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Chair

Mr. Harold Albrecht

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● (0845)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC)): I call meeting number 46 of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development to order.

Today we're meeting to discuss the issues regarding hunting and trapping.

We have witnesses today from the Office of the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development, Julie Gelfand and James McKenzie. From the Department of the Environment, we have Robert McLean and Kevin Cash. Welcome to all.

My understanding is that Julie and Robert will each be making a 10-minute presentation and then we'll go to questions.

We'll begin with Ms. Gelfand.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Gelfand (Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss chapter 3, Conservation of Migratory Birds, of the commissioner's 2013 fall report. Joining me at the table is James McKenzie, the principal who was responsible for the audit.

Although we have not done an audit specifically on licensed hunting and trapping in Canada, our 2013 audit is relevant to this topic, given the important relationship between hunting and the conservation of waterfowl.

I should note that the work for this audit was completed in July 2013. We understand that, since the audit was released, actions have been taken by Environment Canada to further support bird conservation. However, we have not audited those actions.

I would like to start by providing a bit of background information about myself and how I plan to fulfill my mandate. As some of you may know, I have worked in the federal government, as well as in national and international nature conservation organizations, and in the mining industry. These past experiences have allowed me to understand the importance and benefits of bringing together different perspectives to the issues of environment and development. It is clear to me that a prosperous economy, a vibrant society and a healthy environment complement each other.

During my mandate, I intend to focus on the federal role in promoting sustainable, long-term development that meets the needs of current generations and does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

With an economy, society and identity rooted in its natural resources, Canada has a long history of leadership in protecting natural landscapes—including forests, prairies and wetlands—as well as the species living there. Given Canada's vast geography and the range of species in our country—from fish and amphibians to birds, plants and large mammals such as caribou—protecting our natural heritage is an immense challenge.

● (0850)

[*English*]

When we looked at the conservation of migratory birds, we found that Environment Canada and its partners had achieved good results from their efforts to restore waterfowl populations through the North American waterfowl management plan. Implementing the plan has involved contributions from a wide variety of partners, including the hunting community.

Assessments of the North American waterfowl management plan indicate that it has played an important role in the recovery of waterfowl and in the protection of wetlands in Canada. Although challenges remain, such as the loss and degradation of wildlife habitat, many waterfowl populations have in fact increased. The plan's success shows how results can be achieved through partnerships, concerted efforts over the long term, and shared conservation objectives.

I am concerned, however, about the overall state of birds in Canada. Research indicates that some groups of birds, such as shorebirds, grassland birds, and insectivores, have declined by 40% to 60% since the 1970s. These would be birds that you might even recognize, such as the barn swallow, which we used to see in abundance and now we just don't see nearly as much.

Successful conservation requires not only partnerships but also conservation strategies that are informed by scientific research and monitoring. In our audit we found that Environment Canada had missed key deadlines for more than half of the bird conservation strategies the department was developing.

We have been informed by the department that all of these strategies have since been completed. The challenge now is to ensure their implementation. Declines in bird populations highlight the need for actions on these strategies.

Scientific research and monitoring of bird populations are important activities that can be used to track and guide the results of conservation actions.

In 2012, Environment Canada completed a scientific review of the bird monitoring programs it supported. The review found that most programs support the department's information needs. However, it also concluded that many information gaps exist. We found that the department was responding to the recommendations in the review, but that according to the department, significant new resources would be needed to address major gaps.

Before concluding, I'd like to draw the committee's attention to the results from the 2012 Canadian nature survey, which was released in 2014 and was led by Environment Canada in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments. I have a copy of it right here, and I think it will be very useful for your study. As noted in chapter 2 of the commissioner's 2013 fall report, the Canadian nature survey is an important initiative aimed at better understanding how Canadians interact with nature.

The results of this national survey, which was the first of its kind in Canada in over 15 years, indicate that approximately two million Canadians age 18 and older participate in hunting or trapping activities in Canada. The survey also indicates that $1.8 billion was spent on hunting and trapping in the 12 months before the survey was conducted.

These results are important because they point to the number of Canadians involved in hunting and trapping, who in addition to their contributions to the North American waterfowl management plan could be even further engaged in conservation activities. These conservation activities could be used to help Environment Canada address some of the challenges faced by the department and Canada as a whole in conserving Canada's wildlife.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks.

We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have after you have heard from the department officials.

Thank you.

[*English*]

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

I'd welcome you to my area to see some barn swallows. We have a lot of them there yet, thankfully.

Mr. Bob McLean is next.

Mr. Robert McLean (Executive Director, Canadian Wildlife Service, Environmental Stewardship Branch, Department of the Environment): Thank you, Chair, and good morning.

● (0855)

[*Translation*]

I welcome this opportunity to speak today on the important study that your committee is planning on undertaking on the issue of hunting and trapping.

As a party to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Canada is committed to the conservation and sustainable use of biological resources. Within Canada, provinces and territories are generally responsible for wildlife management, including regulation and management of the hunting of big and small game species, and of trapping. The federal government is responsible for conservation and management of migratory birds.

[*English*]

Hunting and trapping continue to represent economic benefits to Canadian communities. Hunting, fishing, and trapping activities contribute approximately $14 billion to the Canadian economy each year. For example, about 70,000 people are directly employed by the Canadian fur trade. Approximately 60,000 active trappers in Canada, including 25,000 aboriginal people, are undertaking trapping activities. Hunting and trapping activities are particularly important to communities which may have limited employment opportunities, particularly aboriginal and remote communities.

In 1997 Canada reinforced its commitment to a sustainable and economically viable fur trade by signing the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards with Russia and the United States. The agreement outlines science-based standards for the trapping industry and applies to trapping for pest control, conservation, fur, and food. Over the past decade, approximately three million federal dollars have been invested in humane trapping standards related to research and testing of traps, and Canada has earned a reputation of being a leader in this field.

The importance of non-commercial trapping, hunting, and nature activities in general to the national economy and individual Canadians' quality of life is described in the 2012 Canadian nature survey which the commissioner just mentioned, which was undertaken on behalf of Canada's federal, provincial, and territorial government departments responsible for biodiversity. The nature survey found that approximately 8% of Canadians—that's 2.1 million adults—participate in hunting and trapping activities for non-commercial use, which on a per-capita basis is higher than the number in the United States. On average, each individual participating in these activities spends about $996 per year with a total Canadian adult direct spending on hunting and trapping of $1.8 billion per year.

The nature survey also found that Canadian adults who participated in nature conservation activities were three times more likely to participate in hunting, trapping, or fishing than those who did not participate in nature conservation. Of these 2.1 million Canadians who hunt and trap, approximately 175,000 purchase migratory game bird hunting permits to hunt waterfowl which, as mentioned, is an area of federal responsibility. Management of the hunting of migratory birds and elimination of commercial harvest were an important impetus to establishing the 1916 Migratory Birds Convention with the United States. Since that time, Canada and the United States have leveraged contributions and support of the hunting communities to manage harvest levels and to establish conservation programs such as the North American waterfowl management plan.

[*Translation*]

Since the establishment of the plan, over 8 million hectares of wetland and associated uplands have been permanently secured in Canada, while an additional 41 million hectares have been directly influenced through stewardship activities.

