and rescue services in the north.

Thank you very much for your attention. I'd be pleased to answer your questions.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. O'Rourke.

Just before I call on Mr. Kelly, I saw Mr. Taylor adjusting his headset when Mr. O'Rourke switched to French. Are all three of you on the English channel?

Good. Thank you.

With that, Mr. Kelly, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): Thank you.

Mr. O'Rourke, in the earlier testimony, you were asked about vessel interdiction and you mentioned that it is not your place to actually intercept vessels because you don't have constabulary power or military authority.

How long does it take, if you are dealing with some potentially illegal activity, to have constabulary capacity on board?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Mr. Chair, ultimately, it's not so much about having a temporary constabulary duty or capability, if you will; it's more about having the people with the authority on board the ship. The most common situation for us, for example, is having a Transport Canada inspector on board a ship, someone who has the authority.

Mr. Pat Kelly: When operating in the Arctic, do you normally have RCMP or Transport Canada—or both—present on ships?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: We do not, typically.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Okay.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: We have the capability to do so when required for those organizations. It can happen very quickly. If it's something that's an emergency situation, it's all about where the RCMP or Transport Canada member might be, and the location, but if it's something just offshore, where they already have a person on the ground, you could get someone onto a ship in 30 minutes by helicopter.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Okay. How about illegal fishing?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Illegal fishing is something that would be more the purview of some of my colleagues in the rest of DFO.

What I can say from the Coast Guard perspective, though, is that we do support the conservation and protection program in that interdiction, and again, they are the ones who hold the mandate and would be on board the vessel.

Mr. Pat Kelly: In the Arctic, where, as you said earlier, you are normally the only or the principal agent of the federal government, really, if there are unauthorized foreign vessels, potential criminal activity or even a potential environmental or pollution situation or something, you're the only vessel there, but you don't have the ability to intercept vessels. You don't have the ability to engage in police activity in the Arctic.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Yes, that's essentially accurate. The information would go to the MSOCs, where those other departments sit, and then a decision could be made by those departments with the authority to say that we need to get out there, and then they would essentially request us to do so.

Mr. Pat Kelly: The Auditor General has said that in the Arctic we have incomplete surveillance, insufficient data and very poor means of sharing data. Do you agree with that assessment?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: We worked very closely with the Auditor General on this report, and the Coast Guard supports the recommendations that were made.

Ultimately—

Mr. Pat Kelly: Do you agree with that characterization?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: That there are improvements to be made with regard to the sharing of information, absolutely we do.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Also that our surveillance is incomplete...?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: From that perspective, yes, I would agree with that.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Okay.

Do you think the estimates of Arctic vessel traffic are accurate? If the surveillance capacity is insufficient and incomplete, how much confidence can you have or do you have in vessel traffic numbers?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: We have very high confidence.

It's really with regard to some of the smaller yachts and leisure craft that don't have a regulatory requirement to have AIS on board where it's possible that some come in that we, as the Coast Guard, are not aware of, but for larger vessels, we have radar systems, we have AIS tracking and we're very confident in the number of larger ships that are entering the Canadian Arctic.

Mr. Pat Kelly: The Auditor General has said that our surveillance capacity is insufficient and incomplete.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: My assessment—again, having worked with the Auditor General in developing the report and in reading the recommendations—isn't so much that from a Coast Guard perspective we feel that we don't have the information to do what our mandate requires. I think what the Auditor General is getting at is that there are multiple departments that have a use for maritime information and that this is shared through the MSOC, which is the fusion centre, but there are opportunities for increased collaboration to give a better maritime picture across departments.

● (1220)

Mr. Pat Kelly: I am going to switch very briefly to Mr. Kirsch, though I would also like you to weigh in on this.

Mr. Kirsch, when you are engaged in a SAR event or activity and you require rescue capacity or assistance beyond what your membership is capable of, what's the typical time for being able to involve Coast Guard or the air force?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: It depends on where it is.

Mr. Pat Kelly: I'm talking about the Arctic.

Mr. Dale Kirsch: We're tasked by JRCC, the joint rescue coordination centre, and in the Arctic it's usually Trenton. We're in constant communication with them. Even up in the Arctic we use satellite phones, and we're able to talk to them and get things happening. The actual rescues would be done by the air force, or possibly by the RCMP as well, depending on the area we're working in or where the incident took place.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Pick an example, then. Are there some examples of SAR events? The Coast Guard just told us there were 36 last year that they were involved in, if I heard correctly. What would be a possible scenario of a response time in reaction to an event?