The success of the plan is due in large part to the contribution and support of the hunting communities in Canada, the U.S. and now in Mexico, which have been instrumental in securing habitats for waterfowl. This includes the active engagement of organizations such as Ducks Unlimited Canada and Delta Waterfowl Foundation.

● (0900)

[*English*]

Hunters and trappers play an important direct role in wildlife management. For example, special conservation measures, including spring hunts enacted for overabundant greater snow geese, halted and reversed the decline of their populations in Canada since the late 1990s. Hunters similarly played an important role in reversing the decline in the Atlantic population of Canada geese in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In response to hunter concerns about the sharp drop in Atlantic population Canada geese, wildlife managers completely closed the hunting season for this population until 1999. As a result of those restrictions, the Atlantic population of Canada geese has recovered and stabilized, and in fact, all hunting restrictions on the species were lifted in Canada in 2002. The harvest continues to be managed carefully, even though the population is now restored.

Trappers, anglers, and hunters represent some of Canada's most dedicated conservationists, contributing billions of dollars over the years to conservation projects across Canada through the purchase of tags, licences, and stamps in addition to countless hours spent in conservation efforts. For example, Canadian waterfowl hunters contribute to habitat conservation through the purchase of a Canadian wildlife habitat conservation stamp. Since 1984, hunters have provided over $50 million to fund habitat conservation projects through Wildlife Habitat Canada, which is the recipient of the stamp revenue.

The hunting and angling advisory panel was established in 2012 to provide inclusive and broad-based advice on a range of policies, programs, activities, and emerging issues related to conservation, hunting, trapping, and angling. In their recent presentation to federal, provincial, and territorial ministers, members of the panel articulated five issues where cooperation among jurisdictions would be important, some of which may be important for the study you are embarking on. The panel recommended pursuing reciprocal suspensions of hunting, angling, and trapping privileges; addressing chronic wasting disease; addressing invasive alien species; pursuing a national economic study on hunting, fishing, and trapping activities; and considering alternate sources of funding, such as excise taxes which are used in the United States to supplement current programs for fish and wildlife management in Canada.

Canada has a strong wildlife management system, one that is based on sound science. For Environment Canada this means recognizing the importance of monitoring and research relating to migratory bird populations to ensure that management decisions, including the establishment of harvest levels, regulations, and wildlife management, are responsible and consider the sustainability of the resource.

The recognition of the importance of wildlife conservation was recently confirmed through investment in the national conservation plan, a $252 million investment to conserve and restore Canada's natural environment for present and future generations. The national conservation plan, including its new national wetland conservation fund, builds on and complements long-standing partnership programs, such as the North American waterfowl management plan mentioned earlier.

In closing, pressures on wildlife continue to mount, with important decisions needing to be made about how to most appropriately manage the landscape in a way that is supportive of a strong economy while also supporting the needs of wildlife. Hunting and trapping is a way of life for many Canadians and is an important aspect of conservation in our country. Continued investment in efforts to support responsible hunting and trapping and recognizing the many values of this investment is crucial to all of us.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (0905)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLean, and you're right on, in terms of your time.

I have one quick question. On page 2, at the bottom of your notes in English, the second-last paragraph, in relation to the greater snow geese, when you were speaking, you said “halted and reversed the decline” and your notes say “halted and reversed the increase”. I'm assuming it's “increase”.

Mr. Robert McLean: Yes, sorry.

The Chair: Okay, that's just for the record, in case it's going from the verbal record and not the written.

Thank you.

We'll move now to our questions.

Mr. Sopuck, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

I'd like to compliment the presenters on the quality of their presentations. They were filled with sound facts and terrific information. They'll be a great help to us as we move forward.

I was especially delighted to hear the commissioner's definition of sustainable development as “long-term development that meets the needs of current generations and does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet theirs”. Of course, the commissioner knows that's directly from the Brundtland commission's report, and I couldn't agree more with this definition.

Too many people seem to forget that this is the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. I think that studying sustainable development in the context of the definition that the commissioner presented is very important.

I'd like to ask the commissioner a question. Compared to other economic activities in Canada, where do you think that modern managed hunting and trapping stands in terms of their sustainability as economic activities?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: As the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development, I'm really interested in the concept of sustainable development.

When I look at the work that the commissioner's office has done in the past, I feel it's very much focused on the environment part of the three Venn diagram and less so on the other two parts, and how they integrate really well. When I look at the commissioner's office, I think, "Wow, we've really audited these guys almost to death". We've been in Environment Canada many, many times, but we haven't really tried to figure out how to look at all three parts of the sustainable development equation.

This year we're launching a study on how to actually do that in the world of audit. I'm now in the world of audit and I have to figure out how to audit sustainable development. We can define it, but how do we actually audit it? We're going to be spending some time trying to figure out how to do that.

Unfortunately, because of my position, I can only talk about things that we have audited. We haven't audited the question that you asked me, so it's difficult to provide you with an answer, because I don't have any data in front of me.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: To any of the panellists, you had talked about hunting and trapping generating about $2 billion per year for the Canadian economy. Does that include the dollars that hunters and trappers spend on conservation, or are the dollars that they spend on conservation over and above that $2 billion?

Mr. McLean.

Mr. Robert McLean: The amount that hunters put into, say, the conservation of wetlands, would be a separate number from the $1.8 billion that hunters and trappers spend directly. That number includes what they would spend on accommodation, transport, food, and buying equipment, but not on those additional contributions.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Okay, so the community that I'm very proudly a part of definitely puts its money where its mouth is in terms of environmental protection and conservation.

Again, Mr. McLean, there's something I've written about in the past called the paradox of hunting and trapping, which is that these are species that are harvested by people, in the case of waterfowl in the millions, yet I can't think of a single species that's harvested in this manner that is scarce. They are all reasonably abundant, in spite of the fact that they're harvested.

Can you perhaps address that paradox, Mr. McLean?

Mr. Robert McLean: I'll take a stab at it.

I'm not sure I actually see it as a paradox. I think it's a direct relationship. I was trying to bring that out in my comments earlier.

The hunters are in fact a strong voice for conservation, for example, in habitat conservation, which you alluded to a moment ago. They are also strong advocates of sustainable management of the resource. Hunters know that if they take too many birds, in our case, they're not going to be there five or ten years down the road. As I mentioned in my example of the Atlantic population of Canada geese, hunters will take measures to reduce the harvest. They will support the restrictions we put in place so that the use of the resource remains sustainable.

● (0910)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: I share the commissioner's concerns about the decline in bird species. I think the commissioner was right to flag that. Interestingly, none of these species that are declining are hunted species—not that I'm recommending that they be hunted.

The fact that the hunted species have a strong lobby group that basically asked to be taxed to fund conservation activities I think speaks to the conservation commitment that the hunting and trapping community does.... Interestingly, hunters and trappers are the only conservationists who actually cherish abundance. That's what we as hunters look for.

Mr. McLean, the national conservation plan just came out. Have the first group of wetland conservation grants been announced yet?

Mr. Robert McLean: We funded about 40 or 50 projects in fiscal year 2014-15 and we're now working on the second slate of projects to be funded under the national wetland conservation fund.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: I know this is a difficult question to answer in a short time, but could you speak to the kinds of projects that were funded under the wetland restoration component and which groups by and large received most of the funding?