The Chair: It's a good question. Unfortunately, Mr. Kelly has left you no time to answer it, but I'm sure you'll work it in the next time around.

Mr. Blois, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's Mr. “Blois”, like “choice”.

The Chair: I'm blowing it left and right now.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Kody Blois: I'm going to start with Mr. Kirsch.

What would be the number of incidents per year related to the Arctic that your organization would be responding to? Do you have that number available for the committee?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: I actually don't have it right in front of me.

Dave is in the Northwest Territories.

Do you have any numbers, Dave?

Mr. Kody Blois: Maybe what we can do, Mr. Kirsch, is that you could table that. I think that would be something interesting for the committee members.

Unless you have it, Mr. Taylor...?

Mr. Dave Taylor (Director, Civil Air Search and Rescue Association): I can tell you that in the Northwest Territories, we respond to between six and twelve requests for humanitarian assistance from the RCMP and, in most years, zero requirements from the air force.

Mr. Kody Blois: Okay.

With Mr. Kelly and his questions, I think you answered part of what I was wondering about, which is the delineation of when you're actually called. The organization that was mentioned was the JRCC.

Mr. O'Rourke, would you have a sense of how often the good work of the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association is involved and how often they are brought in? On a percentage basis, do you have that number?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I don't, no. The JRCC essentially is co-run by the Coast Guard and the Canadian Forces and uses all the different assets that are out there. It's something that we could certainly respond to with data, but I don't have it with me.

Thank you.

Mr. Kody Blois: Mr. O'Rourke, is the work of CASARA essentially to help identify and then there would be a response from the Coast Guard or the air force as necessary to actually rescue the persons in question? Or is CASARA doing some of that rescue work itself? It seems as though it's more about identification.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: It would be hard for me to comment on exactly what they're doing.

I think the main thing that I would want to delineate is the difference between maritime and other search and rescue. I suspect that a lot of the search and rescue they're involved in is actually land based and therefore not in the purview of the Coast Guard.

Mr. Kody Blois: Mr. Kirsch, do you know what the delineation is of how often you're called?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: We don't do rescue, so we normally would be doing searches. I'd have to check the numbers to see what percentage of call-outs we get that actually involve a rescue.

In the Arctic and in a lot of other places, we do work for the RCMP all the time, so we are involved in searching for individuals—for hunters, fishermen and that kind of thing—in the Arctic and even in the south.

Mr. Kody Blois: Mr. Kirsch, how big is your organization? You mentioned that it's volunteer driven, with civilian aviators. How many different planes or volunteers would you have at the ready to call as necessary?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: We have about 1,700 volunteers in Canada. We have several hundred volunteer aircraft that we use across Canada.

● (1225)

Mr. Kody Blois: How many in the Arctic specifically?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: In the Arctic, most of our work is done with charter aircraft or having our volunteers serve on military aircraft as spotters.

Mr. Kody Blois: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. O'Rourke, I'd like to turn my questions to you.

You mentioned in the last hour the differences between how many countries, Arctic nations—I think you referenced eight—have a delineation between the military and then the coast guard as a civilian organization. It's us and Sweden. I thought Mr. Kelly asked pretty important questions about capacity to respond.

Broadly, as quickly as you can, what are some of the public policy rationales for why we wouldn't have some of our Canadian Coast Guard more involved and integrated in the military response, to make sure that if your vessel is there, it can be a quick response, and that we do have the ability to intervene as necessary? What are the public policy rationales as to why they wouldn't be brought together?

The Chair: There is a danger here of getting into public policy from this particular witness, but if he feels comfortable responding on the public policy, I'm perfectly prepared to let the witness respond.

Mr. Kody Blois: Let me reframe the question. For countries that do have that integration, what are some of the benefits or how do they respond in those instances that would maybe not be possible in Canada...?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I think that when we look at search and rescue specifically, I'm not sure there is a benefit one way or the other.

I appreciate that, Mr. Chair, and I think that from a policy perspective what I would say is simply that the Coast Guard delivers a lot of different services—environmental response, icebreaking, search and rescue—which are all internationally civilian in nature.

These other organizations, these other coast guards, like the U.S. Coast Guard, for example, have additional law enforcement and regulatory responsibilities, which in Canada reside either with the RCMP or Transport Canada. It's really just a different model. I wouldn't say that we don't work as effectively because it's part of different parts of the organizations. We have very good relationships with the RCMP and Transport Canada.

Mr. Kody Blois: I have two quick questions. I have about a minute and a half.

On pathways, as you perhaps mentioned in your remarks, how often are Coast Guard boats actually patrolling? Are there regular patrol routes? How does that differentiate? I know we're talking about search and rescue today, but I'm more curious about the regular pathways that our Coast Guard ships would make in terms of monitoring our coasts.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: In the Arctic, we don't have specific patrols, per se, one of our ships comes from the west coast, and is essentially always going through Alaskan waters coming from the west, The other six come from the east.

Our ships are deployed based on icebreaking requirements first and foremost. That also offers us an opportunity to have some coverage for search and rescue and environmental response, and to support other departments.

Mr. Kody Blois: What would be necessary? You mentioned that you can bring RCMP and Transport Canada folks on. Is there merit in trying to have some of your officers also double as peace officers or have that constabulary authority such that it can be a response? Is that something that can be done within your organization?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: It's not something that we have the mandate for right now. We certainly work with those partner agencies. We don't do exchanges, sending our personnel to their organizations at this point, but they do work very closely. Whether with JRCCs or MSOCs, those are areas where our respective organizations work together side by side.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blois.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank our new witnesses for being with us.

Mr. O'Rourke, is the current situation with Russia and China influencing or could it influence your rescue needs? Are we reacting in the same way, or is the political situation having an effect at the moment?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Yes, it has an effect. I talked a little bit about the situation at the North Pole and working with Russia. For us, the situation in the Arctic with respect to Russia and China is different. Russia is an Arctic state and a member of the Arctic Council and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. So it is a country that we are used to working with in relation to the Arctic, except in the last 10 months, so it can certainly have an effect.

As for China, it's different, because they are not an Arctic state as such. Certainly, they are showing an interest. From time to time, Chinese ships come to the north and, as with all ships, we observe what they do. However, it's a bit different, because the relationships are not the same.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I am not a regular on this committee, but I find it fascinating.

Secondly, it seems to me that we've been hearing about Canada's icebreaker needs for decades. There is always sparring about it, depending on which party is in power and which companies are being dealt with.

Do you feel that politicians take your real needs into account?

● (1230)

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: As Mr. Wight mentioned, for years we have been working on the renewal of our fleet and the plan itself.

From our side, we are very happy that the decision has been made to invest funds to make the necessary purchases to ensure the long-term stability of our fleet. Certainly, there will be construction to be done and a lot of personnel to be hired to work on the vessels, but we are happy that the decision has been made to proceed with the renewal of the fleet.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Either you are a real politician, or you have endless patience. From the outside, I find that everything is proceeding very slowly. You go from one company to another to give out contracts, put them aside, and then go back to a previous company because some are not capable of doing the work. That said, I respect what you're saying and I understand the situation.

I'm going to ask you right now the question I was going to ask you at the end.

A committee like this exists to produce a report and make recommendations, which are based on evidence. If you had the opportunity, in your professional category, with your status, to make one or two recommendations, what would they be?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Thank you for your question. I will answer it from a search and rescue perspective.

I think I'm going to go back a little bit to an answer I gave in the last hour. One of the recommendations is about VHF radio communication systems. We need more capacity in the Arctic to communicate with the people who live there. That could help us and obviously help the communities.

On the other hand, when you look at the marine search and rescue system in Canada, we have the auxiliaries, the icebreakers and the same capabilities as elsewhere in Canada. However, we lack a number of search and rescue stations in the north. In principle, the purpose of these stations is to have permanent Coast Guard employees, who have expertise, can work with local communities and also respond to calls. For example, at the moment, when there is a search and rescue call and we have to send one of our icebreakers, that means, in principle, that it is no longer used as an icebreaker to help the communities receive their deliveries. There are implications to that.