Mr. Robert McLean: In response to the second part of your question, we certainly have recipients who are what I would characterize as traditional recipients of funding, for example Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Delta Waterfowl Foundation. However, we made a concerted effort to reach out to new partners. I don't have the number off the top of my head, but we do have quite a number of first-time recipients of funding from that particular funding source and we're delighted with that result.

In terms of some specific projects, the Credit Valley Conservation Foundation has a marsh restoration project removing about, believe it or not, 10,000 cubic metres of sediment. What that will do is it will restore the native aquatic species that are buried underneath that sediment. That project is also going to put into place some habitat structures to improve spawning in that area for the warm water fish community in the Port Credit area.

In Saskatchewan the Water Security Agency has targeted the restoration of wetlands in some of the watersheds where there's been a fair bit of flooding. For example, the Assiniboine River watershed, the Lower Souris and the Lower Qu'Appelle watersheds are targeted for wetland restoration. The more wetlands that can be put into the watersheds, the less the flooding can be.

Those are a couple of examples of the concrete result we're getting from that fund.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sopuck.

We'll move now to Mr. Choquette, for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Gelfand, hunting, trapping and biodiversity are interrelated. You mentioned that Canada is a party to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which we discussed during our study on the National Conservation Plan. At the time, a number of witnesses told us that we were nowhere near reaching the targets in terms of protection of biological diversity set for 2020.

I went over Canada's Fifth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which covers a number of interesting topics such as the change in the Arctic ecosystems, acidification of lakes, habitat loss, climate change, biological diversity, vulnerability, adaptation, and so on.

As commissioner, have you ever audited the work Environment Canada has done to reach the targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity? If not, do you plan on doing that eventually?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: According to the study we carried out in 2013, the former commissioner did look into chapter 2 to determine whether or not Canada had reached the targets. That was chapter 2 of our 2013 report. I don't have all the information on hand, but I see that Environment Canada did set targets. However, there was some uncertainty over how Canada would reach them.

Mr. François Choquette: There was also mention of the National Conservation Plan and the $252 million invested in the plan over four or five years. One of the issues identified during the study on the National Conservation Plan had to do with the fact that some funding was provided to third-party organizations whose mission was to carry out conservation activities.

Have you broken down the amounts of money invested each year? If so, could you send that information to the committee? Is the office of the commissioner planning to audit the results of the National Conservation Plan? How will you go about auditing organizations that are not part of the government such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada and others?

● (0915)

Ms. Julie Gelfand: You have a lot of questions. I will try to answer you.

The recently established National Conservation Plan has not yet been audited. It's highly likely that our office will audit that organization or fund. So we could conduct an audit, but we haven't done so yet.

As for the more technical question regarding the audit of a third party, I will let Mr. McKenzie provide explanations. I am not an auditor, and he will be able to explain it better.

In a similar ongoing study, we have noted that the federal government has provided funding to a third-party organization. I think that we can still proceed in a technical manner and carry out an audit on how the money is being used in those organizations to achieve the objectives. I think Mr. McKenzie could give you more information on that.

[*English*]

Mr. James McKenzie (Principal, Office of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair and Monsieur Choquette.

Essentially, the Auditor General and the commissioner take the same approach in terms of looking at third parties, and it's really putting the onus on the federal department that is providing the funding. We look to see if departments are in fact tracking or monitoring the results that are being achieved through the transfer of payments to third parties. The federal government's policies surrounding grants and contributions are essentially what we hold the government accountable to, and that policy typically requires that departments have a performance measurement strategy in place, for example, to be able to track the impacts that the funding is achieving.

Typically, there are certain provisions in those contribution agreements regarding reporting back to the federal government, so that the federal government has an opportunity to collect that information and then use it to assess the type of performance it's achieving, but we don't typically look at the third parties themselves. We look more at the federal government's responsibilities in terms of providing that overall stewardship for the funding it provides.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Gelfand: In the report I published last October, we considered the fast-start financing the federal government had provided to third parties. As Mr. McKenzie told you, we looked at whether the federal government had set objectives, whether it could receive reports and whether it was reaching its objectives. So we can do that, but we haven't yet done it for the National Conservation Plan.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. Carrie.

● (0920)

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): I want to take this opportunity to thank the witnesses for being here today and, as my colleague said, for their excellent presentations. I applaud you for your leadership, not only here in Canada but internationally.

Commissioner, on what you said about sustainable development, I welcome those comments.

I was wondering if the panel could comment on how Canada and the United States have worked together over the years. We know that species know no borders, and we know the importance of these international agreements and communications. Could you comment on how effective and how successful this working relationship has been between Canada and the U.S.? We've worked together for over 100 years for waterfowl conservation. How's that as an example? How does it compare to other agreements in other parts of the world, such as Europe?

Mr. Robert McLean: That's a good question, and you're absolutely right. We have a number of conservation partnerships with the United States for particular species. I think of the porcupine caribou herd between Alaska and the Yukon, which has been successfully jointly managed for many years now under an international agreement. The same is true for polar bears.

With respect to waterfowl, which is the basis of the longest standing conservation partnership we have with the United States, since 1916, the first half of the 1900s was really about managing for the sustainable harvest and use of waterfowl. I think our two countries working together were successful in that. We had species going extinct soon after 1900—we know only too well that the passenger pigeon went extinct in 1914—but that was the impetus to put the convention in place and to manage the harvest. By 1947 when the Canadian Wildlife Service started, the harvest was being sustainably managed. We continued to improve management of the harvest of the species, and by the mid-1980s it really became obvious that in addition to managing the harvest we needed to manage the habitat on which waterfowl depend. That's the origin of the North American waterfowl management plan. I have the opportunity to work globally on biodiversity conservation, and I know that plan is considered unique globally.

What has it meant for Canada? Since the mid-1980s, we've mobilized a $2 billion investment in wetland conservation and restoration in Canada. About $996 million of that is from the United States, about $512 million from the U.S. government, and the rest from the Canadian partnership. The federal investment in that plan over that time period is about $335 million, but it's very significant to mobilize a continental partnership around shared objectives and to have people put money on the table to the tune of $2 billion for wetland conservation.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Very good. Again I'd like to applaud you for your leadership.

I was wondering if you could let the committee know how conserved land is defined and accounted for in Canada. Is our definition different from that of other countries around the world?

Mr. Robert McLean: Globally we're working towards a standard definition for all types of conservation lands. For many years there's been an internationally accepted definition of protected areas. I'm referring to government-protected areas. The accounting we are doing at Environment Canada includes some areas that are not capital “P” capital “A” protected areas. We're beginning to build some privately held lands into the accounting system. For example, under the natural areas conservation program, an interest in the land is acquired through either the purchase of the land or with what we call a conservation easement. We're working towards making sure we're accounting for those lands in the inventory we're developing. Those then would count towards the 17% aspirational global biodiversity target that's been alluded to already, which was adopted internationally in 2010. Those private conservation lands make an important contribution to conservation in Canada in addition to those government-protected areas.

Mr. Colin Carrie: I think as Canadians we're all proud of our national wildlife areas. Some of my constituents have asked whether hunting is allowed in Environment Canada's national wildlife areas and if so, under what conditions and in which areas.