Compared to elsewhere in Canada, these two aspects of the search and rescue system are, in principle, a little different in the north. Personally, I would add that this is an opportunity for improvement.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I would like you to tell us more about VHF radio communication systems. What are they exactly? What are the specific requirements?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: On the technology side, there are a number of ways to do this, but I won't go into that.

In principle, the VHF radio communication system is a bit like the 9-1-1 system. If there is an emergency, you dial 9-1-1. When you're at sea, it's channel 16. Without a VHF radio communication system, you can't communicate. Every place has different needs. Sometimes all you need is a repeater. On the other hand, it might be a bit of an investment.

There are different technologies and different ways to do it.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Mathyssen, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: To continue on that, it was noted that the Canadian Armed Forces or the government of Canada is going to put into place the medium earth orbit satellite, our search and rescue system. It is only in the implementation phase, I understand.

How are you planning to work that into all of these different levels of communication?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I'm not sure I can tell you about that specific system, and whether we're going to utilize it or how.

More generally, what I can say is that, for both our Marine Communications and Traffic Services centre in Iqaluit, which monitors all the traffic, and those JRCCs, which essentially manage search and rescue.... From their standpoint, they certainly use information. We use a lot of satellite-based information, but I couldn't specifically tell you whether we would utilize this one service as opposed to the others.

Generally, we try to gather information from a variety of sources, because one might go out, sometimes. It also gives us an opportunity to ensure the information we're gathering is consistent, because, sometimes—especially in the north—there can be service gaps and coverage area issues. By utilizing multiple technologies, we hope to have as full a picture as possible.

● (1235)

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: I will now switch over to Mr. Kirsch.

It was mentioned in the context of the 1,700 volunteers that a lot of the search capabilities come from charter aircraft.

In addition to charter aircraft, could you give me more of an idea about where you get your volunteers?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: In southern Canada, our volunteers use their own aircraft. For instance, I fly my own [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] search and rescue. I'm basically available to fly 24 hours a day, almost 365 days of the year. I have another job, but I have a lot of flexibility. When we go up north, where Dave is, or to Iqaluit—up in those areas—pretty much the only way for us to fly is to charter aircraft. We really don't have....

There are a couple of issues in the north. A lot of the private aircraft we use utilize aviation fuel called “100 low lead”. In the Arctic, a lot of the fuel is for turbine aircraft. They just have jet fuel in all of these different areas, so we can't even fly our airplanes up there. The only practical way is to charter aircraft or get the government to buy us aircraft that we can use up in the north. We're probably talking about a couple of million dollars per airplane, in order to get a plane with turbine capabilities that we can use up in the north.

Dave, do you want to comment on chartering?

The Chair: Just as a caution, Mr. Taylor, I'm told that there may be some issue with the translators hearing what you have to say. Go at it slowly.

Mr. Dave Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

I'm in Yellowknife. In the Northwest Territories, we have an operational unit in Yellowknife and in Inuvik. In both places, there are locally available charter aircraft, single-engine and twin-engine, that have range to cover near the community but not the entire Arctic. We have about a hundred volunteers in the Northwest Territories. There are more in Whitehorse and predominantly Iqaluit, Rankin Inlet, Resolute Bay and Cambridge Bay in Nunavut.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: As I understand it, there is a huge shortage of pilots in every aspect of flight. I certainly have seen it in my commute to Ottawa.

What future recommendation could you make in terms of the Government of Canada's investment into more pilots? If you're getting them, and they're doing this on their own as volunteers, that skill set is maybe not unique, but it's certainly not something that is easily found. How would the government deal with that in terms of future pilots that are needed?

Mr. Dave Taylor: I could answer that for the north. I think the continued use of chartered aircraft is the appropriate solution, because even if you purchased an aircraft, we wouldn't have a volunteer pilot who could fly it. There are just not that many capable, experienced, qualified individuals sitting around waiting. If you bought an aircraft for us up here, you'd probably have to hire a pilot to fly it.

Down in southern Canada, it's totally different. They do have volunteer pilots available who could likely fly something. For us in the north, certainly in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, I think the solution is the continued use of chartered aircraft and volunteer navigators and spotters and search coordinators. To me, that gives us the best bang for the dollar.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathyssen.

Mr. Bezan, you have five minutes.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. O'Rourke.

I'd just to clarify something from an answer you gave earlier. Does the Canadian Coast Guard have no permanent stations in the Arctic at all?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: We have one permanent station in Rankin Inlet now that's open seasonally. Then we have our headquarters in Yellowknife. We have a base in Hay River. We have our MCTS centre in Iqaluit. Those are all permanent.

Mr. James Bezan: With the opening of the sea ice, with more navigation occurring up there, are there any plans to have more especially SAR stations across the Arctic?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: I think certainly.... I mean, more SAR stations across the Arctic obviously will require investment. I think from our standpoint, and working specifically with Inuit, Coast Guard and Inuit are very much aligned that to improve the system in the north, that would be the right place to make investment should investment come in the search and rescue program and system.

Hopefully, that answers the question.

Mr. James Bezan: Yes. Even though I'm a prairie member of Parliament, I do have a Coast Guard regional station. It's seasonal. Of course, they fly in from B.C. the Coast Guard staff as well as SAR techs to be there.

Do all the Arctic vessels that you guys are currently sailing have helicopter capabilities?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: They don't all. Typically, most of the vessels we send north do. The *Terry Fox*, as an example, does not have helicopter capability, and neither do some of the interim icebreakers. This year, as an example, six of the seven icebreakers that were in the north had a helicopter on board.

Mr. James Bezan: So not every ship can go out there for a constabulatory exercise. If you had to interdict a ship that was illegally sailing, you would have to go to Transport Canada or the RCMP. You wouldn't have the ability to ferry someone on and off with a helicopter.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: You're correct on that about that particular ship.

What we would typically do is probably utilize a helicopter from one of our other ships. We also have a couple of shore-based helicopters that are often up there doing maintenance work, so we would look at using one of the other assets to transport people as required.

Mr. James Bezan: When we talk about Greenland and the Danish coast guard, are they operating on the same basis as the Canadian Coast Guard—meaning civilian—or do they also have more constabulary capabilities?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: In fact, they're neither. They're beyond that. Their coast guard and their military are integrated. When I talk about the Danish defence force's Joint Arctic Command—which is essentially the presence they have in Greenland—they're responsible for everything the Canadian Forces would be, everything the Coast Guard's responsible for as well as some of the constabulary roles at RCMP.

In fact, they have a relationship both with us at JTFN and with the RCMP, and we're trying on the Canadian side to coordinate our organizations as well.

Mr. James Bezan: In terms of Arctic coast guards, are we the only one with a civilian force?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: What I've found in my experience working for the Coast Guard is that every coast guard in the world is different and they all line up differently. They all have different functions.

Specifically in the Arctic, Sweden's is also a civilian force. The Norwegian Coast Guard, for example, is actually part of the Norwegian navy, but separate. I won't talk about the Russians. The U.S. Coast Guard, as I said earlier, is like a combination of our Transport, Coast Guard and RCMP. Then there are the Danes. They really are all different. The Finns are the Finnish Border Guards, so they're actually almost like a combination of CBSA and the Coast Guard, if you will.

Mr. James Bezan: When we are talking about NORAD and modernization—looking at better security in the Arctic and having more awareness up there—NORAD has been expanded to include not just the aerial domain but maritime domain as well. Right now if you go down to Colorado Springs and you walk in, the U.S. Coast Guard's in the NORAD building and they're part of the day-to-day operations. The Canadian Coast Guard, of course, is absent.

Knowing that there are greater threats in the Arctic—we know there are greater challenges with commercial traffic, tourism and potentially adversarial ships sailing through, under and above the surface—how do we look at the Canadian Coast Guard being more of an integrated package with our overall national defence, especially in the Arctic? You guys have by far the greatest capabilities for protecting Canadians' interests and protecting our sovereignty in the Arctic.

● (1245)

The Chair: Again, we're kind of getting into policy stuff. I'll certainly permit you to respond as you see fit, but it is policy.

Mr. James Bezan: I do think it is relevant to the study and I do believe this is something we need to think about.

The Chair: I agree. It is relevant to this committee. I think the same question has been asked three or four times and I think maybe it's something the committee needs to focus on, but I'll let the question go forward, Mr. O'Rourke, and we'll move on.

Thank you.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think, from our perspective, the system here in Canada is working well. In any kind of organization, if you will, if you have multiple things that are all part of the same organization, I'm sure there can be opportunities but there will also be challenges. We work very closely with law enforcement and military security partners and we support them in their mandate.