● (0925)

Mr. Robert McLean: The answer is yes. We have 54 national wildlife areas, and hunting is allowed in 27 of them. We do manage for conservation outcomes. In some of the areas, to achieve our objectives, hunting is not possible. Some national wildlife areas are quite small, literally the size of the floor in this room, so they don't actually lend themselves to that kind of activity, but 27 out of 54 national wildlife areas do. I can certainly provide a list of the 27. In addition to those 27 areas, land claim beneficiaries in Nunavut are also entitled to hunt in five of our national wildlife areas in that territory.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Having hunters in these areas is not anything that you see as detrimental, right?

Mr. Robert McLean: No, not at all. There are various activities that we allow in the national wildlife areas, and hunting is one of those activities. It's not detrimental to the conservation outcomes that we pursue in those areas.

Mr. Colin Carrie: As one of my roles, I get to take part in the hunting and angling advisory panel that was mentioned. There's a lot of misinformation out there, particularly in Europe, about Canada's fur trade. I was wondering if you could describe Canada's role in protecting our fur trade.

Mr. Robert McLean: We're taking two primary areas of activity.

One is the humane trapping standards. If we're talking about trapping, it's important for market access, if you will, to demonstrate to the international community the humaneness of the trapping. I won't go into more detail on that.

The second thing, and we spend most of our time speaking to other countries about this, is the solid management regime we have in place for our harvested wildlife, whether it's migratory birds, whether it's the fur-bearers, whether it's the big or small game that I alluded to earlier. There are solid management regimes in place. I don't think there's a single species that we have in Canada that we would consider endangered because of hunting or trapping.

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Carrie.

We'll move now to Mr. McKay, for seven minutes, please.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you both for your presentations.

I'll direct my first question to the commissioner.

In your fall report of 2013 you said:

> Environment Canada has made little progress in monitoring activities, conditions, and threats for the protected areas it manages. The Department’s own assessments show a lack of proper inventories and insufficient information on species at risk.

Further on, you said:

> ...the Department does not know the extent to which actions called for in recovery documents have been implemented through its funding programs.

At the end, you said:

> Environment Canada...[has] not met...[its] legal requirements for establishing recovery strategies, action plans, and management plans under the Species at Risk Act.

The main estimates 2015-16 show a decrease of $12.5 million for species at risk. I can't square your observations and the department's response.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: You will have to ask the department.

Hon. John McKay: I will, but I'd like to know your opinion first.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I can tell you that everything we indicated in our audit report was correct as of the date we audited. Our findings are stamped approved by the department at that time, so they are correct. You'd have to ask the department about anything further.

Hon. John McKay: Okay, I'll ask the department.

Mr. Robert McLean: Thank you for your question.

With respect to the main estimates and species at risk, part of the funding we have for the species at risk program is what is referred to as sunsetting, so that decision is yet to be taken whether or not to renew the funds that would be sunsetted, but that depends on decisions yet to be made. That explains why the number looks lower compared to previous fiscal years.

With respect to our national wildlife areas and managing them, the key recommendation from the commissioner was to put in place management plans for our protected areas, and we're moving forward in doing that. We have a number of management plans that we've posted just in the last 12 months and a number more that are in the system and waiting to be posted. We're moving forward on putting the key document in place that will allow us to manage our national wildlife areas.

With respect to recovery strategies, yes, we are behind according to the SARA timelines. A few months ago, we posted a three-year plan to, hopefully, bring us up to speed, if you will, and ensure we have recovery strategies or management plans in place for all of the species that are listed. We are moving forward on those fronts that you mentioned.

● (0930)

Hon. John McKay: It's a kind of curious choice when the environment commissioner says you're not meeting your timeliness —and you're not—and then you post a plan, and then your next choice is to sunset moneys that would have gone to the plan.

Mr. Robert McLean: That's not a choice that I make as an official.

Hon. John McKay: Okay.

Mr. Robert McLean: With respect to the budget and the amount —

Hon. John McKay: Maybe we should ask the minister why she would make that choice of sunsetting those particular moneys.

I'm hoping that my colleagues will agree to have the minister come in and answer that question. I won't hold my breath, but maybe we'll see.

My second question also has to do with the mains, and it's kind of a curious set of numbers for “Biodiversity—Wildlife and Habitat”. The expenditures are $120 million, yet your mains are only $91 million for the fiscal year ending on March 31, this month, and your mains for the following year are back up to $122 million.

Why would the main estimates in effect last year be so much lower than what you apparently expended the year before?

Mr. Robert McLean: I'd prefer the opportunity to look at those numbers and provide a response back to the committee following this meeting. I don't have that information in front of me.

Hon. John McKay: I look forward to that response.

I'll direct the third question to both of you. It has to do with the lapsing of funds.

We are at the end of a fiscal year. There has been a pattern of lapsing funds over the entire period of time of this government. Can either of you advise as to what funds are being lapsed this year?

Mr. Robert McLean: We're still going through our quarterly reporting and taking stock of what any free balances might be in the departmental budget. It's not yet the end of the fiscal year, so I'm not in a position to answer that question.

Hon. John McKay: Environment Canada lapsed about $376 million over the last few years. Can you advise us as to the areas from which it lapsed those moneys? Did it include biodiversity, habitat, species at risk, those sorts of things?

Mr. Robert McLean: Your question speaks to the entire budget of the department, and I'm not involved in most parts of that budget.

Again, perhaps you would permit me to get back to the committee following this meeting.

Hon. John McKay: Commissioner.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We haven't looked at that. That's not something we would look at in terms of an audit, so we can't comment.

Hon. John McKay: Do audits not look at lapsed funding?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Not that I'm aware of, no. The type of audit we do is called a performance audit. We look at objectives and commitments that the government has made. Then we indicate whether or not, and we advise you whether or not, the government's actually meeting its own objectives.

There's a whole other side of the Auditor General's office that does look at the financial statements. That's not part of what the commissioner's office does. That would be over to the financial side of—

Hon. John McKay: Is that out of your bailiwick, so to speak, as commissioner of the environment?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I don't think anything is completely out of my bailiwick. I can, I believe, if I'm interested and want to, pursue that. I would bring some people from the financial side over into our group to do that, but we haven't made that decision.

Hon. John McKay: It's kind of curious, though, that in a budget of roughly $1 billion, give or take, over the last number of years nigh on $400 million has been lapsed money. It does strike me as an area of interest, or potential interest, on the part of the commissioner when you are doing your audit in a normal fashion: these are the objectives, these are the standards, this is what was achieved.

If the government's not actually putting up the money, then I don't know how you achieve anything.

● (0935)

The Chair: We'll have to leave that as a rhetorical question. You're well past your time.

We'll go now to Ms. Moore, for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

My question is for the commissioner for the environment.

Commissioner, in your fall 2013 report you said:

> As of 31 March 2013, there were 518 species in Canada listed as at risk in Schedule 1 of the Species at Risk Act. Many factors can contribute to the decline of a species, placing it at risk. The most common is the loss and degradation of habitat....

Listing them by level of impact on habitat loss, what are those factors that lead to degradation of habitat?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Are you asking what affects habitats and what makes them less useful?

Ms. Christine Moore: What factors lead to the degradation of habitat?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: A number of factors can lead to habitat degradation, the first being outright habitat destruction. If a habitat is being used for something other than its intended purpose and it is changed, it can be almost destroyed.

A habitat can be degraded in a number of ways, such as pesticide application and air pollutants. If all-terrain vehicles are driven everywhere, they can degrade habitats. So there are a number of factors that can contribute to habitat degradation and make habitats less useful.

Ms. Christine Moore: How much impact does industrial development have on habitats?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Any kind of development can degrade a habitat. Even farming operations can lead to habitat degradation. A natural habitat exists prior to the arrival of humans. Once humans start using a habitat, its quality becomes affected. Every time humans are introduced into a habitat—be it in a city or a village—and they use it for agricultural, mining or foresting activities, they change that habitat.

Ms. Christine Moore: In your opinion, what portion of responsibility does industrial development have in habitat destruction compared with other factors?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I couldn't answer that because we haven't considered the issue. I don't know whether Bob can answer you.

Mr. Robert McLean: No.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Urbanization and farming are important factors.

Ms. Christine Moore: Okay.

What role does climate change play in the destruction of natural habitats?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Once again, we have not looked into that aspect, but it's clear that climate change has repercussions on all habitats. It leads to all sorts of changes, such as the amount and timing of rainfall. All climate change has an impact on all habitats, including ours.

Ms. Christine Moore: Are migratory birds struggling to adapt to climate change? Can the usual time when species return to their natural habitat be disrupted by climate change, either because the temperature is already too high or too low when they normally return?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: According to our report on migratory birds, insectivores—birds that feed on insects—have experienced a major population decline ranging from 40% to 60%. Scientists have a theory on this phenomenon. According to them, when migratory birds return to Canada, the insects are not yet out because of climate change. As a result, the birds have nothing to eat, and that leads to a decline in their numbers. That's one scientific theory, but I am not sure whether it has been proven.

There is another explanation. The change in the birds' habitat in the south may have an impact. That's not clear, but it's a theory.

● (0940)

Ms. Christine Moore: Have any comparisons been made between those birds and hibernating animals? If a more significant decrease is occurring in the population of migratory birds, is the same thing being observed among hibernating mammals?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I am not a scientist. That question should be put to scientists. I don't know whether Environment Canada's scientists have done any work on that.

[*English*]

The Chair: A very brief response, please, because we're well past the time.

Mr. Kevin Cash (Director General, Wildlife and Landscape Science, Science and Technology Branch, Department of the Environment): Thank you.

Ultimately, the food availability and the conditions that the birds receive when they come back to Canada are going to be dependent on a great number of factors, as the commissioner has said, and it is possible that climate change and the timing of migratory return could affect food availability. We are looking at that, but for the moment they remain hypotheses, and they are currently the subject of a number of studies, including the points you raise, but we don't have definitive answers right now.

We are hopeful that we'll have those in the coming years, but we're dealing with a situation that is already inherently terribly variable, so every year is very different from the last and very different from the subsequent. We know this in wetlands, for instance. It becomes very challenging to detect a signal against all of this variability, and it takes quite a while and quite a bit of data to understand what the true trend is underlying what is naturally an incredibly variable situation.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, Ms. Moore.

Ms. Christine Moore: Can we ask them to provide the study that he is talking about? He said that there is—

The Chair: When it's finished, you mean?

Ms. Christine Moore: Yes, and write back to the committee just to forward the information.

The Chair: I'm not sure if there's a timeline established for that study.

Mr. Kevin Cash: The research is ongoing at this moment, but we would be more than pleased to provide the results as they become available from this work, absolutely.

The Chair: Okay, all right. Thank you.

We will move to Mr. Toet, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): It's always interesting when we look at main estimates and try to look at the allocations from the year before to this year. I know it's challenging for a department to do that. You can't allocate anything into the main estimates unless that program has been established for the following year or the parameters for that program have been established. That's why we have supplemental estimates. I find it somewhat frustrating to sit in these committees and have people trying to compare main estimates to main estimates, because doing that is an exercise in futility that brings you to nowhere. It would be good if members would have an understanding of that and continue to understand that.

Mr. McLean, I want to start with a question for you. I found it very interesting that in your first sentence you referred to this as an important study that the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development is undertaking. Some have questioned the validity of this study. I wonder if you could expand on your opening remarks and explain why you see this as an important study.

Mr. Robert McLean: At the risk of repeating myself, the primary reason has to do with the voice that hunters and trappers provide for conservation. They not only speak about the sustainability of the harvest, which I've mentioned already, but also are, I think, really an important voice for the need for conservation and the importance of habitat conservation and restoration, as was just mentioned in the earlier questioning.

The third point is that these people actually get out on the ground and do things themselves. As I refer to it, they get their hands muddy and their feet wet to do some of the conservation work on the ground. They're an important constituency with respect to helping us as Canadians understand the importance of our natural environment.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Basically you're saying that hunters and trappers—and I know you also referred to anglers—are in a unique position to observe the decline or growth of a population, whatever species that might be.

You touched on it briefly, but I wonder if you could speak to the reaction to these observations of declining population. Can you give some specific examples of how they've actually reacted to that and been at the forefront of making sure those populations are able to recover and are working within the context of the habitat for these species to make sure there is opportunity to recover?

Mr. Robert McLean: On the harvest side of the equation, they certainly have been a voice for reducing harvest where they're finding it becoming more difficult to obtain the species they're either hunting, trapping, or fishing for. With respect to harvest management, they go one step further as well. They provide important information to us, as the management department for migratory birds, on the species they've hunted, and they actually go one step further. We randomly sample hunters, and they provide, believe it or not, duck wings or goose tail feathers that allow us to identify the species and whether it's an adult or juvenile, a male or a female. That information is fundamental to sustainably managing the harvest. In our experience, that's one of the ways hunters are contributing to conservation.

On the habitat side, I mentioned already the contribution that hunters are making, for instance, financially though the habitat conservation stamp as well as through the hunting and advisory panel. That panel is recommending to my minister that we consider actually increasing the stamp fee to generate even more funds for conservation, so they're willing to put more money into habitat conservation. I've mentioned other ways such as the direct on-the-ground involvement of hunters in habitat conservation on a voluntary basis.

● (0945)

Mr. Lawrence Toet: You see their stewardship of the land all the time. The reference was made that as soon as we have human interaction, we do have an impact, but you'll see that when they go into an area, the hunters and trappers will actually minimize their impact as much as they possibly can. They really want to be integrated into the conservation of species and habitat, because they realize very much the tie-in of habitat to that species, and they want to see that population sustained. They're very involved in the sustainment, because that's their future. That's also what they want for their children and their children's children, because it's a way of life to them. It's important that we recognize that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Toet.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: I was just leading up.

The Chair: You were just getting started, I know.

Ms. Leslie, for five minutes.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Thank you, all, for your testimony. Welcome.

I want to pick up from where my colleague, Ms. Moore, was going when she cited the March 2013 report and talked about habitat loss, because this is a very serious issue, especially when it comes to species and when it comes to hunting and trapping. When I look at the Species at Risk Act, the term "species" is a special concern under this act. What exactly does that mean, and of the species of special concern, I think there are about 130 of them, how many of those are hunted?

Mr. McLean, do you have the answer to that?

Mr. Robert McLean: I'd have to get back to the committee with the answer to that question.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Okay, thank you.

Actually, I wanted to ask the full panel. This is the first day of our study, so we're just getting a grasp on how we are going to do this and what this study will look like. I wonder if it would be possible to ask you back at another time once we have a better sense of where we're going with this study. I'm seeing nods. That's fantastic. Thank you.