As I mentioned earlier, we have direct roles to play in a lot of the other security elements. We're very much part of the Arctic security discussions with RCMP, with Canadian Forces and with international counterparts, notwithstanding our mandate. From where I sit, I think the system is working well and there's really good coordination.

Ultimately, I will leave it to others to decide about responding to some of the bigger policy questions regarding other advantages.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

Madame Lambropoulos, you have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thanks, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here with us today.

My questions will mostly go to CASARA. I find it cool—I think this is the first time that I have realized that there is a volunteer organization that's also working in partnership with the government to provide search and rescue.

First of all, we've been hearing a lot in this committee about the shortage of labour and the shortage of personnel in the armed forces, but we heard at one point that there was a huge shortage in volunteers. I'm wondering if you've felt that as well. I know it's very specialized volunteers who can fly planes, but I'm wondering if you've felt that as well and whether it's something that your organization has noticed.

Mr. Dale Kirsch: Our membership has gone down a little in the past few years, especially with COVID being out there and being an issue. For the most part, we've been able to get most of the volunteers we need across the country, I'd say. If people own an airplane, they like to fly it. We provide them with an opportunity to fly whereby they get some of their expenses paid, so that helps. People see aviation as a neat thing to be involved in. We get volunteers coming to us.

We also get volunteers from among younger people—pilots who want to have an aviation career. They see CASARA as a good thing to have on their resumés. That helps us attract volunteers, as well.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you.

I'm not sure whether you already answered this question at some point in your testimony, so I apologize if it's a repeat question.

Do you do training with the armed forces at all? Obviously, you're doing some of their work and helping them do what they are trying to accomplish. Is there any opportunity for joint training, and are people prepared before going out?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: Yes, we regularly train with the air force. We have officers working with our organization across the country. They're called CLOs, and they work with CASARA to train our members. We train our members on Hercs, Twin Otters and helicopters. Our members go flying with the military, and I work with them on a regular basis.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much.

I'm going to cut it short, but I will ask one last question.

If you could recommend one thing that the Government of Canada could do to help you help them, what would that be?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: One thing I would look into is our being able to purchase aircraft that we could use in search and rescue.

There's a model in the United States called CAP—the Civil Air Patrol. The United States government provides them with aircraft and funding so they can train people. They train pilots from start to finish. They do reconnaissance flights for the government in the United States.

That's some of the stuff we're not doing in Canada, which we possibly could do, if we changed our model and funding a bit.

● (1250)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much.

That's it for me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Colleagues, we have 10 minutes' and 15 minutes' worth of questions. We have a hard stop at 1 o'clock. Many of us want to go to the Holodomor commemoration. My thought is this: a minute and a half, a minute and a half, and three and three. That will get us to one o'clock, if that's all right.

I have Mr. Desilets for one and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. O'Rourke, with respect to the whole icebreaker saga, what recommendation would you like to make to the government?

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: Thank you for your question.

There needs to be continued support from the government, so that the icebreakers are built on the planned construction schedule. Certainly the risk associated with delays in delivery of the ships continues to be assessed.

My recommendation to the government would be to continue to offer support and align the plan with the delivery dates.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Perfect, thank you.

Mr. Taylor and Mr. Kirsch, in 2018, a ship carrying 160 people ran aground near the Kugaaruk coast. In your opinion, can such an incident happen again? Are we sufficiently equipped in 2022 to respond to such emergencies?

[*English*]

Mr. Dale Kirsch: I don't know whether we're equipped to meet all the different emergencies that could happen up in the Arctic, right now. I'm probably not the best person to answer that question, because it's not quite in our mandate.

The Chair: I have Madam Mathyssen for a minute and a half.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: In terms of the Arctic and the search and rescue capabilities there, how has climate change impacted your members? I'm thinking, of course, about the changing weather itself, but there are also a lot of infrastructure problems—landing capabilities, permafrost and that sort of thing.

Could you comment on that, briefly?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: We're certainly seeing a change because of climate change. It could impact runways that are normally frozen throughout the year. There are a lot of gravel runways up in the north. Things are going to change with climate change. I don't think it has impacted us too much yet, but it could in the future.