When I think about habitat loss, one species in particular I think about is caribou, because habitat loss is having a devastating impact on caribou. I remember seeing a newspaper article—I guess it was online—about the George River caribou herd which is in decline. What was really important about the way that scientists were talking about this herd being in decline is they said that it was factors like strain on the habitat and climate change that were an issue, not the hunt, because the hunt was being managed. It wasn't over-hunting. There was a comment earlier that hunters know. The hunt was being managed very well. This herd is very unlikely to sustain sport hunting ever again. That's what I've been reading. There's a huge gap here.

I don't even quite know what my question is for you, so maybe I'll just turn it over to you for any comments about how this is happening. What do we need to do to prevent that habitat loss?

Mr. McLean.

● (0950)

Mr. Robert McLean: Thank you for your question and I'll take a stab at it.

I think it is about the fundamental question around biodiversity conservation and in some ways my answer—and I hope it doesn't get too technical—relates a little to earlier questioning around climate change.

I was responsible for the boreal caribou recovery strategy. I think the nugget for all of us as Canadians in that strategy is that it speaks to scale. There are 51 boreal caribou populations. We need to work at the right scale and then within that scale manage habitat change over time. Climate change will change habitat, so we need to monitor and track and see how that habitat's changing. It also then applies to how we manage development in terms of what areas within a range can be conserved so that we do have sustainability of the resource, while at the same time having sustainable development.

As somebody who's been around conservation for almost four decades, one of the most significant changes I see in conservation is happening at the provincial and territorial level. The real levers for biodiversity conservation are held provincially and territorially, because they make land use decisions and natural resource management decisions. What I see is a beginning of a shift from working on a project-by-project basis to beginning to move to landscape scale considerations. I think the boreal caribou recovery strategy dovetails well with that kind of, I'm going to call it, evolutionary change that is happening in the provinces and territories with respect to natural resource management.

We have one jurisdiction that actually legislated a scale approach to sustainable development and conservation, and that's Alberta. The Alberta Land Stewardship Act divides that province into seven regions, and that jurisdiction is developing regional plans for the very purpose of sustainable development and conservation.

That's the answer to the question.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Where does the federal government fit into this?

Mr. Robert McLean: I think there are several ways the federal government could contribute constructively into those processes that are being led by provinces and territories. One is information. If we have good information coming from a recovery strategy, coming from one of our bird conservation region plans about how a species is using habitat and what its habitat needs are, then that's information that can be taken by a jurisdiction and integrated into how it plans for conservation and sustainable development at those scales. I think information is one key.

In terms of the federal house, if we have lands within those areas that are federal lands, then I think it's important that we also look after the lands that we're accountable for administratively, whether it's a natural park, a wildlife area, DND, a defence base, for example. Are those fitting into a bigger picture for conservation?

Those are two ways the federal government can contribute.

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much.

We'll move now to Mrs. Ambler, for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Thank you to all of you for being here today and giving us all of this very valuable information for our study.

I'd like to emphasize the national wetland conservation fund, because it's been such a boon to my riding of Mississauga South, and the local impact is massive. The Prime Minister announced last year, I think it was in May 2014, that we would invest in a national conservation plan to the tune of $252 million. Sometimes with the big announcements and big numbers, we don't realize what an impact on quality of life it will have on local communities and neighbourhoods, in particular, the wetland conservation fund that you mentioned. I guess one-fifth of that, $50 million, was for restoration of wetlands, which has affected my community positively, I think.

Thank you for mentioning Credit Valley Conservation. I work with them often, and they do a fantastic job in our area in Mississauga and throughout the Peel region on these kinds of programs. I believe they just celebrated their 60th anniversary of operating there.

I know that the wetland conservation program has invested $250,000 in the Rattray Marsh in Mississauga South, but I'm wondering if you could tell us a bit about some of the other programs in which that fund has invested during the first year.

● (0955)

Mr. Robert McLean: There are a few other projects I didn't mention previously. The Squamish River Watershed Society is implementing a Squamish central estuary wetland restoration project. That's in B.C., on the Pacific coast.

We've already mentioned the North American waterfowl management plan. There's a habitat joint venture there that we call the Pacific Coast Joint Venture, and estuaries have been identified as one of the key habitats to conserve. There's an example of the national wetland conservation fund contributing to waterfowl conservation, hunting opportunities, and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Switching to the Atlantic coast and the Bluenose Coastal Action Foundation, the Petite Rivière watershed shale pit remediation and wetland expansion project is just another example of working to improve water and wetland quality. There will be in-stream work and post-restoration monitoring activities to ensure the effectiveness of the project.

Turning to an example in Quebec, la Fondation de la faune du Quebec is doing restoration of wetlands on private property, and that project is focused in the St. Lawrence and the Lac St-Jean agricultural plains areas. In many of our agricultural landscapes across Canada, wetlands have been lost. We have the most significant wetland loss, so there's an organization targeting agricultural systems to restore some wetlands.

Those are just three more examples.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: I appreciate that. Thank you.

I want to read into the record a quotation from when the program was announced by the Ducks Unlimited Canada president, Mac Dunfield, who said:

> An investment in wetlands is not only an investment in critical habitat for fish and wildlife, but it is also an investment in green community infrastructure, jobs for rural communities, a sustainable working landscape and in providing Canadians —especially young Canadians—with opportunities to connect with nature.

That's what Ducks Unlimited had to say about the program.

I see this on the ground, when I see the projects. In fact, it's particularly satisfying for me. There are, I think, four of us on this committee on the Conservative side today who were on the committee three and a half or four years ago when we studied the national conservation plan and what it would look like, and gave that report to the minister.

I'll point out three of the recommendations. One was the youth element of it, that the committee wanted the program to reflect that young Canadians are better off when they interact with nature; two, that it should have an economic component; and three, that it should include an urban component, as well. I represent an urban riding, as do many of my colleagues, and making sure constituents are able to connect with nature was an important element of the program for us.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ambler. We're way beyond the time. We're being lenient. We have two more questioners—okay, three—who have indicated a desire to speak. Following that, we will then try to wrap it up.

We have some committee business to do. We have the election of a vice-chair. I want to mention to committee members at this point, so I don't forget, on Thursday morning we have a group from Ghana who would like to meet with us. I'm going to suggest an informal meeting beginning at 8:00 a.m. for those of you who can come, and then we'll go right into our committee at 8:45 a.m. Thursday morning at 8 a.m., the group from Ghana will be here. We do have some committee business in camera to deal with in terms of a budget.

Ms. Leslie, Mr. Woodworth, and Mr. McKay.

● (1000)

Ms. Megan Leslie: Eight in the morning; that's going to be hard.

I'd like to keep going on this idea of habitat loss. I grew up in a riding very close to Ms. Moore's on the Ontario side. I'm a northern Ontario girl, and I started at the age of seven going out to the hunt camp with my stepdad. It was all about who got what moose tag when and how dumb the partridge were that you could hit them over the head with the butt of your gun. That's the world I come from. Also the world I come from is watching people dig up shoreline on the lakes so that they could have a nice place to put their boats and not even thinking about what that meant, or that behind our place there was a car graveyard where people dumped their cars. I don't even think that kind of action is the worst of it. We didn't know. We didn't have any sense of what it meant to be kind to the habitat and protect it. I can remember we'd skip this one area for hunting because it had been clear-cut and there weren't any animals there. It's that industrial development or forestry that you were talking about, Ms. Gelfand, mining and ATVs; I mean, we tore everything up. That's what the kids were allowed to do. We were allowed to go out on the ATVs without helmets. It was a different time, but we didn't know.

How do we slow these impacts? Part of it is information and education, absolutely. If we had known, maybe we wouldn't have dug up the shoreline, but I think it's more than that. I think it is about regulating what we do with habitat, monitoring, and enforcing those regulations.

Ms. Gelfand, you can comment as environment commissioner, or if you have any thoughts as well from your other work because you've been working on environment for a very long time.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We didn't audit any of this. Bob McLean already indicated that a lot of what you're talking about would be at the provincial level. Some of it would even be municipal. What Bob didn't talk about as much was the federal levers in terms of legislation that they have at their disposal. Yes, research and information. Yes, the second thing was monitoring and having their own house in order, but they also have a variety of different pieces of legislation where they can have some impact: the Species at Risk Act, the Canada National Parks Act, the Migratory Birds Convention Act. These are all federal levers where the federal government plays on the habitat picture.

The stuff that you're talking about is at the provincial level and even down to the municipal regional level.

Ms. Megan Leslie: I don't know if you have anything to add, Bob —sorry, Mr. McLean.

Mr. Robert McLean: It's okay, you can call me Bob for sure.

Ms. Megan Leslie: You've been here so often, I feel like, you know....

Ms. Julie Gelfand: He is the guy. He said for decades.... You've got the guy. This man needs to be commended for his incredible tenure in wildlife service. You've got the guy.

Mr. Robert McLean: That's a very generous—I'm sure too generous—comment, but thank you very much. I appreciate that.

I think it's a multipronged approach. With respect to habitat, just as with biodiversity itself, it's important to keep a diversity of tools to achieve the outcomes. I think government-protected areas at one end of the spectrum will always be important, but so is the other end of the spectrum with stewardship agreements, conservation agreements, and working cooperatively with landowners and land managers to achieve shared outcomes.

We were very actively engaged in those kinds of conversations with industry, with every industry sector in the context of the species at risk legislation and the section 11 conservation agreements. I think we would be better served if we can have agreement on shared outcomes, because then we don't have to worry so much about a big stick of regulation and so on.

It's very difficult, and I think provinces have learned this in their experience, to regulate private land management. When that is done, it needs to be done very carefully, very deliberately, with good engagement of those private land owners. We—the royal we, federally and provincially—probably can't regulate habitat protection to the extent to sufficiently conserve the biodiversity of species. We need those protected areas. There might be occasions when a regulatory approach to habitat protection is warranted on those private lands, provincial crown lands, or federal crown lands, but equally so is the softer agreement, if you will. I don't think we should confuse a softer contribution agreement under the habitat stewardship program, for example, as any less efficient in terms of achieving a conservation outcome.

● (1005)

Ms. Megan Leslie: Yes, Ducks Unlimited has done fantastic work.

Mr. Robert McLean: It's the willingness of the landowner. If the landowner buys in, it's almost a certainty we're going to get the result. The real key is to monitor those agreements, because when landownership changes, one might get a different land management philosophy, and then I think it's important to have the discussion with that new landowner.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Woodworth.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Mr. Chair, I see it was a mistake for me during the election for chair not to disclose to others that you're an early morning starter; perhaps the outcome would have been different.

I appreciate the efforts of our witnesses here today. There is always lots of food for thought on this committee.

I'll begin with a couple of questions for Ms. Gelfand.

I'd like to focus on your comments regarding the Canadian nature survey, in particular the recognition that approximately two million Canadians age 18 and older participate in hunting and trapping activities in Canada. I assume that this is a figure you are willing to accept. It's a solid and recognized figure. Is there any question about it in your mind?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: It hasn't gone through an official audit, but it would probably be an official substantiation document, in my opinion.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I know that auditors are always very cautious, so I almost didn't have to ask the question. When I see a reference to something in your report, I assume you accept it as reliable.

I wonder if you can describe to me why the activity of those two million Canadians is relevant to your work.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Are you asking why it's relevant to my work?

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Yes, you mentioned it in your report, and I am operating on the assumption that you did so because it's relevant to your work, so I just want to hear you articulate why it's relevant to your work.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I think what we were thinking of when we were bringing it to the attention of the committee was that you were doing a study on hunting and trapping. Our chapter in our biodiversity report of 2013 focused only on migratory birds, but it didn't focus on the full extent of hunting and trapping in Canada. We brought this to the attention of the committee to make sure that you were aware of it, because it is important information for you in terms of your study on hunting and trapping.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I suppose that you're here to comment on our study from the perspective of your role as the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development office of the Auditor General, so when I see your report I get the impression that you were commenting on the importance of trying to engage those two million Canadians in the issue of conservation, and that this is relevant in an important way to your work as commissioner for the environment. Am I stating that correctly?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Yes, I guess so. The commissioner of the environment and sustainable development's definition of sustainable development is actually quite broad. People are engaged in conservation, be it the hunters and trappers, but you'll see a lot of other people engaged in conservation of nature in this nature survey, so you have bird watchers. We were just discussing people who golf, hike, snowshoe, cross-country ski and snowmobile, so there are lots of different people who are involved in nature and participate in nature.

As a commissioner, just as a person, I've been working in this field for many, many years, not quite as long as Bob, but almost, so it is very important to me to see in particular what Ms. Ambler was talking about: young people involved in nature. Getting involved in nature is important to understand where we fit. Ms. Leslie was indicating how she participated in nature. What's happening now is we're seeing fewer and fewer young people participating in nature. In fact, more and more of them are looking at screens, spending a lot of their day looking at screens and not actually getting outside. I think this will have a long-term impact on Canadians in the future. It's not yet something I've audited, though.

● (1010)

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Is it a reasonable focus for your work and for our work as a committee to look at how these two million people who are participating in hunting and trapping interact with the environment and what contributions they can make to our efforts to conserve biodiversity and care for the environment, and lead others to the environment?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: It's very clear that the people who participate in hunting and trapping through the North American waterfowl management plan have made a positive impact on those populations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Woodworth.

We will move to our last questioner, Mr. McKay, for five minutes, please.

Hon. John McKay: I just want to pick up on Ms. Ambler's $250 million announcement about the national conservation plan, which I assume is accompanied by the usual panoply of photo ops and background.

I'm looking at the main estimates, and they say the major increases are an increase in funding of $46 million for the national conservation plan. It goes on and adds other stuff for weather services and world-class tankers, etc. Then they say the increases are offset by the decreases of $53 million, which includes the big hit to sustainable development. Another decrease is to species at risk. This looks like sideways money. Then when I look in more detail, they talk about a $22.5 million grant in support of the natural areas conservation program, which is a new column.

Mr. McLean, is this just sideways money—you're taking from Peter to pay Paul—or is this actually fresh money?

Mr. Robert McLean: It is fresh money for new activities. The national conservation plan included the $50 million for the wetlands conservation fund that we mentioned already, and an additional $50 million for the habitat stewardship fund and the aboriginal fund for species at risk. What we've done for the first time is not only prioritized funding for at-risk species, but also the prevention stream, that earlier question around those species of special concern and preventing them from becoming endangered.