Personally, I live in Edmonton. I have flown in the Arctic. I have been to a bunch of places. We have done a number of trips just for our own pleasure, I'll say, for lack of a better word. I have been to Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, Inuvik and a bunch of different places up in the Arctic. When we do these trips, we have to plan fuel stops and stuff in the places that we're going to and make sure that we're able to carry on. Climate change is going to affect what we're doing there.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathyssen.

Mr. Lewis, you have three minutes.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, and thank you, Mr. O'Rourke, for coming back for the second round of questions here.

As a former volunteer firefighter on the Great Lakes, I worked very closely as a water rescue specialist with our aviation folks, both the U.S. and Canada coast guards, so I sincerely appreciate Mr. Kirsch and all of his team and what they bring to the north.

Mr. Kirsch, this summer I had the honour of being at the Windsor airport and looking over the graduation of our young men and women cadets. Many, unfortunately, didn't graduate. I think a lot had to do with COVID and in-person and not in-person. You talked about a major shortage of pilots in the north. Would this be an opportunity to specifically target the cadets going forward so that you would have those types of resources, sir?

● (1255)

Mr. Dale Kirsch: Yes. It could be an opportunity. That's why I mentioned the CAP model, because that's what they're doing in the United States. They are bringing up cadets right through the system, from no aviation knowledge to the point where they become pilots—pilots that could be of use to our aviation community in Canada.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you, Mr. Kirsch.

In the last round of questioning, Mr. O'Rourke mentioned having a major labour shortage specifically to mariners, but we know that to be true across all sectors in all of Canada. Can you expand on or weigh in on mechanics? I realize that it's one thing to have a shortage of pilots, but those same pilots certainly can't fly the planes to do all of the important rescue if we don't have the mechanics.

I have a private member's bill, Bill C-241, coming up here very shortly. It's for travel deductions for skilled trades. Is that something that would help our pilots in the north?

Mr. Dale Kirsch: You're right that another area of potential shortages coming up is mechanics. I don't know the exact numbers out there, or if we're really seeing a huge shortage yet, but it's a potential to happen in future years, for sure.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lewis.

Mr. May, you have the final three minutes, please.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My question is really for both witnesses. What unique contributions do the Canadian Rangers make to SAR operations in the remote and isolated regions? Could we better incorporate the rangers in search and rescue efforts? How can we better incorporate indigenous knowledge in search and rescue efforts?

We'll start with Mr. Kirsch.

Mr. Dale Kirsch: We do use rangers. They are members of our organization. One of the issues we have is that they normally get paid for jobs that they do, but CASARA is a volunteer organization. We don't pay our members. We pay some of their expenses. They are certainly a part of our organization.

Dave, do you want to comment at all about the rangers?

Mr. Dave Taylor: Sure.

We do have our rangers. Rangers are often used in a ground response to a humanitarian or RCMP incident. One issue we do have with rangers is that they have radios, but their radios are encrypted. They don't have a common public [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], so communications between aircraft and rangers on the ground is an issue.

Mr. Bryan May: Mr. O'Rourke.

Mr. Neil O'Rourke: We do work closely with the rangers. I would note, however, that for the most part, they may be utilized a bit more in ground search and rescue than in maritime search and rescue.

That being said, we work with them in exercise. As an example, last September we had an exercise in Resolute with the U.S. Coast Guard and the Canadian Coast Guard vessels. The rangers were doing a ground search from the shore as we were seeking a missing boater. We do work closely with them.

With regard to your question about incorporating indigenous knowledge, we try to do that by building auxiliary units that include Inuit members. Most members in the north are Inuit. We leverage it that way. As we are creating our Arctic region, standing up some of the governance that we have with Inuit, first nations and Métis is also a good way to incorporate that knowledge.

Really specifically, when we talk about search and rescue, one of the things we've been doing a lot of work on is working with locals to better understand where hunting cabins are, for example, which is something that only the locals know and that really could be construed as traditional knowledge.

Thank you.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you.

I think that's my time, Mr. Chair.

I want to say thank you to all the witnesses for helping us out today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. May.

Mr. O'Rourke, you're an amazing man. You came out for double duty. We appreciate it.

Mr. Kirsch, Mr. Taylor and Mr. Ralph, thank you for being with us. A lot of us didn't actually appreciate until now all of the things that you do. On behalf of the people of Canada, thank you.

With that, we are adjourned.