The third component is $100 million for the natural areas conservation plan that you just mentioned. The $22.5 million for the Nature Conservancy of Canada is part of that $100 million. The reason it's mentioned separately in the main—

Hon. John McKay: It says the natural areas of conservation. Is that different from “nature conservancy”?

Mr. Robert McLean: The Nature Conservancy is the recipient of the $22.5 million for the program called the natural areas conservation program.

Hon. John McKay: The $46 million is made up of $22 million for natural areas conservation, which is nature conservancy. What are the others?

Mr. Robert McLean: The numbers that I relayed to you a moment ago relate to five-year totals. The $252 million is the five-year total.

Hon. John McKay: But where are we in the estimates here? Presumably, if you're setting aside $46 million, we'll say $46 million is your one out of five-year total. I'm fine with that.

How do we make up the other $24 million in this set of estimates?

Mr. Robert McLean: It's in the other programs that I just mentioned. The natural areas program is highlighted because it's a grant. Most of the rest of the funding is flowed through contributions, and that's where the bulk of it would be—the habitat stewardship program, aboriginal funds—

Hon. John McKay: This would be.... Support of biodiversity appears to be up by about $15 million.

Mr. Robert McLean: I'd want to look at the line item to make sure that I'm answering your question correctly.

Hon. John McKay: If you could just go through these to find out where the $46 million has gone, we're fine with that, but just out of curiosity.... This is sideways money; this is not fresh money. There's not a new cheque; this is money taken from other sources—sustainable development, species at risk, meteorological services, the project management office, the Great Lakes nutrient initiative, and other rounding errors. The overall budget has not actually increased.

● (1015)

Mr. Robert McLean: The result area related to biodiversity of wildlife and habitat is an increase in the department's budget. The $46 million that is part of the five-year funding of $252 million in fact is new money for enhanced outcomes in that result area.

The only question that remains outstanding relates to what you mentioned earlier about species at risk. There is a decision yet to be taken with respect to renewal of a portion of the funding that we get for species at risk.

Hon. John McKay: It's a little strange. I can't quite figure out how my household budget would increase by *x* dollars if in fact I'm taking away from some other side of the household budget. Your overall budget is not increasing, according to your own main estimates.

Mr. Robert McLean: That's from the departmental perspective. Within the department, there are increases for certain—

Hon. John McKay: Well, in main estimates you're at $961 million, and expenditures in 2014 were $978 million.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. McKay, your time is up. We will have an opportunity to look at the main estimates in more detail and have our witnesses prepared for discussion of the main estimates in more detail.

I overlooked Mr. Sopuck. I thought his name was on the list and it was. In sequence, it should have been before Mr. McKay, so I'll go back to Mr. Sopuck for five minutes, and then we will have about 25 minutes left.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Thank you.

Mr. McLean, does habitat change over time?

Mr. Robert McLean: Yes.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: It's not static in the least; okay. The impression that people leave is that habitat is completely unchanged, and I'm glad you acknowledge that change occurs.

Is all human-caused habitat change destructive of wildlife?

Mr. Robert McLean: No. For example, if one were thinking about wetland restoration, the national wetland conservation fund, it would be restoring the habitat capacity of those wetlands.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: I was a bit surprised at Ms. Leslie's comments about forestry, because the notion that when an area is cut over the wildlife is gone is not completely true. What forestry does is change an old forest to a young forest, and many species prefer a young forest. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert McLean: Yes. Moose and deer, for example, would prefer early successional habitat, as distinct from caribou.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Following the clear-cutting that Ms. Leslie refers to, once the forest starts coming back, that area would probably see an increase in the number of moose and deer, the species that hunters and trappers, of course, find very desirable. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert McLean: Yes, that's correct, and it speaks to the importance of scale that I drew attention to earlier. If there are, say, forestry operations here, is habitat being restored some place else in, say, that boreal caribou range?

Mr. Robert Sopuck: On the issue of the boreal caribou, I think that what is important for the caribou is the ecosystem processes, of which habitat is of course an important part. What I mean is that what has happened—correct me, if I'm wrong—is that many old-growth forests have been cut over because of commercial forestry, and as we discussed a minute ago, the young forest comes back, the moose and deer increase, and the wolves follow, by and large. One of the major reasons for the decline in caribou is that they are not adapted to predation by wolves. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert McLean: Boreal caribou and woodland caribou in general have a fundamentally different predator aversion strategy compared to moose and deer.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: With the abundance of deer and moose in these areas, the wolves have moved in and the poor caribou all of a sudden get surprised by this pack of wolves that wasn't there before. That's one of the big reasons the numbers have gone down. I was very interested to learn that there is that active wolf control program going on in B.C., and Alberta, I think, in the caribou range.

There was a recent study done that showed that the wolf control program primarily done by trappers is having a measurably positive effect on woodland caribou. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert McLean: Yes, that's correct in the context of one of the local populations that Alberta is actively managing. They were able to demonstrate an increase in the population of caribou through that particular population management technique.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: So you would agree that the management of species at risk, and indeed all species, really needs to take into account ecosystem processes that are fundamental to that species' existence, and habitat is one part of the ecosystem process, but the rest is food supply, water quality, etc. Is that a fair assessment? Could you expand on that?

● (1020)

Mr. Robert McLean: Yes, I think that our management tools and techniques need to recognize a broad suite of tools. Habitat will always be fundamentally important where we have populations that have had too much impact on their habitat and their populations are declining. As the boreal caribou recovery strategy acknowledges, other management techniques may be required to sustain the population until the habitat can recover. We need a suite of management tools, habitat and non-habitat, and to keep our eye on the ball of restoring habitat to the levels needed for the different species that might be impacted.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: My preference in terms of environmental policy is to actually see on-the-ground results as opposed to spending money. There's often a misconception that the more you spend, the more results you get. I think the commissioner said earlier that in her auditing she looks at the results. I don't think she said she looks at the dollars spent. Obviously, results for dollars spent are important. But again, when I look at the natural area conservation plan, something like 800,000 hectares of very valuable and precious southern working landscape has been conserved. Can you expand on that program which to me has been a major success?

Mr. Robert McLean: The program is designed to acquire what is referred to as a full or partial interest in the land. A full interest is purchase of the land itself, called fee-simple title. In other situations the land remains in private ownership. For example, for a rancher in prairie Canada who has native prairie, there could be a conservation easement. That rancher continues to manage the land, and the conservation easement provides protection to the native prairie. Ranchers in that example are important because grazing mimics the disturbance that plains bison used to provide. That native prairie will not be healthy habitat without that kind of management approach.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sopuck.

Thank you, witnesses, for appearing today. You've helped us launch into our study on wildlife management and its role in conservation and on economic development.

We're going to move, committee members, not in camera, but for this first section we have the resignation of Mr. Choquette as the vice-chair.

We will now move to nominations for vice-chair to replace Mr. Choquette. I'm open to nominations.

Mr. Choquette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: I nominate Megan Leslie.

[*English*]

The Chair: Are there any further nominations?

Nominations are closed.

Seeing that, we declare Ms. Leslie as the new vice-chair of the environment and sustainable development committee.

Thank you.

We'll now have a short recess before we reconvene in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]